

Heritage Collections in Support of a Narrative Dressing the Body: Silhouettes and Fashion 1550-2015

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Abstract:

Dressing the Body. Silhouettes and Fashion 1550-2015 is one of four permanent exhibitions on display at the Barcelona Design Museum. It uses the museum's heritage costume collection to support a narrative, the ultimate goals being to increase awareness of a current social concern – the human body – and to provide tools for reflection. Fashion, clothing and the body are the three threads that run through the thesis of the exhibition. In a society in which personal image and fashion are aspects of mass culture, the display seeks to show how clothing has modified the body during various periods of history, with changes that are arbitrary since they depend on the canons of fashion that prevail in each era.

We in the museum have taken a museographical approach to the contemporary debate about the body, a powerful presence in the media, in artists' work and in academic studies – by doctors, anthropologists and philosophers – but less so in museums. This exhibition builds a narrative that has a pedagogical purpose in order to make its thesis understandable with a museography that reinforces the narrative.

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Thesis

This exhibition looks at the way we present ourselves visually in society by covering our body in accordance with accepted canons of beauty and altering our natural form in a deliberate manner. For example, we might choose to make ourselves look taller by wearing high heels or a hat, to create a sense of volume at the back or sides of our body, reduce the size of our chest or decorate our skin.

The obsession with attaining perfect beauty is so powerful that it has led to the invention of exaggerated and artificial means to alter body shapes that have even changed people's lives. In Western society five hundred years ago, women wore corsets so tight that their internal organs were forcibly displaced from their natural positions. In our own time, clothing is not the only factor capable of altering the shape of the body, as its appearance can also be modified by plastic surgery or by dieting or exercising to extremes.

Talking about and modifying the body is currently in vogue, and fashion is a fundamental aspect of post-industrial society. Changes in appearance and clothing are artificial and ongoing and are occurring at an ever increasing pace.

The Body

According to Elizabeth Wilson (1985), the body is a cultural artifact with unclear boundaries, making it sometimes difficult to distinguish between the decoration of the body and the clothing that covers it. Bodily adornment is an expression of the methods and aesthetics that modify our appearance. It includes hairstyles, make-up, tattoos and other alterations to the body. Clothing is chief among these forms of bodily decoration.

The concept of the body has been discussed at length in academic circles, but the subject of the body in relation to clothing and fashion was ignored until Joanne Entwistle's and Wilson's first publications, notably *The Fashioned Body* (2000), written by Entwistle, and *Body Dressing* (2001), a collaborative publication by both authors. In the realm of museums, our project takes a threefold approach – the use of real period objects in a permanent exhibition in a design museum – in order to make the concept readily understandable by the general public, in particular those groups potentially affected by illnesses related to a distorted body image, such as teenagers, who are at risk of suffering from anorexia and bulimia. *Dressing the Body* offers an opportunity to observe with a critical eye how the external appearance of the human form has been manipulated. It helps visitors to understand the absurdity of being a slave to one's own body and fashion. This reflection is especially important in a society like today's, in which our image is a central aspect of our sense of identity and social communication.

Far from being a mere product of nature, the body is, then, a social and cultural construct and hence artificial. Even a naked body is a social and cultural indicator, just as a body dressed in a uniform is. Small details like hairstyles and the way we care for our hands differentiate us from one another. The body becomes an artifact we construct over the course of our lives using the legacy we inherit from our family and social environment and our own experiences. Consequently, the body is neither neutral nor isolated from society. Every era has viewed it through the filters of the economy, moral standards and tastes of the time, turning it into a cultural object, a blend of style, posture, behaviour, identity and apparel. The body, the support for the clothing that imbues it with meaning, is the very first habitat we occupy.

Clothing

One of the purposes of clothing is to convey information about people and their social class, their age, gender and aesthetic tastes. Garments are also a means of nonverbal communication for expressing individual and social messages, such as aggressiveness (to instil fear in an adversary), submission, transgression, seduction or power. Clothing is universal and a basic fact of social life in every culture. According to Bernard Rudofsky (1947), even though it is believed that the main function of clothing is to provide protection from the cold and to cover the body, especially its sexual parts, in fact it does quite the opposite, since it draws attention to the breasts, genitals, buttocks, legs and arms. The most evident role of clothing is aesthetic, and this is driven by fashion. The garment, as an object, makes it possible for fashion to be both viewed and displayed.

The Dressed Body

The body and its clothing complement each other: clothes are clearly not self-supporting and so require a body to bear them and, equally, the body needs to be covered by clothing. The dressed body could be regarded as a dynamic partnership, a dialogue between the body, clothing and the moral, social and aesthetic codes of an epoch or culture. Clothing connects the physical body and the social body, making them visible or concealing them. The dressed body is a means of communication, both personal (physical and psychological traits) and social, and can also signal the individual's religious or moral beliefs.

In Western society, the dressed body is and has been the major force in terms of appearance. It is also one of the chief social and cultural concerns of our time: the body, the image we present to others and the modifications we have made to it are all intended to produce a particular look.

Fashion

Fashion is a collective concept or belief manifested in items of clothing. In Western society, the clothed body is governed by fashion, an institutionalized system that changes periodically in an arbitrary manner, as evidenced in the styles of each time and place. Fashion dictates the ornamentation of the human body and enhances the individual personality, to which an impersonal characteristic – (collective) style – is added. Fashion expresses personal tastes (each individual's preferences) despite the fact that it is produced on a massive scale in accordance with changing styles. Everyone is directly or indirectly influenced by fashion, even so-called anti-fashion, which the system copies and incorporates into new trends. Today very little clothing is produced or purchased outside the fashion system. Fashion is not the item of clothing (object) that is seen but a series of invisible elements that give it intrinsic added value. Clothing is what a person wears: it is the translation of fashion into everyday practice.

The Exhibition

This exhibition looks back at the history of fashion over the last five hundred years. To explain how clothing modifies the body, we take as our starting point the evolution in the forms of fashion, which we illustrate by means of items of apparel as well as visual documents: paintings, prints, photographs and films.

However, this account of the history of fashion is not just chronological but also thematic. To arrive at this history of forms, we chart the taste for the new, the imitation of the style of other people in the same social class or another, the rejection of earlier forms or the previous generation, and the copying or development of the forms of earlier eras but not those of the immediately preceding period.

The exhibition proposes a reading or narrative illustrated by the museum's costume collection and based on the premise that the body is the support for clothing, and that this second skin generates artificial silhouettes and volumes that vary in accordance with the changing canons of fashion. The display deals with the dialogue between human anatomy and the resulting form. This relationship between clothing and the body, centred on fashion in Western society, is presented in a broad chronological context that extends from the sixteenth century to the present day, with genuine items of clothing that have been worn and that were part of the wardrobe of real people, some of whom have been identified by name.

This script forms a narrative: it is a reading of the collection seen in the light of a particular concept, as reflected in each of the ten display cases that illustrate ten periods in history.

Three Silhouettes

Throughout history, clothes have artificially modified the shape of the body in order to create silhouettes and volumes. The silhouette, the visible outline of a clothed body, reveals the overall shape of the body and establishes its boundaries in relation to other bodies and other spaces – occupied or otherwise – as well as its own form and gestuality, while determining its interior and exterior space. In doing this, it is governed by fashion, with all the biological, moral and social implications that this entails.

Three different types of silhouettes have recurred, with variations, over the centuries: the rectilinear silhouette, with clothes in the form of a straight tube; the geometrical silhouette, with the basic triangular, rectangular and round forms; and the anatomical silhouette, which respects the shape of the human body.

Five Actions

The fashion of each period is made tangible and visible by the priority accorded to the actions that clothing carries out on the body to make it resemble the silhouette and volume dictated by the standards of beauty of that era.

The exhibition shows how clothes modify the look of the body as a result of actions that tend to restrain it or free it in an alternating cycle repeated over the centuries. With regard to the changes in the morphology of the body, the history of clothing can be divided into a number of major periods. In the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, the body was constricted, whereas the time around the French Revolution was an era of liberation for the body. In the nineteenth century and up to the First World War, the body was once again compressed, followed by a period of greater freedom in the 1920s and 1930s. Between the 1930s and the 1950s, there was another era in which the body was restrained. The social rupture of the 1960s liberated the body once again, a period that continues through to the present day. This never-ending cycle of change contains the very essence of fashion and its arbitrary nature: it is answerable to nothing but itself in a particular social context.

There are five actions carried out by clothing on the body that we regard as being particularly important. These are increasing, reducing, elongating, profiling and revealing.



Fig. 1:
Action of increasing. Court gown, France, ca. 1760, printed cotton taffeta, MTIB 88015, donated by Manuel Rocamora. © La Fotogràfica.

The action of increasing (fig. 1) entails adding volume to various parts of the body, for example the arms, shoulders and hips. Farthingales, petticoats, crinolines and bustles are all undergarments that enlarge the figure.

In contrast, the action of reducing (fig. 2) involves making the natural forms of the body physically smaller, in particular the chest and waist, with no regard for discomfort or the compression of vital organs. In essence, the torso is constricted by means of devices such as corsets, bodices, bras and belts.

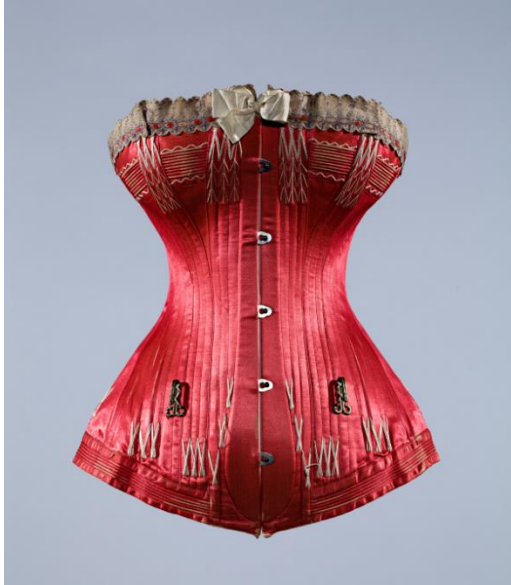


Fig. 2:
Action of reducing. Corset, Spain, ca. 1890, cotton ticking, MTIB 4226/14, donated by Janina Santacana.
© La Fotogràfica.

The action of elongating (fig. 3) consists in seeking to lengthen the silhouette to make the person seem taller and more stylized, an effect most commonly achieved by means of high-heel and platform shoes, hats and dresses with long trains.



Fig. 3:
Action of elongating. Wedding dress by Caroline Montagne, Barcelona, 1905-07, silk crepe and gauze, MTIB 88114, donated by Manuel Rocamora. © La Fotogràfica.

Profiling means clinging to the forms of the body without modifying them (fig. 4). Examples of items of clothing that do this include tights, gloves, body stockings and T-shirts.



Fig. 4:
Action of profiling. *Delphos* tunic dress by Mariano Fortuny, Venice, 1909, silk pleated taffeta and Murano glass beads, MTIB 3225/07. © La Fotogràfica.



Fig. 5:
Action of revealing. Short jump suit, Paco Rabanne, Paris, 1966, Plastic, rings of steel and aluminium, MTIB 109628, donated by Paco Rabanne. © La Fotogràfica.

Lastly, revealing involves exposing parts of the body (which vary from one period to another) or suggesting the figure by using see-through fabrics (fig. 5). Mini dresses and skirts, shorts, sleeveless T-shirts and crop tops all reveal the skin, something that is currently in vogue among people decorated with body piercings and tattoos, which define their personality.

Three Tools

The seamstress, tailor, creator and the fashion designer use three means associated with their craft to carry out these five actions. The first of these is their chosen fabric: a flexible material, such as knitted silk, adapts to the shape of the human anatomy, whereas a stiff fabric, such as velvet or faille, isolates the item of clothing from the body. Then there are the cutting and tailoring techniques they use. The way the fabric is arranged on the body is important: cutting it on the grainline or the bias affects the way it hangs; and the points that support it (shoulders, waist or hips) will determine whether the item of clothing billows or clings. The pattern employed plays a part, as the use of darts will make the garment close-fitting, whereas pleats, gathers and layers of fabric will increase the volume of its silhouette. Additions such as trimmings and lace will also affect the final look.



Fig. 6:
Interior structures give volume to the body or compress it. Corset, Spain, 1850-60, cotton cannelé, MTIB 4139/13.
Crinoline, Catalonia, 1860-62, cotton tape and braid, metal sheet, MTIB 4140/13, donated by Manuel Rocamora.
© La Fotográfica.

Lastly, special mention must be made of the structures concealed inside the item of clothing that help to give the body the desired form, shaping it by compressing it or expanding it (fig. 6). The garment plays an active part in the modification of the body's natural form, but it in turn depends on these inner elements, the main components for taking the silhouette and volume to extremes. The principal internal structures that make the garment more close-

fitting or voluminous, thereby constructing new forms of the clothed body, are the corset, the farthingale, the bustle and the bra. Corsets make the body smaller than it really is, whereas the farthingale and bustle distance the garment from the body. Bras may compress the breasts to make them smaller, leave them in their natural form or make them larger.

Museography

Dressing the Body uses the techniques of museography to introduce the thesis behind the exhibition and is based on the principle that the presentation is as important as the content. As a result, the complex narrative unfolds in the museum space in such a way that the visitor can perceive it visually and intellectually. Every chosen element adds meaning to this narrative, with the chief protagonists being the items from the collection. The sum of all the parts combined with the museographical techniques employed makes the concept understandable and draws visitors in, ensuring that they grasp the proposed thesis almost without realising it.

The museography thus makes an intangible concept tangible and is a multidisciplinary endeavour that brings together everyone involved in the exhibition's curation, space design (including display cases and other supporting elements), lighting design, graphic design, audio-visual presentations, mannequin adaptation and garment conservation.

Dressing the Body can be read on various levels, making it suitable for the general public and experts alike. Firstly, there is the proposed concept: the fact that clothing has modified the body's natural silhouette throughout history. However, it also incorporates other secondary themes, such as the history of fashion, the fabrics used to make clothing, changes in fabric manufacturing methods, the social history of the Western world, including ruling circles, etc.

Characteristics of the Exhibition

The exhibition occupies six hundred and fifty-seven square metres on the third floor of the museum. The space was designed by Julia Schultz-Dornburg. The various sections of the display are distributed around the open-plan space, with the central area of the floor given over to two main blocks, one covering the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, and the other the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. These two main blocks, one historical and the other contemporary, contain a total of ten ambits that follow a chronological order, separated by an annex with a different museographical approach that presents the interior structures of garments.

Exhibits

One hundred and seventy-three items – one hundred and eleven garments and sixty-two interior structures – in the museum's holdings have been selected for display. They come from the Design Museum's collections and cover a timespan that extends from the sixteenth century to the present day. The main exhibits are men's suits and women's dresses, which are to be found throughout the history of fashion. The items were carefully chosen with a view to showing all the materials and techniques used over the centuries, but above all to ensure that the display features all the silhouettes typical of each era and the maximum possible number of particular designs, all the while bearing in mind the exhibition concept and clothing's five actions on the body.

The selection also takes into account the wish to make certain that the maximum number of designers in the museum's collection appear, so long as their designs are in keeping with the proposed concept. The fashion collection of the Barcelona Design Museum is international, covering Western Europe, and focuses on Spanish designers from the twentieth century on-

wards, with a special emphasis on designers from the city of Barcelona. In addition to the period garments, designed and made by unknown hands, the exhibition contains items by a total of fifty known designers, some from the nineteenth century but mostly from the twentieth century through to the present day.

Itinerary

Textual and visual material is presented on the walls on one side, facing the display cases (fig. 7). The content is explained in short texts that include, in addition to the general introduction and conclusion, a brief presentation for each section, giving the visitor background information concerning the era in question and the particular actions that can be found in it, illustrated by period images that show the concepts described and the ideal of beauty that then prevailed. The exhibition's graphic design is the work of Pere Canals.



Fig. 7:
A conceptual itinerary faces the authentic costumes in the exhibition *Dressing the Body, Silhouettes and Fashion, 1550-2015*. © La Fotogràfica.

The display cases contain real garments and no text other than the title and the dates of the section, linking with the textual and graphic information. The exhibits also show the concept concerning the silhouettes and volumes in each period.

The focus is on the central concept of the exhibition, which is the way clothing has modified the silhouette over the course of history, but the itinerary also takes visitors through the history of fashion. The technique of patternmaking also became systematized at this time, with the advent of the first known method.

The exhibition is, then, structured into the ten periods mentioned – each of which lasts for a different timespan, though they are all in keeping with the concept of the display – which show the cyclical character of the modification or respect for natural form of the human body. The first of these exhibition sections, ‘1550-1789. The Gentleman and the Courtier. Clothes constrict the body’, covers a period of more than two centuries and features garments worn by the aristocracy, then the main consumers of fashion, which was initially dictated largely by the Spanish court and later by the French court. The natural lines of the body were modified during this era by corsets and by farthingales and hooped skirts. The fashions changed considerably with the outbreak of the French Revolution. ‘1789-1825. Dress and Revolution. The

body set free' shows the tunic garments inspired by Greek statues and worn without a corset on Napoleon's orders, allowing the body to move and reveal its natural form. This freedom was short-lived, however. Over the course of the nineteenth century, when the main consumer of fashion was no longer the courts of Europe but the rising industrial bourgeoisie, which gradually acquired financial power, dress changed once again. Women's bodies were subjected to extreme treatment, as their torsos were compressed by corsets, giving them ever narrower waistlines, while hips and behinds were made more voluminous by crinolines and bustles. These modifications of the body are displayed in various sections, among them '1825-1845. Ethereal Ladies. The dress inflates the body', which features clothing from the Romantic era, with rounded skirts and inflated sleeves; '1845-1868. The Well-dressed Bourgeoisie. Exaggerating volumes', in which the crinoline takes centre stage, with skirts that are more voluminous than any that had gone before, and in which, for the first time in history, we find the fashion designer who imposes his own ideas on his clients; '1868-1888. The Age of the Bustle. What matters is at the back', featuring fashions that changed ever more rapidly, forcing people to purchase ever more garments; and '1888-1910. S-shaped Belles. Clothes deform the body', in which women's clothing is another demonstration of the applied arts during the time of Art Nouveau. This review of the nineteenth century reveals how men were not subject to the same dictates of fashion but instead wore discreet, rational clothing that bears no relation to the voluminous, embellished gowns worn by women.

A new break in the history of fashion occurred in the opening decades of the twentieth century, as seen in '1910-1930. Clothes Reveal the Body. Corsets off!' In the period leading up to the First World War, when women joined the labour market in large numbers, replacing the men who had gone off to fight, clothing became more comfortable, women left off wearing corsets and hemlines began gradually to rise, revealing women's legs for the first time. Dress waistlines also changed, dropping from below the breasts to the hips. During the twentieth century, fashion was led by the great designers, who set the trends and whose designs were bought by the middle and upper classes. '1930-1960. Haute Couture. The artificial silhouette' covers a conservative period that sought to return to earlier times, with dresses that once again emphasized the silhouette with a narrow waist and wide hips. In the 1960s, however, there was a new climate of freedom in the air. Young people did not wish to resemble their parents and asserted their independence. Designers and the industry quickly adapted to the new times and fashion was democratized, becoming available to everyone. '1960-1990. Prêt-à-porter. The body on show' features a wide diversity of silhouettes in comfortable clothing for men, women and unisex. Women at last began to wear trousers, as well as mini, midi and maxi skirts. '1990-2015. Designers versus Globalization. Clothes outline, wrap or reveal the body' shows how all silhouettes are now admissible, with large volumes coexisting alongside more minimalist designs by Japanese designers. The media have grown increasingly powerful since the twentieth century. Firstly magazines, then television and more recently the internet have between them created a need for constant consumption.

Characters

Each display case covers an era with a particular silhouette and a concept regarding the modification of the human body or respect for its natural form. In order to make this concept understandable, a pattern, repeated throughout the exhibition, is established at the beginning of every display case. We call this recurring thematic thread "the characters" (fig. 8).

First character: anatomical modification

A museographical device consisting of an articulated mannequin made of resin that shows which parts of the body are modified and draws visitors' attention to the way this is achieved in each period.

Second character. the prosthesis

A mannequin made of card that supports the interior structure used to achieve the alteration mentioned above.



Fig. 8:
Four characters in the '1845-1868. The Well-dressed Bourgeoisie. Exaggerating volumes' display case. © La Fotogràfica.

Third character: the key outfit

The clothing that best represents the silhouette of the period and its relationship with the body that wore it.

Fourth character: the complete image

A period illustration showing a person dressed in the clothing of the era, including their hair-style, accessories and some background context. These images are paintings for the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries; photographs for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, reproduced using a system of lenses that imbues the image with a degree of movement; and videos for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Fifth character: the reference

A gold-coloured mannequin is dressed in twenty-first century clothing that in its form calls to mind the silhouette of the period in question, giving visitors insights into the historical garments from a modern viewpoint by making them more relevant to modern times and more understandable.

The rest of each display case is given over to different designs from the period concerned.

Display Cases

The clothes are arranged in large display cases that resemble rooms (fig. 9). Glass panes separate the garments from the public, protect the exhibits from dust and ensure they are conserved in optimal climate conditions. The vitrines can be accessed for maintenance and conservation work via a passageway at the back. In each room, the garments are arranged in a dialogue with each other in groups, drawing attention to the similarities or differences between them.



Fig. 9:
The '1910-1930. Clothes Reveal the Body. Corsets off!' display case. © La Fotográfica.

Two large wall display cases contain the interior structures (corsets, bustles and bras) in a deliberately more abstract and static arrangement than the main garments, while cylindrical vitrines made of methacrylate house hoops for skirts.

Lighting

The lighting design by Toni Rueda succeeds in achieving a theatrical effect, as only the garments and visual information are illuminated, leaving the visitor in half-darkness. The clothes are kept under lighting at a constant fifty lux, while a cyclorama of soft colours very slowly changes hue behind them, providing a backdrop against which the clothes stand out in the display cases. These cycloramas are a different colour for each period from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. To enhance the volumes of the clothing, spotlights built into the ceiling of the display cases are directed onto the garments. The lighting thus reinforces the concept of the exhibition which, as we said, speaks of two-dimensional silhouettes and three-dimensional volumes. All the lighting uses LED technology, thereby complying with conservation requirements (no infrared or ultraviolet light) as well as the need for sustainability.

Mannequins

The mannequins represent the human body and support the clothes. It was decided that mannequins without a head would be used, thereby according importance to the clothing while maintaining the relationship with the body. In addition, the visitor is able to observe the garments without the distraction of looking at a face, though the arms and legs are present when required by the design. All the mannequins have had to be adapted, regardless of type, and were chosen, budget allowing, in the following way:

- Dressmaker's mannequins used in the museum since the 1960s, when the costume exhibition opened for the first time to the public. Made out of card, stuffed with cotton padding and covered in cotton fabric, they come in different sizes and proportions that match the various silhouettes in earlier periods and hence are used to display women's period clothing.

- Male shop mannequins made of painted resin in a range of brands and sizes, including boys, with legs and arms if permitted by the costume. Used to display period and contemporary male clothing.
- Female shop mannequins made of painted resin in a range of brands and sizes, including girls, with arms and legs. Used to display women's clothing after 1910, when women's arms and legs started to become visible.
- Mannequins individually modelled to exhibit interior structures. The special mannequins for corsets were made by Carmen Lucini. Made of inert card and intended to display corsets and bras in an abstract manner, these mannequins support the garments and give them form but remain virtually invisible. All that can be seen is their interior, which has been painted in the same colour as the garment in order to go unnoticed. The crinolines and bustles have been mounted using a structure that supports them from the waistline, again invisibly, showing only the garment without the body that would have worn it.

Adapting the Mannequins

Each mannequin has to be adapted to create and shape the specific body required for each garment (fig. 10). Using materials that will not cause damage, volumes are added to the mannequin by filling in those areas needed to give it the exact form to support the clothing. The garments are placed on the mannequin, their original form untouched and unmodified by tucks or pins. The mannequin, the artificial body, provides the support for the item of clothing, which rests on it without any tension, thereby ensuring the proper conservation of the garments.



Fig. 10:
Adapting mannequins. © Aniol Resclosa.

Most of the clothes in the collection belonged to particular individuals and hence were made to measure as the system of standard garment sizes was not used in patternmaking until the advent of prêt-à-porter clothing in the 1960s. Till that time, every garment was tailor-made for a real human body using the individual's measurements. The collection also contains garments used in fashion shows. Such items are in the 'special' sizes of catwalk models, who bear no relation to ordinary people. Each garment tells us what the body of the person who wore it was like because we are familiar with the line, silhouette and volume of each design thanks to fashion images (prints and photographs) and other documentary sources. Bodies vary, as people are unlike in height and vital statistics.

The Modelled Body: from the physical corset to the mental straitjacket

Unlike the motionless mannequins in the museum, which require the hands of restorers to give them the desired form, real bodies are a kind of capital asset that require considerable financial and aesthetic investment, as well as constantly changing modifications. The aims of body modifications have remained the same throughout the history of fashion and indeed of society: we want to feel unique and at the same time we want to fit in with a particular social group by adopting continual changes to renew our appearance in keeping with the desirable and seductive new trends in fashion. In addition, the body as a creation and re-creation is increasingly being modified as a result of genetic research into the limits of human nature, grounds for believing that in the near future we may find ourselves with a new artificial body that some thinkers envisage as a fusion of a physical body and a machine.

The ideals of beauty, femininity and masculinity that we have embraced in our lives force us to expend considerable effort in relation to our bodies, an ongoing and never-ending effort to remain slim, muscular and healthy. We have to remain vigilant, constantly monitoring ourselves and others. Now that fashion is global and uniform, people stand out not just by the way they dress but also by altering their skin and their body shape. Society 'invites' us to follow restrictive diets, to use creams and cosmetics to sustain our skin, to do exercise on a continual basis, all of which is big business for professionals such as doctors, dieticians and personal trainers and the treatment centres and companies operating in the beauty industry. 'Aesthetic' surgery offers ever younger body shapes in the likeness of body image leaders, athletes, actors and actresses, singers and models. Extreme diets are financially and physically very demanding, and we need to establish a balance between effort and outcome. Such serious modifications, which change as the individual ages, are themselves subject to revision and transformation like fashion itself. Our freedom to choose is reduced, since social pressure forces us to go with the herd, to adopt the adequate, the trend in beauty of the time, especially now, when the media dominate everything.



Fig. 11:
Contemporary fashion. © Xavi Padrós.

Dressing the Body. Silhouettes and Fashion 1550-2015 is intended to help visitors to the exhibition to observe the past in order to understand the present and adopt a position in relation to the future. Visitors are fascinated by the main narrative and the particular stories of the garments, designers and donors, and the close sense of connection that this interest kindles invites us to engage in individual reflection on subjects of collective concern. The exhibition offers visitors the opportunity to critically assess the way the external appearance of the body has been manipulated over the last five hundred years. This in turn leads to the conclusion that it is absurd to be a slave to our own body or to fashion. Prompted by our reflections in the mirrors in the exhibition (reflecting ourselves in order to reflect), we end up asking ourselves: what about me, what am I doing with my body? How am I altering it? And how do I feel? And that is precisely the aim of the exhibition: to help us to consider questions about the world in which we live; to raise awareness of and resistance to the growing obsession with our personal image and with achieving a perfect and eternally young body (fig. 11). This reflection is particularly important in a society like ours, in which our image is central to our identity and social communication.

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