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BUF 4900: Internship Midterm Essay Exam

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11/4/2021



**Image of Dress (Taken by Makenna Prince)**

## **Abstract**

The Metropolitan Museum of Art is currently hosting an exhibit called *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion*. The contains designs from as recent as the 2021 and as old as 1856 (the quilt). Though some of these designs are decades apart, with out look at the dates one can see that the designs echo each other. The designs also show different parts of American culture and how it's influenced by other cultures due to being a melting pot. This exhibit overall encompasses what it means to be American which also making a commentary on it.

Keywords: Melting Pot, American Culture, Design

Many designs caught my eyes while walking around the exhibit, for a moment I was unable to decide which dress to choose. That was until I noticed the African wax print dress designed by Claude Kameni. This dress labeled *Vitality* has a semi plunging “V” neckline and shoulder pads which is influenced by the 1980s (Shaw, 2019; vintagefashionguild, 2014). Women started to enter the workforce in the 1940’s after World War two which started the introduction of shoulder pads. This can be seen in movies such as *Mildred Pierce* which is worn by Joan Crawford who played a working woman (Shaw, 2019). In the 1980’s the pantsuit was worn to display woman empowerment. These pantsuits usually featured bold and bright colors with statement shoulder pads (Khan, 2016). Pantsuits with broad shoulder pads were not only seen on Hollywood celebrities but also on political figures such as the Prime Minister of England Margaret Thatcher (Alford, 2014; Shaw, 2019). Just like it did in the 80s shoulder pads are making a comeback in the 2020’s as seen in Claude Kameni and Tom Ford’s (*Seductiveness, 2018*) design. The silhouette of this dress has always represented the empowerment of women and will continue to represent and uplift women.

Colors are often used as a motivator for shoppers to be drawn to an item as colors tend to affect the emotions of the viewer in either positive or negative ways. Due to color having such a power over the consumer the colors used are significant. Color is also affected by tones, shading, and value. Value is basically the amount of light or darkness that is perceived in the color. Shade is a part of value as it is what causes the darkness in the color, while tints add the lightness in the color. Tones on the other hand deals with the coolness and warmth of the color. Usually, red is used as a warm color while blue is seen as a cool color (Pegler, 2011). Claude Kameni’s dress is a combination of blue and red which seems purple when one glances at it for a second. According to color psychology red is usually used to stimulate love or assert power and sometimes display

vulgarity while blue is gentle, calm, and comfortable. Purple which is a combination of blue and red represents happiness and distinction along with a sense of being old fashioned (Pegler, 2011). One can say that this dress was correctly labeled as “*vitality: lively and animated character*” as shown by the colors that was chosen by the designer.

Line is this described as direction which is a major part of composition and determines the effectivity of the way things are presented or arranged (Pegler, 2011). Kameni’s choice to use a mermaid silhouette for this dress helps accentuate the curve of the wears body. This design causes the viewers to draw their vision from top to bottom as the dress flows out into a beautiful, layered skirt at the knees. What draws the viewers eyes to the top of this dress are the shoulder pads which gives off a rectangular shape to the upper half of the body but is then changed into a snug fitting waist.

Rhythm is described as a “self-contained movement that goes from one element to another and leads the viewers eyes from the dominant object to the subordinate object” (Pegler, 2011). With its snug fit this dress has the motion of walking down the runway. One can assume that this dress will cause one to sway their hips side to side for the bottom of the dress all those back and forth. The shoulders will be moving in an angular way to show and display dominance. While wearing this dress one can expect to be the center of attention.

Form is the visible shape of the element (Oxford Languages, 2021). One can describe the shape of this dress as an hourglass on top of a triangle. Hourglass defines the overall shape of the dress which is squared at the top and pulls in tightly around the waist and over the hips, then flares out at the bottom which is the triangle. This garment can overall be described as a combination of those two shapes.

Balance deals with the optical weight between elements and it can be either symmetrical or asymmetrical. This optical weight helps to create a well thought out design (Bell, 2017; Pegler, 2011). The optical weight of this dress shifts from the top to the bottom with the bottom being the heaviest part. With the weight being unbalanced one's eyes shifts from both the top and the bottom trying to focus on both the shoulders and the skirt of the dress. This dress is also perfectly symmetrical horizontally if one were to place a mirror between the dress you would see the perfect reflection of the other side of the dress. This dress is balanced on a horizontal axis but unbalanced on the vertical axis, which adds to its playful yet mature nature.

Juxtaposition is basically the contrast between two elements that are usually placed close together (Oxford Languages, 2021). The broad padded shoulders are a great example of juxtaposition compared to the flared skirt and hourglass body of this dress. With the shoulders representing masculinity and the hourglass skirt representing femininity. Masculinity and femininity are usually seen as opposites of one another but that does not mean that they did not complement each other. The dress is reminiscent of the shoulder pads of the pantsuits from the 1980s Which was used to show a woman's dominance in the workplace. This dress takes it a step further by carrying most of its weight and the flared skirt that starts at the knee. While pantsuits can be seen as slightly masculine the flared skirt brings femininity into the dress. This combination creates a unified presentation I've got masculinity and femininity working together in a powerful way.

Dominance or first to the element that stands out sort of like the leader of the display (Pegler, 2011). The first part of this dress that stands out the most layered flared skirt at the bottom. At the museum one is able to observe the people around them looking at the dress with their eyes falling from top to bottom staring at the skirt. The shoulder pads are second the

element of this dress that stands out to me in terms of dominance. Not only are they a dominant feature of the dress but they also show dominance while one is wearing this dress.

Proportion has to do with the relationship between the elements in terms of size, scale, and weight (Pegler, 2011). This dress varies in proportion from its wide shoulders to its skintight waist and layered skirt. The center area of the dress is smaller in comparison to the width of the shoulders and off the skirt. The different sizes in width complements each other making the dress a showstopper.

Repetition, like the word state is the “reiteration of an idea or motif” (Pegler, 2011). The colors and shapes on the fabric are repeated throughout the garment. Making the pattern of the dress consistent. Another element that is repeated in this dress is boldness. From the bold statement shoulder pads to the bold knee to floor length layered skirt.

According to the description plaque next to the dress the material used was *polychrome wax-block-printed cotton plain weave fabric*. While at the museum you are not allowed to touch the garments, but one can assume based on the description and on the samples from [The Textile Kit](#) that the dress would have a slightly rough texture. This type of fabric lacks Sheen which means that it will not reflect much light back at the viewers. since the fabric is a plain weave one can assume that it has a standard denier level between 40d and 80d, this means that the fabric is not very see through (Maker’s Row, 2017).

Claude Kameni’s reflects the zeitgeist of 2021 by representing the world's reentrance into society. The majority of the world has been locked up due to the coronavirus since March 2020, now with COVID vaccines the world is beginning to open up again. As it did back in the 1940s this dress shows empowerment as the world is feeling empowered again in this time.

This dress reflects the social attitudes of this generation by mixing both masculinity and femininity together to make a powerful statement dress. In today's society gender is becoming more fluid sort of like this dress. At the same time this dress empowers women which relates to the push for women's rights.

This dress shows today's value by being bold and outstanding and not hiding who you are or what you are. This dress isn't afraid to represent its African roots while still following trends of American fashion history. This dress mixes culture together in a way that America is a melting pot for many cultures. This dress overall shows what it means to be a modern person living in the United States from a different country or background.



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Proof of visitation

