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FASHION

The Grown Woman's Guide to Ageless Style

Want to burn your pandemic wardrobe? Join the club. Two women—one in her 40s and one in her 60s—seek chic strategies for their next acts.

ADULTS ONLY From left: On the elder model: Jacket, $1,490, Turtleneck, $550, Pants, $690, AnotherTomorrow.co; Boots, Similar styles for $415, Bevza.com; Earrings, $3,050, AnitaKo.com. On the younger model: Jumper, $2,400, Skirt, $3,300, BottegaVeneta.com; Boots, $1,295, ManoloBlahnik.com; Earrings, $149, Missoma.com; Ring, $1,788, GraceLee.com; Ring, $3,150, AnitaKo.com; Rings, $4,180, $1,460, ProunisJewelry.com; Photographed at Tula House in Brooklyn. (Note: models are not the authors.)

By Baze Mpinja and Dana Wood / Photographs by Jingyu Lin for The Wall Street Journal, Styling by Lizzy Wholley

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AFTER THREE YEARS of upheaval and change, many women are realizing their old wardrobes are no longer a good fit—both literally and figuratively—for their post-pandemic selves. Whether you celebrated a milestone birthday, became a mom, switched jobs (or just discovered the joy-giving power of elastic-waist pants) during the Covid era, chances are you're not interested in dressing the same way you did in 2019. Here, two writers of different generations seek guidance on suiting up for their next chapters.

The Woman in her 40s: Baze Mpinja

A couple of months ago, I went to a sample sale for the first time since the pandemic began. I showed up hoping to score a great deal on Jimmy Choo shoes (mission accomplished)—but the experience also gave me a glimpse of just how much my style shifted during Covid times. For instance: While most of my fellow crazed shoppers were throwing elbows to snag sky-high pumps, I only had eyes for kitten heels. Apparently, after years of working from home in cozy socks or sneakers, I'm no longer interested in suffering for chic footwear—even if I can get it at a deep discount.

In fact, I've lost interest in most of the items that used to be in my regular rotation, and it would appear I'm not alone. "Not that much time has gone by, but I feel like I'm a different person," said Natalie Rand, 43, a Los Angeles wellness entrepreneur and songwriter whose closet is in the middle of what she calls a major "Marie Kondo moment." "I think lots of people have had an urge to ditch or burn their wardrobes from the pandemic," said Roopal Patel, SVP, fashion director of Saks Fifth Avenue. "Clothing carries memories…and customers are eager to get back to the joy of living."

With lockdown—and my 30s—in the rearview mirror, I'm now trying to relearn how to have fun with fashion. The images I'm bombarded with daily, in ads or on social media, mostly feature women in their 20s or early 30s, and it's hard to know which ideas I can steal and which will make me look like I'm desperately clinging to youth. One thing I know for sure? My new wardrobe needs to convey the best of both worlds: a combination of the relaxed aesthetic my feet (and the rest of me) have gotten used to, plus a modern, edgy elegance that announces my newly minted middle-aged confidence.

Instead of a sporty puffer, opt for refined outerwear to polish a casual look. Coat, $1,195, Shirt, $395, Kallmeyer.nyc; Jeans, $450, NiliLotan.com; Sneakers, $85, Superga-USA.com; Earrings, $858, Rings, $2,188, $1,588, GraceLee.com

At this age, we shouldn't be chasing trends—but no one wants to look like they've thrown in the towel, either. That's why, for 40-somethings who want to look stylish without sacrificing comfort, New York stylist and wardrobe specialist Allison Bornstein suggests strategically deploying a foundation of elevated basics. For example, dress up a laid-back sweater-and-jeans ensemble with luxe loafers. (I'm currently lusting after Prada's leather platform version.) Refined outerwear can also polish a casual look: Instead of a puffer, opt for a cashmere robe coat.

As we cruise through holiday party season, sleek trousers, skirts and blouses in an array of textures like leather and silk are great go-tos for evening fêtes. On the accessories front, upgrade daytime looks by trading flats for low-heeled booties, and add layered necklaces, gold hoops or a belt to the mix, said Ms. Bornstein. Nighttime is about "taking what you're comfortable with and dialing it up a bit." On fancier occasions, Ms. Patel turns to printed frocks from Johanna Ortiz, Silvia Tcherassi and Zimmerman, which make a statement—and can also do double duty in professional settings if paired with a structured blazer.

For 30- and 40-year-olds who are actively dating, "going-out" clothes present another dilemma. What do we do now that we've outgrown the days of crop tops? One surprising workhorse: that '90s stalwart, the bodysuit. Don't shy away from bodysuits at this age, advised Ms. Bornstein, as they flatter curves and are sexy without revealing too much. Turtleneck versions look especially fab under a suit or leather jacket.

If you graduated from high school over a decade ago, you'll also want to bid farewell to distressed boyfriend jeans. But that doesn't mean denim can't play a role in your closet. "Just find the silhouette that suits you," advised Alysha Cassis-Shaw, an Oakland stylist and owner of vintage clothing brand Neutral Ground. Straight or boot-cut styles from high-quality brands like Mother are flattering and age-appropriate—and all work with the chunky footwear trending right now.

For value and versatility, Ms. Patel recommends restocking your closet with effortless separates from brands such as Nili Lotan, Khaite and Loulou Studio. Among Ms. Cassis-Shaw's must-haves: a LBD, black or brown booties, a classic coat and timeless accessories like a medium-thick chain.

Still, part of the fun of getting older is knowing what rules matter—and which can be bent. So while you're updating, don't forget to experiment, too. "I don't think there's ever one look that can really define you," said Ms. Patel. And that's true no matter how many birthdays you celebrate.

WELL-AGED For younger women, separates in a mix of textures go easily from day to night; For mature women, a tailored pantsuit is always a power move.

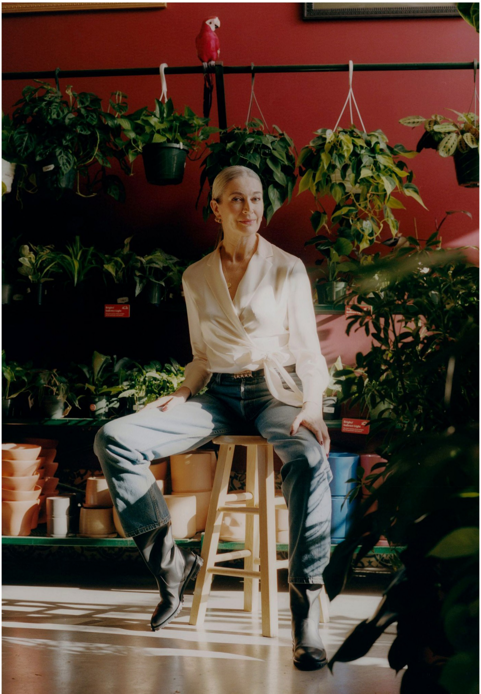
The Woman in her 60s: Dana Wood

During the two decades I spent running the beauty departments of national women's magazines in New York City, I developed a uniform of sorts: J.Crew No. 2 pencil skirt in a bold hue paired with a slim button-down or snug mock turtleneck and vertiginous heels. Think former French Vogue honcho Carine Roitfeld, minus the sexy-smudgy raccoon eyes. On weekends, I'd let all hell break loose in the form of 7 For All Mankind trouser jeans.

A move to St. Petersburg, Fla., a few years ago put an end to a lot of that, though I still trot out my No. 2s for my docent gig at the Dalí Museum. Now, however, I'm more likely to pair them with my chunky-soled black Palmz Chelsea ankle boots or, when it's 100 degrees in the shade, white, cleated-sole Pumba hiking boots, both by Dune London. Having recently turned 60, I worry that I've lost my mind. Who wears borderline combat boots at my age? I'll tell you who; numerous fiercely hip, older women I encountered on an October trip to Paris with pals.

Alas, I live in the U.S., not the Marais—so I've been curious how other over-50 American women are dressing, particularly now that a good chunk have returned to an office or are meeting clients regularly. Add to that a slate of sparkly holiday gatherings, which pose their own wardrobe challenges. After years of Covid-driven sartorial drought, how are we pulling this off?

"No one knows what work wear or cocktail attire looks like anymore," said New York City stylist Alison Bruhn, herself newly turned 60. "We all have to step out and try some things on, literally."



After a certain age, quality and fit are key—so it pays to splurge on craftsmanship and tailoring. Blouse, $348, RalphLauren.com; Jeans, $350, ShopReDone.com; Belt, $380, Khaite.com; Boots, $1,295, ManoloBlahnik.com; Earrings, $440, Necklace, $273, us.CompletedWorks.com

Ms. Bruhn recommends starting with a clear-eyed—but loving—assessment of your body's current strengths and weaknesses. Maybe those loathsome "bingo wings" are starting to make their presence known, or your crinkly neck is driving you nuts, but you've still got killer legs. "For women in their 50s and beyond, I take into consideration that bodies change as we age," said stylist Allie Koehler. "We start with what a client loves, and then layer-in what makes them feel comfortable and confident."

For Brooklyn wellness consultant Milana Knowles, pantsuits by Max Mara, Smythe and Cinq à Sept are serving up post-pandemic superhero vibes. "Now if I'm going to a meeting, I'll put on a suit because it makes me feel powerful." Just remember, after a certain age, quality and fit are key—so it pays to splurge on craftsmanship and tailoring.

Another winning piece for older women: an off-the-shoulder top. This surprised me too, but evidently "the shoulders are the last to go," according to Ms. Bruhn, who advises pairing such a top with gorgeous earrings for effortless elegance.

Conversely, 56-year-old photographer Heidi Lender, is digging modest simplicity. "I lived in India and got into roomy shmatas," she said. "They're my staples, along with Rick Owens and Comme des Garçons when I need something more slick."

Here's what Ms. Lender won't be wearing anymore: miniskirts and spaghetti straps. "This has more to do with body-consciousness and fit than 'Do I look like a teenager?' " she notes. Another no is ripped jeans—unless they're legit (read: super-vintage Levi's). Which isn't to say denim is out. Mid- or high-rise jeans with a bit of stretch work wonderfully on mature women. "A darker wash is my favorite for day-to-night," said Ms. Koehler. "And whoever said no white denim after labor day was, well, wrong."

Finally, while she always recommends a tidy list of staples for older women ("a statement coat, chic blazer and a fabulous black dress"), Washington, D.C., stylist Naina Singla said that ultimately clients shouldn't feel restricted by a number. No matter the age, "style and fashion are meant to be fun."

Models: Ursula Wallis/Wilhelmina, Britt Bergmeister/Wilhelmina; Makeup: LB Charles/B&A Reps; Hair: Aziza Rasulova/B&A Reps; Photographed at Tula House in Brooklyn

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Older—But Not Wiser

Straight talk from stylists about common over-50 fashion fails

ILLUSTRATION: FEDERICA DEL PROPOSTO

“Don’t wear **heels that you can’t stand up straight in** or walk in without grimacing and holding on to walls. I see this everywhere in NYC and I’m afraid these women are going to break their ankle or hip!” —*Alison Bruhn, New York City*

“I go crazy when I see the same blouse or sweater in a client’s wardrobe in **every single color of the rainbow**. I get that they love it, but any more than two colors is definitely overkill.” —*Naina Singla, Washington, D.C.*

“My pet peeve is **really oversized clothing** on women of a certain age. It reminds me of Lily Tomlin in “The Incredible Shrinking Woman.” Leave that look to the teens and 20-somethings. You don’t look current—you look sloppy.” —*Alysha Cassis-Shaw, Oakland, Calif.*

“There’s nothing scarier than **strapless on someone whose chest is large and headed south**. Once a woman was dancing at a wedding reception, and as she lifted her arms above her head, her top came down.” —*Ms. Bruhn*

“Don’t cling to clothes that don’t fit anymore. I see this all the time. Constantly pulling at a **tight-fitting blazer** that doesn’t even button isn’t flattering. Especially as you age, fit is critical to elevate your look.” —*Ms. Singla*

“When you’re 50-plus you can’t get away with what you could when you were younger. **Sweats and a hoodie** looked cool then, now you look like you’re unwell. Same goes with ironing and dry cleaning—time to grow up and just do it!” —*Ms. Bruhn*