

DRAWING FASHION

Colin McDOWELL,

Fashion Critic

Taking an instrument in one's hand and using it to mark a surface is almost as old as humankind. Cases across the globe – and, I am sure, many more as yet discovered – prove this on virtually every continent. Equally as interesting, nearly all the marks so far discovered are representational and, as anyone who has seen Werner Herzog's recent film of cave drawings in France will be aware, created with considerable manual dexterity and observational skill, not to mention a clear understanding of the subject.

That movement of hand-held tool over a surface has remained at the core of our civilizations and their differently developed artistry has continued until the end of the last century as the major basis for representing not only the object but also the emotion that arises from its depiction as interpreted by the person whose hand is holding the instrument – by no means always an 'artist'.

But we are looking at the work of artists – and of a particular kind. Those who wish to depict the human figure. Traditionally, European portraiture was based on the exploratory sketch, in pencil, silver point, charcoal or chalk – or even with thinned oil paint or water colour. Some of the most moving work in the history of Western civilization falls into this category: Rembrandt, Reubens, Leonardo, Michelangelo and the many who worked before them or followed after did their initial thinking and problem-solving on paper. Even with modern artists, exhibitions of 'Works on Paper' pull in the crowds. The reason is that we hope that the complex thought processes of the artist might be revealed in works less formal and 'finished' than the final canvas.

The lure of drawing is more than that. Tentative, unfinished, scrubbed out – the drawing brings us close to the heart and mind of the artist. And that is why, although fashion drawing normally remains just that – a drawing or sketch – and is rarely used as a stage towards a work using oil, tempura or any other more permanent pigment, it gains in immediacy and emotional intensity over more formal and complete representations of the human form.

And that is why the lessening use of fashion drawings in our fashion magazines is such a tragedy – especially as the drawn figure is still the basis for idea testing and figure representing in more fashion houses. From the grandest couture house to the mass-market manufacturer, drawings are the things that explain thoughts and enable ideas to be understood and exchanged. In the cabine at a fashion show, polaroids are attached to the garments as an aide memoire for the dressers, but the crucial boards showing everything, including swatches of fabric, are always drawn. The reason is that

drawing shows the personality of the garment but does not presuppose a particular personality in the model who will eventually wear it, and amalgamate her personality with that of the clothing.

We will return to the artistry of fashion drawing but, at this point, it seems sensible to face up to the battle rumbling, unacknowledged, in modern fashion depiction. We are talking about the battle between drawing and photography – and which one most successfully parallels the moods and wishes of the designer.

To look at any ‘glossy’ magazine is to be convinced that their editors, stylists and publishers have clearly opted for fashion photographs in order to show all the different types of clothing featured in the several stories a well-balanced magazine must have. The decision is made on availability and cost of models, photographers and all the many – and extremely costly – participants in a fashion shoot. I have been part of many such discussions over the years and can recall no moment when anyone present suggested that a drawing might work at least as well and possibly better to give the reader the sense of a particular fashion. On the rare occasions when fashion drawings do appear in *Vogue*, *Harper's*, *Elle* and all the other expensive magazines published monthly, bi-monthly or bi-annually, they are not real fashion drawings. They are the sad efforts of a fashion illustrator chosen for cheapness and instructed to make the drawing look as much like a photograph as is possible.

Only a fool would say that a photograph by, say, Irving Penn or Horst B Horst lacks the character of a drawing by Eric or Bérard but, it has to be noted that most of the great black and white photographs of the first half of the twentieth century – the work of Hoyningen-Huene; Beaton; Henry Clarke or Hiro – concentrate on the garment in exactly the way a fashion artist does. Their backgrounds are not always neutral as those for drawings of the period are, but they always have the same stillness and interaction between image and background of those drawings – which is why the really great photographic portraits of clothes were almost entirely created before the fifties.

After that, fashion photography, influenced by television advertising, set out to create fashion *mis en scene*: clothes shown in a disco; on a beach; in a chic restaurant; even (in the cases of Helmut Newton and Steven Meisel) in a hospital. The garment became only an element in editorial pages less about fashion than lifestyle. Predictable and repetitive, such an approach focused attention on the peripheral surroundings of the image quite as much – and often more than – the actual garments it featured. It is an approach – clothes shown in naturalistic settings – that goes back at least two centuries and one that was very common in the early years of the twentieth century, when the pochoir fashion drawings of Iribe, Erte and Marty were featured in specialist fashion journals such as *La Gazette du Bon Ton* or *Art Goût Beauté*, often with a whimsical humour that engaged the reader's imagination. It was that form of illustration that early photographers of the calibre of Baron de Meyer and Edward Steichen were influenced by, before technical advances gave them wings to fly on different routes by the time the twenties had dawned.

But fashion drawing took longer than that to be subverted. It was accepted that readers liked illustrations because they could imagine themselves actually wearing a drawn fashion, a privilege accorded to only a very few when the dress is photographed on a modern supermodel. The soft line of Erik; the bold outlines of Gruau; the sophisticated ‘cool’ of Bouché all found an answering cord in the woman turning the page of the magazine. Even the quick, impressionistic fashion drawings of Christian Bérard spoke to them. His technique was to portray the dress and to leave the face largely unformed – an approach that lost him his job on *Harper’s Bazaar*, whose owner, William Randolph Hearst, dismissively called him ‘Faceless Freddie’. *Vogue* was more prescient and snapped him up immediately, realising that he was the fashion illustrator of the era – and, incidentally, the man who according to contemporary Parisian insiders, the man who gave Christian Dior the initial idea for the New Look.

Grace, charm, elegance, panache – the words used to describe fashion in the glory years than ended in the sixties – are repeatedly found in the descriptions of the fashion illustrations of the first half of the twentieth century, and it says much for the oversimplification of modern fashion that they have all be subsumed into the fashion word most common today. ‘Sexy’ is all that we seem to require as description now. In other words, the individuality that fashion illustrators gave to their drawings has gone just as much as variety has. And that brings us to the final point to be made concerning fashion illustration as a vital part of fashion.

The period that saw the decline of drawing as a fashion force coincides with many social changes, from the redistribution of wealth to the de-formalisation of social life and the lowering of the age of fashion credibility, all of which changed the fashion demographic. Young women now obtain their fashion information very quickly and from a variety of sources: TV, newspaper fashion supplements and, above all, websites, blogs and Twitter bring fashion to them within seconds of it being launched. It would seem that fashion illustration as a valid art form is finally finished – but I would propose that it is the traditional glossy magazines that are most under threat. Would it not be sensible to make their USP the reintroduction of glamorous, elegant fashion illustrations, not for little snippets at the front or back of ‘the book’ but for the major seasonal stories? Such an approach might also help to reinstate couture as the only remaining fashion that is not aimed at 25-year-old readers. There are Watteaus and Bouchers out there. All they need is the chance to shine.