

AESTHETICS OF DRESS

Marilyn DeLong

Bibliographical guide

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Aesthetics of dress contributes to quality of life and is therefore significant to study. In the broad sense, aesthetics is the reaction of pleasure and satisfaction derived from human sensations through experiences of sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste. When the study of aesthetics applies to apparel, the focus may be on just the product, or on the way the product interacts with other products on oneself or others wearing the product, or on the look created for a specific time and place. Aesthetics of dress is about how people choose to appear, and the way they want to look to themselves and others within a particular context.

Professional roles are important to consider in aesthetics, such as designing and producing products or creating consumption niches for the marketplace. In a professional role, designers need a market to succeed and merchandisers need consumers to buy what they stock and sell. But there is more to creating, selling, and buying than understanding the consumer perspective. The consumer must translate what is fashionable in general to what is meaningful in particular, and may have difficulty predicting product satisfaction and how this relates to purchase. By understanding the aesthetic response, one can better understand the critical relation of product to culture and to values of the individual and the group. Aesthetics is important to understand because if a product design does not please aesthetically, few will buy or wear that product.

Aesthetics involves understanding value. Great pleasure may be found in dressing oneself, in recognizing good design, or even asking the philosophical question, "What is beauty?" An individual who has a pleasurable experience may simply exclaim, "Wow!" without a conscious understanding of how and why such a peak aesthetic experience took place. Ideally, in aesthetics one would engage in examining the reasons for such peak experiences and how they relate to what is valued. To critique means to be aware of and provide reasons for one's experiences with dress. Engaging in discussions about aesthetic criteria means exploring the patterns and characteristics of dress that provide meaning. The outcome is appreciating the richness and complexity of aesthetics of dress.

Contributions to the Study of Aesthetics of Dress

A number of scholars have helped to develop the field of aesthetics of dress using a multidisciplinary approach. An early literature review was completed by dress scholars DeLong et al. (1974). Marilyn Horn (1975), also a dress scholar, approached the study of clothing as an

interdisciplinary topic. Later, DeLong and Ann Marie Fiore (1994), seeking to provide a better understanding of aesthetics of dress, edited a compilation of papers that included a variety of perspectives. Fiore, Patricia Kimle, and Josephine Moreno (1996) completed a comprehensive literature review that focused on the three categories of creator and creative process, the object, and the appreciator and appreciation process. Specific theory and applications of aesthetics of dress recommended for the reader interested in an overview include books written by dress scholars DeLong (1998) and Fiore (2010).

Historical Aesthetic Concepts: A historical review of aesthetics of dress reflects a changing perception. In the early twentieth century, recognizing and then practicing “good taste” was a goal of dedicated educators such as Harriet and Vetta Goldstein (1940), sisters and design teachers, who authored numerous editions of the textbook *Art in Everyday Life*. Dress and the decorative arts were the focus. Students were provided with examples of what was good in design and they were expected to learn through the examples provided. Design elements of color, texture, line, and shape, and principles such as balance, proportion, and harmony were learned and applied to clothing. In recognizing these elements and principles of design in clothing, an individual would then apply them to dress herself distinctively and in good taste.

Aesthetics is tied to the experiences and values of a society at any particular time. In the 1930s, for example, U.S. males identified primarily with their work and showed relatively little interest in aesthetics and fashion compared to females. Dress in the 1930s was heavily influenced by a new innovation—the talking motion pictures—and women were a primary target for star-endorsed products and publicity as analyzed by Sarah Berry (2000). Target markets overlapped among the apparel, cosmetics, and accessory industries and this overlap gave rise to cross-promotional efforts. Women were often encouraged to purchase an entire ensemble to create a look of instant harmony—all the way from clothing and accessories to cosmetic colors for eyes, cheeks, and lips.

Fashion guides of the 1930s emphasized the importance of choosing the right clothes based on the wearer’s personality. Dressing with a certain consistency was frequently tied to identifying one’s personality type. The “fashion type” was a means of stylizing through clothing selections and was used as a successful marketing tool. F. W. McFarland, dress author, writes in *Good Taste in Dress* (1936) that analyzing one’s own personality to discover a “style” was at first an unfamiliar concept. Fundamental classifications of women or “types” were linked to well-known Hollywood stars of the period. For example, the “athletic” type was associated with the personality of Ginger Rogers, the “ingenue” with Janet Gaynor, and the “romantic” type with Norma Shearer. The dress historian James Laver (1973) commented that the movies had become an engine for imposing certain types of beauty. The spread of type-consciousness among the moviegoing public was a result of the power of film. This idea of dressing according to “fashion type” lasted long after the 1930s and the idea was still prevalent in the 1970s in U.S. textbooks such as the one written by Harriet McJimsey (1974).

In the 1970s and 1980s, design and individuality in dressing became a focus as Marian Davis (1980) argued. One’s personal style was often associated with achieving a distinctive and consistent look—especially in a culture where value was placed on individuality. Advice columnists cautioned readers to cultivate their individual style. In the preface of *Individuality in Clothing Selection and Personal Appearance*, textile and clothing professors Mary Kefgen and Phyllis Touchie-Specht (1986) state that the art of dressing is about being able to produce a desired effect and the design principle that sums up this goal is unity. To achieve unity they believe that an individual must know herself, the expectations of others, and what is appropriate for one’s age and body conformation, as well as for the time, place, and event. Other writers, such as Marilyn Horn, also suggest that selecting the right clothing to express oneself is highly important.

In the 1980s, the idea of “dressing for success” and according to one’s color palette arose as a result of men and women wanting to dress to be attractive and present their most professional image. *Dress for Success* author John Molloy (1988) wrote about how to present oneself in the most professional manner with a business wardrobe. Color consultant Carole Jackson (1981) wrote about how to dress using one’s own special colors. Both concepts became well known and were followed by both men and women. In the late 1980s, “style” became a key phrase and a goal for the consumption of goods in contemporary culture. Style is defined by Stuart Ewen (1988), author and cultural historian, as the general sensibility that touches on countless

arenas, including clothing, and helps to make assumptions in a given society about how things are aesthetically expressed and received.

Contemporary Aesthetic Concepts: A new age of aesthetics will occur when fine design can be recognized and found in abundance everywhere, according to Virginia Postrel (2003), cultural critic. What is of aesthetic worth and authentic is an important focus of Postrel's writing. Authenticity is the desire of the consumer to have information that confirms the product, such as the story behind it, the way and where it was designed and manufactured, and other such documentation that provides the consumer with meaning about the product.

Today, aesthetics involves recognizing the continually evolving nature of fashion. Clothing is mass-produced and plentiful—often designed in one country, manufactured in several others, and marketed worldwide. What one wears and how one chooses to appear is ever changing—today wearing this ensemble with this scarf or tie to set it off; tomorrow wearing the ensemble minus the scarf or tie but with the addition of a hat, based upon current mood and activities. Knowing how one appears in various ensembles—that is, appearing consistently or experimenting with a variety of appearances—continues to provide an interesting window on personality. Ted Polhemus (1994), an anthropologist, pointed out the congregating force of style tribes and street styles. Cunningham, whose visual display of street style is regularly featured in the Sunday New York Times, illustrates the ephemeral nature of the contemporary aesthetic and how dressing for the street has become a concept to watch. However, street watching does not satisfy the philosopher who wants to discuss the enduring beauty of dress. But it does recognize the significance of aesthetics in everyday life as well as its evolving nature. It also recognizes the active role of the individual in creating a personal style. Perhaps the Goldsteins' idea of art in everyday life and their teaching has come full circle: to live with good design all around us to appreciate every day.

Contributions to Aesthetics from Related Areas: Many writers contributing to the field of aesthetics have done so on general topics of dress. For example, Terri Agins (1999), a journalist, wrote about the evolving nature of the fashion system; Ingrid Loschek (2009) wrote on fashion and innovation systems; Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas (2012) edited a book on art and fashion relationships; Christopher Breward and Caroline Evans (2005), and Elizabeth Wilson (1985), fashion scholars, wrote on dress and modernity; Alexandra Warwick and Dani Cavallaro (2001) and Joanne Entwistle and E. Wilson (2001) wrote on the body, its boundaries and dressing; Entwistle (2009) also authored a book on the aesthetic economy of fashion; Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins, Joanne Eicher, and Kim K. P. Johnson (1995) wrote on culture, identity, and dress; Mary Lynn Damhorst, Kimberly Miller-Spillman, and Susan Michelman (2005) on the meanings of dress; Phyllis Tortora and Keith Eubank (2010), and Anne Hollander (1978), art historian, on interpreting dress history; Sandy Black (2008), Kate Fletcher (2008), Janet Hethorn and Connie Ulasewicz (2008) wrote about apparel sustainability. Many authors who have contributed to the theory and language of art and design have written valuable accounts that contribute to aesthetics but are outside the field of dress.

Aesthetic Experience

Aesthetic Perspectives as Focus: Aesthetics is considered to be a field of study open for discussion and debate. Aesthetics can be approached from different perspectives and a framework for considering these various perspectives is helpful in understanding the aesthetic experience. For example, one's individual experience and response is one perspective and this includes the experiences of dressing oneself for individual satisfaction. The collective response was noted by Herbert Blumer (1969), a sociologist, in his classic research on the collective selection process of professionals recognizing what is going to be fashionable for a given time and culture. Finally, a universal perspective comes when many people across cultures and time agree upon the ultimate aesthetic experience. As fashion becomes more global, there may be a push toward understanding a universal aesthetic response when the market is defined as worldwide. In the study of aesthetics many writers consider it important to distance oneself from the object under consideration and focus upon the various perspectives from that vantage point. Sorting out and reflecting upon what is individual, collective, and universal in our response is needed to understand aesthetics, as well as to recognize the importance of interrelationships in aesthetic response.

Aesthetic Response: DeLong declares that an aesthetic response is involvement in looking and resulting experiences, such as what one likes and selects as an expression of preference (DeLong 1998). Understanding one's aesthetic response comes through awareness of the form, the viewer or wearer, and the physical and cultural contexts, and the interactions that take place among them.

Form: The form of dress is a distinctive arrangement of colors, textures, lines, and shapes that are created by the interaction of the body with all that is done to manipulate or modify the body (DeLong 1998). Attending to the form means not only attending to the details of surface but also to the lines created, such as the silhouette and the shapes of buttons, or cut of sleeves and collars. The character of these details and how they are combined and arranged is what provides definition and distinctiveness to the form. Information can be concrete, such as what is perceived as present in a definite and physical way, as well as abstract, that is, what provides meaning, such as the iconic nature of the form, or the recognition of its symbolic relation to a culture.

Analysis of the unit needs to be focused on the interactions created by the dress components: apparel with the body and the entirety of the unit. This means recognizing not only details of surfaces (such as color and texture) and perceptible lines and shapes (such as sleeves, silhouettes), but also relations of part to whole—that is to say surface details of color and texture to silhouette. The entire unit of analysis needs attention, with all of the information received from the look or image created from the interaction of the body of the wearer, and this includes body proportions, hair shape and texture, skin color and texture: that is, all the physical aspects that are present, or are manipulations or modifications of the body, and the materials arranged upon the body.

For the best understanding of the aesthetic outcome, the entire body from head to toe is recommended as the unit of analysis, including everything placed upon it—such as hats and hosiery, or inserted—such as earrings into pierced ears, or the sound made when the body is moving—such as the rustle of a taffeta skirt. But often perception involves only parts and details, especially when parts are discrete and elaborate, such as shoes or a hat. One can get caught up in the treatment of the feet and talk about shoes, heel height, color, and textural details and learn something from the discourse, but unless consideration of how this treatment of the feet affects the whole unit of analysis, something is missing in our understanding of aesthetics.

Various meanings can result from viewing the form of dress. There are several ways that meaning occurs: through expression from the form itself, for example an expression of femininity may arise from certain colors, textures, lines, and shapes, such as light values and muted hues, curvilinear lines, or small shapes and smooth textures that define the body in a soft and lingering way. Another type of meaning arises from the affect upon the viewer as a result of viewing the form. Viewers may associate emotions with the form, such as nostalgia for the past. For example, a mature viewer may experience a look that reminds him of what he wore as a teenager.

Viewer: The viewer may be the observer of the form or the wearer dressed in an ensemble and looking in the mirror. Each viewer brings with him or her individual traits such as gender, age, personal aptitudes and skills, knowledge and experience, likes and dislikes. These individual traits affect one's response (DeLong 1998). Preference is the favoring of one thing over another, such as a favorite color being blue or favoring curvilinear lines or geometric ones. Preferences may be approached from an individual, collective, or universal response to dress, especially when the viewer is experienced aesthetically.

Viewer expectations are important to aesthetic response; for example, different combinations of lines, shapes, colors, and textures may be preferred in the summer and winter seasons. One may also have a personal set of guidelines that express values, such as interest in how one looks and acts, or how one expresses a modest or flamboyant nature. Though certain expectations may have developed over time and become familiar, what is new is also an attraction. The viewer is confronted with expectations of both the familiar and the new in forming his or her aesthetic response, and the viewer brings those patterns formed from past experience to his or her present aesthetic response.

Past experience influences the present and this moment in time and the evolving nature of the mind's eye is what is called a "schema." Perceived patterns form a schema by which what is seen is evaluated, and these patterns become a part of the expectations brought to one's next experience. For example, a schema for fashion currency becomes an evaluative criterion as indicated by DeLong, Minshall, and Larntz (1986). One can be trained to look for the just right combination of the familiar and new in collective selection.

Context: Context is the physical space that immediately surrounds the form as well as the cultural milieu. Lighting of the immediate space, the colors and textures that exist around the form—all affect aesthetic response. Context includes the time, place, and current and past values and ideals held by the viewer's society (DeLong 1998). The use of white is an example of how color and context can affect aesthetic response. Commonly worn in the U.S. and U.K. for weddings, white is expected as a form of dress for the first bridal experience. Contrarily, white in Korea is commonly worn for funerals and is only being adopted for weddings oriented to cross-cultural expressions of dress.

Context is important in the study of aesthetics, and fashion is a term that is often applied to dress within a particular time context. Fashion is defined as those patterns of dress or the look accepted by a society at a given time and usually implies an expression of currency and being up to date in the way the forms of dress are presented on the body. Fashion also implies product innovations that may relate current technology, cultural events, or designer creativity to the products of dress. Appearing up to date or fashionable is an evaluative criterion of aesthetics, but other terms such as "style" and "authenticity" may become evaluative as they relate to dress.

Fashion is understood as important in the context of aesthetic response. Fashion is the look identified as what is current at the time. It is the image that is recognized as having currency by individuals living at a certain time and location. Fashion defined as an innovative or new look must constantly evolve and change with time and with cultural values. However, it is important to understand fashion and the tension resulting from our wanting some measure of the familiar and the new in the introduction of any fashion. James Laver (1973), the art historian and museum curator, suggests that with time, response to what the eye sees changes. Thus, a look that has immediately passed in fashion is perceived as ugly but years later may be perceived as attractive and pleasurable once again.

Style in aesthetics was defined by Paul Nystrom (1928), a former marketing specialist, as the characteristic manner of expression. Style as currently used in relation to aesthetics of dress may be considered in a variety of ways—"This person has style," meaning that the individual consistently looks and acts in a distinctive or characteristic manner. Or "The style of this ensemble is defined by the 1940s," giving reference to a group of characteristic attributes of the 1940s. Or "The style of the designer portrays a soft and feminine look." In the first instance, style is used primarily as an expletive but also implies a reference to expressive characteristics, and in the others as a defining factor that identifies one pattern of shapes and surfaces based upon ways found to categorize what is viewed. For best results, the term "style" should be recognized in all of its various uses with regard to aesthetics.

Reference to a classic form has a variety of meanings. First, a classic is a recognizable pattern or image that may be reintroduced from time to time with minor variations. Second, using the term, "classic" may refer to a garment that creates an optimal relation of the ensemble of dress with the body. For example, "classic" is a term used for the trench coat. The layout of the trench coat is memorable visually—for example, a large, shaped collar and a smooth, khaki-colored surface. The trench coat has a front opening and is belted, often with a double row of buttons. The trench coat flatters many types of body conformations for both men and women and has been worn throughout much of the twentieth century. Then, too, the term "classic" is often used for basics that serve well in terms of versatility in assembling. For example, the "little black dress" is basic to the twentieth century because of its enduring qualities and flexible nature. Contrary to the trench coat, the surface attracts attention because of its immediacy in viewing and emphasis on the two-dimensional silhouette of the body. This attention to silhouette is flattering for many body types.

Approaches to Studying Aesthetics

Measuring Aesthetic Response: Aesthetics sits between science and art as a discipline and writers such as Thomas Munro (1956) have rationalized the topic by treating aesthetics as a science. Quantifying aesthetic response is one approach to understanding the nuances of aesthetics. For example researchers Charles Osgood, George Suci, and Percy Tannenbaum (1965) describe how to measure meaning using carefully selected words placed at the end of a continuum so that a person responds to a given object by noting his/her position on the continuum, for instance masculine–feminine. This continuum has been used successfully in measuring aesthetic response.

Qualitative methods in studying aesthetics help us to understand the complexity of the topic and one's subjective viewpoint is also recognized as of value, especially when the result is from the perspective of an educated or expert viewer. Dress scholars Nancy Rexford, Patricia Cunningham, Roberta Kaufman, and Patricia Trautman (1998) and Aileen Ribeiro (1998) outline several expert viewer approaches to the study of dress history, for example. The material culture approach has been developed into a system of critical analysis that involves focusing on the product or artifact, interpreting and then evaluating the result, by DeLong as well as the anthropologist Daniel Miller (2009) and dress historian Lou Taylor (2002). Julia Gaimster (2011), an eLearning teacher, provides a means to analyze and interpret visual information essential in fashion.

Need for systematic critique: Much of understanding of aesthetics comes from the ability to engage in critique. But what makes a good aesthetic critique involves the ability to recognize the subjective nature of our response and then to justify it through reasoning. This is quite different than the rush to judgment that often occurs when one becomes satisfied with "I like it" as the sufficient response. An expert viewer may have learned to make a quick judgment but then moves on to thoughtful critique. Learning how to do a thoughtful and well-developed critique brings one closer to understanding the complexity of aesthetics. There is a continual need for recognition and acceptance of the educated eye and the expert viewer.

Analysis and critique requires in-depth and systematic examination. Analysis of any artifact of material culture starts with "form" as object and moves to relational and more subjective aspects of viewer and contextual perspectives. DeLong's (1998) Expert Viewer's Framework contains four steps:

1. Observation: attending to and describing what is seen.
2. Differentiation: the viewer considers the relations in what is seen.
3. Interpretation: the question, "What summarizes the form?" is asked.
4. Evaluation: the value of what is seen is assessed.

Emphasis is placed on holding evaluation until the conclusion of analysis. This approach is the beginning of an understanding of the nature and depth of critique.

Subjectivity when engaged in viewing an image considered of value is important; this would include one's instantaneous reaction and then rush to judgment—liking or hating it. Then one may decide through reasoning to agree or disagree—or agree to disagree with what others may think and feel; however, then one must make a judgment and engage in critique: an open dialogue about the image, and realization that the perspective of the individual engaged in critique is the beginning of understanding the collective and universal in aesthetics.

Aesthetics and Current Topics: Many current topics related to dress will be enhanced with our understanding of aesthetics. Regarding current practice, authors like Black, Fletcher, Hethorn, and Ulasewicz argue for better environmental practices, or designing with the goal of furthering the health and well-being of the citizens of the world. But if the product is not pleasing to the eye, such approaches are limited. To promote sustainability in our environment and a better understanding of our human interactions with clothing, one needs to understand the nature of aesthetic response. For this we need to continually ask such a question about aesthetic response from a universal perspective: how can I develop an educated eye and thereby learn to act as a citizen of the world?

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