

THE BLURRING LINE

WENDELL RODRICKS

Abstract:

Since antiquity, art has played a vital role in fashion. This process continues to the present day with designers sourcing inspiration from Egyptian Art, Greek Statues, Mesopotamian motifs and Indian sculpture. In the 20th century renowned designers have turned to artists to create fashion for the public. Chanel socialised with the Cubists and gave the world the first crystal cube as a perfume (Chanel no5) at a time when perfume containers were delicate Murano glass in feminine shapes. Elsa Schaparelli used her association with Dali to create Surrealistic details on her clothes. Most famously in the 1960's, Yves Saint Laurent revived the art of 30's minimalist Piet Mondrian. So close was he to art that he drew inspiration from Matisse and Van Gough. On the Indian scene, fashion designers have done the same. From temple art to frescoes, modern painters to Shantiniketan lines, Indian fashion flirts with and continues its fascination with Art. Wendell Rodricks explores the various art inspirations and speaks about his own passion for art and fashion.

Since antiquity, the line between art and dress has been an osmotic exchange fuelled by a cross pollination of pioneers, personalities and philosophies. The art world maintains a hallowed space in the hierarchy of the art world. Fashion on the other hand has been relegated to the lowest rung, falling short of the performing arts and architecture. Is it due to the transient, temporary trend of clothing that has resulted in this myth? Or is that most fashion people themselves feel their work is not high art?

At the end of the 19th century, curators began to talk about museums exclusively for fashion. The discoveries of the fine linen garments and gleaming golden adornment when the tomb of Tutankhamun was unearthed threw open the doors to Fashion Museums. Old garments were dusted out from closets, royal boudoirs and freshly minted couture houses. By the end of World War II, fashion museums became a reality, infusing a frisson of excitement among the public. Those who did not dare step into the hallowed salons of Chanel, Dior, Balenciaga or Schiaparelli now pondered over their refined collections in dimly lit halls. Fashion entered the Art world to stay. Just as visitors streamed in to marvel at the Tutankhamun travelling exhibition, timid ladies, men with aspirations to become designers and an adoring public fascinated with fashion stood in queues to drool over fashions of another era. This adoration continues to the present day. At the Musée de la Mode in Paris, visitors gasp in wonder, squeal in delight, shudder in horror, smile with childlike glee and dream of the rarified world of fashion. They whisper in church tones "Imagine those shoes were worn by Marie-Antoinette." "That Dior gown for Evita Peron is fabulous." "Look at the complexity of bias drape on that Vionnet bodice!"



ALEXANDER MCQUEEN'S, Disturbing body of work. These birds appear innocent till the model starts to twirl. Suddenly they become birds of prey feasting on her face. Alexander McQueen's spray painted dress, coloured by robots moving around the model. Art in the making ?

Er...Vionnet? The Queen of the Bias Cut is known by fashion historians and students. Her legacy though is legendary. At a time when no one would dare cut a dress on the chillingly dangerous bias, Vionnet attacked that diagonal challenge in couture...and won the battle. Famous designer Azzedine Alaïa took many days to unravel a Grecian style Vionnet gown when it was to go on exhibition in the 80s. When he finally triumphed,

he declared her the world's most astonishing designer. Her sheer talent and mastery over fabric and drape made Vionnet a legend in her lifetime. Madeleine Vionnet, inspired by Greek statues and friezes, created clothes that fell in soft Grecian folds, flew in the wind like the paintings in Pompeii and even paid tribute to Tutankhamun in her embroidery. While she created clothing on the bias, she could not have imagined that one day her creations inspired by Greek and Egyptian art would become art in their own right.

This year in Paris, another designer who worshipped Greek dress, entered the hallowed Musee Bourdelle near the Montparnasse tower. Madame Gres lived a long life in couture. She saw the rise of fashion from the early 1900s and watched as fashion became empires of wealth. Though she died penniless, her clothes of fine pleating have become treasures. Both Vionnet and Gres continue to intrigue and inspire fashionistas. Taking from the art of antiquity they gave the world fashion art in return.

Giving the world something to contemplate on was Coco Chanel in 1920. Her iconic bestselling fragrance broke all rules among perfumers. She created her liquid gold, Chanel no 5 in a flacon revolutionary for its time. From the plethora of handblown bottles in delicate feminine forms, the crystal cube of Chanel no 5 was cubist in inspiration and masculine to touch. It looked more like a whisky decanter. Inside was an amazing concoction that had women and men enthralled. In an age when a perfume reeked of roses for the wealthy and jasmine for women of ill repute, Chanel changed the rules. She created a new fragrance that smelled not of one flower but many flowers. Her perfume had three notes : a bracing clean snow smell attracted the olfactory first. Then came the floral mid tones. Finally the musky smell that clung to the skin and the senses. Never had a perfume smelt so sexy before. In a rare case were art imitates fashion, the Chanel no 5 bottle was immortalised by artists such as Charles Demuth and Andy Warhol on canvas. The perfume got star endorsement as well. When asked what she wore to bed, Marilyn Monroe famously replied "Nothing except Chanel no 5".



RICHARD AVEDON'S photographs for Versace use Roman Statues and undertones of Michael Angelo's hand poses from the Renaissance.



MADAME GRÉS Tribute to Greek pleated dresses.

Chanel paved the way for the style in which women dressed in the 21st century. Creator of as many as over two dozen new inventions, the designer was not only considered an artist, she encouraged friendships with the famous artists of her day like Braque And Picasso.

A designer who was an admirer of Chanel and became a legend in his time was Yves Saint Laurent. Time and again Saint Laurent went to art for inspiration. The famous Picasso,

Monet, Braque and Mondrian collections were so popular that art went on the streets. Saint Laurent even dared to embroider hand written verse on clothing in Jean Cocteau's familiar hand writing.

Artists such as Miro, Chagall and the great portraitists from the Renaissance and Baroque periods provided inspiration on one hand and detailed fashion on canvas on the other. The Romanticism of the works of Francois Boucher or Winterhalter till today inspire designers.... and film. The movies have looked at art for inspiration and also provided inspiration in turn for fashion. Movies such as Bonnie and Clyde, Chicago, Breakfast at Tiffanys, Marie Antoinette, Some like it Hot and Evita created iconic screen images that designers imitated; creating trends that caught the imagination of the public.

In the realm of fashion, photography plays a vital role, evoking romanticism of antiquity, fetish sexualism, androgyny and the beauty of the human form. Photographers such as Richard Avedon have turned to art for inspiration. Some images are Michaelangelo, Da Vinci or Caravaggio to the core. The posturing, heightened sensuality and overt sexuality can intrigue and intimidate the viewer. In the way that Claude Manet's famous full frontal, reclining nude courtesan Olympia (1863) shocked the art world, some paintings such as the naked back of an odalisque in the Ottoman Harem by Ingres (1814) created an erogenous zone in fashion. Low backs were the rage many years later when the painting gained popularity. Thanks to the painting, Manet's Olympia actually put sex into fashion. Among the many disturbing details was a black pussycat, provocatively suggestive and unmistakably incorporated into the artwork as symbolism.

Designers have conventionally played to the beauty of fashion. Christian Lacroix overtly used Monet, his Arles roots with matador bravado and Ottoman scenes in art to inspire his collections. Lacroix himself is a great illustrator. His collection sheets are as exquisitely rendered as when he takes paint to chiffon and silk, creating art of great beauty.

Using origami, Japanese minimalism and unique Shibori dyeing, designer Issey Miyake creates clothes that speak of a new language of communication. The body form disappears altogether in the origami folds, pleats and colour, to create clothing of artistic poetry.

Sometimes, a designer comes along whose body of work is meant to disturb, ponder and inflict emotions with brutal candour. One year after he took his life, the editors who were shocked at Alexander McQueen's couture, realised that a true artist dwelt in the savage beauty of clothing he sent out on ramp. The clothes



CHRISTIAN LACROIX Draws inspiration from Monet (slide A), creates art strokes on silk (slide B) and makes a collection sheet into art.

are an intoxicating blend of rage, innocence, romanticism, naturalism, nationalism and bizarre beauty. Looking at McQueen's shows is like hanging a gigantic penis in a salon. It disturbs people. It makes them wince. It questions their prudishness. A chiffon gown held up with birds looks innocent. But when the model turns around and it appears that the birds are clawing at her face, it is theatre of the beautiful and the macabre. McQueen's early clothes had a lock of his own hair sewn under a clear plastic label. It is something out of Dickens or Jack the Ripper. What are we to make of this unusual labelling? At one show, McQueen sent out model Harlow in a flared net dress while robots sprayed her with black and green paint. As she weathered the paint spray, the artwork was being created on the dress.

Viewing these designers and their work leaves no doubt that fashion can be art. It is a fleeting moment of beauty. But when crystalised into a glass cubicle at a museum, it is elevated to the grand altar of fine art!



ISSEY MIYAKE'S Minimalist Japanese design using origami and shibori dyeing.

Wendell Rodricks trained in Los Angeles and Paris and returned to India in 1988. After a brief span of two years, designing and styling for reputed companies such as Garden Vareli, cosmetic giant Lakme and diamond corporate DeBeers, Wendell Rodricks established his own label in 1990. He moved to Goa in 1993, creating memorable collections inspired by Tibetan Monasteries, Tribal symbols, the Harem at Istanbul, Lambadi tattoos and the Visionnaire collection transferring Braille onto fabric for the visually challenged. He has been involved in lecturing, writing and has served on several boards and committees. He is presently writing a book documenting Goa's clothing tradition.