

It's party time!

To really dazzle this Christmas, forget the high street and think vintage. We've tracked down a wardrobeful of fabulous Fifties frocks perfect for the festive season – but you'd better be quick if you want one!

FEATURE MADELEINE MARSH STYLING NAOMI THOMPSON

P As a child, dressing up in my mother's 1950s cast-offs – sticky-out petticoats in soft, candy colours and huge bell-shaped skirts decorated with roses and pictures of Paris – always made me feel like a fairy princess.

As an adult, Fifties dresses continue to make me feel fabulous and now it seems the rest of world has cottoned on too. At Vintage at Goodwood (last summer's coolest new festival), the favourite girlie option was a Fifties frock worn with layers of fluffy petticoats and a pair of gumboots, while, according to *Vogue*, this winter's must-have item is a circle skirt. 'Fifties styles never go out of fashion because the shapes are classic and suit women's bodies,' says Sparkle Moore from The Girl Can't Help It, one of London's leading dealers in Fifties vintage.

Fifties dressing as we know it now tripped elegantly on to the scene in 1947, when French couturier Christian Dior showed his revolutionary New Look collection. Little padded jackets that emphasised the bust and hips, tightly cinched waists and long swirling skirts took the catwalk – and the world – by storm. To a generation used to rationing, this sheer extravagant use of fabric was an enormous shock – British politicians even campaigned in the House of Commons against the criminal waste. But, despite the scandal, women loved the New Look and Dior's hour-glass silhouette soon became a symbol of Fifties design. »

Betty wears

Ideal for New Year's Eve, this mid-1950s silver satin dress with intricate prism beading is much better made than many current high-street equivalents, and comes in at a budget-friendly £125. The built-in bra and nipped-in waist are both flattering and ensure that everything stays in place on the dancefloor, whether you're doing the hand jive or the more energetic cha-cha. Let the dancing begin.

Silver dress, £125, Pelicans & Parrots

VINTAGE SIZES

Many dresses are small in size (a modern 8-12). Most will not have original size labels in but, when they do, remember that we have all grown considerably since the war. A 1950s/early 1960s size 14 is often the equivalent of a modern day 10. Skirts can be adapted by moving buttons, and coats and tops come in a wider range of sizes. All the dresses featured here are a modern size 10. If you like a style but want a bigger size, try companies such as silksawsdust.com.



Diamanté earrings, £35, Clifton Vintage Boutique



Lucite Bag, £165, Fur Coat No Knickers.



Grace wears

A classic shape in the colour of the season constructed in raw silk and a metallic thread, which adds structure and weight. Dress, £125, Strut. Black bag, £25, Vintage Secret



Cream bag, £35, Clifton Vintage Boutique



Dior brooch, £120, Clifton Vintage Boutique



Happily, what nature couldn't supply, new developments in underwear, from waspie corsets and 'sweater girl' bras, could. 'There is no fashion without foundations,' claimed Dior. Strapless evening gowns came with sharply controlling bodices designed to maximise feminine curves and Dior's dresses were so filled with internal corsetry that they were said to stand up by themselves. 'Boned horrors, that's what they are,' raged Coco Chanel, who hated this constricting style. When she reopened her fashion house in 1954, she drew on her pre-war styles to produce simple cocktail dresses and the classic cardigan suit. Parisian styles quickly filtered through to Britain. For glamorous ballgowns ladies could go to Victor Steibel or Norman Hartnell, designer of the Queen's Coronation dress in 1953, and famous for sprinkling his creations with what he called 'the jolly glitter of sequins.' Thanks to the mass production techniques and synthetic materials developed during the war, there were plenty of

Mabel wears

With its sassy black lace over a traditional A-line prom dress, this dress shows that 'Mademoiselle' (the name of the design) likes to be twirled around. Add a fur stole for cold evenings and secure with a sparkly brooch for festive flair. Black and white lace dress with built-in net crinolene, £75, Hunky Dory Vintage. Fur stole, £245, Fur Coat No Knickers



Pearl necklace, £18, Velvet Ribbon Vintage



Black and gold bag, £25, Vintage Secret



Blue brooch, £14, Clifton Vintage Boutique



Black tapestry bag, £45, Vintage Secret



Unusual paste necklace, £45, Clifton Vintage Boutique

Iris wears

Originally from a Mayfair boutique, this classy number is in silk organza for extra swish factor. Blue dress, £145, Clifton Vintage Boutique



Rita wears

A modest cowl neck and a plunging back nicely balance this fine silk chiffon dress. Show your vintage nous by wearing long gloves rolled down with statement bracelets. Fifties bags bring a touch of originality to modern outfits too. Yellow dress, £125, Strut. Gold bag £40, Juno Says Hello. Lace gloves, £12, Black Pearl Vintage



CARE & CONDITION

Fifties cottons were very high quality and, generally speaking, vintage clothes are often cheaper and better quality than their modern-day equivalents. Many clothes are beautifully made with boned bodices, good linings and extra details, such as little popped tags in the shoulders for securing bra straps (no one revealed underwear in the Fifties). Always check for condition before buying and be aware that the smell of damp can be very difficult to get rid of. Simple cotton dresses can be put in the washing machine but, for more elaborate outfits and fabrics, go to a good dry cleaner. Ask your nearest vintage dealer who they use or find a company that cleans theatrical costumes, and so is used to handling more unusual designs and materials. Old zips can sometimes stick - try rubbing them with a lead pencil or a plain white candle.

Betty wears

Something of a bargain, this rich emerald green dress has cute bow detailing to the waist. Dark green dress, £85, Love Miss Daisy



Betty wears

It might look demure but when this dress catches the light it's a real show-stopper. Green silk jacquard dotted dress, boned to the waist, £420, Circa Vintage



Pearl necklace, £22, Velvet Ribbon Vintage



Brooch, £18, Velvet Ribbon Vintage

Grace wears

There's no hiding away in a corner in this stunning dress whose light-catching gold thread patterns mean all eyes will be on you. Bulk out the skirt with layers of petticoats (they show off the pattern better and make your waist look smaller) and cinch-in your midriff with a broad belt for a more contemporary look. A pair of killer gold or black heels completes the effect.

Gold and black dress, £85, Velvet Ribbon Vintage.

cheaper alternatives too – all now highly collectable. The ready-to-wear market boomed and Marks & Spencer (under the St Michael label) produced popular and affordable versions of Dior's New Look. Many women also made their own clothes – from 1949, *Vogue* was licensed to produce seasonal patterns from the great French couturiers, meaning the latest Paris fashions could be run up at home in England on your Singer sewing machine.

Whatever the style, the key note of Fifties fashion is its femininity, fun and sheer *joie de vivre*. Having been a widow for a decade, this year I'm getting remarried. The look I'm going for is full-on 1950s ladylike glamour. I might be too old to look like a fairy princess but I know that, inside, I'll feel like one.



Iris wears

Wear this with metallic heels or team with flats for a summer's day. Blue lace and ribbon dress, £180, Vintage Secret. Brooch, £18, Velvet Ribbon



Mabel wears

The two classic silhouettes of the Fifties were Dior's full skirts and the 'Wiggle' or pencil shape, as seen in this sparkly, romantic number that harks back to the golden era of Hollywood. As the hem is slightly smaller than the waist, it causes the wearer to 'wiggle' as she walks – a look made famous by countless screen sirens, from Marilyn Monroe to *Mad Men's* Joan Holloway. Accessorise with kitten heels, a kittenish pout and a large dollop of self-confidence. Navy silk taffeta cocktail dress with beading and sequins, £320, Circa Vintage



Rita wears

This dress uses a puffball type skirt to create the longed-for hourglass silhouette. Blue bubble dress, £45, Beyond Retro

For personal shopping and vintage styling, contact Naomi Thompson on 07951 438951 or visit vintagesecret.com



Black bag, £25, Vintage Secret



Brooch, £18, Velvet Ribbon Vintage

WIN A VINTAGE MAKE-OVER

If you really want to feel like Audrey Hepburn or Grace Kelly as you step out this Christmas, it's about more than just the dress. H&A has teamed up with Nina's Hair Parlour in Alfies Antique Market, London, to offer one lucky reader a vintage make-up and hair make-over in a style of their choice, worth £100. To be in with a chance of winning, simply send a postcard marked 'Nina's' with your full details to the address on page 8. 020 7723 1911; ninasvintageandretrohair.com



Cream clutch bag, £22, Vintage Secret



Black lace gloves with bows, £22, Black Pearl Vintage