Fashion Theory

A Reader

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PERSONAL ADORNMENT is characteristic of all societies, whereas coverings that protect are not. For many people, dressing oneself can be an aesthetic act, and all aesthetic acts are acts of speaking, through which an individual may speak as an individual, what is said having meaning only because of relationships with other people. Aesthetic acts do not grow out of a vacuum, but from what is learned from others. For example, no one individual invents fine dress, instead, the language of personal adornment is acquired from others. Personally unique inventions embellish or modify the “tongue” learned from human associates, but do not represent a new language of dress.

The form of a society's language of personal adornment depends upon environmental resources, technical developments, and cultural standards for judging what is fine or beautiful; and an individual may speak the dialect of a specific sub-group within a society. Beautiful dress or finery in one group may be represented by clean and neat dress, in another by a jewel-studded crown, in still another by an array of body scar. The form of what is most or least “fine” also depends upon the social group from which the standards for judging “fineness” emerge. Clean and neat dress may be a maximum standard for beauty in dress among those in American lower economic levels for example, but only a minimum standard for middle levels.

Adornment as aesthetic experience

The individual can derive aesthetic pleasure from both the act of creating personal display and from the contemplation of his own display and that of others. In either the creative or contemplative act a person is concerned with the characteristics of body and dress that prompt aesthetic responses. The body itself has its aesthetically
describable qualities — color, texture, shape, and dimension — and the added materials of adornment modify the total arrangement displayed by an individual.

Reactions to the three-dimensional, and mobile, presentation of body and dress on the basis of its aesthetic qualities alone are almost impossible; for as human beings receive stimuli they continually process and respond to these stimuli attributing meaning to them. Thus, what is seen may stimulate an aesthetic response, but it also carries a number of other messages, frequently of social and psychological significance.

**Individualistic expressions through personal adornment**

**Mood.** Personal adornment may reflect inner emotional states called mood. It may also reinforce, disguise, or create mood. An individual caught up in a certain mood may wish to externalize it so it can be conveyed to and shared with others. Perhaps an individual feels light-hearted and energetic. In America, a culturally recognized way to create this effect is to choose costume with colors and linear arrangements that show contrast rather than sameness. Typically, color contrast can be attained by using a number of different colors together, by using bright colors that contrast with a somber background, and by using sharp differences in lightness and darkness of color. Linear contrast occurs if lines suddenly change direction or intersect when proceeding in different directions. The culturally encouraged interpretation is that the redirection of eye movements required by line contrasts is symbolic of a dynamic inner state within the wearer. Thus, at least for Americans, contrasting line and color in costume can express exuberant mood to others and also reinforce the same mood in the wearer.

Dressing in a certain way, however, may contradict rather than support mood. To banish depression and melancholy, an individual may deliberately wear dress of color and design which is thought to express opposite feelings, the joyful and buoyant, for example. Success in changing mood may depend also on other environmental changes, such as change in activity or human company. A more complex kind of mood change can come with the putting on of new clothes. Part of the reorientation of mood that some people receive from new clothes results from response to crisp new textures and the unblemished quality of the color and design that has not been altered by wear. A new item may affect mood by reinforcing an individual’s feeling of uniqueness and providing a break from the sameness of appearance that an individual had been presenting for a period of time. However, the reaction of an individual is also likely to be highly social in reference. New clothes may be a way of acquiring the confidence that comes with “good” timing within the fashion cycle. The anticipation is that new clothing places one more surely within the range of the most admired appearances of the moment and, therefore, in a position of social approval. Thus mood change may grow out of adjustments to social environment as well as aesthetic responses.

Dress may be used to hide feelings from others with no expectation of transforming one’s mood. If the disguise of mood is to be convincing, gesture, body stance, and voice tones must complement dress, otherwise associates will not be deceived.

An individual who consciously decides to “dress up” or “dress down” perceives
the possibility of creating mood through dress, particularly if the act of “dressing up” or “dressing down” is isolated from any particular social event or occasion. In the theater and in dance performances, such conscious use of dress is the rule, for performers are expected to use dress to create a mood that can be communicated to and participated in by their audience. The dress is a cue that communicates mood from performers to audience, a mood which may in turn be conveyed back to performers.

Dress used in cerem.onial rites contributes to the creation of mood. For example, because of sentiments attached to traditional bridal attire, it can add to the solemnity or joy inspired by the traditional music, precise movements, and recita-tions of a wedding ceremony. The lively spirit of festivals may be promoted by clothing clearly designated to be festival dress and not everyday attire. Festive dress ordinarily presents colors, materials, accessories, and designs that are different from dress worn every day.

DIFFERENTIATION FROM OTHERS. Complementing, yet opposing, forces that influence people’s lives are those that provide feelings of individual worth and those that assure social value. Preservation of some kind of balance between these forces contributes to emotional survival. Although one learns the language of personal adornment from peers, and thus may be expected to conform somewhat to their patterns of dress, one can also show determination to be an individual and declare uniqueness through dress. Differentiation of one’s self from others on the basis of dress relates to rarity. Acquiring the most expensive clothing is often a way of achieving differentiation through rarity, which usually commands social admiration. Rarity, however, sometimes has quite an opposite social effect. The least expensive clothing may be comparatively rare within a society with widely dispersed economic resources, and may be owned by the poor. The type of clothing may be their possession exclusively, but its quality of rarity does not automatically bring social value; instead, it is more likely just the opposite. For those who reject the expensive, or wish to identify with the poor, the inexpensive (like bib overalls) may express individual philosophy and ethical stance.

The new and fashionable also has the quality of rarity for a time and may set one apart. The position of a form of dress within the fashion cycle, from introduction to obsolescence, has interesting effects on rarity. An item just out of fashion may be relatively rare but, because of its recent descent into the realm of the unfashionable, socially unpopular. However, given sufficient age, an out-of-date fashion takes on the aura of the antique and it may become a device used to show uniqueness. English and American youth discovered this route to individual expression in the 1960s and early 1970s. The display of attic discoveries or secondhand store finds were sources of unique expressions of dress by youth, regardless of their economic level.

Individual differentiation also depends on reference group. Thus individual differ-entiation from general societal norms for dress is different from subgroup differ-entiation in that the individual who is differentiated in appearance from general society may still be conforming to group code, that of the subgroup. The individual-ist looks for differentiation no matter what group he is in. Thus "hippies" of the 1960s sought individuality within the accepted code of dress of their peers, whereas Liberace or Tiny Tim in their early careers were truly individuals.
Contrary to popular belief, widespread mass production of clothing does not eliminate possibilities of dressing uniquely. It places its own peculiar limitations on forms produced, but the high volume of goods produced, in America at least, allows room for greatly varied combinations of clothing, especially in color and texture, and in type of combinable items. For some observers this can be a confusing variety, since the communicative efficiency of dress is reduced as the possible types of expected appearance multiply in number.

Adornment as definition of social role

Adornment is communicative of many subtleties in social relations. It suggests the behaviors (roles) expected of people on the basis of their various and sometimes multiple connections with each other and can, therefore, distinguish the powerful from the weak, the rich from the poor, the hero from the outcast, the conformer from the nonconformist, the religious from the irreligious, the leader from the follower. It can make these distinctions, but not necessarily so. Just as verbal language can be deceptive, so can the language of dress. Individuals can assume disguises to deceive the observer. Such a disguise usually involves dress, but requires correlation of dress with other style-of-life symbols. We can seldom be fooled by people we know, but we can be deceived by strangers because we depend almost entirely upon external cues of dress and grooming, facial expression, tone of voice, and conversational style, plus props such as automobiles or furnishings in living quarters to identify them.

Not all disguise via dress is deception: in the theater, players deliberately dress to fit a role, choosing costume that helps the audience identify the age, social class, sex, or occupation of the character being portrayed, and the audience knows that the dress used is intended to transform the actor temporarily into the stage character and obliterate for the moment the real-life identity of the person playing the part.

Beau Brummell remains a classic example of someone who used clothing and other props purposely to establish a role for himself in a situation that was not make-believe or deceptive. The careful way in which he prepared the setting for his entrance into society suggests that his arrival as leader of the fashionable elite of London was more than fortuitous circumstance (Franzero 1958). Brummell's education at Eton and the opportunity to meet the Prince of Wales helped him establish a foothold in society, as did a modest inheritance from his father. But more important was the astuteness with which he chose his acquaintances and put his inheritance to work. He bought several good horses in order to transport himself in "correct" style. He chose his apartment carefully so that it would be in the "right" location. He hired a cook who could prepare exquisite meals for dinner parties and invited groups of carefully chosen guests. Within the security of the "right" setting he practiced the art of personal dress to its fullest and established a unique image for himself in a position between the florid elegance of the earlier part of the eighteenth century and the neglect in dress affected by some fashionable Englishmen in the latter part of the century. The lingering legend of Beau Brummell after more than a century is proof that his uniqueness aided him in establishing his role as fashion leader.
In times of great social unrest and rapid change, an individual's approach to dress is likely to reflect general social upheaval. The hypothesis that variability in dress reflects conflict concerning content of social roles (Busch and London 1960) appeared to be substantiated in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Racial roles, the roles of rich and poor, the roles of male and female, were questioned and efforts made, particularly by the young, to articulate new roles within all these categories, and to wear dress that reflected these new roles. Sometimes during a time of testing new roles the language of dress becomes a jumbled code, difficult to decipher. For example, a study of college students in the late 1960s showed that variation in style of dress was a weak indicator of radicalism of political ideas, even though the general public was interpreting forms of dress that deviated greatly from the traditional as indicating political radicalism (Life 1970).

Adornment as statement of social worth

Evaluations of social worth are often made on the basis of personal adornment. In some societies valued kinds of adornment are widely available to all, with perhaps some restrictions placed on age. Among the Andamans, when studied by Radcliffe-Brown (1933) scarification was a mark of added value generally available to all boys and girls who were at the threshold of adulthood. The kind of value it bestowed and the incentives to acquire them were thus described:

The explanation of the rite [scarification] would therefore seem to be that it marks the passage from childhood to manhood and is a means by which the society bestows upon the individual that power, or social value, which is possessed by the adult but not by the child. . . . The individual is made to feel that his value — his strength and the qualities of which he may be proud — is not his by nature but is received from him from the society to which he is admitted. The scars on his body are the visible marks of this admission. The individual is proud or vain of the scars which are the mark of his manhood, and thus the society makes use of the very powerful sentiment of personal vanity to strengthen the social sentiments (1933:315).

In societies with sharp social divisions of caste or class, adornment that represents the most desirable symbols of social worth may be exclusive to an upper-class elite. The elite maintain a monopoly on these symbols as long as they maintain a monopoly on wealth, for lack of economic resources prohibits lower classes from adopting adornment that could proclaim for them a social worth equal to that of the upper class. However, when wealth becomes more available to the common man, as happened in the late Middle Ages, the upper classes cannot automatically keep "fine dress" exclusive to their class. Enactment of sumptuary law is one way a social group may try to stave off obliteration of the outward distinctions of class that exclusive access to finery provides them. In the late seventeenth century in Nuremberg, where four ranks of society were recognized, the paternalistic government regulated the amount that citizens of all ranks could spend on clothes, weddings, christenings, and
burials. Regulation on dress included top-to-toe specifications. Specifically, a late fourteenth-century Nuremberg ordinance indicated that "no burgher, young or old, shall wear his hair parted; they shall wear the hair in tufts as it has been worn from of old" (Greenfield 1918:109). An order of the mid-fifteenth century directed cobblers "on pain of a definite penalty henceforth to make no more peaks on the shoes" (1918:110). Equally intriguing is that even horses had differential access to adornment, for they also had to abide by the sumptuary laws that bound their masters. In the upper class the horse that drew a bride’s coach might have his forelock, mane, and tail tied with a colored ribbon; in the second class only his forelock and tail; in the third class nothing but his forelock (1918:128).

Earlier in origin, much more explicit and detailed, and more restrictive, were sumptuary laws in Japan (Hearn 1904:183–185). However, they reached their peak at about the same time as in Europe, that is, about the seventeenth century. During the Tokugawa period (1600–1867) the regulations for the farmer classes varied according to their income and described in great detail the limitations placed on the exact length of houses, the kinds of foods to be served, and the fibers to be used in the thongs of sandals. In the family of a farmer worth 20 koku of rice, no one was allowed to wear leather sandals: only straw sandals or wooden clogs were permitted and thongs of the sandals or the clogs were to be made of cotton. In the family of a farmer assessed at 10 koku the women of the family were required to wear sandals with thongs of bamboo grass.

When wealth is widely enough dispersed for lower classes of people to afford finery in dress similar to that worn by those in the upper classes, but they are prevented from doing so by strict enforcement of sumptuary laws, they may spend money on adorning themselves in ways unique to their own social level and not competitive with other classes. Some regional dress in Europe is such a phenomenon, and represents a phase in the long transition from feudalism to capitalism. Davcnport (1948:376) suggests that much of European regional dress emerged in the sixteenth century when the bourgeois costume became differentiated on the basis of provinces or sometimes cities. These differentiations became a basis for the later peasant regional costume. As the well-to-do bourgeois climbed the social ladder to become gentry, the peasantry were also rising, and well-to-do peasants could afford to adopt the regionally unique costume of the former bourgeoisie.

### Adornment as indicator of economic status

Adorning oneself can reflect connections with the system of production characteristic of the particular economy within which one lives. Clothing worn at work can identify the productive, that is, occupational role of an individual. A uniform and badge indicate services expected from a policeman; a pin, cap, and white uniform the services expected from a nurse. Other costumes place individuals in general occupational categories: white-collar apparel (suit with shirt and tie) is, for example, associated with many levels of office work and the professions. Blue-collar apparel of denim or work twill is associated with some kind of manual labor.

In America, women's dress is generally more ambiguous in its symbolism of occupational role than is men's. This ambiguity stems partly from the tendency of
industrial societies to recognize only occupational roles that produce money income and partly from traditions established during the nineteenth century. Thus, because they do not receive money income for work, the large number of women who are exclusively homemakers, performing many productive tasks within their households and communities, do not have clearly perceived positions within the American occupational structure, and correspondingly no form of dress that clearly distinguishes them as belonging to a particular occupational category. However, persistence of nineteenth-century traditions concerning male and female roles is probably what more strongly limits symbolic association between women's dress and occupation; for nineteenth-century society developed an expectation of women to indulge in personal display through dress, contrasted with an expectation of men to eschew such display and to garb themselves in somber symbols of the occupations provided by an industrializing society. In the twentieth century, women continue to fulfill the display role, exhibiting a great deal of variety in their dress, as they are homemakers and also as many of them are workers in a number of different occupations. Among white-collar women workers, who represent the largest percentage of women in the labor force, relatively little consistency in dress has developed to symbolize the occupational category, despite occasional drifting in that direction. At the turn of the century, for instance, a costume consisting of a dark skirt and a shirtwaist seemed destined to become a standardized type of dress for female white-collar workers since it was widely used by them and in a general way resembled the type of dress that had become standard wear for male white-collar workers. But, as time passed, competing forms brought variety into the dress of female white-collar workers and the shirtwaist and skirt did not emerge as long-lasting symbols for the group. A trend in the 1970s toward use of so-called career clothes by female as well as male workers in some business institutions such as banks may indicate that occupational dress symbolizing white-collar work for females has simply been slow in coming, or it may represent one more drifting toward consistency that will disappear as variety reasserts itself.

As far as economic symbolism is concerned, women's dress probably indicates ability to consume more clearly that occupational role since consumption is dependent on money available, no matter what the source. This is not to say that type of work, and the skill with which it is done, does not affect dress, for occupation affects income, and income, in turn, directly affects ability to consume, hence the opportunity for both men and women to indulge in personal display. In some societies, because of religious conviction or moral precept, conspicuous display in dress is at a minimum no matter what level of income. In others display is confined to class levels that can afford it. In still others ability to display is widely available and actual display largely a matter of personal values and philosophy.

Adornment as political symbol

Adornment has long had a place in the house of power. It may show the position of a person in a hierarchial system of authority; it may be visible proof of affiliation with a particular political party, or dedication to one political ideology and opposition to another. If political power passes from one ideological group to another, sometimes
the entering group will adopt the symbolic dress of their predecessors. Napoleon reintroduced types of dress that were symbols of state from the old regime to support the legitimacy of his empire visually and to unite the old and new elite. At other times a group will institute its own symbols of dress, as did Castro and his followers when they adopted drab fatigue uniforms. At yet other times, subtle modifications in dress, rather than radical change, may occur among the politically sensitive. For example, the military coups in Nigeria in the 1960s resulted in de-emphasis of the Nigerian “national” dress among the Ibo politicians and civil servants of eastern Nigeria, because the “national” dress symbolized the peoples of the west and north, that is, their political opposition.

An occasional political figure may have unique adornment that helps set him apart in his elevated position of leadership. Moshe Dayan, defense minister of Israel in the 1960s and 1970s made a black eye patch more than a cover: it was his particular ornament and mark of identification. The brown derby was the personal identification mark of Al Smith, New York politician and Democratic party leader, who ran for president of the United States in 1928, whereas the ten-gallon hat symbolized Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1970s.

Traditional ceremonial costume of royalty has become less common in the world, but the investiture of Prince Charles in 1969 as Prince of Wales gave opportunity for traditional costume to mix with the contemporary. Queen Elizabeth dressed in twentieth-century fashions but her son, the prince, was bejeweled in eighteenth-century splendor. The 1970 wedding of the crown prince of Nepal was another occasion for much traditional ceremonial display. In both cases fineness in dress indicated the elevated political status of the participants (Newsweek 1970).

Military and police uniforms with various kinds of ornamentation call attention to those who stand ready to exert force in maintaining social order according to the authority delegated to them by those in positions of power. Police uniforms adorned with brass buttons, badges, buckles, and insignia announce the policemen whose job is to help with law enforcement. Identification of police uniforms as symbols commanding respect was sometimes challenged in America in the 1960’s, as sentiments were expressed against what was considered the dehumanized, impersonal nature of police authority within America’s mass society. This loss of respect for the uniform sometimes encouraged its abandonment, apparently in the hope that removal of the uniform would also remove hostility it might symbolically stimulate in encounters between police and the public. In 1969 Newsweek reported that a growing number of police forces were moving into civilian clothes in an effort to reduce a military image which had become unpopular and to encourage people to regard policemen as “friends” (Newsweek 1969).

Decorative emblems frequently accompany planned political activities. Pins, badges, armbands, and hats often declare political affiliation and support. American political conventions are usually made colorful by these kinds of identification. In protest marches against the war in Vietnam in 1969, black armbands identified those voicing their protest.

During the reign of Queen Anne in Britain in the early years of the eighteenth century, preferences for political parties could be indicated by beauty patches. Whig women patched the right cheek, the Tories the left, and those who were neutral, both cheeks. Out of either vanity or political fervor, one woman in 1771 stipulated
in her marriage contract that she be permitted to patch on the side she pleased no matter what her husband’s political stand was (Andres 1892:192).

The seriousness with which people may take the ideological symbolism of dress was probably never so clear as during the French Revolution, when fine dress and powdered hair identified the aristocracy placed them at the risk of being arrested by the revolutionaries (Davenport 1948:653). Trousers also were an important symbol of political differentiation: to be a sans-culotte was to be a revolutionary who wore tubular trousers; knee-breeches (culottes) belonged to the aristocracy.

Powdered hair lasted longer in England than in France but there, too, met political opposition. When a flour shortage hit England, anyone using hair powder was required to purchase a license at one guinea per year (Ashton 1885:60–61, 73). In angry opposition to the legislation, the Whigs in 1795 entreated men to abandon hair powder. Some organized the Crop Club, a group that cut off their hair and made a ceremony of combing out the powder.

A twentieth-century social movement with strong political intent is the women’s liberation movement that gained momentum toward the end of the 1960s. The members of this movement did not have physically restricting dress to protest against as did their nineteenth-century predecessors, but they followed in the spirit of their feminist forebear by protesting against the social restraints of their clothing. Rejection of cosmetics, elaborate hairstyles, foundation garments, and of the practice of removing body hair was a symbolic demand for freedom from customs that placed women in a position of dependency upon rather than equality with men.

Adornment as indicator of magico-religious condition

An individual’s approach to self-adornment may reflect affiliation with a religious sect or denomination. In addition, it may show position within a religious group and possibly indicate the intensity of a person’s religious participation. Some dress showing religious affiliation or position was once common, fashionable dress of laymen, but, as the dress of the laymen changed, the dress of the religious did not — perhaps as a symbolic reinforcement of belief in the everlasting value of the tenets of the religion to which they subscribed. Sometimes the dress used was formerly the clothes of the poor people, at other times the dress of the well-to-do. In either case, the antique appearance of forms of dress characteristic of an earlier time sets apart the religious individuals or groups who are wearing them so that they can readily be distinguished. The Roman Catholic church has retained examples of dress that typify the poor and the rich of bygone days — some of the vestments of the priests take their form from the everyday costume of well-to-do Romans. From the fourth century, while Roman dress changed steadily, church dress changed little if at all. The male monastic orders, however, adopted and kept the everyday dress of the poor people of the Middle Ages. For example, St. Benedict, in the sixth century, prescribed the scapular, which had been a farm-laborer’s apron, as the work garment of his monks (Davenport 1948:99; Norris 1947:172). The women’s orders, evolving later than the men’s, wore tunics or frocks similar to those worn by the male orders but with added draped head coverings similar to those of widows and married women of the Middle Ages.
The dress of the Roman Catholic clergy shows how clothing can indicate position and rank within a religious structure, with different dress prescribed for different clerical ranks such as priest, bishop, cardinal, and pope. Outstanding distinctions in clerical dress are the tiara of the pope and the scarlet costume of the cardinal. These items and others identify relative positions in a hierarchical system of prestige, responsibility, and power.

The dress of the Hasidic Jews is considered by them to be apparel once worn by all Jews (Poll 1962:65). Since most present-day Jews dress similarly to non-Jews, the costume worn by the Hasidim is an exclusive symbol of their sect. Hasidic men and women in America utilize systems of dress related to other American dress but with distinguishing differences. The dress of the Hasidic men indicates for them their degree of religious intensity. The greater the number of rituals and the more intensely these are observed, the greater the esteem accorded a person, and costume makes known to the individual and to others this degree of intensity. The less the fervor of a man’s religious observance, the more his appearance resembles that of a man in modern Western dress. The most religious class, the Rebbes, have the greatest quantity of Hasidic elaborations in dress. The Yiden class wear the fewest of the Hasidic symbols and are the least religious and also least ritualistic (Poll 1962:59–69).

The relation of adornment to the individual as a religious figure may differ. Adornment may protect the religious individual in his encounter with the supernatural; it may prepare him to act as celebrant of a religious rite; it may symbolize his leadership in acts of petition or meditation; and it may also be a means for his assuming the power of the supernatural, as he puts on the clothes of God.

**Adornment as a facility in social rituals**

In many rituals of social life, such as weddings, funerals, feasts, and dance, dressing up in garb with more fineness than that used in routine day-to-day existence is expected. Dress used for such events may range between the best dress one has to a very explicitly prescribed type of dress, Donning the dress generally marks “putting on a mood”: ritual cheerfulness and gaiety or ritual sadness and gloom may, for example, be required. In Western society the traditional black garb of the widow identifies her as the chief mourner. How well an individual can assume the required mood may determine how socially at ease the person will be in the ritual situation.

**Adornment as reinforcement of belief, custom, and values**

Adornment, or rejection of adornment, may serve as a means for symbolically tying a community together. Agreement on bodily adornment reinforces common consciousness and a common course of action that holds people together in a closely knit group. This unifying function of adornment is easier to identify in a small, homogeneous society than in heterogeneous mass society, because not all groups within the latter type of society have the same beliefs, attitudes, and values. In the small Amish community, for example, a very clear-cut symbolism can be observed
within their very restricted definition of finery (Hostetler 1963:131–148). Amish dress admits individuals into full participation with the society of the Amish and clarifies the part each plays. Hats thus distinguish the Amish from outsiders, but variations do exist in hats for young boys, bridegrooms, grandfathers, and for bishops. Their dress stands as an ever-present reminder of the Amish position in society and of the individual duties associated with Amish life.

The Hasidim are also aware that their religious dress may protect them from the disunifying effect of outside influences, as illustrated by the following remark of a Hasidic Jew:

With my appearance I cannot attend a theater or movie or any other place where a religious Jew is not supposed to go. Thus my beard and my sidelocks and my Hasidic clothing serve as a guard and a shield from sin and obscenity (Poll 1962:65).

Adornment as recreation

For people who have leisure time available as well as the opportunity for display, acquiring materials for personal adornment or adorning oneself may be recreational activities, that is, they may provide respite from regular routines, responsibilities, and work. As the recreational purpose is achieved, however, other functions may also be served. For instance, in societies where leisure is a scarce resource monopolized by a social elite, personal display that is recreational may become an indicator of social class.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries American society has generally allotted more discretionary control of time to women than to men; therefore, dressing as a recreational activity has been more characteristic of the former. For the same reason — available time — male and female adolescents in the twentieth century have used dress as a recreational outlet more often than older age groups. An aspect of the entertainment value of dress was also identifiable among the youth in the 1960s and early 1970s who used unique adornment to authenticate that they were "doing their own thing" — really joining in a popular search for identity.

Adornment as sexual symbol

Male and female have historically been differentiated by their dress. However, bodily adornment of the sexes has not only been used to distinguish one sex from the other but also for the purpose of sexual enticement. Obviously, emphasizing the genital area by special ornamentation or type of clothing focuses attention on that area. The codpiece, a decorated covering for the male genitals, is one example. The "pasties" over the nipples of a burlesque dancer is an example for females. Padding of men’s shoulders and women’s breasts and hips emphasizes differences in male and female body contours.

Dress used to entice members of the opposite sex may be considered within two settings: private and public. Private or intimate settings are best exemplified by
the bedroom or boudoir where undergarments, sleeping garments, or lack of garments, are used to lure one's spouse, lover, or momentary companion into sexual involvement. These liaisons may represent legal or illegal relationships between the sexes or between members of the same sex. Historically, adorning the body has been an integral symbol of sexual enticement. Public settings such as the street, restaurants, and theaters are places where dress can be a public announcement of sexual identity and an enticement to private settings. Prior to enticement, whether for heterosexual or homosexual involvement, sexual identification must occur. Dress and ornamentation may emphasize body characteristics and mannerisms that have been culturally defined as symbolic of sexual enticement. Emphasizing body characteristics beyond what the mode in dress prescribes has often provided the additional variable necessary for enticement. Thus, micro-miniskirts during the time of the miniskirt, the tightest sweaters during the era of the sweater girl, or the most sleekly fitting trousers for males, may publicly announce the availability of the wearers for sexual pursuits. Films have stereotyped the dress of the prostitute in Western society so that red high-heeled shoes and a matching handbag worn with tightly-fitting clothing and heavy makeup are common symbols.

In countries, ordinarily tropical, where a completely or partially nude body is the norm in public, the nude body with its obvious sexual distinguishing characteristics is seldom used for sexual enticement purposes, while ornament may. In special nude enclaves within clothed societies, such as in Europe and America, nudist-colony members claim the nude body is less enticing than the clothed body. Some analysts of behavior in these colonies explain the differences as essentially cultural. Interaction patterns are altered among the nudists so that more controls are placed on touching and looking at each other and on verbalization with sexual references than among nonnudists (Weinberg 1968:217–219).

Summary

Adornment is a communicative symbol that serves crucial functions within human lives. Individual satisfaction may be derived from pleasurable emotional experiences prompted by both display and observation of the adornment provided by dress, whether extensively or minimally developed. Adorning oneself supports the individual in his endeavors to speak as a unique individual and provides him a way of expressing, reinforcing, initiating, or camouflaging mood. At the same time that adornment offers a way for individual expression and for dealing with life aesthetically, it serves a number of useful functions within society. It can be used to indicate social roles, to establish social worth, as a symbol of economic status, as an emblem of political power or ideological inclination, as a reflection of magico-religious condition, as a facility in social rituals, and as a reinforcement of beliefs, custom, and values. Furthermore, adornment can be elaborated into a recreational activity and utilized in sexual enticement.
References


