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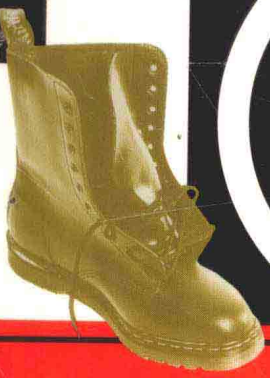
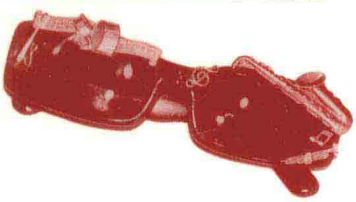


Meanings and Messages in American Culture

RUTH P. RUBINSTEIN



Dress Codes

Meanings and Messages in American Culture

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Westview Press
Boulder • San Francisco • Oxford

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Published in 1995 in the United States of America by Westview Press, Inc., 5500 Central Avenue, Boulder, Colorado 80301-2877, and in the United Kingdom by Westview Press, 36 Lonsdale Road, Summertown, Oxford OX2 7EW

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Rubinstein, Ruth P.
Dress codes : meanings and messages in American culture / Ruth P. Rubinstein.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0-8133-2282-0 (hard) — ISBN 0-8133-2283-9 (pbk.)
1. Costume—United States—Social aspects. 2. Costume—United States—History. 3. Body, Human—Social aspects—United States.
I. Title.
GT605.R835 1995
391'.00973—dc20 94-32808
CIP

Printed and bound in the United States of America

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4

To the memory of my parents,
Eliezer Peles and Sara Calderon Peles

Acknowledgments

Writing this book has been a challenge and a pleasure in part because it depended on the contributions of others. The support I received for my graduate education from the National Institute for Mental Health and the seminars I attended offered by the National Endowment for the Humanities have demonstrated the importance of investing in human capital. Professors Hildegard Peplau of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey; Jan de Vries of the University of California at Berkeley; and Robert Wohl of the University of California at Los Angeles helped me acquire the theoretical sensitivity needed for the task at hand.

I owe thanks to Professor Robert Perinbenayagam of Hunter College for providing me with a summary of Gregory P. Stone's dissertation and giving me his moral support throughout the many years it took to complete this project. A former Stone student, he intuitively understood the kind of synthesis I sought to achieve.

I am also grateful to my colleagues at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), members of the art history, political science, and economics disciplines. They patiently withstood years of incessant questioning in their particular specialties: Webster Boodey, Robert Cahn, George Dorsch, Larry Homolka, Jackie Lakah, Katherine Michaelsen, Justin O'Connor, Ernest Poole, and Charles Opincar. The staff of the FIT library provided constant support. This book demonstrates that interdisciplinary discourse is beneficial to students and faculty alike.

The grant of a sabbatical leave in fall 1993 made it possible for me to complete this project sooner rather than later. To the FIT administration and the United College Employees of FIT I extend my thanks.

Edith Sancroft, Acting Dean of Liberal Arts, also supported this enterprise. As a professor of dance she contributed to my understanding of the body and its use in social constructs for particular reasons and purposes. In addition, she made it possible for Jerry Gaschen, her assistant, to help me with faxes and other communications. Social Science Chairperson Barry Karp deserves particular thanks for encouraging me to submit my first formal paper (encapsulated in Chapter 2) for presentation at a psychology of fashion conference at New York University. I am grateful to the late Gladys Marcus, Dean of Liberal Arts at FIT, who first suggested that I teach a course on clothing and society at a time when I knew much about society but little about clothing. Students in my classes over the past ten years have had to shift their thinking away from fashion media hype to clarify ideas and make sense of actual observations. We have all gained in the process.

Loretta Lawrence Keane, Patrick D. Hennessey, and Beverly Douglas of the College Relations Division at FIT have also supported my work. By referring re-

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porters and their questions to me they have helped me stay informed of popular interests and current concerns. At Westview Press my thanks go to Gordon Massman, editor of the Cultural Studies Series, who recognized the merit of my manuscript and coordinated the review process; in addition, I wish to thank Jane Raese, the book's production editor, and Beverly LeSuer, copy editor, who contributed immeasurably to the clarity of the text. Finally, personal thanks go to Ann and Karl Rodman of Camp Thoreau, New York.

Ruth P. Rubinstein

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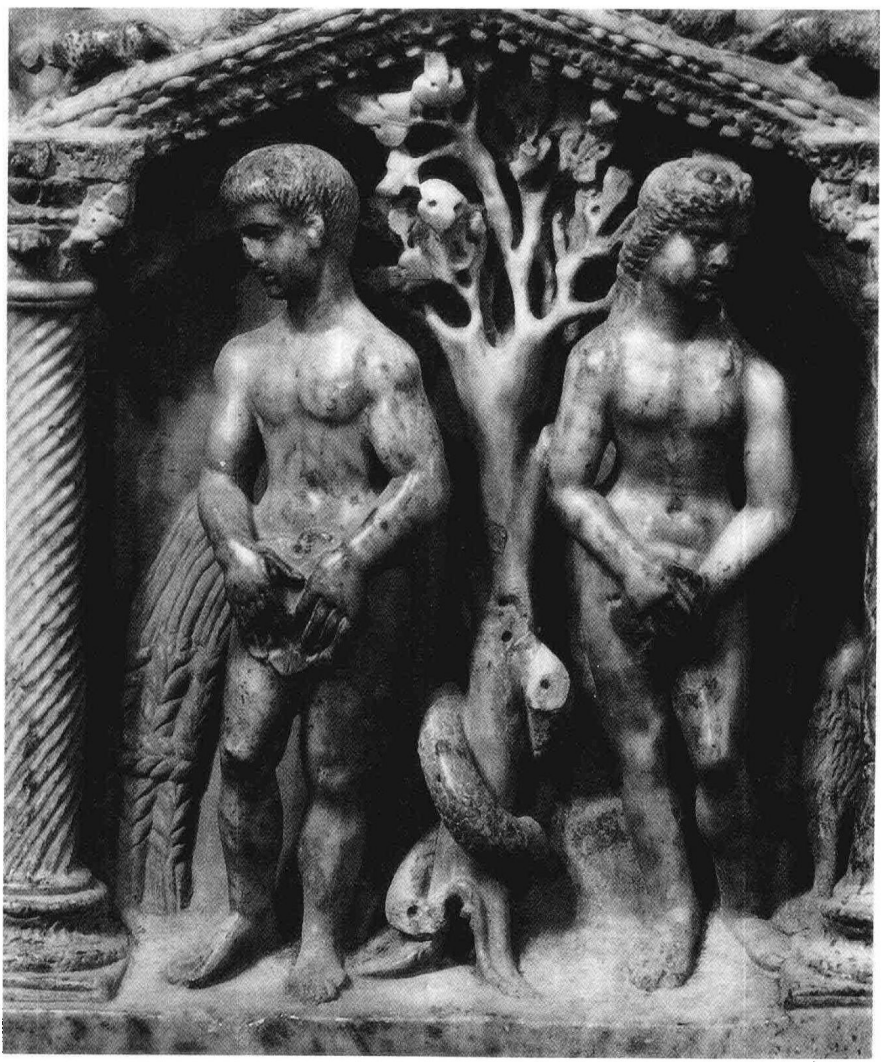

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1

Dress in Societal Discourse

Most social scientists take it for granted that an individual's clothing expresses meaning. They accept the old saw that "a picture is worth a thousand words" and generally concede that dress and ornament are elements in a communication system. They recognize that a person's attire can indicate either conformity or resistance to socially defined expectations for behavior. Yet, few scholars have attempted to explain the meaning and relevance of clothing systematically. They often mistake it for *fashion* (a period's desired appearance), whereas *clothing* refers to established patterns of dress. As a result, neither clothing images nor the rules that govern their use have been adequately identified or explicated.

Writing on the changes that occurred in the early part of the nineteenth century in London and Paris, Richard Sennett (1974) pointed out that standardized modes of dress offered a protective "cover-up" at a time when the distinction between private space and public space first emerged. When one lived and worked among strangers rather than family members, there was a need to protect one's self and one's inner feelings. Wearing the expected mode of dress enabled individuals to move easily among the various spheres of social life. "Appearance was a cover for the real individual hiding within," observed Sennett. Clothing, as Sennett saw it, provided a buffer between the public and the private self.[1]

For the American economist and social critic Thorstein Veblen ([1899] 1953), the desire to cover up a lower social origin underlay consumption patterns in the United States. He claimed that in American society there was a general tendency to buy more expensive clothing than one should. This practice applied, as well, to groups and institutions, which buy expensive products in an attempt "to cover up the ignoble, selfish motives, and goals."[2]

In his article "Fashion," Georg Simmel ([1904] 1957) observed that fashion, the latest desired appearance, allows for personal modification, enabling the individual to pursue competing desires for group identity and individual expression. There is no institution, "no law, no estate of life which can uniformly satisfy the opposing principles of uniformity and individuality better than fashion."[3] The self is also an audience, and clothing allows individuals to view themselves as social objects. By extricating the self from a setting or situation, the individual can scrutinize the image he or she presents in view of the social response that is desired. This separation and objectification, in turn, allows the individual to correct the image if necessary.[4]

In contrast to the social scientist, fiction writers typically imbue a specific image of clothing with meaning. Nineteenth-century novelists, such as Balzac, Flaubert, Proust, Dickens, and Trollope, wrote detailed descriptions of what their characters wore. For example, when Flaubert described Madame Bovary's initial appearance in the kitchen of her father's small farm, he wrote that she was wearing a blue merino wool dress with three flounces. The clothing carried the message that she was fun-loving, frivolous, fashion-conscious, and out of place. Playwrights also describe garments as a means of delineating a character. Today, no newspaper reporter would write a profile of someone without describing the person's style of dress. The implication is that a person's clothing somehow reflects his or her character.

Fashion historians usually discuss clothing in terms of style and the aesthetic tastes of a particular period or a particular group in society.[5] However, they pay little attention to clothing iconography. Examining fascist propaganda, Laura Malvano in *Fascismo e politica dell'immagine* (1988) demonstrated the relationship between politics and patterns of dress, style, and appearance. She analyzed the ways in which Mussolini successfully utilized visual images to encourage consensus among his followers, creating a "new organic whole" composed of people from all levels of society. To promote this ideal he commissioned artistic representations that combined images from the classical art of the past with those from traditional folk art. In that art, men assume the various postures of victory portrayed in ancient Roman times yet they hold familiar farm implements and are thus seen as agricultural victors. Through this appeal to a pride in a shared past, made visible in synthetic images, Mussolini gained support for his political program.[6]

Adolescents and young adults have long recognized the significance of clothing. To signal connectedness and to distinguish themselves from others, groups of young people adopt styles of dress that express their particular, distinct identity. In making clothing choices they demonstrate their awareness that a style or mode of appearance has meaning.[7]

The Notion of Public Memory

Visual images from the past and present form what French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs called public memory. They are a part of core culture, like time and space, and give shape to a child's orientation to social realities. Ideas, beliefs, and values—the basic constructs of collective life—are embodied in images. They contain the central system of rules of behavior and thought that controls much of what we do. The growing child is bombarded by these images and their shared public meaning. As Halbwachs explained, learning begins early in life and in a most informal way, but full understanding requires both biological maturity and social experience.[8]

Public memory includes depictions of people in carvings, sculpture, paintings, mosaics, stained glass windows, prints, and drawings in books. These im-

Public memory. Through the portrayal of royalty in fairy tales children are introduced to basic ideas of social class and power. (Illusration by Françoise, in Margaret E. Martignoni, ed. [1955] The Illustrated Treasury of Children's Literature *[New York: Grosset & Dunlap].)*

ages are concrete, tangible representations of "currents of collective thought" from the various historical periods. The clothing in these visual portrayals has been so closely associated with ideas that the clothing itself is seen as embodying them.[9]

Prior to the nineteenth century, the majority of the people represented in Western European art were therefore figures of political power, religious authority, or both. Their dependents—wives, mistresses, children, or servants—also sometimes appeared. As might be expected, their clothing and accessories came to be seen as a physical manifestation of the ideas, the institutions, and the power they held or controlled. The clothing worn by individuals in authority in a given society at a given time has provided visual information about their position and power.

Because many of these works of art have survived, they now form a part of the cumulative public memory. For example, the crowning of a new monarch often set off a round of new paintings depicting the new court. These visual images would be added to those of the previous monarchy. In some cases new rulers continued and elaborated on past traditions. In other instances the new leaders attempted to distinguish themselves by espousing new ideas and values, which led to new styles of painting and dress. However, these would not wholly replace the old and would eventually be added to the existing body of images of royalty. The result has been an expanding vocabulary of visual images. A group searching for a visual image to embody its ideas might create a new synthesis from among the elements represented in the storehouse of images. This novel synthe-

Public memory. Contemporary use of a nineteenth-century image from Pinocchio: *Jim Florio and Jim Courter portray each other as lying in the New Jersey gubernatorial race.* (New York Times, *October 16, 1989; reprinted by permission of NYT Pictures.)*

sis or pattern of appearance would, in turn, be added to the existing repository. In each instance the clothing, the accessories, and the style would be seen as embodying the ideas represented by those images.

Giacomo Balla's "Futurist Manifesto of Men's Clothing 1913," a proclamation that argued for a totally new approach to dress, attests to the powerful persistence in Western society of this storehouse of images and meanings. Leaders of the avant-garde Futurist movement sought to reject the images existing in public memory: the "pretty-pretty," "tight-fitting," "decadent," "unhygienic," "symmetrical," and "boring," the "gloomy" and "humiliating hypocritical custom of wearing mourning" (i.e., the black three-piece suit celebrated by Thomas Carlyle). The Futurists called for abolishing "sadness in dress" as well as "timidity," "harmony," and "good taste." In a world transformed by science and technology, observed Balla, "we must invent Futurist clothes, clothes that are happy and practical" and "spread good humour." Items of dress must have strong colors and dynamic designs, "triangles, cones, spirals, and circles," and come in a variety of styles to complement each mood. The cut must incorporate dynamic and asymmetrical lines. Above all, clothes must be made to last for only a short time to encourage industrial activity and "to provide constant and novel enjoyment for our bodies." The "consequent merry dazzle" produced by the clothes in the noisy streets "will mean that everything will sparkle like a glorious prism." With their noisy cries of rebellion the Futurists demonstrated a tacit awareness of the necessary connections between appearance, the self, and society.[10]

Clothing Semiotics

The first step toward a systematic understanding of clothing images and meanings in American society is to define the basic constructs of the communication

discourse system. This step entails identifying the language and vocabulary of the images that give shape to contemporary discourse. All systems of communication consist of language and speech, with language providing a basic vocabulary and accepted rules of usage. It offers a structural framework within which an individual speaker can operate. As defined by Ferdinand de Saussure, language is a system of signs and symbols that exists prior to and outside its use by a given individual.[11]

When applied to clothing, the term "language" refers to the use of a particular vocabulary derived from the storehouse of images that support the structure of social interaction, the system of statuses and roles. Like words, clothing images become significant only when they are used in a specific social context. Images may function as signs that convey a single, relatively clear-cut meaning or as symbols that have multiple meanings and connotations or associations. Images are signifiers that carry meaning and value.[12] Seen from this perspective, the language of clothing can be analyzed, as sociologists Erving Goffman (1951) and Gregory P. Stone (1959, 1962) have suggested, in terms of signs and symbols.

Since our contemporary clothing vocabulary has been culled from the storehouse of images in Western history and supplemented by the "American experience," definition of the parameters of the language of clothing requires a study of the historical record (that is, the types of images, their origins, their purposes, and their permutations over time).

Style of Dress

Style of dress has significance beyond that of conveying information. The early-twentieth-century psychologist J. C. Flugel suggested that styles of dress and elements of appearance act to summon distinct feelings that enhance role performance. One's sense of importance is increased when "different parts of the whole, body and clothes, fuse into a unity." This style "expands the proper self." Flugel called this visual image *confluence* (see Figure 1.1).[13] A visual image in which a person's appearance is augmented by elements that extend the body's reach (for example, a guard carrying arms) increases the person's physical ability to control the environment. "The consciousness of our personal existence is prolonged" and the sense of power is enhanced when a walking stick is used or tools are carried.[14] Conversely, clothing that is too big, too tight-fitting, or too small, or that "refuses to become a part of an organic whole with the body," can "dwarf the body" and imbue the person with a sense of insignificance. Flugel called this image *contrast.*[15]

Clothing Signs

Attire that constitutes a clothing sign is characterized by (1) being task-oriented or instrumental; (2) having one primary meaning; and (3) being generally recognized as a sign by those who wear it. In many instances, formal code, promul-

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