

Clothing with a Cause

OVERVIEW

In 2022, the Autry Museum presented the exhibition *Dress Codes*. *Dress Codes* is about what we wear, how we wear it, and why. The exhibition excavated the histories embedded in icons of Western fashion and the threads connecting them to ideas of Western identity, tradition, individual freedom, hybridity and re-invention.

In this lesson, you are asked to take themes from *Dress Codes* and analyze how women throughout U.S. history used pants as a form of protest, either against an explicit legal code or implicit social norm. In some cases, women used jeans as an avenue through which they protested specific areas of American life, like racial inequality and sexual harassment. In all the examples provided in this lesson, women decided to put their pants on to make a statement, to assert their identity, and/or to protest an injustice.

You will analyze how clothing can be used to make a statement, assert an identity, and/or protest an injustice by reading biographies of four different women to help answer the question: How can clothing be used as a form of protest?



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PART I: BIOGRAPHIES

Use this graphic organizer to summarize the information presented in the biographies about women who wore pants as a form of protest. As you read each biography, answer the question in the corresponding section.

HISTORICAL FIGURE	WHAT WAS SHE PROTESTING BY WEARING PANTS?	HOW DID OTHERS REACT TO HER CLOTHING?
Helen Hulick Time Period:		
Ramona Fonseca Time Period:		
Rita Wanstrom Time Period:		
Patti Giggans Time Period:		

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PART II: CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

After completing the graphic organizer in PART 1, reflect on what you have learned from the biographies by answering the questions below.

1. What were some reasons these women decided to wear pants?

2. What happened to these women when they wore pants?

3. Which biography did you find most interesting? Why?

4. Why do you think clothing was used for protest?

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PART III: CLOTHING WITH YOUR CAUSE:

Use this space to design a piece of clothing that brings awareness to an issue you feel needs to change in your community.

1. Think of something you want to change in your community or your school. Why is this change needed? Write your ideas down here.

2. Can you think of a piece of clothing that you or others can wear that would bring awareness to this issue? Consider color, words, symbols, images, or how it is worn. It can be more than just a t-shirt. Sketch your idea in the space below.



3. How does your design address your chosen issue?

4. How will you decide to wear this clothing? As an individual, everyday act, or, in an organized group, or both?

Biography #1: Helen Hulick



Photograph of Helen Hulick, who won the right to wear pants in court in 1938. Photograph by Andrew H. Arnott. Courtesy of Los Angeles Time Photograph Collection. Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

Read the following biography, answer the questions to consider and then fill out the Part I: Graphic Organizer.

In 1938, a witness to a burglary walked into a Los Angeles courtroom and caused a big **commotion**. It was not her **testimony** that drew so much attention, but rather her clothes. Helen Hulick decided to wear pants to the courtroom, the clothing that she used most days and in which she felt the most comfortable.

The judge, outraged by Hulick's fashion choice, ordered her to wear a dress for the rescheduled court hearing. Hulick was quoted in the Los Angeles Times saying, "You tell the judge I will stand on my rights. If he orders me to change into a dress I won't do it. I like slacks. They're comfortable."

And indeed, on the date of the next court date, Hulick wore slacks once again and the court date was once again rescheduled. The judge ordered her to return in "accepted dress" and gave her a final warning, "If you insist on wearing slacks again you will be prevented from testifying because that would **hinder** the administration of justice. But be prepared to be punished according to law for **contempt of court**." Helen Hulick, kindergarten teacher, appeared in slacks a third time and was sentenced to jail.

Hulick hired an attorney to fight her sentence and her case went to a court of appeals, where people go to overturn previous judges' decisions. The appeals judge ruled in her favor and she was now allowed to wear pants to court.

Question to Consider

What does the judge mean when he says Helen Hulick should appear in "accepted dress?"

Glossary

commotion: a disturbance

testimony: a statement made by a witness in court

hinder: to make slow or difficult

contempt of court: disobeying a court order

Biography #2: Ramona Fonseca and Pachucas



Ramona Fonseca poses in a zoot suit. Photograph dated June 26, 1944. Courtesy of the Shades of L.A. Photo Collection/Los Angeles Public Library.

Read the following biography, answer the questions to consider and then fill out the Part I: Graphic Organizer.

In June 1943, during World War II, the streets of Los Angeles erupted in violence when members of the U.S. military attacked young Mexican Americans wearing a particular outfit, the zoot suit.

The zoot suiters or *pachucos*, as they were sometimes called, wore oversized suits and **trousers**, as a cultural and political fashion statement. Young Mexican-Americans used the zoot suit style to assert a distinctive identity that disagreed with the traditional Mexican culture of their parents and the **dominant** white culture that discriminated against Mexican Americans. Since zoot suits required large amounts of fabric to make, many people saw the suits as disrespectful given the need to save fabric and clothing for the war effort. Continuing to wear clothing that challenged **war time norms** expressed their frustration with the discrimination they faced as Mexican Americans.

What is often ignored in this history is the role of *pachucas*, or women who wore zoot suits. Some women wore these suits with pants, instead of skirts, like the woman in the picture, Ramona Fonseca.

The **mainstream media** made fun of women wearing zoot suits, focusing on their “deviant” or inappropriate behavior. They were portrayed as looking and acting too much like men. Their fashion choices **protested** traditional Mexican and mainstream American views on respectable female clothing and behavior. The *pachuca* style highlighted and celebrated a unique cultural identity for young Mexican American woman.

Question to Consider

A social norm is an expectation on how people are supposed to behave or look. How did wearing a zoot suit protest a social norm of the time?

Glossary

trousers: pants

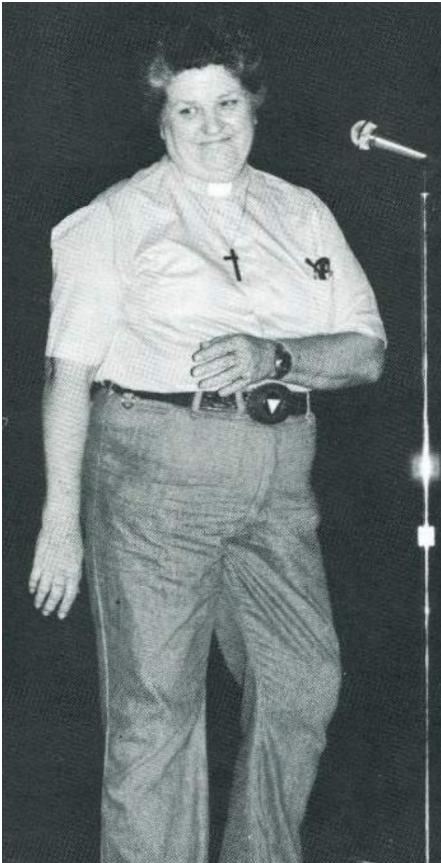
dominant: having great influence over all others

war time norms: expected ways of acting to support the war effort

mainstream media: traditional or established sources of news

protest: an action expressing disapproval of something in society

Biography #3: Rita Wanstrom and the Tumblebugs



Picture of Rita Wanstrom, who protested anti-cross-dressing laws in Houston, Texas. Photograph by Roz Vecchio for We the People Pride Guide: The Official Guide to Houston's 1981 Gay Pride Week.

Read the following biography, answer the questions to consider and then fill out the Part I: Graphic Organizer.

Despite the efforts of many **activists** in the preceding decades, **anti-cross-dressing laws** persisted in the United States well into the 1960s. Anti-cross-dressing laws reinforced **social norms** around gender, but also discouraged members of the **LGBTQ+** community from gathering and creating public spaces for themselves.

Nonetheless, individuals fought these laws and opened spaces where members of the LGBTQ+ community could feel safe and be themselves by wearing what they wanted. One of these spaces was the Roaring 60s, the first lesbian bar in Houston, Texas. It was opened by Rita Wanstrom, affectionately referred to as Pappa Bear, on June 23, 1967.

Soon after it opened, police used anti-cross-dressing laws as an excuse to raid the bar. They arrested Wanstrom and many other patrons for wearing “fly-front” pants, which were thought to be too masculine. Determined to combat this injustice, she organized several fundraisers through a group called the Tumblebugs. They gave themselves this name because the Tumblebug beetles continue to get up and persevere no matter how many times they fall. Money from the fundraisers helped pay their legal fees as they took their case to court. Eventually, the case against them was dismissed but the cross-dressing laws remained in place until they were finally overturned in 1980.

Question to Consider

How did Rita Wanstrom fight back against the anti-cross-dressing laws?

Glossary

activists: people who work for political or social change

anti-cross-dressing laws: laws forbidding men and women from dressing outside traditional gender roles

social norms: expectations society has for the way people are supposed to behave and look

LGBTQ+: An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other gender identities.

raid: surprise intrusion by law enforcement

Biography #4: Patti Giggans and Denim Day



Photograph of Patti Giggans, who started Denim Day to protest sexual and domestic violence. Photo courtesy of Cayla McCrae/Peace Over Violence.

Read the following biography, answer the questions to consider and then fill out the Part I: Graphic Organizer.

In 1998, a judge in Italy dismissed charges against a **convicted** rapist because the victim was wearing tight jeans. In the judge's view, wearing tight jeans meant that the victim must have helped the person who raped her remove her jeans, thereby implying that it could not have been rape.

People were outraged at this ruling. The next day, women in the Italian parliament staged a public protest by wearing jeans as a symbol of **solidarity** with the victim.

Word of the protest spread around the world prompting an organization in Los Angeles called Peace Over Violence to start Denim Day, a day of action to bring awareness to sexual violence against women.

The founder of Denim Day is Patti Giggans, who serves as the Executive Director of Peace Over Violence, an organization that advocates for communities free from sexual and **domestic violence**. For Denim Day, Giggans wore jeans to protest sexual violence. Many people joined her in wearing jeans, marking the first Denim Day in 1999. Denim Day has continued ever since and takes place in April in honor of Sexual Assault Awareness Month. It has become a worldwide protest that anyone can support simply by wearing jeans.

Question to Consider

What is the purpose of Denim Day?

Glossary

convicted: proven guilty

solidarity: united with a common purpose

domestic violence: violent or abusive behavior within a family

Sources

Helen Hulick

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Photograph by Andrew H. Arnott of "Helen Hulick, who appeared in court to testify in the burglary of her home, wears pants, which the judge presiding over her case objected to, Los Angeles, 1938," Los Angeles Time Photograph Collection (uclamss_1429_11717). Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA

Ramona Fonseca

Escobedo, Elizabeth R. "The Pachuca Panic: Sexual and Cultural Battlegrounds in World War II Los Angeles." *Western Historical Quarterly* 38 (Summer 2007): 133 – 156.

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Portrait of Ramona Fonseca, 1944. Shades of L.A. Photo Collection/Los Angeles Public Library

Ramirez, Catherine S. *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics*. Duke University Press, 2009.

Rita Wanstrom

Picture of Rita Wanstrom. Roz Vecchio. We the People Pride Guide: The Official Guide to Houston's 1981 Gay Pride Week, <https://www.houstonlgbthistory.org/Houston80s/Pride%20Guides/Pride%20Guide%201981.compressed.pdf>. Accessed December 20, 2022.

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Patti Giggans

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Giggans, Patti. "Letter from the Founder." *Denim Day Info*, <https://www.denimdayinfo.org/letter-from-the-founder>. Accessed May 12, 2022.

Photograph of Patti Giggans at Union Station, 2019. Photo courtesy of Cayla McCrae/Peace Over Violence.

"Why Denim?" *Denim Day Info*, <https://www.denimdayinfo.org/why-denim> Accessed May 12, 2022.

Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7

Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.9

Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CA History Standard 11.5.4

Analyze the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment and the changing role of women in society.

CA History Standard 11.8.8

Discuss forms of popular culture, with emphasis on their origins and geographic diffusion (e.g., jazz and other forms of popular music, professional sports, architectural and artistic styles).

CA History Standard 11.10.7

Analyze the women's rights movement from the era of Elizabeth Stanton and Susan Anthony and the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the movement launched in the 1960s, including differing perspectives on the roles of women.

CA History Standard 11.11.3

Describe the changing roles of women in society as reflected in the entry of more women into the labor force and the changing family structure.