November 1967

The Metropolitan Museum of Art BULLETIN

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Fashion, Art, and Beauty

JAMES LAVER

Everybody knows what fashion is; it hits us in the eye every time we go into the street. And most people are convinced that they know what art is, although they would be hard put to define it. Beauty then! For it is the obvious purpose of art to produce beauty; and it is the obvious purpose of fashion to make women beautiful. Fashion, art, beauty must surely mean the same thing, or so nearly the same thing that we can swallow them all in one gulp and rest content.

Yet when we begin to consider the matter we find it is not so simple. The three terms shift their shape and change their meaning. Let us take beauty first. Myself when young did eagerly frequent the aesthetic philosophers in search of some acceptable definition. I learned from St. Thomas Aquinas that "beauty is that which, being seen, pleases"; a dictum that fails to distinguish between a painting by Titian and a jam tart. And, more important, leaves open the pertinent question: pleases whom, and for how long? From Ruskin I gathered that beauty was an essential attribute of "Nature" and that "truth to Nature" was the goal of art. But when we examine the paintings Ruskin admired we find that by "truth to Nature" he meant truth to local color, ignoring altogether the intervening layers of air that turn a brown hill in the foreground to a blue mountain in the far distance. Ruskin was also of the opinion that art should have an uplifting effect and teach a moral lesson; and this doctrine was pushed to the extreme by Tolstoi, who came in the end to believe that any picture of a lifeboat was necessarily a good picture.

Whistler and his school repudiated all such notions, and so did the great French impressionists, for what moral lesson does a landscape by Monet teach? Then came Clive Bell with his theory of "Significant Form," which turns out to be an argument in a circle. "Why do you like that picture?" "Because it gives me an aesthetic sensation." "Why does it give you an aesthetic sensation?" "Because it has Significant Form." "How do you know it has Significant Form?" "Because it gives me an aesthetic sensation." There was no salvation here for the earnest inquirer. And, say some other theorists, perhaps the end of art is not beauty but expressiveness; this makes the cloud of unknowing more impenetrable still, for one is compelled to ask, expressive of what?

When we turn to fashion the problem becomes even more complicated. Let us consider the word in its narrow sense as meaning the clothes people (especially women) wear. "What a beautiful dress," we say, when we see a woman in the latest creation of some great couturier. It is therefore a fashionable dress, which means it is attractive in the context of contemporary taste.

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Rita de Acosta Lydig, by Baron de Meyer (1869-1946), American. Photograph, 16⅜ x 12¼ inches. Gift of Mercedes de Acosta, 67.639.1

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Photograph, 1967, by Richard Avedon

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The Letter Before Waterloo, by William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863), British. Frontispiece of Vanity Fair (1848). The New York Public Library

But now a very disconcerting thing happens. The dress we thought so beautiful goes "out of fashion," and then we do not think it beautiful at all. In fact, we think it hideous. It seems to us outrageously ugly, and we cannot imagine how or why anybody ever thought it anything else. It would be easy to multiply examples, but perhaps one may suffice. The first edition of *Vanity Fair* was illustrated by Thackeray himself and, in his foreword, he remarks that "of course" he could not bear to clothe his Amelia in the "hideous" clothes of 1815 (which, after all, was his plain duty), and he calmly proceeds to clothe her, and Becky Sharp too, in the mode of 1838.

An amusing game can be played with the family album. Show any young woman a photograph of her own mother in the dress she wore when *she* was young, and the modern girl will cry "Hideous!" with complete conviction. Go on turning the pages until you come to a photograph of the girl's grandmother. The reaction is not so violent; the clothes worn are likely to be dismissed as "quaint." Great-grandmother's clothes are likely to seem more attractive, "romantic" even; and great-great-grandmother's clothes will in all probability be pronounced "beautiful." They have, in short, entered the realm of "historical costume" and we question them no more.

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART *Bulletin*

VOLUME XXVI, NUMBER 3 NOVEMBER 1967

Published monthly from October to June and quarterly from July to September. Copyright © 1967 by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fifth Avenue and 82nd Street, New York, N. Y. 10028. Second class postage paid at New York, N. Y. Subscriptions $5.00 a year. Single copies fifty cents. Sent free to Museum members. Four weeks' notice required for change of address. Back issues available on microfilm from University Microfilms, 313 N. First Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan. Associate Editor in Charge of Publications: Leon Wilson. Editor-in-chief of the *Bulletin*: Katharine H. B. Stoddert; Editors of the *Bulletin*: Suzanne Boorsch, Joan K. Foley, and Anne Preuss; Designer: Peter Oldenburg.

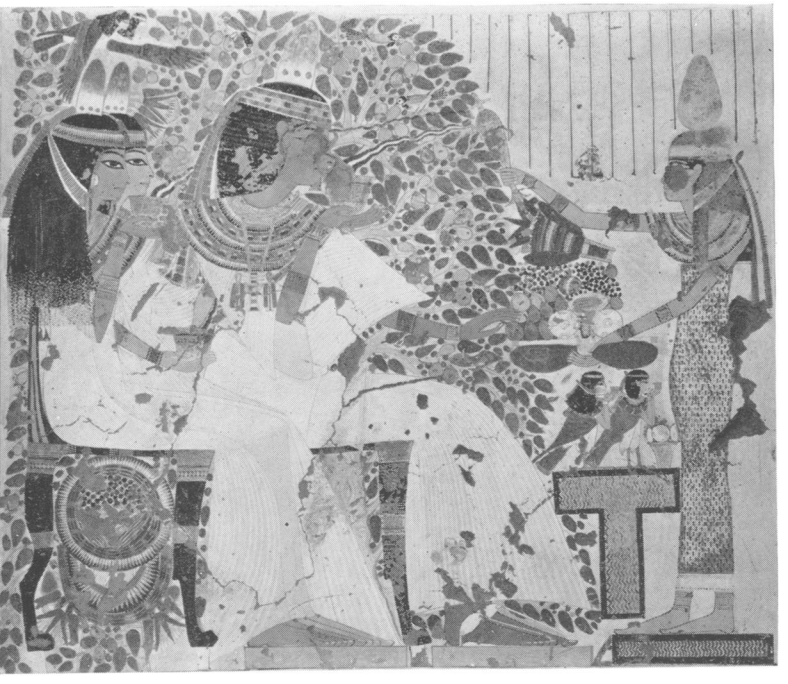
This is surely a most extraordinary state of affairs. If our judgments in the matter are so completely subjective, and subject to a time scale beyond our control, are we justified, when we are looking at clothes, in using the word beauty at all? There is a further complication. Whatever else art may be, it surely involves a certain harmony in the parts. But mere harmony is not enough; it is apt to be dull, or, as Francis Bacon, with his acute insight, put it, "There is no excellent Beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion." This is the exaggeration *à propos* in which some have seen the essence of art. But if art is exaggeration *à propos*, fashion seems very often to be exaggeration *mal à propos*.

If we think that the female body is itself a beautiful object (and only Schopenhauer will disagree with us about this), what are we to think of what fashion has done to it? In the Elizabethan epoch it cut off the legs altogether, so that every woman became a mere torso emerging from a drum. In the early eighteenth century, by means of panniers, it made the female body look extremely wide when seen from the front and extremely narrow when seen from the side. The mid-nineteenth-century crinoline made it seem immensely wide all round. The bustle that followed gave every woman the colossal buttocks of the Hottentot. The early twentieth century sliced her in two at the waist and pushed the upper part several inches out of true. The 1920s abolished the bosom as effectively as previous epochs had abolished the legs.

The psychologists have attempted to explain this by the theory of "the shifting erogenous zone." According to this theory the female body is attractive only within certain limits, indeed at certain seasons, as can be seen among savage tribes whose women go about in a state of nudity. The only way in which it can be made *permanently* attractive is to shut off, so to speak, its total impact and to emphasize one beauty after another. This is exactly what fashion sets out to do. In one period it emphasizes the smallness of the waist, in another the smoothness of the shoulders, in another the grace of the legs. Fashion says: "Look! Here is something you had forgotten about for a decade, or perhaps for a century; here is a form neglected too long, here is a beauty too much concealed."

Fashion is a game of hide-and-seek, played between seduction and modesty, with moves so rapid that, from one minute to another, no one can tell which, or who, is "It." New fashions are always "daring" because our attention is being directed to a part of the female body that, having been hidden for a generation, has been able to accumulate erotic capital and has now all the attraction of novelty; recent fashions are always "dowdy" because our attention is being directed to a beauty that is already familiar and of which we have begun to grow tired. This is all very satisfactory as far as it goes, but it does not seem to have very much to do with art or beauty.

Are we then to throw in the sponge and admit that no purpose is served by attributing either to the clothes people wear? This would seem to be altogether too pessimistic a view. Once a fashion has emerged from the "gap in appreciation" that inevitably follows it (and during this period any judgment we pass upon it is necessarily invalid), once it has passed through the stages we have mentioned and we can look upon it as historical costume, we are surely entitled to call it "beautiful"–if it is.



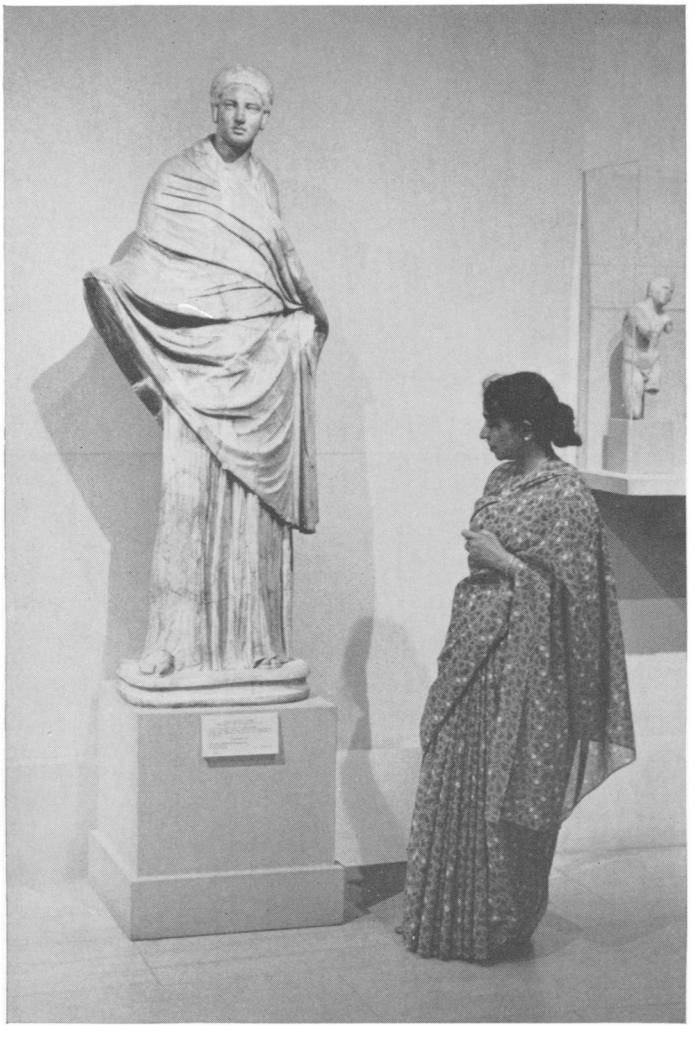
The priest Woserhet and his wife and mother. Tempera copy, by N. de Garis Davies, of a wall painting in the tomb of Woserhet, Thebes, Dynasty XIX (time of Seti I, about 1310 B.C.), 30.4.33

Ashurnasirpal II and an attendant. Relief from the palace of Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 B.C.), Assyrian. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 31.143.4

For it would be to abrogate aesthetic standards altogether not to admit that the clothes of some epochs are beautiful in a sense in which others are not. When we turn over the pages of any well-illustrated history of costume (and there are dozens of such books available today), we find our eye resting with pleasure on a hundred examples of paintings that are not only beautiful in themselves but depict people in what we have no hesitation in calling beautiful clothes.

There is no lack of documentation. In Egyptian wall paintings and bas-reliefs we can admire the close-fitting diaphanous dresses of the court ladies and their wide collars of gold and bright stones. In Assyrian and Babylonian carvings we can see the fringed garments with which both men and women were clothed. In the figurines and frescoes of ancient Crete we see women represented in startlingly modern costumes, with tight waists, flounced skirts, and daring décolletages. One of these creatures in a fragment of a fresco in the Palace of Knossos is so elegant that she is known as "La Parisienne."

The beauty of ancient Greek costume was entirely in the draping of oblongs of woolen cloth, and what effects could be obtained by such simple means a thousand statues testify. Who can deny the dignity of the Roman toga and not marvel at the elaboration of the ladies' headdresses and the simple grace of their flowing gowns? But as yet there is little or no hint of the use of materials rich or beautiful in themselves. With the rise of Byzantium all that is changed. To this day, in the Church of San Vitale at Ravenna, we can see, translated into glittering mosaic, the costumes worn by Justinian and Theodora; the cloth of gold encrusted with gems, the jeweled fibulae, the collars of precious stones, the red leather shoes. But the clothes of both sexes are still draperies; there is no attempt to reveal or to exploit the shape of the human figure.



Roman copy of a Greek statue of the III century B.C. Marble. Gift of Mrs. Frederick F. Thompson, 03.12.9. Photograph: Stephen L. Murphy

The Empress Theodora. Mosaic from the Church of San Vitale, Ravenna. Byzantine, VI century. Photograph: Alinari-Art Reference Bureau

Courtiers with Roses. Wool tapestry, Arras or Tournai, about 1435-1440. 9 feet 7 inches x 10 feet 11¾ inches. Rogers Fund, 09.137.2

Then came the long eclipse of the Dark Ages when the costume of all classes was reduced to its simplest terms. And so it remained until the Crusades introduced the men of western Europe to a degree of luxury and refinement they had never dreamed of. They came back from the Levant with the rich stuffs of Damascus (hence the word damask), with materials patterned with the strange beasts that were to become heraldic emblems, with fine linen and purple cloth enriched with thread of gold. And then, toward the end of the fourteenth century something that we are entitled to call fashion begins to appear.

Portrait of a Lady, by an unknown British painter, XVI century. Oil on wood, 44½ x 34¾ inches. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 11.149.1

It arose in the luxurious courts of France and Burgundy, where, in a single generation, the three main weapons of fashion were discovered. These were: décolletage, tight-lacing, and headdresses of striking design. The veils with which women had concealed their attractiveness for centuries now took on a life of their own, rose on wires and assumed the shapes of steeples and horns and butterflies. They no longer tried to hide the face but to draw attention to it. Devil's work indeed, as the monkish moralists proclaimed; and, if beauty be a snare, no doubt they were right, for some of the late medieval fashions are seductive even to the modern eye.

By comparison, the modes of the sixteenth century seem modest enough, and when we reach the age of Elizabeth most people would agree that the shapes of women's clothes are among the ugliest ever devised. For they almost abolished the female form altogether, and presented the appearance of an icon instead of a woman. The only beauty to be found was in the materials used, which have never perhaps been richer, with glittering brocades, elaborate embroideries, and jewels set along every seam. Added to all this was the fantastic ruff, that strange exaggeration of the simple device of a drawstring at the throat, which none the less is capable of extreme beauty, with its layer upon layer of fine linen edged with lace, putting, as it were, a frame round the face and adding to the hieratic effect of the whole costume.

When the ruff lost its stiffness and fell upon the shoulders, and when the skirts and bodices assumed more natural lines, the result was a very beautiful costume: that worn by the ladies of the Cavaliers of the time of Charles I – and by the Cavaliers themselves. Most people would agree that the 1640s produced some of the most attractive clothes for both men and women in the whole history of costume.

Robert Rich, Earl of Warwick, by Sir Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641), Flemish. 1632-1635. Oil on canvas, 84 x 50½ inches. The Jules S. Bache Collection, 49.7.26

Madame Favart, by François-Hubert Drouais (1727-1775), French. 1757. Oil on canvas, 31½ x 25½ inches. Mr. and Mrs. Isaac D. Fletcher Collection, Bequest of Isaac D. Fletcher, 17.120.210

Portrait of the Artist with Two Pupils, by Adélaïde Labille-Guiard (1749-1803), French. 1785. Oil on canvas, 83 x 59½ inches. Gift of Julia A. Berwind, 53.225.5

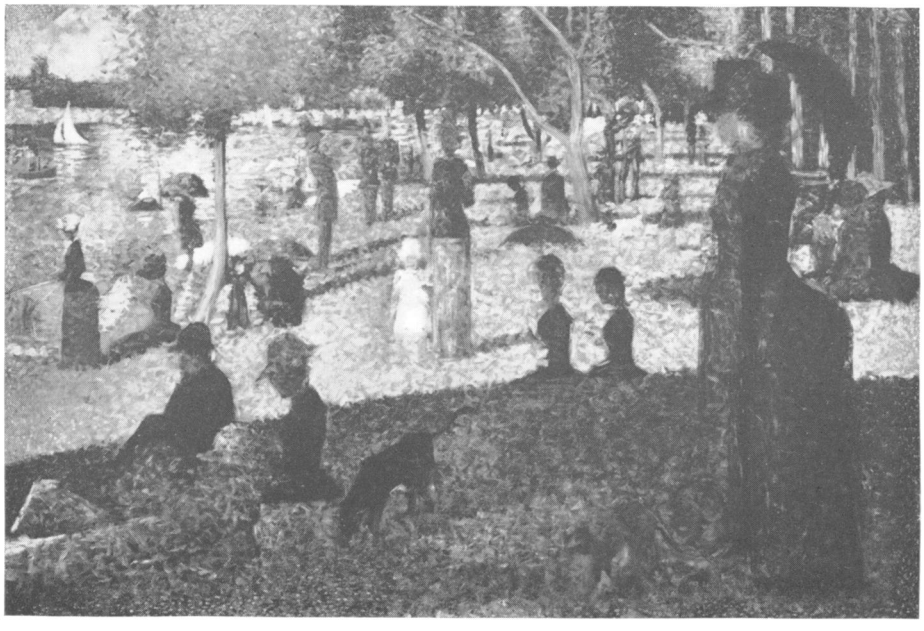
The rest of the century saw a falling off, and another high point of beauty was not reached again until about 1740. How enchanting is any costume *à la Pompadour!* The neat, powdered head, the little bow round the throat, the deep square décolletage, the embroidered stomacher or beribboned corsage, the half-sleeves with their froth of lace, the ample but not distorting skirt, the tiny red-heeled shoes – it is the acme of elegant artificiality, a worthy witness to the stylistic homogeneity of the rococo.

The age of Marie-Antoinette spoils the picture by the excessive size of the headdress, and yet there was a new *désinvolture* in the clothes of the 1780s that is not without its charm. The dresses were less rich, the materials more flimsy, the embroideries more widely spaced. There is a general air of lightness, or rather there would be if it were not for the top-heavy hats.

The Revolution swept it all away, and what emerged afterward was a style that restored harmony and proportion by letting the beauty of the body speak for itself. In spite of Thackeray's opinion, most people today find the Empire gowns, depicted in the newly invented fashion plate, attractive enough. With their straight lines and high waists they at least avoided the absurd exaggerated sleeves of the 1830s and the essential dowdiness of the following decade. And then, in the 1850s, fashion flowered again with the many-flounced skirts that finally became so ample that the crinoline had to be invented to support them.

Madame Desbassayns de Richemont and Her Daughter, Camille, by Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825), French. About 1800. Oil on canvas, 46 x 35¼ inches. Gift of Julia A. Berwind, 53.61.4

Virtue Rewarded: A Booth in Vanity Fair,
by William Makepeace Thackeray
(1811-1863), British. From Vanity Fair
(1848), opposite p. 624. The New York
Public Library

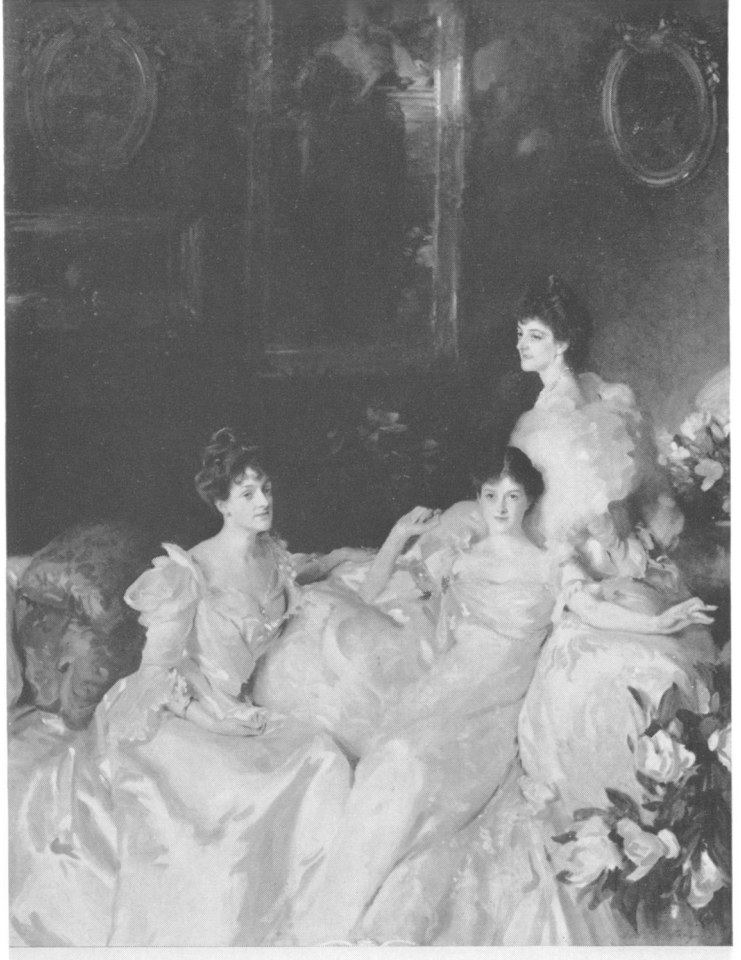


Of course the crinoline was an absurdity, but it gave wide scope to the designer, and surviving sketches by Worth show what a couturier of genius could do with it. Its successor, the bustle, was infinitely less attractive, and it is hard to decide which was the uglier, the bustle of the early seventies or the bustle of 1885. Balloon sleeves in the middle nineties, and perhaps we find them acceptable only because we see them through the eyes of Toulouse-Lautrec.

Madame Charpentier and Her Children, by Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919), French. 1878. Oil on canvas, 60½ x 74⅞ inches. Wolfe Fund, 07.122. Madame Charpentier's dress was designed by Worth

A Sunday Afternoon at the Grande Jatte, by Georges Seurat (1859-1891), French. About 1885. Oil on canvas, 27¾ x 41 inches. Bequest of Samuel A. Lewisohn, 51.112.6

Detail of Madame Thadée Natanson at the Theater, by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901), French. 1895. Gouache on cardboard, whole 24½ x 29½ inches. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard Rodgers, subject to a life estate in the donors, 64.153



The Wyndham Sisters, by John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), American. 1900. Oil on canvas, 9 feet 7 inches x 7 feet ⅛ inch. Wolfe Fund, 27.67

So we come to the swirling skirts and dripping lace and picture hats of *la belle époque*, to be followed by the Oriental fantasies of Paul Poiret. More recent fashions are perhaps too near to us to be the object of any valid judgment. But when we look back over the whole pageant of costume, we can surely agree that there has been much art and much beauty and that fashion has frequently (if not always) given them their chance.

Designs for three dresses. Plate 3 from Paul Iribe, Les Robes de Paul Poiret (Paris, 1908). The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 59.591.2

IS FASHION AN ART?

NORMAN NORELL
LOUISE NEVELSON
IRENE SHARAFF
ALWIN NIKOLAIS
ANDRE COURREGES

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NORMAN NORELL

Is fashion an art?

Norman Norell, one of America's most renowned fashion designers, hesitates, then gives a qualified yes. "The best of fashion is worthy of the name art."

Norell picks Grès, Chanel, Vionnet, and Balenciaga as the artists of fashion of the twentieth century, declines to make any judgment on fashion as an art historically. "It's hard to say if you didn't live in a period. Pictures don't mean a thing . . . even the clothes themselves don't. What counts is how clothes look in life. Take New York today. A woman who is all dressed up looks awful. With the way our buildings are, the woman who is overdressed looks like a fool."

How would you define the art of fashion?

"Well, if you're talking about fine stitching or intricate detail, about some great thing that took weeks and weeks to make, that's not what I mean by the modern art of fashion. Anyone can sit around and sew for days and days. It doesn't prove a thing any more. Modern fashion is more direct and simple."

Still, for Norell, elegance and quality are the two attributes of fashion that count the most. "Quality means a lot to me. I like to think about people wearing their clothes a long time. It was drilled into me when I was young. There's no getting around it: good quality looks great. The other stuff never looks any more than just okay."

Norell considers the period just before World War I as the most elegant era in modern fashion, but paradoxically it is Chanel, the designer who did the most to displace that tradition of elegance, that he cites as the most influential force in twentieth-century fashion.

"Everything that's going on in fashion now really started in the twenties. The seeds are all there. The main thing that happened was that all of that changing stopped . . . one dress for morning, another for lunch, another for tea, etc., etc. Chanel pared it down to one dress or suit to wear all day plus that rag of an evening dress for parties. I still remember that evening dress. If you didn't have that dress on, you were out. Every chic woman wore it, but, of course, each one did something different with it. That was the fun of it. My idea of chic is that everyone in the world would have the same dress and the chicest woman would be whoever could do the best thing with it. The main trouble with fashion today is that there are too many clothes designed, too many choices. Look at colored stockings. They just give women another pit to fall into."

How do you feel about what's happening now in art, design, fashion?

"It's not my era. I'm sixty-seven years old and I go along the best I can, but really I'm just hanging on. I would love to have an additional room in my apartment simply to put modern things in. A few very good modern things from the thirties and forties as well as from today. For instance, I recently saw a huge modern painting that was all reds and black and white. In front of it there was a mass of fresh red flowers. It was marvelous.

"As for fashion, yes, I think short skirts are fine. Why not? They suit the times. I'm tired of all this talk about bad legs. After all, there are a lot of ugly faces hanging out. Look at the young kids. They don't care whether they have good legs or bad legs.

"Actually, I think fashion has been a little behind art for some years now, but we're catching up."

How would you describe the direction of modern fashion?

"More and more practical, fewer and fewer things. I think more and more people will keep what they need and drop what they don't need. Already it's obvious that hats and jewelry in the traditional sense make a woman look older. When I went to Palm Beach recently for a few days I took two pairs of pants and a few shirts, and I only wore one pair of the pants."

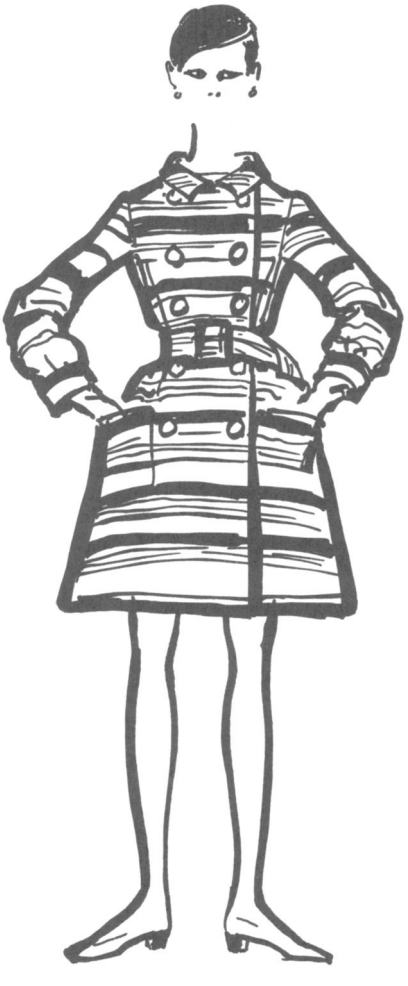
Norell thinks that the new practicality and paring down will have far-reaching effects on the field of cosmetics, too. "Women will use cosmetics for fun or they won't use them at all except for health." (This is in contrast to the present main purpose of cosmetics, which is to tint, paint, or simulate youth.)

Norman Norell takes the current explosions of young fashion with a grain of salt, but he is not enraged by them. "There is something about the new fashion that lacks roots or permanence. You feel like, 'Okay, we've had this for three months, what are we going to do next?' But I think it's a good thing. We'll all come out of it much better off. It's a heck of a big physic."

Interview by Priscilla Tucker

Culotte suit with wool jersey blouse, spring 1965, by Norman Norell

Embroidered absinthe evening dress with forest green velvet coat, fall 1965, by Norman Norell



Roman-striped wool trench coat, spring 1967, by Norman Norell

LOUISE NEVELSON

Is fashion an art?

Modern sculptor Louise Nevelson says no. Mrs. Nevelson, a pioneer of environmental sculpture, thinks that to qualify as an art, fashion must be an expression of the wearer and must relate to her environment. She dismisses the concept of fashion being a designer's idea or a fleshless sketch.

"Today it's the designer who gets all the attention. I was reading about an art opening and every woman — even the ones who had collected all those beautiful things — was identified by who designed her dress, not by how she looked or what she did. It's insanity to negate these ladies, reduce them to a label. I'm much more interested in knowing something about them than I am in knowing what label they wore.

"Fashion could be an art, but it isn't. On earth at any time there are few people who understand themselves well enough to bring themselves to a high art. Today many rich people are living at such a pace, busy from childhood partying and traveling all the time, that they are not interested in developing themselves, so they lean on designers, hairdressers. I'm not sure they're not right — but that's not art."

How do you choose your own clothes? What do you like to wear?

"Being 'well dressed' is not a question of having expensive clothes or the 'right' clothes — I don't care if you're wearing rags — but they must suit you. If you think you're not put together well, you can't confront the world. I don't go in for dresses as such. Even as a young girl I felt that kind of fashion was too temporary. I look for something that suits me, something more permanent. I like wearing lovely things around me in the daytime, old lace dresses, Japanese robes. When I buy something new in a store I may not wear it for a year until I get used to it. Often I find I have to create my own clothes." Mrs. Nevelson produced a box of her own jewelry, heavy, thick chunks of wood worked dimensionally so you could look into them just as you look into her intricately pieced-together wall-sized sculptures.

"The main trouble with fashion today is that it takes too much time. I usually wear something around my head because I can't be bothered going to have my hair done. It's a production. I'm concerned with economy in time. My day is filled with my work and my interests — dance, exercise, comparative religion. I can't have my brain in a million little pieces.

"I don't like chiffon — too pretty for the way the world looks today. I saw two adorable girls on the street, but they were too feminine. Twiggy looks right, they didn't. (Or I should say Twiggy in photographs. Did you see her in person? She wasn't like her photos at all.) The way the world looks, we need a new approach to fashion."

How does the world look to you?

"Science fiction is becoming science fact. The new architecture and furniture are making New York into science fact. You can't have that romantic look any more. Take beautiful antique furniture. A house filled with beautiful antiques is a period piece; it's not a home. Most of America is living in the nineteenth century. Look at San Francisco — it bores me. They think they're the elite, but we went through all that years ago.

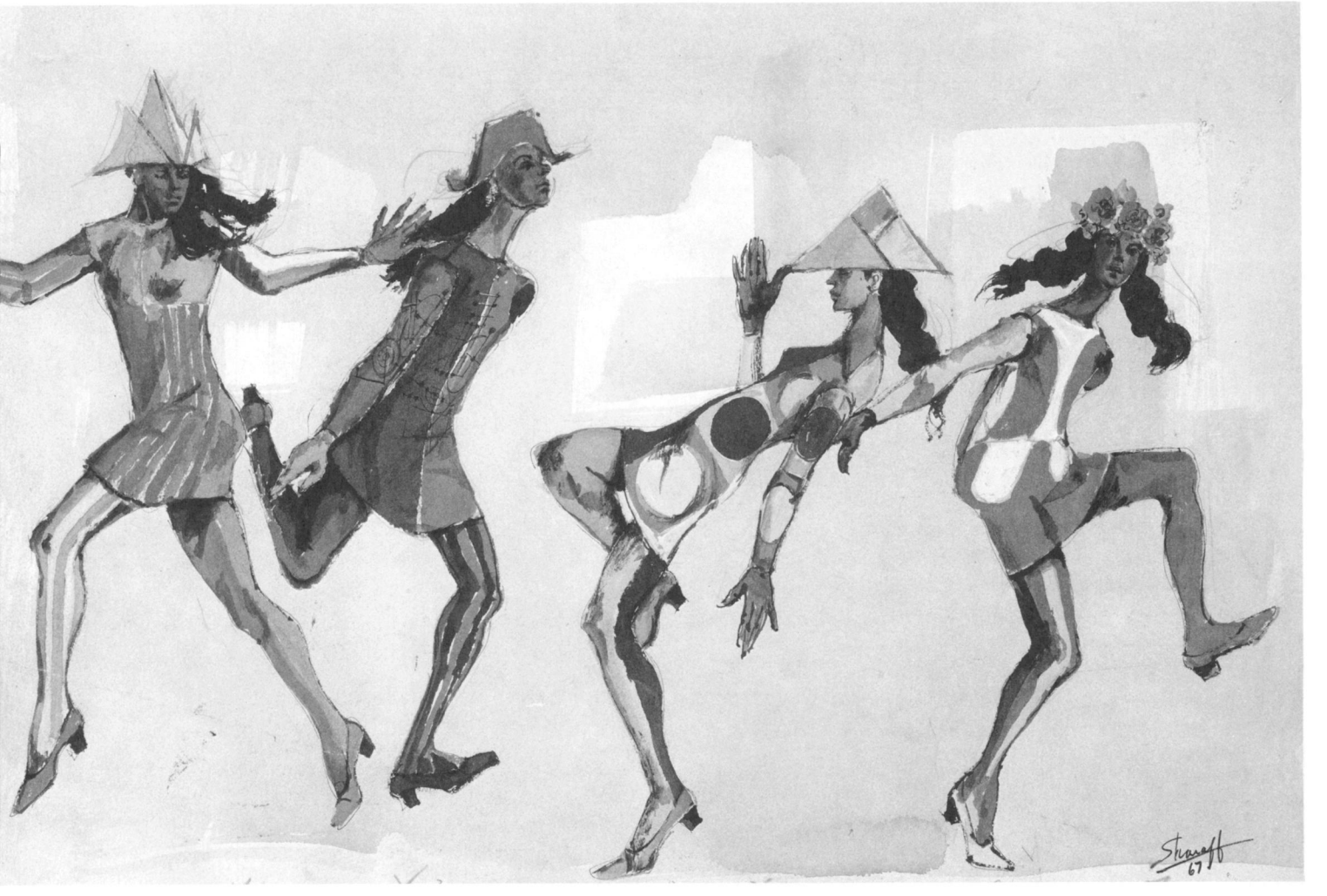
"I feel I am gearing into my time. I'm more contented and feel better with the present day, from architecture to furniture to the way we set our table. The casual way we do things now is more gracious than all that silver and china and glass. I'd like a wall-less house, one not divided into rooms for special functions. A house used to be history and decoration; now it's structure and form.

"We are working toward a total unity and that would include clothes. It won't be so unique, but it will be ordered. The way we live now clutters the mind. We abuse ourselves because we don't know the toll we take. We don't have meters on our minds and senses."

What happens to the individual in this new world?

"Man has become the cheapest thing on the market. In the old days we had more individualism but not necessarily more art. There's not much place for the original or personal. Take minimal art; I'm not for it or against it. But I am all for outer space. Man has explored this earth. He has new worlds to conquer, new visions. Man is already expanding his mind to outer space."

Photograph: William Grigsby. Copyright © December 1965 by The Condé Nast Publications, Inc.



Design sketch by Irene Sharaff for the Integration Ballet of Hallelujah, Baby! Copyright © 1967 by Irene Sharaff

IRENE SHARAFF

Is fashion an art?

Irene Sharaff, one of America's busiest and most successful designers of theatrical and movie costumes, says definitely yes, fashion is an art. "Of course it depends on what you mean by art, but the creative part of fashion has always worked alongside the creative forces that have defined and colored a decade, an era. As much as art, fashion is a manifestation of the times — of its psychological, social, political, visual existence."

Miss Sharaff, whose career began with Eva Le Gallienne's *Alice in Wonderland* for the Civic Repertory, is currently working on Barbra Streisand's costumes for the movie of *Funny Girl*. Nearly every assignment in between — uncounted plays, including *West Side Story* and *The King and I*, and eighteen movies, including the Taylor/Burton *Cleopatra*—has begun with serious research into the life and times of the period.

In the context of history, what do you think future generations will see as the most important force in fashion today?

"The American way of life. Although Paris is still powerful for economic shock value (for instance, if everyone in Paris suddenly lowered hems ten inches a lot of women over here would panic), in fact Paris is no longer top banana on the banana tree. Our greatest export is the American way of life. Everyone wants to lead the kind of casual life we do, and naturally this is having a great impact on clothes." Miss Sharaff herself wears Norells ("I'm most comfortable in them"), plus skirts and sweaters or Puccis for working.

Is there a difference between designing costumes for the theater or movies and designing clothes for real life?

"Yes. Most costume designers are not dealing with contemporary life. They are historians with a sense of poetry."

But Miss Sharaff thinks that the movies in particular have already had considerable influence on everyday clothes and that the gap between theater and life, art and life, is narrowing all the time. "Clothes are no longer clothes today, they are costumes. There are too many collections, too many designs." As for today's kids, she says they are play acting all the time, playing one role after another. "After all, they get a world tour simply by turning on TV."

As an example of her own influence from stage to fashion she cites the color palette of *The King and I*. "I was the first to use Thaibok silk. I had seen a photo of the fabric in *Art News* and finally tracked it down to a tiny hole on East Sixty-first Street. That was in 1951. I don't think people were aware of the Asian color palette before then."

How would you describe the direction of modern fashion?

"I think that great femininity is coming in. A woman's place has changed economically, and she is more and more on an equal footing with men. Aggressiveness is no longer necessary to succeed, and I think that is already reflected in clothes.

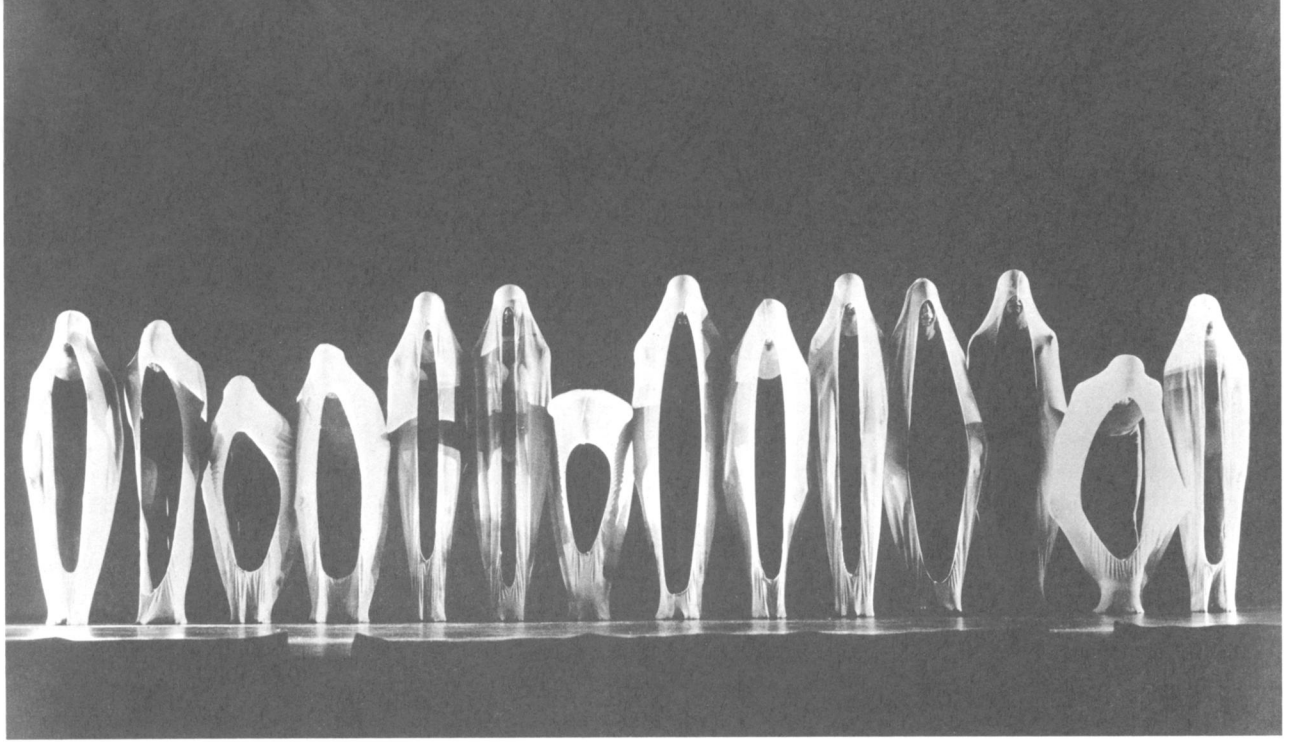
"I won't gamble on silhouette, but I think these days just about anything goes. What is more important is the perfection of the instrument of the garment. Shoes, stockings, underwear all have been perfected so that they are comfortable to wear, easy to care for. Things work better.

"One of the things that have always fascinated me in my research is the tremendous influence that inventions have had. When power weaving came in, the whole concept of fashion changed. Now we are in the midst of an era with all kinds of wonderful new inventions. Look what electronics has done for music. We listen calmly to music today that would have sounded very strange even three years ago."

Although Miss Sharaff thinks that the influence of new technologies on fashion will be enormous in the next decades, she is no partisan of the throw-away revolution. "I think man by nature likes to keep things. More people are collectors. I think people will collect old things and use them in new ways, much as Picasso used a tin can for his goat sculpture or an automobile for the head of his monkey." She says that what the English kids are doing in their forays on Portobello Road is to "use their past to exist in the present."

An art student and painter before she was a designer, Miss Sharaff is still a dedicated Sunday painter. She finds modern sculpture more imaginative than modern painting, feels that clothes and art are moving closer together all the time. With all the wonders of modern technology, "we no longer need the protection of animal skins. Freed from utilitarianism, fashion is now free to be more of a form unto itself."

Interview by Priscilla Tucker



ALWIN NIKOLAIS

Is fashion an art?

Alwin Nikolais, whose Henry Street Dance Theater has been a leading avant-garde force in the dance world for the past decade, says definitely no.

"Fashion is not an art because women rely so much on other people to design them. Most women wear what *sort of* fits. Clothes should state yourself. After all, creativity is a statement of self, so for clothes, fashion, to be an art, a woman would have to design herself. Last summer in Utah I saw a kid go by on a motorcycle. He was wearing a crazy long fur coat and a hat. It was the most compelling thing, particularly against that landscape. But even in Southampton I saw a typical 'well-dressed' woman — you know how they dress out there — walking down the street followed right behind by a teenager. The teenager really looked much better. Everybody could be beautiful, really, but most women present themselves so awkwardly. Women should set themselves forth attractively but innocently, like a cat. A cat is never a presentation, but an innocent happening. I've always liked what the Navajos say when they part. They never say 'Goodbye.' They say 'Go in beauty.' "

Although reviewed by dance critics, Mr. Nikolais has always insisted that what he is after is an experience of total theater. He writes his own music, does his own scenery and lighting, and makes his own costumes.

When you design costumes what are you aiming for?

"My costumes are part of a total stage design, action, or painting. The idea is not to see each body separately. My stage designs are a theatrical abstraction of the way I see man — not as an ego, but as part of a socio-economic mechanism, an agreeable but not a central part. I have been in revolt against the whole Freudian thing. I have often been accused of dehumanization of the dancers. It's not that, it's de-egoization. I see a bigger state of being for man. Man has to learn to design himself into the total environment, to see himself as a relatively minor part of the whole universal thing. We need to have the experience of living in a world of motion, sound, color, and action, and having it affect us and us affect it."

In his dance-theater productions Mr. Nikolais has pioneered many materials and techniques and concepts just hitting the fashion world now.

What are some of the new materials that you have used for costumes, and new techniques you have experimented with, and what were some of the problems?

"In *Kaleidoscope* (1956) I colored the dancers' hands and faces so that the figures wouldn't look decapitated. What interested me most was that as I watched one of my dancers painting one side of her face blue and the other side green, I really saw her for the first time. She was much more beautiful than I had thought."

Mr. Nikolais has always found fabric useful in abstracting the human figure into sculpture or shape. "Some of our earliest experiments were with wool jersey, forms moving inside the jersey rather than using the jersey to drape the body. It was an idea I later noticed was being used in fashion. I began using ultraviolet fabrics three years ago, and recently we have experimented with boning very light fabrics in such a way that the figure gets fatter or thinner as it gets up or down. One of the biggest fabric problems is that materials are so periodic. It often happens that we can no longer buy the material we need. For instance, light-reflecting silver Helanca was all over the place a couple of years ago, then last spring we couldn't find any.

"Some of our most difficult experiments have been with the use of light. In *Prison* (1957) I used lights projected on the dancers to break up the bodies. For example, one dancer's costume was bright salmon and white stripes on which I then projected stripes of light. It gave him the look of being fragmented. I was entranced by the optical effect. Since then I've used movie projectors, slide machines with wide-angle lenses, light bulbs. Last winter in *Somniloquy* the dancers carried globes designed to reflect both on themselves and on the environment. Designing with moving light forms is very difficult. The light is never bright enough. The problem is to get enough intensity of light without heat."

The charges of gaudiness and vulgarity that are often leveled against the current avant-garde in fashion (mod, op, psychedelic) have also often appeared in reviews of your dance-theater pieces. How do you feel about these charges?

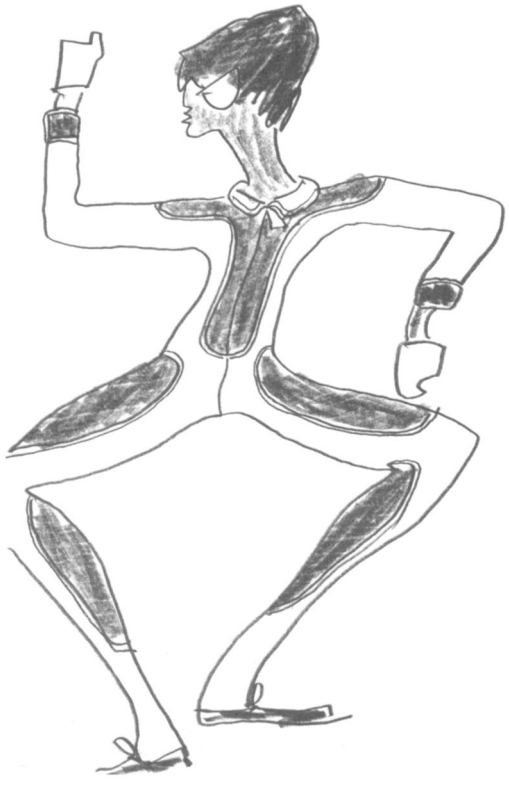
"I've never understood what they meant. Just look at the world around us. I only hope it's lack of breadth of vision in the reviewer and that I'm seeing what's really there. Not that I reject the old. I love antiques, for instance. They give you a way to communicate with the past. But there is no need any more to be locked into time or space. Man can go backward or forward at will. In one short trip I went from modern New York to Spoleto, then to do a TV program in a London studio, then the next day to Athens where I saw a play done exactly as the ancient Greeks would have done it. And that thing everyone complains about, TV. It's marvelous. Turn it on and there's India.

"Most reviewers have a literary approach to the theater and most dance critics see dance purely in terms of kinetics. It's their training. But all of that is changing. Kids don't trust words much any more. They feel the need to sense everything more strongly. No, I've never taken LSD — I need Miltown to keep my expanded consciousness down — but I can understand why people take it. Today you need to see and hear with your teeth."

Interview by Priscilla Tucker

Scenes from Sanctum and Vaudeville of the Elements, dance-theater pieces created by Alwin Nikolais. Photographs: Ken Kay, Faludi

ANDRE COURREGES



Croquis de tendance, winter 1967, by André Courrèges

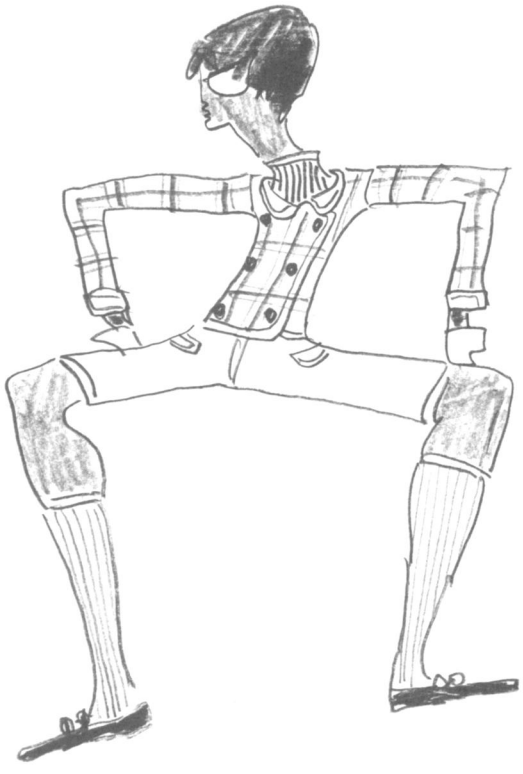
Is fashion an art?

"I would certainly not affirm that fashion is *not* art," says André Courrèges, whose first collection, in 1963, opened up a new fashion era. "But this is something for others to judge. The profession of fashion designer for me is simply a job like that of any artisan who attempts to introduce taste and proportion into the object he is creating, exactly in the way an architect tries to build a harmonious structure.

"I have always liked to paint and, being a staunch admirer of Le Corbusier and Saarinen, I might have become an architect had my family been able to finance my studies. They were not, and so couture has become the best way I've found to formulate my ideas. The frivolous, superficial aspects of my profession do sometimes offend me, since for me couture is not an end in itself. I truly want to bring solutions to the problems of modern women. Designing a building and making a dress have much in common. The principal concern of both is to give the impression of grace and harmony while at the same time being practical. My designs are simple and functional like modern architecture. I have always tried to consecrate an important part of my work to the functional aspects, to have real contact with life. Fashion today is too often divided into tough chic and froufrou. I consider neither of these mine. It is the woman who wears the clothes, their details, coloring, seaming, and cut that make for femininity, not miles of frills and chiffons. To me it is the woman who is important, not the dress — what she does, how she moves, how she lives. Her clothes should not be chic abstractions. They must be rational and logical. It is not logical, for instance, to work all day on three-inch heels. No woman is born with three or even two inches under her feet. Heels are as absurd as the bound feet of ancient Orientals.

"My aim is to dress women to permit them to live and to live with a piece of clothing, to take into consideration their real needs, which are indivisibly functional and aesthetic. The purely functional can be very ugly. But the functional must be the soul of dress, its composition, its interior rhythm, and its sense. Aesthetics is the envelope. I do not believe that a true designer can conceive a dress in the abstract. Each work of art, if you want to call it that, must have its *'raison d'être.'* Useless, luxurious art for me is a thing of the past. It's dead.

"Until relatively recent times, after all, the 'artist,' as we now term him, was an extremely functional being. I even doubt that the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century painters were thus designated. A fashion designer is an artist to the same extent as a cabinetmaker, a ceramist, a carpenter — or an architect. Ancient Egyptian furniture was studied and comfortable. It was also very beautiful. The Romanesque capitals were sculpted by master craftsmen. We called the cathedral builders masons, and the



cathedrals had very specific functions. They were constructed to serve many purposes, induce meditation, call in and unite the masses, and, as the spirit of the Church changed, so did the function of the cathedral. See how soaring Gothic makes you raise your eyes to the sky in adoration, as low Romanesque makes you bow your head in humility.

"Be it the construction of a house according to the needs of a family or the construction of a dress, the problem is the same — how best to fit into what I call 'the modern grand design.' Listen to the music of Shönberg, Berg, Xenakis, or look at kinetic art and you will see what I mean.

"I cannot dress everyone. I cannot dress the Chanel woman and I think she still exists. It is a question of age and habit. Chanel was a great creator, well ahead of her time, especially from 1925 to 1935. She was at the forefront of modernism, functionally and aesthetically.

"It is all a question of modernism. Look at cars. It is always interesting to study old models. During all periods there are decadent forms and real forms. Today, if most automobile design is decadent, it is because aesthetics is in the airplane, in the purity of aerodynamics — like sharks. Fish are particularly aesthetic.

"I think that during each period what we call art is produced when (as today with airplanes) the worker applies the maximum of his taste to the maximum in technological and sociological advances of his time. If any one of these lags behind, something inaesthetic happens. When the artisans building the cathedrals applied the purity of their art to the most advanced techniques, what they created was beautiful. Look at pure Gothic, then how it deteriorated with flamboyant, and downward when unnecessary decoration was applied simply for ornamentation and not in relation to any additional structural need.

"In all periods of fashion, interesting and beautiful things have been done. The court and château costumes were extremely valid when women were on show as sumptuous decorative objects.

"But then I rarely look back into history. I prefer to look ahead [while so many other couturiers haunt museums, rummaging for inspiration in engravings and old manuscripts, Courrèges picks only an occasional idea from one of his pet passions, rugby, auto racing, or the like]. Using past dress as inspiration is as ridiculous as trying to perfect a spaceship by studying the steam engine.

"Like an architect, I work on my drawing board with my models and my fabrics. I don't need to see the woman who will wear my clothes any more than an architect needs to build a house before he decides where he's going to put the windows. We can do all that on the plan. I am a technician, and drawing is my manner of philosophizing, of reflecting.

"My models are of different types but always beautiful, more beautiful than most of my clients. Using their proportions I create a prototype—a certain norm of modern woman, an aesthetic canon. In the salon on my tall girls, skirts are exaggeratedly short. Because of this, my clothes very often fit almost any woman.

"In any case, it is perfectly ridiculous to focus on hemlines, to be obsessed by length. It's all a question of proportion. Wearing my clothes is above all a matter of spirit, not of knees. I myself know how rare are those beautiful knees, those designed in the exact continuation of the thigh line and mostly found on Negroes. [Courrèges generally has at least one Negro model.] Ultra-short dresses help to balance long torsos. But there are no rules. I never stop testing, adapting, thinking about each woman I dress. Each is an individual problem. If women who buy my dresses are shorter, the skirt can be lengthened to create the harmony, but generally the prototypes are such that the models that fit my five-foot-ten mannequins also fit even my shortest clients.

"I cannot tell you why I think certain proportions are right before I work them out on paper. Then I always know. I know, for instance, that on my models and most of my clients, the relation of leg to torso is such that the body looks right in short skirts with boots or high socks completing the silhouette, preventing it from being top-heavy. But, with my preoccupation for the functional, I first shortened skirts for freedom, then added the boots to keep women warm in compensation. It was only then that I discovered boots to be indispensable aesthetically. My hats are something else. I called the old ones 'Calder stabiles,' but now I find that they were a purely aesthetic touch with no functional reason for being. Why keep them simply because of convention, when a woman's own natural well-brushed hair is generally sufficient to complete the volume? Now I create hats only for rainwear or very functional ones for winter.

"The predominance of white in my collections has often been viewed as purely aesthetic. But I have chosen white for its functional qualities as well. After all, it is considered the most functional color in hot climates. We dress babies and small children in white. For me white means health and cleanliness, which I in turn associate with beauty. Men wear white shirts, not black. Black soils as fast as white, except that the dirt on black shows less. But is it modern to be dirty? What thought could be more ugly? White is the universal color, synthesis of all the others. It harmonizes with all other colors, puts all other colors into motion. It is flattering to a woman's complexion, gay and lively.

"I have said that my clothes aim to liberate the spirit as well as the eyes. Don't forget the body. The woman who interests me does not belong to any particular physical type. But she does live a certain sort of life. She is active, moves fast, works, is usually young and modern enough to wear modern, intelligent clothes. She is often American, quicker to pick up new ideas than Europeans.

"A woman is truly beautiful only when she is naked and she knows it. So why all the hypocrisy anyway? Why not liberate women from girdles and bras, just as their mothers were liberated from the infamous ribbed corsets? Without a bra, a girl loses a few inches of her bosom. So what? Our fathers loved beauties for their caged-in, tortured, twenty-inch waists. Our ancestors worshiped the Hottentot Venus. Now we giggle when we see her, so why not accept the inevitable evolution, the liberation of woman's body in our hectic space age. The trouble is that, although couture could be up there at the forefront of our times, along with serial music and kinetic art, the public in all these domains lags behind. I often have to design space-age clothes with fabrics that haven't changed since the eighteenth century. I simply am not drawn to silks, which I do not consider functional, except occasionally when they are incorporated with other materials. I prefer flat-faced tattersalls, linens, gabardines, heavy cottons, and synthetics. I find enough of these to satisfy my needs, but I know we could go much farther if we, and the fabric manufacturers, knew that the public would buy.

"I suppose we shouldn't complain. *Wozzeck* and *Moses and Aaron* are just reaching public comprehension now, decades after they were composed. This is probably normal. A musician or a painter spends fourteen hours a day working out his solutions, whereas a listener or viewer devotes only an hour now and then to the consideration of the same problems.

"Unfortunately we must dress woman now. Our creations are temporal. Not manuscripts or canvas, they cannot be stored until the public consciousness is ready. Luckily there are those happy few who do live with their times, and one thing is certain. Women have become liberated little by little through thought, work, and clothes. I cannot imagine that they will ever turn back. Perhaps they will continue to suffer occasionally to be beautiful, but more than ever they seek to be both beautiful and free.

"If the function of art is to bring joy through harmony, color, and form, perhaps we can, after all, by dressing a woman to feel younger and to participate fully in life, bring her joy comparable to that she experiences in contemplating a painting."

Interview by Betty Werther

Fashion Plates

JANET S. BYRNE *Associate Curator of Prints*

Girl in a Swing, by Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), French. Detail of leaf 76 from Figures de différentes caractères (Paris, n.d.). Etching, 8¾ x 6½ inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 28.100 (2)

From the first quarter of the eighteenth century, this young girl in a swing is either a servant or is dressed for a lower-middle-class morning, since her cap proclaims her social status. The square-backed stiffened bodice and the clumsy high-heeled shoes show her closer to seventeenth-century fashion than to the normal, kerchief-covered shoulders of the 1780s.

Man of Quality in a Scarlet Cloak, by Jean Mariette (1694-1774), French. About 1700. Etching, 12 x 7⅞ inches. The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 49.50.395

This fashion plate from the very beginning of the eighteenth century shows an evolving style. The large and inconvenient sleeve, long and curled hair, and three-cornered reduction of the large-brimmed cavalier's hat are all modifications of seventeenth-century fashions that are combined with eighteenth-century details. This man of quality would have trouble reaching for his sword in any case; it would be even more difficult if he wore the long fur-lined sleeves of ancient China, Rome, and medieval Russia. His muff could be instantly discarded and is also fashionable, as is his habit of taking snuff. This plate is simple reportage of what the latest fashion is; it is not really a design, although a good tailor or seamstress could almost follow it to make such an outfit.

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La Sortie de l'Opéra, by J.-M. Moreau le Jeune (1741-1814), French. Plate for the Monument du Costume, 1783. Engraving by Georges Malbeste, 10¼ x 8⅝ inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 33.6.15

Although one of the plates in a set called the *Monument du Costume*, this picture of a chattering lobby full of opera-goers tells a great deal more than the latest styles. A social comedy is taking place in which lovers and husbands play their parts with elegant gestures, snuff-taking, and monocles. The sleeve and wrist fashions of both men and women lent themselves to a graceful language of hands, part of a national tendency to gesture.

The Go-between or Barrow Man Embarrass'd. Published in London by G. T. Stubbs, 1786. Etching, 9⅜ x 10 13/16 inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 17.3.888-258

Fashion drawings are occasionally very close to caricatures in their exaggeration. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English artists made thousands of caricatures of royal, political, and topical subjects; their comments on fashions give an immediate impression of what the fashion trends of their times were. This unidentified satirist's use of the word "embarrassed" is especially telling, since many women's styles, when misused or overdone, really embarrass other people. The last verse of a poem published in the *London Magazine* in 1777 gives some advice to the unwary gentleman:

> Thus finish'd in taste, while on Chloe you gaze
> You make take the dear charmer for life;
> But never undress her – for, out of her stays
> You'll find you have lost half your wife.

Les Bouquets ou La Fête de la Grand-Maman, by Philibert-Louis Debucourt (1755-1832), French. 1788. Intaglio color print, 15 x 11⅜ inches. Gift of Mrs. Leon Dalva, 64.552.2

Recording the look of the French bourgeois of the 1780s and '90s was the great success of Debucourt. His elaborate colorprinting technique, akin to mezzotinting, enabled him to display all the seductiveness of pale satin skirts shimmering through black lace shawls, little-girl ribbon sashes, transparent neckerchiefs that come adrift over bare breasts. Boys wearing shoulder curls, long-skirted coats, and fitted silk suits with lace cuffs, even when taking grandmother a bouquet, now seem inappropriately dressed. Grandmother, although it is her birthday, has been knitting a child's stocking.

Man and Woman Playing Chess, by Henry Moses (1782?-1870), English. Plate 6 from Designs of Modern Costume (London, n.d. [1812?]). Etching, 4 x 5½ inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 30.31

The French Revolutionary interest in the Noble Savage, when added to downright fear of being recognized as an aristocrat, led to simplification of the elaborate, overdecorated styles of the French court. The great English designers the brothers Adam had traveled and reported on classical archaeology. Excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum from the 1750s onward interested designers and artists like Piranesi. Henry Moses may not have expected any English family to go quite this far in adapting the costume and decorative art suitable to the hot sunny climate of Greece: he is simply cramming into this fashion plate everything he can think of in a classical guise – except the man.

Incroyable, by Horace Vernet (1789-1863), French. Plate 14 from Les Incroyables et les Merveilleuses de 1814 (Paris, about 1815). Etching by Gatine, hand colored, 14¼ x 9¼ inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 24.18

The simplification of fussy eighteenth-century styles was not necessarily linked with a desire for comfort. This man may be practically and comfortably dressed in his leather breeches and gaiters, but his ill-fitting coat, high stiff vest collar, and cravat make present-day relaxed Americans perspire to contemplate. His umbrella, his gloves, and the stripe in his silk vest are a matched green. His social status (post-Revolutionary) is not immediately recognizable, as was that of the Man of Quality in the picture on page 141; his enormous watch chain and key are vulgarly ostentatious, and the telescope protruding from his pocket suggests that he is watching horses.

Design for a ball gown, by Pierre Numa, French. 1836. Pen and wash drawing, 9⅝ x 5⅞ inches. The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 53.664.40

This ball gown, shown front and back, is a good example of the fashion of shape and line. The details are important but subservient, unlike those of many eighteenth-century ball gowns in which the ribbons and lace blurred the outline. Here in 1836 is displayed the bell-shaped skirt, the tiny waist, and the large sleeves of the period. The feet in their flat slippers are shown below the bouffant skirt worn over petticoats.

Tresseuse de Cheveux. From Lanté and Gatine, Costumes Parisiens: Les Ouvrières de Paris (Paris, about 1824). Hand-colored etching, 11¾ x 7⅞ inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 41.23.3

In Paris today, just as in 1824, one finds the girls who work, especially those in the fashion trades, often more beautifully dressed and up to the minute than the wealthy customers who can afford to wear what they please whether it is suitable or not. The elegance of this simple dress covered by the long practical black apron makes the most of the charm of this wigmaker, who displays false curls on a ribbon like the ones she herself is wearing.

WINTER FASHIONS for 1843 & 44, by B. READ & Co. 17, Hart St. Bloomsbury Square, LONDON, and Broad Way, New York, AMERICA.

Winter Fashions for 1843 and 1844. Poster for B. Read & Co., London and New York. Hand-colored aquatint, 17¾ x 23½ inches. The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 57.616.4

Pretending to be a street scene, this is really a fashion poster. Fashion models are often shown in a famous as well as attractive setting, like Rockefeller Center, Central Park, or even the Museum itself. London fashions for the winter of 1843-1844 are shown in front of the Horse Guards with a view of Nelson's Column (finished later that same year) being erected in the background. The exaggerated and unnatural poses of several of the figures were drawn to display the way the clothing was made, not to start a trend in posture or the poses of models. Although B. Read & Co. published these fashions in London, they also were publishing them for "Broad Way, New York, America."

Robe Diana. Design for Dollfus Mieg & Co., by Lacour and Morin, Paris. 1865. Hand-colored lithograph, 13⅞ x 10¾ inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 40.121.12

Just how important the fabric manufacturer is in the creation of fashion is often forgotten by the casual shopper. The invention of the cotton gin and the development of spinning and weaving machines in the Industrial Revolution helped to make cotton dresses cheap and popular. This picture is a suggestion by a French textile firm for the use of the fabric they were manufacturing in 1865. The cotton skirt is supported from underneath by so large a hoop that one wonders whether the lady with the lilacs ever entered the gazebo.

On Board the Calcutta, by James Joseph Jacques Tissot (1836-1902), French. 1876. Etching, 10⅜ x 14 inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 24.13.5

Not a fashion plate, this etching of Englishwomen pretending to watch the harbor traffic from the canted deck of H.M.S. Calcutta shows the fashions of 1876 in detail. Bustles, tucks, ruffles, pleats, and ribbons contribute to a style with emphasis on the rear of the lady's figure. Restricted by costumes like this, women were better at watching than at actually participating, and were required to sit bolt upright on the edges of armless chairs. It is no coincidence that the circular upholstered bench or ottoman reached the height of its importance at this period. The Calcutta ladies are more appropriately dressed for indoors in cities, just as the fashionably classical lady in Henry Moses's chilly English interior (on page 144), with her transparent loose gown worn over almost no underwear, is appropriately dressed for outdoors in the country in some distant and hot climate.

Girl in a Plush Cape. Unknown artist, about 1890. Pen and wash drawing heightened with white, 15⅞ x 9¾ inches. The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 53.664.45

Which fashion artist first thought of using an exotic-looking model instead of the standard vacuous pretty one is not known, but it seems to be a twentieth-century idea, and in part an outcome of the use of photography, which has changed the course of fashion illustration. The embroidered fur-trimmed plush cape with its moiré ribbon pussy-cat bow and the rustling silk skirt worn by this innocuous young model contribute their textures to another fashion of shape and outline.

Fashion plate, by Jules David (1808-1892), French. 1891. Watercolor, 11¼ x 9 inches. The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 51.578.3

Robert Benchley remembered his Little Lord Fauntleroy suit with horror as well as humor; these French children in their less pretentious Foreign Legion and sailor costumes probably had fewer complexes than the generation of rugged non-Scottish boys made to wear the kilt. Aside from play costumes – cowboy, Indian, and space suits – children's clothing today is apt to follow the fashion of comfort and easy maintenance.

Galopp, by Leo Rauth, German. 1910. Hand-colored lithograph, 12 x 10¼ inches. The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 59.608.102

Harder to date to the decade within the twentieth century by fashion than most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prints, this hand-colored lithograph of a 1910 couple dancing the galop shows the almost three-hundred-year survival and development of an idea. When, in the seventeenth century, doublet and hose with cloak were no longer the style and gentlemen found themselves trying to ride horseback in long-skirted coats, tailors solved the problem by splitting the skirt to the waist at the back. Cut away at the front in the eighteenth century, the "tailcoat" survived, and is still worn today for extremely formal occasions by dancers, diners, musicians, and waiters, none of whom is expected to ride horseback on his way home.

Steeplechase Day, Paris, by Edward J. Steichen (born 1879), American. 1911. Gum print, 10¾ x 11⅝ inches. Gift of Alfred Stieglitz, 33.43.51

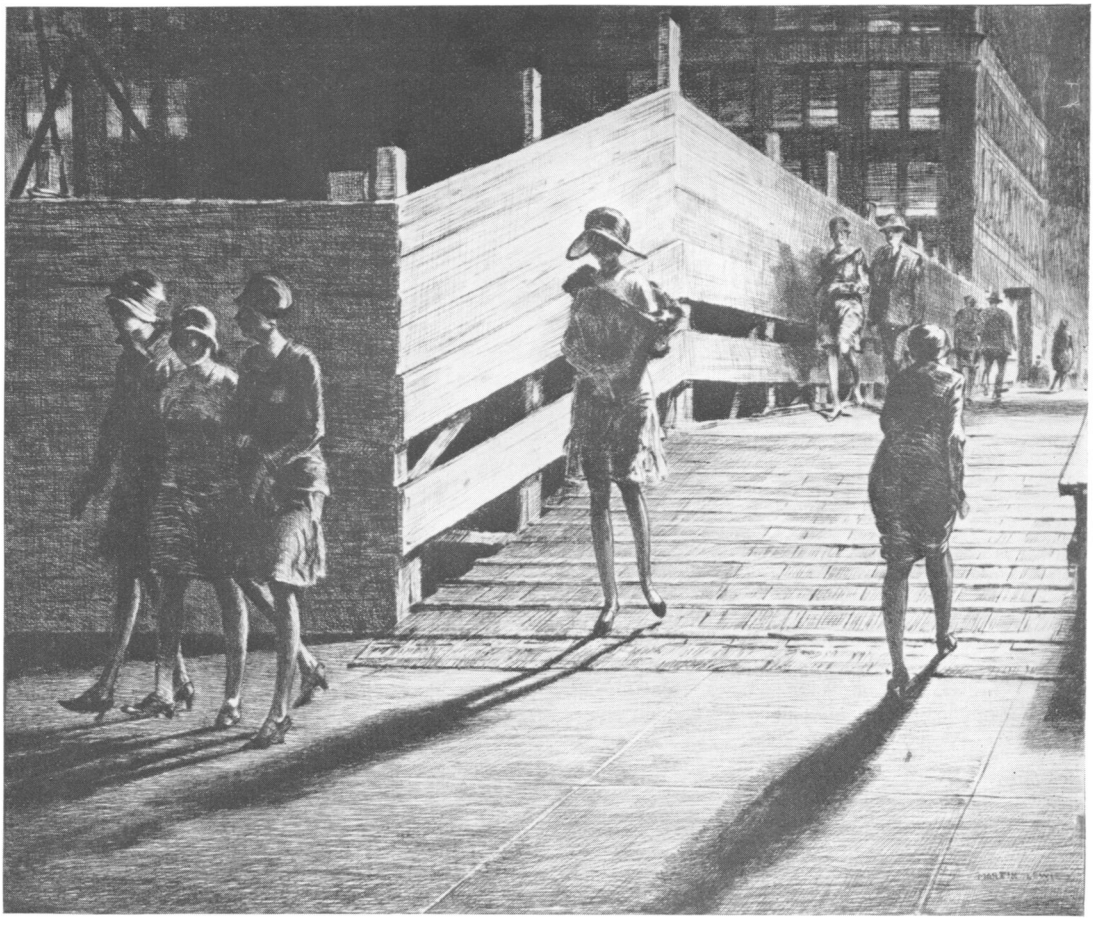
A major work of art, this photograph taken at Auteuil in 1911 tells more about how it was to wear this clothing than any fashion drawing could or would. Any occasion that women attend in order to be seen, and that includes a great deal of time in which to do nothing but look and perhaps flirt, will find them making elaborate plans ahead of time. Today's "all-purpose" dress, designed for a day at the office, a cocktail party, and a theater engagement, when compared to an anachronism like a tea gown, for instance, is shown up for what it is, a poor woman's garment – that is, poor in time, if not in servants, space, or finances.

La Toilette Délicieuse, by George Barbier (born 1882), French. 1921. Etching with aquatint, hand colored, 6¼ x 4¼ inches. The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 60.628.1

At just what moment the fashion show as we know it today was born is not clear, but it is a natural outcome of a *vendeuse* showing a customer the possibilities with a live model instead of with a drawing and a bolt of cloth. A style that looks hilarious only to the children – not the grandchildren – of those who wore it, this Siren Suit of 1921 is nevertheless partly inspired by the eighteenth century: the floating side panels are reminiscent of paniers, and the shoes with buckles, the tricorn hat of the client, and the adapted Adam style of the architectural background all show twentieth-century impressions of earlier fashion.

Footbridge, Fifth Avenue, by Martin Lewis (1883-1962), American. 1928. Etching, 9 15/16 x 11 15/16 inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 29.7.2

The Fifth Avenue look of 1928 shows short skirts, cloche hats, and waistlines not always successfully kept low on the hips. Stockings, then as now almost totally visible, had stopped being embroidered and colored, and had settled down to varieties of "flesh color." When legs were again visible after their eclipse in the thirties, the war, which predicated short skirts, made the newly developed nylon stocking at the same time the only kind any woman wanted to wear and the most difficult to buy. The current interest in stockings is obviously due, once again, to their almost complete exposure.



The Art of Fashion

The question as to whether fashion is art or whether there is art in fashion has long been controversial. The exhibition of costumes that will open in the special exhibition galleries in October may cast a new light on fashion's aesthetic values. Let us first consider what we mean by fashion in relation to costume.

History has shown that people of all nations and from time immemorial have felt the need for adornment. This is understandable when one considers that man is the only terrestrial creature born without a protective covering, and who has found it necessary to elaborate upon his original state. With this decision came the excitement and challenge of changing what nature had imposed upon him.

Many theories have been expounded regarding the origin of costume and why man wears what he does. Hilaire Hiler, for instance, in his *Costume and Ideologies*, draws a distinction between costume and clothing, and says that costume preceded clothing. Clothes, he theorizes, are merely bodily covering, while costume incorporates adornment, including tattooing, body painting, and so forth. Man "dressed up" before he clothed himself.

While various theories invite interesting argument, they are, however, often conflicting, and therefore no single factor can be pinpointed as a basic explanation, since what may apply to one civilization may not apply to another. What, for instance, will some of the clothes of the present communicate to future costume historians? How will they explain the mods, beatniks, hippies, and flower children? It captures the imagination when one conjectures how a computerized world will affect man and his clothes.

Costume is a complex of many factors. It has components found in works of art: it has form, color, and texture; it is symbolic, it serves an important function in ritual and superstition, and it also communicates. Costume can offer protection against the elements and physical enemies; it may be worn to ward off evil or to attract good luck; it can conform to standards of modesty and still be a source of sexual attraction; it can denote rank, wealth, and power. Costume can be a mask to reveal or conceal characteristics of the individual, or it can be an expression of one's ego; it can be considered the height of fashion and still be a source of great discomfort. But costume can also afford pleasure, stimulation, and diversion.

Fashion in its broad sense is not only a manner of dressing; it is also a social expression of an age, a way of life that reflects man's cultural heritage and current ideals. Fashion in costume documents the taste of its time in the same manner as do painting, sculpture, and other works of art. Fashion has its roots in the past and bears the seeds of the future; its only constant is change. It is a continual stream of shifting values that shape the present.

The art of fashion is so intrinsically woven into the fabric of the story of man that one can hardly be separated from the other. Today costume has become so powerful a

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force in our economic structure that what once may have served as a need for protective covering or as spiritual stimulus has evolved into a vast business enterprise that concerns practically all people of the world.

The dynamic spirit of fashion, growing out of the past and reaching into the future, has been a constant challenge to the human artistic impulse. Our exhibition, *The Art of Fashion*, will portray dramatically the high level of aesthetic achievement attained by costume, often dismissed as superficial frivolity. Approximately 183 costumes will be shown. They range in date from the early eighteenth century through 1967, with the majority from this century.

The exhibition will be more than a collection of beautiful clothes. The early costumes afford not only a glimpse into the past, but also reveal that there were periods when there was a strict etiquette of dressing, a respect for the occasion for which clothes were worn, as opposed to other periods, like today, when propriety of dress was more relaxed. It will become apparent how the tempo has changed in the twentieth century from that of earlier periods: a dress of the time of Louis XV may suggest the minuet, a dress of the Second Empire the waltz, a dress of the 1920s the Charleston, a dress of 1967 the pulsating boogaloo. The costumes show how, in fashion, there is a point of emphasis that shifts from one area of the body to another, changing the external aspect of the human form, and how these shifting accents recur. It should be evident also that fashion is an inherent part of art in environment, and that the phenomena of fashion could not survive without the creativity of those who give it substance.

Costume is a most provocative subject. We want the exhibition to be provocative too, as well as beautiful and enjoyable. The Metropolitan Museum, dedicated to the recognition of achievement in the arts, hopes the exhibit will cast new light on the living art of fashion.

POLAIRE WEISSMAN

Executive Director of The Costume Institute

This exhibition is made possible through a grant from the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities, and with matching funds generously contributed by the Council of Fashion Designers of America. The 1967 American fashions were chosen by a special selection committee of people involved in fashion and the related arts. The exhibition has been designed by James R. Lamantia, and the mannequins were made by Mary Brosnan. The costumes were co-ordinated by the Executive Director of the Museum's Costume Institute, with the assistance of the staff.

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