It may be said that commitment to the power of visual form is what makes art modern, a belief in the capacity of form to lead its own life and carry its own meaning. But the idea that fashion might seriously participate in the important visual modernity of art, not just in the moral and economic life of modern society, is itself modern, and quite revolutionary. Nevertheless it may also be said that fashion, unlike art, was born modern. Since its beginnings in the late Middle Ages, when style in European dress became committed to constant change and competitive expression, strong and free visual form was characteristic of it; but this only helped to promote its abidingly low reputation. According to traditional views, art is fundamentally serious, whereas fashion is frivolous and concerned with social or sexual surface, not basic aesthetic issues. Its very quality of shiftiness, its early commitment to formal subversion, made fashion appear wholly opposed to the principles governing works carried out in stone or mosaic, or even in paint and wood.

The conscious modernization of fashion has required reviving the ancient idea that clothes are as fundamentally interesting as art itself, even from a wholly formal and not just a social point of view, and that they are in fact part of it. There are non-modern societies for which this has always been true, where dress is the chief art, using living bodies in conjunction with other media, perhaps none of them cloth, to create meaningful and perfectly integrated artifacts out of individuals. But if dress were going to be seen as a modern rather than a primitive art, aesthetically serious for modern society, then changeable, dynamic form in fashion would have to acquire an authority like that of form in modern art, with an analogous prestige.

The route to such prestige lay through the increasingly important realm of modern design. With the advance of modern aesthetic ideals during the last two centuries, form in ordinary material objects acquired great significance. Designing them began to seem less like merely providing trivial ornaments or practical tools, and more like finding an authentic medium for personal aesthetic expression, even for collective moral expression. With the establishment of serious interest in design, the way was even further opened for an aesthetics of mass production, one certainly suitable to modern democratic social ideals, and consequently suitable to modern dress. The design of fashionable clothes, like the design of any made thing, could first of all be seen as a formally interesting creative endeavor. But it thereafter could become part of a generally profitable and differently creative scheme of commercial design and

Left: Sir John de Saint Quintin and Right: Lora de Saint Quintin, 1397, brass, Brandsburton Church, Yorkshire, England
even industrial production, without losing its aesthetic honor. The attractiveness of pure form in clothes, like that in cars or telephones, could determine their success in the marketplace.

Fashion itself thus changed its role, as it both rose in general aesthetic and economic importance and fell as an exclusive, luxurious, and traditionally minor enterprise sustained by ancient craft traditions. With the development of social studies in the nineteenth century and the further understanding of psychology in the twentieth, fashion also became interesting as a modern social subject. Attention to fashion in the past had been deliberately superficial, consisting either of disapproving rhetoric, some of it eloquent but most of it just harsh, or of witty reflection, some of it inspired but much of it inane. But by this century, a detached anthropological interest could turn itself on the dress of modern society as well as on that of ancient of alien cultures. Instead of writing scornfully about fashion, calling it foolish and unhealthy by comparison with the wholesome productions of folk cultures, scholars and thinkers (notably J. C. Flügel in his *Psychology of Clothes* of 1930) made it plain that fashion was as fundamental for the modern world as facial tattooing for the Maoris or feather mantles for the Aztecs, and serious people including writers could take it seriously without apology.

More significantly for the history of modern design, the anthropological spirit had also suggested a formal link between modern artistic expression and the totemic artifacts of some Oceanic and African societies. With its acceptance as an aesthetic undertaking, the inventive design of modern clothes could also share in the visual experiments being derived from primitive example, instead of feeling opposed to them, as fashion had once seemed to be. The formal beauty and symbolic character of folk and primitive objects could nourish modern fashion design, along with the newly articulated principles of functionalism and streamlining. An added moral dimension gave authority to both such sources, the idea that basically significant formal invention was not just more imaginative but more honest than making dull or awkward things and overlaying them with seductive ornament.

But at the beginning of this century, except for George Bernard Shaw’s knitted woolen suits and the workers’ outfits being designed by Russian Constructivists, such thoughts were being developed only about female fashion. This suggests that fashion itself was considered to be basically feminine, and that its rise in general esteem simply accompanied the rise in esteem for women, the same rise that gave women the vote and other rights confirming their full citizenship and transcending Victorian assumptions. Women had new opportunities for practical and imaginative expression, and dress design, both for and by women, could acquire new importance because they did.

This social change undoubtedly mattered. It is moreover true that male fashion hadn’t budged much in a century, and people had the vague idea that it never had as much importance as feminine display. Despite the emancipation of women, the view was still held that civilized men naturally dress plainly, as if for unself-conscious action, but women dress fancifully for deliberate allure. In fact, the most
superficial overview of the earlier history of fashion shows the opposite to be true — that is, for
centuries male potency was expressed in erotic and vividly imaginative clothing, and female charm was
expressed in much simpler clothing that primarily emphasized modesty. When women wanted to look
more interesting, they either cautiously exposed a small area of skin, or imitated men. What happened to
change this old system? How could it be that at the dawn of twentieth-century modernity, men’s clothes
seemed to be made according to formula, and only women’s clothes were “designed?”

Since the beginnings of fashion, men undertook the most interesting “modernizations,” if that means
new leaps in basic formal invention. Women tended to stick to old rules for the basic form, and vary the
surface effects, in the standard premodern way. Women’s first variation on the ancient theme of
modesty was the lowering of the neckline in the fourteenth century, an electrifying maneuver
accomplished without giving up any of the overlapping and enveloping robes and veils that women had
been wearing since antiquity. It was certainly not a modernizing step — if anything somewhat
regressive — adding a consciously narcissistic and submissive eroticism to modest garments, a
dimension that only emphasized their continuity. And it set a certain precedent for feminine fashion.

But men had been wearing enveloping robes, too, since antiquity; and at that late-medieval moment they
largely gave them up, in order to make their clothes express actual bodily form in new abstractions of
cut and fit. Male dress began to be “designed,” while women’s clothes went on being perpetually
adapted from the past. Men thus undertook the first exercises in sartorial modernity, which was
originally achieved in the form of brilliantly conceived plate armor and its accompanying tailored
innerwear. After the 1300s, male fashion followed the path first indicated by fitted armor, continuing to
articulate the body with interesting complementary shapes, adding remarkably designed hats and shoes
and cutting the hair with extreme expressive vigor.

Women maintained the ancient robes and gowns and hoods and veils, allowing them all to drag and
drape and float with varying degrees of excess, and occasionally stiffening them. The female chest was
frequently exposed, but the true structure of the female body was visually distorted rather than
expounded by fashionable clothing. There appears to have been a sustained insistence on old-fashioned
corporeal modesty, but in the form of distraction and deception rather than simple concealment.
Women’s shoes hardly showed at all, and their hair was usually bound up and often hidden.

Later on, beginning in the perverse Mannerist period, female fashion often copied male hats and shoes
and hair, and sometimes aped the shape of male doublets in the provocative manner of modern women
wearing male dinner jackets and top hats or fedoras. Upper-class riding dress for women also copied
male modes above the waist, but skirts always prevailed below. Copying men became a standard
provocative move in women’s fashion, undertaken to emphasize the large scope of feminine sexuality,
not really to shift the course of female fashion to the creative masculine track. This entire state of things
lasted until the second half of the eighteenth century, when so many other transformations, apart from new fashionable bargains struck between the sexes, began to produce the circumstances of the modern world.

The decisive moment for the modernity of fashion occurred during the period of Neoclassic taste, which seems to have generated a first stage of aesthetic modernity altogether; and it duly occurred in masculine dress. The reason for the halt in the swift movement of men's fashion soon after the beginning of the nineteenth century is that men's clothes became definitively modernized within a couple of decades after 1790, and needed no radical revision in the next two centuries. Revolutionary new masculine looks, presciently reorganized to suit an emergent new world, represent a triumph of design comparable to that achieved by plate armor. But this time a reformed image appeared at a moment when design itself was consciously undergoing the first stage of its modern rise.

Neoclassic design in architecture and decoration was accompanied by writings that praised an abstract simplicity of form for images of "Reason in her most exalted mood," as Wordsworth put it. Rather than allowing taste to evolve slowly away from Rococo modes, a deliberate attempt was mounted to cut through the repetitive refinements that had swamped classical decoration and let material design speak clearly in the new Romantic language of first-order imagination. Buildings and any other objects made in such a spirit could do some spiritual and moral good, could "enlighten" in themselves, and be neither superficially pleasing nor overbearing. For the purpose, the classical structural vocabulary was overhauled and renewed according to its fundamentally simple origins.

Neoclassic masculine tailoring had no theoreticians among its early practitioners, but the entirely new cut and fit of men's dress show a strong affinity with other Neoclassic developments supported by idealistic theory. To begin with, the man himself was remodeled to match the classical nude, now rediscovered as the image of truth, an ideal "natural man." To expound his natural nude body in natural cloth, tailors dressed him in simple wool, linen, and leather, of which the cut was clarified and the seams evident. No ornament now interfered with the lines of the figure, and obscured neither the honest texture of the fabric's plain weave nor the honest piecing of the garment. No brocaded surfaces added an artificial luster to the man's presence, no distracting lace encumbered his wrists and neck, no wig disguised the shape of his skull. His figure was expressed only in the harmonious interplay of matte-finished planes of cloth in muted colors. Because of their subtle cut and fit, these moved in further harmony only with the movements of the body, and the costume made no extraneous gestures of its own.

All of these developments produced so modern a vision of the clothed man that it has endured with few changes ever since. The English Regency dandies who first ostentatiously wore its early versions (exemplified by the legendary Beau Brummell) first proclaimed, in their own beautifully tailored persons, the modern nobility of naturally brilliant and well-behaved individuals of whatever origin. Natural excellence, rightly clad in perfectly natural and perfectly simple garments, now appeared in sharp
contrast to the old nobility once blindly revered in naturally stupid or disgusting men, artificially elevated by lands and titles, who had worn gaudy clothes to display their rank and hide their personal failings.

During the first quarter of the nineteenth century this visible distinction of the individual man by means of tailoring alone was already extended well beyond the sphere of a few inspired English craftsmen and their leisured clients to include large numbers of enterprising men on the rise in post-Napoleonic Europe and the young United States. The real inspiration in the Neoclassic male costume proved to be not just its formal simplicity but its foundation in proportionate measurements, which permitted its multiple production with no loss of integrity. Classical principles had not been studied in vain; and following certain rules of proportion could be seen to ensure the making of multiple good suits as well as of multiple good buildings.

The original modernity of the visual scheme lay in its sculptural abstraction of the entire male body — tailoring now created a mobile envelope that seemed to give each man a classical figure. This was not indecently exposed, but delicately suggested in simple areas of plain cloth that also suggested skin or a sleek animal’s hide, or perhaps molded bronze and marble. The man appeared to be naturally revealed by his costume, even though it veiled his body completely with an illusory suggestion of absolutely perfect fit. The fit was in fact not the kind that clings demandingly to every curve and hollow, but was intermittent and subtle, so that some of the body would show artlessly through, and other areas be delicately augmented or tactfully suppressed, all without actually lying. This was form following several functions at once, satisfying practical, sexual, moral, and imaginative requirements at one and the same time. The formal scheme, moreover, had the same built-in flexibility that characterized the revived classical scheme for building; the complete composition could be infinitely varied over time, changing shape and emphasis without recourse to any corrupting departures.

The other element of enduring modernity in Neoclassic male tailoring — the thing that permits it to continue in the twentieth-century world of industrial fashion — thus already lay in the ability of well-fitting coats, waistcoats, and trousers to be mass-produced. Between 1810 and 1830, technical calibrations invented by tailors working at the very highest level of the craft eventually made it possible for hundreds of suits to be cut and made up in advance in a subtle range of shapes and sizes, and the ready-to-wear idea to be put into practice for men’s clothes. Because of the flexibility of proportionate sizing, these ready-to-wear clothes were not crude versions of exquisite artifacts, but almost indistinguishable from them. A brisk trade in excellent ready-made men’s clothes began very early in this country, originally for uniforms for the War of 1812, but very soon for the general civilian public. A whole range of differently shaped men’s bodies could be very well provided for with only the most minor of adjustments, and each would carry the look of individual tailoring that suggests individual distinction without the need of idiosyncratic ornament. The range of possible fabrics was also reduced to manageable size by a general ideal of matte finish, muted color, and unpretentious surface.
According to Neoclassic aesthetic theory propounded in Romantic times, both aspects of this modernization were perceived as naturally masculine. They followed a Romantic male ideal that was rugged, artless, and naturally beautiful, and simultaneously reasonable, clear-headed, and forward-looking, as opposed to the “feminine” overornamented and overcultivated Old Order. Female response to Neoclassic taste had in fact taken the less imaginative form of imitating classical sculpture directly, rather than creatively abstracting from it, and consequently, the deceptive program for female dress continued unchanged. The theatrical effects of skimpy drapery and sandals in vogue in 1799 could not survive for long in Christian Europe. They needed too much support from body-tights and bosom-improvers, and more layers of clothing were obviously required both for normal weather and for serving the ancient needs of modesty and Eros at the same time. With some temporary displacement of the waistline and diminution of the skirt, women’s fashion kept up the old ways.

The radical modernization of male dress, however, meant that the sexes were much more visibly divided than ever before. As if in answer to the new male simplicity, fantasy began more and more to rule the figurations of female fashion, and produce even further journeys into erotic theatrical machinery for women’s clothes, now often based on historical allusion. It was the habit of fanciful excess (soon including fetishistic and cumbersome underwear), which had been carried to extreme lengths by the last quarter of the last century, that seemed to need such quick reform in the first quarter of this one. In the face of real social reform, a brisk modernization of women’s clothes seemed all the more necessary since men had got so far ahead so long before. Because of its surface complexity, fashionable women’s clothing had been nearly impossible to produce in great amounts for a ready-to-wear market, except for outdoor garments and underwear; so women’s fashion was way behind in that respect, too. The field was ripe for new imaginative effort in female dress that would abandon fetishism and fantasy, at least temporarily, and aim for the beauty of structural clarity and the look of natural movement.

Far from being staid and boring, men’s clothes provided the dynamic model for modern women’s clothes. Simple shapes that followed the body without being immodest took their essential theme from the men’s tailoring invented so much earlier. The same easy fit that emphasized motion but also hid bulges was adapted from the male program. Even trousers began to be part of the feminine scheme, although it took longer than anything else to establish them as basic female dress. By 1920, well-cut jackets that flatteringly skimmed the figure had already become a standard feminine necessity, and neat hats and short hair showed the real forms of female heads and necks, as they had done for male ones. But instead of making perfect imitations of male gear for women, as they had occasionally done before for seductive effect, designers were now copying the Neoclassic masculine program in feminine terms. Feminine privileges such as color, glitter, and the use of skirts were preserved, but the body was visually unified and harmonized as in a classical statue, instead of being divided into separately ornamented parts that falsely reduced or extended its true shape. Modern skirts did not stick out like swaying tents...
nor drag in heavy folds on the ground, but took their motion only from the wearer and showed the way legs and feet really work. In general, the key to classic modern design for female dress was seen to lie in the Neoclassic method of masculine tailoring, the creation of an intelligible bodily envelope out of inventively cut fabric shapes, something that revealed its own structure along with that of the body.

Apart from seizing on new examples from modern art, women’s fashion still did a lot of preserving and alluding and retrieving, as it still does. But the initial formal modernity of it all was a radical borrowing from the male, who had learned to modernize at the start of fashion itself. Indeed, some of the more arresting effects in modern female fashion have been stolen not from the female historical past, but from earlier male modernizations — cavalier effects, for example, with breeches and loose big shirts, or Regency waistcoats. Even the miniskirt and tights with soft boots are echoes of the early Renaissance courtier’s leggy elegance.

It has been said that the word “now” should never be used in writing about the history of fashion; the movement of sartorial taste is convoluted and perpetual and there is no “now.” But of late, one might venture to notice, classic modernity in fashion has become visibly dissipated and fragmented, and form has clearly lost some of its power in favor of content. Elements of fashion are more highly valued for what they signify than for their formal visual beauty, and combinations are valued more for the symbolic virtue in their separate parts than for the purely visual harmony of the whole. Fashion is meant to be read, not seen; fit and proportion matter less, signals matter more. The modern aesthetic principle of formal integrity has moved to one side to make room for the manifold expressive material of a postmodern world. But with all that, the power of excellent masculine tailoring has not diminished at all, and shows no sign of doing so in the coming millenium.