

What is fashion?



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For centuries individuals or societies have used clothes and other body adornment as a form of nonverbal communication to indicate occupation, rank, gender, sexual availability, locality, class, wealth and group affiliation. Fashion is a form of free speech. It not only embraces clothing, but also accessories, hairstyles, beauty and body art. What we wear and how and when we wear it, provides others with a shorthand to subtly read the surface of a social situation.

Fashion as a Sign System

Fashion is a language of signs, symbols and iconography that non-verbally communicate meanings about individuals and groups. Fashion in all its forms from a tattooed and pierced navel, to the newest hairstyle, is the best form of iconography we have to express individual identity. It enables us to make ourselves understood with rapid comprehension by the onlooker.

Fashion as a Barometer of Cultural Changes

How we perceive the beauty or ugliness of our bodies is dependant on cultural attitudes to physiognomy. The accepted beautiful female form that Rubens painted is subliminally undesirable nowadays, if we are to be thought beautiful in a way that the majority accepts in the 21st century.

Today an inability to refashion and reshape our bodies whilst constantly monitoring the cultural ideal leaves us failing the fashion test. Those that pass the fashion test invariably spend their lives absorbed in a circle of diet, exercise, cosmetic surgery and other regimes. This includes the rigors of shopping in search of the ultimate garb.

The Need for Tribal Belonging

Our reluctance to give ourselves a regular makeover through diet, exercise, and consistently conscious use of specific dress styles infers that we have the personality flaws of a weak willed human. We become in the eyes of fashion aficionados somewhat inadequate and imperfect in the fashion stakes. Thus we strive to keep a culturally satisfying appearance so that we feel better, whereas in fact we are striving to stay in the tribe, whatever type of tribe that may be.

Group affiliation is our prime concern with regard to fashion. As long as some group similarity is identified within the group, our personal fashion whether current or dated can belong to any tribe. It is the sense of belonging marked by how we fashion ourselves that gives us the tribal connection.

Roles

An innate characteristic of human beings is the desire to strive for differentiation. The removal of Sumptuary Laws and rigid dress codes has enabled the individual to use fashion as a means to identify clearly the many different roles that a person plays in any one day.

Sociologists borrowed the word 'role' from the theatre because, like actors individuals play many parts and each part has to be learnt. Roles are continually learned and rehearsed and relearned. They are also shared, because like the actors on a stage, fluid interaction only occurs if all the performers know the behaviour expected.

Class Stratification

The Edwardians were experts in the art of role play. They had had sufficient time to readjust to the new patterns of behaviour established by the Victorians.

The Edwardians were socially stratified into those who wore tailor made clothing down to those who wore other people's cast offs. The poor simply looked poor, because their raiment betrayed them. Whilst the rich and nouveau riche displayed their wealth through an iconography of signs and symbols that enhanced their body image in the eyes of those that saw themselves as socially inferior.

Role Set

Roles and activities are closely linked to what people wear. People are affected by their role-set, which includes boyfriends, girlfriends, sisters, brothers, friends, husbands, lovers, mothers, fathers, grandparents, relatives, employers, customers, clients, work mates, business colleagues, peer and age groups.

The people with whom a purchaser interacts affects the final purchase and this applies to any fashion dominated item from interior furnishings to choice of cars. Likewise the purchase of fashionable clothes, fabrics, or accessories becomes a visual currency and speaks volumes silently. The tools of fashion provide the signs and symbolism that function as an information service for the role-set.

People are so aware that others make judgements about them through their clothes and accessories that many run up huge debts to appear to belong to

a particular lifestyle. Frequently the rest of their role-set are doing likewise. Members of the role-set often encourage them. Only individuals with a strong sense of self identity stick their necks out and admit to wearing items that others might consider dubious or passé.

Occupation, Status and Purpose of Clothing

Those with high status occupations will wear the clothes they think others expect them to wear. They will not wish to experience role conflict by wearing the incorrect clothing. It is from the clothes a person wears that we get our first impression of personality. They provide mental clues to a person's status and occupational role, as well as being a means of conforming to peer group expectations.

Clothes also have the utilitarian function of providing both protection from the extremes of the elements, keeping us warm or cool or safe. They also act as an aid to modesty or immodesty as the wearer so desires.

The state of a person's clothes is synonymous with self respect and is a sign of respectability. It also adds another sign that the person has sufficient status in society to maintain at the cost of time and money, laundering, dry cleaning and repair. To be respectable some expense has to be incurred in the maintenance of cleanliness and neatness.

Veblen's 'The Theory of the Leisure Class'

Thorstein Veblen the US economist who wrote the book *The Theory Of The Leisure Class* in 1899 maintained that Dressing for status as an outward expression of wealth is indeed functional, by the very fact that such clothes prevent the wearer from engaging in manual labour. Also because of their

restrictive design they need the assistance of others to dress the wearer and keep clothes in pristine condition.

Veblen devoted a whole chapter of his book to ' Dress As An expression Of The Pecuniary Culture'.

He wrote '...our apparel is always in evidence and affords an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observers at first glance...dress, therefore, in order to serve its purpose effectively should not only be expensive, but it should also make plain to all observers that the wearer is not engaged in any kind of productive labour...

Foremost in Veblen's mind must have been the fashions of the 1890s a decade that gradually favoured increasing conspicuous consumption by the rich. A century later the vogue for power dressing in the 1980s saw excessive indulgence and conspicuous consumption in fashion. Fashionable behaviour was the epitome of conspicuous waste, but the purest form of relief in a stressed, angst ridden society.

Status Symbols

One of the most favoured forms of semiotic distinction is fashion, because fashionable clothes, accessories and body adornment are easy for others to observe at glance. Incidental items, particularly branded specific handbags footwear, jewellery, accessories and new hairstyles act also as important status symbols.

First – a fashion is approved by others.

Then – it is copied because of competition.

Finally – it is replaced as it becomes commonplace and has ceased to fulfill its function of being distinctive.

The status fashion can be anything from a particular jewel such as solitaire diamond stud earrings or the latest fad for long drop gold earrings to a brand logo pair of jeans in a particular style and colour. The ability to decode trends that are not deliberate and obvious is limited to a small group who adopt consumer items early.

Wearing a Uniform

Some people instinctively know how to appear respectable to the majority through their clothing. Others are less obviously successful in attaining consistently reliable grooming. The rise of the Corporate Uniform adopted by banks and similar institutions in the 1980s reinforced power dressing. It indicated how important the uniform is as a means of distinguishing one person from another instantly. Uniforms provide us with mental clues.

Occupational Uniform

Wearing an occupational uniform puts an employee in the position of being a visual metaphor. We learn quickly to associate different uniforms with different role conceptions and different role expectations. We connect the policeman or security guard's uniform with authority, law, order and help. Likewise we associate the nurses or paramedic's uniform with help, care, protection and mothering. By contrast the jaunty overall and hat of the ice cream vendor with the promise of pleasure.

When people put on a uniform they adopt what they think it symbolises, but even people who don't wear a specific occupational or leisure uniform tend

to know vaguely what to wear. Those who adapt their wardrobe to “fit in” with their company, succeed much faster in terms of upward job mobility.

Mass Youth Uniform

Young people in particular adopt the uniform of their peer group. However the uniform must be the peer group’s uniform, not one imposed on them by adults. Fashion in the form of a mass youth uniform can create a sense of belonging to the peer group and a feeling of identity as the adolescent personality reaches maturation.

For the majority, an old status symbol, be it a brand, a logo or attitude accessory is old-fashioned the moment it loses favour within the group. An up to date status symbol cries out to some “I must have it now”. The mobile phone as a belt accessory was a perfect example of this. As new products develop, last year’s non WAP mobile phone version is passé. It is essential to have the latest fashion accessory, to gain instant peer approval

Mass Production and New Textile Technology

Between the first and second World Wars mass production of clothing truly developed. But it was not until clothes rationing was introduced in the UK that production methods became more streamlined. Rationing of cloth and haberdashery, along with strict specifications ensured manufacturers created garments in a speedy, efficient, economic manner whilst attaining a certain standard of quality control. By the 1950s increasing numbers of women abandoned the little dressmaker and bought from the increasing majority of chain stores.

Department stores like Debenhams continued to move with the times experimenting with new fabrics and new looks. By the 1990s were using designers like Jasper Conran to design ranges with style and flair.

A whole range of exciting yarns, new fashion fabrics, protective materials and engineered fabrics became widely available after 1960. New materials and fabric finishing techniques are at first exclusive and expensive. Initially they are offered to the world of Haute Couture. A couple of years later they filter to the mass market.

Youth Cult in the Global World

The youth cult of the teenager in the 1950 s became a major force in the 1960s. Other contributing influences were the glamour of the cinema, the television in ordinary homes and a change in attitudes and values after the introduction of the female birth pill. Global coverage of the mood of society was absorbed from the cinema, television and fanzine magazines. The world had instant access to the latest trends and fashions as fast as the picture could be transmitted.

Today what people see in their homes on television or when surfing the Internet soon becomes accepted very quickly as normal and everyday. In the comfort of one's own home the television monitor scales down the stark newness of an idea, especially the impact of a fashion concept and this makes it easier for us to accept more quickly when worn by others even if we can't see ourselves wearing a similar item.

Fashion Cycles

The young have not always been dominant in fashion history. Until the Victorian Era a fashion look took between 10 and 15 years to permeate country areas. Once rail travel improved mass communication between country and city, the cycle of fashion speeded up so fast, that by the Edwardian Era in 1901, fashion was moving in a yearly cycle.

Emancipation of Women and the contribution of all classes of women to the 1914 - 1918 war enabled and encouraged women to adopt more practical clothing and to try out new styles in fashion, hair and beauty.

By the millennium everyday changes in lifestyle included fitness and health pursuits, car and air travel and centrally heated environments in homelife. All created a need for clothing fashion designed for the way we live now. How we perceive our persona and what we want to say to society in a very visual camera obsessed culture, is still expressed through our bodies, the way we wear clothes, jewellery and body art.

Today fashion and beauty can be affordable for everyone. There is always a range such as Avon that provides quality beauty, make up and accessory products at a prices most can afford.