Fashion as Art

The notion of crossings between art and fashion has become a new fashion itself at the moment. It appeals to the contemporary desire to understand the allure of everything from Louis Vuitton handbags to pop-up ‘guerilla stores’. Sometimes it responds to the strident yet rather rearguard call to keep the fashion arts out of the art museum. Art historians should know better, as fashion and art have always been intertwined. The relationship of artists to fashion has a long back-story that is sometimes overlooked. The premium placed on ephemeral entertainments orchestrated by artists and architects such as masques, operas and pageants within court culture is another indication that fashion’s ability to create impressions and allusions has been valued across geographies and chronologies.

In the early-modern period, artists engaged with and influenced fashion, many designing the very stuff of its support, cloth. In order to be a successful manufacturer or provider, artisans at the highest level had to be familiar with social contexts and also frequently knew distinguished artists. Artists of high standing continued to be very prominent within the French textile sector throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, continuing the model established at the Gobelins manufactory where the academic artist Charles le Brun (1619-90) directed a raft of other artists such as the flower painter Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer (1636-99). The important Lyon silk designers Jean Revel (1684-1751) and Jacques-Charles Dutillieu (1718-81) were the sons of Parisian court artists. In 1790 there were eighty draughtsmen, or dessinateurs pour la fabrique, working in the silk town of Lyon. Not all were as highly trained as Philippe Lasalle (1723-1804), a designer, manufacturer and inventor who trained under an artist and married the daughter of a silk manufacturer. Lesley Miller has argued that such artist-designers were highly conscious of developments in adjacent disciplines and changes in taste. Some of the famous artist dynasties of the 18th century were directly descended from fashion ranks: the Van Loos had provided mercer services to the court of Spain; the Saint-Aubins were embroiderers to the King as well as being mercers and engravers; and the father of the famous woman portrait painter Adélaïde Labille-Guiard (1749-1803) was a marchande de mode. At Jouy, the entrepreneur Christophe-Philippe Oberkampf (1738-1815) employed famed academicians such as Jean-Baptiste Huet (1745-1811) to provide models for textiles that carried titles, like prints or paintings. As Miller argues, this process married textile directly with text and narrative, particularly so for the one-colour copperplate printed cottons which resembled exactly the prints previously viewed in folios or on walls. Some 18th century dresses survive in which actual engraved prints have been sewn into their design. Although such garments might be a great novelty, they indicate that the integration of ‘information’ within clothing was undertaken long before the digital revolution.

The appearance industries were a part of the trades and commerce. The latter’s relationship to academic art, which had to embody abstract moral principles, was debated throughout the 18th century. Enlightenment theorists such as Jacques-François Blondel (1705-74) provided a worldview within sets of hierarchies. Architecture was seen as the organising system for much of design as it embodied principles of decorum passed down from the classical world. The classical notion of decorum, or bienséance, asserting that external marks must be appropriate to social rank, extended from architecture to court dress. Thus spending was neither wasteful nor sinful for a courtier, but an

How artists changed fashion: ‘back-story’

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obligation both appropriate and necessary to indicate high status and to sustain the commerce in luxury goods. The operation of fashion was an entrepreneurial activity that took place within guilds that made the components of dress as well as coordinating that activity, and included additional input of ideas from patrons. Fashion was also considered to be a highly significant exercise of the power of taste and discrimination.

However, it would have been absurd to propose that fashion and its ancillary activities (textiles, making-up, hair-dressing, wig-making, cosmetics, deportment) were able to obtain academic status. From the Renaissance writer Vasari (1511-74) came the notion of dependent, the ‘dependent arts’. Imitation was the central intellectual issue in the realm of the liberal arts, and minitus the focus of creativity in the fine arts. Hence theoreticians esteemed ‘paintings’ rendered in other media such as mosaic, wood or textiles, and admiration grew across Europe for the pictorial silks associated with Philippe Lasalle which were associated with furnishing at any rate, not fashion. Reynolds’s thirteenth discourse limited the arts to painting, sculpture, poetry, music, theatre, landscape and architecture. The Encyclopédie placed the decorative arts and crafts under ‘Natural History’ and noted that they were associated with rote learning, whereas the fine arts were associated with the imagination. Apart from widely-held views regarding the hierarchy of art (in which even portrait painting was suspect), fashions in clothing changed too rapidly for thinkers of the day to accept their validity as having any relationship to platonic forms. This makes the critical writing of the mid-19th century avant-garde on fashion even more striking; they attempted to overturn this proposition but also relied on its longevity to add piquancy to their prose.

Fashion, art and commerce

The shift from mercantilist economic theory to economics for a consumer-led society prompted theorists such as Hume to argue that arts and manufactures were intertwined: ‘[W]e cannot reasonably expect, that a piece of woollen cloth will be wrought to perfection in a nation which is ignorant of astronomy, or where ethics are neglected’. As historian Peter Jones notes, the Encyclopedists used both word and image to reveal process, technique and the context for trades including fashion in an age which valued interpretation and improvement. The success of the decorative arts and crafts in the textile town of Bradford, the latter considered the Manchester of the continent. These 19th century interventions were not widespread, and it would require the programs of the English and Belgian Arts and Crafts, Viennese Secession, French Orphism, Russian Constructivism, Italian Futurism and Bauhaus movements to launch serious attacks on the separation of art and industry, all of them at times paying considerable attention to clothing.

Designers before the late 19th century had no notion of ‘artistic control’, Anna Marie Garthwaite working for Spitalfields merchants in the 1760s knew that mercers and customers would modify her designs to accord with shifts in taste ranging from colour to scale. There were shifts taking place, however, particularly in the elite level of the appearance industries. In her study of 18th century rococo interior decoration, Katie Scott recounts an emblematic legal dispute between Paris wigmakers and hairdressers in the 1760s. Hairdressers argued that their confections were akin to the fine arts, and used terms such as ‘composition’ and ‘colour’ in arguing the case. In 1776 they won the right to practise relatively undisturbed by the wigmakers. The language and strategies of academic art practice would be used most effectively by mid-19th century fashion and interior designers to claim a new social status akin to that of the artist, a process that began within the fashion design of Enlightenment Europe.

Artists transmitting fashion

Art and aesthetic theory played a major role in the transformation of western European dress and North American colonial dress in the Enlightenment. Western European design became more stylistically consistent during the course of the 18th century in large part due to the transmission of artistic models and templates. The French Calvinist or Huguenot Diaspora that continued for 150 years before the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 spread both technical skill in silk and gold-smithing and associated drawing and modelling skills, their knowledge of the French Regence pattern books and sculptural forms, and a new type of design sophistication to the British Isles, Holland, Prussia, Switzerland and North America.

As Hallett notes of the print trade, French stylistic devices and imagery indicated both social status and refinement and were extended from the fine arts into all other fields of design in the 1730s. Some Huguenots showed a remarkable ability to transfer ideas between completely different trades, such as Nicholas Sprimont who shifted from goldsmithing to managing the Chelsea porcelain company by 1748. English production of Spitalfields dress silks such as those designed by amateur draughtswoman Garthwaite showed an awareness of French technical and aesthetic development, as well as providing simple styles at lower prices for the ‘middling sorts’. From the 1760s the promotion of the startlingly new ‘neo-grec’ (neo-classical) design including textiles and fashion accessories such as buckles and jewellery involved complex circuits of interaction between England, France,
Sweden, Russia, Italy and Spain, in which architects, entrepreneurs and patrons circulated designs, models and ideas. The prestige and financial benefit attached to luxury industries such as silk, low-weave tapestry and ceramics drove smaller countries such as Sweden to import technical expertise and establish new national workshops. Style and manufacturing became a type of fiscal and emotional warfare linked to emergent nationalism in Enlightenment Europe.

Ideas about metropolitan fashion spread more rapidly throughout the century as travel became easier, communications improved and the literate gained access to burgeoning illustrated periodicals. The proliferation of detailed engravings permitted the rapid dissemination of fashionable ideals, spreading also the cult of individualism, novelty and self-fashioning. Printed sets of ‘modern habits’ circulated in the first four decades of the 18th century, depicting elegant dress and posture of men and women after exquisite French designs by Hubert-François Gravelot (1699-1773) and Bernard Picart (1673-1733). Cheaper English women’s ‘pocket books’ illustrated existing fashion (and not predictions) in the 1760s, but the specialised fashion press first emerged in France in 1768 with the Journal du Goût and in England in 1770 with The Lady’s Magazine. Galerie des modes et des costumes français (1778-1787) published seventy portfolios with detailed texts and engravings of breathtakingly variable dress for men and women, naming many suppliers. By the end of the century fifteen different fashion journals were published in England, France, Holland, Germany and Italy, many also showing details of seasonal changes in interior decoration, object and even carriage design. All of these fashion periodicals required the services of artists and the quality of the images were sometimes exquisite.

Caricature fashion prints also provide essential information about the mood or set of a fashion, such as the insouciance of the incroyable, a fop of the Directoire period. The production of fashion caricatures in western Europe, developed at first by artists in the Renaissance, and then by printmakers, particularly the enormous English production from 1760, taught people how to avoid absurd excess, though the role of caricature should not be reduced to the illustration of moral laxity or limited to the provision of mere amusements. Fashion, after all, involves a relationship between image and reality. Fashionable people saw exaggerated images of themselves on stage, in the print shops, and on the streets. On the one hand satirical, these images, which poured from English, French, German and Dutch presses in many different versions, also taught people what it was to look ‘fashionable’.

Caricature fashion prints also exist in a relationship to respectful engravings of the cries or occupations of the town, plates depicting national dress, and ‘costume plates’ depicting courtier men and ‘women of quality’ by 17th-century artists including Abraham Bosse and J. D. de Saint-Jean in France and the Bohemian Wenceslaus Hollar (1607-77) working in England. The work of Jacques Callot (1592-1635) in France crosses the boundary between observation and satire. Etched images take on new meanings when pointed titles or moralising verse were appended; the caricature generally makes use of a combination of word and image. As Anne Hollander’s highly influential book Seeing Through Clothes (1978) argues, art may lead or determine the shaping of the human body, not merely reflect its already clothed forms. As she noted of Renaissance art, forms such as engravings taught people what it was to look fashionable. In the 18th century, high-art painting and caricature were both means through which fashion was read, experienced and modulated.

Artists changing fashion

Artists themselves may have set dress fashions as early as the mid-to-late 18th century. The clearest case of this is the promotion of the new simple shift-like dress worn by both Queen Marie-Antoinette and the portrait painter Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun (1755-1842), who created paintings of herself, the Queen and the Queen’s circle that were scandalous for their informality and modernity. The dress can be understood as a radical statement of modernity, as shocking in its own way as the stripped back architecture promoted 200 years later by Le Corbusier. Indeed, in the Queen’s case, one can argue that dress here exceeded the built environment and decorative arts for its modern potential. The cognate radical designs for architecture that were proposed at the time by Boulée generally remained on the drawing board. The Queen dwelt in private in greatly simplified and rather cubic, but certainly not minimal, architectural spaces.
The relationship between artists and fashion reform became overt during the post-revolutionary period in France. One of the first acts of the National Assembly in October 1789 was to repeal the compulsory costumes of the estates; whether the military should demonstrate hierarchy in its garb was also debated. The Revolutionary government called upon artists to submit designs for new civil uniforms, including Jean-Michel Moreau (1741-1814) and Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825), the latter the most significant neo-classical artist in Europe. The Republican David drew upon sketches of classical dress that he had observed in Rome, designing costumes for Revolutionary plays with themes of classical virtue. In order to design a new system of dress for the new representatives of France, David, like Moreau, turned to a mixture of theatre costume – leggings not breeches, 16th-century slashing, sashes, capes and boots for men – setting the tone also for the late nineteenth century is clearly not borne out by history.\(^{13}\)

The suggestion by Christoph Doswald, among others, that the fields of art and fashion only started to develop a link in the cultural economics’.\(^{14}\) As popular culture has shaped contemporary life and consumption.

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THE EXTRAVAGANZA
OR THE MOUNTAIN HEAD DRESS OF 1776.