



Season of the sleeve

Kelly Killoren Bensimon, author of "American Style", ex-model and thirtysomething mother of two, is most generally found leaning over her holiday table or gracing a charity fundraiser in a body-conscious Azzedine Alaïa sheath. This season, however, she says she has surprised herself by falling in love with a black silk blouse from Tibi. The blouse was given to her by her boyfriend but really, she admits, it's the billowing bell sleeves she loves.

It is the season of the sleeve - balloon, bishop or bell no matter. Consider it this year's equivalent of last year's skinny jean, only much more wearable and body-friendly. As the weather gets colder, the parties hotter, and the pressure to don an upper-arm revealing number higher, the blouse, with its built-in volume becomes an ever-more attractive alternative. But which to choose?

A quick sleeve tutorial: the balloon, aka the leg-of-mutton, sports a large puff at the shoulder and top of the arm, narrowing toward the wrist; see Alber Elbaz's bright dresses for Lanvin. The bishop sleeve, sometimes called the poet sleeve, is a long sleeve flared from elbow to wrist and then gathered into a cuff, as seen on catwalks from Chanel to Dolce & Gabbana, Oscar de la Renta and 3.1 Phillip Lim. Finally, the bell sleeve can be either long or short but is always narrow at the top of the arm and flares out at the lower edge - yup, like a bell.

Of all the above, the bell might just be the easiest to wear. It has volume, but not too much, so it's less likely to make a heftier frame appear dumpty or overwhelm a petite figure. As Beth Blake, one of the duo behind Thread Social, a popular line of day and cocktail dress, points out, "There's a lot of fabric in some of the big sleeves out there. You need to have a lot of arm and leg to carry them off."

At their best, bell sleeves can conceal a flabby upper arm, magically slim down a torso (volume in the sleeve draws away attention from the midsection and makes the waist look small by comparison) and inject an outfit with a healthy dose of either chic (imagine Jackie in one of her prim little coats) or cool (think 1970s Biba girls and Bianca Jagger in Ossie Clark). For good examples see Allegra Hicks' green silk velvet coat with bell sleeves flaring from above the elbow to the wrist; Vanessa Bruno's brown wool funnel-necked coat with pleated bell sleeve; Anna Molinari's black coat with short, puffy bells; and Fendi's black ribbed sweater, updated with bell-like sleeves.

Of course, there are tricks to wearing a bell well. Wichy Hassan, creative director of Miss Sixty, who designed a host of contemporary 1970's-inspired bell sleeved pieces in fabrics like silver lurex for the label's spring '08 collection suggests "mixing pieces and influences from different eras."

Abi Ferrin, a Dallas-based designer, likes bell sleeves on short dresses that showcase a lot of leg,

while Finola Hughes, host of How Do I Look? on the Style Network, suggests layering bell sleeved-blouses with chunky knits. "Make everything really simple so the sleeve really does stand out," Hughes counsels. Designer Anya Hindmarch recommends wearing bell sleeved tunics "over a long sleeve t-shirt for a more casual look on the weekend" - which happens to be the way New York philanthropist Heather Mnuchin plans to wear her recently purchased bell-sleeved cashmere sweaters from Biba and Calypso.

Style
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They are this year's equivalent of last year's skinny jean, only more body-friendly, reports Tatiana Boncampagni



Arms' length: (from left) Oscar de la Renta; Allegra Hicks; Lanvire; Phillip Lim

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