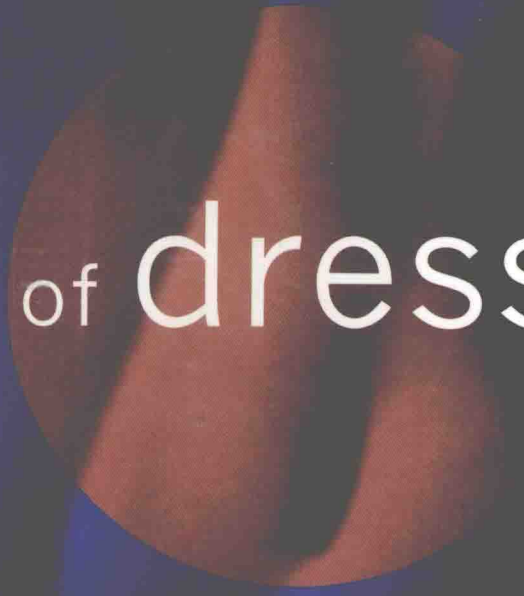
the meanings of dress



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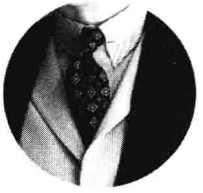

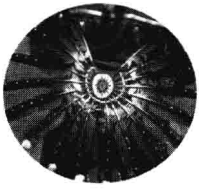

THE MEANINGS OF DRESS

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Fairchild Publications
New York

Executive Editor: Olga Kontzias
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Interior Design: Jeanne Calabrese
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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 99:72451

ISBN: 1-56367-165-4

GST R 133004424

Printed in the United States of America

PREFACE

All three of us were in the same quandary. What should we assign as reading material for our classes on the social, psychological, and cultural aspects of dress? Our classes cater to an increasingly diverse body of students—young, older, international, male and female, minority and mainstream. And each of us teaches with a substantial number of freshmen in our classes—students new to the college experience. How can we engage students in the subject matter and in the wide array of resources that can facilitate learning?

We've each tried a number of approaches: text that covered some but not all of what was included in our courses; text that was too advanced; individual readings on reserve in the library or available through a copy center; and handouts that summarized elemental concepts. All of us found that resources offering minority perspectives and global diversity were limited in availability or fairly absent from texts.

This book does not answer all teaching needs for introductory classes on the social, psychological, and cultural aspects of dress. But we've created a resource that we think is a valuable supplement to existing and future textbooks. *The Meanings of Dress* provides readings that are compelling and that expand our notions of what dress does for the individual and society. It introduces basic concepts likely to be covered in classes related to dress and psychology, sociology, cultural studies, and consumer behavior.

This book is about dress, that is, all the things human beings do to the surfaces and appearance of their bodies. Dress is an essential part of human experience. Perhaps because of its closeness to the body, dress has a richness of meanings that express the individual as well as groups, organizations, and the larger society in which that person lives. Understanding its function helps us relate to other cultures, facilitates our interactions with others, and moves us to reflect upon and understand ourselves. We can also gain insight into how and why consumers buy clothing and other products related to dress.

Emphasis on Diversity

Diversity is an important fulcrum for the book. We have tried to incorporate perspectives offered by a variety of disciplines, cultures, and issues. We look to voices of multiple authors to help us understand dress.

These authors vary in gender, ethnicity, cultural backgrounds, age, and work roles. We hear from academics, journalists, business professionals, novelists, and students. They demonstrate how dress is a central factor in most areas of everyday life, such as work, school, sports, rituals and celebrations, intimate relationships, fantasy and play, and aging and development throughout a person's lifespan. The authors talk about dress and the body as a means of communication, but one that also contributes to problems of stereotyping, discrimination, and exclusion from power in society. They describe the richness of meanings associated with the body and dress that varies as a result of age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, culture, immigration, position in society, and era. Dress is also examined as a reflection of larger social processes such as fashion systems, political conflict, hegemony, technological changes, organizational evolutions, generational experiences as well as cultural change in general.

The Meanings of Dress takes an interdisciplinary approach. Articles are selected from psychology, sociology, anthropology, material culture, history, communications, semiotics, aesthetics, consumer behavior, marketing, business management, consumer economics, popular culture, gender studies, feminist scholarship, minority studies, and more. Dress is a multifaceted phenomenon. One viewpoint is just not enough.

Plan of the Book

Writings and visuals from popular magazines, newspapers, scholarly journals, books, advertisements, and cartoons contribute the illustrative material of the book. Some of the articles are carefully selected reprints, while others are new and written specifically for this book. Our aim was to build a collection of scholarly, but easy-to-read works.

Chapter 1 introduces the essential concepts used throughout the book, including those of culture, self, identity, social role, meaning, and fashion. Chapter 1 establishes the centrality of diversity, pluralism, relativism, and holism to understanding dress.

Chapters 2 through 13 introduce a variety of concepts and issues and include pedagogy and readings. Key terms and concepts are emphasized in bold in the chapter introductions. Each article is highlighted in its chapter introduction to explain the relevance of the article to chapter issues and themes. Suggested readings at the end of each introduction encourage the reader to further explore topics. The learning activity also at the end of each introduction, helps students experience the ideas and concepts in the chapter. Discussion questions following each reading encourage critical thinking about the articles. In general, chapters are arranged in a micro to macro organization, starting with discussion of some basic components of human life in relation to dress and moving to larger societal systems. Throughout all chapters, however, we consider the perspectives of individual, group, and larger society and culture.

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The integral relationship of the body to dress, self, and society is introduced in Chapter 2. Chapters 3 and 4 unpack the process of communication and the creation of meanings of dress through human interaction.

Chapters 5 through 10 focus on various social roles and how dress helps us express, perform, and experience those roles. Gender and sexual identity, are examined in relation to the self within various cultural contexts in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 examines how individuality and conformity are essential to dressing the self for various identities. Chapter 7 focuses on the function of dress in the work environment. Chapters 8 and 9 chart dress as a reflection of age roles throughout the lifespan, from infancy to elder years. Race, ethnicity, and social class are roles examined in Chapter 10. The chapter addresses the importance of body and dress to issues of minority status, hegemonic power, and exclusion and inclusion from power bases.

Moving to still larger systems in society, Chapter 11 examines the fashion process as part of the dynamics of cultural change. Religion is the focus of Chapter 12. Religious ideology is a major influence on larger cultural organization and values, and dress is a reflection of religion. Finally, Chapter 13 takes a macro look at dress as a part of cultural change.

The Meanings of Dress ends with Chapter 14, a look at major societal trends in the near future that may affect dress. Future shifts of age and ethnic representation, technology as it affects modes of access to procuring goods, and environmental issues are examined for impact on dress and how we think and feel about the body. Consideration of multiple scenarios closes the book with a useful exercise on the complexity of dress in society.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book of readings and activities is the result of the collective efforts of many individuals. We thank all our helpers for their generous time, effort, and support.

We would like to thank the Department of Textiles and Clothing at Iowa State University for allowing graduate assistants to help with various aspects of the book. In particular, we thank Harriet McLeod, Cai Guise-Richardson, Jennifer Ogle, and Mary Alice Casto for their energetic and often innovative efforts at locating articles and visuals. Eunah Yoh, Carol Hall, and especially Sherry Shofield-Tomschin were instrumental in getting the endless array of permissions completed and organized.

We thank the writers who willingly let us include their work. They have told engrossing and valuable stories. We especially thank the contributors of original manuscripts for their enthusiasm for the book and their willingness to lend to our editorial requirements.

We thank Jo Moreno, University of Rhode Island, for helping us "test drive" the book.

Our editor, Olga Kontzias, deserves endless praise for her patience at our plodding progress. She served as an astute guide to the intricacies of publishing a text, performed miracles at getting the visuals compiled, and was an extraordinary cheerleader. Her energy for this project was essential. Many others at Fairchild Publications assisted in the preparation of this book. Mary Siener, the art director at Fairchild Books, was bound by e-mail for many months.

Mary Lynn Damhorst would like to thank her colleagues Jane Farrell-Beck, Nancy Miller, and Ann Marie Fiore for funneling interesting articles and cartoons her way. She also thanks her parents Florence and Clarence Damhorst for their support of her multiyear efforts. Her Mom clipped articles faithfully over the years and her Dad even pitched in as a fact checker. She also thanks her students in her Appearance in Society class during the spring of 1998. Their completion of evaluations of the readings tested was most helpful in shaping the book. Of course, her coeditors were the most essential part of the team. It would not have been possible to assemble such a diverse and rich array of material without working together. Their great efforts at writing, editorial feedback as they developed the chapters, and camaraderie during the long process made this book one of the most valuable experiences of her life.

Kimberly A. Miller would like to thank Jill Buckland, reference librarian at W.T. Young Library, University of Kentucky, for her prompt and able assistance. She would also like to thank The College of Human Environmental Sciences at the University of Kentucky for granting her a sabbatical leave, which allowed time for the completion of the book. The support of Charles Lee Spillman, for his patience and willingness to review drafts of the manuscript is deeply appreciated.

Many people helped Susan O. Michelman directly and indirectly in the production of this text. First, she would like to thank her coeditors, who were wonderful to work with in both good and difficult times. Second, she would like to acknowledge the many students she has taught in Dress and Culture at the University of Massachusetts since 1995 who shared their interest and enthusiasm in this topic. They motivated her to provide them with a textbook that would draw them into critically thinking about the diversity of human appearance. Their ideas have greatly enriched her thinking. She must also thank the Center for Teaching at the University of Massachusetts, which awarded her a Lilly Foundation Teaching Fellowship in 1995 to work on developing this course. Some of the creative ideas about teaching that she shared with colleagues from other disciplines that year are woven into this textbook. Her acknowledgments would not be complete without thanking her family. Her husband John who patiently listened to her ideas and critiqued her writing for years, almost consistently gives her great and realistic feedback. Her son Adam and daughter Adria always kept her abreast of contemporary culture. Her father-in-law, Irving Michelman, patiently proofread many pages for her. For those of you who have inspired her thinking on the topic of the meanings of dress, she thanks you all.

Readers selected by the publisher were also very helpful. They include M. Lynn Alkire, Central Missouri State University; Linda Arthur, University of Hawaii; Diane Frey, Bowling Green State University; Melody Lehew, Kansas State University; Charlene Lind, Brigham Young University; Elizabeth Lowe, Queens College; Nancy Oliver, Northern Arizona University; and Sarah Schmidt, UNC-Greensboro.

1999

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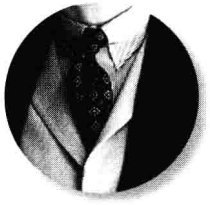

AFTER YOU HAVE READ THIS CHAPTER, YOU WILL COMPREHEND:

- How dress is a multifaceted behavior.
- How dress is a part of culture and society, reflecting how people think and organize themselves.
- Fashion is collective behavior.
- How meanings of dress are relative to cultural, historical, social, and individual context.
- The relationship between dress and the self.
- The value in diversity in dress across cultures.

> . . . appearance is a primary mark of identification, a signal of what they consider themselves to be.
>
> *Banner, American Beauty* (1983, p. 3)

This book is a compilation of readings about **appearance**, including all aspects of the human body that have the potential to be observed by other human beings. We focus particularly on **dress**, which we define as any intentional modification of appearance (see Kaiser, 1990; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). Dress is what people do to their bodies to maintain, manage, and alter appearance; therefore, dress is behavior.

Dress includes more than clothing—those three-dimensional objects that enclose and envelop the body in some way (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). Dress includes a wide array of other supplements and attachments to the body, such as makeup, nose rings, masks, shoes, headdresses, wigs, and hair plugs. Dressing may include application of chemicals, heat, and light to change color, texture, and odor, as in perfumes, deodorants, tanning, facial peels, hair straightening or curling, tattoos, scarification, and branding. Removing noticeable portions of the body can also be an act of dress, such as cutting hair, shaving a beard, removing a facial mole, removing fat through liposuction, or getting a nose job. Dieting and exercise are also, in part, a type of dress—if those activities are undertaken to change weight, muscle definition, or body shape in any way. Extremes of purging or self-starvation can also be dressing activities when adopted as strategies toward losing weight. The dressed (or even undressed) body is very much a project under continual construction (Brumberg, 1997).

Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) contend that dress is intentional, but in accidental circumstances, this requirement of intention becomes complex. For example, getting splashed and covered with mud by a passing truck is not an act of dress, but how one deals with mud all over one's clothing is an act of dress, even though there might not be complete freedom of choice in how the mud problem is solved.

Dress and appearance are worthy of study because they are laden with meanings. Appearance and dress often provide the most immediate and apparent visual cues about age, gender, ethnicity, social status, and social roles. The shape of the body, as we shall examine in Chapter 2, has significant meanings. In addition, dress protects the body from the environment—physical, psychological, and social. It expresses relationships, steers individuals to approach or avoid others, shapes actions toward others, reflects how people feel about themselves, and expresses personal values and values of the society in which an individual lives. Dress is more than the mere objects and materials people put on their bodies. Dress can be a sign or symbol that refers to and stands for **meanings** not inherent in the material or object.[1] In sum, the physical body when dressed reflects the "social body" or surrounding societal system (Turner, 1991). Chapter 4 examines the complex array of meanings that can be expressed through dress.

Dress is a chronicle of any time in history. As fashions or norms of dressing change over time, trends in technology, the economy, religion, the arts, notions of morality, social organization, and patterns of everyday living are reflected in dress. Chapter 13 looks at societal changes reflected in dress. We can learn much about people in any society through the way they dress and the meanings assigned to their dress. For example, Ellen Melinkoff in *What We Wore* (1984) compared the late 1960s and early 1970s to the previous 10 years:

> The hippie look was many things: sloppy, creative, unstudied, studied, uniform, eccentric, and most of all, casual. That casualness is its legacy. Of course, true hippie garb went to the extreme of casualness, unkempt. But it drew our attention to just how uptight, plastic, cookie-cutter-correct we had been in our dress.
>
> Whether in Jackie Kennedy A-line outfits or Mary Quant minis, we dressed in packs. The only avenue open to us to impress other people was through correctness. The hippies spit on that idea. They felt clothes should be a form of expression and people should be comfortable as well. (p. 170)

PREVAILING CONCEPTS

Several themes and concepts are introduced in this first chapter so that we can draw on them in the following chapters and readings. The concepts include culture and society, fashion, relativism, self, diversity, and pluralism.

A Cultural Perspective

Culture is an elusive and complex concept. Throughout the lifetime of an individual, culture surrounds and shapes the individual in ways that are barely recognizable to the individual.

Linton (1936) pointed out that culture is a complex whole that includes any capabilities and habits held by members of a society. Culture is a system that is learned and reflected in behavior patterns characteristic of the members of a society (Hoebel, 1958). The behavior patterns under focus in this book are the many forms of dress. In taking a cultural perspective to understand dress, a **holistic** approach must be adopted in which all aspects of a culture are considered as shaping the meanings of dress and the choices people make when choosing forms of dress.

WHAT PEOPLE THINK. Spradley (1972) neatly summarized culture as ". . . what people know, feel, think, make, and do" (p. 6). What people know and think are the mentifacts of a culture, which include ideas, ideals, values, knowledge, and ways of knowing. Knowing how to dress is a part of any cultural knowledge base. How, indeed, do so many people know they should wear jeans on their legs and not on their heads? This seemingly obvious rule is very much a part of many cultures today, as jeans are a garment worn by people all around the globe. We will examine the complexity of unwritten rules for dress in Chapter 3.

In any one appearance, a person may express personal and cultural values simultaneously. For example, a culture that creates changing fashions may be expressing a general belief that change and newness are positive (Sproles & Burns, 1994). In contrast, a culture that values tradition and doing things the old way will likely produce clothing that changes very little over time, as among old order Amish groups in the United States who wear clothing similar in style to what Amish wore in the 1800s.

People also learn meanings of different styles or types of dressing—another component of cultural knowledge. Note the many dress features that are used in the United Technologies ad to create the image of a car thief in the United States (see Figure 1.1). For viewers of the ad who are familiar with large U.S. urban areas, the combination of dress items in that ad image may elicit a **stereotype**, or a network of meanings assigned on the basis of appearance. In the ad text—the advertiser gives further information that the man is a thief and not someone whom many people want hanging around their neighborhood. Appearance stereotypes are mentifacts shared by members of a cultural group.

Stereotypes are based on limited information, such as appearance, and result in a network of inferences about characteristics of the person. Even though the stereotype rarely fits any individual completely, believers of the stereotype generalize its characteristics to all members of the group. The stereotyper tends to be blinded to other characteristics that make the individual unique. Some individuals hold to a stereotype so rigidly that they become **prejudiced** against a group and discriminate against the group regardless of information that the stereotype is unfair or untrue. When a stereotype is widely held in a culture, prejudicial treatment of the group on a broad scale is likely to occur in that society.

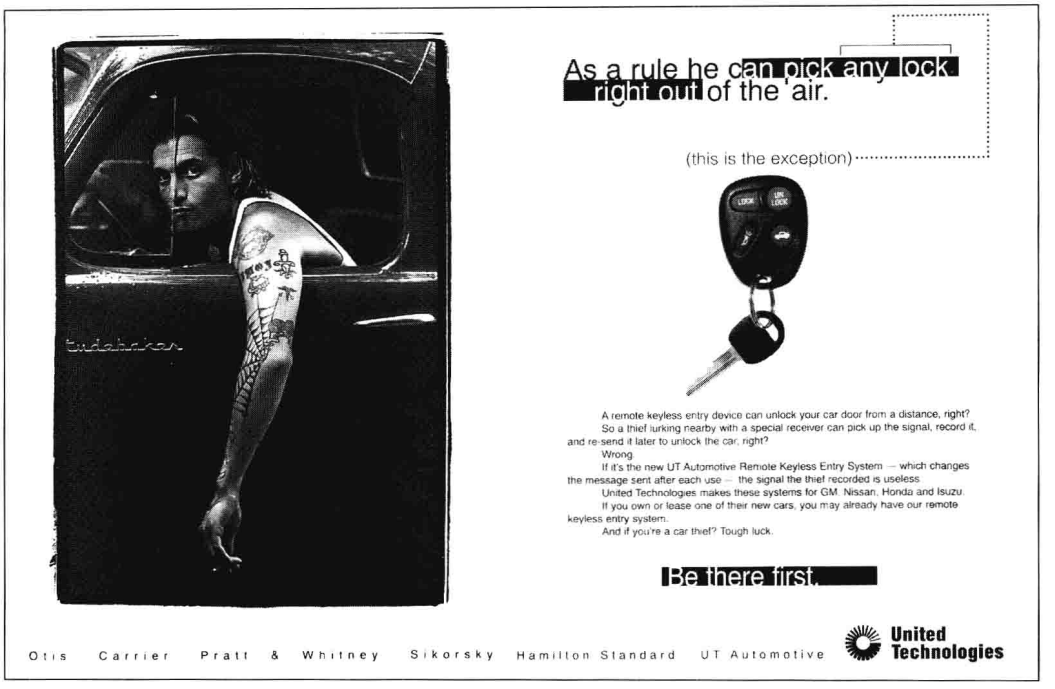

FIGURE 1.1 *Advertisers use appearance cues to present images that evoke stereotypes. In the context of this ad, the man appears to be someone you might not trust with your car.*

What makes stereotyping particularly dangerous is that many people are unaware that they apply a stereotype consistently to a group. Human beings have a natural tendency to attempt to classify others into familiar types to simplify the task of making sense of the surrounding social world. Only by recognizing that we all, at some time, use stereotypes can we become more diligent at avoiding erroneous stereotyping and labelling.

WHAT PEOPLE DO. What people do are the **sociofacts** of a culture. Sociofacts are social behaviors or how people organize themselves in relation to one another. In fact, the term **society** is often used to refer to a group of people living and working together in a systematic way. George Herbert Mead (1934) contended that society requires coordinated interaction of individuals. Dress can help in coordinating interaction. For example, uniforms can help people know whom to ask for help if an auto accident has occurred and whom to ask for water in a restaurant. Dress gives clues as to the age of individuals, their gender, and their attractiveness—all helpful in deciding, for example, who to ask to dance at a campus bar (even though dress cues can be deceiving). In some cultures dress helps identify who should be accorded special respect and courtesies and who should be ignored or barred from entry to "polite" public areas.

Societies often have a group that dominates and leads minorities and less powerful groups in society. This situation of dominance is referred to as **hegemony**. The powerful group tends to set standards for behavior and ways of thinking (Gramsci, 1971). We will examine how hegemony in the United States has an influence on standards of attrac-

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