

Artists Design Clothes Body Art?

Dr. Karin Thönnissen
Krefeld, Germany

Abstract:

A well-cut and well-made item of clothing may, in fact, be termed body art. Ideally the design, cut, material, construction and assembly should combine to form a harmonious whole! Hence, does an item of clothing that displays the above properties constitute body art? Or does this term apply to haute couture pieces that express the *zeitgeist* but negate their content, i.e. the body? Or does it apply to outfits that accentuate the body, like the fashion created by Thierry Mugler? Or does body art mean items of clothing that are removed from everyday life – and actually not fit for everyday life – like the designs by Rei Kawakubo? Or does “body art” mean changes to the body itself, for instance by tattooing?

Contents:

Artwear in Museum Shows / Morris and the Reform Movement / From Klimt to Delaunay / Russian Revolutionary Dress / The Futurists / Conclusion

Artwear in Museum Shows

Artists have given attention to the theme of clothing throughout the ages, as seen in the work of Leonardo da Vinci through Dali to Rosemarie Trockel. Sometimes they simply changed an item of clothing by means of a pattern – a surface design; sometimes they featured entire outfits; and sometimes items of clothing were used in art as independent iconographic subjects. In her definition of “art clothes”, Ingrid Loschek, a fashion historian, begins with the British Arts & Crafts Movement, i.e. the mid-19th century, and ends with Michael Ody, a Munich fashion designer who taught at Hamburg University.

An exhibition presented at Kaiser Wilhelm Museum, Krefeld, in 1900, was arguably the first to feature contributions by the then leading artists of Western Europe. Showcasing ladies' dresses only, the event elevated the status of clothes to objects worthy of museum display, on the strength of the fact that they had not been sewn by nameless seamstresses but designed by artists. The next overview of the subject was not presented until 1992: “Against the Grain – Clothes by Artists” was shown in Lausanne (Musée des arts décoratifs) and Zurich (Museum Bellerive). The display spanned the first 40 years of the 20th century, ranging from the Krefeld exhibition to Sonia Delaunay (fig. 1). The next exhibition on the theme followed in 1995: “Fashion and Art, 1960-1990” was on view at the Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels, and the Musée d’Art Contemporain, Montreal. It centred on the correlation of fashion and fine art. An exhibition shown in Paris and Dortmund in 1996, “Künstler ziehen an (Artists dress People)” covered the period from 1910 until 1939. Beginning with the Italian futurists, it included Russian constructivists and Bauhaus. The show featured clothing as a constituent part of a synthesis of the arts, as part of the re-design that man’s world had to undergo; at the same time clothing was shown to express a socio-political attitude.



Fig. 1:

Coat by Sonia Delaunay (1920s)

<http://www.hintmag.com/post/sonia-delaunay-mother-of-abstract-art--december-02-2016-1019>.

Morris and the Reform Movement

William Morris was one of the first who lived the idea that a synthesis of the arts meant an environment designed by artists. He considered not only aesthetic but also social elements. He felt that humans would not attain happiness through the mere production of aesthetic objects, but they would change "for the better" if they lived with such objects. Morris attempted to live out this vision. All objects in his house were designed and made by himself, from the interior decoration up to the clothing. He drew a great deal of inspiration from previous periods, especially when designing clothes, when he harked back to late Gothic and early Renaissance models. The appearance of women belonging to the Arts & Crafts movement included loose and lavishly pleated shirt dresses with wide belts, flat shoes, and centre partings. Stitched by hand, although sewing machines were already available, the clothes used only hand-woven and hand-printed fabrics. Neither the shape of the garments, which was influenced by the reform ideas, nor their patterns met with general approval since they were not in line with the fashion trends of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Men's clothing rarely came under consideration. Photographs show the male staff member of Morris & Co at work in suits, white shirts and sometimes even hats. Morris himself preferred wooden clogs and a comfortable work smock.

It was not until the late nineteenth century that thoughts arose to change men's clothing, although these centred less on the notion of artistic designs and more on the leading ideas of the reform movement. Based on health-related, hygienic and functional considerations, men were supposed to wear one-piece outfits (shirts & trousers) made of animal fibres. In the UK this idea met with great interest, but was only put in practice in a limited way. Thus the knitted suits and colourful woollen suits designed for men remained a marginal phenomenon in costume history since they were ultimately as unfashionable as the reform dresses designed for ladies. Nevertheless the reform movement saw some success, and in Germany especially it attracted many comrades-in-arms. Not only were societies and magazines founded in the country, but essays were published and conferences held on the theme.

One prominent advocate of the movement was the artist Henry van de Velde (1863-1957). He believed that the respective fashion styles enslaved women and disregarded their needs as well as their bodies. Constricted by corsets, their dresses decorated with frills and ribbons, women were at the mercy of fashion designers' whims. Above all, Van de Velde postulated that artists should have an influence on clothing to produce designs that would unify form and materials – clothing whose construction would be revealed by emphasised seams; clothing that would accentuate the wearer's figure and person. He was able to present his ideas to the public in an exhibition entitled: "Sonderausstellung moderner nach Künstlerentwürfen ausgeführter Damenkleider (Special Exhibition of Ladies' Dresses Executed to Artists' Designs)". The dresses were shown in the 1900 Krefeld exhibition.

Krefeld, a town with an old textile tradition where silk has been processed for more than 300 years, established its museum in the late nineteenth century to support the crafts and collect art objects. Aside from Van de Velde, the then great names of the German Arts & Crafts movement were invited to participate in the above-mentioned exhibition: Margarete von Brauchitsch, Curt Hermann, F.A.O. Krüger, Alfred Mohrbutter, Bernhard Pankok, Richard Riemerschmied, Paul Schulze and Hugo van der Woude. The artists were asked to design ladies' clothing that followed the principles set out by Van de Velde. Functional and, in some cases, aesthetically pleasing, the creations attracted great interest among the population. An accompanying catalogue contained photographs together with patterns and cartoons for embroideries and appliqué work. Each woman was meant to be in a position to reproduce the clothes herself, realising her own needs and preferences. The artist was to provide guidance only up the point where she had developed her "personal dress", and found her own independent solution for her individual requirements.

The clothes used precious materials unaffordable to large sections of the female population, who were thus marginalised. Clothing designed by artists tended to be applied art objects that were worn by emancipated women and artists' wives as part of a house entirely designed by an artist. Some contemporaries bitingly alleged that Van de Velde matched the colour of his wife's clothing to the meal of the day. Van de Velde himself had his traditional suits made by a tailor. They did not display any fashionable extravagance because the artist believed that men had no vanity and did not submit to the dictates of fashion.

From Klimt to Delaunay

Clothing as a means of self-portrayal is nevertheless a common theme in male artists' biographies. As early as the fifth century BC, the painter Zeuxis wore garments that had his name woven in gold thread. Another painter, Jan Gossaert (1478-1534), emphasised his special position as an artist on festive occasions by wearing imaginative paper costumes. Some late nineteenth century artists like Melchior Lechter (1865-1937) and Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) liked to wear clothing that was unusual for men (fig. 2). They designed loosely draped, floor-length shirts for themselves, some of them ornately decorated and, in Klimt's case, displaying patterns of his own design (fig. 3).



Fig. 2:
Melchior Lechter
https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melchior_Lechter.

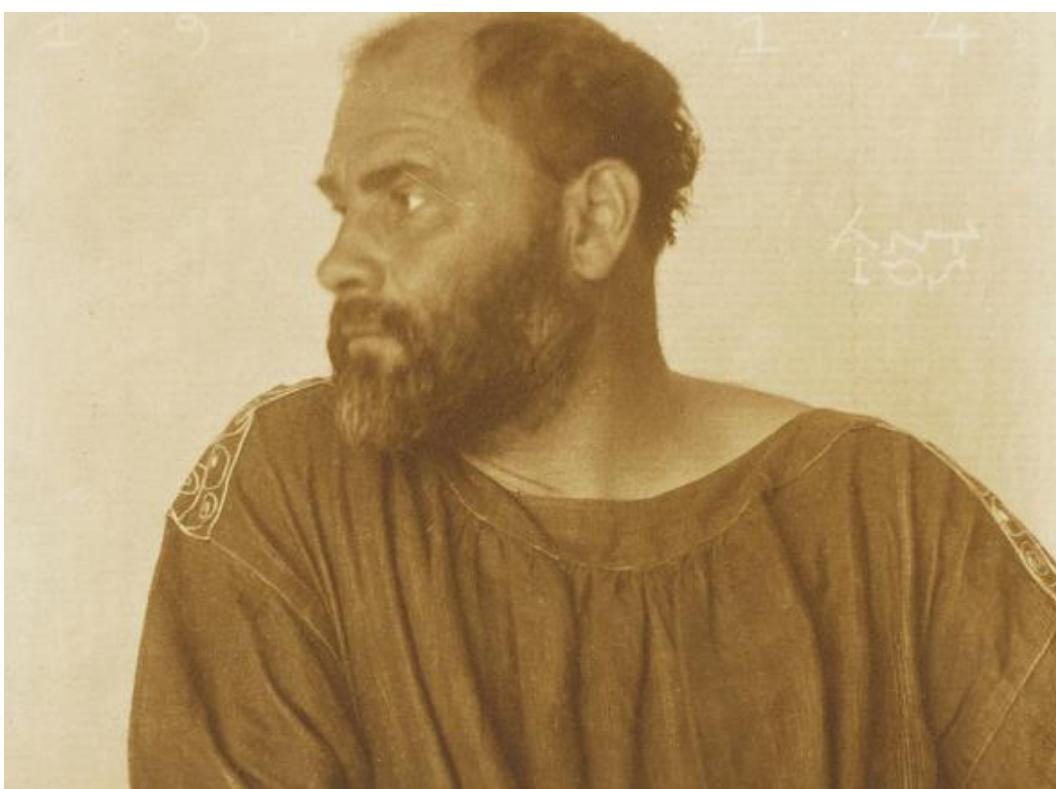


Fig. 3:
Gustav Klimt
Photo: Josef Anton Trčka 1913. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=17474423>.

Other artists modified traditional items of clothing such as trousers and jackets, and embraced rich colour contrasts or changed the fabric like Percy Grainger (1882-1961). His clothing was quite normal except the material. He used tea towels for shirts and terry towels for trousers and jackets (fig. 4).



Fig. 4:
Percy Grainger
Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne.

Another “dress-artist”: Wenzel Hablik (1881-1934) combined “short trousers with long black stockings, and wore these with a short waistcoat closed almost to the neck, and a jacket whose collar was worked in the manner of dinner jackets” (Fuchs-Belhamri 1993, 25). One of his morning jackets was made of a colourful striped material with solid red, long sleeves. Hablik also designed ladies’ clothing – idiosyncratic creations inspired by Paul Poiret’s model dresses and influenced by the ideas of the dress reform. Only a few of his rather fashionable designs were actually executed.

Similar to Hablik's designs, the designs of Wiener Werkstätte displayed fashionable trends. However, their underlying idea was a synthesis of the arts. Established in 1903, Wiener Werkstätte ran a fashion department as of 1911. They did not distinguish between great and minor art, but focused on aestheticizing life and on achieving equality in the arts as a prerequisite for a synthesis of the arts, where all art disciplines would unite and contribute to making the visible world more beautiful. Wiener Werkstätte believed that since clothing was an element of the visible world, only artists were in a position to design it. Thus clothing ceased to be a basic commodity and became art, joining the synthesis of the arts.

Van de Velde followed this tradition, but at the same time he advocated aesthetic education for women. Vienna renounced this idea and rejected artistic guidance for women to produce their "personal dress". They did not supply instructions and patterns to make their own dresses to female clients. Wiener Werkstätte's orientation on the prevailing Paris fashion style and adoption of the reform ideas gave it a position somewhere between haute couture and art-to-wear. "Nevertheless the autonomous laws of the fashion phenomenon made those products particularly attractive, precisely because they were so eccentric" (Völker 1986, 604).

Oscillating between the two positions, Wiener Werkstätte perforce alternately shifted its focus to one or the other of the two diametrically opposed trends. Sometimes creations were more in line with general fashion, and at other times they were removed from it by a long way. A special characteristic appears in the period from 1928 to 1931, when the fabric design – the pattern – assumed priority over the cut, and the latter became subordinate to the former; this characteristic also distinguishes the work of Sonia Delaunay (1885-1979). Her garments are usually based on a simple cut, and her dresses and coats were roomy and covered the body loosely. Her design of adjoining colour blocks is the dominant feature, and is not subject to the form. Sonia Delaunay, an artist with a solid art academic background, transferred her painterly principles to the textile medium.

However, a common feature shared by all the artist clothing designs discussed above is that they were always destined for an upper stratum of the bourgeoisie. Their expensive materials and high proportion of crafts production meant that these clothes were only affordable to a particular target group.

Russian Revolutionary Dress

A group of Russian artists thought and acted quite differently. Following the October Revolution of 1917, a euphoric mood prevailed in the Soviet Union, and there were dreams of a new classless society. Artists were assigned a new role. They were supposed to turn to the sphere of real life, i.e. industrial production, since this was where they were needed. Consequentially, easel painting was abolished as paintings were considered expressions of an elitist and highly individual art. Slogans such as "art for the people" or "art for industry" were in circulation, and artists attended to everyday objects with great enthusiasm. Aside from textiles, this especially applied to clothing. It ranked first among the basic commodities, so to speak, because it had great symbolic significance. Now it was supposed to strengthen social togetherness and epitomise egalitarian values.

To this end, Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953) designed clothing for men with a comfortable fit and practical, economic and hygienic property. Jackets and trousers both followed the same basic formula, and were occasionally joined to form overalls. The trapezoid jackets or tops were tightly closed around the neck and waist, and similarly the trouser legs fitted closely around the ankles. The fit of the pockets was determined by the length of the arms and size of the hands. The coat designed by Tatlin was slightly egg shaped, made of water resistant material, and equipped with two interchangeable linings. It was composed of three individual elements, each of which could be individually changed depending on the degree of wear; thus the coat was virtually indestructible. Tatlin saw himself as an engineer who assembled

standardised clothing from individual components, making it fit for the production line, as it were. He endeavoured to exclude all random elements from his creative process; to use nothing that was reminiscent of any previous models; to only produce what was necessary; and to forego colour. His timeless clothing was to be free from any suggestion of fashion.

Tatlin was not the only one to propose such ideas; the designs by the artists Varvara Stepanova (1894-1968) and Ljubov Popova (1889-1924) followed the same principle. Stepanova developed three types of clothing: production clothing, special clothing and sportswear. Its function determined its appearance and materials, and, in the case of sportswear, also its decoration.

In Alexandra Exter's (1882-1949) work, the graphic design of the fabrics also played an important part. The pattern and cut of her dresses were supposed to form a unified whole, taking into account the properties of the material. Although "simple and practical" was her motto, her clothing had a certain formal elegance. Few revolutionary clothing designs were executed and even fewer were worn. The proposals ran counter not only to the social conditions but also the economic situation of the period. Above all, however, they ran counter to the age-old fashion yearnings of the population, who spurned printed geometric patterns in favour of floral fabrics.

The Futurists

The Italian futurists suffered a similar fate to the Russian designers. They, too, saw clothing as an expression of a new society. They, too, used form, colour and new materials, such as plastics. The "futurist redesign of the universe" (Stern 1992, 25) required fundamentally modern clothing. This clothing was not supposed to continuously change with fashion, but was to be permanent and enduring.

The futurists brought various manifestos before the public, and also appeared as living models for their new ideas. In the first futurist manifesto of 1914, Giacomo Balla (1871-1958) demanded dynamic clothes for men that were to be simple but cheerful, and were to have pneumatic buttons to allow the wearer to fit different accessories. Their men's suit was considered a prime example of rationality; it expressed the economic and social standing of the bourgeois classes. This clothing called for change and surprise. The tie could be illuminated by fitting a light bulb; phosphorescent fabrics afforded a shining appearance. Balla was convinced that clothing was capable of psychologically influencing the wearer.

The 1920 futurist manifesto made a case for futurist ladies' clothing. Poets or painters were to take over as managers of all ladies' fashion houses, thus ensuring that the new principles would be applied. Now clothing was to be ever changeable, allowing the wearer to act out her creativity in her dress and to be dressed according to her mood and the time of day. The futurists caused sensations and provoked scandal. For instance, Balla was not given a hotel room in Paris because the porter was suspicious of his futurist clothing.

A suit by Ernesto Thayaht (1895- 1959), who also counted among the futurists, showed an equally outlandish cut but was not so colourful and far simpler. A one-piece in a single colour, probably inspired by the American overall, and devoid of decorative elements, this item of clothing was primarily practical. The *tuta*, as it was called, was also available in a ladies' version with a skirt. Both variants were worn without a shirt or blouse, adorned and completed by a belt, hat and jacket. Thayaht propagated his design not only by means of the dress pattern, of which he sold several thousand, but he also wore the suit himself. However, he ultimately failed, like all other artists before him.

Conclusion

Both the backward-looking clothing style propagated by William Morris and the integration of clothing into the overall aesthetic concept embraced by Van de Velde and the Wiener Werkstätte failed to convince the public. The Russian constructivists' ideological notions of clothing proved to be as unattractive as the standard dress that was practical, comfortable and suitable for all figures.

Time and again during the course of the twentieth century, there were artists who gave attention to clothing, and who cooperated with fashion designers; thus Salvador Dali worked with Elsa Schiaparelli and Lucio Fontana with the Italian fashion house, Bini-Telese. There are also examples of paintings being directly transferred onto fabrics and made into clothing; Andy Warhol and Piet Mondrian may be mentioned in this context. In the early 1980s, Jean Charles de Castelbajac showed an entire collection of uniform dresses that had been individually decorated, i.e. painted, by artists.

Artists' creative ideas were appreciated and adopted but their ideology – their endeavour to change society for the better – was only rarely accepted.

References

- Fuchs-Belhamri, Elisabeth. 1993. *Wenzel Hablik: Textilkunst und Mode*. Exhibition catalogue. Heide: Westholsteinische Verlagsanstalt.
- Stern, Radu. 1992. *Gegen den Strich: Kleider von Künstlern*. Exhibition catalogue, Zurich and Lausanne. Bern: Benteli.
- Völker, Angela. 1986. „Wiener Werkstätte“. In *Anziehungskräfte: Variété de la Mode 1786-1986*. Exhibition catalogue, 604-11. Munich: Münchner Stadtmuseum.