

## A Study on Black Dress

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### Abstract

*From the viewpoint of color perspective, black has more obvious effects to impart images than dress itself. This study aims to examine black dress through the fashion history to highlight the aesthetic value of black and to make better use of black in designing.*

*Black in fashion, particularly in the guise of the little black dress, became an indispensable feature of cosmopolitan style after World War I. Designers harnessed the power of black, drawn irresistibly to its innate qualities of drama and strength of line.*

*For the past five hundred years, aside from the use of black for mourning as well as for religious, academic, legal and ceremonial dress, black with a greater or lesser dominance has been a fashion constant.*

*Since then black has been an important color in fashion. How to use black in formative designs should be studied continuously.*

*Key words : aesthetic value, color perspective, images, power of black, formative.*

### I. Introduction

Color which has become so much a part of our lives tends to have symbolic power when it is chosen and used by human beings. That is because color conveys meanings and imparts messages. Different colors were favored by different ethnic groups in different times, but black among other colors has dominated the fashion world. From the viewpoint of color perspective, black has more obvious effects to impart images than dress itself. This study aims to examine black dress through the fashion history to highlight the aesthetic value of black and to make better use of black in designing.

### II. History of Black Dress

In earlier days, black had negative symbolic images that it was used predominantly for funeral garments or dress for priests and clergymen. It was not until the 15th century when black began to be considered aesthetically and was worn in daily life.

The reason why people wear a black suit in the western culture is that they fear the dead no matter who the dead are<sup>1</sup>.

In the fifteenth century it was favoured by Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, who made deliberate and effective appearances and effective appearance clad from head to toe in stylish black. Henceforward black became a significant

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<sup>1</sup> Hee-Sun Oh, "Interesting Fashion story." (Seoul: Kyohakyongyusa, 2002), p. 49.

player in fashion.

Black asserted itself in the dress of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish aristocrats: it was favoured by the haute bourgeoisie of seventeenth-century Holland and, in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, was the not-so-secret weapon of a few daringly elegant women of the Belle Epoque in Europe and America.

Though black textiles have a long history, examples of pre eighteenth-century black clothes are rare due to the destructive characteristics of the natural dyes and fixing agents required to achieve a true black. Synthetic dyes replaced corrosive natural dyes, dramatically improving the survival rate of black dresses.

Upholding tradition, late nineteenth-century women had cut a dash, tightly corseted and compressed into black riding habits. The twentieth-century plethora of dyeing methods and recipes resulted in wide range of black, a diversity increased by the fact that every fibre and fabric responds to dye and reflects light in varying ways. Techniques, such as pleating, ruching and quilting (Fig. 1--3), add to this abundance.

During World War[] women were chiefly



<Fig. 4> Afternoon dress, Christian Dior. 1947.

confined to uniforms, the overalls of war-related occupations or remodelled pre-war clothes, while fashion marked time<sup>2</sup>. The black of mourning was dreaded though on occasion when fabrics became scarce women ran up little numbers in black-out material and were tempted by the fashion offerings of black marketeers. Graphic black has recorded shifts in style perfectly : it caught the bullishness of the squared-off, war-time silhouette and then, five years later, brought the rounded contours of the conquering New Look into sharp focus (Fig. 4) Christian Dior was a lead player in one of the most active decades



<Fig. 1> Evening gown, Mariano Fortuny. 1920.



<Fig. 2> Evening gown, Lucien Lelong. 1946.



<Fig. 3> Evening ensemble, Matilda Etches. 1947.

<sup>2</sup> Valerie Mendes, "Black In Dress," (V&A Publications, 1999), p. 12.



<Fig. 5> Mini dress, *Mary Quant*. 1967~68.



<Fig. 6> Mini dress, *Biba*. 1968.

for black in fashion, the 1950s.

The 1960s youth revolution that affected all levels of the fashion industry in Europe and America also revised the notion of the little black dress. Formerly it had been monopolized by women aged perhaps twenty-five and over: though the young might have yearned for 'slinky, shiny black dresses' they were cautioned to wait until they were 'matured, when it will give you dignity and poise' However, in the hands of a new wave of young designers creating for their own generation, black lost its smart, older woman appeal, being translated into

teenager wear(Figs. 5, 6). With her finger on the pulse, Mary Quant spearheaded the movement rejecting 1950s mannered sophistication by initiating short-skirted, body-skimming, easy-to-wear styles.

In the 1950s it was recommended that black should not be seen in the country or by the sea, but the take-over of black in the 1980s brought little black swimsuits into prominence and summer travellers were encouraged to 'pack black'.

Annexed by mainstream fashion and analysed by dress historians, the anti-fashion black clothes of rebellion and anti-establishment culture lost something of their outsider status and power to shock. An achromatic subcultural line can be tracked from the all-black leotards and skirts of American beats through the black leathers of bikers to the black cherished by punks and goths.

Punk was the product of disaffected youth, whose bondage trousers, ripped T-shirt and up-standing fluorescent hair were a rude salute to conformity<sup>3</sup>.

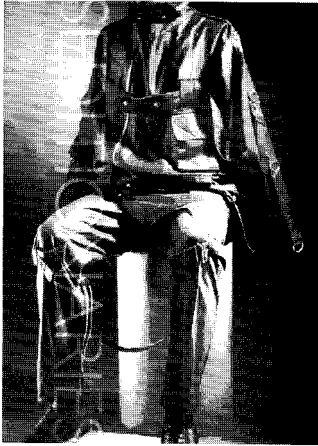
Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren harnessed black to heighten the self-conscious venom and destructive message of the iconic punk rock band the Sex Pistols. Locked into steering a coterie of disaffected youth, Westwood and McLaren, under the Seditious label, created an ideal vehicle for the lead singer Johnny Rotten-the black sateen bondage suit of 1976(Fig. 7).

Along with body piercing and spiked hair, it became part of the punk 'uniform' for either gender.Zandra Rhodes's1977 'Conceptual Chic' collection (Fig 8) recognized and adapted the brutal inventiveness of British punks, whereas the streamlined Swanky Modes disco sheath may be seen as a precursor of 1980s minimalism.

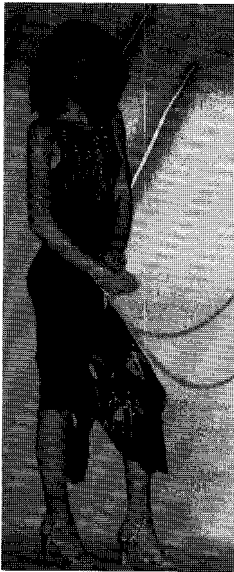
Black dominated the realms of high fashion in 1981~82 and swiftly spread to all market levels.

### III. Conclusion

<sup>3</sup> Linda Watson. "VOGUE TWENTIETH CENTURY FASHION." (Carlton Book Limited, 1999), p. 68.



〈Fig. 7〉 Bondage suit, Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren. 1976.



〈Fig. 8〉 Zandra Rhodes' 1977 version was called 'Conceptual Chic'.

Colors take an important part in fashion because they represent impression of dresses<sup>4)</sup>.

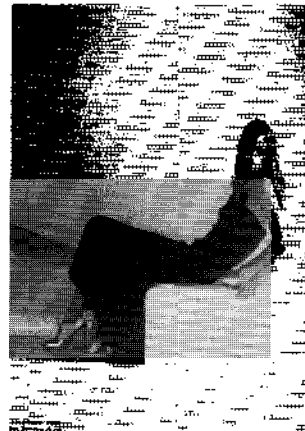
Black in fashion, particularly in the guise of the little black dress, became an indispensable feature of cosmopolitan style after World War I. Designers harnessed the power of black, drawn

irresistibly to its innate qualities of drama and strength of line. With their keen appreciation of dress history, these designers have always been aware of the black bloodline in fashion and alert to their role in its continuum. For the past five hundred years, aside from the use of black for mourning as well as for religious, academic, legal and ceremonial dress, black with a greater or lesser dominance has been a fashion constant (Figs. 9~12).

It seems that dressed in black a woman can be pious, slender, seductive or witchlike: she can



〈Fig. 9〉 GAP, 2006, P20 ALEXANDER McQUEEN.



〈Fig. 10〉 In FASHION, 2005~6, P27 GUCCI.

<sup>4</sup> Gyu Hwa-Jo, "Aesthetics of Costume." (Seoul: Kymunsa, 1988), p. 132.



〈Fig. 11〉 In FASHION, 2005~6, P43 CHANEL.



〈Fig. 12〉 HARPER'S BAZAR, P11 GIVENCHY.

stand out in a crowd or vanish into the background. Some think that the little black dress is

a soft and tedious option while others agree that black is the 'invariable choice of the elegant and well dressed'.

Since then black has been an important color in fashion. How to use black in formative designs should be studied continuously.

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