

# Eva Perón as a Model for Class-Based Femininity

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Figure 2



Figure 3

## Tailored Suits and the Humble 'Woman of the People':

As one of Argentina's first female political figures, Eva Perón's iconographic precedent was limited. Her fashion shifted into a more elegant, less flashy style upon travelling abroad. European influence brought her to wear simpler, well-tailored suits for her role as president of the Eva Perón Foundation. The adoption of a business suit became iconic in itself, as it represented Eva Perón's humbleness, her authenticity, commitment to her people, and Argentina's collective struggles. Coupled with her salute, where she raised one or both arms as if to embrace her people, this more conservative way of dressing added to the religious symbolism within the regime. It led to her nickname "Santa Evita" and a Christ-like propagandist image of Evita as the mediator between the common laypeople and the almost "Holy" Juan Domingo Perón, her husband and Argentina's president from 1946 to 1955, and later from 1973 to 1974.



Figure 4



Figure 5

**Lavish Dress and Occupying the Oligarchic Space:**  
 In official discourse, Evita and Peronism denounced the oligarchy as arrogant and "anti-Argentine." Her social justice efforts were in direct contrast with the "old" ways of charity, and so when Evita dressed in designer brands like Dior and Balenciaga, she did so to occupy the symbolic space of the oligarchs. She purchased expensive European clothing, dressing in a hyper-feminine style, characterized by fur coats and luxurious gowns for national and international formal events, galas and banquets. Having been born into poverty, her fashion was bold and demonstrated a rags-to-riches journey of class ascent. This style was not a betrayal of the working-class Argentines she represented since she saw herself as the "embodiment of their most cherished dreams and her proper role as their champion." Her journey and her dress were a model for what Argentina could accomplish when everyone worked together, through Peronism, to transform the nation. She represented the masses invading government spaces, symbolically linking her as the keeper of Argentina just as women were keepers of the household.



Figure 6



Figure 1

Eva Perón (1919-1952), one of the most-studied and most-influential public figures of twentieth-century Argentina, is surrounded in myth. This project outlines Evita's embodiment of Peronism through her fashion to understand the rationale behind critics using her body, hair, makeup and dress as a target for their critiques of the Peronist state. I study Evita as an ideological as well as aesthetic icon of womanhood in popular imagination.

The way Eva Perón presented herself, in mannerisms and dress, altered popular representations of class and social status. She used her "double personality" of Evita, the humble and benevolent social justice advocate, and Eva Perón, the savvy politician and First Lady, to challenge notions of the feminine domestic as a foil to the masculine political. Labelled a saint, harpy, Madre, witch and the Spiritual Leader of the Nation, she remains a polarizing figure. Childless and facing death at age thirty-three, her image was compared to those of Catholic saints as she acted as a motherly figure to the *descamisados*, (the "shirtless-ones," or Perón's supporters). Her fashion personified the work she did and became iconic within the Peronist regime.

## Future Evitas in Children's Textbooks: Between Ideological Conditioning and Fashion Trends:

Evita's image featured heavily in children's school textbooks both during her time as First Lady (1946-1952) posthumously. A common image is her performing her iconic salute in Heaven, blonde hair neatly pinned with her plain, tailored suit. Other photos depict her as youthful and feminine, "the Spiritual Mother of Argentine children," wherein it is Evita's body that is propaganda. She and Juan Perón both feature in parental roles and wholesome situations. Critics and parents alike complained of Eva's picture as serving no purpose but to glorify Perón and his government. The young girls her image influenced, were expected to then one day become voting Peronists and continue Perón's legacy.

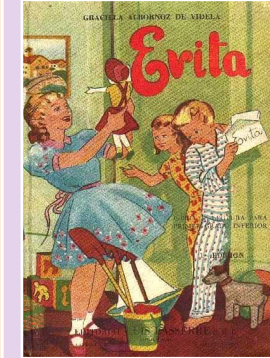


Figure 7



Figure 8

## Evita in Popular Memory:

Despite appearing on the cover of *Time* twice, once in 1947 and then again as part of their *100 Women of the Year* campaign, then named "Woman of the People," the Anglophone world now remembers Eva Perón primarily through Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's 1978 rock opera *Evita*, made into a film by Alan Parker in 1996. Madonna's role in the film, specifically her rendition of the song "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina," intersected Argentine and Hollywood ideals of femininity, redefining what it meant to *act* like Evita. The historical First Lady tailored her personality to suit the needs of her politics. Between Evita, the Spiritual Leader of Argentina, and Eva Perón, a lavish and conservative First Lady, she moved between motherly feminine and politically masculine, within the constraints of personal ideals of femininity. As the song "Rainbow High" succinctly puts it, "the people need to adore me, so Christian Dior me."



Figure 9

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