

# THE LITTLE BLACK DRESS

WITH ITS SUGGESTION OF  
EROTIC ALLURE, REFINEMENT, AND ENERGY,  
BLACK CAN MAKE  
COLOR LOOK FOOLISH



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**B**lack is everything and nothing, a color vibrant with a mysterious ambiguity, a color that allows whatever takes it on to enjoy total associative freedom. So in our century what has come to be called "the Little Black Dress" seems to belong wherever it appears. It may effectively go to a formal dinner, a lovers' tryst, a funeral, a wild party, or a committee meeting. A woman may teach school in it and worship God in it, or seduce, entrance, betray, and take revenge in it. A black dress will show vividly among colors but submerge swiftly among shadows. Skin of all fints and all ages is

flattered by black, as are all eyes and all hair. In it, all things are possible, yet it sets its wearer apart from the dailiness of life—a notion strongly supported by the photographs of this season's Little Black Dresses on these pages.

At the ball in Moscow where Vronsky falls in love with her, Anna Karenina appears in a black velvet dress. Tolstoy describes her through the dazzled eyes of the young Kitty, who has a crush on Anna and has imagined that she would come to the ball in lilac. "But seeing her now in black, she felt she had never before realized all her charm." Anna could not possibly

In a Little Black Dress, a woman belongs wherever she may find herself, be it a ballroom or a deserted beach. In this instance, the dress is Carolina Herrera's black cotton chenille with small dots woven on black silk gauze.

CONNOISSEUR

# BLACK IS THE COLOR OF THE UNKNOWN; IT IS EVERYTHING AND NOTHING.



have worn lilac. . . . She stood out from whatever she was wearing; her dress was never conspicuous on her. The black velvet served only as a frame. It was Anna alone, simple, natural, elegant . . . whom one saw." Vronsky also saw; the fatal drama commenced. The black dress had done its work.

Tolstoy here invokes the power of the black dress to signal both acute sexual readiness and tragic distinction. Anna emerges like Venus from a black shell, her full shoulders and bosom gleaming like ivory and tendrils of hair curling on her neck; but Tolstoy has seen to it that we also know she is doomed, and that her dark fate envelops her like a gown. To create such romantic effects in literature, a black dress seemed indispensable in 1870, and it probably seemed a wise real-life investment for achieving maximum impact in any ballroom.

Black clothing has a long literary history that can be traced at least to Castiglione's influential *Book of the Courtier*, published in 1528. It recommended that both sexes wear black to emphasize individuality without vulgarity. Castiglione was the first to suggest that black clothing indicates a superior degree of fashionable taste, a notion that has kept cropping up in fiction ever since. In art the black dress has even more brilliant lessons to teach than it does in literature. By the time Tolstoy created Anna, black dresses had been projecting their powerful spell from the canvases of Leonardo and Bronzino, of Memling and Titian, of Rubens and Velázquez, of Goya and Ingres. Such painters demonstrated with sympathetic genius that a woman's beauty could find no better foil than a black dress, garnished to suit the times and the lady.

**T**hough fashions vanish, great portraits and great novels endure. Women interested in clothes could learn much about the telling effect of black from Ingres and Tolstoy long after the clothes they described were outmoded—even, indeed, from Memling and Leonardo, after a lapse of many centuries. And if they did not learn it directly, their dressmakers and dress designers and all the inspired creators of clothes for the stage and the screen could teach them. Those who make careers out of enhancing women's looks have always profitably raided the history of art for fashion's most successful ideas. The black dress (along with its rival and counterpart the white dress) is obviously one of the greatest of them.

Until this century, dresses, whatever their color, were anything but "little." A fashionable dress, however simply designed, was an enterprise of great visual importance. It extended a woman's body, making her take up a lot of space, thus automatically expanding the emotional influence of her presence. By Tolstoy's time, women's dresses had become extremely eloquent and rhetorical, while men's clothes were consistently more abstract and reticent. In the psychological temper of their clothes the sexes

diverged radically. While strict economy of line and shape ruled male costume, extent, variation, and expressiveness governed the character of feminine dress. Women's costume therefore played a large emotional part in the nineteenth-century drama of the sexes, and a woman in a black dress was like a ship with black sails—a vivid portent or a vast mystery, a cloud before a storm.

She could also be a depressing sight. Black for mourning had been introduced by the Christian church as early as the sixth century, and it was ritually worn throughout the nineteenth, including thick black veiling. The custom did not die out until well after the First World War. Although conventional deep mourning might be fetchingly becoming to certain very beautiful widows and daughters, it had an oppressive effect on most women's looks. To succeed as fashion, a nineteenth-century black dress had to carry a lot of extra, sensuous elements. Décolletage, glittering trim, lace, jewels, and the spread of richly tactile fabric were needed to keep the connotations romantic or possibly tragic, but not dismal.

Two things changed the Great Black Dress of artistic tradition, such as the one Anna wore at the ball, into the Little Black Dress now famous as a modern classic. One was the reduction and simplification of all social rituals, and consequently of all elegant clothes, after the First World War. Along with formal visits and at-home days, conventional mourning was gradually abandoned. As women went to work and took up sports, the clothes of the two sexes began to occupy similar amounts of space and, despite all their other differences, were designed with equal simplicity. By the mid-1920s, all dresses were "little," whatever their color. Gabrielle Chanel, who gets credit for inventing the Little Black Dress, was a pioneer of the new casualness, but she was also canny and insistent about feminine allure. With her acutely modern sensibility, she was quick to seize on simple black for its range of erotic suggestion as soon as it stopped signifying bereavement.

The other great promoter of the Little Black Dress was the camera, especially the movie camera. When the movies first seized the public imagination, the visual world of romantic drama was totally recast in terms of black and white. Black for clothes took on a set of meanings never perceived before the age of cinema. On the screen, all social and sexual messages had to be conveyed within the black-and-white spectrum. For clothes, the cut, texture, and sheen of fabrics became more significant than their colors, and the range of tones from black to white the most important element in creating the emotional flavor of all screen productions. Thus a new romantic era was born, ushering in the shimmering platinum blonde in the sequined sheath and the raven-haired temptress in tight, slinky satin or fluffy marabou, inky velvet, smoky black net, or frothy white ruffles, all set against shiny black lips, glittering white teeth, and deeply shadowed eyelids.

*A woman may go to a wild party, a formal dinner, or a lovers' tryst in her Little Black Dress. This wistful lover waits, not in vain, one hopes, wearing a wool crepe dress with dropped waist and velvet cuffs, by Carolina Herrera.*

## CHANEL SEIZED ON SIMPLE BLACK FOR ITS EROTIC SUGGESTION.



And among these sleek and glamorous beings also moved their unobtrusive attendants, the maids, hairdressers, and shopgirls in their neatly fitting, dull-surfaced black dresses, who kept their own counsel and hid their aching hearts, or perhaps cracked wise, or came adroitly to the rescue, or otherwise helped complicate the plot. It was these subdued and essential characters of the Hollywood legend, as much as the great sirens, who furthered the romance of the Little Black Dress.

Chanel had already perceived the romantic possibilities of shopgirls' black. At the couture level, she perfected and enhanced the appeal in the schoolgirlish black dress, unpretentious in line and trim, that suggests a slightly mistreated and much misunderstood but deeply sensitive and responsive feminine soul. By the serious 1930s, the poor working girl struggling on her own, though considerably modified since Jane Eyre's day, was once again a romantic heroine in both the comic and the melodramatic vein. In the new American folklore, sirens and madcap heiresses were getting tough competition in the race for men's hearts from secretaries, newspaper reporters, and aspiring scientists.

Apart from clothing the discreet maid or manicurist, a Little Black Dress might now be the modest but stunning and utterly transforming evening garb of an ordinary nice girl who spent her days earning her living in a tailored suit or a lab coat. Such a black dress could combine the ancient task of enhancing individual beauty with the new job of displaying a modern girl's ability to be many different things. The Little Black Dress became a powerful resource in the emerging drama of feminine independence.

Late-twentieth-century visual imagery is dominated by color. Black-and-white film is no longer the standard vehicle of popular romance, and all media swamp the public eye with the intensive play of hues. But in fashion the Little Black Dress has prevailed as conclusively as ever in its history. Perhaps in our lurid and multi-form culture, just as in the Renaissance, elegant black can suddenly make color look foolish. For one thing, it still carries all its old symbolic freight. Black was worn by the religious orders in the Middle Ages, by the scholars and thinkers of the humanist Reformation, by the Dutch burghers and Puritan divines of the seventeenth century, and by the austere Spanish nobility. In a frivolous and colorful world, black is serious. Indeed, in certain perverse, extreme circumstances, it is far more than that—it is sinister.

When religion is subverted into witchcraft, when obsessive scholarship leads to pacts with the devil, when overzealous piety seeks to purify with fire, then the black costume of sober righteousness becomes the thrilling cloak of evil, dyed the color of the bottomless pit. And so in the startling beauty of a lady in black lurks a note of menace. A woman in alluring and festive black is always a potential witch, a possibly fatal trap for the unwary, as Anna was. She seems to wear her somber color for a purpose: her

sexual power is deliberately unleashed, not just displayed. Who can fathom her design? Apart from links with Satan, black clothes suggest an intense concentration of moral energy. Inner force has been banked, not diffused and diluted by the distractions of color; and just like spiritual power or intellect, sexuality is given extra depth when it is expressed in terms of black clothing. But if it is done in a well-fitting and becoming dress, designed and made with subtle care, it cleverly incorporates ideas of refined taste, social assurance, and good fashion sense right into the erotic message, instead of flouting all these to create a crude sensation. The effect is thus redoubled, and the Little Black Dress scores another triumph.

**A** Little Black Dress sets off contemporary female sexuality particularly well, because it enhances the look of mobile slimness that gives modern women the fullest sense of their power. A black dress seems to make the body neater and smaller and to unify its parts. Since many bodies are not slim and lack either perfect harmony or absolute coordination, a black dress can help give them that delicious resemblance to a stretch limousine that seems so desirable in the present fashion climate.

The currency of the Little Black Dress also expresses the uneasy fluidity of modern social demands. It may either deny or assert the importance of the wearer; it may be both risqué and dignified at once; and it may be perceived to make an advance or a retreat, depending on the circumstances. Except for ceremonial events, present-day social occasions often fall into no clear category, and dressing perfectly for them may defy even a practiced social skill. But through its complex history, the Little Black Dress has acquired so flexible a set of virtues that it offers a certain safety to the undecided. It rises to almost all occasions. The convenient "littleness," the inherent simplicity of such a black dress means that its visual effect is somewhat subdued—not too much bizzarerie, not too much exposure—yet it never lacks a distinctively interesting character. It must not look safe. In its stringent way, it must demonstrate good judgment, and so wearing it must never convey the idea of an impoverished imagination.

Apart from the camera, the greatest influence on the arresting beauty of black dresses has been modern abstract art. Through it, a new awareness of purely visual form has profoundly affected all twentieth-century women's clothing; but because of their clarity of shape, black dresses have expressed it best. After Chanel, the modern designer who most dramatically showed to the world the visual value of the Little Black Dress was Cristóbal Balenciaga, in the 1950s. His historic affinity, as a Spaniard, both for black and for strictness of form gave him great control over the theme: his black dresses are indestructible masterpieces of pure design. He

*She may teach school, worship God, seduce, entrance, betray, and take revenge in her Little Black Dress. At this moment, prepared for anything, she wears Jackie Rogers's crepe-back satin with fanny wrap and three-quarter-length dolman sleeves.*



# BLACK HAS BEEN WORN BY THE REBELLIOUS EVER SINCE HAMLET.



gave an authoritative presence to the simple Little Black Dress, raising it from its association with maids and shopgirls into the company of princes and patrons, without once cluttering its lines, exaggerating its size, or overloading its surface. The shape of the dress has its own distinction. He absorbed and transmuted into sartorial terms the visual lessons taught by Picasso, Braque, and Matisse; and his aesthetic contribution gave new scope to all subsequent designers of simple black dresses.

At odds with elegance, black clothing has played a large part in the long history of antifashion. In a world wholly committed to fashionable change, antifashion black has been worn by the rebellious of all sorts ever since Hamlet, for whom ritual mourning was obviously only an excuse. The impulse often takes the form of using black for things conventionally not black—sports-wear, loungewear, and, of course, underwear. The Japanese offerings of recent years have shown that black garments have even

greater imaginative possibilities than either fashion or antifashion in the West has yet considered. Formless black bunches of shredded fabric, the look of wet ashes, sick crow's feathers, or charred rags have shown further paths for black to follow.

Colors are worn by those who prize rude health, lively fellowship, and simple views. Black suits those who challenge all simplicities, keep to themselves, brood a lot, and seem to be dangerous even if they do nothing. Black is the color of the unknown. Whatever developments occur in future fashion, the infinite Little Black Dress will have something to contribute to them so long as black itself resonates so deeply in the fashionable mind and dresses keep their feminine message—and fashion itself continues to entrance us all. □

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*In alluring and festive black, she is a possibly fatal trap for the unwary. Above: Trapper or trapped? She wears Oscar de la Renta's satin-faced silk dress. Right: Waiting for the right moment in Chanel's cutout dress of silk and viscose velvet.*

STYLIST: CHRISTINE ACCABE HAIR AND MAKEUP: RAYMOND COSTANTINI



