

Colin McDowell

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The Anatomy of Fashion



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Colin McDowell

The Anatomy of **Fashion**

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»The Anatomy of Fashion« takes a new approach to chronicling how we dress. By breaking fashion down into its basic elements and showing how they all fit together, it goes beyond the what, when and who of fashion to address a much more difficult – and much more interesting – question: Why? Why do we dress as we do? Why has fashion changed and evolved over centuries? Why does the human body shape, which, when all is said and done, does not vary massively in its essential form, require so much variation in its clothing?

The answers to such questions put clothes in the context of society and social change because clothes are, after all, a social construct. How we dress reflects a wide range of influences, from the technological development of new textiles or dyes to the economic advances that created a stratified society, from the requirements of unrestrained movement on the battlefield to the psychological desire to align oneself with a group of others through dress, from religious proscriptions on particular garments to the fascination of artists with other societies.

Above all, however, clothes reflect the different functions and needs of parts of the body. It goes without saying that the priorities when clothing the head are different from those we face when clothing the legs. The hands require a degree of freedom that the feet do not. The constant wear and tear on the feet, however, means that they need more protection than the hands. The feet are cushioned by layers of hardened skin, but early cultures further protected them by tattooing the skin with designs they believed could magically prevent evil spirits entering the body from the ground. The next stage was to tie soles of tree bark or grasses to the feet, followed by fur; these were the ancestors of the hard-soled sandals later worn by the Assyrians, Greeks and Romans.

Like the feet, other parts of the body have particular requirements from clothing – and reflect their own particular symbolism. Each shows the influence of the broader sweep of forces at work in the creation and development not just of clothing but of all aspects of appearance. Throughout history, people have had far greater freedom of choice in how they present themselves than in many other fields of life. That freedom was once a privilege but is now – in the developed world at least – a right.

Once the basic requirements of clothing – protection, warmth, comfort – were addressed in ancient times, it can be argued that any later change reflects not necessity but fashion. Items of dress have remained static, not least because the human body has remained static. Much change in fashion is a variation on a theme worked out centuries ago, and reflects clothing's role as a weapon to impress, protect, excite or intrigue. Those variations are at the heart of »The Anatomy of Fashion«. Why did a suntan replace a pale, peaches-and-cream face as a sign of a high-class woman? Why did men shave their heads so that they could wear closer-fitting wigs in the seventeenth century – or so that they can wear a beanie hat today?

Covering up has been the norm in most societies for at least 3,000 years. The reasons humans wear clothes are many. One – the basic impulse in cold climates – is for warmth. For our early ancestors, using animal skins to supplement their own insulation allowed them to roam further in search of food from the warm regions they initially inhabited. Another reason is closely related to the first: our clothes protect our relatively vulnerable skin from cuts, bruises, knocks, dirt and also the heat of the sun.

Other impulses to cover our skins are more complex. Although nakedness is our natural state, it is also the state that most reveals our animal natures. This has meant that it has been viewed with deep suspicion by those for whom the physical is the debased side of our natures, compared with the spiritual and intellectual nature that separates

us from the animal world and lifts us closer to the divine. Religions have urged their followers to cover themselves since the Old Testament days, when Eve fed Adam the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden and they became ashamed of their nakedness.

Under the urgings of Christianity, Buddhism and Islam, the human form virtually disappeared from public view for centuries (or even from private view: in the early modern world it would not have been unusual for a husband and wife to rarely see one another entirely naked, and even the Prince in the classic Italian novel »Il Gattopardo«, set in nineteenth-century Sicily, tells his mistress that, although he is a father, he has never seen his wife entirely nude). In a dualistic view of the universe, the spiritual is pure and holy; the physical is corrupt and licentious. The sight of nudity encourages base appetites and lust, a universal sin. It is worth noting, however, that the oldest of the surviving major religions, Hinduism, did not place such a high value on being clothed: the Naga Sadhus (saints) still go naked in their thousands, although often their bodies are covered in a layer of mud.

Moral and religious injunctions against nudity have rarely been entirely successful, however. Since Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils in the Bible, strip-tease artists, pornographers and priests have understood that partial nudity is usually far more arousing than complete nudity. The 'well-turned ankle' of the early nineteenth century or the 'glimpse of stocking' of its close took on erotic significance only in the context of clothing that otherwise disguised the body completely. Such is the complexity of the relation between clothes and skin that nudity may at times seem like the most innocent (and honest) of all human states.

Once everyone in a society wears clothes, how one dresses becomes a form of projection and differentiation. Clothes present clues about the wearer. Finer cloth, richer dyes or whiter linen have

always been the preserve of the wealthy. The poor meanwhile were dressed in fabrics that itched or chafed, dull browns, blues and greys, garments and shoes (if any) that fit poorly ... or with wearing next to nothing.

Clothes do not simply conceal the body: they alter it. Pads make shoulders wider; bras change the silhouette of the breasts; corsets and belts provide narrower waists; collars make necks longer and more slender; vertical stripes elongate the body; dark clothes appear to slim. These physical trompes l'oeil have an emotional counterpart: if we think we look good, we feel good. This is the reason that clothes become an obsession for so many people – because ultimately we do not dress for other people; we dress only for ourselves and what we perceive as our physical inadequacies and imperfections. We dress in order to clothe whatever perception we have of ourselves and to shape how we wish the world to perceive us. Clothes become part of our personalities, betraying how we wish we were rather than who we actually are.

The signals that we send to others are reflections of our visions of ourselves. Of course, clothes do send out signals. They might reveal our job or where we stand in society; they might indicate our preferences in music, in sports or even in bed; they might reflect a tradition in which we function. But the signals are strongest to ourselves. Apart from clothes that people are forced to wear, we dress to reinforce how we see ourselves, to give us comfort, help us to belong (or not) and to instil a feeling of well-being and confidence when facing the world.

That is one reason why many clothes are so similar. The majority of people are more comfortable if they feel that they are part of a larger whole. Although society has at various times imposed rules on what people may or may not wear, a far more profound influence on dress has been people's inherent conservatism and peer attitudes. Excepting the most robust individualists, few of us want to move

too far away from the herd. The continuity of clothing for conformity and anonymity is often a far greater force in how we dress than the innovation of fashionable clothing, and one of the reasons (the other being lack of money and the right social habitat) why fashion change has been such a relatively slow-moving stream for most of civilization, with whole centuries passing with very slight variations in dress, which might better be called tweaking more than creating: a slightly wider sleeve here, a bigger pattern there.

To some extent, all dress is fancy dress, unless it is purely practical. Once anyone owns more than one set of garments, dressing for the day becomes a series of decisions – conscious or otherwise – about how to present oneself to the world. The clothes become part of whatever character it is wished to create. Thus, in a psychological sense, the adult's wardrobe remains an echo of the child's dressing-up box.

The power of clothes is that they are tools in our constant quest to find a personality with which we are comfortable. They are like the decorative and often concealing masks that liberate revelers from the responsibilities and repressions of daily life. They allow a new spirit to take over. We can be bold where we are normally shy, flirtatious when usually modest, provocative instead of correct. (When it comes to fancy dress parties, it seems to be always the naughty figures that appeal – transgressive Mother Superior, saucy tart, Marie Antoinette, Nell Gwyn are figures with overwhelming personalities that lend power to even the most retiring character.)

Designers love the make-believe element of clothing. Why not? This is where their imagination and creativity finds free rein. They no more want to be trapped in the everyday and humdrum than the rest of us, so they are happy to give us the clothes to help us escape. To that extent, they share the same sense of wonder and acquisitiveness of the seafarers and merchants who in past centuries voyaged around the world, witnessing strange sights and behaviours and bringing home the richest

and most exotic goods from the cultures that they encountered. But they are also storytellers who use clothes to impart their vision of the world – a vision that is filtered through a prism of romance, beauty and escape. Indeed, it could be argued that the fashion shows of the great designers are largely a coat of many colours offering a surrogate alternative to the imagination rather than suggestions for actual fashion wear. During their careers, John Galliano, Vivienne Westwood and Marc Jacobs have increasingly presented a make-believe, unrealizable fashion story which is no longer a serious suggestion of how to dress but a fantasy fairy tale that frequently leaves the viewer bewildered as the gap between the vision and reality looms ever larger. The only saving grace is the fact that little, if any, of the catwalk fantasy actually appears in the stores.

»The Anatomy of Fashion« is a new exploration of how we dress, based on that most obvious – but often overlooked – foundation: the human body. Examining each part of the body and how it has been dressed allows for historical or geographical or cultural juxtapositions that are not instantly obvious from a more traditional approach to fashion, illuminating both contrasts and continuities. This is not intended to be an encyclopedia. Rather than being comprehensive, it is intended to highlight some of the more interesting and revealing facets of dress that are often overlooked. It is not a book written for the dress specialist or costume academic but, rather, a book for the general reader of any age who wishes to learn more about themselves and their fellows by how they dress. Many of the images are not 'fashion': this book is about dress, and dress exists outside the stylized pages of magazines, in advertisements, snapshots, drawings, news images and everyday photographs. Dress is the inescapable and essential element of lives at all levels – and its variety and complexity is endlessly revealing and fascinating.

The Body Unclothed

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