

FASHION AND MODERNITY

Patricia M. Mulready, New York University
New York City, NY 10003

This study examines the historical foundations and evolution of fashion in Northern Europe during the medieval period, from 900 to 1400 A.D. Theoretical constructs that have been presented as initiating fashion are important precursors and/or enhancers of fashion change, but they do not singularly account for it. Status competition, market economies, extensive communication and trade, urbanization all existed in highly developed forms in China and the Middle Eastern countries that were contemporary with medieval Europe, however these areas did not have fashion. Thus it is clear that the underpinnings of fashion theory were not adequately fastened to reality.

This study examines the theoretical constructs utilizing an empirical, comparative, socio-psychological/historical approach. Those precursors which were central to fashion theory were examined as to their presence and timing in different parts of Northern Europe during the medieval period and their relationship to changes in dress. Dress took on a different meaning and reflected a changing view of the self and society. The speed-up in the change of dress styles corresponds to the 12th century Renaissance--a result of the impact of the sudden, overwhelming rush of the re-opening of world communication/trade with the preexisting propensity for ostentatious display of the Franks. This resulted in new ways of approaching culture and a changing view of the self (Elias, 1939/1978)--the rise of the individual and increased gender differentiation (Stannard, 1972).

Blumer's (1969) concept of fashion being a means of adapting to social change can be applied to the origins of fashion in the Middle Ages. Konig's (1972) integrated approach, which combined most of the theories of fashion, is most explanatory, especially when juxtaposed with Elias' "civilizing process," whereby multitudes of factors interact with individuals and society, resulting in mutually reinforcing changes in the micro and macro levels of society. Thus, fashion resulted from several centuries of development, where changes in individual self concept interacted with culture and society to produce a new way of viewing and presenting the self. This suggests that the macro differences in the development of the eventual states of France, Britain, and the Low Countries would be reflected in the peoples' use of fashion and dress. Thus, Elias' example of France as the epitome of centrifugal, competitive, and then coalescing forces in state formation can be seen in France's lead in the development of fashion. Blumer, H.G. (1969) "Fashion: from class differentiation to collective selection." The Sociological Quarterly 10:275-91.

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DRESS, GENDER IDENTITY, AND THE PUBLIC DISPLAY OF SKIN

Joanne B. Eicher, University of Minnesota
St. Paul, Minnesota

Eicher (1981) proposed that the dressed body could be analyzed in relationship to presenting the public, private, and secret self. This paper draws from 8 field trips and archival documents to analyze gender and public presentation of the Kalabari of Nigeria, relating to expectations for body coverage and skin display.

Kalabari males and females have a hierarchy of dress that emphasizes sociopolitical status for males and sociophysical status for females (Michelman and Erekosima, 1992). These hierarchies differ. Adult males in public are expected to cover their bodies from neck to foot with garments, for public formal ceremonies or everyday activities; in private, they may be bare-chested. In contrast, females in public ceremonies are expected to cover the genital area after onset of menstruation, but traditionally exposed the breasts as a sign of beauty, eligibility for marriage, or accomplishment of motherhood. Today, as a result of knowing Western standards of modesty, females cover the breasts, but leave their shoulders bare for public ceremonies known as *bite pakiri inwain*, *konju fina*, and *iriabo*. Adult women in everyday public life are expected to cover both upper and lower body.

The difference in the amount of skin display and coverage of the body for male and female relate to the basic orientation of adult males and females in public life, for males are seen as sociopolitical figures who are formally responsible for power and economic decisions, and females are seen as sociophysical figures, formally responsible for the reproduction of Kalabari society. In conclusion, Kalabari gender differences are similar to the display of body coverage and skin in the Academy Awards and many wedding ceremonies in American society.

References:

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