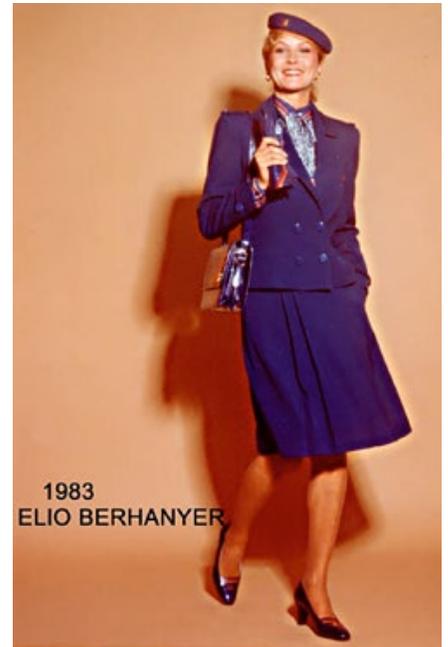


Flair in the Air

Flight attendant uniforms carry fashion to dazzling new heights. BY DEBRA BOKUR



When today's travelers hear the word "runway," it's likely in connection with takeoffs and landings rather than haute couture. But not so long ago, the word applied equally to Champagne-popping designer shows and air travel. Back before trekking shoeless through security was compulsory, high heels were standard fare for the growing legions of flight attendants who not only promised to keep passengers safe above the clouds but who also dressed for the occasion.

During the early days of passenger flight, while echoes of military connections still reverberated through the rarified air above the clouds, pilots and flight crew most often wore military uniforms, and flight attendant outfits bore the same no-nonsense lines and creases. Many of the women attending the needs of passengers were nurses, possessing skills useful for dealing with airsickness and earaches.

Later, during the 1960s and 1970s, flight attendants — known as air hostesses — were elevated to the status of jetsetters, fully on par with supermodels and popular actresses. Their designer attire evolved as an elemental component of that powerful image, enhanced by tall, come-hither boots; Dior scarves; and stylish hairdos peeking from beneath the brims of bespoke hats crafted by eminent milliners.

At United Airlines, California designer William Travilla introduced 1965–1968 summer uniforms hailed as "cheerleader" style, thanks to the flared skirt. The outfit featured white gloves and navy pumps, while above the waistline white blouses with rounded necklines and an ascot drape set the frame for jaunty, sugar scoop-style hats. From 1968 to 1970, Hollywood designer Jean Louis received a \$3 million contract — the largest airline uniform contract to date — to create swinging, London mod styles for United flight attendants featuring knee-high boots, four different double-knit A-line dresses, coats and hats with hints of Jackie Kennedy Onassis.

On the other side of the Atlantic, legendary Parisian designer Marie-Louise Carven, founder of French couture house Carven, created the uniforms for Scandinavian Airlines worn from 1965 to 1971. Fresh new looks created by Dior in 1971 and Calvin Klein in 1983 followed. Iberia sourced the design talents of Pedro Rodriguez, the legendary Manuel Pertegaz and Elio Berhanyer, who designed multiple uniforms for Iberia's crews. Today's sleek, elegant look is the work of Adolfo Domínguez.

Not a single curve-hugging skirt or fitted jacket has been accidental. It's Advertising 101 that sex is a great sales tool, and the airline industry discovered it could increase the power of its mes-

DECADES OF DESIGN:

Historic Iberia uniforms

PHOTOS: © IBERIA

sage with some artfully applied eyeliner and a shapely silhouette. Savvy airline executives found if the smart, multilingual young woman serving drinks and tidying bathrooms also happened to look great in a thoughtfully tailored dress, it was a win-win for travelers and companies competing to attract passengers away from ocean liners and into the friendly skies.

The plan to use sex and glamour to sell seats was both genius and effective. Airlines chose beautiful candidates on the basis of poise, demeanor, looks, shape and size; and flight attendants became — literally — the poster girls for the world's new generation of high flyers. Photos from the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum archives document the rapid transformation of the cabin crew serving Boeing's 80A craft from sensible shoes and military-esque uniforms in 1930 to TWA's 1939 posters boasting its transcontinental route featuring a flight attendant in a short skirt flashing both a seductive smile *and* plenty of knee.

Cruising altitudes and hemlines rose measurably higher, and in 1965 Braniff International Airways took things to another dimension with the "Air Strip" advertising campaign. The television ad (still viewable via YouTube) depicts a stewardess unbuttoning her coat, slipping off her jacket and moving through a series of outfits, all to a background of striptease music while a voiceover explains that at Braniff, "even an airline hostess should look like a girl." The message was clear: Not only did a Braniff hostess look great in and out of her smartly tailored uniform, she was a superwoman who'd also be happy to serve you a hot meal and your choice of beverage.

Lest you leap to conclusions about the gender of the advertising professionals behind this stunningly successful campaign, it was whiz ad executive Mary Wells Lawrence — part of the team at Jack Tinker and Partners — who created Braniff's "The end of the plain plane" drive and who brought designer Emilio Puccio

on board to conceive new uniforms for cabin and flight crews. Braniff flight attendants even wore a plastic space helmet to and from the plane to keep their coiffures free of flyaway strands. The campaign's blistering success led Wells Lawrence to launch her own agency, Wells Rich Greene, acquiring Pan Am and Trans World Airlines as clients.

Provocative pleas to potential customers included the multi-million-dollar "Fly Me" campaign launched by National Airlines in 1971. A series of print ads featured a beguiling stewardess with the words, "I'm [Laura/Cheryl/Jo]. Fly Me." Whether this appealed equally to passengers of all sexes was less clear, but gender bias was addressed subtly by the line-up of male and female cabin and flight crew singing during Continental's "We'll shake our tail for you" television commercials.

During much of the 1980s and 1990s, cabin attire took a step backward in the direction of more utilitarian outfits in subdued colors. The bright, geometric and flowered leggings and the acid-drenched colors reflecting popular styles in London and New York were gone, replaced by darker neutrals and no-frills accessories. The sweethearts-of-the-sky allure had been replaced by fare battles and competitive ticket offers.

Today color is definitely back, from the crimson jackets and lime-colored scarves that accent the wardrobes created by Portuguese designers Manuel Alves and José Manuel Gonçalves for TAP Portugal's crews to the brilliant ruby, fuchsia and French navy colors conceived by Australian designer Martin Grant that define the wardrobe at Qantas. Airlines seem intent on actively nurturing the runway connection, right up to Alitalia's recent unveiling of elegantly sophisticated new uniforms re-imagined from past classics by Milan-based designer Ettore Bilotta, also the creative force responsible for updating the attire of Etihad Airways' glamorously

FLIGHTS OF FANCY: *Finnair uniforms over the years*

PHOTOS: © FINNAIR



clad cabin attendants in 2015.

“Finnair uniforms for cabin crew members have always been on top of the latest fashions and trends,” says Noora Rajala, a Finnair flight attendant currently assisting on a project to build an archive of Finnair’s past uniforms. “A big reason for this is that the company gave the opportunity for Finnish trendsetters to work with Finnair to design uniforms. All of the designers working on Finnair uniforms have been well-known in Finland: Kari Lepistö from 1969 to 1973, Marimekko in 1976, Vuokko in 1973 and Marianne Sten in 1981. The latest uniforms that we wear now are by Ritva-Liisa Pohjalainen.” Even accessories had big names attached, including Björn Weckström, who designed the Finnhostess silver brooch in 1969, and Dior, who designed the scarves worn in the mid-1970s.

When it comes to standout color, Aeroflot deserves the limelight. In February 2013, the current crimson cabin crew uniforms (introduced in 2010 and designed in Russia by Julia Bunakova and Evgeny Khokhlov) were voted the most stylish in Europe according to a survey organized by the global travel search site Skyscanner. The vibrant reds are offset by white gloves and tipped hats that offer an elegant and coherent blend of past and present.

They’re a far cry from the first Aeroflot uniforms, debuted in 1954. “Professional Soviet designers were participating in its development,” explains Aleksandr F. Lukashin, head, International PR Division, Aeroflot. “It consisted of a navy jacket, white blouse and midi-skirt. The look was completed by a dark blue forage cap. In the late 1960s, accents in Aeroflot uniforms shifted from elegance toward convenience. Usually, [the] Ministry of Civil Aviation took the final decision about what and how [a] Soviet stewardess should wear.”

The uniform was redesigned again before the 1980 Olympic Games and the opening of the new Terminal 2 in Sheremetyevo International Airport. Lukashin says the 1980 uniform set included two types of skirts — a dark blue one, just below the knee, and a midi skirt with one-sided pleats in front, made of lightly checkered gray and dark blue fabric with a dark blue jacket, white blouse and apricot apron.

“The uniform was very practical and looked elegant and lasted for a long time,” offers Lukashin. “But by the end of the 1980s,



the Aeroflot uniform had been swapped seven times. Sometimes a new outfit existed for one season only.”

In 1995 distinguished Russian designer Valentin Yudashkin created a new red and black version of the Aeroflot uniform. He was the first designer to add trousers to the usual women’s outfit. In the 2000s, famous Russian designer Victoriya Andreyanova revamped Aeroflot uniforms.

Concept is also key. The rich colors and stunning fabrics of the uniforms at China Airlines are a credit to their designer, William Chang, the recipient of 11 Golden Horse Awards for Best Costume and an Oscar nomination for Best Costume Design. The new uniforms honor the traditional *qipao* dresses worn by royalty during the Qing Dynasty, reinterpreted for both sexes and incorporating modern functionality and comfort. Blue decorative lines and sapphire-hued footwear pull from the airline’s corporate color palette.

Have the days of airborne glamour returned? Perhaps. But believing in this possibility may require you to cover your eyes while walking past the hordes of passengers in pajama bottoms waiting at the world’s airport gates and focus firmly on the sophisticated, designer-clad cabin crew waiting to welcome you aboard.

THEN AND NOW:
Aeroflot uniforms through the years

PHOTOS: © AEROFLOT

Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum
airandspace.si.edu