A Study of Green and Its Imagery in Western Costume

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Abstract

In fashion history, the color “green” has been used from ancient to modern times constantly. Especially nowadays, the worth of green in fashion is becoming bigger than ever before to express the longing for pure nature. The purpose of this study is to define green’s imageries in western costume history.

For the basic about green, first of all, this study researched green of origin, effect and costumes in western history, then classified green's imageries. Green’s imageries expressed in western costumes can be divided mainly into a ‘nature imagery’ and a ‘religious divinity imagery’. Nature imagery was extended again into ‘youth, devil, citizen and ecology image’. Youth image came from the luxurious feature of nature and it was extended again into ‘innocent love, virgin and immaturity’. Religious divinity imagery has been represented in the ancient Egypt, Islam and Christian religion. In those cultures, green was considered as a sacred color of Osiris, Mahomet and Holy spirit.

Key words: green, imagery, nature, religious, divinity

I. Introduction

Under the influence of growing concerns about environment, the image of ‘Human Ecology’ has been presented as one of main fashion themes. Furthermore green has become the representative color in latest fashion. At this point of time, it is worth the effort to make a study about green. Moreover, all studies about green up to now have been focused on green in eastern costume or planning green color in modern fashion, not about imageries and not in western costume.

The purpose of this study is to inquire into green and its imagery’s role in western costumes from ancient to modern times based on the hypothesis that the symbolic meaning of colors in clothing is a by-product of societies and cultures. This study refers to documentary records and visual materials, such as literary works, paintings of the past and movies.

II. Green’s Origin and Effect

Green’s origin is nature: people experienced green at first through green plants and minerals of nature. In ancient Egypt the copper compounds malachite was used as green’s dyes and in the middle ages verdigris made of copper carbonate was invented. After Renaissance, development of science caused various shades of green to be used and the invention of aniline
dyes late in the 19th century made it possible to color excellent and various green as much as present day\(^2\).

Green has a therapeutic and psychological effect: it relaxes mind and eyesight. So green is used for the space where people look for concentration and repose and is the symbol color of safety, process and first aid internationally. On the other hand, modern painters such as Kandinsky and Mondrian have defined static green as a tedious color making an unfavorable impression.

III. Green in Western Costume History

In costume history, green originated from ancient times. Although Romans seldom wore green, Greeks wore several shades of green\(^3\) and Egyptians widely liked green (bluish green) in their accessories and make-up\(^4\). In middle ages, green became a constituent member in the Christian symbol and revolutionized in color system all that time. Consequently, green became popular in men and women’s apparel, indiscriminated social status, and it began to give imageries in green costume\(^5\). After Renaissance, green has been various in costume and people wore green as one of their preferred colors. In today’s fashion, green expresses contemporary trends or the individual ideas of designers.

IV. Green’s Imagery in Western Costume

This study classified the imageries of green into two categories—the image of nature and the image of religious divinity. And it further divided the imagery of nature into ‘young, devil, civil, and ecology’, and divided the imagery of religious divinity into ‘Egypt, Islam, and Christianity’ to study the formation and extension of the green’s imageries.

1. Extension from the Nature

Green is the most commonly used color to symbolize the nature since the concept of color was brought to humankind\(^6\). The nature is something to grow and prosper, but also to diminish and die. As such, various features of nature, from light, hopeful green to dark green, caused the imagery of green to have been extended to more complex meanings, positive or negative, not simply a color of nature.

1) Extension to the Young

Green is widely used as a color for the young as defined as ‘youth, energy’ as well as ‘nature’ in dictionaries. Green became the color for the young because certain descriptions of color green, such as ‘energy, beginning, prosperity’, are well associated with the most active period in human life - the young age.

In the middle ages, green was already considered as the young and in the Shakespeare’s Plays of Renaissance, it was also used to describe youths. In "The Taming of Shrew", in a dialogue of Katherina and the old man Vincentio who was disguised as a young girl, green symbolized the youth.

Kath—That have been so bedazzled with the sun.
That everything I look on seemeth green.
Now I perceive thou art a reserved father—
(The Taming Shrew, IV. V. 45-47)
As a means to express the power and energy of the young, green tends to inspire fashion designers in modern times. They use this color for leisure clothing, sportswear, clothing for vacations to attract and express the youth<Fig.1, 2>. A traditional English brand, Burberry, has been tried to extend its brand image to ‘young and lively’ since 1997 and it was estimated to be successful. They started to use various colors such as light green or violet from traditional color mix of beige or navy. In ‘2003-2004’ Autumn/Winter Burberry Prorsum Collections, they emphasized the young image using pure green<Fig. 37).

From the imagery of the young, green further extended its image to ‘love as a privilege of the young’, ‘an innocent virgin’, or ‘immaturity due to the lack of experiences’.

a. Love, Virgin, Innocent

Medieval paintings depicted green as a symbol of a virgin and her innocent love before the marriage. This imagery was also described in the literatures of those times. Green represented a blossoming love with hopes and was also related to a virgin who was in love.

Venus, the goddess of love, was originally a god of vegetation so the color green was used to honor her and to express the meaning of love. In a dialogue of Armado and his servant Mos in Shakespeare’s play, “Love’s Labour’s Lost,” green was said as a color of love.

Arm... Green indeed is the colour of lovers. (Love’s Labour’s Lost, II. i. 81)

Friedrich Schiller who completed German Traditionalism with Goethe described a beginning love using green. He said that “Our relationship is still green”. So ‘Green lady’ means, in this extent, a virgin8).

b. Immaturity

In nature, fruits or flowers are grown from immature fruits or blossoms. This natural phenomena gives the color green the imagery of an immaturity occurred from the lack of experiences in the young age. In English, the term ‘greener’ or ‘greenhorn’ means the beginner. ‘Do you see any green in my eye?’ means ‘Don’t treat me as a novice’. Green in this context means gullibility - the immaturity. In western psychology, the green costume of Peter Pan represents the joy and energy of youth but also an adult who does not mature spiritually.

2) Extension to a Devil (something to be avoided, a witch)

In Europe, green woods shined in the dark moonlights or green skin of inhuman beings gives fears and negative imagery12). Since the middle ages, artists used the color green along with
black or brown to describe the evil spirits. Their concepts were well described in the sculptures or paintings. The painting of St. Michael against an evil dragon, the color green is used to describe the dragon<Fig. 8>. In modern science fiction movies or posters, monsters or aliens are pictured as green creatures. And many green monsters are creating with green skin with computer graphics.

The negative images of green were also shown in a demon who is trying to seduce humans. In medieval plays, demons were described as a creature wearing a dark green custom with scary mask performing a pantomime. In plays after medieval period or modern movies, a villain's part frequently wears green costumes. A villain with twisted mind in the movie 'Batman Forever' wears a green costume to reflect his character efficiently. And also in the 'Harry Porter' series, the green gown of evil wizard group reflects their evilness as oppose to the red gown for their counter parts<Fig. 9>.

Since the devil image added negative meanings to green, green became also to symbolize a mad or bankrupted man who needs a careful attention. In case this image is applied to a woman, it reminds an image of a temptress or a witch. This image of seduction shown in a modern fashion is a Versace's dress using green leather or a dark green with black representing a provocative, enchanting, and strong woman's image<Fig. 10>.

3) A Color for Villager

A practical and naive impression of nature brought up a villager or a commoner image. Since the middle ages, the color green has become to represent villagers such as a person making hunting devices, a peasant, a gardener, a fisher, or a servant for lawyer in costume. In the theatre of Commedia dell’ Arte in Renaissance period, green was used to express a person’s occupation. Brighella wore a green striped costume to reveal his occupation as a farmer<Fig. 11>. Since then, the color green was used for costumes of a farmer, a gardener, or a servant, and associated with the images of grasses, vegetation or barley fields. When a new civil class was born, a farmer and a gardener belonged to this class. They desired to have freedom against the nobility, and green was used to represent the citizen’s movement. The color green in Italian and Hungarian national flags also symbolizes a hope of citizen. Goethe connected colors to the social status in his color theory and says that green represents useful citizens such as a merchant, a craftsman, or an employee. In the expression 'Would not exchange his royal purple for a forester’s green' which was described in the 17th century literatures, green meant a low social class and that implies that green was a color for theirs clothes.

4) Ecology

As the development of civilization and industrialization destroyed our environment and the ecosystem, the term ‘ecology’ has become a buzzword worldwide. The late 20th century becomes an era in which the environment is an important issue. Designers need to consider their ethical or social responsibilities related to the environmental issues. Fashion in 1990s was certainly affected by this and the ecology has been a major issue in fashion. The natural image associated with the ecology applies the green to the costume. A textile exhibition, Expofil, in 1989 was under the theme ‘Going Green’ reflected people’s concerns about global protection and
presented the fashion trends for Fall/Winter of 90/91. Using green for their fashion, designers transmit hopes to return to the world of the clean status and stimulate the yearning for cleaner environment<Fig. 12, 13>. Green is the most suitable color to express the clean nature as it is, and to remind people of the nature.

2. Religious Divinity

The colors used in religions have been served as the medium to transfer the beliefs connected with the gods. Green is one of main colors which have been used in Egypt, Islam and Christianity, and its religious imageries have been reflected in everyday life.

1) Osiris in Antient Egypt

In Egypt, the color green was considered as a color for Osiris who is considered as a king of gods along with Ra, the sun god<Fig. 14>. Because Egyptians believed that Osiris controls the deceased and resurrection of spirits, they prayed for eternal happiness to Osiris17). In Egyptian wall paintings, Osiris was portrayed with green skin and was referred to as ‘The Great Green’. Describing the god who has been honored with these positive emotions means the color green was also honored as sacred color.

The Egyptian ideas about green are also depicted in ornaments or in make-up. In Egyptian wall paintings, light green to bluish green was used for crowns or other jewelries of important persons such as Pharaoh or queen. Green is also used for its ornaments for cremation19). The color green was honored as a sacred color for Osiris and represented in costumes. Also green expressed Egyptians' hopes for eternal lives as well as the holy spirits of gods.

2) Mahomet in Islam

The color of green was a favorite of Mahomet(570-632), the supreme prophet in Islam. He wore green turban and gown as the prophet who directly hears god’s words<Fig. 15>19. And green became the representative color for Islam world. As a color for the prophet Mahomet, green has been considered as a color of peace and Oasis, containing the meaning of ‘Eternal Life’. The reason why green is sacred and becomes the best color in Islam was effected from the natural conditions. For Islam nations located in deserts, green is a great being which continues the lives against death and deserts, in other words, it’s heaven. The desires for the nature, green, was reflected in their religion, and vested a strong symbolic meaning to this color. As the best color representing Islam society, green became to symbolize the prophet, the holiness of the religion, and also the eternal life acquired by this religion. The emotions of this color were spread to Islam culture and transferred till now. As symbols of Islam culture, all the members in Arab league use green for their national flags. Sharif or the prophet Mahomet and their offsprings wear green or blue turbans indicating that they finished their pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

3) Holy Spirits in Christianity

Since the middle ages, green has become to have a special meaning as one of the colors of Christian rituals. When the colors for the ritual has been established, in 12th century, green was considered as a medium color connecting black, white and red, and frequently used as a Christian color in daily life or art works, and one of the holy colors for ceremonies20). As green was defined a
color for Christianity, its role has been increased and its symbolic meaning has been strengthened in daily lives and culture of the middle ages. In the 16th century, Rome strictly defined the colors for ceremony costumes as 5 colors and it continues in modern times. Green is used for Catholic rituals with the basic three colors-white, black, and red nowadays<Fig. 16>. Green in Catholic rituals symbolizes the resurrection of Christ, joy of life, hope for eternal life, and holy spirit. It is used for normal weekends not a festival21). Saint Luke was depicted in a medieval illustration to lift a heaven in his arms. Since the purpose of this illustration was to convey Christian doctrine and to influence people, the drawing should effectively convey the holiness. The green color applied to the heaven, or the animals drinking water besides the preacher represents the holiness and the eternal life<Fig. 17>22). In stained glass, green was frequently used for the clothing of Christ and priests, and it is also confirmed the cover of Gospels.

The people’s images depicted in medieval illustrations are important materials which indicate how people in that time used the color to their clothing. Features of Christ, Virgin Mary, and status representing Trinity frequently used green to express their holiness. Green as a holy color also expressed angels or apostle in clothing. In the painting of Seraph St. Michael in the Annunciation or other paintings, angels were usually wearing holy green tunics. In Christianity, green represents the holy spirit and affects to the ritual clothing in modern Catholic. The examples of modern fashion designs that use green’s Christian image represent the symbolic meaning formed in Christianity<Fig. 18>.

V. Conclusion

As stated thus far, green has been used for costume from ancient times and given a good impression based on the thinking that it embues the beneficial nature and religious divinity. Nature imagery was extended again into both positive and negative images, ‘youth, devil, citizen and ecology image’. Youth image came from the luxurious feature of nature and it was extended again into ‘innocent love, virgin and immaturity’. On the other hand, the uneasiness and fear from nature’s dark space brought up a ‘devil image’ and the practical and naive impression of nature brought up a ‘citizen image’. According to a big concern about environment in modern society, green became a symbol of ecology.

Religious divinity imagery has been represented in the ancient Egypt, Islam and Christian religion. Green was thought as the divine color of ‘Osiris’: the god relating to the matter of life and death in ancient Egypt and of ‘Mahomet’: the supreme prophet in Islam. In Christianity, green is a divine color which has been used in rituals and symbolized the Holy Spirit.

Imageries of green which are stated on this study can be applied to modern fashion design in various ways and that will widen the range of using green in costume.

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<Fig. 1> Green Sportswear (First Lady, 2003)

<Fig. 2> Green Long Jacket, Dolce & Gabbana ('00 S/S COLLECTIONS.)

<Fig. 3> Green Jacket, Burberry ('03-'04 A/W COLLECTIONS.)

<Fig. 4> Green in Engagement Party, The Month of April (Très Riches Heures, 1997)

<Fig. 5> Green in Prenuptial Festivity, The Month of May (Très Riches Heures, 1997)

<Fig. 6> Bride’s Green Dress (A History of Illuminated Manuscripts, 1950)

<Fig. 7> Green Watteau Evening Dress, Vivienne Westwood (The Cutting Edge: 50 Years of British fashion, 1947-1997)

<Fig. 8> Green Monster, The Mass of Saint Michael (Très Riches Heures, 1997)

<Fig. 9> Green Coats of Evil Wizard Group in Harry Porter (http://www.films.co.kr)
<Fig. 10> Green One-Piece Dress of Temptress Image, Versace (’00 S/S HAUTE COUTURE.)

<Fig. 11> Green Costume of Brighella in Commedia dell’Arte (Commedia dell’Arte at the Court of Louis XIV, 1980)

<Fig. 12> Green Dress of Ecology Image, Yves Saint Laurent (’97 S/S HAUTE COUTURE.)

<Fig. 13> One-Piece Dress of Ecology Image (’01-’02 A/W HAUTE COUTURE.)

<Fig. 14> Green Osiris in Egyptian Wall Painting (The Complete Collection of World Arts, 1993)

<Fig. 15> Green Costume of Mahomet in Islam (Color Temptation, 2002)

<Fig. 16> Green Costume of Catholic Ritual, 18C (Mille Ans de Costume Français, 1991)

<Fig. 17> Sacred Green in Christianity (Purposes of Art, 1962)

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