

## Vietnamese Styles Past and Present

### LE Thi (Vietnam)

In Vietnam's tradition, when going out, women wear *ao dai* (tight-fitting tunic). This tunic which dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has become a national costume for women.

In the past, women in big cities wore the *ao dai* tailored with the upper part tightened to fit women's torso. The *ao dai* was buttoned from the neck down to the waist before extending from the waist down to have two slits on both sides to form back and front flaps. The length of the *ao dai* was varied, depending mostly on the trends during a given period. (At present, this dress is very long). In old times, the *ao dai* was in a loose-fitting style. Tailors then tightened the fit in order to reveal much of the women's bust and show their slender waists as seen in the current *ao dai* (Photos 1 and 2). The summer *ao dai* was tailored with delicate fabrics, while the winter *ao dai* was tailored with woolsens or coloured velvet. Usually, the *ao dai* was worn over silk pantaloons with plain white or black colours.

I remember that I had been forbidden to wear blouses when going out. So even at the age of 11 and 12, I wore the *ao dai* over plain white pantaloons when going to school or going out with friends. In the past, pantaloons with plain black colours were worn by women in rural areas only. In rural areas, women wore the *ao dai* that appeared to have two flaps with slits on both sides and the front flaps loosely tied at their waist. As the two front flaps were unbuttoned, women wore a plain white halter top (yem) underneath together with a white or coloured silk tie belt. The dress was worn over a black loose skirt (Photo 3).

Nowadays, the *ao dai* is rarely worn in daily activities. It is mostly used for formal occasions (including the lunar traditional Tet festival, weddings, funerals, meetings, and formal receptions, etc...). The *ao dai* is still tailored in the old looser-fitting style using coloured or adorned fabrics. Be collared or collarless, the dress, with two broader flaps, emphasizes women's torso (Photo 4). When attending meetings or receptions, women wear trouser-suit and blouses tailored in different styles. For working, they wear a blouse over trousers (Photos 5 and 6). Young girls prefer western fashions. At home, women wear the combination of daywear, consisting of sleeved or sleeveless blouses and lightweight long pants. In the past, the blouse appeared to have two front

flaps buttoned in the middle. It was often seen that each flap was sewn with a small patch pocket. The blouse was previously made of plain white fabrics and the long pants was made of plain black or white silk. Today, this sort of clothes is made of coloured fabrics.

Besides women's main clothes, the palm-leaf conical hat was popularly worn by both city and peasant women. Presently, many women in rural areas still wear conical hats. However, they prefer cloth caps or palm-leaf caps (Photo 9). In the past, women used to wear wooden clog sandals. Now, they turn to leather sandals and cloth shoes. Accessories also play a role in women's fashions. For example, rings, necklaces and bracelets made of gold or silver were commonly worn by women in the old times. Nowadays, women are offered various choices of jewelry in terms of styles, materials and prices.

Regarding hairstyles, women in the old time often let their hair grow long then pulled it into a bun style behind their head. For girls, they let down their hair or held it with a hair tie to the back of their head. In many cases, women rolled their hair inside a fabric handkerchief or a velvet scarf and let a pony tail out. They then scrolled the arranged hair around the head and wore a black square-shaped scarf over their head to hide their done hair (Photos 7 and 8). Nowadays, this hairstyle is found commonly only in elder women living in rural areas. While elder women in big cities have their hair cut short or curled, girls prefer a short straight layered hairstyle.

In Conclusion, Vietnamese fashion continues to evolve from past to present. In the old time, women used to sew their own clothes themselves and only went to the tailor for making the *ao dai*. At present, women still go to the tailor for making the *ao dai* or trouser-suit. They are also very interested in ready-to-wear clothes sold at fashion shops. Shopping is now one of the favourite activities of women of all ages although it is time-consuming affair. Window-shopping is also preferred greatly by women and has become one of their hobbies. As fashions change rapidly, shopping becomes a daily activity of most women, especially young ones, contributing not only to the economy but also to the Vietnamese clothes tradition.



Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3



Photo 4



Photo 5



Photo 6



Photo 7



Photo 8



Photo 9