

The history of fashion

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I figured that with the morning program so full of information about fragrances that I would discuss a related field—the history of fashion. This subject took me back to my college days when I was a major in chemistry and a minor in costuming and the history of fashion.

Often the best way to look ahead is to start by looking backward, at what it is that got us to where we are today. Since today you are looking forward at the challenge of the 80s, I would like to suggest a few minutes of looking backward at some of the peculiarities of humanity that have brought us to the 80s in the first place.

The peculiarity I find most fascinating is fashion, or the history of costume. More than 50 years ago, Anatole France said: "If I were allowed to choose from the books that will be published 100 years after my death, do you know which one I would want to read? By no means would I select a novel from that future library—I simply would take up a fashion magazine so that I could see how women dress one century after my departure. Because these rags would tell me more about future humanity than all the philosophers, novelists, prophets, and scholars!"

The way we dress goes far beyond simply covering and adorning the body. Dress determines posture and movement; it animates or slows down its wearer. It influences the way we walk, run, squat, kneel, and sit. And it reflects on our culture.

A history of the way people dress is concerned with the story of their first and most enduring addiction—their intense preoccupation with the appearance of their own bodies. This obsession is hardly surprising. The body is all we have when we begin life, and it is the only thing we can be sure of keeping until death. Far less understandable is people's frequent dissatisfaction with what nature has given them. To say that people come in all shapes and sizes is gross exaggeration. Lean or fat, short or tall, they all look depressingly alike. Barring a quirk of nature or some misfortune, they all have the same kind of trunk, the same extremities in the same places, and move more or less in the same way. Hence their boredom with their bodies.

The urge to alter their bodies is felt by humanity only; animals, enjoying the advantage of healthier instincts, do not share it. Rarely—if ever—have people accepted the image in which they were created as final. They early decided that there was room for improvement. Neither prehistoric cave dwellers nor late-industrial urbanites have considered the human body aesthetically satisfactory. Uneducated and sophisticated alike seem to act on an uncontrollable impulse to rearrange their anatomy. No part of the body is spared some more or less violent interference. From time to time, people have wanted larger heads, longer necks, smaller feet, more pronounced bosoms or tinier waists. Above all, people have used clothing as a means of aspiring toward their fantasies of a better, or at least different body.

Modesty comes and goes, but common sense has always been absent and the most elementary anatomical facts have been consistently ignored. As a rule, people see in their bodies little more than the raw material for their creations. Works of art often exist only in the minds of those who create them, and the so-called improvements perpetrated on our anatomy are no exception. The instruments of torture used by humans on themselves in the pursuit of fashion comprise an arsenal of horrors. The wooden planks used by the Chinook Indians to elongate the skulls of their infants, the feet of Chinese women, mutilated when the smallness of the bride's foot was in direct ratio to the size of her bridal price, the high necks of the Burmese women who added ring after ring until, if the rings were removed, their weakened necks would break—these are only a few of the means people have used against themselves in an endless search to alter their bodies.

Most vulnerable of all, that area of the flesh between the pelvis and the ribcage has attracted the greatest attention. The first pictures of civilized Europeans illustrated both men and women with tiny, corseted waists, and throughout the centuries, innumerable variations of the corset have formed an essential part of changing fashions.

An obvious question for anyone embarking on a study of the history of costume must be "Why clothes?" What first persuaded people, in totally isolated parts of the world, that clothes were essential?

Most historians have attributed the origin of cloth-

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ing to three causes: A need for protection against the elements; a desire for modesty; and a love of display connected with sexual attraction. The first has only a limited role, for humans have always preferred decoration to comfort. Despite what seems to be obvious logic, no evidence exists that clothing was invented exclusively to fend off cold. The Patagonians who inhabited a cold mountain climate, and the Marquesans in a hot island climate both thought themselves suitably dressed in pigments alone, while North American Indians preferred feathers to furs. Nor did primitive people wear clothes to protect them from the rain. Visiting Tahiti in 1850, Dr. Charles Pickering, "exposed for some days to frequent and heavy rains, soon began to envy the naked condition of the natives, who became dry in a few minutes," while his proper Victorian attire remained soggy for hours. The Polynesians, he added, "never had colds until they began wearing clothes." Very few styles of dress, therefore, have been designed solely to protect the wearers from weather extremes.

However, from earliest times articles of clothing were worn to ward off demons. Primitive peoples, convinced that hostile forces lurked everywhere, took all possible precautions to avoid calamities. Magic must be met with magic. In the primitive's wardrobe of amulets and other supernaturally endowed adorn-

ments we find the precursors of the charm bracelet and St. Christopher's medal. Superstitions die slowly. The original purpose of the European bridal veil was to protect its wearer from evil spirits on her way to the marriage ceremony. Even today there are those who insist on investing articles of clothing with supernatural qualities. Why else "something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue"?

Maybe primitive peoples started wearing clothes to cover their nakedness, as the Bible tells us. "And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons." These words, from the Book of Genesis, more or less settled the matter of the origin of clothing in the minds of western society for two millenia. Man and woman dressed to clothe their shame—more implicitly, their sexual shame—when they were banished from the garden of eden.

If we are going to accept this theory we might take a moment to look at its positive side. Perhaps conditions in Paradise were not conducive to eternal bliss. Here was Adam, a man who never had a childhood, deprived of a normal upbringing, condemned to permanent leisure—how could he *not* have fallen victim to overwhelming boredom? Sinning gave him what he needed most—a fresh sense of identity, a chance to quit loafing and get to work. So Adam turned to con-

cealing his shame and made man's first clothes from fig leaves. The aprons were clumsy, ill-fitting and wilted all too soon, and anyway fig leaves are ludicrously inadequate as dress material since they don't lend themselves to being joined together. No matter, it was certainly these open work garments that made the first couple supremely selfconscious about their *bodies*. *If these garments were identical for him and her*—as we may assume in view of Adam's utter unfamiliarity with clothes—they could not have failed to bring out the anatomical differences between the two, and thus open up exhilarating vistas for playing games of hide and seek. It was at this point that the Lord, shocked by the turn of the events, took matters into his own hands and presented Adam and Eve with fur coats, or what the Bible condescendingly calls animal hides.

Until the publication of the findings of archaeologists and anthropologists in the last century, the Biblical version was never questioned. In fact, the desire for modesty *can* be expressed in clothing, but it is rarely a factor that determines fashion. Concepts of modesty vary enormously, and each period and each civilization has developed totally different ideas of which parts of the human body should or should not be exposed. Women have gone bare-breasted when fashion decreed, as in ancient Crete or during the Directoire period of the French Revolution. On the other hand, they have sometimes covered even their faces in deference to custom, and Moslem women in some all too familiar parts of the world wear a garment covering the entire body to this day.

The love of display connected with the erotic urge is definitely the most important of the three factors contributing to the development of fashion, and the desire to attract is clearly the major reason for dressing up. An extreme indication of this is to be found in the habit of certain African tribes whose women, when they are old, dispense with all covering, there no longer being any need for it. Sexual attraction, rather than repulsion, seems to be one of the major purposes of clothing as decoration. It fulfills our instinctive desire for the equivalent of the luxurious plumage of the male bird. In many primitive societies, where little dress is worn, the sexual organs are not only not covered, but are accentuated. After the plague years of the Black Death, when the population of Europe had been decimated, people wore tight-fitting, frankly "sexy" clothing as if by instinct. Clothing, when introduced to the naked members of *primitive societies*, *did not seem to improve their* so-called moral state or reduce promiscuity, at least as far as the missionaries were able to ascertain. Rather, in the view of Arthur Grimbal, Research Commissioner of the Gilbert and Ellis Islands, clothing stimulated "a nasty curiosity which never before existed." It also stimulated the growth of vermin and parasites as well as dirt among the islanders.

Added to a love of sexual display, and intimately connected with the place people occupy in society, is the wish to flaunt wealth and power. Until lately

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clothes were the easiest and most straightforward means of telling people just who you were and what you were worth. In the most simplistic sense, from the medieval maidens who embroidered poetic couplets on bodices to the message-emblazoned T-shirt, our dress is our banner.

Moreover, a drastic change in manner of dress can instantly change people's attitudes toward themselves, whether it be a child "dressing up," a young woman assuming a nun's habit, or a man putting on a uniform. Dressing and adorning oneself is like filling a census blank. Consider the scope of statistics possible to convey: One's sex; age group; nationality; religious affiliation; means of livelihood; social; economic, and marital status; political or military rank; personal achievements; loyalties and beliefs; family connections; state of mind. Witness, respectively: red fingernails, rompers, lederhosen, wimple, fireman's helmet, club tie, sable coat, wedding ring, judge's robe, sergeant's stripes, cap and gown, political button, the tartan kilt, and widow's weeds. Interestingly, quite a few articles of dress have been assimilated into the language to express particular convictions, attitudes, and beliefs, such as: "blue-stocking," "hard hat," "black shirt," "white collar," "blue collar," and more.

In any given era, many styles of clothing are worn.

Not everyone is "in fashion." This was particularly true when clothing represented a greater expense than it does today. The custom of dressing servants in "livery" of 18th century style even in the 20th century evolved from the habit of dressing servants in cast-off and therefore out-of-fashion clothing.

But despite such incongruities, an individual and identifiable style has emerged in every age. Whatever the function that clothing fulfills, this style has always been formed, molded in every detail, by the society itself. In the words of Stella Blum, Director of the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of art, "A fashion is no accident. It will always suit a situation, time, and place. Fashion is really a matter of evolution. It has a natural life, unlike a fad, which is a stillbirth."

By the manner of dress individuals reveal not only their conception of society, but also the role they play in it. Fashion, a social phenomenon, can be a powerful force. Societies evolve for themselves a set of rules, and most people, consciously or subconsciously, do their best to conform. It's their social security. Because this is so, costume—if read properly—can give us an insight not only into the structure of a social organization but also into its religion and aesthetics, its fears, hopes, and goals.

Our clothes continue to reflect our anxieties and how we try to cope with them. Today our society is rapidly becoming global. The worldwide rage for jeans is an example of this new universality and the wholesale movement to break down barriers—geographical, social, and cultural. Now, as we enter the 80s, it is obvious from what the history of fashion has taught us that we are beginning a decade in which some old distinctions may disappear—and that a new kind of equality, of sex, of income, and of social class, is well on its way.

My colleagues, this brings to a conclusion this, our 26th Annual Symposium. We, the society, have attempted to prepare you for a fascinating and creatively exciting challenge for the 80s. I wish everyone good luck in the new decade of the 80s.