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A New Stretch for Fashion

Designers Bring Back '80s-Style Leggings On the Heels of Popular 'Skinny' Jeans

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The next big fashion trend is destined to have legs.

Designers are betting women will make room in their closets for 1980s-style leggings, stretch pants and opaque pantyhose. As New York Fashion Week gets under way today, these skin-tight styles will be the focus of many designers' fall collections, including Narciso Rodriguez, Nanette Lepore, Donna Karan, Tracy Reese and Wolfgang Joop.




The leggy look is part of a "mushroom" silhouette that designers are pushing for next fall -- fuller on top and slim on the bottom. On top, designers will be showing "dolman-sleeve" sweaters that are wide on the upper arm but narrow at the wrist, tunic dresses, knee-length peacoats and long jackets.

The embellished and colorful "bohemian look for the past season is so over," says Ms. Lepore. "It's time for a cleaner touch."

How widely the new look will catch on remains to be seen. Boomers may shudder at the memory of '80s-style leggings so tight they looked sprayed on, paired with oversized sweaters or sloppy T-shirts. But designers say they are going for a sophisticated look this time around. Back then, leggings were made of cotton, spandex and nylon and were prone to pilling and losing their stretch, especially in the knees.

Now, leggings, stretch pants and jeans use improved fabric technology that retains their stretch. Having perfected figure-molding "shapewear" undergarments, manufacturers are offering innovative blends, such as microfiber, cashmere, rayon and nylon, which give leggings and stretch pants a structured and polished look that they didn't have previously. (Even leg

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The skinny on the latest fashion trend: Hue's opaque tights

warmers -- for the street, not the gym -- are making a comeback, thanks to additional Lycra sewn into the top and bottom to prevent them from falling down.)

One promising sign for retailers: The look has been easing its way into the mainstream for more than a year. It follows tight and slim-to-the-ankle "skinny jeans" worn by hip, young women in London and Manhattan who tucked them into short and tall boots.

Now, tight jeans have "morphed into skinny leggings," says Julie Gilhart, Barneys New York fashion director. Last fall, Marc Jacobs, Anna Sui, and Dolce and Gabbana were among the designers selling tight pants, both long and cropped, and leggings. The trend was in full swing on the haute couture runways in Paris last month, including white mini-dresses over black skinny pants and boots at Chanel and shiny, footless tights under billowy dresses at Jean Paul Gaultier.

"For me, the skinny look is a directional change. It just feels right again," says Mr. Rodriguez, who will show pants in stretch fabrics with leaner legs and voluminous coats and jackets on Tuesday.

Hosiery makers are hoping the leggings trend will coax bare-legged women back into hosiery for the first time in nearly a decade. With women dressing more casually in capri pants with bare legs, hosiery sales had dropped 12% to \$2.76 billion in 2005 from 2003, with sales of tights plunging 26% to \$109.9 million in 2005 from 2003, according to NPD Group Inc., market researchers.

The leggings trend already has boosted sales at hosiery maker Kayser Roth Corp. where sales of its Hue brand "footless tights" tripled in the last quarter of 2005 from a year ago, says Alison Hessert, Hue's spokeswoman. For Fashion Week, both Hue and Wolford will supply designers with free tights and leggings for their runway shows. Hue models will dress in black parkas and miniskirts to hand out "Fashion Week Survival" kits with navy sweater tights to show guests on Monday.



Getty Images

Stretch pants from Chanel

"I love mousey-gray opaque stockings -- a leg that is sexier than last year, when I had no stockings in my show," says Mr. Joop, whose Wunderkind-label runway show is Thursday. The effect, he says, "looks like a strong, modern, practical-thinking woman, who is walking, not riding in a limousine."

The return of leggings is a classic example of the fashion cycle repeating itself. When designer jeans were launched around 1978, styles became progressively tighter over the years, leading to the Guess brand "Marilyn" jeans with zippers at the ankles. Stretch fabrics exploded with the 1980s' exercise boom, when leggings, white athletic shoes and baggy tops replaced jeans as the casual uniform for most women.



Donna Karan International

Donna Karan's long jacket and leggings for her upcoming fall collection

In the 1990s, flared-leg jeans and wider pants came into style and over the past four years, \$100-and-up low-

rise, boot-cut "premium denim" caught fire. Designers infused them with stretch and in recent seasons introduced more styles that were narrower in the legs.

As more women wanted to show off their embellished, colorful boots, they began rolling up their jeans -- a look that celebrities such as Jessica Simpson helped popularize.

For Ms. Karan, putting leggings and tights on the runway allows her to come full circle to the launch of her company in 1985. "A bodysuit and heavy tights were the foundation of Donna's collections," remembers Patti Cohen, her longtime spokeswoman. For fall, Ms. Karan is showing ribbed tights, wool leggings and skinny pants "for the first time in years," Ms. Cohen says. The collection will include longer jackets meant to be worn over the leggings.



Wunderkind

Leggings by Jean Paul Gaultier



AP

Sketch of opaque tights by Wunderkind by Wolfgang Joop

And while retailers hope that trendy customers will splurge on a vast number of the new styles, more women are likely to make a few strategic purchases to update their wardrobe rather than revamp it, says Nina Stotler, a consultant at fashion-trend forecaster Peclers Paris North America in New York. Leggings and opaque stockings can be had for under \$20 -- making them an easy, but inexpensive, purchase. For example, Hue's cotton, spandex, nylon and microfiber "sweater" tights are \$18 while Wolford's "velvet-deluxe" nylon and elastane leggings are \$38.

"The narrow-leg pants they are talking about for the fall seem pretty cool, and I bet stores will have them for a lot less than they are selling those \$150 designer jeans now," says Debbie Turner, a 41-year-old, middle-school teacher in Atlanta.

Retailers aren't overlooking mature women who may be intimidated to wear leggings and miniskirts. **Saks Inc.**'s Saks Fifth Avenue plans to position the styles as an updated look reminiscent of Ms. Karan's earlier designs. "A woman can put on black opaques with a longer jacket or a slightly shorter skirt just above her knee, and she's feeling covered up, but she's still part of a generation," says Michael Fink, women's fashion director at Saks Fifth Avenue.

Designers also are pushing more than just leggings and stretch pants in order to cater to today's eclectic tastes. Ms. Lepore, for one, is hedging her bets this fall. She says she is "playing with the volume" on the runway, with new wide-leg pants with fitted tops and as well as pencil leg pants and tops with fuller sleeves. "In the real world, women still want options," she says.

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