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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

MODERN SOCIETY: THE DEMISE OF STYLE

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN

AND COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES

AND

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

FACULTY OF DESIGN

DEPARTMENT OF FASHION

BY

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MARCH 1989

MODERN SOCIETY: THE DEMISE OF STYLE

Has Western Society in its quest for the preferment of lifestyle
resulted in the extinction of our culture?

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INTRODUCTION

We have become world businessmen. In the old days fashion designers, seamstresses really, made and sold only dresses. Today we sell a lifestyle to the whole world. We have moved into more and more areas of influence and this has made a huge difference to how we are perceived. It has made the career more socially acceptable and I think that in the end all social structures come to depend on power and influence, and, of course, on the influence and power that money brings/

quote: Oscar de la Renta interview with Nicholas Coleridge 1987.

Society is a system where by people live together in organised communities. Culture is the development of the body, mind and spirit by training and experience. Society deals with the development of the populace while culture deals with the development of the individual.

Western society possesses only a rudimentary form of culture and it appears that in modern civilization where emphasis is on progress culture has not been encouraged to thrive.

As human beings we have the basic needs of food, shelter and clothing. As we progress our desire to achieve more than the essential requirements for survival becomes greater. Initially the more demands that we made on society the more society was pressurized into fulfilling these demands. We learned to develop a taste for delicacies as commerce crossed international borders and introduced us to more exotic tastes. Our living quarters changed and expanded as more rooms and amenities were added. Clothing became more elaborate and decorative. It displayed a person's quality and status and expressed a social system.

Eventually clothes began to change and then more rapidly with the introduction to new fabrics and styles of dress worn abroad.

This characterized fashion; the perpetual restless change in dress.

Particular aspects of fashion may be recognised as sensitive recorders of the times in which they exist. But "There is no evidence to establish direct links between fashion changes and general historical events" claims anthropologist Ted Polhemus. (1)

Today the evaluation of fashion is being induced by industry. The direction that fashion takes is carefully etched out by industrial sharks whose continued monopoly of the market can only be maintained by manipulating the direction of fashion trends. Fashion is all about change. If something is fashionable it is current: the latest trend. Ironically, however, no sooner does something become fashionable than it begins a downward cycle. First the fashion becomes widely popular and quickly thereafter achieves "mass" popularity, then it fades into the background, superseded by the newest trend. The power of advertising continues to soar and prey on our weaknesses. The human mind can be easily manipulated. The look of the season is created by the designers, dictated by the media and readily absorbed by the consumer.

I believe that the influences in western society have had a detrimental affect on our natural more instinctive development of style.

In the following chapters I wish to outline the way in which our natural ability to define quality and our personal development of style

have been marred by major influences in modern society. Our lifestyles are becoming more and more dictated by society which is largely controlled by the mass media. Never before has our world been so bombarded by media such as newspapers, magazines, television, video and cinema. All of these mediums are vital methods of communication but in such a short time they have achieved great manipulative power and have become ogres of style and a threat to our individual identities.

FOOTNOTES

1. Ted Polhemus, Is Fashion Out Of Fashion?
The Irish Times (January 21, 1989), P.10: Style:
2. The Fashion Conspiracy, Nicholas Coleridge, P.29

CHAPTER ONE

DEFINITION OF STYLE

Style, what is it anyway? Who has it? Can it be bought? The dictionary gives us various definitions, but the one that causes most debate is "Quality that marks out something done or made as superior, fashionable or distinctive". So the dictionary directly relates style to fashion and a superior and distinctive fashion at that. But style is not as easily defined as that.

Some element in our minds provides us with a natural ability to determine when we perceive an aesthetic vision. The familiar saying, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" states clearly that we as individuals differ in our personal perception of beauty. We regard people instantly with either admiration or distaste and seldom question our assumptions. Instinctively we know who is visually pleasing to us. Our natural and distinctive perception of beauty may stem from an accumulation of ideals and desires which we develop through life. Nevertheless, we all have our own ideas and interpretations of beauty. But beauty is not style. Style is intangible. It is a quality possessed by a few yet entire nations have it. In the west style is a sought after commodity but it cannot necessarily be bought. In the quest for style, the west has gone from the sublime to the ridiculous. We need only to think of certain eras in the history of costume to realize how desperate this need to acquire style is. How else would we explain bandaging our bosoms in the 1920's to emulate boys, or lacing ourselves into 18" corsets in the 1800's to look like hourglasses.

Somehow this desperation is more evident in the west.

In ethnic cultures, we also see gross distortions of the body, for example, the plate inserts in the lips of the Sara women of Chad and the neck elongations by gold rings in the Turkana nomads of Kenya, but it seems more acceptable. Somehow because the tribes have sound reasons for performing these distortions. They usually indicate religious roles, tribal identity, or social status differing from the western ideology which was pure and simply a desire to be a different shape for fashionable reasons. We look at the ethnic cultures in their own environments and we do not recoil in disgust. On the contrary we marvel at their ingenuity in the face of such limited resources and we revere the beauty, grace style and creativity. (Fig 1 and 2)

By the same token we look at pictures of our forebears squeezing themselves into iron corsets and laugh at the stupidity and frivolity of it all. Even today we see incredible sights on the catwalks which leave us just as open-mouthed as past fashions did, so much so that the wild imagination of the Punk movement seems relatively tame.

Style is the spirit of individuality reflected in one's appearance and is self-evident. It is often disputed whether style is innate in a person or whether it is acquired later in life. In my opinion, true style is innate. However I do believe that a semblance of style can be achieved, not by following the guidelines laid down by fashion journals

but more by following one's own instinct.

"To have style you must believe in yourself" stated Yves Saint Laurent in an interview by Caral Troy in 1979. (1)

It is my theory that clothes project the personality of the wearer. By projecting an image through choice of dress, we can portray certain qualities of our character. Georgina O'Hare, author of

The Encyclopaedia of Fashion writes,

"Dress has always been used as a social tool to display wealth and position, just as the deliberate rejection of status symbols relays other messages. Clothes can reveal our priorities, our aspirations, our liberalism or our conservatism. They go a long way towards satisfying simple or complex emotional needs and they can be used consciously or unconsciously to convey subtle or overt sexual messages." (2)

The more a woman is confidently aware of her individuality, the more care and attention she pays to how she expresses herself visually. Ultimately when she is possessed with firm feelings of self-reliance and certainty of character she will project a strong sense of her own personal style. It is naively presumed by many wealthy socialities that style is more readily obtainable to them as a result of their social status and access to couture salons. On the contrary, style is

as often recognised on street level and on bodies unknown as it is in the gala receptions of the rich and famous.

It is generally accepted that the fashion conscious woman in America relies mainly on the direction of the designers to determine what is "vogue" for a particular season. She is not renowned for using her own initiative because she more readily accepts and adopts the style of the current season. In contrast, her European counterpart tends to rely more on her own personal taste. She is more aware of the silhouettes which enhance her figure. Her change from one season to the next may be dramatic or demure but it reflects a development of her character.

Donna Karan gives this advice to the American woman on how to obtain style.

"You've got to experiment and not be afraid. The European woman, for instance, works at it a lot. She's not afraid of change. With change you can find out about yourself and what your style is." (3)

By acknowledging our assets and being aware of our less attractive attributes we can begin to understand our own personal style. It is better to display our better qualities and enhance their appearance because this in turn reflects an aura of self confidence.

Yves Saint Laurent suggests, "A woman can feel very sexy in a chemise,

as she can feel very sexy in jeans. It depends on the person. If she thinks she isn't sexy she will not be sexy". (4)

Such a suggestion gives vent to the idea that the source of style is within the individual.

FOOTNOTES

1. Carol Troy, Cheap Chic Update P.57
Interview with Yves Saint Laurent
2. Georgina O'Hare, Encyclopaedia of Fashion P.9
3. Carol Troy, Cheap Chic Update P.99
4. Carol Troy, Cheap Chic Update P.59

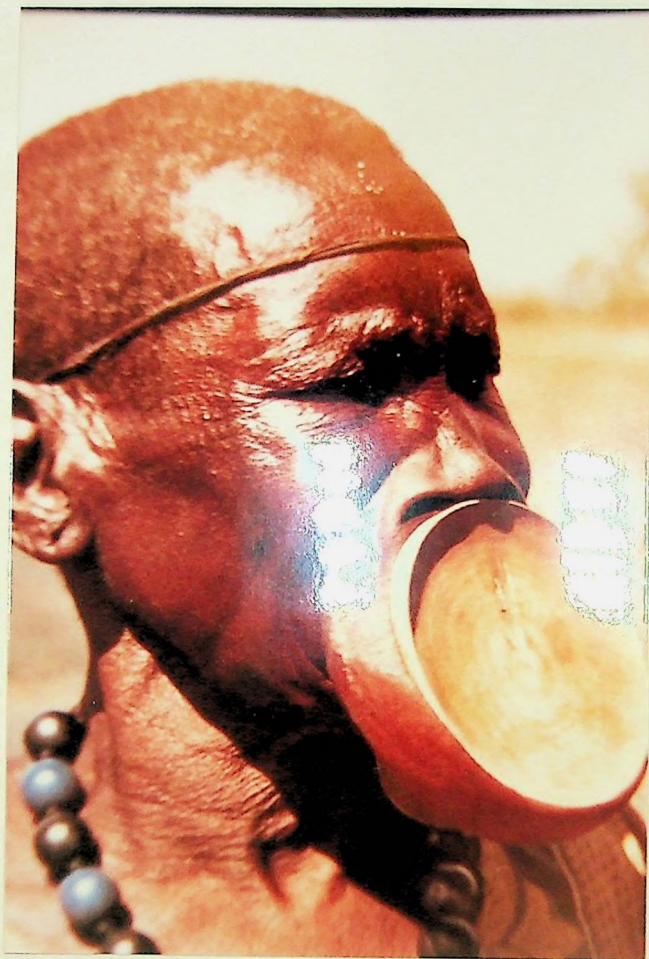


Fig. 1 : SARA WOMAN
OF CHAD.



Fig. 2 :

THE STRAIGHT FRONTED CORSET 1902.

CHAPTER TWO

THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA ON FASHION

From day to day we are exposed to an array of influences which to some degree sway fashion in one way or another. The media provides certain influences and through television, cinema and fashion publications, we have become more vulnerable under their powers of persuasion.

Included as major influences in fashion are past and present supermedia stars such as, Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, Audrey Hepburn, Jackie Kennedy Onassis, Deborah Harry and Madonna.

Other inducers of change in fashion are publications' editors, art directors and photographers who have recorded, promoted and perhaps manipulated fashion in their own ways.

Long before fashion publications were available to provide information on current fashion and trends, people adopted fashion ideas from books and illustrations. In 1872 the Alice band was introduced. In Lewis Carroll's book Alice Through The Looking Glass illustrations showed (Fig 1) his heroine wearing a ribbon across her head which swept her hair away from her face. This band became popular from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day. In the same period circa 1870 "The Dolly Varden" was introduced. The Dolly Varden was a style of dress named after a character in Charles Dickens novel Barnaby Rudge. The dress was made from various types of printed fabrics worn in layers and tied in a bustle at the back. (Fig 2) People in the public eye at



Fig. 1 : THE ALICE BAND, popularised in the late 19th Century as a result of this illustration from Louis Carroll's, Alice Through The Looking Glass.



Fig, 2 : The Dolly Varden Style Dress

this time were regarded as being an authority on fashion and so their style of dress was often imitated by their admirers. Queen Alexandra of England was admired for her sense of dress and was responsible for several fashion innovations, most notably, the choker. This jewellery item consisted of rows of pearls tied closely around the neck. (Fig 3 & 4) Dancer and choreographer Isadora Duncan, born in 1878, abhorred the restriction of fitted garments so she banished the corset from her wardrobe.

While performing her ballet in the major European cities, she earned herself an infamous reputation by shocking her audience with her revealing costumes. Eventually though, she was responsible for popularizing a general trend towards less restrictive clothing.

With the advent of cinema came the opportunity for the public to view the most glamorous of fashion. Hollywood costumes became more dramatic and flamboyant with top American and European designers being employed for their creative skills and expertise in achieving garments of the highest quality and unique style. Inevitably a lot of these designs were copied in New York by the manufacturing sharks of Seventh Avenue and mass produced. The most internationally renowned costume designer of this century was Edith Head, born in Los Angeles California in 1899. She died in 1981, having achieved over one thousand screen credits to her name. She began working with Paramount Pictures in Hollywood in



Fig. 3 : (Centre) QUEEN ALEXANDRA, who popularised 'the Choker'.



FIG. 4 : ISODORA DUNCAN, illustrated poster depicting her in a flowing and revealing costume.

1923 and later worked freelance with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Columbia, 20th Century Fox, Warner Brothers and Universal Studios. Among the actresses for whom she designed were Mae West, Marlene Dietrich, Dorothy Lamour, Elizabeth Taylor and Grace Kelly. She had the ability to create the most flamboyant fantasy gowns as well as the most simplistic, but always maintained an indefinable appeal. In 1951 for Elizabeth Taylor in the film A Place In The Sun, she designed a strapless evening gown with a fitted bodice covered with white violets and a skirt made of white tulle over green satin. For Dorothy Lamour in The Jungle Princess she designed a very simple Sarong type dress. These two dresses, though very different styles were both widely copied in the United States. (Figs 5 & 6) Other equally influential film couturiers in the first half of the twentieth century were, Gilbert Adrian, Oleg Cassini and Orry Kelly. They were major innovators of fashion and were responsible for creating the image and style of many leading actresses.

Costume designer, Gilbert Adrain (1903 - 1959) designed costumes for many of the top actresses from the 1930's on, including Joan Crawford, Greta Garbo, Norma Shearer and Jean Harlow. He was responsible for creating the style that became the hallmark of Joan Crawford. He designed gowns with wide padded shoulders to give the illusion of narrow hips. One such gown which he designed for her character in the film Letty Lynton 1932, was a white organdie dress with ruffled



Fig. 5 : ELISABETH TAYLOR, in the gown designed for her by Edith Head.



Fig. 6 : DORATHY LAMOUR, THE SARONG - A simple style of dress made popular by designer Edith Head.

sleeves and a narrow waist. The "Letty Lynton" dress became much in demand and was copied by many manufacturers in the United States. Macys department store alone reported to have sold 500,000 copies. So great was the admiration for the stars of the superscreen, people were held captive, intrigued by their mystery and glamour. With the mass-production of these designs, previously unattainable glamour was believed to be available now at street level.

Cinema has maintained its influence on fashion to the present day. Many films have diverted fashion in some way: Some attracting a cult following of ardent fans who develop into clone-like images of characters in the films. Examples of such films are The Rocky Horror Picture Show, The Blues Brothers, and The Little Shop of Horrors.

Each of these films has a dynamic music score and hand in hand with flamboyant costumes and larger than life characters has earned the distinction of cult status. The fact that such films are on permanent view in selected picture houses perpetuates the influence they have on fashion.

Other films may revive costumes of a particular era, or introduce us to costumes of rural peoples and some films create and promote completely new looks in fashion.

One film which created a huge impact on fashion was the Woody Allen Film Annie Hall (1977) for which Ralph Lauren designed the costumes. Diane Keaton who played the leading role dressed in oversized garments, notably baggy pants, an extra large mans shirt and a mans pinstripe waistcoat, a tie and floppy hat completed the image. The "Annie Hall" look became very popular as menswear for womenswear. Other interpretations of the style included mixing designer label garments with second hand men's accessories such as braces, spats, ties and sleeve suspenders. (Fig 7) Using such accessories currently, Ralph Lauren's influence has gone beyond the realms of mere fashion and into the hallowed halls of the stock market. He, as a designer interpreted the desires, or more correctly, the dreams of the American people. He recognised a want or need in them that harked back to their roots. IN exploiting this need he used media in the form of massive country wide advertising that appealed directly to the American desire to belong. His look is simple. Wholesomeness. Buckskin jackets, Calico shirts, denim skirts, lace chemises are all wrapped up in a slick advertising campaign showing wholesome models wearing wholesome clothes in a wholesome pioneer environment. The campaign shouts at the American people from coast to coast. This is our history! This is our tradition! This is America! Of course it worked, and, mega successfully. Ralph Lauren is probably one of the biggest American success stories and, as a designer, is probably influenced himself, by that most endearing and innocent and naive of all media vehicles, the



Fig. 8.



Fig. 9.

cowboy movie.

The film Grease (1977) starring John Travolta and Olivia Newton John brought about a revival of the 1950's fashion for a brief period; reintroducing peddle pushers, jeans, angora sweaters, full circular skirts with petticoats and open-toe sandals.

A more recent film which had a big influence on fashion through the promotion of the clothes worn by the English in Africa in the 1920's and the 1930's was Out Of Africa (1985). Many details in the clothing, recreated for the film were pirated by the mass marketers. First the influence was reflected by the designers in their collections, through their use of colour fabric and styles; such as; gaberdine jodpurs, linen skirts with tie loops and safari type jackets in heavy linen and light tweed. Then it followed the normal cycle of fashion trends. After a certain time the look was exhausted through over production and then fashion drifted on to the newest and latest trend. (Fig 8)

It is interesting that in the film Out Of Africa we were introduced to the Masai Tribe of Kenya, a race of people who possess a grace, elegance and undeniable sense of style.

This highlights how the media has focused in on tribal cultures. The recent introduction of satellite television has made it even more

feasible to produce documentaries about other races making insights into their lives and style much more accessible. The remotest tribes of deepest Africa and Amazonian jungles can now be observed and in the recent past have been the sole influences for many international designer collections. (Fig 9)

Stylist and photographer Michael Roberts used the body painting of the Masai warrior as a dramatic uplift for a photoshoot of Katherine Hammetts famous torn denim collection in 1986. (Fig 10) Other designers has been inspired by their unique combinations of colour and testures and their dyeing and weaving techniques. Their use of natural resources and clever craftsmanship have produced some of the most creative and dramatic jewellery and accessory pieces. There is a mystery and inexplicable sence of style surrounding these people. These deeply cultural groups have developed their innate sense of style by keeping within their environment. They are not effected by outside influences or swamped by the media. Their interpretation and projection of style is solely related to their own cultural environmnt.

Fashion photographers and stylists have attempted the capture the aura of these people and reflect it in western society. It is somehow ironic that western society should look towards these ethnic groups for inspiration. The strength of ethnic style seems to me to have its roots in the fact that it does not rely on other cultures and it is the



Fig. 10.

constant building upon itself which gives it substance.

In contrast, we in western culture are so hungry for style that it is the fact, that we tend to mix and match so many different ones, which leads to a sort of dilution. We have become victims of a media-ridden and run society. We have become convinced that to develop further, it is necessary to look beyond our own boundaries of style. To illustrate this point we need look no further than the recent massive influence on fashion by the recent massive influence on fashion by the Japanese designers. This in itself is a paradox, in that, the look the Japanese foisted on the west was in total contrast to their own traditions and culture. When one thinks of Japanese dress and costume, one automatically calls to mind rich colours, patterns, embroidery and textures. The traditional costume, the Geisha girl attire, illustrates this richness as does the Kimono and the Samurai garments. The Ikat weaving expertise that has been developed over the years in Japan shows in its intricacies the attention to detail, and the importance of colour, dyeing and texture that the Japanese attach to the basic fabrics they use.

However none of these traditional influences is apparent in the overall look with which the Japanese designers stormed the west. It was as though they stripped away the tradition, picked the bones of their culture until they were left with the skeletal frame of the geometric



Fig. 11.

Kimono and on that frame built a look that was angular, disciplined, and sculptured, yet acquired a grace and movement that only became evident when worn. (Fig 12)

The main proponents of the Japanese look were Yoji Yamamoto, Comme des Garçons and perhaps one of the greatest of all designers Issy Miyake. Strange reason, most of what was most successful among their designs was monochrome and for the most part black. One interpretation of this phenomena and predilection for black is that the Japanese fashion invasion coincided with an economic recession in western society and in western society in times of recession we revert to sobriety. Frills, flounces and frippery are frowned upon and viewed as superfluous and superficial. The Japanese influence is perhaps not as strongly evident in current fashion but it certainly retains a hold.

The strength of this fusing of Eastern and Western style lies in the careful assessment of the Japanese designers of their own culture first and foremost. The eastern input was the basic garment shape and this coupled with the traditionally western woollens and linens lent to the creation of a chic and classic look which has firmly established itself. (Fig 13 & Fig 14).



Fig. 12.



Fig. 13.



Fig. 14.

CHAPTER 3

THE INFLUENCE OF FASHION ON MEDIA

Since the early fifties a link has developed between fashion and music. The fifties brought about cult groups like the mods and the rockers. Mods dressed in the latest fashion, loved dancing and rode around on scooters which they adorned with medals and wing mirrors as status symbols. They had a trendy image, very clean cut and neat. Their idols were Roger Daltry and The Who. (They later inspired the making of the film Quadrophenia in 1978 starring Sting.) The rockers liked only Rock 'n' Roll music. They wore metal studded leather jackets and drove motor bikes - their image was tough and their hero was Marlon Brando. (Figs 1 & 2)

The sixties was a very exploratory period. The beatles were the strongest influence in the development of pop music. At this time music was not just something to listen to, it became a way of life. (Fig 3)

1961 brought the introduction of discos and disc jockeys. Disc jockeys became teenage heroes. Teenagers mimicked top models Twiggy and Jean Shrimpton. Footballers took on the status of film and popstars. (Fig 4)

In 1964, England became the centre of young fashion and boutiques started to appear in Carnaby Street and Kings Road in London. Mary Quant introduced the mini skirt and tights and brought fashionable



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.

clothes within the price range for teenagers.

The sixties produced Hippies, and Flower Power which originated in California, it was a reaction against America's involvement in the Vietnam war. Many Hippies expressed their contempt for society and its values by dropping out. The Beatles song All You Need Is Love, expressed flower power.

Just over a year later the mood turned psychedelic (this term was first used to describe experience derived from taking drugs especially L.S.D.)

The Rolling Stones arrived on the music scene, with a rougher image than The Beatles but they managed to attract as strong a following by their image as much as their music.

Bob Dylan was considered spokesman for the age - He wrote folk songs with a message. The times they are a changing and Like a rolling stone, became anthems of the time. A hard rains a gonna fall, was a warning about nuclear fall out and With God on our Side, was an anti-war song.

Perhaps the most provocative and probably the most diverse reaction to the fashion machine was punk. No other era got more critical acclaim.



Fig. 3.

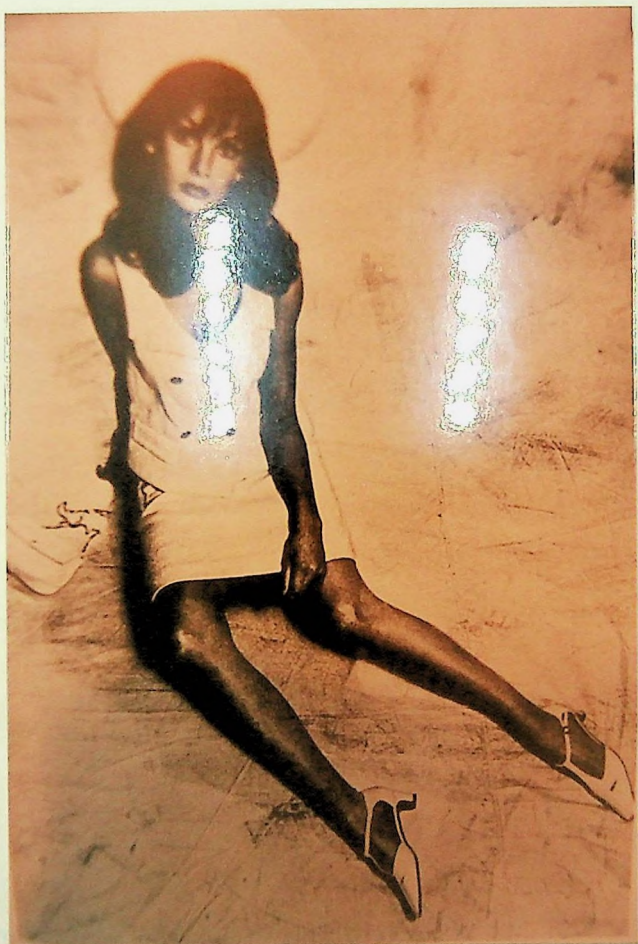


Fig. 4.

Punk was totally opposed to everything traditionally regarded as fashion and style. The punk image was anti-beauty. There were no limits to subversion, their image was based on the contradiction of everything that was acceptable as style. Ironically ardent followers of punk rock turned out to be the worst fashion victims of all. The instigators of punk rock style were Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood. Westwood had a natural ability as a fashion designer and this formed the perfect counter-point to McLaren's streetwise business skills. (Fig 5)

They began to explore a radical new direction for British style through a series of shops at 430 King's Road. They started off in 1971 with a fifties revival shop called "Let it Rock" which sold period memorabilia and music. (Teds wore an early example of street fashion taking a traditional style and making it their own by adding details).

Eventually Westwood and McLaren opened their infamous "sex" shop in 1974 selling fetish/fantasy clothes in rubber and leather. Their aim was to divert fashion and create trends. They felt that clothes could be subversive like books or posters. In this context the irony of their bondage-inspired clothes was that they represented a show of force, inviting opposition. The printed images were taken from conventional culture without emphasising which were traditionally regarded as "Beautiful" or "Ugly".



Fig. 5.

While Westwood created the look, McLaren packaged it and put it out in the street. McLaren was renowned in the music industry for his manipulative brilliance. He skilfully used people to achieve self-acclaim. When he decided to manage the Sex Pistols he was aware of their lack of musical substance, but he considered that a challenge. He wanted to encourage their anti-social behaviour and promote his product based on their controversial image. Sid Vicious and Johnny Rotten, who were the Sex Pistols two main characters were somewhat naive and ignorant of the powers that generated the image machine. They had no idea how destructive it could be. As McLaren promoted them it was purely a visual thing, musical ability wasn't regarded as important and he encouraged the band to become more and more outrageous. (Fig 6 and Fig 7)

The band became aware that that was what the press expected of them because of their appearance which was intimidating, loud and usually aggressive. They had a very threatening appearance and people regarded them with contempt. Their hair was cut short, spiked and completely dishevelled. Their clothes, always black, were untidy and dirty. They wore worn, torn leather jackets and jeans. (Fig 8)

Their accessories were studs and chains studded dog collars leashes and safety pins. Their boots were black and heavy. Anything that wasn't conventional and was controversial was attractive to punks. They



Figs. 6 & 7.



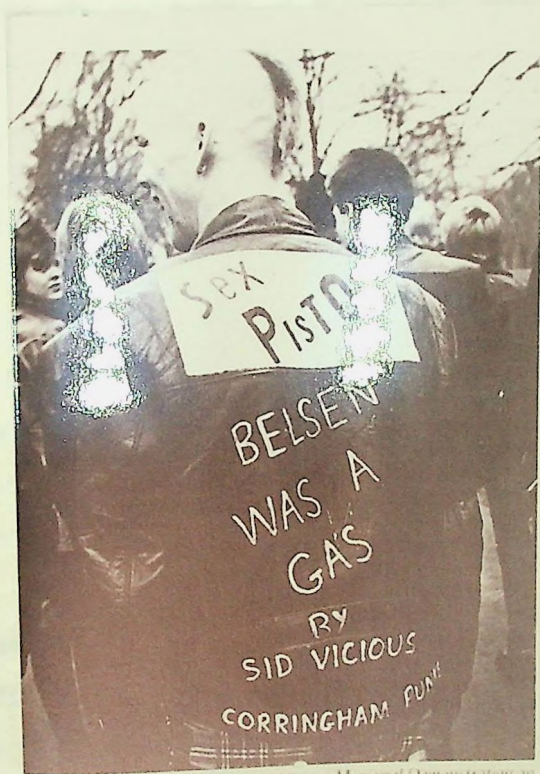


Fig. 8. *member me this way.* The 1980 Sid Vicious Memorial Demonstration on

tattooed slogans onto the back of their jackets. The more outrageous the Sex Pistols were the more it encouraged their fans who idolised them. The Sex Pistols set the trend and they followed it. As long as the band continued to make headlines McLaren continued to encourage their hostility. He stated in an interview with Jonathon Ross on Channel 4 television 1987. "Rock 'n' Roll is not just music you're selling, it's an attitude too".

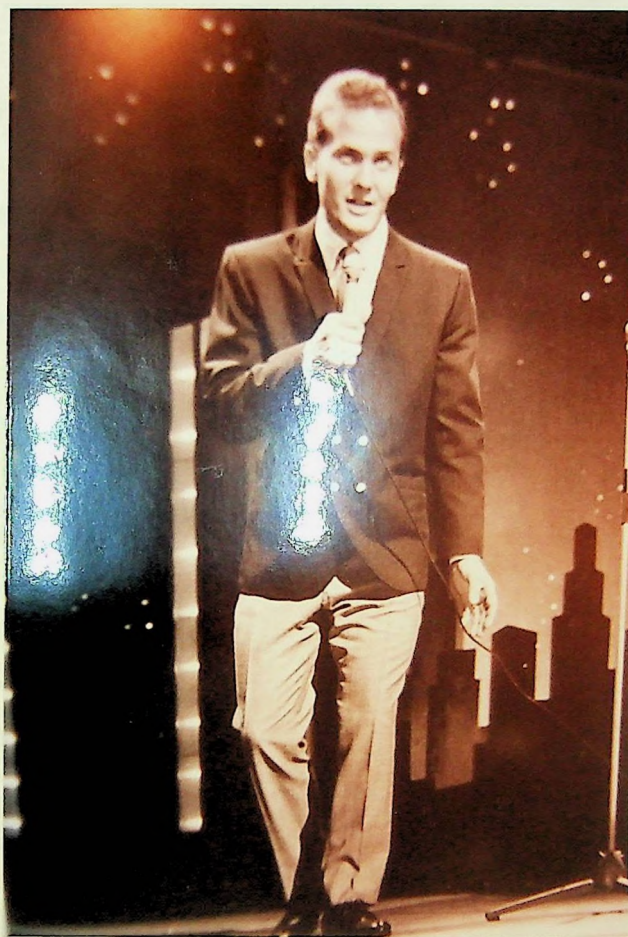
He claimed that his aim was to shock and be controversial. "Its the best way to get attention and to make people talk". When the Sex Pistols stopped making headlines he realised that their show was over but he had known it would only have a limited life span before the Media would tire of it. It was simply time to move on.

The most dynamic and enduring rock stars have developed iconic costumes that clearly identify them as mythical characters who satisfy the psychic thirst for larger than life human symbols. Their costumes not only help fans enter a realm of wonder and catharsis, they similarly transform the performer into something other than his or her ordinary self. These outfits overcome inhibitions by separating a stage role from the customary self image to produce an altered state that permits extraordinary ways of acting.

In Mablen Jones' book Getting It On, David Bowie reveals why he made up so many costume characters early in his career. He claimed that they allowed him to perform his songs in a way that inhibitions denied his

ordinary self. As in Japanese Kabuki theatre a mask is the identity of the wearer. It is believed that the actor becomes the spirit of the mask. It is like having someone take your place and projecting a clearer image. Fantastic costumes help suspend stage anxiety. Clothes often reinforce words and actions and are visual expression of character. In the music business performers are expected to be Gods and Goddesses. They are larger than life. There are the good and the bad contrasting images, Elvis Presley versus Pat Boone, (Fig 9 and 10), The Beatles versus The Rolling Stones, Michael Jackson versus Prince. Their costumes display symbols of their personality, Bad Boys wear leather, Good Girls wear pearls. Their costumes must emphasise their music.. Orininally it was believed that music did not sell on television. In 1981 a company started in the United States of America by Warner Amex satellite entertainment, emerging through the National cable television network it was M.T.V. Music Television. The introduction of this visual media for music brought on a compelling new facade to the music machine, abstract concept videos with animation techniques and surreal montage clips have released music and image from the restraints of naturalistic narration, a high degree of fantasy has become normal. To elaborate for a moment, on the power of the visual media, one only has to see how important visuals have become to music today. The eighties will be the decade whereby just having a good song is not enough. To sell records today an artiste has to have a video, slick and persuasive. It does not even have to relate to the song, as

Fig. 10.



long as it numbs the viewer into a sense of fantasy, it will be successful. Perhaps it is a sad indictment on today's music culture or maybe it is just a different set of values for a different age. But, somehow, in the eighties media has brought about a less than subtle change in what the public wants.

A beautifully packaged glossy Bros singing "When will I be famous" X number of times to an inane beat compared to a balding 40ish Van Morrison or Bob Dylan singing a ballad concerning social issues would give today's record buying public no contest. Costumes have evolved to accommodate evolving styles of presentation. Designer Bob Mackie, who recently presented his first ready-to-wear collection in New York, began his career working in film costume. He brought glamour to rock 'n' roll, through creations for Cher during her 1970's television series. Each week the audience waited in anticipation for the newest witty extravagance in cloth to appear. Cher, whose exotic looks enabled her to transform into an Amazonian Goddess, a Haitian, American or an Aztec Princess in feathers, beads and enormous head-dress.

Bob Mackie was also responsible for designing Elton John's stage gear for his 1986 world tour. His costumes are extremely elaborate. They are humorous and over exaggerated statements which reveal something about the wearer. He creates illusions which add height or reduce weight by using clever arrangements of beading and sequins in strategic

places.

Another famous American costume designer - Le Gaspi dressed many famous rock stars, among them Patti Labelle, whom he brought through a complete metamorphosis to achieve one of the most flamboyant entertainers in these past decades. Le Gaspi explains the difference between designing at retail level compared to designing for an entertainer.

"At retail it is a dress, but this is an image, the design had to convey a very specific image, be made in no time flat, wear like Kryptonite, more like water and photograph like the finest gossamer silk or supple leather".

It is not as simple as designing a collection of garments, designing an image means you must be dedicated. It is not easy to change an image, so it must remain consistent without allowing boredom to set in.

Two other American designers of rock costume are Stephen Sprouse and Betsey Johnson. While Betsey Johnson likes to create designs which relate more closely on a street level with an element of humour, Stephen Sprouse works more on a thematic basis. They both have a talent for combining fashion and music culture in its present sense.

New York Times fashion writer John Duke, sums them up in an article August 21st '84.

"They are the first clothes of popular culture and to translate the drive of rock music and M.T.V. videos into retail form".

CHAPTER 4

THE DEMISE OF STYLE

THE BIRTH OF INDUSTRY

Having dealt in previous chapters with my interpretation of style culture, and the major part that modern influences of society have played in shaping it, I wish now to enter the area of industry and big business.

According to the fashion forecasting agency Promostyl, changes in style begin in the sociological melting-pot.

Promostyl is the world's largest fashion forecasting agency. It was set up in 1966; the first of its kind, and has a track record for reading the signs and predicting the fashions, stretching back over twenty years. It is difficult to imagine fashion being correctly predicted several years in advance, but is this actually predicting or pushing trends?

"Defining fashion trends isn't such a big deal", says Sebastien de Diesbach president of promostyl.

"The prime, forces in fashion today are matters of general information movements in the arts, travel patterns, economics and sport. Within fashion itself, technology, spontaneous street-style and the avant-garde ready-to-wear designers are far more important than couture. So it really is not difficult to get hold of the right information, the skill is in the way you interpret those signs".

A

Promostyl was set up by Francoise Vincent-Ricard, a French consultant on textile design. She spotted the potential for a fashion go-between who made sure, first, that the textiles and accessory manufacturers understood what colours, fabrics and detailing would be needed, a year later, by the designers and, secondly, that the designers themselves anticipated what clothes the consumer would be wearing another year after that. Reasoning that everyone stood to benefit, she set up a small, all female team with six textile manufacturers for clients.

Today, over twenty years later fashion and design have become big business, and fashion draws on global influences; the 1980s, for example, being the decade of both Japanese post-war black and London 1960s nostalgia. Promostyl's growth has paralleled the changes: Turnover has risen to thirty-seven million francs a year and they have become an international operation with twenty-five offices or agencies scattered around the world and a cosmopolitan team of sixty analysts and designers in Paris.

These analysts gradually pinpoint four main themes for each season which are directly related to social changes. They then translate them into every conceivable fashion detail and produce three large illustrated books on colours, fabrics and styles.

As the market becomes more complex, making the bridge from ideas to

reality can be difficult. Promostyl's solution is to tailor their services to customers particular needs by publishing increasingly specialised trend books dealing with everything from jewellery to prints for children's clothes. In the 1970s they brought in sociologists and then marketing consultants to improve their skills. In the 1980s they have linked up with young artists and begun using computer graphics and provided a constant updating service through monthly videos and weekly newsletters. Their employees around the world operate like sociological radar transmitting a constant stream of soundings back to the central Paris office. Again they revert back to influences from the media and encourage the promotion of details or dress styles in current films. They create the necessary momentum to plunge us into an even more artificial environment. When we consider the enormous influence companies like promostyl have on the fashion industry, through their 3,000 clients world wide, it is hardly surprising that their predictions are usually right, at lease in the middle market bracket. Vasts amounts of money are invested by companies, as a result of these forecasts, which are regarded as the bible of the industry. They cannot afford to make a bad judgement, so they are forced to work. Some of the most well known of Promostyl's clients are Levi's and Estee Lauder in the U.S.A., and in Britain, Marks and Spencer, Courtelle, Boots, Mary Quant, Sock Shop, Conran Design and Jaeger Hnadknitting. The fast growth of this company, especially in this last decade, and the increasing demand for its

services, only, go to prove the lack of interest the fashion industry and society have in maintaining any sort of cultural aspect in fashion. The business of fashion forecasting is only a small area in the conspiracy of style.

I have always been intrigued by the psychology involved in the art of selling and the ability to seduce a potential consumer by presenting a product with maximum appeal. Every last detail in the packaging of a product is a carefully thought through decision and plays a significant role, in the success that product has, in fighting the existing competition. We find ourselves lured by the appearance of certain commodities and compelled to buy them merely because of their presentation. Those who carry out extensive research, segment the market. We are labelled and placed in our appropriate category. They devise a way to convince us that we need this or that particular product.

There are certain codes and techniques used in advertising relating to different products, and thorough research of the market will give the marketer some indication as to his best approach. For example, there are certain colour associations which we automatically link up subconsciously, i.e. red for danger, green suggests nature, blue is clear and cool, yellow for hygiene and so forth.

Originally manufacturers were reluctant to suggest that cars were man-made pieces of machinery. It was thought better to avoid emphasis on technology and instead to create an illusion of natural birth. However in this age of computer technology, research shows we are quite prepared to accept the fact that motor cars are really a product of precision robots which carefully assemble and test run every model. It is possible to see the amusing aspect with regard to these inanimate objects which are dressed up and presented in a way that suits their purpose. There is however a serious side to the art of selling which does not stop at promoting unanimate objects.

In my introduction quote by Oscar De La Renta he states clearly how he sells a lifestyle. His commodity is not only a garment bearing his label but an image and packaged "style" which he created for and promoted, "as a way of life". The designers of the eighties emerged as icons. They were raised to a higher status than ever before. They did not have to strive to achieve the credibility and artistic recognition as did the great couturiers of earlier decades. They swept through society on the crest of the wave that was the fast growing fashion industry. Designers like Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein and Giorgio Armani have created from nothing fashion empires on a scale and with a speed that seemed impossible in the mid-1970s. In less than ten years they have achieved annual turnovers of 1.3, 1.1 and 1 billion dollars respectively. Their instant acclaim was as a result of their simple

uncluttered and structured approach to garments, their clothes appealed to the masses. Their approach to fashion was innovative in that they created a complete look and a well presented image. Their inspiration stemmed from the preconception that the fashion conscious woman required a ready-to-wear image. This concept was further expanded with the introduction of licensing. (A means by which designers rent their names to manufacturers). As a result designers were able to lend their names to complete ranges of household and other products, to help create the environment they desired, to market their original image. Often the money earned by designers through licensing their name far exceeds their actual turnover from their existing business. Pierre Cardin has as many as 840 licences, (ranging for scuba-diving suits to designer igloos!) which produce an annual personal income of 10 million dollars. Many designers simply licence to perfumes and toiletries, the theory is that for people, who cannot afford the extravagant designer labels, can be introduced to and have the prestige of owning a smaller item. This enables the designer to reach customers who would not normally be attracted by the clothes alone. The idea originally behind the licensing was to further promote the new concept of selling a life style.

Ralph Lauren was the first designer to put his designs into a complete environment. His shops all maintain a uniformity of style such as bed linen, drapes, great overstuffed pillows, fabric covered book ends, hat

boxes and neatly folded night attire all strategically placed on props such as large sturdy wooden beds and wooden trunks.

Eventually it became recognised as an innovative way of selling. The theme has been adopted though modified by many stores. (Fig 1) Marks and Spencers was probably the first store (on a less stylish level than Ralph Lauren) that engineered the concept of selling a way of life. First opened in Leeds in 1884 as a penny bazaar by a Lithuanian immigrant, Michael Marks who was later joined in 1894 by Tom Spencer. In 1926 the company went public and continue to prosper to this day with nearly 300 stores across the United Kingdom.

Marks and Spencers continues to hold fifteen percent of the entire clothing market in the United Kingdom. Their maintainance of top class products has been a major reason for their continued success. Marks and Spencers are not renowned for selling top fashion garments, but their ability to select and sell more basic and easy-to-wear fashion garments has remained consistent.

Another store taking on the same sort of format but on a slightly more up market level is Next. Originally selling womens wear separates it quickly expanded and moved into other areas of merchandise, mens wear, childrens wear and home furnishings.



Fig. 1.

While these stores offer a service which is practical and obviously in demand they do not offer choice which means that we are becoming increasing swamped by a society consumed with pre packaged living. While we have freedom of choice we reject it, and opt for the easy accessible living provided in its ready-prepared form ignoring our own ability to add personality and style to living. Since the demise of haute couture in the late 1950's early 1960's fashion has become more democratic. In theory, fashion has become available to everyone, multi chain stores like Next, through the development of their marketing strata, has made fashion easily accessible and competitively priced. Yet if clothes aim for the middle ground, they will never satisfy all our demands on them. Industry is devouring the style that existed before fashion, when dresses were like monuments, made from precious materials brought from distant lands. They were put together one after the other - constructed as an architect constructs a house, slowly and with infinite care. Not merely to dazzle the eye, they were meant to outlast the generation which conceived them. A time-less fashion never looks old but it also never looks new. How can we laugh at ourselves, express ourselves, poke fun at each other and fulfill our craving for novelty and change if fashion remains more or less the same, an endless cycle of monotonous life styles. In recent years, we have enjoyed the fruits of easily available ready-to-wear. The same clothes can be found in stores from Dublin to Dallas, but we yearn for something more. We want clothes that speak of the future or tell of the past. Clothes

that give us the chance to wear something we might have missed and clothes that reflect many mirrored messages.

Most designers create their garments with a particular image of a woman in mind (Figs 2 and 3). Karl Lagerfeld's house Model at Chanel, Ines de la Fressange is his idea of the most perfect and ultimately stylish woman. Yves Saint Laurent creates his silhouettes with model Loulou de la Falaise Klossowski in mind and Charlotte Rampling is the inspiration behind Bruce Oldfield's most glamorous gowns. These images of almost larger-than-life beauties are what creates form and style to the designers initial concept of a garment. The designers image is based on their perception of the ideal woman, who possesses the very essence of style and who will display their wonderfully mastered garments to their best advantage.

In his extensive research for his book The Fashion Conspiracy, Nicholas Coleridge visited fourteen different countries and spoke with over four hundred people directly involved in the world of fashion. With each designer he interviewed he inquired about their customer and in reply received the same monotonous profile of an amorphous woman. "Married or nearly married and yet the mistress of her own destiny, building a career, but with a full rounded character confident but confiding, ambitious but yielding, a workaholic but intending one day to quit the rat race for a beach house at Newport". (1) If this description was



Fig. 2.

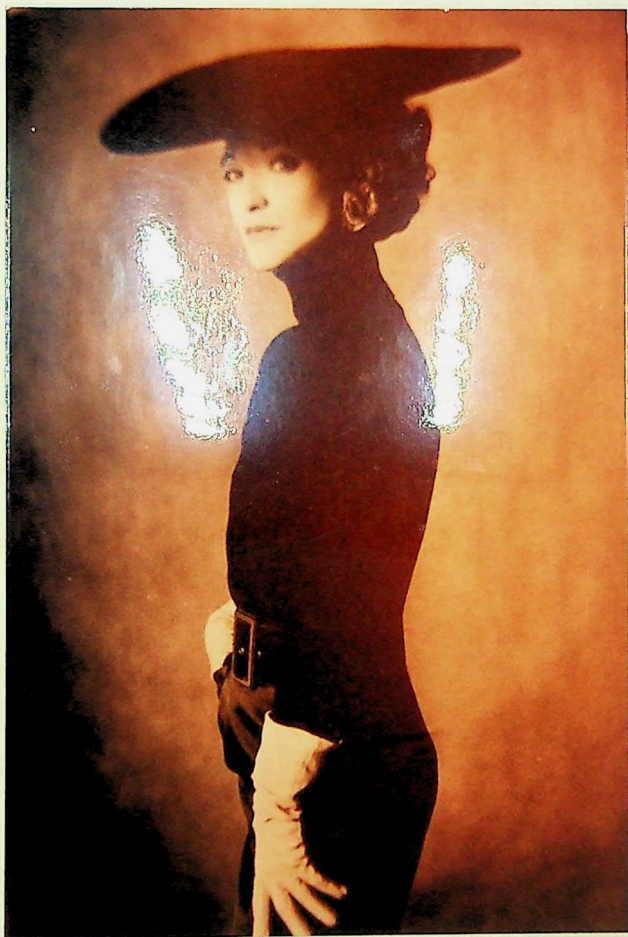


Fig. 3.

taken as the true profile of a woman, she sounds totally confused and indecisive. No indication is given as her personality. Without a reference to any quality of her character it is impossible to imagine the style of this woman. The ideals and aspirations of an individual are only a small part of their makeup. The common have no doubt which links this customer with so many designer clothes affordable. There may be an egotistical reason on the designer's part to imagine his customer having these qualities which neither threaten nor question his ultimate authority. The designers prefer to believe their garments are worn by only the most confident and stylish of women. The image was born and nurtured by the designer and it is presumed the customer adopts it quite naturally and instantly grows accustomed to its form. The power and influence the designer exerts on the customer overwells their own instinctive perception of their individuality. The authority of the designer qualifies even more the idea that what carries his or her label is collectively considered style. People are blinded by the image machine, and the competitive urge to gain status compels them to buy into their lifestyle.

Since the fashion industry's continued survival is based on the correct predictions of the fashion cycle it is in their interest to make it work. The customer is therefore manipulated.

Since fashion has a voracious appetite for change, it is easy to assume

that women who have been walking around in Doc Martens and Levis will turn to something else. That is the fervent hope of those in the fashion trade who live by selling clothes.

Fashion is the result of designers and brilliant commercial minds interacting together. In as much as art and society affect fashion, So too do industry, commerce and science and in no other age has art and industry so readily held hands together and created the fastest growing enterprises of the twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

From the onset of modern life one aspect has coloured all things;

"Time and Motion" = "Money"

Making money is the overriding requirement of modern man. Our society has developed within these parameters and in keeping pace with this development we lose something along the way. It is my conclusion that the more we develop into the computer age the more we lose our sense of individuality, and thus our sense of style. We only have to compare modern art of old masters, today's architecture to the buildings of the past, the urban suit to the Grecian drapery to realise that, to a large extent we have sacrificed craft in the pursuit of the perfect lifestyle. Our business oriented society dictates that we streamline our lives to revolve around the business ethic, "time means money". To this end it is easy to perceive why our modern buildings lack the grace and embellishments of the Sistine Chapel or Gaudi's Casa Mila. In the past the cheapest part of planning a building or a collection of garments was the labour, and to prove it we have the pyramids in their stunning solitary elegance, the Gothic cathedrals which are lasting monuments to man's ingenuity and in the clothes line we have the contents of the Victoria and Albert Museum to wonder at.

We stand in awe at the expertise and craft that produced the bead work and lace masterpieces of days long past. Today labour is the most expensive item in any costing and so it gets cut and whittled down to the minimum input, and the result is less craft, less beauty, less care and less style.

Style is connected to all things time consuming and so illustrates perfectly, the reason for the style of the Indian woman washing clothes by the Ganges, or the Maasai warrior in full regalia. They are not living in a pressurised society like we are in the West. All this is not to say that in the West we are completely bereft of style. We do still have a strong creative urge but in order to produce we have to charge prices that generally take it out of the average persons economic grasp. A simple illustration of this would be gardening. To the average householder with an average creative output, creating a beautiful garden, no matter how small costs a small fortune. It would only be the most ingenuous and sensitive of persons with great style, who could make a miniature garden of paradise using wild flowers and shrubs. Is this why we have housing estate after grey housing estate, saying nothing about their occupants?

Has a lack of money stunted our style? To answer this we can look at the sliding scale of modern society. America, the ultimate dream, is the most consuming of consumer societies, yet possesses little or not style. We Europeans tend to secretly sneer at our American peers in their gauchness. America is the ultimate melting pot of all races and creeds, yet instead of this incredible mixing of cultures leading to a blossoming of unique expression, the very opposite has occurred. Individuality, has all but disappeared, as though the very integration of peoples has served only to dilute and dissipate their cultures.

This can be illustrated in the sense of culture retained in small pockets throughout America; for example Little Italy in New York, China Town in San Francisco, and Bourbon Street in New Orleans. We view these pockets of culture as the places to sight-see in America, places to absorb the spirit of the community. Apart from the natural style of Nature's awesome glories, such as the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, and the Californian Red Woods, the rest of urban stateside would do little or nothing towards inspiring style. Of course, we salute the heights to which the American dream has aspired, and indeed reached in terms of Science and Technology, but sadly the development of the individual has been sacrificed to this end.

Further up the sliding scale we can look at the progress of the European counterpart. Within the confines of Europe we have a further sliding scale crossing the individual country borders. In recent years the only country to have maintained a steady profile in terms of style has been Italy. Milan has been the fore-runner in almost all areas where style is regarded as important, clothes, car design, and furniture. Perhaps this is because the government has recognised the need for, and indeed encouraged in an economic capacity, the development of design. The Italians are world leaders in the Fashion field and one has only to look at the immigration of top British and French Designers, such as Katherine Hamnett and Karl Lagerfeld to Italy, to recognise the fruits of the Government endeavour. But then perhaps

style is indigenous to the Italians, since their history has been so richly endowed with it. (But then what happened to the Greeks?!)

No other European country reflects the creativity and passion of the Italians. France perhaps in the Fashion area, and Denmark in the field of Industrial design, show a certain nod in the direction of style; but nothing like the depth of the Italian commitment. England, Ireland, Holland and Belgium do not rate on anything but a less than average level, whilst Eastern European countries are positively stifled. West Germany has sacrificed even its sense of humour in the pursuit of the preferment of lifestyle.

Leaving America and Europe aside, the remainder of the sliding scale involves the Third World, and here we find style in abundance. In the West we constantly look to the future; we constantly change fashion and dress, and only on occasions when we find ourselves at a stalemate regarding change do we hark back to other eras to absorb ideas. Our society is one of constant grasping for new ideas - a positive trek in search of Utopia. Fashions are only valid for a miniscule timespace, and are then abandoned and discarded for the latest trend. Our quest for greener pastures is only ever satiated momentarily. In direct contrast to Western society we discover the timelessness of ethnic cultures. In contrast to us their quest is only for their immediate needs. Their dress doesn't change from season to season, they don't

breed their animals to produce "faster" models, they don't decimate an acre of forest to satisfy their taste buds with a hint of hamburger, and they have style season in season out. Their Saris don't change hemlines to suit some egocentric fashion leader and their decoration is not dictated by media but by fertility rites, tribal custom and nature itself (Fig 1). Even in the direst moments of Third World society, the decimation of whole tribes from hunger is viewed from a patronising voyeuristic viewpoint by us stylish sophisticates in the West. We discuss how noble these dying peoples are and how proud they stand in the face of destruction. We only stop short of saying how stylish they are in death.

So we reach the conclusion that style is innate in our natural state. In our pursuit of the perfect lifestyle we blind ourselves with science and fail to see the obvious. Our desire for style overrides our ability to recognise it in ourselves and occasionally, when we see examples of it in others, we then try to define it and categorize it and emulate it. We stifle our own individuality in our eagerness to improve our images which themselves are based on others interpretations of style.

Perhaps when we cease our endless pursuit of Utopia, we will find that style can slot in naturally to any society. It will only happen when we stop being fashion victims and allow ourselves to develop naturally.

We may then reflect the style we so readily recognise and envy in the very ethnic peoples to whom style has no meaning at all.

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