



Figure 6-29. Without a designer label on the patch pocket of their jeans, many disco patrons were refused admission. Ad 1980.

Saturday Night Fever defined this cultural phenomenon with cynical characters who were keenly preoccupied with their youth, looks, and wardrobes. Was the movie an example of art imitating life or vice versa? Night spots and dance clubs began to admit only those who were appropriately dressed for the scene, which, along with anything that glittered and sparkled, included skintight designer-label jeans for both women and men. (Figure 6-29.) Disco fever had been fueled by a huge segment of consumers: the baby boomers, most of whom were in their twenties at the time. In response to the demand, the American fashion industry cranked out the costumes for their nighttime play.

American Fashion Style since 1980

Following the U.S. presidential election of 1980, the fashion industry took its cue from the West Coast couple who took up residence in the White House. Not only were Ronald Reagan and his second wife, Nancy, from California, they were genuine Hollywood. The Reagan "court" included many of the country's best-known glitterati, and after the modest simplicity of Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter, the fashion industry anticipated a return to flair and ostentation.

Calvin Klein recalled that everyone on Seventh Avenue expected "that glamour would be back and we'd be doing glam evening dresses to show it off . . . because the Reagans are Californian and California is pretty showy."³²

In actuality, two trends in American fashion coursed through the first years of the decade simultaneously. Luxurious exhibitionism returned to fashion, inspired by a style-conscious First Lady who enjoyed showcasing fashions with her size 8 figure, coupled with the costume tableaux in prime-time television soaps such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. (Figure 6-30.) Designers such as Maryll Lanvin, Jean-Louis Scherrer, and Paul-Louis Orrier led the way with formal, luxurious, and abundantly decorated creations. "Unabashed extravagance, whether manifested in wearing a couture-calibre ball gown to shoot pool or in piling on dollar strands of pearls à la Madonna, suited the moment," summarized fashion historian Caroline Milbank.³³

In contrast to the voluptuous styles of the Reagan circle and the Dynastyites was the strong current of conservatism in mainstream fashion at the same time. Despite the perceived glamour of Ronald and Nancy, American fashions responded more emphatically to the palpable ultraconservatism of the Reagan administration: the simplicity of Giorgio Armani's dresses, the clean lines of former architect Gianfranco Ferré's suit separates, the inexpensive materials of Beene Bag coordinates from Geoffrey Beene, the painterly colors of Perry Ellis's sportswear, and the nostalgia of clothing



Figure 6-30. Influenced by the Hollywood couple in the White House and the costume tableaux of prime-time TV soaps, luxurious exhibitionism returned to fashion in the 1980s. Ad 1984.

Figure 6-31. Despite the perceived glamour of the Reagans, most American fashions largely reflected the ultraconservatism of the administration and its chilling effect on society. Koret ad 1984, Leslie Faye ad 1985.



stylist Ralph Lauren. Advertising by American ready-to-wear makers followed the lead of the homegrown designers with minimalist ad layouts and static photo compositions. (Figure 6-31.)

Even by the late 1980s, *Vogue* was hard-pressed to gush over anything new for the fall collections. In 1987, one editor explained, “our view of the season is slanted a particular way . . . that the best of what’s new has to fit different criteria today”; the “starting point” for this new criteria was “with clothes that are minimal, low-key, almost uniform in their simplicity.”³⁴ In other words, no significant fashion changes had occurred since the decade began (except the addition of shorter skirt lengths to the variety of hemlines already in play). The following year saw more of the same. Among the designers interviewed by *Vogue*, Romeo Gigli stated, “I do not go in for dramatic revolutions in style. I tend to reinvent around an old theme.” Echoing this thought, designer Azzedine Alaïa said, “My collection never really changes.”³⁵

Following the conclusion of Reagan’s second term in 1988, George Bush was elected president. Since he had been Reagan’s vice president and closely linked with the conservatism of that administration, historians often refer to the two as one entity: the Reagan-Bush years. First Lady Barbara Bush was a large-size grandmother who often made fun of her sensible shoes and lack of designer labels in her wardrobe. Hence, the fashion industry had no political or social drama to inspire and generate any significant changes as the 1990s dawned.

As at the end of the Depression, when styles and silhouettes were unchanged but color provided fashion newness, so too emerged fashions in the nineties. “Color is the new luxury item,” said designer Isaac Mizrahi in 1990 with an eye to French designer Christian Lacroix’s “powerful brights.”³⁶ Jewel tones and startling combinations of fuchsias, reds, and oranges were applied to the same styles of women’s dresses, suits, and separates that had been produced during the preceding several years. In trying to figure out the “Paris dictates” of 1991, *Vogue* writer Suzy Menkes assured women that “short and tight is definitely out.”³⁷ The following year, *Vogue*