

The Little Black Dress



It's hard to believe that the 'shift dress' has been around for over 80 years (thanks to Coco Chanel for its original conception in 1926) and has evolved into a statement staple garment that is a 'must have' in every wardrobe. The 'little black dress', for us in this day and age, was made an icon by Hubert de Givenchy when it was worn by

Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* but the dress we more so relate to in regards to today's fashion would be the black crepe 'sheath' with a square-cut neckline from Ralph Lauren's 1995 fall collection. This garment has been re-designed over the past decade and still remains a favourite due to its simplicity and clean cut.

Retro Dressing

The difference between a shift dress and a sheath dress is simple. A 'shift' simply hangs straight from the shoulders and has a slight suggestion of waist-shaping but more so resembles a 'sack dress'. It can have an A-line shaping to give a faux 'baby doll' look or hang very straight as in the '60s Mary Quant mini dress that was very popular in that time. Remember the knee-high white boots that accompanied it?

The 'sheath' is probably the true name for the dress we call a 'shift' today. This style is basically a close-fitting dress that can either be one piece or have a waist or empire line with darts, panels or tucks for good fit and definition. There are so many versions of this dress and with the addition of a sleeve it has taken on a further look enabling even more women to wear it with ease.

Although being a true tailor by inclination there has always been a place for a classic simple dress in the line up of styles that I suggested to my past customers. A basic suit almost always comprised of a jacket, a skirt, a pair of trousers and a dress. This gave a good working ensemble and allowed the jacket to be worn with so many different looks as it didn't end up an 'orphan in the wardrobe' once the skirt or trousers had done their dash! Alas the colour choice of these suits were

mainly black as this has been the predominant colour (black is not really a colour) of choice for the past 20 years due to its cunning ability to slim and elongate the body which of course hides a multitude of sins and easily dressed up with jewellery or other accessory garments. My past clients would refer to it as an "easy, no thought" garment that that would work anytime of the day or night.

The most important thing to get right with this dress is the fit. If it was at all possible the dress would be lined and have a centre back or side invisible zip so it looked as if it was seamless, of course this was not always possible when using knit fabrics. A trial garment (calico or cotton muslin) seemed so unnecessary due to the simplicity of the style but it ended up a priority to ensure the fit was perfect. The most successful way of fitting a sheath is to make up a very basic dress with bust darts and waist darts, fit this mock-up to perfection and then draw on the design lines (panels or other design lines) while it was on the body. This made the pattern alternations and design manipulations much easier and the garment could be at a 'finish fitting' stage with the confidence of knowing there would be very little, if anything, to change. Subtle detailing like piping, braiding, lace application or embroidery (generally tone on tone) personalised the garment



and ensured that it was NOT store bought, but hand created!

Further reading on the subject of 'the little black dress' is abundant, but by all accounts the best read ever on the topic must be *The Little Black Dress* by Amy Holman Edelman (first published in 1997). Audrey Hepburn is pictured on the front cover and this masterpiece tells of the metamorphosis of this icon garment and its effect on society in the early years of its inception (most of this to do with women wearing black for anything other than mourning). Some of the history of the 'little black dress' shows how this garment was a key utilitarian fashion statement that integrated itself with the emancipation of women, an allegory to the quilting movement of the previous century, where women could meet, stitch and discuss their lives, make change and take charge.

The pattern images in this article are from the Kwik•Sew catalogue, but styled in black. Did you know that some of the Kwik•Sew pattern images have a colour visualiser that allows the viewer on the website to change the colour of a pattern to see what it will look like in a more personal colour choice? Have a play with this the next time your on the website www.kwiksew.com



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