

Visions of the Body——Body Images and Fashion in the 20th Century

Akiko Fukai

Chief Curator, The Kyoto Costume Institute

Dialogue between Clothes and the Body

Our bodies wear clothes. to meet the demands of the times and society, clothes have become fashion. Fashion can be regarded as the story of the fictitious body as a visible surface.

Until the 19th century, in the history of European fashion, clothes, working in concert with the body, created new forms through the interposition between them of "foundation," a sub-structure which functions creatively. It created extravagant forms and proliferated intricate decorations on the surface. However, in the 20th century the relationship between clothes and the body showed a different development from that of the previous centuries where it was ensconced in a uniform, visual space. Clothes and the body-fashion-changed, became the subject, and was no longer an object simply to be seen. As the art of the 20th century was devoted to an expression of the self, the body itself became a powerful medium of expression in fashion.

Although in general we must concede to Lemoine-Luccioni's statement that "women had no bodies of their own until the beginning of the 1980s. Courrège's line, Dior's line, Saint-Laurent's line..... They were as different as their handwriting,"¹ the multifaceted relationship between the body and fashion blossomed around us at the end of the 20th century. How did it happen and where does it intend to go? How did the 20th century culture actualize body images in fashion?

Before the Corset

The history of European fashion follows the effort to reconstruct proportions of the body. Underwear initially facilitated the visual tricks, and certain exaggerations favored by each era. The plaster busts produced by the Kyoto Costume Institute (KCI), based upon its research on clothes since the 18th century, distinctly show these developments. It is interesting to note how the malleable parts of the woman's body such as breasts and waist, changed. The body has been reconstructed according to the aesthetic sense and social ideals of the times.

Fashion, up until the 19th century, had already begun to acquire 20th century devices of fabrication

and structure. However, in the creation of clothes there was a fundamental difference from that of the 20th century, which resulted from what society required in women's clothes. To be more precise, it can be said that the function of women's clothes was to indirectly display the social status or the wealth of men. Therefore, how functional and comfortable clothes were was not an issue like it is today in the relationship between the body and clothes, and the visual form and decorativeness that make up the outer structure were pursued. Marcel Proust alluded clearly to this fundamental difference in *Remembrance of Things Past*.² A dress is created with the woman's body as a support, an inner structure, and it became possible through the interposition of foundation garments since the Renaissance, which determined the body proportion and supported the visual tricks of clothes from the inside, such as the corset, worn on the upper body to support the breasts and shape the waist, and hoops, called by different names at different times like crinoline and bustle, which freely changed the shape of skirts. Jean-Paul Gaultier (cat.88-90) and Vivienne Westwood (cat.91) repeatedly tried to establish the corset as outer wear in the eighties by reversing the inner and outer clothes. It was also an attempt at making the boundary between outer wear and underwear blurred.

It was not that there had not been any interesting attempt already in the 19th century as found in the relationship between clothes and the body in the 20th century. Corsets, for instance, had been discarded for a time in France after the French Revolution, and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement and Rationalism in England and Amelia Bloomer's dress reform linked with the feminist movement heralded the clothes of the 20th century. However, although women's clothes in European culture until the 19th century dynamically changed their outer forms and applied colorful modifications on the surface, in essence they had evolved in a quite uniform expression. The function of clothes then was never related to the body but was related instead to society, to show woman's role in society.

The Discovered Body

Abandonment of the Corset, Exposure of Legs and the Mini

When Pablo Picasso painted *Les Femmes d'Alger* in 1907, the body started to become an index of all things in art and a dialogue between the body and clothes became quite loquacious in the 20th century. It was 1906, when Paul Poiret declared the destruction of the corset. However, women continued to use corsets in real life and it was only after World War I when women's social status and lifestyle changed drastically that they finally discarded corsets. Since then with the release from social and moral constraints, clothes evoked the body as found in a great stream of "body natural," i.e. the body laid in a new framework. A search started from every direction for ways to be involved with it. Paul Poiret created a dress which released women from corsets, and although it took ten years for this practice to be generally accepted, it was significant that he changed the course of fashion to new directions. Dresses in crepe de Chine by Madeleine Vionnet (cat.37), pleated dresses by

Mariano Fortuny (cat.35) and suits by Gabrielle Chanel (cat.42), as examples of fashions created one after another at the end of the 1910s, were trials in expression and attempts to actualize the new relationship between the body rediscovered and clothes. The rediscovery of the body was also the discovery of legs. After World War I European women, for the first time in history, bared their legs up to the knees under dramatically shortened hemlines, as a result of a changing society demanding functionality in women's clothes. However, the creation of stockings in natural flesh colors, accentuating the bared effect (a dual meaning that she was wearing hose but appeared bare), was probably a compromise with the past. Women's legs gained increased notability in society of the 1960s with the advent of the mini dress and the final ascent of the hemline to the mid thigh. Simultaneously women's trouser suits became accepted by society.

Social changes required women's clothes to be functional and comfortable. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, mentioned above, illustrates that the body is made of moveable parts. As the Ballets Russes and Isadora Duncan showed on stage and tennis player Suzanne Lenglen displayed on the court, clothes can serve to absorb the "movement" of the body. Coco Chanel gave clothes functionality in their relationship with the body, and established the style of clothes today in which the wearer, a woman, takes the initiative (cat.42). From the end of the 19th century men's clothes had already started to be adopted into women's wardrobes. This is an important aspect from the stance of gender politics as well. The changes adopted in women's wardrobes via the precedent of clothes which matched the rational movement of the body to practical function, medical and ethical practices were expanded to begin to serve the specific needs of women in everyday life.

Visions of Forms

Women's release from the corset and form with the constrained waist as a fulcrum signaled the relationship between clothes and the body entering a new phase. Form extended along the vertical axis, the fulcrum centered in the beam of the shoulder from which clothes now descended to the hemline of the skirt establishing space between the surface and the body. Supported by the amazing development of materials in the 20th century, development in cutting theory, interaction with artistic ideas, and possibilities of creating clothes other than in the context of European culture, expanded the potential for form never experienced before. In the face of these changes the body continued to be conceived in the form of a dress.

The "New Look" by Dior, created in 1947, paradoxically converted the actual suffering, destroyed and weakened postwar body of society to a fashion image of a woman of ideal elegance, or more precisely a form of a woman, through a sympathetic appeal to a prewar past. For instance, Dior encouraged the use of foundation garments reminiscent of corsets, such as the "Merry Widow," and clothes again took on a form with the waist as a fulcrum.

In the 1930s, women with voluptuous figures like those of the ancient Greek Venus as seen in Man Ray's photograph, modeled bias-cut dresses by Vionnet incorporating the elasticity of fabric used on the bias, and streamlined dresses by Edward Molyneux (cat.38) made these voluptuous figures appear even more striking. Fashion did not go beyond reality and as if it adhered to reality clothes followed the body faithfully. What helped to shape the curves were the bra and girdle which evolved from the corset.

Movement to shape one's own body to correspond with fashion trends had already started in the 1920s. When the rapidly mounting concern for one's health became paramount and brought a boom in exercises and physical fitness in the 1970s, the conscientiously built-up body along the lines of Lisa Lyon to Madonna, and the availability of elastic materials that the technology of the 20th century, the century of synthetic fiber, achieved such as spandex, brought on the emergence of Azzedine Alaïa (cat.86) and other designers who created dresses with new approaches. They separated the three-dimensional body from the traditional cutting methods and lines, then reconstructed it in a new way. The form of the dress became infinitely closer to the form of the body when it became possible today to alter the form of the body itself with diet, exercises, cosmetic treatment, and more aggressively, with plastic surgery, (these means can be regarded as an immanent corset as well), or with fashion made of see-through fabrics, which has the effect that the wearer is exposing her body, and the availability of advanced synthetic materials with elasticity which snugly fit the body.

On the other hand, dresses in abstract forms also characterize the 20th century. Responding to the actions of Picasso and Fernand Léger, who were enthusiastic in experimenting with form and tried to reconstruct a harmonious and exuberant body in the 1920s, fashion also moved toward quite an abstract form symbolized by the linear cut of Vionnet. A mannequin by Andre Vigneau, an ideal body to wear such fashion, was produced for the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs* (Exhibition of Art Deco) in 1925. It was an elongated, cubic and tubular form of a feminine body with the rich curves of breast nullified and made abstract by the bra (then called a flattener).

Without relying on the inner structure of underwear but relying only on cutting techniques, Cristobal Balenciaga, at the end of the 1950s, created an innovative form of dress which could be called a sculpture that enfolds the body (cat.54, 59-61). The creation incorporated the "space" between the body and dress and was subsequently developed into the Trapeze line dress by Yves Saint-Laurent in 1958 (cat.63), the Chanel Suits in 1954 with which Coco Chanel made a comeback, and the minidress by Andre Courrèges in 1966.

Furthermore, clothes which were interpreted as two-dimensional, became the canvas exemplified by the Mondrian dress (1965-66) (cat.76) and Pop Art dress (1966-67) produced by Yves Saint-Laurent and this still continues today.

The Emerging Body

Joseph Beuys tried to ensure art was involved with life and existence, going beyond a mere visual realm through the shells of the body in a series of work since the 1960s. Although different from Beuys' context, when Issey Miyake with "a piece of cloth" in the 1970s or Rei Kawakubo and Yoji Yamamoto in the early 1980s, hurled their clothes created with a Japanese sense of fashion into the context of European clothes, the visual expression of traditional European fashion which could not be separated from the body at last reached the concept in a different phase. Clothes were no longer something which should always be suggestive of the body inside. Since the latter half of the 1980s this concept greatly influenced the younger generation of designers such as Martin Margiela and A. F. Vandevorst. Clothes by Margiela and others are constructed from the divided parts, and clothes as a covering make the boundary with the body infinitely ambivalent. However, clothes by Japanese designers that discarded the European concept of form, just a shell in the European sense, or clothes made from parts such as sleeves, bodice, front skirt..., or even dresses like a string, all paradoxically and eloquently suggested the body inside.

Rei Kawakubo produced clothes in strange forms with deformations, with humps on the back which were made of elastic material and down cushions, or outlandishly swollen belly and hips (cat.127). They were suggestive of different forms found in historical, sometimes ethnic, costume with "a sense of going back to the past while heading toward the unknown"³ or Francis Bacon's "organic form which completely deformed a human image." Does this article of clothing indicate a new direction, a new way of coexistence of the body and clothes which goes against the stream of the "body natural" in the 20th century? Merce Cunningham, the choreographer, expanded the potential of images with the body with his choreography for "Scenario."

Skin and Clothes

Until the 19th century clothes and the body which were to be "seen" created the surface as a visual cover with sequences of gorgeous embroidery and lace. The concealed body was exposed. The clothes and the body which became the subjects regained a forgotten sense which was tactility, a physical sensation of skin awakened by the absence of a corset. The body and clothes subtly sense each other's existence. Is it possible to achieve this when many layers of lingerie and foundation are tightly pressed against the flesh by a corset? The skin is able to sense the sensuality of fabric only when the fabric subtly touches the skin. Tactility at last started to gain importance with the straight tubular dresses created by Mariano Fortuny and Madeleine Vionnet in the 1920s or when silk lingerie played softly on the skin. Subsequently at the end of the 20th century, as a result of the advanced development of synthetic materials, interest in clothes which provoke the sense of skin continues to expand.

Concern for the body became paramount in the 1960s when the consumer society that pursued pleasures and novelty expanded rapidly. As if guided by the expression of Yves Klein and others or what Marshall McLuhan foretold, "clothes are extension of the skin,"⁴ body consciousness spread in fashion, and clothes actualizing these ideas appeared one after another. The minidresses by Andre Courrèges and Mary Quant exposed the thighs, Rudi Gernreich's Monokini bared breasts and the dresses of metal and plastic by Paco Rabanne evoked a sense of cyborg-like skin. And those who modeled these clothes were Twiggy and Veruschka with a new type of body with a conspicuously bony physique with so much flesh shaved off. Furthermore, the object to be seen became not the clothes which are on the outside but the body itself and the body images were consumed. The social consciousness for the nude changed drastically and the sculpture dress by Saint-Laurent, embodying the form of breasts and see-through dresses, an excuse for a dress, came into the limelight.

Clothes, in a wider sense, are the minimal living space involving the body such as space suit and hibernaculum. With the coming of the space age various futuristic clothes appeared in science fiction movies. Today clothes are gaining new meaning such as a space for survival, for healing, in the absurdity of protecting ourselves from the worsening environment of the earth which we ourselves have caused, and furthermore, as an alternative for the body which has an artificial communication ability.

Takaaki Yoshimoto said about the nude in 1984, "the reason why it has become so generalized is that women today, in swimsuits and underwear, pose in the nude like primitive people and even illustrate the pages of magazines because they consciously regard the surface, form and undulation itself of the skin, as a fashion of clothes. Although their nudes appear the same as that of primitive people, they are quite opposite in reality, as their bodies are covered with invisible and infinite fashion "⁵ The body itself is becoming fashion which is apparent in piercing in which ordinary young people, in the midst of fashion at the end of the 20th century, pierce their ears and noses, foreheads and breasts, and even navels with pins or undertake body painting including tattoos as their normal routine. Today when we are unable to feel the sense of reality even with our body, body painting is an act of self-confirmation more direct than clothes. Utilizing a sense of anxiety that young people feel, fashion is dictating trends similar to what our ancestors did at the time when they had no concept of clothes—the desire to change the human skin inherent to our bodies closer to clothes as a variable skin that coincides with the development of synthetic materials.

Fashion: A Tool to Express about the Body

Fashion is a form to enfold the body, to cover the surface but it is also a tool to speak about the body in a new way and the changes in the above-mentioned plaster figures illustrate it paradoxically. Today, when Paris Collections are aired on television throughout the world, and super models who

appear on the catwalk brought on a boom and we are forced to realize again the times and environment we live in are manipulated by highly advanced visual technology such as photography, cinemas and computers. A tendency to arrange and treat the body with various means produced bodies symbolized by Lisa Lyon and Madonna in the early 1980s. It was a fictitious world, the loss of a sense of reality, which led to the elongated body images which appeared in Japanese girls comics, and the virtual bodies of super models who have been seen on television in the 1990s.

Karl Lagerfeld designed for Chanel's Spring/Summer Paris Collection in 1996 the micro-bra which carried the Chanel logo as outer wear where the bra's innate function to contain and support had completely vanished. What was left was an article of clothing to confirm the existence of breasts, the femininity, and furthermore, the self, an article of clothing which questioned the meaning of clothes. Fashion is a fictitious image to provoke the desires of the consumer society, an image to define the self. Fashion in the past has been given images by the upper class then moved downward but the influence from street fashion and subcultures in the 20th century, though going against the mainstreams, can be regarded fundamentally as a new offshoot of fashion within the bounds of a fashion system of the 20th century, as *prêt-à-porter* branched out of *haute couture* in the 1960s

Analyzing photographs of Diane Arbus, Joanne Finkelstein points out to us the fictitious nature of fashion with her remarks, "the surface visible to the eye is already a fiction."⁶ With the flier she created for Comme des Garçons, Cindy Sherman gave a clear blow to the cliché of "femme objet," a woman, an object to be seen in fashion posters, which led toward expressions of the lightness of femininity seen in the videos by Pipilotti Rist (cat.192, 193). Vivienne Westwood told me, "I think my intention of not to imitate the male or the times influenced. When women are recognized as just being feminine in a true sense, the world will be better off."⁷ We must reappraise the meaning of her words and the concept of femininity.

Society in the 20th century, in principle, does not differentiate between bodies, the male from the female, and the body addressing the issues produced a phenomenon of the fashioned body such as underwear fashion, the deluge of the nude, the boom in cosmetic treatments, the availability of artificial organs and a mounting interest in makeup by both male and female. The fashioned body, with pierced ears and other body parts, dyed hair in bright colors, tattoos and makeup by males, is a means of differentiating oneself from others without the medium of clothes when clothes become available to anyone equally, a new way to speak about the body. Now that the fashioned body applies equally to women and men, it may make a breakthrough for changes in men's sense of fashion which may alter men's fashion in the 21st century. It is already apparent not only in the clothing of the younger generation, but also in the body itself which has changed visually as well as physiologically, with woman's body fat decreasing and becoming unisexual. How much can religion, a brake, put a stop to this phenomenon?

Technology/Body/Clothes

The amazing progress in technology is making the body itself a basically variable object. Organ transplants, artificial heart and blood vessels and genetic manipulation are making the body, even a human being, an object of creation. However, will technology really make the world a paradise?

We must return to the issue of clothes and the body. It is unlikely that mankind in the near future will abandon the clothes that mankind has created over thousands of years. Because we have seen how expressive the relationship between the body and clothes is, it is unlikely that any culture would not pay attention to body images at all, that is, clothes which are the awareness of the self of the body.

Roland Barthes wrote, "Clothes, on the other hand, have been reflecting a mystic dream of 'seamlessness' in an earthly manner since ancient times. As long as clothes are something to envelope the body, to slip the body into clothes without leaving any trace is just a yearned for miracle. From another direction, clothes, to some degree, are something erotic and within that understanding they should have slits here and there, and clothes, without hindering the eye, should evoke the nude body underneath."⁸ We feel it might have been realized when we see Issey Miyake's "A-POC." (cat.70) A simple technique of knitting which has not changed much since the 16th century, a simple concept of breaking up the body into basic parts then constructing the whole. However, now it is created by technology controlled by computers which enables production in quantity as well as variety in sizes.

Fashion or Invisible Corset

Fashion is starting a new dialogue with the body, that is, the inner side of the wearer, and the function and sense of the body itself. Various researches are undertaken today in the realm involving "the body," the most fundamental issue concerning the existence of human beings. With the collection of modern dresses from the Kyoto Costume Institute, the present exhibition, *Visions of the Body: Fashion or Invisible Corset*, is an attempt to reevaluate the future relationship between clothes and the body, focusing on how artists interpret parts which fashion has not yet actualized clearly. What comes out is the multi-structure of the fashion culture.

Has the corset really vanished today? Undoubtedly women have been released from the physical enforcement of the corset but the abnormal abhorrence against obesity or latent desire to be within the bounds of a fashion system at the very end of the 20th century, still exist as obsessions. The corset is fashion, in other words, a social framework which always exists within.

(Translated by Tomoko Matsutani)

Notes

1. Eugenie Lemoine-Luccioni, *La Robe*, translated by Kiyokazu Washida and Osamu Kashiwagi, Tokyo: Sangyo Tosho, 1993. P.11.
2. Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu, Du côté de chez Swann* (Eng. tr. *Remembrance of Things Past, Swann's Way*), translated by Michihiko Suzuki. Tokyo: Shueisha, 1997, p.29.
3. Takaaki Yoshimoto and Shunsuke Serizawa, *Taigensō, n-kono seio megutte*, Tokyo: Shunjusha, 1994, p.117.
4. Marshall McLuhan, *Extension of Man*, translated by Kazuhiko Goto and Susumu Takagi, Tokyo: Takeuchi Shoten, 1967, p.152.
5. Yoshimoto and Serizawa, op. cit., p.120.
6. Joanne Finkelstein, *After a Fashion*, translated by Hiroshi Narumi, Tokyo: Serika Shobo, 1998, p.127.
7. October 18, 1998, Paris
8. Roland Barthes, *Système de la Mode*, translated by Nobuo Sato, Tokyo: Misuzu Shobo, 1972, p.194.

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