

# Exploring surrealism in fashion fashion essay



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You only have to take a glance at today's catwalks and fashion magazines to see the unmistakable traits of Surrealism in fashion. How is it then that an art "initially composed of concepts and words and subsequently of images generated in the complexities of the intellect and subconscious imagination" (Martin 1987, p. 9) would forge such a harmonious relationship with fashion? In a bid to answer this question this thesis will investigate the origins of Surrealism in fashion and its enduring effects on the fashion industry to this day.

In order to understand how an ideal founded on political reactions would find its way into the glamour and materialism of fashion, we will firstly begin with a brief analysis of Surrealism and the main ideologies of the movements. This essay will highlight the key steps in the progression of the Surrealist movement from its founding roots through to its manifestation in its most commonly recognised form, art.

Upon having completed a review on the key characteristics of Surrealist ideology we will then explore how each of these characteristics has been expressed through fashion. Though surrealism's founding fathers would not have concerned themselves with the attire of their movement, the metaphorical and meaningful attributes of fashion created a natural avenue for the expression of surrealist ideas (Martin 1987).

No study on Surrealism in fashion would be complete without mention of its pioneering first lady, Elsa Schiaparelli. This essay will contain a case study on the life and works of Schiaparelli, focusing specifically on how she led the way in merging art with fashion by introducing Surrealist ideas in her

designs. Her collaborations with artists such as Salvador Dali, Man Ray and Jean Cocteau “ shocked” the fashion industry with its ingenuity and style.

A subsequent case study on Viktor & Rolf will examine the contribution of Surrealism in today’s fashion industry. Just like their predecessor Schiaparelli, Viktor & Rolf are known for their ability to “ shock”, with their extravagant collections and high-concept catwalk shows (Evans & Frankel 2008). Though not explicitly billed as Surreal, the flamboyant designs of Viktor & Rolf exhibit tell tale characteristics of Surrealist ideas and serve as an ideal example of the height of Surrealism’s impact on today’s fashion.

This study aims to reveal the important role that Surrealism has played on the fashion industry. Both from a historical point of view in the way that it changed the way fashion was viewed, as well as its continued impact on fashion as a source of inspiration for contemporary designers. The collaboration between artists and designers allowed for fashion to move forward in unprecedented ways, pioneered by the likes of Salvador Dali and Elsa Schiaparelli, and exemplified in today’s fashion by the likes of Viktor & Rolf.

## **Surrealism**

Often when we hear the word “ Surrealism” we automatically think of art and conjure up images from Dali and his contemporaries. However, in actual fact there is no such thing as surrealist art. At its true core surrealism is not a matter of aesthetics, but rather a way of thinking, a point of view (Waldberg 1997). It can be summed up quite well by Rimbaud’s dictum “ Change life” (Levy 1995, p. 5).

Surrealism, through its roots in Dadaism, was a reaction to the philosophy of rationalism, which many felt had caused, through the Industrial Revolution, the disaster of World War I. Tristan Tzara, leader of the Dada movement, believed that a society that creates the monstrosity of war does not deserve art, so he developed anti-art in a bit to shock society through scandal (Sanchez 2000).

Lead by Andre Breton, the participants of the movement were influenced by the works of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. The differing interpretations “ automatism”, a term used to describe one of Jung’s theories on personal analysis, split the movement into two distinct groups of thought (Sanchez M, 2007, P. 49). Some went down the path of abstractionism, where calligraphy, animation and movement were the key attributes, regardless of the subject. Their belief was that images should not be burdened with meaning. The others however, believed that images could be a link between abstract spiritual realities. Through faithful representation, objects stood as metaphors for an inner reality (Waldberg 1997, p. 9).

For the purposes of this thesis, the focus will be on the latter interpretation of automatism in the realm of surrealism as it applies to a subset of artistic expression in the form of fashion design.

## **Surrealism in Fashion**

Though surrealism’s founding fathers would not have concerned themselves with the attire of their movement, the metaphorical and meaningful attributes of fashion created a natural avenue for expression of surrealist ideas (Martin 1987, p. 9). Its appeal to the fashion industry was instantly

obvious in the use of ordinary everyday objects and weird landscapes that transferred easily to fabric printing, jewelry, hats, couture etc, allowing designers the freedom to create “ art pieces”. The amalgamation of surrealism and fashion changed the view of fashion from being disposable and unsubstantial to an art form in its own right (Warburton T, 2008, P. 2).

As surrealism evolved into an artistic style through the 1930's and beyond, fashion became one of surrealism's most observable juxtapositions between the ordinary and extraordinary, disfigurement and embellishment, body and concept, pretence and reality. This fascination worked both ways as what covered the body had always been important to the Surrealist philosophy, in the way that it allowed the imagination to wonder what lay underneath, and this translated easily into wearable garments. The inherent characteristics of fashion offered a natural association to the physical properties of disfigurement that was central to the Surrealist style.

## **Symbolism and Metaphors**

Fashion and its instruments were at the core of Surrealist metaphor even before Surrealism found its way into fashion. The imaginary of women and beauty has long been a favourite topic for Surrealist artists. Based on the line by French poet Isidore Ducasse, “ the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table”, Man Ray's photograph of a sewing machine and an umbrella paved the way for the Surrealist study of the sewing machine object as a symbolic metaphor for woman. The sewing machine itself is the primary tool of fashion, and as such came to symbolise women, who at the time were the primary workers in the clothing industry. Therefore since the process is deemed female, so the result - fashion - is

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also deemed primarily female. Future Surrealist works would take this idea further such as Joseph Cornell's untitled collage depicting a sewing machine producing not only a garment, but the woman within it also (Image 1). The sewing machine was a central metaphor in the Surrealist's understanding of beauty within a woman as being composed of clothing and form.

Image 1 - Joseph Cornell, 1903, Untitled

Music was another key imagery in the Surrealist's arsenal; in particular musical instruments and their resemblance to the female form. This objectification of women included the idea of women being substitutes for musical instruments. Perhaps one of the most famous of Man Ray's photographs *Le Violon d'Ingres* (Image 2) fittingly illustrates this concept. This exact imagery has been used many times in fashion from Christian Lacroix's *Violin Dress* (Image 3) to more recently Viktor & Rolf's black violin dress (Image 4). Influenced by Dali and Man Ray themselves, Elsa Schiaparelli also used musical notes and instruments in her designs (Image 5).

Image 2 - Man Ray, 1924, *Le Violon d'Ingres*

Image 4 - Viktor & Rolf, Spring/Summer 2008, Harlequin Collection

[Mention mirrors?]

## **Human Form and Parts**

The mannequins and dress forms of fashion created the ideal playground for the Surrealist's appropriation of the human body. The bottle for Elsa Schiaparelli's fragrance *Shocking* adopted the shape of a human torso

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(Image 6) is a prime example of the Surrealist ideal of the conversion between the living and the inanimate. These surrogates for living figures allowed for greater distortion and display than real models, thus allowing the Surrealist to fully examine the relationship between clothing and the naked body.

The Surrealist fascination with parts of the body as symbolic representations is central to the understanding of Surrealist works. To the Surrealist, the eyes represent not only optical vision, but also dreaming, sight, voyeurism, and even blindness. Yves Saint Laurent's used this convention in 1980, producing a jacket with emblazoned eyes, *Les Yeux d'Elsa*, paying homage to Schiaparelli as the greatest advocate of Surrealist fashion (Image 7). The French designer also used lips, a commonly used decorative device in surreal art, in his *Lip Dress*; the alignment of the lips with the breasts, creating a distinctive Surrealist touch along with sexual overtones (Image 8).

Image 6 - Elsa Schiaparelli, 1973, *Shocking*

Perhaps the most imaginative of the abstracted parts are the hands. Used widely by Surrealists in all manner of creative, sexual and functional contexts. Schiaparelli's jacket embroidered by Jean Cocteau plays on the functional concept of hands being a natural device for belting around the waist (Image 9). This is also emulated in Francis Lesage's *Hand Belt* (Image 10) and Marc Jacob's *l'Oeil Beaded Dress* (Image 11). Likewise, Pierre Cardin's leather shoes in the shape of feet draw out the functional characteristics of feet (Image12).

## **Displacement of Objects**

One of the most common devices of Surrealism is the placement of everyday objects in unusual places. The dysfunction and dislocation of an object allows for a redefining of that object and a friction between the conventional and the subliminal.

One obvious method of displacing object is by using it backwards as is the case with the backwards jacket created by Karl Lagerfeld (Image 13), originally pencilled by Elsa Schiaparelli. Viktor & Rolf created a similar effect by presenting a whole collection of dresses worn upside down and a show itself that was run completely back to front (Image 14).

However, displacement is not confined to within the realm of fashion itself. Objects from one classification can be used within another to create an even more vivid reaction. Dali's fusion of furniture and the human form inspired Schiaparelli's design of a desk coat (Image 15) and later on Doline Dritsas's Painted-Silk Drawer Dress (Image 16). The use of traditionally non-fashion related objects in fashion is common among contemporary designers. Viktor & Rolf have often used objects such as bells, pillows and even spotlights in their designs.

Hats have offered some of the most interesting examples of this Surrealist philosophy; from Schiaparelli's Dali inspired shoe hat (Image 17), to Karl Lagerfeld's mini sofa chair hat (Image 18). The hat is an appropriate agent not only because its function allowed for a seemingly limitless display of dissimilar objects, but it also enabled the ridicule of the hat as a symbolic accessory in culture, ceremony and rank.



Image 14 - Viktor & Rolf, Spring/Summer 2006, Upside Down Collection

## **Nature and Fantasy**

The natural world itself offered the Surrealist with an array of symbolic objects. Some chose to contort existing symbols and metaphors, such as Rene Magritte's unconventional mermaid (Image 19); while others chose to make up their own eccentric associations, the perfect example being Dali's association of the lobster with female genitalia (Image 20). Dali's obsession with the lobster influenced Schiaparelli's legendary "lobster dress" (Image 21), the painted lobster deliberately placed at the front of the dress over the woman's groin area

Surrealists had a particular interest in fantasy and the worlds within the imagination

They had a fondness of merging things in nature with the human body

Looking for objects within nature to symbolise certain things such as sexuality, beauty, metamorphosis

Image 19 - Rene Magritte, 1934, A Reverse Mermaid

Image 20 - Salvador Dali

Image 21 - Elsa Schiaparelli, 1937, Organza Dress with Painted Lobster

## **Surrealism in the Fashion Industry**

Throughout the 1930s and 40s major Surrealist figures entered the realm of fashion, fashion advertising and shop front displays. Spurred by the first generation of pure Surrealists they sought a channel to continue their

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exploration into the reconciliation of revolutionary art and everyday realities. By enlisting the talents of notable Surrealists such as Jean-Michel Frank, Jean Cocteau, Cecil Beaton and May Ray, fashion magazines became the method for the propagation of Surrealist style.

The partial figure, dislocation of body parts and the placement of these parts in unnatural settings were adopted by new fashion imagery in the 1930s. The Surrealist's ability to juxtapose the real and the imaginary made it an ideal form for advertising and media expression.

### **Case Study 1: Elsa Schiaparelli**

For Elsa Schiaparelli, her works were more about the passion and energy than fashion and design itself. What mattered to her more was that moment of inspiration (Martin 1987, p. 197). Born to an intellectual family in Rome, the would-be French designer's work is best known for its Surrealist period in the 1930s, yet her work can be traced back to the 1920s during the earlier Futurism movement. Her marriage to Theosophist Wilhelm Wendt de Kerlor in 1914 encouraged a bohemian existence that led to encounters with a broad circle of international avant-garde artists and thinkers including Dada artist Francis Picabia and surrealist photographer, Man Ray.

Through collaborative efforts with Surrealist artists like Jean Cocteau, Man Ray, Salvador Dalí and Marcel Vertès she was able to bring enthusiasm and spontaneity to her collections. The Modernist characteristics and avant garde style of Schiaparelli's work must have reflected their interests. Her simple and sharp design aligned well with their modern lifestyle in tailored suits and evening dresses; and her witty persona esteemed her original designs with

embroidery and complementary colors fit for an active clientele (Bryan 2010).

Schiaparelli was more an artistic designer than a refined designer, always grasping at ideas but not extracting a style from her garments. In her mind, the objectives of both the designer and artist were equal, and that “ a garment was a place for artistic expression rather than a medium for the couturier’s craft” (Martin, P. 198). The defining characteristic of Schiaparelli was her daringness to dream, enabling her to bring creations of pure, undiluted inspiration to fashion.

A keen interest in unusual materials kept Schiaparelli at the forefront of design innovation. She was persistent in accruing new fabrics for fashion, especially manmade fabrics which were intentionally different from natural fabrics. Her use of cellophane like materials played on the illusions of transparency (The Torso, Picture Book, P. 65), and hard rendered soft materials challenged the traditional notions of the properties of materials. In one instance Schiaparelli commissioned the creation of a newspaper-clipping fabric, producing a paradox between the expected ruffle and stiffness of newspaper with the softness of fabric. She also designed a number of accessories to complement her garments; costume jewelry, hand bags as bird cages and even necklaces made of insects (Picture from Elsa picture book, P. 43). Most of these were created to make a statement rather than to be worn on the street.

Not only was Schiaparelli eager to use unconventional materials in her garments, she was also zealous in adopting new fashion innovations of her

time. Invented in 1936, the zipper was already being used by Schiaparelli in imaginative ways. Though we may look at a wool dress with a zipper and contrasting colours and see nothing sublimely Surreal about it now, at the time it was considered novel and daringly inventive.

In the 1937-38 season, Schiaparelli “shocked” the world with her Jean Cocteau jacket (Martin, P. 100). The jacket presents an illusion of hands clasping the waste complemented by the profile of a figure and a cascade of hair down the side of the arm. In typical Surrealist style it creates a friction between the figure on the jacket and the wearer, frustrating the viewer’s attempt to place parts of the body in relationship with the figure. That same year also saw the creation of the iconic, Dali inspired lobster dress (Picture book, P. 46). An elegant party dress imprinted with a giant lobster. The lobster was a prime example of the Surrealist vocabulary of forms, Dali using it as a substitute for female genitalia and sexuality.

Of all of Schiaparelli’s artistic collaborations, it is the one with Salvador Dali which produced some of the most imaginative and unusual results. In 1936, Schiaparelli and Dali presented suits and jackets with bureau-drawer pockets reflecting themes prevalent in Dali’s Art. In that same year, she and Dali created the “Shoe Hat” (Martin, P. 111), a black felt concoction in the shape of a high-heeled shoe with a shocking pink heel. In these designs, Schiaparelli and Dali used the idea of displacement, where an object is selected and then removed from its usual environment. In doing so, they modify the object’s original purpose. The same Surrealist idea of displacement can also be seen on another of their collaborations, the “Mutton Hat” (Example?). With the desk suit, shoe hat and mutton hat, the

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artist and the designer altered an object's conventional meaning by transforming it into an item of clothing.

The beginning of the Second World War put a halt on Schiaparelli's work, which after the war would not return to the same level of exuberance as the past. Her glory was brief, but left a lasting impact on both art and fashion. Perhaps Schiaparelli's most important legacy was in bringing to fashion the playfulness and sense of "anything goes" of the Dada and Surrealist movements. She was an artist in the world of couture, not a designer involved in the evolution of designs. A pioneer, whose inspiration and merger of the arts altered clothing with a capacity to be art, enabling it to be more than just apparel.

## **Case Study 2: Viktor & Rolf**

Viktor & Rolf started in 1993 with the pairing of two Dutch graduates, Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren. Ever since then they have endeavoured to blur the line between art and fashion. Through their early installations at European galleries, Viktor & Rolf quickly gained a reputation as high-end conceptual designers who created images and ideas rather than commercial fashion (Evans C. and Frankel S. 2008, P10). Though early on they were known for wowing the fashion press but not selling a stitch Viktor & Rolf made a move from haute couture to ready-to-wear in 2000.

Similar to conceptual art, conceptual fashion involves works in which concepts and ideas take precedence over traditional aesthetic and material concerns. Aside from the garments themselves, conceptual fashion was marked with radically new retail spaces, experimental fashion shows and

adventurous publishing ventures. All of which have been exemplified in the works and methods of Viktor & Rolf; their upside down store in Milan, performance piece catwalk shows and designs for “miro-zines” such as Visionaire.

For Viktor & Rolf, couture is an artistic medium, and a playground for the expression of ideas. They are innovative designers who make exquisite and technically amazing garments, yet at the same time they are commentators of their own industry. This is probably most evident in their early gallery installations, as many were critiques and commentaries on the difficulty of breaking into the fashion industry. The pair’s first collection of over-sized dresses expressed their feelings of minuteness in the threatening world of Paris fashion. The internal referencing of the industry itself can also be seen in Viktor & Rolf’s use of Yves Saint Laurent emblazoned fabrics and paying homage to the iconic silhouettes of Chanel, Balenciaga and Yves Saint Laurent in their “Black Hole” collection. More recently their “The Fashion Show” collection presented their view on the importance of the fashion show itself to the industry. The garments for this collection were draped over scaffolding and spot lights worn by the model in a surreal juxtaposition of hard metallic frames and soft flowing fabric.

Having mostly displayed their work through art gallery installations for the initial few years of their career, Viktor & Rolf had their first fashion show during the 1998 Paris Fashion Week, albeit without the endorsement of the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture, the regulators of haute couture. However, even then, their works hardly existed outside the realm of the fashion show. As one magazine put it “their gowns tend to go straight from

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the catwalks into art museums rather than into wardrobes" (Tuner J. 2000).

The almost virtual nature of their garments prevented them from initially being granted admittance to the Chambre Syndicale. Despite not conforming to the Chambre's requirements, it was their success in the fashion press and magazines that eventually gained them the respect and recognition for membership.

Through their simulation of an emergence into the fashion industry via media channels, Viktor & Rolf were able to do it for real. In doing so, they had also discovered the rising importance of images in an ever more media rich society. They grappled with the philosophy that our perception of reality is shaped by images and that illusion is now a new form of reality; believing that " fashion doesn't have to be something that people wear. Fashion is also an image" (Gan S. 2001). This ideology is personified in their Autumn/Winter 2002-03 collection labelled " Bluescreen". Models dressed all in blue were recorded via a video camera with the image then being projected onto large screens. On the screen, urban and natural landscapes were transposed onto the blue areas utilizing a movie industry method for creating special effects, thus creating a blur between image and reality.

The innovative and often outlandish clothes produced by Viktor & Rolf were often complimented by the surreal theatrics of the fashions shows that they were displayed in. In their Autumn/Winter 1998-99 collection " Atomic Bomb", the duo fused the silhouette of mushroom clouds with the human form by installing silk padding to inflate the clothes. The apocalypse themed show was followed by models parading the same outfits, however with the implants removed to reveal the graceful draping of the clothes. They used a <https://assignbuster.com/exploring-surrealism-in-fashion-fashion-essay/>

similar dichotomy in their Spring/Summer 2006 “Upside Down” collection, showcasing pieces that could be worn bottom up or bottom down; presented on the catwalk one way then the other. Applying the same surreal reasoning, the show itself was presented entirely backwards, with the designers appearing first followed by a procession and then the presentation of each individual piece.

Perhaps one of Viktor & Rolf’s most memorable shows was for their Autumn/Winter 1999-2000 “Russian Doll” collection. The show was more a performance piece, involving just one model who was dressed one piece at a time in layers of couture dresses by the designers themselves. The resulting effect was that of a reverse Matryoshka doll. This fascination with dolls has been prevalent throughout their career since their “Launch” instillation of miniatures in 1996 to their latest offering at London’s Barbican Art Gallery. Proving that their move to more commercial markets has not diminished the duo’s affinity towards Surrealism, the 2008 Barbican display consists of a gigantic dollhouse inhabited by 55 dolls clothed with miniaturised Viktor & Rolf outfits showcasing their 15 year career, aptly named “The House of Viktor & Rolf”.

In 2004 the duo launched a perfume called “Flowerbomb” and in fine Surrealist fashion packaged it in a grenade shaped bottle. Complimenting that was a clothing collection featuring the excessive use of oversized bows and ribbons. Viktor & Rolf’s penchant for the Surrealist ideology of displacement of objects can be further witnessed by their “Bells” collection of garments, heavily embroidered with brass bells, and the use of pillows and quilting in their intimate “Bedtime Story” collection.



Not only do Viktor & Rolf draw on the ideologies of the Surrealism movement, but their works also show inspiration from other Surrealist artists. The ever present trait of medieval carnival was brought out explicitly in their Spring/Summer 2008 “ Harlequin” collection. The garments exhibited references to commedia dell’arte, a theme that was once adopted by the queen of Surrealist fashion, Elsa Schiaparelli (Evans C. and Frankel S. 2008, P16). Motifs of violins adorning the dresses paid homage to Surrealist photographer May Ray and his famous image, *Le Violon d’Ingres* (Image 2).

Though not known specifically as Surrealist designers the characteristics of Surrealism are clearly evident in Viktor & Rolf’s designs. They have used Surrealist methods such as the displacement of objects, manipulation of the human form and merging of the real and imaginary as tools for their own conceptual ideas. Just like their predecessors, in the likes of Elsa Schiaparelli, they employ these methods to create innovative and “ shocking” garments often more akin to art, than off-the-shelf fashion.

## **The Lasting Impact of Surrealism on Fashion**

### **Conclusion**

When Surrealism came to fashion it was with a passion, engulfing the fashion arts with an enthusiasm that has never left. Over time ideas about fashion presentation in magazines, window displays and apparel have evolved, but Surrealism remains fashion’s favourite art.

The collaboration between artists and designers allowed for fashion to move forward in unprecedented ways, pioneered by the likes of Dali and Elsa Schiaparelli, and exemplified in today’s fashion by the likes of Viktor & Rolf.