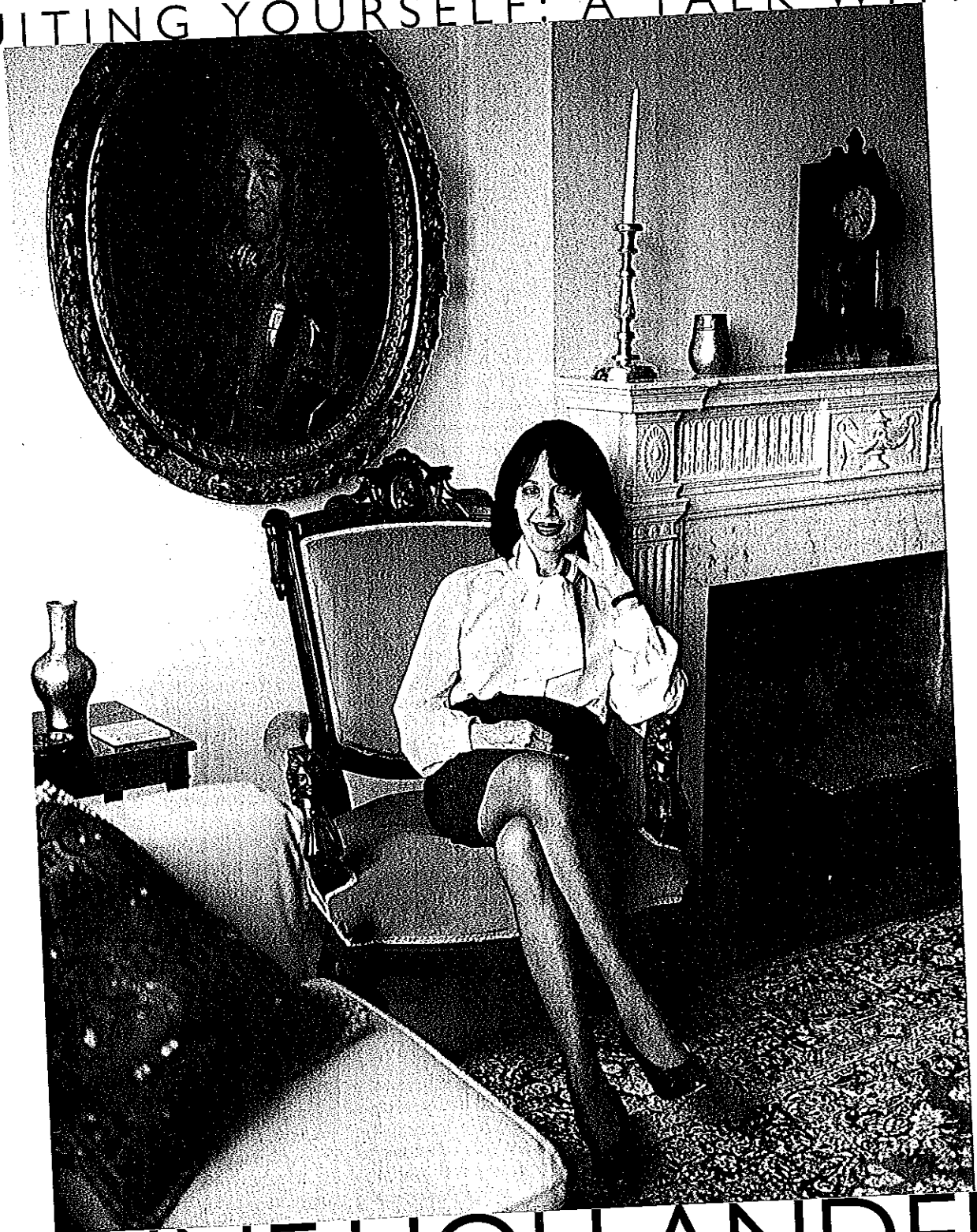


SUITING YOURSELF: A TALK WITH

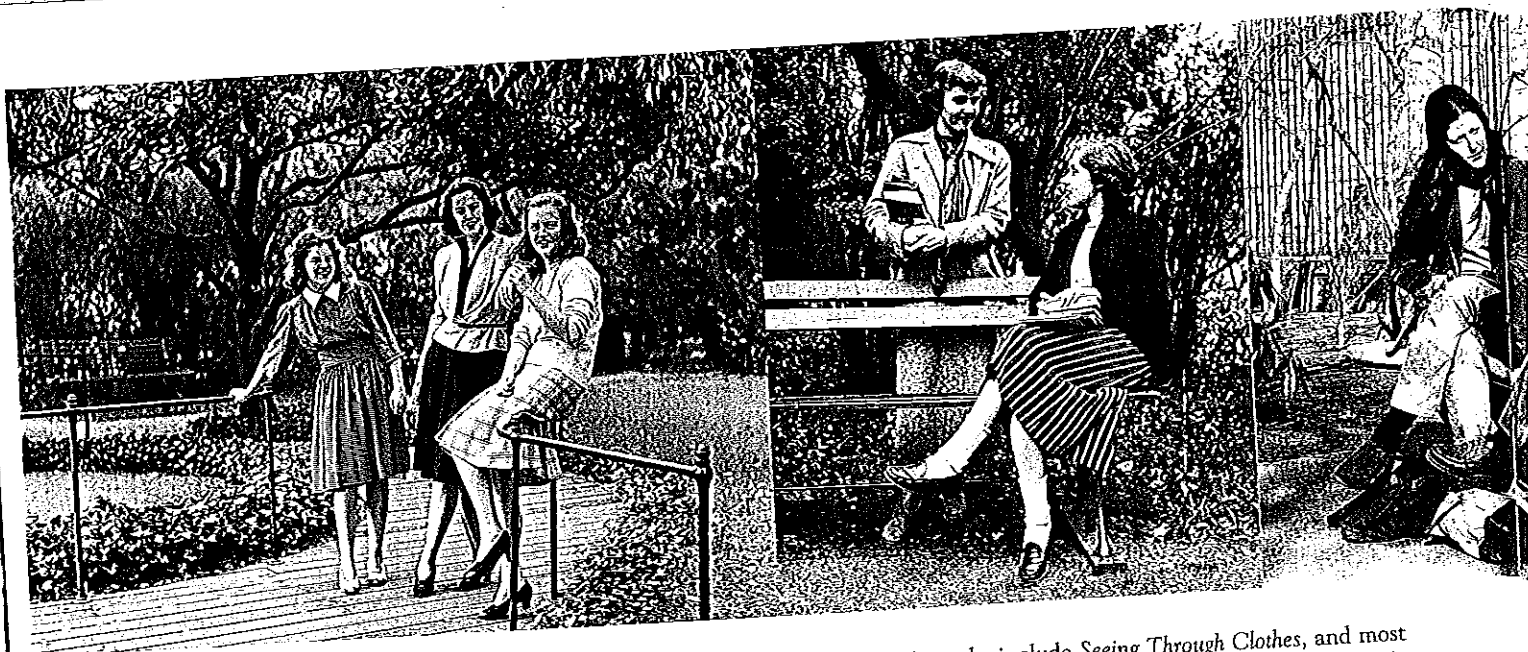


ANNE HOLLANDER

BY SUSAN GOODMAN '74 PHOTOGRAPH BY CLAIRE HOLT

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“Let me show you my men in suits,” says fashion historian Anne Hollander ’52 as she leads the way into her airy Washington Square apartment. Dotting the apartment walls is an eclectic collection of European and American paintings—a portrait of a daunting French nobleman in full armor, lace jabot, and red cravat, circa 1690, by Largilliere, an itinerant’s rendering of Silas Hutchinson, a nineteenth-century gentleman farmer and a great-great-great-great uncle of Hollander’s.

Over her desk, dozens of photos and postcards of men in suits through the centuries are on display. Oscar Wilde in dandy mode, Gary Cooper in dashing double-breastedness, Edward Hopper in a lightweight summer number, Frank Lloyd Wright, his suit topped with a coat, and a miniature of a black-garbed Hollander ancestor dating from the nineteenth century. Among these well-known suit-wearers are snapshots of Hollander’s husband, the philosopher Thomas Nagel, with whom she lives half the year in New York, where he is professor of



philosophy and law at New York University, and the other half in an apartment in the seventh *arrondissement* in Paris, between *Les Invalides* and the Eiffel Tower.

Hollander grew up in Cleveland in the thirties and forties in a household of arts patrons and practitioners. Her uncle was renowned Broadway musical composer and lyricist Frank Loesser, and her father, a concert pianist, music teacher and critic, wrote a classic social history of the piano entitled *Men, Women and Pianos*. It was her mother, however, a former art student, who passed on to Hollander her love of art and fashion in equal measure. "My mother had elegant clothes to wear out in the evenings. The house was filled not only with *Vogue*, but with books filled with pictures of people either nude or dressed in beautiful garments from the past ... *Vogue* and art books did not look different to me. It was all the same story."

Indeed, Hollander has fashioned a highly original career writing books that show how pictures convey a vision of fashion.

Hollander's works include *Seeing Through Clothes*, and most recently, *Sex and Suits*, an acclaimed examination of the male suit in which the author credits its development as the most avant-garde to have come along in all of fashion history. In *Sex and Suits*, Hollander chronicles how the suit transformed fashion by allowing the articulation of the body—in the early nineteenth century for men, and by the twentieth century for women. The suit has persisted because it allows the wearer to be sexy and serious simultaneously, Hollander contends.

Today, Hollander is conspicuously not wearing a suit. But her simple appearance—a short black skirt with a cream-colored silk blouse and black suede pumps—presents a picture of completeness. It's a habit of hers, she admits, to compose a fully coordinated outfit every day, even though she primarily works at home. (She confesses that she has bought a pair of jeans only once.) "One of the reasons I can love adult female costume is that I don't have to wear it," she admits. She dresses not only to be ready for whatever the day may bring but to feel complete

"A postmodern person, now one of either sex, has further learned that not only may disparate wardrobes cohabit in one person's closet, as if on backstage costume racks, but they may now be combined. Beyond the classic cinema, in the new world of music video and free-wheeling, overlapping unrooted camera imagery, old denim and fresh spangles or pale chiffon and black combat boots are worn not just in quick succession but together. The new freedom of fashion in the last quarter century has been taken up as a chance not to create new forms, but to play more or less outrageously with all the tough and solid old ones, to unleash a swift stream of imagery bearing a pulsating tide of mixed references." from *Sex and Suits*

Right: Barnard fashion today, a "pulsating tide of mixed references."





Hollander reads Barnard fashion through the ages, left to right:

(1941-42) "Women were changing to girls in the early 1940s. The dress on the left looks as if it could be worn by a ten-year-old; the woman in the middle has more of a transitional ladylike look; the woman at the right appears to be in a high school costume, accessorized with heels." (1953) "Casual sportswear that was considered suitable for schoolgirls before trousers became possible." (1979) "One of the ancient ways of wearing a suit was to combine plebeian trousers and a nicely-tailored upper-class jacket."

whenever she glimpses herself in one of the many mirrors throughout the apartment. "I love mirrors," she says. "I think of them as very benign presences. I love the truth that they offer." She seems to be describing a way she has of studying the pictures she makes of her own costumes.

Hollander's charmingly chatty talk is punctuated by surprisingly objective observations concerning her circuitous path to an intellectual life. While her first husband, the poet John Hollander, studied for his graduate degree at Indiana University in the 1950s, and then began teaching at Yale, she became an independent scholar, amateur costume designer, and full-time wife and mother.

"I was an anachronism," she says of her decision to pursue independent interests instead of a career. "I was behaving in the way I was raised to behave ... like a lady."

It was only in 1970, when a friend suggested she submit an article on costume history to a new journal, that Hollander's intellectual passion turned into a paying profession. At that

point, she decided to forget about designing costumes and to begin, instead, to write about them. Her article on understanding the history of clothes through the study of pictures became the nucleus of her first book. During the seven years that she worked on the manuscript, she also established herself as a journalist with an expertise in fashion history, publishing articles in *Esquire*, *Commentary*, and *New York* magazine, among others. In 1976 she won a Guggenheim fellowship.

Although much recent writing on fashion history has been of a political nature, Hollander remains staunchly independent. She groups herself not with the social historians and critics so much as with the art historians. She neither denies nor adopts the political view, but insists that there are other threads in the fabric of fashion history—namely aesthetic and emotional ones.

"We have been taught lately to find that fashion is political, and that is no doubt the case," she says. "But seeing [political] meaning in fashion is risky. Certain fashions have no meaning other than a change in shape."



On the subject of the suit, however, Hollander is clear: it stands as an emblem of power, an emblem women have adopted from men.

In *Sex and Suits*, the shapes and silhouettes of the centuries metamorphose before the reader's eyes as Hollander vividly traces the suit's genesis. Our first view of man as he really is (although certainly in heroic proportions), she writes, was by way of medieval armor. Beginning in the late twelfth century, men began dressing in clothing reminiscent of these body-sculpting "suits" of armor, with clearly defined legs, feet, and genitals. The garment that more accurately stated the evolution toward the modern suit was the padded layer that protected man from metal. Hollander considers linen armorers, the makers of those form-fitting undersuits, the first European tailors.

By the late seventeenth century, the buttoned coat had gained ascendancy as a form of what would become the modern suit. This eventually gave way to the English aristocrat's "natural" attire. The landed English gentleman preferred to stay in the country hunting and shooting; his outfit reflected a certain ease with the natural world. Seams were visible, and the "natural man" wore three-part ensembles in wool and leather, which resembled the rugged skins of his dogs and horses. In France, the look of the revolutionary "sans-culottes" was jaunty and rough, and gentlemen began to imitate their street look.

Throughout Europe, the burgeoning neoclassic movement in art and design idealized the classical nude figure. All of these elements eventually converged as the male nude body was reinvented via the natural fiber suit. Indeed, Hollander believes the suit has evolved and continues to flourish because it has "kept its ability to make that nude suggestion," even if the suggestion may hide the truth. "If the man does not have the perfect figure, the suit will make it for him and idealize him on the spot."

The lounge suits of the nineteenth century (worn with a shorter, easier jacket and all three parts made of one fabric) most resemble the suits of today. Unlike the contemporary suit, the lounge suit was made for leisure wear and meant to make the off-duty gentleman feel more accessible and at ease. The working class appropriated this outfit for their best wear and fashioned it in new ready-to-wear versions. And by the early twentieth century, the modern suit had thoroughly arrived.

And what of women? While male clothing, since the Middle Ages, evolved to bring the male body more clearly into focus, female clothing was a form of selective exposure, often creating a corporeal blur.

"A woman's arms and head might be fairly intelligible, but her hair was usually carefully bound up and often covered by headgear that further disguised the actual shape of her head and its normal relationship to her neck," writes Hollander. "Her pelvis and legs were always a mystery, her feet a sometime thing, and her bosom a constantly changing theatrical presentation."

By the late seventeenth century, Louis XIV had approved of a scheme to create a guild of female tailors. Thereafter, women dressed women and men continued to tailor for men. (Corset makers, the secret architects of female clothes, remained male.) Although the king's decree appeared at the time to be a great step forward for women's fashion, the results proved disastrous. Dressmakers were trained in needlework, not tailoring, and consequently became pruning-and-shearing instruments for their customers. Add a flower here and a furbelow there, commanded the client, and the dressmaker humbly followed.

The arrival of Charles Frederick Worth, the preeminent Parisian designer of the late nineteenth century who became the czar of women's fashion, prompted women to rebel against their perennial fictionalization *via* dress. The fact that a man had come into control of the way women were displayed made it suddenly clear to women that the fashion they had been wearing all along was a form of sexual tyranny, whether created by themselves or the opposite sex. Their response was to co-opt the male symbol for their own. "Women copied the male scheme in this century because they wanted the power of reason and the power to have sexual fantasies about the other sex," says Hollander. "After all, women in the garb of the opposite sex gives rein to the idea that women's sexual fantasy is much broader, and includes a predatory side."

By the 1920s, the hand of women designers was also felt in the way suits were cut and how they felt. Garments began to cling to the body; fluid fabric caressed it. Women designers had found their niche by freely expressing this new "tactile delight" and the "working beauty of the garment in wear." The final liberation was the emergence of the long-hidden leg, an event Hollander believes gave men and women "clothed parity."

"It [the short and narrow skirt] gave the female body a coherence that had been a male privilege," writes Hollander. "The head was shown to have a necessary relation to the feet, as thought has to action." Soon thereafter the hemline became a variable thing. Women were, at last, allowed to choose from short to long, as men had been allowed, six hundred years before, to choose a tunic length. Pants would be adapted by women only after legs had become a "customary sight."

What has followed is a kind of fashion schizophrenia, a "pulsating tide of mixed references": the combination of old and new, dressed up and dressed down, even what Hollander calls an attempt to turn ourselves into "latter-day androgynous children" in our off-duty outfits of zippered jackets and sweatpants.

"Fashion makes you wish to be like everybody else, a tribal longing, while you also wish to be unique," says Hollander. The source of these longings is often personal, often a mystery. For years, she confesses, she had been attracted to light suits with dark blouses, not knowing exactly why. "After years it finally leapt into my mind," she says. "At a certain point in my life my mother owned a light suit with a dark blouse and she looked so elegant in it. There must have been something going on between us or in the world at that moment—that's why I had taken it on."

Interestingly, despite her recent examination of the suit-as-emblem, Hollander posits that what we ultimately decide to wear is a very private and emotional matter. "The famous messages of dress, the well-known language of clothes, is very often not doing any communicating at all," she writes. "A good deal of it is a form of private muttering."

Hollander takes her leave on Sixth Avenue, a long way from the contemplative quiet of her apartment high above Washington Square. In the evening twilight, she reiterates her belief that the communicating we manage to achieve by way of fashion is at best evanescent. "We don't really make any statements," the author says before disappearing into the murky hodgepodge. "We just sing our little song." ■

Susan Goodman is a writer living in Manhattan.