

When we put on clothes, we change the shape, texture, and outline of our **body**—sometimes quite profoundly. The **silhouettes** we cast are determined by several factors: by shifting trends in fashion, for instance, by what looks and feels good, or by our desire to project our inner essence, even when doing so departs from what is considered normal or acceptable. Clothes function as layers or armor. They can be used to augment or reduce. They allow us to pursue collective formal ideals or individual idiosyncrasies. Whether skin-tight or billowing, garments accentuate or hide certain areas or assertively claim space and attention. The constellation of little black dresses on view here exemplifies the open-ended dialogue between constancy and change in fashion, as the history of this typology is punctuated by modulations in silhouette.

Garments can also help us to travel between identities. Introduced in the mid-1960s, Yves Saint Laurent's Le Smoking was aesthetically radical yet reinforced the demarcation between genders. Rudi Gernreich's **Unisex** Project (1970), on the other hand, disregarded biological difference to focus on future emancipation and possibility, offering **fluidity** with its nonbinary approach to **gender** and deliberate subversion of dress conventions.

To help us mold, contour, and prepare our bodies for the outside world and for the image we want to project, we wear undergarments—such as the briefs, bras, shapewear, and tights on display across the gallery—that are deeply influenced not only by technological advancements but also by cultural ones. Their relevance extends beyond their functionality and moves them solidly into the realm of fashion. They enable us to embrace or reject the **beauty standards** of our time.

Garments change our **shape**, at times in ways that offer us power and freedom and at others in ways that compromise our autonomy or make us conform more closely to particular standards. Adorning the head, for example, has historically connoted power or deference, while platform shoes can transform their wearers' stature and make them more imposing. Agency can also be expressed by deliberately protecting the body's contours from public scrutiny or by emphasizing dressing for **comfort** rather than style alone. In the 1960s and '70s, the centuries-old caftan and abaya became popular in the West, where they embodied freewheeling hippie culture and jet-set beach glamour. They were relaxed, accommodating, personal, and vibrantly decorated expressions of style that graced fashion spreads but simultaneously evoked profound undercurrents—colonial, military, migratory—that encompassed many different geographies, cultures, and moments.

Human bodies are mutable and rarely conform to the beauty **standards** of any era. People gain weight, lose it, become pregnant, suffer from illnesses, and have accidents. Western fashion does not always accommodate these **deviations**. Maternity wear, for instance, has often been designed to hide—if not outright compress—growing bellies, and even today most fashion is presented on models wearing size 0 and 2, while the average size for American women is 16.

Starting in the 1980s, Japanese designers like Rei Kawakubo, Issey Miyake, and Yohji Yamamoto challenged the notion of an ideal, unchanging body by designing unstructured and even “re-formed” silhouettes, such as Kawakubo's Body Meets Dress—Dress Meets Body, on view nearby. Traces of their trailblazing work appear in today's everyday clothes, in nonchalant **asymmetries**, in the special effects achieved with new technology, and in unexpected combinations of forms and materials. By **augmenting** and **modifying** the body with clothes, we make choices about self-presentation and bring physical, practical, personal, and psychological considerations into play.

Designers of all kinds have always been fascinated with the **future**, imagining better tomorrows, building utopias through experiments in making and being, and devising solutions to problems that do not yet exist.

Both Pierre Cardin's 1960s Cosmos collection and Kerby Jean-Raymond's 2017 response to it grapple with the anticipation of and anxiety about the unknown and position clothes in clear relationship to the social, environmental, and political **ecosystems** in which they are made and worn. Companies that promote the repair and long-term use of their products, including Patagonia and Gore-Tex, take a similarly broad and long-term view. By pursuing new **material technology** and encouraging new **behaviors** aimed at reducing our environmental impact, such brands recalibrate not only their own approaches but also consumers' expectations—and through them, the whole fashion industry.

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, fashion designers have taken different launchpads into the future—from airplanes and space travel to genetic engineering, from jumpsuits to the Moon Boot, and now mushroom-spore MarsBoots. They have seen the future in aesthetic terms or as a site where we might exploit technological advances—and sometimes both. Beyond attire, scientists are now investigating how humans might self-produce sunscreen as part of their body chemistry, while new wearable technologies offer individuals (and the larger entities that harvest the data such accessories record) new ways to understand their bioscapes. Each **experiment**, speculation, or prediction sparks a chain of information sharing and shaping, synthesizing art, design, technology, and science in a generative loop between fields and expertises.

Clothing often constitutes the first physical interface between us and the world; just as what we wear can loudly announce identity or status, it can also act as a defense against public interaction or as a demarcation of personal space. *Existenzminimum* is an early-twentieth-century architectural concept of the minimum spatial requirements for domestic subsistence. In response, ***Existenzmaximum***, a term coined in the last decade, describes the metaphysical **personal spaces** created by items of technology and clothing that function as portable cocoons.

The Walkman, introduced in 1978, is an example of a device that can expand our private space well beyond the volume occupied by our physical self, as are iPods and other portable players, and earbuds and headsets of all kinds, which are often also deliberate fashion choices. Analog items like surgical masks, sunglasses, hoodies, and baseball caps offer practical protection and envelop the body in a safe bubble—as impalpable as it is real—and abstract it from the **social sphere**. However, they also form barriers around key parts of our bodies—expressive areas like the eyes and mouth, or sensory and communicative areas like the ears—sealing them off and giving us the illusion of being impenetrable. While they might help us hide and detach, their very purpose can call negative attention to those who wear them, designating them as “other.”

In the words of contemporary designer Hana Tajima, the turtleneck can both “undefine and redefine” groups and individuals, allowing “the physical form to become an expression of and an extension of our minds . . . an anti-uniform, but a uniform nonetheless [that embodies] democratization and anonymity.” The turtleneck’s generous neckline means that it is a suitable fashion staple for those who prefer moderate dress, while its eschewal of the traditional shirt collar indicates a rejection of office and formal-occasion attire. Its versatility is proven by the diversity of its wearers and the stereotypes it has engendered around them: academics, beatniks, feminists, activists, artists, modest fashionistas, and tech entrepreneurs, to name a few. In its overlapping associations, it connects the seemingly disparate nodes of **modesty**, **rebellion**, and **emancipation**, symbolizing one, two, or all three depending on the context. It belongs to a category of items that, one way or another, attempt to set us free.

Garments frequently reflect social change or unrest, and in some cases they come to be defining catalysts of such tumult. This connection is easily made with famously bold staples of rebelliousness such as leather pants and biker jackets, but even some apparently demure garments can be loaded. While often thought of as sunshine-appropriate casual wear, at their midcentury debut capri pants signified freedom and agency for women still limited to a choice between skirts and dresses. The salwar kameez has come to connote similar symbolic **agency**; it is a cipher for the young, educated women on the Indian subcontinent and beyond who—in Bollywood films, in advertisements, and often in real life, too—move with confidence from classroom to workplace to social spheres. In the 1960s, the emancipating ease of the shift dress—less incendiary and thus a more far-reaching kin of the miniskirt—liberated some women’s bodies without antagonizing the status quo.

How the body is covered or revealed has long acted as a potent metaphor for individual and collective desires and anxieties. Bodies can become physical maps, sectioned into sites of **control**: the head, the ankles, the legs. Women's bodies—often seen as dangerous and to be policed or virtuous and to be displayed as paragons—have in particular served as lightning rods for social anxieties, mores, and aspirations in too many culture wars to count.

The barely there slip dress was enshrined as minimalist chic in the 1990s by Calvin Klein, but it was the rakish, liberated pop culture provocateur Courtney Love who made underwear as outerwear part of public conversation—and, in doing so, set off paroxysms concerning everything from her femininity to her fitness as a mother. In China, the cheongsam has since its emergence about a century ago been associated with different stereotypes, including the confident and modern public figure, the bourgeois reactionary, and the fetishized other.

Swimwear fashions perfectly crystallize such pendulum swings. The first Speedo bathing suit for women was deemed so scandalously lacking in **coverage** that it almost cost an Australian Olympic swimmer her medal in 1932. Conversely, almost a century later, in 2016, French police forced a Muslim beachgoer to remove her full-coverage burkini, insisting that it violated national laws mandating the separation of religion and state. The modern bikini, on the other hand, deliberately incited controversy at its debut in the 1940s.

The regulation of dress—in the form of ancient laws, the modesty police, or fruitless parental proscriptions—occurs at the intersection of oppression, objectification, and the cultural construction of so-called appropriate behavior. **Decency, modesty, and etiquette** are measures formed by us or around us, as are their subversions.

Modesty has many sartorial expressions. It can be a subjective and personal **choice** manifested in garments that draw attention away from the body by shielding parts or all of it from external gazes (even though, ironically, such deflection sometimes results in increased and unwanted scrutiny). Or it can be the **law** of the land, codified in religious texts or secular norms, and its modulation can be variously prescribed and fiercely enforced (from Egypt to Saudi Arabia to France and beyond).

Clothes are a powerful way to convey modesty, and some garments (such as the hijab) and dress rules (regarding the length of sleeves and skirts, for instance) can communicate a particular social, religious, or political stance. Modesty can be a positive guide for getting dressed; it can also restrict choice, ensure deference, or suggest **morality** and atonement. There is no single yardstick for a modest dress code: what one person prefers might be uncomfortable or unacceptable to another.

In its more disturbing incarnations, the notion of modesty is used to instigate or validate violence. Debates about modesty are frequently coded along gender lines. For example, scholar Reina Lewis notes that although instructions concerning religious dress and behavior “logically require modesty from both genders, it is most often women who have borne the burden,” while historian Eric Silverman points out that in Judaism, “men who violate *tzniut* [modesty or privacy] insult God. . . . By contrast, immodest women endanger men.” In both religious and secular contexts, questions about attracting “**appropriate**” attention or displaying the “correct” level of humility—and the ways these standards are codified, from workplace dress codes to rules that require covering the head in places of worship, whether one is an adherent or not—are part of a conversation that eventually envelops all members of the community, from youngest to oldest and of every gender.

What we wear can help us to express pride in belonging to a community, to flaunt national **identity**, to celebrate newfound **independence** and **emancipation**, to render the memory of a faraway homeland, or to recognize the mastery of culturally specific skills.

Garments can be powerful bearers of cultural meaning. Kente, for instance, a traditional cloth that originated in West Africa, took on new associations when Ghana became the first sub-Saharan country to gain independence from colonial rule in 1957. Worn by that country's newly elected political leaders, it became a fashionable symbol of emancipation and nascent **national identity**, and of Pan-Africanism worldwide. The kilt offers another example. After the garment was banned in the Scottish Highlands in the mid-eighteenth century by the British monarchy, which saw it as a sign of Highland rebellion, it was resurrected by those who sought to reshape Scottish identity along more pliable and Romantic lines. Both items have enjoyed rich afterlives in diasporic contexts and have also been embraced by high fashion, demonstrating that the **meaning** of what we wear is always subject to the nuances of its **context** and deployment.

Craftsmanship and **material culture** proudly inform items that have come to represent whole regions of the world and which rely on localized skills prized as national treasures and jealously guarded. From the carefully calibrated design, screenprinting, and hemming of a Hermès scarf to the painstaking process of producing a Kashmiri pashmina shawl—all the way from shearing the wool to embroidering it—to the fine weave of guayabera linen, artisanship acts as a metaphor for accumulated knowledge and concretized civilization and provides a platform for both public pageantry and personal nostalgia.

Clothing and accessories whose production involves fine materials, skillful hands, and plentiful time usually command a high price. Their monetary and symbolic worth is established by both the **effort** they demand and their **rarity**. Their qualities are often reinforced by the way in which they are carefully handed down through generations—a practice encouraged by **marketing** campaigns. A diamond ring or an expensive watch can be purchased new, but it is not uncommon for them to be treasured as family heirlooms. These items are framed by the notion of **luxury** as timeless; they are to be taken care of not only because they are expensive but because they are tied to highly idealized bonds of family and marriage.

The role and perception of the wearer is key. **Appropriation**—whether by recombining, recycling, or entirely co-opting ideas and forms without attribution—is a longstanding trope of visual culture. When certain items are worn without acknowledgment of those who have historically contributed to shaping their meaning, their value can become diluted, reduced, or even misrepresented. Sometimes displacement is intentional, as in the case of Dapper Dan's Boutique, where the appropriation of signature monogram styles circumvented the original brands' refusal to stock the store.

Items can also announce **status** and self-worth. Diamond stud earrings have long been a delicate yet direct sign of comfortable financial status; in the 1990s, they gained popularity with male sports heroes and musicians, becoming supersized and prompting the creation of an entirely new descriptor: bling. Luxury items wax and wane in their popularity. While these items are always more than the sum of their parts, their foundations—gold, fur, leather, precious stones—have historically enjoyed near-universal appeal. They have also engendered covetousness, counterfeiting, environmental destruction, and conflict over their control and dispersal. Their availability is often carefully controlled through limited production that increases desirability. Whether luxury is expressed by having many choices or a handful of the finest things, it is relative to one's aspirations and social position; in many cases the luxurious items treasured by the few are built on the backs of many others who may never enjoy them.

The language of sportswear influences the look and attitude of many other types of clothing. Designer Yohji Yamamoto once declared, “The sports world and technology seek for necessity, practicality, or functionality while fashion is seeking the opposite.” Interestingly, it was Yamamoto’s own Y-3 line—a collaboration with Adidas—that helped bridge these worlds and prompted the creation of a term that has become commonplace: **athleisure**.

As well as fulfilling practical performance needs, **sportswear** is subject to stylistic concerns and can indicate complex social identities. It has been taken up by various tribes, including fitness fanatics, superfans, lager louts, and SoulCycle disciples, and by those who are willing to spend large sums for highly engineered and beautifully designed pieces of kit. Sportswear is often worn outside the gym, as one more wardrobe choice for city dwellers with fluid work schedules and locations.

Items that were once valued exclusively for their utilitarian performance qualities have come to be prized for their forward-looking designs and adaptability to modern life. This is evident in myriad examples from the past hundred years or so, from the widespread adoption of knitted textiles inspired by tennis and bathing costumes in the first quarter of the twentieth century to the proliferation of collector-worthy sneakers in the twenty-first. The late 1970s and early 1980s saw the birth of an entirely new category of fashion—**streetwear**—in which sports-inspired designs come into contact with artists and subcultures to create clothes that are at once individual and utilitarian and have inspired cultish devotion in their wearers.

A **uniform** is a standardized item or ensemble deemed appropriate for a certain occasion or setting, such as school or the military; it can also describe a piece of clothing or an accessory that is worn so often that it becomes a default. In many workplaces, staples like the Oxford-cloth button-down shirt or the pencil skirt offer **templates** that are then differentiated by quality of fabric or the flair of the individual wearer. Such **standardizations**, whether unofficial or dictated by human resources departments, help to produce orderly professional environments. The attire of one person can set—even mandate—that of many others: the Mao jacket is a potent and deeply charged example.

A uniform, often born as a practical garment worn by many individuals engaged in the same activity, can be repurposed as a badge of **belonging**, as in the case of the plaid flannel shirt, which was popular with workers and outdoorsmen long before it was adopted by grunge and indie rock musicians in the 1990s. In general, a uniform depends on social location and cultural context. For example, Dutch Wax textiles—inventive, dynamic, and used in a plethora of garments and accessories, from head wraps to evening gowns—may seem the antithesis of uniform, but it is produced in massive quantities, indicating that it is in some sense a wide-ranging shared style. Similarly broadly disseminated but often personalized in form and character are **humble masterpieces** like the flip-flop, the loafer, and Levi's 501 jeans. Their worldwide adoption was made possible by the intersection of large-scale industrial production, globalized markets, and mass media.

In a 2012 interview with *Vanity Fair*, President Barack Obama explained that he wore only gray or blue suits because he was “trying to pare down decisions . . . because I have too many other decisions to make.” Performer RuPaul punctures the emphasis on facade, status, judgment, and deference demanded by many uniforms by insisting that there is no difference between “a person who dresses up in a three-piece suit and goes to Wall Street [and] a person who dresses up in a polyester uniform and works at McDonald's. . . . It's all drag.”

Power is channeled by the clothes we wear. Either individually or collectively, we decide the meaning of garments and accessories and the image they project to the world. “Fashion is the armor to survive the reality of everyday life,” said Bill Cunningham, the late, great photographer whose work was for decades a mainstay of the *New York Times*. The suit is a powerful example of modern armor that has evolved dramatically over the past century. As a typology, the suit was once reserved for the professional sphere, the private club, and the bespoke tailor’s premises—all of which were, until recently, exclusively male and predominantly white. Styles like the zoot suit of the Jazz Age challenged this **hegemony**; its first adopters were primarily black and Hispanic Americans, for whom it afforded a form of freedom at a time of entrenched racism, even as others deemed it scandalous. In the last half-century, as women flooded the workplace, policies guarding equal employment opportunities as well as several waves of feminism and civil rights movements helped change the suit’s gendered stereotype. A more recent response to the obvious **hard** power strategies of the conventional suit was Donna Karan’s Seven Easy Pieces; **soft** and subtle but commanding, her concept launched a thousand capsule wardrobes for professional women.

What power looks like has recently evolved in pivotal ways. Today, the most dominant person in the room might not subscribe to the dress dictates of yesteryear, and the three-piece suit might instead be donned by the underling. Paired with a hoodie and jeans in the boardroom, the T-shirt signals an indifference to established codes. The white T-shirt also allows us to interrogate the lopsided power relations that are part of its DNA, including those that shaped the cotton industry, built on the backs of enslaved people in this country and beyond; the labor involved in its cutting and sewing; and its environmental footprint throughout its life cycle.