

## Can the history of clothing tell us about anything other than changes in fashion?

Fashion's changing nature is generally accepted as a fact of life. Fashion columnist Diana Vreeland said, 'fashion is part of the daily air and it changes all the time, with all the events. You can even see the approaching of a revolution in clothes. You can see and feel everything in clothes.' Changes in fashion, however, when removed from their historical context portray only a timeline of shifts in the taste of those in control of the cultural hegemony. It is this historical context that provides more substantial knowledge from the study of fashion history. Fashion can act as evidence of a society's attitudes, as an expression of political identity and even as a tool of oppression. Throughout this essay I will explore the relationship between fashion and politics, history, and public opinion.

The history of clothing is a window into people's attitudes and the structure of society throughout time. In hierarchical societies, clothing is used to differentiate leaders from followers, as seen in Europe's Sumptuary laws, for example. While these existed to curb excessive spending, another aim was to differentiate the ruling class from the rest of society<sup>1</sup>. Henry VIII's 'Act agaynst wearing of costly Apparrell' prohibited materials based on their colour, quality and price. For example, no man below the status of a lord could wear gold or silver, and crimson or blue velvet was banned for anyone below the degree of a knight of the garter<sup>2</sup>. These laws awarded an air of unattainability to the ruling classes, and had to be increasingly adapted, as historian Wilfrid Hooper states: 'Fashion [...] was stronger than law, and apparel continued to overstep its appointed bounds in a manner that alarmed the government into further action.' People recognised the power of garments as a status symbol and restricted their use to highlight the strict hierarchy of the time.

The way that clothing can highlight the wealth divide can perhaps most clearly be seen in French 18th century fashion, which is often remembered by the extravagance of aristocrats. Naturally, events like the French Revolution help to further highlight class divides of the time. French 18th century fashion was not only extravagant for those who could afford it, but France was also seen as the fashion capital of the West. Artist Carl Kohler argues that 'In the realm of fashion the leadership of France was as unassailable as it was in the political sphere.'<sup>3</sup> The 'robe à la française' featured intricate trimming and embroidery, and large ribbon bows down the front of the skirt. During the 1750s, petticoats were at their widest, measuring over 1.5 metres in diameter.<sup>4</sup> It can feel as though designs of the time were created specifically to signal the wealth of the wearer. Furthermore, French dolls called the 'Pandora' were created to depict current fashions<sup>5</sup>. These were sent from France to the rest of the world and distribution continued even during wartime. Even as material shortages arise, many people are still desperate to stay up to date with trends.

This desire to stay fashionable during times of scarcity is reflected during World War II. Clothes rationing was introduced in 1941 in Britain<sup>6</sup>. Nylon was near impossible to get a hold of as it was required for parachutes, so many women drew lines with cosmetic pencils on the back of their legs to simulate the seam of hosiery which was increasingly harder to get a hold of. The desire for the illusion of a covered leg grew in popularity as skirt hemlines got

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<sup>1</sup> *The Right to Dress, Sumptuary Laws in a Global Perspective, C.1200-1800*, ed. by Giorgio Riello and Ulinka Rublack (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p.12.

<sup>2</sup> Wilfrid Hooper 'The Tudor Sumptuary Laws' *The English Historical Review*, 30 (1915), 433-449 (p.433).

<sup>3</sup> Carl Kohler, 'French fashion and costume history in the 18th century. Era of the Rococo', (New York: G. Howard Watt, 1930).

<sup>4</sup> Anon, 'Introduction to 18th Century Fashion', *Victoria and Albert Museum*, <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/introduction-to-18th-century-fashion/#:~:text=At%20the%20beginning%20of%20the,with%20frills%20and%20linen%20underdrawers>> [Accessed 26 February 2022].

<sup>5</sup> Maxwell Barr, *Fashion in 18th Century Paris*, online video recording, YouTube, 11 Aug 2011, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8WZw5-FDiA>> [Accessed 22 February 2022].

<sup>6</sup> Meghann Mason, 'The Impact of World War II on women's fashion in the United States and Britain', in *UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones*, (Nevada: University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2011).

shorter during WWII, due to the increased fabric cost. The British government was worried that clothes rationing would lower British morale, so the 'make do and mend' campaign was introduced<sup>7</sup>, encouraging people to fix and repurpose old clothing. In American war effort propaganda posters, slogans like 'use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without' could be seen, further emphasising the need for creative and practical use of the limited materials available. All of these changes in fashion are reflective of the war effort and prove that there's a demand for fashion even at times where, seemingly, there are bigger issues at stake. In addition, this suggests that fashion adapts to its time period, rather than the other way around.

Clothing also tells us about people's political identity or group membership, for example through uniforms. Uniforms can be used to identify people as a united mass, sacrificing individual expression in favour of strength in numbers. As Gabriele Mentges describes, 'uniforms function through their delineation of hierarchy, status, authority and value.'<sup>8</sup> The Nazi Schutzstaffel (SS) uniform, for example, can tell us about how the SS were intended to be perceived; feared by the public but proud enough to do their duty. The SS needed to be seen as bringers of order and instil a nationalistic pride from civilians. Nazi SS uniforms were designed by the artist and SS member Karl Diebitsch. North Woods comments that 'the power of the [SS] uniform lies in its silence' - it is omnipresent, mirroring most Nazi propaganda, but it is not as explicit as pro-Nazi posters or films<sup>9</sup>. The almost entirely black SS uniform combined elegance, fear, and respect. Members in charge of running concentration camps even wore skull symbols called 'Totenkopf' on their uniforms. Stylistic illusions were used to make the SS members appear taller, and the uniform featured rigid lines and sleek, symmetric designs. The SS served as the main part of Nazi Germany's police state. Fear, was therefore, a crucial aspect of the uniform's design. All of these design decisions emphasised the role of the SS. However, the intimidation that SS uniforms conveyed was furthered by the atrocities committed by those wearing them. This illustrates the point that clothing can be used as a tool for propaganda and intimidation, and that values can be assigned onto clothing through the context in which it is worn.

During the 1960s, many groups were resisting mainstream fashion trends amid a wave of counterculture. During the Civil Rights movement, fashion was used as a symbol of black pride, and an embracement of black culture and heritage. During the 1960s, dashiki tunics and shawls were made out of Ghanaian Kente cloth<sup>10</sup>, and black activist Muhammad Ali wore a Kente cloth wrap on his visit to Ghana in 1964. As these fashions gained popularity, the Black Panther Party - a group initially founded to protect black people from police brutality - rejected Kente cloth as a symbol of further exploitation and commodification of black culture, though for many, Kente cloth still remains a symbol of black pride. The Black Panther Party uniform also sent a clear message about the group's political identity and demands. The uniform was chosen by the party's founders - Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. It consisted of a black beret, black leather jacket, pale blue shirt and black trousers and shoes. The black beret was a choice inspired by French resistance to Nazis during WWII, and a symbol of militancy that the Black Panthers wanted to convey. As Mary Vargas describes, 'The Black Panther Party uniform sent a powerful message to white society that African Americans fully embraced 'blackness' from head to toe.' It is interesting to compare the use of black between the SS Nazi uniforms and the Black Panther uniforms. Where the Nazis used black to instil fear and authority, the Black Panthers used black to represent their pride in their heritage and

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<sup>7</sup> Imperial War Museums, *Clothes Rationing in Britain: Make Do and Mend | Archive Film Favourites*, online video recording, YouTube, 3 Jul 2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5zpOmzOs98>> [Accessed 1 March 2022].

<sup>8</sup> Gabriele Mentges, Dagmar Neuland-Kitzerow and Brigit Richard, *Uniforms in Motion*, (Waxmann, 2007), p.37.

<sup>9</sup> North Woods, 'Dressing the Reich: The Fear and Elegance in Nazi Uniforms', in *IU Scholar Works*, (Indiana: Indiana University, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Mary Vargas, 'Fashion Statement or Political Statement: The Use of Fashion to Express Black Pride during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1960s', in *Undergraduate Review*, 5 (Bridgewater: Bridgewater State University, 2009).

unwavering demands for change. For both groups, black symbolised power, though that power was harnessed for opposing intentions. When discussing movements like the Civil Rights it can be dangerous to simplify these down to their aesthetic counterparts; as black activist Angela Davis states - 'it reduces a politics of liberation to a politics of fashion'<sup>11</sup>. This highlights the importance of studying fashion history within a wider context. These uniforms are evidence that clothing can be worn as a political statement.

The history of clothing also tells us about the distribution of power in society. Clothing used as a tool to further the persecution of a group can be seen in the clothing worn by the victims of the Holocaust. The same design was distributed to all prisoners in concentration camps, so the intentions of the Nazis are revealed in the design of these garments. Textile conservator Lizou Fenyvesi highlights that 'in European cultures, stripes have a long association with loss of freedom,<sup>12</sup> though from a practical standpoint, the striped uniform made for poor camouflage if a prisoner tried to escape. Especially when contrasted with the black uniforms of the SS guards running these camps, the pale uniform of prisoners highlights their powerlessness. Within the hierarchy of prisoners in concentration camps, any prisoners selected by the SS as 'prominents' were permitted an extra layer of clothing during the winter and other minor improvements to the uniform. The practical side of clothing is demonstrated here, as an extra layer of warmth or a pocket to hide stolen food in could mean the difference between life and death. As Fenyvesi notes, 'the condition of the uniform can also indicate the type of work assigned to the inmate'. It is estimated that on the 75th anniversary of the Holocaust, only 400,000 survivors were still alive, so using the clothing of concentrations camp prisoners as evidence of the lifestyle they were forced to endure is becoming increasingly more important.

In contrast, the portrayal of the corset as a symbol of oppression that permeated women's fashion for centuries is a myth I wish to disprove. Psychologists Nan Zhu and Lei Chang describe the corset as a cultural practice which 'exaggerate[s] women's vulnerability, powerlessness, and need for protection while restraining their mobility.'<sup>13</sup> This view is challenged by the fact that many men also wore corsets in order to reduce beer bellies or generally improve their figure, and there is evidence of corset ads targeting men<sup>14</sup>. While men were usually the ones manufacturing corsets<sup>15</sup>, the fashion industry was run by women, meaning that most corsets were designed by women. It is unlikely that almost every woman played an active role in her own subjugation by wearing this alleged torture device on a daily basis. Moreover, there is little historical evidence that suggests that corsets restrained mobility. Corsets helped to provide support to the body as well as shaping its silhouette. It is the stays that provided more rigidity in the early 18th century, though stays went out of style around the 1780s, as dresses moved from the robe à la française silhouette to simpler columnar gowns<sup>16</sup>, possibly due to the rejection of excessive opulence associated with aristocratic fashions during the French revolution. Stays were boned with baleen - a highly flexible material which is often

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<sup>11</sup> Angela Y. Davis, 'Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia', *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1994), 37-45.

<sup>12</sup> Lizou Fenyvesi, 'Reading Prisoner Uniforms: The Concentration Camp Prisoner Uniform as a Primary Source for Historical Research', *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*, 341 (2006), 351-357.

<sup>13</sup> Nan Zhu and Lei Chang, 'Evolved but Not Fixed: A Life History Account of Gender Roles and Gender Inequality', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10 (2019)  
<<https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01709>> [Accessed 26 February 2022].

<sup>14</sup> Anon, *Madame Dowding Corsets*, 1899, advertisement, London, Madame Dowding's Corsets, 1, p.27 <<https://www.cuttersguide.com/pdf/Corsets/Madame%20Dowding's%20corsets.pdf>> [Accessed 27 February 2022].

<sup>15</sup> '(De)Constructing Corset History and Myths with Cynthia Settje, Part I', *Dressed: The History of Fashion*, October 2021, podcast, Spotify,  
<<https://open.spotify.com/episode/0vUjumiOehdo43MPV0Taleg?si=99e49b7f465d46d8>> [Accessed 26 February 2022].

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

confused for whale bone<sup>17</sup>. Women of all classes wore corsets, including those who helped with heavy labour and agricultural work, and there are even examples of sport corsets<sup>18</sup>. The corset is therefore more comparable to a modern-day bra than a medieval torture device. However, feminist analysis has questioned if bras are also a symbol of oppression for decades. This discussion tends to lead to the same question as feminist analysis of makeup or plastic surgery: is women's desire to be beautiful at the core of female oppression? Feminist author Naomi Wolf argues that 'the real issue has nothing to do with whether women [...] make our clothing and faces and bodies into works of art or ignore adornment altogether. The real problem is our lack of choice'<sup>19</sup>. This view applies to the history of corsetry. While primarily worn in a time of female oppression, the benefits of corset wearing applied to the wearer more than the viewer, as evidenced by women choosing to continue corsets as a fashion staple for centuries in an industry where they were given agency.

The history of clothing is more than changes in fashion. Fashion reflects its time, in the same way that one may look towards historical literature or artefacts to study a certain time period. What is the challenge, then, to getting fashion taken more seriously by historians? Can academic history be blind to the information that clothing tells us about people's actual, unbodied experience of political and cultural decisions? And how well-preserved are these clothing items? Could we develop a consistent theory by which to decode these future documents to ensure we get the most out of clothing history?

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<sup>17</sup> V. Birchwood - Historical Fashion, *Fashion Historian Busts Corset Myths ft. Reconstructing History/Kass McGann | Corset Myths Debunked*, online video recording, 18 March 2021, YouTube, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0NFwupgTQE8>> [Accessed 27 February 2022].

<sup>18</sup> Anon, *Ferris' Good Sense Corset Waist For Bicycle Wear ad*, 1897, advertisement, Smithsonian National Museum of American History, <<https://americanhistory.si.edu/object-project/bicycles/sport-corset>> [Accessed 27 February 2022].

<sup>19</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, (London: Vintage, 1991), p.272.

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