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DRESSING WITH DRAMA



Created for a new heroine, the

By Anne Hollander

When women first began to declare their independence of men, their clothes showed they actually felt otherwise. In fact, throughout this century, the strongest visual mode has been modeled on a relentlessly masculine standard. From classically tailored jackets and well-cut trousers to casual T-shirts and jeans, female dress has ranged through all the work clothes of the conventional male occupations. More recently, the originally masculine elements of active sportswear have been added — clothes for boxing and for basketball, for skin diving, running and mountain climbing — and, even more lately, the fantasy garb of men from other planets. Women have also briefly taken up historical accouterments suggesting Regency dandies, swashbuckling cavaliers and Romantic poets. Since women got the vote, the most consistent spirit expressed in fashion for the free woman has seemed to be identity, not equality, with men: The greatest liberty has been permission to dress like a man.

Meanwhile, naturally enough, the alternative fantasy has been polarized and developed with equal force — and with equal dependence on men's eyes. When women have not been using female fashion to mimic men's clothes, they have shown a desire to mimic the creatures of men's imagination in the more standardly eroticized and romanticized trappings designed for the opposing principle, the ultra-feminine self. Later 20th-century fashion has produced infinite variations on very traditional themes: the wicked siren, the sophisticated lady, the cheeky schoolgirl, the farmer's daughter and the Romantic heroine, mixed with occasional traces of peasant and gypsy. To convey all these ideas, clothes have kept firmly within a visual vocabulary drawn from the entire history of female iconography — literary, pictorial and cinematic — and the formal language composing such clothes has been as confined as the roles they suggest. The masterly skill of some of the greatest dress designers of this epoch, especially in France, in translating all such associative sexual imagery into fashionable terms has done much to insure its lengthy appeal.

But modern female freedom in clothes, once the male sartorial empire was annexed, has seemed to consist mainly in the liberty to shift at will among the standard costumes — to be a kid in faded denim one day and a lacquered sophisticate the next, to shed leather and metal for feathers and lace on impulse, or vice versa. And the result has been simply to confirm the ancient notion of female mutability that fash-



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and left: Wrapped poncho side-fastened with three silver buttons over pants with narrowed legs by Yohji Yamamoto. Wool poncho, \$500. Wool pants, \$170. At Barneys New York. Chartari Workshop, 441 Columbus Avenue. If Boutique, 474 West Broadway. Knit Wit, Philadelphia. Antique Scottish pin of agate set in silver, circa 1860, \$400. From James II Galleries.

Anne Hollander, the art and fashion historian, is the author of "Seeing Through Clothes."

...e. the designs are strong and defiant.

ion itself has so long supported. Even the very real freedom to succeed in the corporate world has further served to chain up serious women in the most potent sartorial scheme of all: the public costume of modern female power, the perfect skirted suit. This outfit shares with a vengeance in the very conventions that women have loved to think they were escaping.

Women now seem to be reaching for an even more serious kind of freedom than those they have so recently achieved, and not just for practical freedom but for freedom of self-image — for greater inner scope and its appropriate outward expressions. A need for strong, profound feeling and thought, perhaps of a dark and difficult kind, seems to be demanding a new outlet in fashion. After so much public progress, some larger inward liberty may now be taken and may become visible.

At the cutting edge of fashion, the whole shape of women's clothing is signaling a new wish — a liberation from old visual associations, a breaking of the customary molds. In many new clothes the colors are muted and dim, the shapes large and fluid. They suggest a greater interest in basic form and less attention to effective variations of the surface. The new clothes offer fabric released from its traditional stylistic boundaries, ready to create its own drama, to suggest inner states of release from old codes, even of free behavior. A dressed woman can begin to suggest a cliff wrapped by Christo or a banner in the wind. She can strip off old shapes

and be entirely reclad in new assumptions.

One way to be new is to be Other — to forsake the forms of Western fashion entirely and seek revision by the light from the East. The recent flow of talented designers from Japan has opened Western eyes to hitherto unseen possibilities in the use of asymmetry, in creating unfamiliar relations between the body and its garments, and between garments themselves. Their uncanny looks contain no immediate associations for us of status or class, of sex or age, of historical period or literary genre:

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Dark brown and black leather coat with large cuffs and a deep inverted back pleat over pants from Vittorio Ricci. Coat, \$2,575. Wool pants, \$235. At Bergdorf Goodman. Vittorio Ricci, 645 Madison Avenue, by special order. Shoes by Manolo Blahnik. Scarf by Hermès.

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ight: Black suede and dyed shearling three-quarter-length coat from Basile, about \$1,800. At Barneys New York.


Jimmy's, Brooklyn, N.Y. Hattie, Birmingham, Mich. and Palm Beach, Fla. Stanley Korshak, Chicago. Boots from Millers Harness Company. Scarf by Hermès. Gloves by Aldo & Ivo Portolano.



Strong feelings seem to be d



The female in a male in fashion



Long double-breasted rubberized-cotton slicker lined in black and white checks by Norma Kamali, \$170. At Bloomingdale's. OMO, 5 West 56th Street. Saks Fifth Avenue. Bullock's, Los Angeles. Jordan Marsh, Boston. Macy's, San Francisco. Wanamaker's, Philadelphia. Boots from Millers Harness Company.

These are new clothes . . . the

They are quite free of our old allusions.

But the Far East is not the only source. In the last two decades, Italian designers have been deploying in cloth their own native love of essential form, although it always carries with it an inescapably Italian classicism, an intrinsic restraint. And in America, where a distinctive kind of radical artistic experiment has had a long tradition, a related kind of elemental originality has surfaced in fashion, in the work of Norma Kamali, for example, or of Ronaldus Shamask. A certain fundamentalism is a strong American trait, always infused with a candidly Romantic longing and desire for transcendence. Clothing no less than architecture or poetry may be the conduit for this impulse among us, especially among women.

The new look is hitherto uncharted, an unmapped terrain of style suggesting unmapped and possibly untapped areas of female thought and feeling. These are clothes for the new heroines of a future and as yet untold and unwritten Romance. ■

Oversize wrap coat with a collar closing by Yohji Yamamoto, about \$745. At Barneys New York. Charivari Workshop, 441 Columbus Avenue. If Boutique, 474 West Broadway. Alan Bilzerian, Boston. Ultimo, Chicago.



...their history is yet to be written.