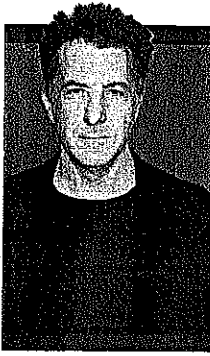


Review



The tales of Hoffman

Nigel Farndale interviews a Hollywood legend
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Why I repainted Picasso

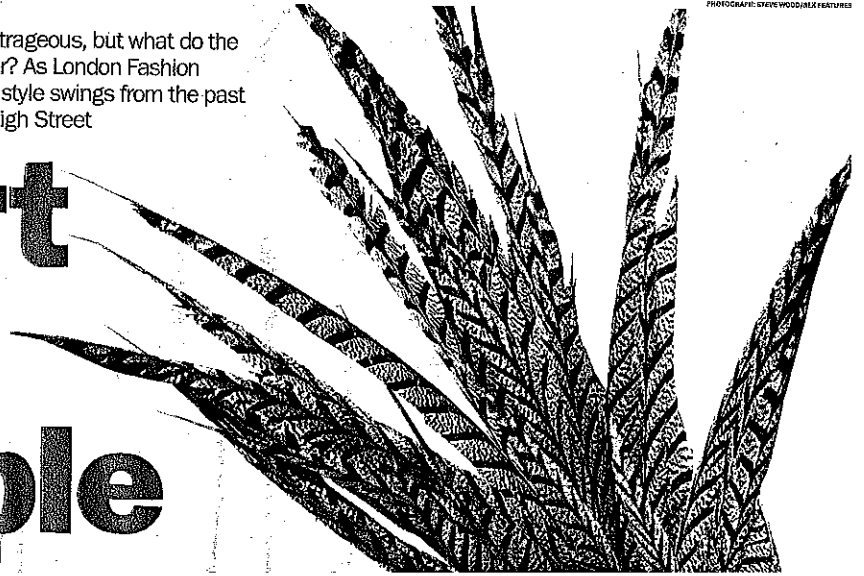
By Matisse's great-granddaughter
ARTS P9



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The designers' shows may be wonderfully outrageous, but what do the clothes have to do with what we actually wear? As London Fashion Week opens, **Anne Hollander** explains how style swings from the past to the present, and from the catwalk to the High Street

The art of the possible



PHOTOGRAPH: STEVE WOOD/REX FEATURES

by a sleek collar and face above a smooth sheath or suit, an invitation to observe the clever details of the cut and trim. Then you know that the designer is referring to the days of elegance, before deliberate absurdity took over the world of high fashion.

And man, even like Johnnie? Well, everyone has to get dressed every day, everyone else's needs to look right in public and looking right is an emphatically a matter of fashion—and money, and the money, and the intractability of the flesh. How many times have I stood in front of the glass, railing at fate for not giving me just four more inches in height, two below the knee and two above? With those, what delicious triumphs I could enjoy! But some things cannot be altered, even by fasting, prayer and good posture... although high heels can help.

To find inspiration for all this variety, you look

but the process of assimilation is less straightforward than that. These days, for example, you may feel wrapping a thick, fringed monoclonal scarf round your neck and tying it from over a warm, hip-length jacket—whereas some years ago you might have felt like wearing a multi-colored shawl around your shoulders over a long, full coat. Who can say why, exactly? At that time, shawls were wearable, now scores are—neither has ever appeared on a catwalk. In the mode current of the street, Popular

the shirt's soft and pluffy of hand-embroidered silk gauze, arranged around the torso with consummate mastery and placed in the distal region, in the idea that their aesthetic claim is somehow eternal, like that of a breathtaking performance registered in heaven, even if unrepeatable. At mass-market level, nothing so easily modish can look even moderately lasting. Every clearly new garment manifested in the language of teenage girls (and would-be teenage girls) bears in its very shape and texture the seeds of its own extinction.

Now, an alternative convention in dress has become a boon to millions of women and girls—that is, the masculine convention, always acceptable, becoming to all at every age. This doesn't just

'Some things cannot be altered, even by fasting, prayer and good posture... although high heels can help.'

Condemned to envy the perched, doleful beauty of the parrot and the gazelle, human beings invented fashion apparently to signal their dissatisfaction, both with themselves and with one another. Fashion — meaning a public sartorial custom that keeps changing its usual ground, swinging taste in one direction for a while, so as to distinguish the wise from the clueless, and soon putting it another way, to shift that distinction — has been followed (and objected to) since its inception, somewhere in early 14th-century Europe, for many centuries before and since.

but wealth has increased because of the loss of concentrated fashion-power among rulers and social leaders, and the rise of it among fashion designers, the businesses supporting them (including, of course, showbusiness) and the media promoting them. Millions of people today are as personally involved in what's fashion-

courts, both sexes played the same games of courtship, the display, and men and women dressed in equally beautiful and magnificent in the same elaborate and artificial ways, with stays, padding and inventory headgear, so you can see it in the paintings of Italian and Flemish, Chinese and van Dyck. Just so moving, artificial-looking fashion gradually came to seem specifically feminine during the course of the 18th century, and then retained from it. Fashion became known as something women engaged in as part of their upbringing, of seductive artifice, something the artificial and tricky. "Designers" did not then exist - dressmakers obscurely

Continued overleaf

Send in the clowns Feathered hat (right) by Alexander McQueen for Givenchy

Paris return from

FARES AVAILABLE ALL YEAR ROUND

Continued from page 1

helped create the elegance of clients, who got all the credit or blame for it.

The masculine soul, by contrast, began to need visual expression. A man no longer wished to look attractively noble, rich and powerful because of his complex, tight-fitting and ornamented clothes, but rather wished to be unassumingly clad so as to seem attractively straightforward, and interesting for his mind and heart.

Simple and flexible modern tailoring – unadorned wool trousers, waistcoat and coat over a plain shirt and cravat – was gradually developed to give male sexual allure those natural qualities. It emphasised the individual face, and the easy pose and movement of the male body. A keen eye might distinguish a gentleman from a non-gentleman only by the suave fit of his garments. Fashion – now a low-profile force among men – might loosen or tighten them slightly, but the basic design was not tampered with for more than two centuries. It became part of their nature, like the panther's coat.

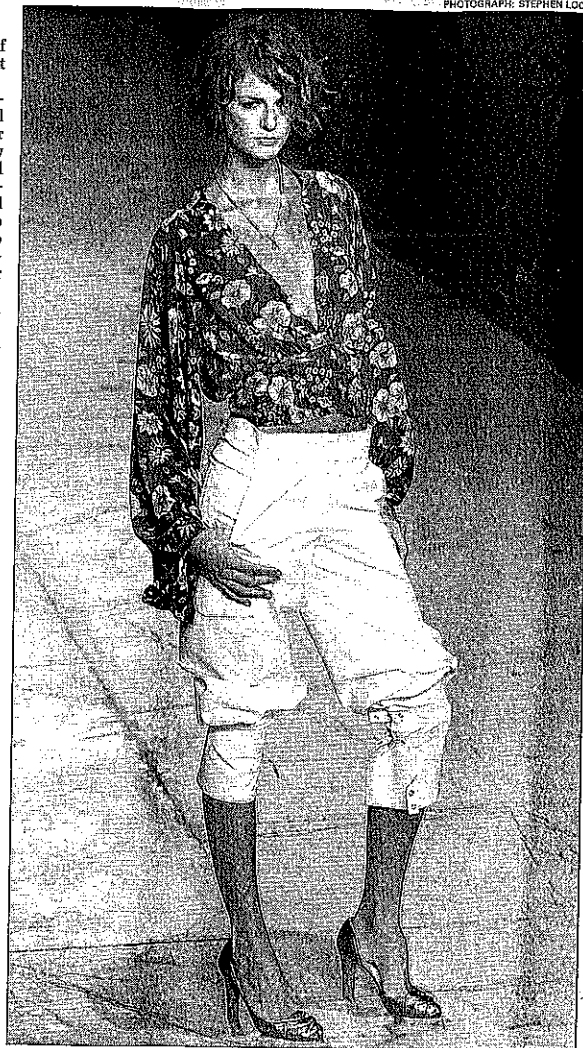
The more understated the design of male dress during

Men's couture shows a freshly aggressive character

those two centuries, the more complicated and suggestive and variably alluring became female dress, ranging from the long, transparent muslin shifts girded high under the breasts in 1800 to the utterly ungirded, knee-length chiffon shifts covered with spangles in 1926.

Between those years it went through several extreme forms of smoothly upholstered torso, variously exposing the shoulders and bosom and arms, exploding below into hoopskirts both long and calf-length, bustles both high and low, trains heavy and slithery, and ankle-length hobbleskirts, everything laden with beading, ruching, soutache and passementerie.

One notable innovation around the beginning of the Second World War was the absolutely strapless bodice for evening dresses. This was



Once more unto the breech 'Knee-breeches, which refer back not only to the 1970s but to the 18th century, are very much in evidence today'



LORD JOHN STUART AND HIS BROTHER LORD BERNARD STUART BY ANTHONY VAN DYCK; BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

Women, cannily, haven't given anything up

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passionably in modified, well-made versions of formerly male sportswear or labouring

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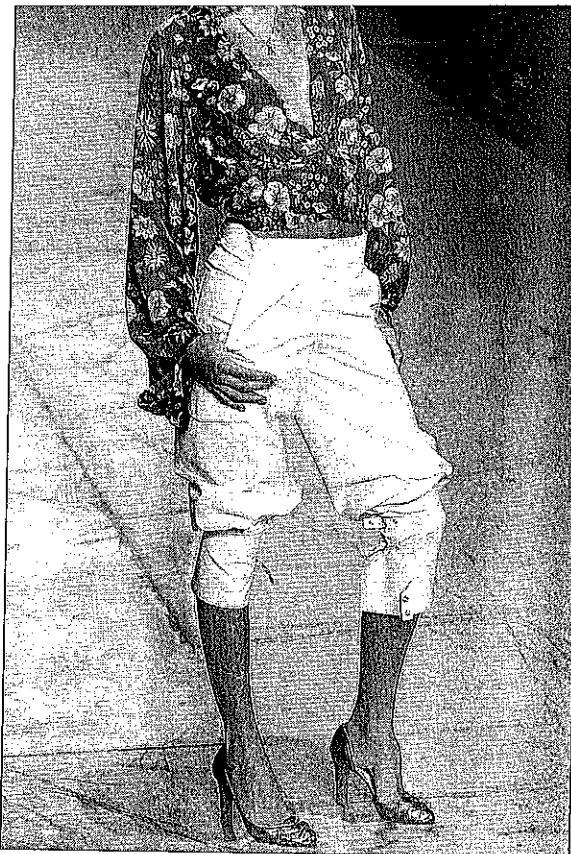
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One notable innovation around the beginning of the Second World War was the absolutely strapless bodice or evening dresses. This was a striking new exposure, never before suggested even in the daring evening fashions of the First World War.

During the past 30 years of self-conscious absurdity, feminine high fashion has tended to use the past as a kind of joke; the same shapes have reoccurred, even in a mocking spirit. Vivienne Westwood, for example, used 1880s bustles with short skirts in 1994, in her "On Liberty" collection, to startling effect. In 2000, for Givenchy haute couture, Alexander McQueen used 1850s skirt-width and 1950s straplessness together in a dress apparently made of circles, sugar and tinfoil brought into a cage-like network around the model's fig-



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Women, cannily, haven't given anything up

ure. From this we can see that the huge skirt – so fine a feature of history and the dread 1950s – is not dead but sleeping, getting ready to awaken among us all.

Of course, many designs which include historical references, as fashion has long done, make it to the High Street. Knee-breeches, for example, which refer back not only to the 1970s but to the 18th century, are very much in evidence today.

Twentieth-century female fashion was marked by two historic changes. In the first half, it was the permanent shortening of female hair and skirts, after millennia of length for both; and, in the second half, the permanent adoption of male dress by women. Feminine sexuality, expressed for six centuries as a mystery cre-

ated by selective exposure and surface ornament supported by constriction and extension, came to find expression in the same natural, straightforward covering invented for the masculine version.

After 1970, under the influence of Yves Saint Laurent, women at last permitted themselves to be elegant and seductive in simple trousers, shirts and jackets. In the decade before, it had all been revolution and liberation, and women wore old-style farm clothes or gypsy trappings, or the tiny dresses and huge shoes à la Mary Quant. In addition they modelled childhood hairstyles, or rebellious outfits involving threadbare army uniforms and varieties of abused blue jeans.

We now find that both sexes across a broad social spectrum are sharing com-

panionably in modified, well-made versions of formerly male sportswear or labouring gear in denim, khaki and synthetics, or in wool, silk and leather, now and then leavened by unusual effects born of current events, personal quirk or inspired invention.

Women, very cannily, haven't given anything up, and old-fashioned fashion is still a mighty resource for them. They have reserved their ancient right to eye-catching skin exposure, to hair and skirts of any length, to bangles and tassels, to frills, fringe and ornamental or transparent lace, and to alarmingly fragile shoes. Men, not to be outdone, have

reclaimed their own ancient rights, and many have gone back to various styles of long hair, remarkable hats, scarves and belts, earrings, necklaces, bracelets and colours not seen since Cavalier times.

Skirts have occasionally appeared on high-level masculine catwalks, but they have instantly disappeared. Their time is clearly not yet. Men's couture in fact shows a freshly aggressive character, perhaps in reaction to the overwhelming female takeover of male trappings. Ferocious suits share the runway with the criminal look, the "gangsta" effect. Suggestions of fanciful ancient armour appear, together with menacing modern warriors in terrorist, soldier or even inter-galactic mode, with sculptural boots and breastplates, many with

belts and holsters for death-dealing weapons.

These fantasies are being proposed in the same spirit as the extreme fashions proposed for women, and both prove that freely invented visions of violence, eroticism, and excessive luxury make a great spectacle for the voyeurs we know ourselves to be. On the other hand, what we normally wear shows the true common fantasy of the 21st century – that what we most desire is durable peace and comfortable equality, accented with unpredictable touches of wit and pleasure for everyone.

■ *Sex and Suits. The Evolution of Modern Dress* by Anne Hollander (Clarendon Press) is available for £15.50 plus £1.95 p&p from Telegraph Books Direct (0870 155 7222).