



Washington Post  
Jan. 2, 2000

## We'll Still Be Wearing Them

By ANNE HOLLANDER

William Blake once wrote of "... Love, the human form divine, and Peace, the human dress." He was suggesting that the naked body, standing for blazing truth or wayward sex, does fine as the symbol of love because love breeds trouble (nude Cupid is armed)—but that for serene communal living, people need clothes. We get dressed not just for warmth and weddings, but for peace of mind. Probably the safest prediction about the clothes of 100 years hence is that they'll still be here, if humans are.

Human dress is primordial, if "dress" includes everything humans have done to complete their bodies, which they have universally felt to be unfinished. Enveloping garments of woven cloth are only about 8,000 years old, but body marks and mutilations, wrought body attachments and complex hair creations are three times older. If the Adam and Eve story portrays the beginning of civilization, the first artifacts were clothes. Significance was their job, not use or beauty. That meant they didn't have to consist of much.

At the end of the 20th century, we feel the same way. Our clothes are often small in scope and primitive in shape, but we believe they flash signals of social niche and collective desire. Perhaps this notion is what makes current garments so simple and so similar. We think readings should be quick and easy, to avoid the scrutiny invited by suspiciously elaborate trappings.

During the last 50 years, we have shed whole categories of stuff. Gone are top hats and bowlers or multiform versions of snap-brim for men, choices among intricate gloves and belts or fanciful hats for women's everyday wear. Vanished are women's dresses with imaginative pleating, facings and tucks, or men's suits with ranges of texture, shape and color, of pocket, cuff and lapel. You can see this huge menu in old movies and old photos, as you see the great array of Renaissance dress in old paintings. Now we want garments that render us just like the rest of our tribe, we want no gloves at all except in zero weather, and three all-purpose hat shapes for everybody.

Invention has flourished in hairstyle and footgear during those same 50 years, as well as a resurgence of body marking and piercing. In the decades after 2000, more modes of tattooing, painting, scarring and mutilation may well join still newer modes of cutting, coloring, manipulating, augmenting and creatively shaving the hair, along with ever more inspired versions of clog and shoe, sandal and boot. As for clothes, the rope-mesh skirts of 20000 BC might easily return.

It looks as if habits abandoned by Western dress for two dozen millennia were making a comeback, as if we wanted to retrieve something we gave up in Paleolithic times, or at the Adam and Eve moment. Maybe we're starting over, seeking Peace by some different route. Without losing track of Love, of course, and the human form divine.

Anne Hollander is the author of "Sex and Suits: The Evolution of Modern Dress" (Kodansha).