

Reform Dress in the Collection of the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

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Introduction

In the early 20th century, many other movements contributed to the dress reform movement in the Netherlands. There was a desire to give women greater physical freedom by making it possible for them to lay aside their corsets and wear clothes that were less restrictive and more practical and hygienic. How such clothing should be designed was an interesting question. In the Netherlands, various solutions were advocated.¹ Some of them reflected international trends, while others were more peculiar to the dress reform movement in the Netherlands. Some approaches were more conservative, while others were extremely radical. In certain European countries, most of the ideas for alternative forms of female attire were advanced by artists, such as Henry van de Velde (Brussels), Alfred Mohrbutter (Berlin) and Gustav Klimt (Vienna).² In the Netherlands, however, it was women themselves who designed and made their own reform clothing. In doing so, they made use of the platform provided by the Dutch Society for the Improvement of Women's Dress (*Vereeniging voor Verbetering van Vrouwenkleeding* or V.v.V.v.V.), established in 1899.³

Since 'artistic' reform dress constituted a statement concerning the wearer's whole philosophy of life, it ignored Paris fashions and was intended to be purely aesthetic. Most of the women involved in the Dutch dress reform movement were members of wealthy families and had advanced ideas about society and art. The V.v.V.v.V.'s membership included leading players in the women's emancipation movement, like

¹ The dress reform movement also concerned itself with children's clothing. This aspect is disregarded here because of space restrictions. In 1984, an exhibition on 'Reform Dress in the Netherlands' was held in the Centraal Museum in Utrecht and featured items on loan from the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag. This article is based on research done for: Madelief Hohé, *Mode ♥ Kunst*, exhib. cat. (Gemeentemuseum Den Haag), Zwolle 2011.

² Meij 1982/1983, Mackrell 2005, p. 109, Sterenborg 2010.

³ The Society was set up following the 1898 National Exhibition of Women's Labour (*Nationale Tentoonstelling van Vrouwenarbeid*). Schnitger 1984, p. 1. A few male Dutch artists did show an interest in reform clothing. Examples include Jan Toorop and Gustave van der Wall Perné. Toorop indicated that he would be willing to produce designs, but apparently never did so. Gustave van der Wall Perné was a member of the V.v.V.v.V. and worked at the trade school it established. He designed a few examples of reform dress and wrote and lectured on the subject. Schnitger 1993, p. 86.

Aletta Jacobs (the Netherlands' first ever woman doctor), but also women from well-established families in The Hague and Amsterdam who realised the importance of well-designed clothing, hygiene and freedom of movement. Many of them entertained Socialist ideas and showed an interest in esoteric philosophical movements like Spiritism and Theosophy, which had emerged in the 19th century; some were also vegetarians.⁴ Many members of the dress reform movement were striving to create a better, more democratic world and saw reform dress as part of a whole new way of life. However, the physical movement offered by reform dress also made it attractive to Dutch women living in the tropical climate of the colonial Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia) and to stage performers like singers and actresses.

This article discusses examples of early 20th-century Dutch dress reform with reference to a number of items now in the collection of the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag. In 2011, these items played a prominent part in the Gemeentemuseum's 'Fashion ♥ Art' exhibition, which featured examples of 20th-century clothing in the context of the visual arts.⁵

Liberty at Metz & Co, Amsterdam

In 19th-century England, a number of avant-garde artistic movements addressed the issue of dress reform. Artists from the Pre-Raphaelite, Aesthetic, and Arts and Crafts movements all showed an interest in the creation of alternative, artistically designed garments.⁶ They sought inspiration both in the past and in nature. Liberty's of London responded to the demand for fine fabrics in artistic colours for use in these alternative forms of dress. From 1884 the store also sold Aesthetic clothing in a specially established 'Dress Department' headed by architect E.W. Godwin, a well-known member of the Aesthetic movement.⁷ The clothes were designed in accordance with the philosophy of the dress reform movement and were therefore to be worn without corsets. Collaboration with artists gave them an aesthetic basis. They often featured

⁴ Schnitger 1984, pp. 4-5.

⁵ The exhibition ran from 3 September 2011 to 8 January 2012.

⁶ Meij 1982/1983, p. 24.

⁷ Meij 1982/1983, p. 24.

neo-historical styles, 'artistic' colours, and beautiful embroidery.⁸ When a leading Amsterdam fashion firm, Metz & Co, became the 'Sole agents in Holland for Liberty & Co Lmt. London' in 1902, people in the Netherlands were able to acquaint themselves with Liberty's ideas. Metz sold Liberty fabrics and, from 1904, Liberty dress imported from London.⁹ Metz's customers were generally progressively-minded women whose clothing was a deliberate statement about their philosophy of life.¹⁰ The Gemeentemuseum Den Haag possesses a wonderful lady's outfit made by Liberty and comprising a high-waisted skirt, a jacket and a smocked blouse. It is a top example of the Aesthetic look produced by Liberty at that time. The outfit was worn by Mrs Henriette Wilhelmina Zeverijn-Wichers (1869-1912) (**ill. 1**). The company's surviving order books show that she placed several orders with Metz & Co of Amsterdam over the 1906-1908 period.¹¹

A quest for a new aesthetic

Liberty's ideas were reflected in the V.v.V.v.V.'s monthly magazine, *Maandblad der Vereeniging voor Verbetering van Vrouwenkleeding* (first published November 1899 and henceforth referred to as the *Maandblad*). Within the V.v.V.v.V., there was a lively internal debate on the form that reform dress should take. Photographs of Dutch women (well-known and otherwise) wearing outfits of their own creation were regularly published in its monthly magazine and show how women were drawing inspiration from the costumes of the Middle Ages, Renaissance and classical antiquity. The magazine also regularly featured classically inspired designs by Madame Margaine Lacroix of Boulevard Hausmann 191 in Paris. A reform dress by Margaine Lacroix survives in the collection of the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag (**ill.**

⁸ The silks were specially dyed for Liberty in 'artistic' colours: subtle shades in a range of colours very different from the aniline dyes usual in the Paris fashions of the day. The poetic names of e.g. Liberty's silk velvets also allude to the current interest in nature: 'Hydrangea, Turquoise, Tomato, Mist Blue, Haze Blue, Sun flower, Dark Peacock, Cream Lemon White, Oakleaf, Jade and Myrtle.' *Velveteen Liberty & Co Ltd. London*, cat. no. KA 22911, collection Amsterdam Museum, Amsterdam.

⁹ Timmer 1995, p. 22, and folder published by Metz, containing text by Constance Wibaut, spring 1960.

¹⁰ Timmer 1995, p. 23.

¹¹ Documentation on C.H. Zeverijn-Wichers, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag; Metz & Co appointments diaries, Amsterdam City Archives, no. 977, 191 (no. 628, 3-10-1906 and no. 629, 3-10-1906), 192 (no. 301, 10-12-1906), 195 (no. 169, dated 30-1-1908). Her name occurs a number of times in 1906 and 1908, being given as 'Mrs C.C. Zeverijn' (i.e. with the initials of her husband, Christiaan Cornelis Zeverijn).

2).¹² This extremely elegant high-waisted gown with a train clearly reflects the ideas of the reform movement, albeit in a rather toned-down version.

'Shapeless bags' or tasteful reform dress

Within the V.v.V.v.V., there was a constantly recurring debate on the relationship between dress reform and fashion, and on the question of how to make reform dress more visually attractive. Discussions in the monthly magazine suggest that there was more than one type of reform dress. Surviving examples reveal major differences between the clothing of the most orthodox members of the Society and the more fashionable variants in circulation. For example, there was a clash of opinion on whether or not gowns should have trains. Opponents thought trains were unhygienic, whereas supporters were apparently unwilling to abandon the dictates of the Paris fashion world on this point.¹³ Because of their wide cut – very different from the closely tailored mainstream fashions of the day – reform dresses were reviled as 'shapeless bags' ('*hobbezakken*') and the magazine reported that the unattractive appearance of reform dress was a reason for many women not to wear it. Scrutiny of the *Maandblad* reveals that many Dutch reform outfits were individual creations, with decoration and colour schemes reflecting the influence of the Dutch equivalent of Art Nouveau (known as *Nieuwe Kunst*). The decorations tended to be geometrical and a favourite colour scheme involved shades of purple and green. The popularity of these colours may be linked to the symbolism then ascribed to colours, for example among suffragettes in England. From 1908, members of the Women's Social and Political Union saw purple as standing for dignity, white for purity and green for hope.¹⁴ These general features of Dutch reform dress are exemplified by gowns now in the collection of the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag (**ill. 3**). They were probably owned by Mrs E. Huender-Wegener Sleswijk, who is listed in the records of the V.v.V.v.V. as a

¹² *Maandblad*, 1 July 1901, p. 68. Members of the V.v.V.v.V. were informed of Margaine Lacroix's work as early as 1901, when the July issue of the Society's magazine discussed a creation by her called 'Sylphide'. The illustration was taken from *La Nouvelle Mode* (5 May 1901) and the outfit was supposed to be worn without a corset. A paper pattern for it could be ordered from the firm of V. Schmit, Leidschestraat 3, Amsterdam. Patterns for all the models featured in the magazine could be bought from this address, as the *Maandblad* emphasized in 1901.

¹³ Schnitger 1984, p. 15.

¹⁴ www.en.wikipedia.org/suffragette.

member of its Enschede section in 1904/1905.¹⁵ They are extremely wearable high-waisted models, although they do have small trains as a concession to current mainstream fashion.

The Trade School for the Improvement of Women and Children's Dress

In 1909, anxious to increase the availability of good reform clothing, the V.v.V.v.V. set up its own 'Trade School for the Improvement of Women's and Children's dress' (*Vakschool voor Verbeetering van Vrouwen- en Kinderkleeding*) where pupils were trained to be professional producers of garments satisfying the ideals of the V.v.V.v.V..¹⁶ The Gemeentemuseum Den Haag possesses a dress designed by the school's headmistress, Marie Faddegon, and worn by one of its teachers, Bastiana Schot (**ill. 4**).¹⁷ The ankle-length dress is designed in accordance with the 'Thierbach method', named after the inventor, a Dutch woman called Marie Thierbach-Paris.¹⁸ The Thierbach method was well-known in reform circles and was a way of 'tailoring' baggy dresses roughly to the intended wearer's body by pinning and then sewing vertical folds in the garment. The construction of these and other reform dresses often showed a desire to relieve the shoulders of some of the weight of the garment. At the time, excessive weight on the shoulders was thought to be unhealthy because the tops of the lungs were believed to be situated in that area of the body.

A design by Marie Beijers-de Graaff

At the start of the new century, women in the Netherlands were looking not only for new a new silhouette, but also for new kinds of decoration on their clothing. They knew about the elegant designs produced elsewhere by Art Nouveau artists like Henry van de Velde and Alfred Mohrbutter. Once again, they looked to the equivalent Dutch movement (*Nieuwe Kunst*) to provide a suitable style of decoration, usually in the form of embroidery or batik. One very fine example of this is a woollen dress

¹⁵ Archive of the *Vereeniging Vakschool voor Verbeetering van Vrouwen- en Kinderkleeding*, cat. O. 899, no. 122, Annual report and membership list for 1904/1905, in the Amsterdam City Archives.

¹⁶ Schnitger 1984, p. 18.

¹⁷ The Amsterdam Museum possesses a blue satin dress with brown silk embroidery that was also designed by Faddegon, while the Centraal Museum in Utrecht has a pale green dress that was worn by a prominent member of the V.v.V.v.V., Mrs J.L. Redeke-Hoek. The dress was made for her at the Society's trade school.

¹⁸ Schnitger 1984, p. 49, 50 and Schnitger 1993, p. 86.

designed by Marie Beijers-de Graaff in around 1904/1905 for her own use (**ill. 5**). Marie Beijers-de Graaff was a member of the V.v.V.v.V and in this creation she managed both faithfully to reflect the principles of reform dress and to create an extremely elegant outfit. The dress has a high-waisted woollen skirt attached to a bodice made of cotton lining material. Over this, she wore a woollen bolero that is beautifully appliquéd with flowing decorative motifs in a pale green woollen fabric. Among the practical features of the outfit are the front fastening on the dress and a concealed pocket in the skirt, accessed via an opening in the seam.

An eye-catching butterfly dress

The stylised butterfly on a 1914 dress designed by actor Herman Kloppers is a fine example of the avant-garde embroidery of the period (**ill. 6**). The butterfly adorns both the front and the back of the dress's neckline and is designed in *Nieuwe Kunst* style. Its bright colours – an eye-catching combination of bright green, purple and lilac – give it a very modern and artistic look. The dress was designed for an actress known as Else van Duyn. Her real name was Peggy Nicoline Moltzer (1881-1930), and she married Kloppers in 1914. Else van Duyn was a prominent member of the Dutch Anthroposophical movement and the design of the dress reflects her philosophical interests. The outfit is made of lilac silk and consists of a two separated garments: a shift and an overdress decorated with the embroidered butterflies and wooden beads. Else van Duyn must have been a conspicuous sight when she wore the butterfly dress on the streets of The Hague since Queen Wilhelmina, passing in her carriage, is said to have turned round to stare at her as she walked past.¹⁹

The new ideas gain greater currency

Between 1910 and 1920, a more geometrical style emerged, reflecting the ideas of the contemporary Cubists, Wiener Werkstätte and De Stijl movement. The flowing lines of the Liberty dresses were already out of date. The alternative wardrobe of a Dutch lady known as 'Miss M. Fokker', now in the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, includes several comfortable Modernist dresses made of sturdy cotton or woollen fabrics with geometrical patterns (**ill. 7**). The position of women was greatly affected

¹⁹ Meij 1998, p. 53. See also documentation on Else van Duyn in the collection of the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, including information provided by Herman Kloppers' second wife, Mrs J.E. Kloppers-van Kempen.

by the First World War, employment outside the home, and the growing influence of sport and other activities in which women were increasingly engaging. Couture designer Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel was the personification of the modern young woman of the era. With youthful panache, she designed sporty women's clothes that drew on the conventions of male attire, for the first time introducing jumpers, cardigans, suits and dresses made of fabrics like jersey onto the fashion scene. In the 1920s, these elements are echoed in the creations of Dutch designer Mies van Os: modernity, geometrical decoration and freedom of movement (**ill. 8**). The changes in functionality and hygiene that occurred in mainstream female fashions in the 1920s were actually far more effective in liberating women than the dress reform movement had managed to be. In the Netherlands, therefore, the V.v.V.v.V.'s monthly magazine ceased publication in 1926.²⁰ The movement's ideals had found their way into mainstream society and been overtaken by other developments.

²⁰ *Onze Kleding* ('Our clothing') ceased to appear as a separate publication in 1920, but continued for a time as part of another magazine called *In en om de Woning* ('In and around the home'). Schnitger 1984, p. 21.