Lydia Edwards

How to Read a Dress

A Guide to Changing Fashion from the 16th to the 21st Century

REVISED EDITION

BLOOMSBURY

Contents

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Preface

The story of the evolution of dress is not as readily accessible as might first be imagined. Books and articles often choose to focus on narrower areas of interest such as a particular era or style, and some function as a wider sociopolitical analysis of how dress adapted and molded to fit contemporary demands. Extraordinary museum collections worldwide are a first and highly precious resource for many researchers and enthusiasts, but most face various inevitable limitations. Chief of these are space, resources, funding, and, more specifically, the necessity (because of loans or conservation requirements) to have a significant number of garments out of the display cases at any one time. Because of this, it can be impossible for visitors to witness a continuous, chronological flow of styles, changing before their eyes in fundamental shape and small details, to produce a comprehensive vision of—quite literally—the evolution of clothes. That is the express intention of this work, which aims to take the reader on a sartorial journey through women's fashion in the Western world, explored in blocks of a few years each and spanning the years 1550 to 2020. The scarce availability of extant (surviving) garments prior to 1550 means that this date has been chosen as a starting point, but there are many publications that consider dress in detail before this point. Books such as Ninya Mikhaila and Jane Malcolm-Davies's *The Tudor Tailor* offer expert reconstructions of earlier garments and a strong background to Tudor dress leading up to the era covered in the first chapter of this book. Janet Arnold's acclaimed *Patterns of Fashion* series starts with a look at *The Cut and Construction of Clothes for Men and Women c.1560–1620,* providing coverage of the sixteenth century through an exploration of extant garments; it is a highly recommended source of further reading.

Examples from works of art and, primarily, extant collections from some of the best (and lesser-known) museums across the world teach the reader how to anticipate and "read" the details of dress, thereby developing a trained eye and enhancing their enjoyment. In a few instances, painted representations have been included, but this only occurs where it has been impossible to find full examples, a particular struggle for sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century garments because only small fragments often remain. Paintings can also cause some confusion when it comes to using them as reliable historical indicators, and readers should be aware of their limitations as well as great benefits. One of the reasons why portraits can be unreliable evidence is seen in the following examples. First, consider Peter Lely's *Portrait of Louise de Keroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth* from c.1671 to 1674. The Duchess is wearing what came to be known as "fashionable undress": light, flimsy garments for "at home" wear that, due to their suggestion of leisure, were a popular portrait costume of choice for the upper echelons

LEFT
Joseph B. Blackburn, Portrait of Mrs John Pigott, c.1750. Los Angeles County Museum of Art

BELOW LEFT
Peter Lely, Portrait of Louise de Keroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth, about 1671–1674, Oil on canvas, 125.1 × 101.6 cm (49 1/4 × 40 in.) The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

of society. This fabric was pinned into shape and, while hairstyle and other accessories can be helpful confirmation of a broad time period, the actual "undress" itself remained similar right into the eighteenth century. Mrs. John Pigott's dress in the neighboring image is more shaped to the body in the manner of a usual gown but its wide, low décolletage and unstructured sleeves set it apart as a piece of "undress."

The garments in the following chapters come from museums in Australia, Britain, Canada, the United States, Italy and Czechoslovakia. They have been chosen for their ability to illustrate fashions from a broad Western geographical base, with European, American, and Australasian fashion being the prime focus in order to maintain a clear and concentrated overview. Some of the dresses, suits, and ensembles seen here have never been published before: those from small Australian collections such as Swan Guildford Historical Society (Western Australia) and Manning Valley Historical Society in New South Wales. These are important examples because they demonstrate the fluidity with which European fashions were taken up, and often modified, in colonial societies. More generally, it is important not to view the development of fashion through purely European lenses but to bear in mind other Western countries that had a significant impact. Wherever possible, original sources have been consulted to highlight the prevalence of certain trends and the uniqueness of others. These range from contemporary newspapers and books to theatrical reviews.

Trends in accessories—shoes, hats, purses, fans and so on—are discussed in the dress analyses themselves (particularly where it is felt that accessories are a vital part of the overall style ensemble). However, the title of this book being *How to Read a Dress*, the focus is very much on the dress as garment: the body covering worn by women in various phases through history. The aim is to recognize key changes in the cut of bodice and skirt, of overall aesthetics, embellishment, and innovation. This approach is not a universal one and, whilst staying general within its theme, is intended to emphasize the structural and decorative shifts in this very particular item of clothing. As fashion became more diverse, dresses were no longer the only option nor, recently, even the most representative. Therefore, on occasion, a single coat or suit will be shown when deemed representative of the general line of dress at that point in history. As designer Elsa Schiaparelli put it in 1936: "I wear suits nearly all of the time. I like them; they are practical in every way, and my advice to a business girl who wishes to dress smartly at all times and whose income is very limited is this: buy a good suit and live in it."[1] This quote also exemplifies another aim of the later chapters of this book, which is not to showcase exclusively upper-class clothing. Despite a lack of extant examples, we know from pictorial and written accounts that working clothes did attempt to follow the fashionable line to however small an extent, and that those who could afford it would have had a single dress "for best" made, as far as possible, to copy the styles seen in fashion plates and on the bodies

of the wealthy. It is inevitably the garments of the rich that have for the most part survived; since these clothes are most representative of the fashionable ideal, we draw the majority of our knowledge and enjoyment from them. Therefore, until the twentieth-century examples, it will be these (with some exceptions) that make up the majority of the images in this book. Nevertheless, the ability to recognize the adaptation of fashionable details into lower-middle and working-class dress across the centuries will be a skill the reader can apply to their own exploration of fashion history. Such an approach also applies to clothing worn in exceptional, traumatic periods of history such as the Holocaust and the Great Depression, and garments from both are considered in Chapter 9.

An end date of 2020 has been given because, it can be argued, by the second decade of the twenty-first century most women consider "the dress" less as their main choice of clothing, and more as just one among a great many. Since the 1970s in particular, the ability to "choose" has been key: as historian Betty Luther Hillman put it, "'Liberation' came not from the actual clothes a woman decided to wear, but from the knowledge that the choice was hers to make."[2] This is illustrated here through the discussion of several distinct styles of the 1970s, including Diane von Furstenberg's iconic 'wrap' dress and an example of 'couture punk' by Zandra Rhodes. The latter initiates discussions around not only the punk movement that inspired it, but the status of elite fashion during the decade – a decade in which, as Paula Reed puts it, 'haute couture was at a crossroads' with its relevance, for the first time, 'hotly debated'.[3] Rhodes's dress was problematic in its glamorization of punk and apparent disregard of the anarchist, anti-commercialism tenets the movement promoted. Nevertheless, her blend of slinky evening gown with chains and safety pins demonstrated the possibilities on offer for the dress, and the increasingly bold and unexpected ideologies it could embody and promote on the journey towards a new millennium.

It is, of course, impossible to cover every element of such a complex and diverse topic as fashion evolution in just one volume. The aim here is to provide coverage of some of the most important and easily recognizable styles worn by women from 1550 to 1970, and to offer the reader a means by which to identify them. Such knowledge will aid visits to costume exhibitions and allow a greater enjoyment and understanding of historically themed films, TV, and stage adaptations. It is also hoped that the student of art and fashion history or fashion and theatre design will find in these pages a handy reference guide, and a gateway to understanding dating and analytical techniques to aid the increasingly interdisciplinary arts and humanities researcher.

Introduction

Fashion history is a major component of the cultural landscape in Western societies today. Dress can be the ultimate signifier of a person's gender, age, class, employment, and religion down to more subtle indications such as aesthetic predilection, political standpoint, and marital status. Fashion, in particular women's wear, has been a source of great social and cultural importance since the earliest civilizations: inciting passion, obsession, derision, scorn, scandal, and fascination in all its many guises. Dress can hold the power to alter perceptions and opinions, to disguise and reinterpret, to heighten or lessen the wearers' very sense of themselves for better or for worse. This has been the case for as long as society can remember and, indeed, as far back as the first century B.C.E., Ovid wrote that "We are captivated by dress; all is concealed by gems and gold; a woman is the least part of herself."[1]

In the twenty-first century, fashion is as much a topic of discussion as it ever was, and historical fashion has not ceased to inspire. "A little worn, a little torn / Check the rack . . . what went out, is coming back" is a key lyric from Paul McCartney's 'Vintage Clothes' on the album *Memory Almost Full* (2007) and illustrates the fact that, time and time again, contemporary designers have turned back to the past for stimulus.[2] Throughout much of the twentieth century and now—well into the twenty-first—there remains a deep interest in historic sartorial representation. The prevalence of historical dramas on TV and in film is testament to the current craze for vintage nostalgia and the ever-present reminiscences of a "golden age," which frequently accompany the start of a new century. Fashion museums across the world have experienced a swell in visitor numbers in recent years, but despite this there seems to be little general recognition of how and why styles have changed across time, or of an ability to pinpoint subtle changes in shape as they occurred. Even the smallest alteration in cut or the application of trimming can indicate new reactions and associations on the part of the wearer and her social and cultural climate, and an ability to recognize these increases our understanding of significant shifts and trends in the social, political, economic, and artistic world.

It is therefore of concern that the current fondness for so-called vintage style is not representative of any era in particular. The word itself is deeply problematic in the breadth and casualness of its use. In contemporary bridal fashion, for example, "vintage" can simply mean a section of lace trimming or a sparkly, antique-looking brooch placed at the center of a satin belt. Brides asking for a "vintage look" can walk away with a gown whose pretensions to nostalgia include nothing more than a lace overlay or pair of sleeves. There is a tendency to

loosely align this trend with the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, elements of which are often amalgamated into one. This clearly illustrates the cyclical nature of fashion, but it does mean that anyone wishing to recognize and enjoy legitimate examples runs the risk of confusion and misinformation. The ability to date clothing and to recognize particular stylistic elements is vital if we are to distinguish and understand those same elements being recycled today. It is the author's hope and intention that this book will abate that confusion and reduce usage of the catchall vintage label, offering the reader an informed and concise model with which to read contemporary as well as historical fashion.

Many wonderful museum and gallery collections across the world offer the best way of discovering and understanding historic dress. But with old garments comes inevitable alteration and conservation across the years, and this book will also aim to highlight a few examples where contemporary intervention—however appropriate and effective—needs to be acknowledged. Some museum items will also provide a broad provenance, or one that has been debated, and this is particularly common in smaller collections and historical societies, where funds for further definitive research are not available. Two examples in this book, both from a small but valuable historical society in Australia, discuss the most likely date and background for the dresses in question.

The ebb and flow of fashionable shape makes up the fascinating and familiar styles that have dictated women's dress for the past 1,000 years. The dress—as we know it today, generally a single-piece garment or bodice and skirt—first arrived with the Plantagenets, and that basic nonbifurcated (a garment covering the legs that is not divided into two) foundation has remained. Its reaction to changing society and attitude, though, has been anything but static. In their various phases, bodices have been flat-fronted, waist cinching, intentionally baggy and androgynous, encompassing only the bust or from neck to hips. Corsets have been either indispensable or shunned. Petticoats of some sort were rarely deemed unnecessary, from the farthingale of the sixteenth century (which was to return in many incarnations at various points over the following 400 years) to the slinky satin slips of the 1930s. So, despite these resurgences and the enduring presence of that garment known as a dress, gown, robe, or mantua, innovative phases—wrought by style or necessity, and sometimes both—have worked to create an extraordinarily vibrant and dramatic silhouette across the centuries.

It has never just been a simple case of studying dress as a single entity. As society progressed and as class distinctions became more concrete in the West, it became usual for wealthier women to present themselves in more than one garment during the day. By the mid nineteenth century, for example, it would be usual for upper-class (and increasingly, middle-class) women to possess gowns for morning, afternoon, tea, dinner/evening, and specific occasions such as a reception or ball. Adding to the repertoire might also be the half dress,

worn for both day and informal evening occasions; the walking or promenade dress, made for particular sports (most popularly, the riding habit—in existence since the eighteenth century); and the traveling dress. Most of these varieties were also available as clothes for mourning and maternity, states of life that the majority of nineteenth-century women would experience at some point. This book will show an assortment of such garments, all chosen for their adherence to the fashionable silhouette, but also to define and discuss the many variants that existed. There may be subtle differences in the fabric or trimming of an afternoon gown as opposed to a morning dress, for example, that make further analysis necessary.

This revised and expanded edition gives space to consider several important perspectives. Various additional styles (such as a 1730s *robe volante* and Coco Chanel's initial 'little black dress') have been carefully chosen to aid the reader in filling further blanks on the journey between one style and another. The book now also considers specific examples of lower and working-class as well as middle-class clothing, presenting a complete picture across different sartorial and social experiences, as well as complementing the contents and structure of *How to Read a Suit* (2020). This inclusion is vital if we are to fully explore the concept of 'the dress' in all its forms, and to allow us to bear in mind that 'high fashion' has for centuries been worn by only a very small percent of the population. Examining lower class clothing offers a stark contrast, but also demonstrates with more intensity how to 'read' the fashionable aspects that were, despite poverty and lack of resources, incorporated within ordinary dresses whenever possible. This illustrates the importance of fashion across all sections of society and speaks of the age-old effort to enjoy and value clothes as much as possible. It is discussed most poignantly through two 20th century examples, a late 1930s Depression-era 'migrant mother's' worn house dress, and a dress owned by a Holocaust survivor and her mother, first in the Warsaw ghetto and later in the safety of post-war England.

The largest addition to this book is another chapter, which covers the period 1980–2020. As discussed in the Preface, this period is important because it demonstrates how the late twentieth century firmly left the dress behind as a *requirement*, but retained it as a perennially popular *choice* that continues to inspire and intrigue into the twenty-first. In 1999 the designer Barry Kieselstein-Cord commented that fashion in the new millennium would 'bring into play status, chic, social position, and the love of beauty – same as it always has.'[3] 1980s and 90s women's fashion did, as fashion always does, replay centuries-old themes including menswear, underwear, outerwear, historicism and romanticism, and in dresses these refrains were as strong as ever. Twenty years on, we can pause to reflect on the extent to which millennial predictions may or may not have come true. Speaking of the 'Moschino woman' in 1999, Rossella Sardinia linked her prediction to a broader social phenomenon, saying that: 'In the future, the dress will be an accessory for a woman. It will not be her main

RIGHT
Portrait by Thomas Askew, c.1899-1900, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

priority.'[4] The garments discussed in the final examples of this book speak to that prophecy, with dresses more and more frequently discussed alongside other options. The final two pieces are not necessarily readily wearable garments, unlike others discussed throughout this book. Criticism levelled at one of the designers, Rei Kawakubo, over the years has condemned her work as 'unwearable': and this perhaps suggests the antithesis of fashion, not to mention an uncomfortable elitism. However, these avant-garde pieces have been chosen to illustrate how far the traditional boundaries of 'the dress' can and have been pushed, and the intellectual shifts in the way women's fashion is both inspired and inspires. The first twenty years of the twenty-first century have seen one of the most ground-breaking shifts in the use and perception of 'the dress' in western society: it is becoming, for the first time since the fifteenth century, not an exclusively female garment.

Men have worn nonbifurcated garments at various points through history, and into the nineteenth century small boys typically wore dresses, and then shorter tunics, until they were "breeched" at around the age of six or seven. Skirts for men have included, among others, the Scottish kilt (still worn today for special and ceremonial occasions: this is a common choice of outfit for a bridegroom), the medieval *tonlet* (a metal skirt worn as part of a suit of armor for protection during foot combat, and based on tunics seen in contemporary dress), and in ancient Greece and Rome, men and women wore very similar non-bifurcated clothes in the shape of a long robe known as toga, himation, and chiton. Since then, however, the dress—also known across the centuries as a gown or robe—has been almost exclusively feminine in the Western world, and women have embraced or merely accepted it as such. Although gender boundaries are now far more fluid than they were even fifty years ago, the dress has remained a garment that typifies femininity in all its guises. With a wide variety of daily clothing options, including, of course, trousers, women now relegate the dresses in their wardrobe to particular occasions. For many, a dress will signify "best" or "smart" outfit or perhaps a garment worn more for work than at home during the weekend. Most brides still expect to wear a dress on their wedding day, and it was only during a key period of utility—World War II—that the tailored suit often became a bridal choice through necessity, and only later by design, as can be seen in this photograph from a 1960s London wedding. Critic Quentin Bell wrote in the 1930s that "western woman's long struggle to be recognized as a biped began in the nineteenth century,"[5] and this book will also document the rise and influence of "rational" dress in that century and into the twentieth, twinned with a similar movement toward "aesthetic" clothing that was largely propagated by Oscar Wilde and other prominent bohemian figures.

Whether studying or just enjoying historic costume, it is always important to consider the very physical implications of wearing particular clothing. The way people moved in, and consciously managed, their clothes can tell us much about attitudes toward gender, class, and standards of decorum and decency throughout the ages. The way elite female sitters in mid-seventeenth-century portraits were posed—for example, with exposed lower arms bent and elbows held out, slightly away from the body, with one hand on the other arm's wrist—was not just for aesthetic reasons. It is true that, from the early years of the century, women were, at last, permitted to show their arms, and this must have influenced the choice of portrait posture quite considerably: but in the stiff bodices, it was also far more comfortable for a woman to hold her arms up and away from her body.[6] In images from the early 1840s, dresses and their narrowly cut shoulders (with sleeves sometimes set well below the shoulder line) necessitated a wearer's arms to be held much closer to the body, whereas gowns from 1900–05 had sleeves set at the "natural" armscye (armhole), just before the shoulder meets the top of the arm, and consequently allowed, in some respects, a more natural posture. The lower classes (who do not generally appear in such portraits except occasionally as favored servants) would, of course, have needed to wear clothes that enabled ease of movement and that took up as little time and energy as possible. Nonetheless, the upper classes still held the yardstick for fashion and the "correct" mode of appearance and, as stated in the Preface, the lower and middle classes would have attempted to emulate this where they could.

The study of dress is an invaluable methodology when attempting to understand and deconstruct the past. In the context of this book, it can also shed light on gender relations and the ways in which society perceived women but also, crucially, the way women perceived themselves and presented their bodies to the world. With clothing for so long deemed a woman's main interest and occupation, it is incumbent upon historians to fully understand the aesthetics and function of that interest and to chart the developments of dress and the changing ways that women used fashion to express, to conceal, to rebel, to protest, and to forge identity within—for the most part—a fiercely patriarchal world.

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