



Elements of style

By Elisabeth Andrews

In the beginning, so far as we know, clothing had a functional role as well as an aesthetic one, protecting our vulnerable skin from the elements. But today, says Kate Rowold, “we live in artificial environments. We really don’t need clothing to cope with the climate. At this point it is all about appearance.”

Rowold is a professor of fashion design and culture in the College of Arts and Sciences’ Department of Apparel Merchandising and Interior Design at Indiana University Bloomington. While comfort may be a factor in the evolution of fashion, she says, creating a pleasing look is really the primary intent of donning clothes. The clothing choices we make can therefore provide a great deal of information about our current concepts of beauty.

Rowold, an expert in the history of Western fashion, says that “fashion, in any century, is closely aligned with definitions of beauty.” As curator of the Elizabeth Sage Historic Costume Collection, a 24,000-item repository of clothing from the last 250 years housed on the IU Bloomington campus, Rowold has an intimate knowledge of how these definitions have played out over time. Although it does include haute couture from famous designers, the Sage Collection largely comprises everyday items worn by ordinary people. These garments chronicle a “social history” of fashion, Rowold says, demonstrating how ideas of beauty continually shift.

“We look for examples of the ways people have ornamented themselves, adorned themselves, dressed themselves, and

presented themselves, things that change with the pulse of the population,” Rowold explains.

A MATTER OF CONTEXT

Looking at the range of items in the Sage Collection, from bathing suits to wedding gowns, Rowold says it’s obvious that what is considered appropriate, or beautiful, changes according to the setting and circumstances.

“There is very little anyone can say definitely about fashion except that it is contextual. What’s considered beautiful changes, not only across time, but hour-by-hour within your life. You wouldn’t wear your everyday clothes to a wedding, and you wouldn’t go to a meeting in a bathing suit,” she says.

Of course, social expectations and fashion rules also change over longer periods of time. Each era has its own look, from the lace collars of the 16th century to the monstrous shoulder pads of the 1980s. Yet whether the trend is toward bustles, bloomers, or baby-doll dresses, Rowold says the sources of inspiration have been relatively consistent.

Throughout Western history, she says, “You would look at the most powerful woman and the most powerful man and want to emulate them.”

In earlier centuries, those fashion icons could be found in the aristocracy. Rowold points to Queen Elizabeth and, in particular, Marie Antoinette, as notable trendsetters. The majority of the population could not afford to emulate the lavish styles that graced the European courts, and in many instances were

[LEFT] A beaded and embroidered short-sleeve dress inspired by the paintings of Gustav Klimt, worn with a paisley-printed taupe double-faced wool coat. Both pieces are by Bill Blass, 1995, now in the Elizabeth Sage Historic Costume Collection at Indiana University. Gift of Mrs. Henry Grunwald.



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In her shoes

[1] Brown pumps with strap, maker unknown, c. 1925 [2] Gold and silver lamé sandals, maker unknown, c. 1940 [3] Gold leather sandals, Tupper, purchased at L.S. Ayres, Indianapolis, c. 1945 [4] Gold metallic wedge sandals, maker unknown, Japan, c. 1950 [5] White and Gold brocade pumps, Ben Becker, c. 1955 [6] Clear vinyl and metallic glitter sandals with sculpted heels, Tip-Toez, c. 1960

barred from doing so by “sumptuary laws” intended to enforce a social hierarchy of dress. But, Rowold asserts, “anything I’ve ever read suggests that people of the lower class tried to look as much like the set style as they could.”

In more recent years, rather than modeling ourselves on royalty, we have looked to the modern world’s “most powerful” people: celebrities. “The entertainment world is our new aristocracy,” Rowold says.

Yet while much of fashion sensibility comes from the top, increasingly, trends are being influenced by youth and “street culture.”

“This really began following the French Revolution,” explains Rowold. “Within a subculture of citizens who were protesting traditional fashion, women dressed in very revealing revivals of Greek and Roman styles while the men wore exaggerated versions of European masculine fashions.”

The Aesthetic Movement of the 19th century, with its roots in art and literature, also created an opposition to the nobility’s dress by favoring flowing, organic, Greco-Roman inspired fashions over the stiff and ornate Victorian standard. In the last century, styles like flapper, beatnik, bohemian, hippie, punk, and hip-hop have all originated in youth culture.

It’s not surprising that our ideas of beauty continue to derive from youth movements, Rowold notes, when you consider that the body “never looks better than it does when it’s young.”

While both men’s and women’s fashions are subject to these influences, they have become increasingly divergent over time. For much of human history, Rowold says, men and wom-

en dressed in similar garments. Even in the late 16th- and early 17th-century courts, “men’s clothing was just as ornamented as women’s, and, although women wore skirts, the men’s breeches were so full that they looked like skirts.”

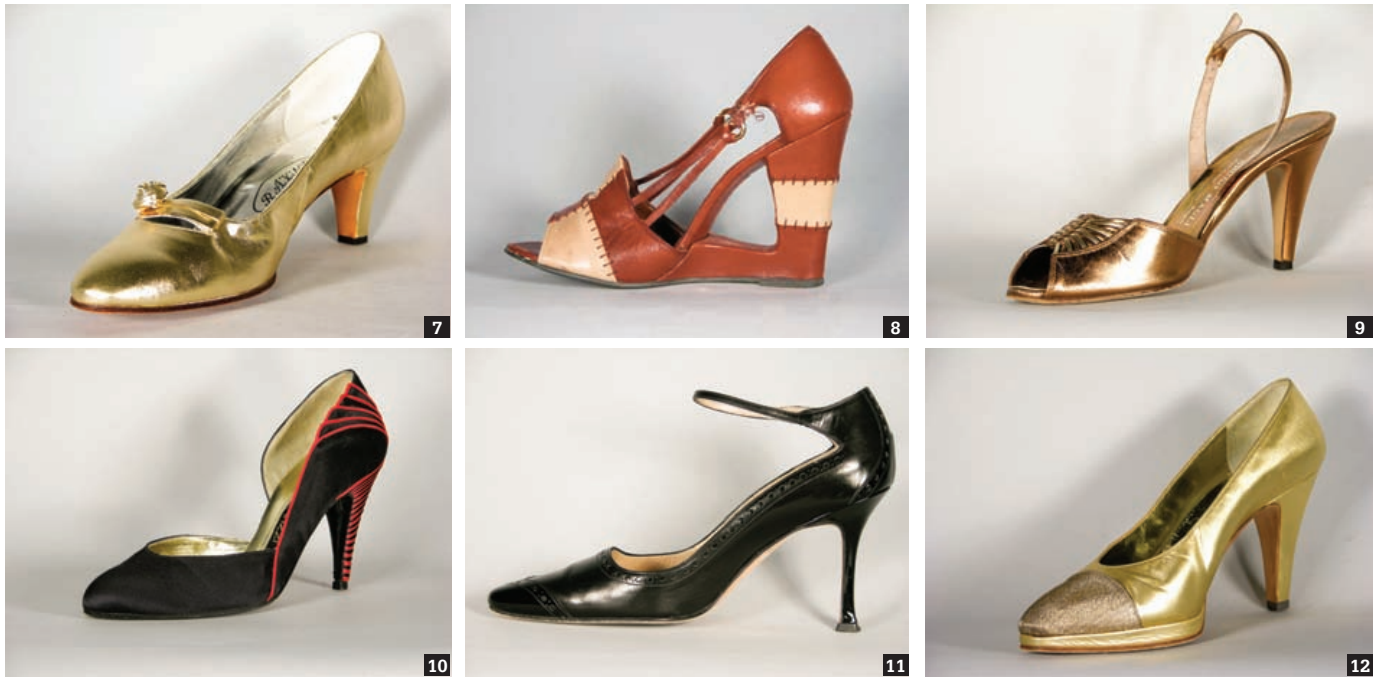
It was King Charles II of England, facing the economic threat of French imports coupled with the growing influence of somberly clad Puritans, who declared it inappropriate for men to continue to outfit themselves “frivolously,” Rowold says. “He proposed a darker, simpler jacket and vest. From our perspective it would still look very dandyish, but it introduced the idea of masculinity and femininity in clothing, starting to separate out into sober sensibility versus frivolous superficiality.”

Today, the contrast is incredibly stark—just picture a modern formal event, in which women will be seen in all colors of the rainbow, festooned with jewels, while the men, of course, wear dark suits.

While this bright/dark division reflects a modern notion of the superficiality of the feminine in opposition to a more serious, staid masculinity, there is another contrast in dress that offers perhaps even more insight into present gender roles.

At the same formal event, the men will be covered from necktie to toe, but the women, most likely, will be exposed at shoulder and neck, perhaps back or midriff or from mid-thigh down. Men will wear a flat, closed shoe with dark socks and women will wear high heels with either bare legs or sheer knit stockings that resemble bareness.

“It’s not a level playing ground,” Rowold says, explaining that when one segment of the population is fully dressed and the



Photos courtesy of the Elizabeth Sage Costume Collection, IU Bloomington

[7] Gold leather pumps, Rayne, 1960s [8] Brown and tan patchwork leather shoes with high cut-out wedge, Creacianes Magceli Elda, Spain, c. 1970 [9] Gold leather open-toe slingbacks, Bruno Magli, Italy, c. 1980 [10] Black and red silk satin pumps, Sidonie Larizzi, Italy, c. 1986 [11] Black patent leather ankle-strap spectator pumps, Manolo Blahnik, Italy, 1996–1999 [12] Gold leather and lamé pumps, Rene Mancini, France, 1998

other is barely clothed, it's not hard to identify which group has more power and authority.

The recent interest in First Lady Michelle Obama's decision to bare her arms in diplomatic settings only highlights this division, Rowold says. "So her husband is there wearing four layers, and she's wearing one-half. What does that say?"

What it says, put simply, is that women are objectified. And if that notion seems outdated, it's only because we've become so accustomed to women's clothing becoming more and more sexualized. To illustrate, Rowold recalls a recent collaboration between the Sage Collection and the Kinsey Institute to put together an exhibit at the Mathers Museum.

"We thought we'd assemble a selection of high heels from Sage and contrast them with the fetish footwear from Kinsey's collection. But there was almost no difference! The fashionable shoes of today are remarkably similar to the fetish shoes from 30 years ago," she says.

ELEMENTS OF DESIGN

Regardless of these evolving influences of gender, youth, and aristocracy, there are some consistent features that have set apart "beautiful" clothing throughout the ages. Rowold says the "elements of design"—color, texture, shape, and proportion—distinguish fine clothing from garments that are less appealing, just as they differentiate an architecturally stunning building from a more mundane one.

"Beautifully designed clothing has always elicited some kind of satisfaction," she says. "In terms of color, it might be beauti-

fully saturated, or so delicately unsaturated that it catches your eye. A satisfying texture in the fabric might be as buttery soft as cashmere or sharp and rigid from beaded or gold embroidery."

Shape, at least with respect to Western fashion, generally succeeds or fails according to "how the line works with the body," she says. "A garment that is well shaped and beautifully proportioned will enhance the shape of the human body." To do so, the garment must not only fit the wearer, but make his or her body appear closer to the "classical ideal" depicted in Greco-Roman art, she explains. Delineating a small waist in comparison to a woman's hips, making a man appear broad-shouldered, and generally elongating the figure are the primary ways in which clothing has taken on a beautiful shape.

"Only recently have notions of 'beautiful design' begun to diverge from the elements of design," she adds. "Today, a design may succeed specifically because it flies in the face of the traditional elements of design." This contrarian technique, however, still refers back to those traditional elements in its very rejection of them, Rowold explains.

The construction of the garment is another aspect of its aesthetic quality. Construction can affect not only a garment's ability to hold its shape, but also to keep its own integrity as a work of art.

"There's a certain engineering to fashion, having to do with the angle, grain, or gauge of the fabric," Rowold says. "The beauty of the garment might be the extent to which the construction itself is hidden or vanishes into the fabric."

On the other hand, Rowold adds, a contemporary emphasis

Photo courtesy of the College of Arts and Science, IU Bloomington



Kate Rowold is a professor of fashion design and culture in the College of Arts and Sciences' Department of Apparel Merchandising and Interior Design at Indiana University Bloomington.

on deconstructionism has found its way into fashion. “Garments that appear to be inside-out, seams that are purposefully revealed, or fabric that is distressed—this visible evidence of construction can lend its own beauty,” she says.

STANDARD VERSUS IDEAL

Naturally, most people can't afford the sort of fashion perfection that embodies such design. Fortunately, another enduring concept in fashion history has been separate expectations for fashion icons and mere mortals.

“Pick a time in history, and you will find that there is always a distinction between the ‘standard’ of beauty and an ‘ideal’ of beauty. The standard is something we might actually be able to attain. The ideal is something we strive for,” Rowold says.

What distinguishes our current ideals of beauty from ideals of the past is that the images we see today appear to reflect reality, when in fact they contain an imaginary “ideal” created through computer imaging and cosmetic surgery.

“What those images do to us, and the extent to which they are damaging, is more than enough for a whole separate discussion,” Rowold says. While the “desire to improve on the human appearance” through dress and adornment has been an impulse throughout history, she says, there are “people today who go to great lengths to modify their bodies.”

ELEGANCE, GLAMOUR, AND CASUALIZATION

Our aims to improve our appearance have generally gone in two directions: the quiet, understated beauty of “elegance” or the bold and gaudy result of “glamour.”

“Elegance might be defined as more soft-spoken and glamour a bit explosive,” Rowold explains. This dichotomy might once have been understood in terms of a “Madonna/whore” division, but as “fashion has become increasingly less modest,

there isn't a clear division between what is respectable and not respectable,” she says.

In Rowold's view, our present era represents a new direction in fashion that she calls “casualization,” a movement away from the formality of the past.

“There are fashions worn on the street today that would have been unthinkable even in the 1960s,” she says. “People are walking around town in garments that look like pajamas. Students are wearing fancy, expensive sweatpants. Even on the [fashion] runways, you see lots of men's hoodies. These are clothes invented for doing a specific thing, like exercising, and now they are on the runway and in everyday wear.”

Rowold says the extent of the casual revolution really struck her when she was putting together *Child's Play*, an exhibit of children's clothing installed at the Monroe County History Center in Bloomington, Ind., in fall 2009.

“We were looking at different ways in which children have been presented as miniature adults, when suddenly it hit me that what the adults around me were wearing actually looked like kids' playwear,” she says. “The kids are being made to look like adults, and the adults now look like little kids.”

INDIVIDUAL EXPRESSION

From the aristocracy to the entertainment industry to the present preference for extreme informality, a range of social and aesthetic factors have affected our definitions of beautiful dress. Yet clothing is popularly viewed as a means of expressing one's individuality. How can this be possible in our world of mass production and mass media?

For the most part, it's not, says Rowold. The very nature of advertising, now positively ubiquitous, is to encourage conformity, she explains. Even a brand that seems to be selling distinctiveness and eccentricity does the opposite if it is successful.

“A lot of people today think they are being unique, but how unique can they be?” she asks. “It's interesting to hear students talk about advertising and conformity, because they don't seem to realize what's going on. They think the way they dress is all about expressing themselves, when they are all dressed alike.”

You may attempt a little flair, but most people, Rowold says, think that “if it's too weird, it's not beautiful.”

Still, the fashion rules can be broken, if only rarely. Even a historian like Rowold, whose job it is to categorize and make contextual sense of clothing choices, admits that sometimes a person comes along who—independently, beautifully—sets a new standard.

“How else can you explain both Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn simultaneously serving as icons of their era, when they were so different?” she says. “When that happens, it's because of the individual. There are people who are so charismatic that their extraordinary presence sets a style.”

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