

Fashion is Cultural History by It's Reflection of the Zeitgeist

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Upon attending the panel discussion, Exhibitionism: 50 Years of The Museum At FIT, Felicia Caponigri made a statement that "Fashion is cultural history". This statement meant that fashion is something much more than a popular trend, it culturally and socially represents the zeitgeist of the time. Although fashion constantly changes, the only thing that's constant about it is its portrayal of culture. Fashion is cultural history through its representation in influence of culture, fabric in fashion, social norms, diversity, and social inspirations of society.

Fashion portrays the influences of culture, by constantly redefining the meaning of clothing. The corset was a controversial, significant piece that was believed to bring out erotic femininity but also was used as an instrument of women's oppression. Although the earliest corset from the 16th century was intended to fix spinal deformities it became a fashion statement throughout history by constructing an ideal body image. During the 18th and the 19th century corsets were worn by women, pregnant women, children and men (The Corset: Fashioning the Body, 2000). According to the curator of the exhibition Valerie Steele (2000), it was applied that the earlier usage of corsets was very unhealthy and led to medical problems like deformed ribs and cut livers in half. As a result, corsets changed its meaning from glorifying unrealistic ideal body shapes into, sexualizing body, from 16th century to the 20th century. The Punks played a huge role for couturiers bringing back corset-inspired clothing by transforming underwear into outerwear. "Feminine corset-inspired fashion, emphasizing "the female form divine," included evening gowns by Christian Lacroix, Gianfranco Ferré, Karl Lagerfeld at Chanel, John Galliano at Dior, Josie Natori, Yves Saint Laurent, and Vivienne Westwood" (The Corset: Fashioning the Body, 2000). This is one example of how the influence of culture establishes fashion as cultural history. Fashion reflects the history and the beliefs of a culture by redefining past designs.

Fabric in Fashion plays a major role on how fashion is cultural history. The use of textiles has created a social and economic history for the world. The importance of quality fabrics has evolved over time. According to Elizabeth Way (2019), in the past, textiles were the most valuable possessions of fashionable individuals however, it doesn't necessarily matter as much now. Fabric carries unique qualities that helps to create specific silhouettes and aesthetics. For example, silk can be used to create a flowy chiffon dress that falls in dramatic folds. Silk is a luxury fiber that led to a trade network that connected countries all over the world. Silk textiles inspired Asian aesthetics, that still exist in Western fashion today. Trade of wool allowed the British economy to grow in the beginning of the Middle Ages (Museum at FIT, 2019). Demand for cotton played an enormous role in the creation of enslavement of Africans in the United States. The Industrial Revolution created what is now called "fast fashion". The new technology and machinery allowed textiles to be created more efficiently. This also allowed people to be able to afford previously precious and expensive textiles. Although this allowed for anyone to be fashionable, today we are struggling as a society from "fashion's pollution of the environment" (Way, 2019). All in all, fabric in fashion plays changing roles whether economically or socially affecting people throughout history. By exploring different fabrics used in the past and in today's world one can see how fashion is cultural history.

Fashion plays a huge role reflecting social norms of society. This is done by designers creating designs that display a specific image or message that is built by the society and the zeitgeist. According to Sharron J. Lennon, Kim K.P. Johnson and Nancy A. Rudd (2017), something held by each culture is ideology. "Ideology refers to the principle beliefs and values of a culture (Lennon, Johnson, & Rudd, 2017). Social norms are ideologies of how a specific group of people should behave. Historically, fashion affected culture by either following or protesting

against these social norms. The most obvious one is gender identification through dress. Throughout history it was believed that men and women should be identified by their appearances, whether by the color or silhouettes of their garments (Tortora, P, 2015). This was done by signing masculine looks for men and feminine looks for women. However, one can see through fashion history that culture has evolved and that fashion became more gender fluid. In the article "When It Comes To Gender, For a Growing Number Of Fashion Brands, The Feeling is Neutral", the author Tamim Alnuweiri argues how gender no longer defines a person and how gender neutral fashion is high in demand (2018). Many fashion brands are starting to think outside the box. As stated by Tamim Alnuweiri "Over the last few seasons, luxury designers like Gucci, Saint Laurent, and Haider Ackerman have held coed runway shows" (2018). As seen by this example, as social norms continue to change in the world, they are also being reflected in fashion. One can also see that fashion is a tool in which social norms can be promoted or protested. Social norms are constantly reflected in fashion further establishing that fashion is cultural history.

Through diversity one can see how it has a major role displaying fashion is cultural history. Historically, fashion has trickled down from upper classes to the lower classes throughout society. However, as diversity expanded within culture, fashion has evolved to trickle up from lower classes to higher classes. One great example of this is "Street Style". Street style has influenced high fashion enormously for the past ten years. Hilary Milnes states "While luxury brands have always gained inspiration from underground, subculture and streetwear style, for the first time, these designers and brands are getting a seat at the table" (2018). By this she is referring to how street wear designers finally have a platform in the fashion industry. The influence of street style can be seen on the 2019 Fall Fashion week runways by designers like

Hedi Slimane and her haute bourgeois collection at Celine, or by Riccardo Tisci at Burberry with separates based dressing. Runway styles and street styles tend to overlap. A great example of how the Fall 2019 runway clashed with street wear would be how “Victoria Beckham and Burberry’s new look of bourgeois elegance in London prompted several women to wear skirt suits and head-to-toe camel before the trend had even crystallized at Hedi Slimane’s Celine show” (Farra, 2019). These examples further explain how fashion is diverse and how diversity has evolved through fashion. Diversity in fashion has broke down the barriers of social class, showing how fashion is cultural history.

Fashion is in constant repetition of itself. Although fashion often replicates prior designs it is inspired by the political and the social changes that reflect the spirit of the times. Inspirations of society is often reflected in fashion, making fashion a tool that captures cultural history. As fashion evolves, it portrays the social beliefs of the zeitgeist. Recently women empowerment played a major role in 2019 Fall Fashion. Diane Von Furstenberg was just one of the many designers that empowered women by their collection. Diane Von Furstenberg stated that her collection was “all to give women confidence” and that it was her “mission in life” (Foley, 2019). Fashion has always served as a way of popular expression and personal views from artistic to political. Designers tend to be inspired by social and political changes and create collections that might attribute old trends but convey a different message. It is by the social inspirations of the time, that fashion reflects, that makes fashion, cultural history.

Overall, after reading this paper one can agree with Felicia Caponigri that “fashion is cultural history”. As fashion evolves, it continues to repeat itself, only differing by the reflection of it’s zeitgeist. Fashion portrays the beliefs and the culture of it’s society. One can imply that Fashion is cultural history through its representation in influence of culture, fabric in fashion,

social norms, diversity, and social inspirations of society by the examples given above. Fashion is way more than a trend, it reflects and captures the culture and history of its society, bringing inspiration to generations that's to come.

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