

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF FASHION

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Abstract

Although the nouns *dress* and *fashion* are often used interchangeably, scholars usually define them much more precisely. Based on the definition developed by researchers Joanne Eicher and Mary Ellen Roach Higgins, dress should encompass anything individuals do to modify, add to, enclose, or supplement the body. In some respects dress refers to material things or ways of treating material things, whereas fashion is a social phenomenon. This study, until the late twentieth century, has been undertaken in countries identified as “the West.” As early as the sixteenth century, publishers printed books depicting dress in different parts of the world. Books on historic European and folk dress appeared in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By the twentieth century the disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and some branches of art history began examining dress from their perspectives. The earliest writings about fashion consumption propose the “trickle-down” theory, taken to explain why fashions change and how markets are created. Fashions, in this view, begin with an elite class adopting styles that are emulated by the less affluent. Western styles from the early Middle Ages seem to support this. Exceptions include Marie Antoinette’s romanticized shepherdess costumes. But any review of popular late-twentieth-century styles also find examples of the “bubbling up” process, such as inner-city African American youth styles. Today, despite the globalization of fashion, Western and non-Western fashion designers incorporate elements of the dress of other cultures into their work.

An essential first step in undertaking to trace the history and development of fashion is the clarification and differentiation of terms. A broad and imprecise vocabulary is used in both the popular and the theoretical literature about “fashion,” which often leaves the nonspecialist reader uncertain about the distinctions among words.

Although the nouns *dress* and *fashion* are often used interchangeably in the popular press, scholars tend to define these words much more precisely. Based on the definition developed by researchers [Joanne Eicher](#) and [Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins](#), dress should be understood to be anything an individual does to modify the body, add to the body, or enclose or supplement the body. Under this definition, examples of dress include body treatments such as tattooing, wearing perfume, applying paint or makeup, or even undergoing cosmetic surgery, in addition to enclosing or supplementing the body or parts of the body with any kind of garment or device. Body supplements and body enclosures can be made of almost anything. The usual examples that come to mind are textiles, leathers or furs, and precious and semiprecious stones, but the historical record also includes such diverse substances as metal (used in items such as suits of armor or belts), straw, paper, feathers, and wood.

Another word that has multiple and sometimes confusing meanings is *costume*. Costume can refer to the dress worn in theatrical, film, or television productions and for masquerade. The context usually clarifies this usage. But within the museum and history communities, the dress that is collected, exhibited, and written about is often called “historical costume” or, for items of more recent date, simply “costume.” Therefore, what is here called “historical dress” may elsewhere go under names such as “historical costume,” “costume,” or “historical fashion.”

In some respects, *dress* refers to material things or ways of treating material things, including the body. In contrast, *fashion* as it is discussed here is a social phenomenon affecting the way members of a culture or society behave. In any discussion of “world” dress and fashion, the word *fashion* is problematic not only because of the many different meanings it has for those who study the topic but also because of Western scholars’ frequent claim that the fashion process is unique to the dress of the West. One of the reasons for this view is that most of what has been published about the history and development of fashion has been written by scholars who live and work in the West and lack familiarity with sources outside their own cultures.

Furthermore, as Canadian anthropologist [Sandra Niessen](#) has pointed out, anthropologists who write about dress in cultures other than their own rarely address the subject of fashion. The cultures of antiquity are usually described as lacking the fashion process in their dress. In writing about fashion in medieval France, medieval French specialist [Sarah-Grace Heller](#)'s comment that any attempt to evaluate fashion in a culture if one is not an expert in that culture is "tricky" serves as a cautionary note. However, as a result of the largely Western focus on the topic of fashion, discussion often does deal predominantly with fashion and its history in the West.

Writers from Europe and North America have offered a number of definitions of *fashion* and *the fashion process*. Some are concise. Others are developed at some length. But in virtually all of them, two elements can be identified. The first is acceptance of something by a large number of people. And the second is duration: This acceptance by a large number of people must be of relatively short duration. The key element in the operation of fashion when used in this way is *change*.

While the prevailing notion holds that fashion is a characteristic of clothing styles, in particular of women's clothing styles, any examination of life in the Western world in the twenty-first century will quickly reveal a wide range of aspects of daily life that can be seen as undergoing fashion changes. These can be elements of material culture or of human behavior. It is evident that there are fashions in styles of automobiles, architecture, interior decor, home furnishings, and children's toys. One can also identify fashions in vacation destinations and in the choice of what sports to pursue, what foods to consume, which books to read, or which weight-reduction diet to follow. In some areas, fashion changes are less obvious because the cost of an item or of participation in a practice may be sufficiently high that individuals are less likely to replace items or change habits with great frequency. But even if the cycles of fashion change may be slower, it is possible to see fashion playing a large role in many areas of the culture.

Why, then, is fashion so often seen as simply a part of what people wear? Fashion change in dress is more evident because the industry that has developed around the manufacture and sale of clothing and other elements of fashionable dress is able to introduce a variety of alternative styles quickly and the cost of those items is often a relatively small portion of an individual or family budget. Many individuals, then, are willing to discard a relatively inexpensive item in favor of a new and more fashionable one.

Dress in museum collections, pictorial records, and documentary evidence serves to debunk another view, which is that women's dress is subject to fashion while men's dress remains subdued, stable, and unchanging. Men's dress has been and continues to be subject to fashion change. One need only look at a sixteenth-century portrait of King Henry VIII of England with his wide-shouldered, handsome satin jackets trimmed in fur, his full, short, skirt-like bases, and jewels bedecking everything from his sleeves to his hat to realize that his dress is in many ways more lavish than that of any of his six queens. Not until the fashions for men's dress changed in the nineteenth century did women's dress become more decorative than that of men. However, even after this change, a close study of men's dress reveals continual, although sometimes subtle, fashion changes.

Factors That Inhibit Fashion Change

Before examining the circumstances in which Western fashionable behavior did arise, it is instructive to identify what might prevent the development of fashion. The essential aspect of fashion is the acceptance of a taste or preference by a large number of people for a short time period. But certain conditions must prevail to permit that large number of people to develop a preference. Of primary importance is a sufficiency of resources that will allow many people to make choices among alternatives. In order for a fashion preference for silk fabric head scarves for women to develop in an isolated community, there must be silkworms to spin the silk, skilled workers to unravel the cocoons, and spinning and weaving devices to create the fabric. If the silk is obtainable only by trade and only in such small quantity that fewer than a dozen scarves can be supplied, then silk scarves cannot become a fashion followed by a large number of people.

In addition to adequate resources, there must be adequate wealth to permit the acquisition of fashionable goods. Widespread poverty is an inhibitor of fashion. Moreover, if the society has a rigid caste system or class structure in which sumptuary laws or political control regulate expenditures on luxury goods or restrict the dress of each social stratum, participation in fashion cannot spread throughout the entire society. Some degree of social mobility must be present if fashion is to be widespread. However, it might be possible that members of an elite class could exhibit fashionable behavior even though those who are poor do not.

Portrait of Henry VIII by Hans Holbein the Younger, 1540. From the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries women's dress in the Western world has consistently been more decorative than men's. However, in earlier periods the dress of men has been as elaborate or even more elaborate than that of women. This change came about after the French Revolution. © 2003. Photo SCALA, Florence. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome.

Lack of opportunity for communication or sharing of information also inhibits fashion. For fashion change to take place, individuals must have some method of learning about new fashions. Life expectancy can play a part here. If the life span is short and if change occurs only slowly, one individual may not live long enough to see and imitate those changes.

Societies in which tradition is strong usually have developed a more rigid code of dress in which value is placed not on change, which is the key element in fashion, but on the codified elements of dress that identify individuals and their place in society. In ancient Rome, for example, the draped outer garment called the *toga* was the primary symbol of Roman citizenship. Only male Roman citizens wore togas. Although over time there was some slow evolution in the styles of togas, these garments could not be said to be subject to fashion. Even in the West, some segments of society do not participate in the fashion process but are regulated by traditions of long standing. The dress of the Roman Catholic clergy is such an example. Their dress is prescribed, with forms and colors that are assigned to specific ranks such as the pope, bishops, archbishops, and so on or that relate to particular holidays or functions.

Fashion in Western Europe

Fashion as a Topic for Study. The study of fashion as a social phenomenon has, until the latter part of the twentieth century, been undertaken in those countries that are identified as "the West," in particular, in western Europe and North America. As early as the sixteenth century, publishers printed books depicting dress in different parts of the world. [Lou Taylor](#) in her book *Dress History* reviewed the earliest works and described their scope. Many had as their subjects the lands of the Americas and other parts of the world that had been newly "discovered" by Europeans, but these books' content was not limited to dress. They also depicted other regional artifacts, flora, and fauna. Others presented illustrations of the dress of individuals from different socioeconomic classes in different countries in Europe and abroad. German diplomat Sigmund von Herberstein has been identified as the first author to publish, in 1560, an account focusing on the cultural significance of dress. [Taylor](#) reports a "burst of publications" from 1560 to 1600 in Italy, Germany, and France. As Europeans engaged more in trade, travel, and colonization in the Middle East and Asia, illustrated books that included depictions of dress in these areas proliferated.

Books on the dress of the European past, on eastern Europe, and on folk and rural dress appeared in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By the twentieth century the academic disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and some branches of art history began to look at dress from their individual perspectives, and some scholars attempted to deal with fashion as an aspect of behavior related to their disciplines. Less focused on the specifics or on images of dress, these authors presented a variety of theories about why and how the fashion process operated.

The Origins of Fashion in Western Europe. When fashion historians and scholars from the West examined the topic of dress over time, they identified periods and cultures in which the style of dress either did not appear to change or changed very, very slowly. Ancient Egyptian dress, for example, shows relatively little change from one generation to another. The major elements of

Egyptian dress may have been accepted by large numbers of people but apparently not for a short period of time. With this key element missing, scholars do not see the dress of such periods as affected by fashion. Even though popular writers may speak about the “fashions of ancient Egypt,” they are not speaking about fashion as a social phenomenon but are using the word *fashion* instead of *dress*, *garment*, or *clothing*.

As dress and fashion developed as a focus of theory and research, the questions arose of how, where, when, and why fashion became an important element of dress. Many individuals provided answers. There was a general consensus that fashion in dress first appeared in Europe, and probably in the Middle Ages, but there was little agreement about the specifics. A. H. Rodrigo de Oliveira Marques, writing about daily life in medieval Portugal, has placed the beginnings of fashion in the thirteenth century but has noted some evidence of fashion-like alterations in styles from the eleventh century on. Fashion theorist James Laver sees it as originating in the fourteenth century in Burgundy, French historian [Fernand Braudel](#) has placed it in the 1400s, and anthropologist Edward Sapir in the Italian Renaissance.

[Braudel](#), in the first volume of his study of material civilization and capitalism, focused extensively on the development of fashion in western Europe. In addition to the aforementioned factors of sufficient affluence to obtain fashionable goods, resources, and technologies that permit the production of these goods, a class structure that permits some degree of social mobility, and a means of communicating information about new styles, he also sees urbanization and the emergence of capitalism as important in facilitating fashion.

Europe in the latter part of the Middle Ages does seem to satisfy all of these requirements. The “Dark Ages,” as the early medieval period (fifth to ninth centuries) following the dissolution of the Roman Empire has been called, would not have provided the essential conditions needed for fashion to develop. Demographic decline, limited technology, shrinkage of cities, and depressed economic growth characterized the period. At the same time, the Byzantine Empire with its capital in Constantinople thrived and provided a stylistic model of luxurious dress for political leaders in the West to imitate. And in the early ninth century, a new religion, Islam, was founded in the Middle East.

Gradually, the West revived, and its economy recovered under a number of feudal monarchies. In the eleventh century, the Christians in Europe launched the first of a series of expeditions called the Crusades that were intended to wrest control of the lands holy to Christians from the Muslims. The Crusades lasted for two hundred years. Over this period the extensive contacts with the Muslim world were responsible for bringing new textiles, designs, and ideas about dress into Europe.

Style Changes and the Pace of Change. In Europe, dress for both men and women at the beginning of the medieval period was based on the tunic, a T-shaped garment. For women and upper-class men, the garment was floor-length; often, two layers were worn. The most common garments for working and military men were shorter tunics worn with leg coverings. For warmth, men and women wore capes or shawls. The more affluent wore clothes made of high-quality fabrics with some additional trim at the neckline. This basic pattern was characteristic of the period from the fifth to the eleventh centuries.

Twelfth-century art, however, depicts some rather radical changes in dress. The formerly straight and fairly loosely fitted tunic is replaced, as shown in sculpture and manuscript paintings, by a garment that is fitted close to the upper body and over the hips and has a gathered or pleated skirt. Sleeve lengths of women’s gowns reached almost to the floor. Moreover, [Heller](#) has pointed out that the literature from this period, especially the romances that describe French and Occitan court life, indicates that participating in fashion was of great importance. Writers such as the early-twelfth-century monk Orderic Vitalis complain about the styles men were adopting in footwear, clothing, and hair dressing. By the thirteenth century, styles had changed and garments were again loose-fitting, but the outermost layer, called a *surcote* or outer tunic, was cut in a number of ways. The variety of terms used to identify items of dress increased substantially, and outer garments of more complex cut replaced, to some extent, capes and shawls. Even the depictions of working-class men and women reflect some of these changes.

Portrait of William II, from *Historia Anglorum* by Matthew Paris, originally published in England, 1250–1259. By the mid-thirteenth century, styles were loosely fitted and had a very different sleeve shape from earlier times. The length of time for which a style was popular became shorter and shorter throughout the Middle Ages. © 2003. Photo SCALA, Florence/HIP. British Library, London.

In the fourteenth century, the pace of change seems to have accelerated still more. [Françoise Piponnier](#) and [Perrine Mane](#), French dress historians writing about fashion changes in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, have stated that the smaller details of style were “in a constant state of change” and that the larger changes in silhouette altered about every fifty years. In each century after this period, the changes in Western fashion accelerated. By the twentieth century, some authors spoke of “fashion racing” as a way of describing styles that changed with ever-increasing rapidity.

The Relationship between Fashion, Its Production, and Its Consumption

In order to supply fashionable goods to consumers, systems of production, distribution, and acquisition developed. Textile fabric is one of the essential elements in dress. Textile manufacturing in Europe evolved from the system first established during the Roman Empire. Romans had manufacturing sites (called *gynacea*), much like factories, in which women, most of them slaves, did the weaving. Upper-class Roman women, who did not produce cloth as a product for sale, were expected to know how to weave as a symbol of their mastery of household management.

Roman textile-production systems appear to have continued into the early Middle Ages. After the fall of the Roman Empire, when the practice of enslaving individuals gradually ended, the *gynacea* slowly went out of existence. Historian [David Herlihy](#) has identified this change and additional factors that took weaving out of the hands of women and made it largely the labor of men. He stresses the movement of most of the work into urban centers, its transformation into professional and specialized production, together with the resulting need for funding to buy equipment, and the rise of guilds, artisans' organizations that restricted membership and created monopolies. These patterns evolved at different rates of speed from one part of Europe to another, but by the late Middle Ages (ca. fourteenth and fifteenth centuries), commercial weaving was a male occupation. Some families continued to produce textiles for household use, but much of this production had moved out of the home and out of the hands of women.

Fibers readily available in Europe included wool, hemp, and linen. Silk was a luxury fabric, available but costly, and therefore limited to those who could afford it. Silk production had begun in China, possibly as early as around 2650 B.C.E. The Greeks and Romans were able to obtain silk through trade with China. In an early instance of stealing trade secrets, the essentials for silk production were brought to the Byzantine Empire around the sixth century, when several priests returned from China, hiding, it has been reported, silkworm larvae and mulberry tree seeds in hollow walking sticks. Silk fiber is spun by silkworms into cocoons, and the food of silkworms is mulberry leaves. Cotton was also a luxury fabric in Roman times, and small quantities were imported from India. Relatively small quantities of cotton were available in the Middle Ages, and it did not become an important fabric in Europe until trading organizations established active trading posts after the Portuguese found a maritime route to the East around Cape Horn and reached India in 1498.

Certain European regions were centers of production for particular types of textiles. Other areas were skilled in processing fibers and constructing, dyeing, and finishing fabrics. International trade and the nonperishable nature of fibers and fabrics made it possible to transport them to those areas where they could be processed or sold. Trade fairs established throughout Europe were an especially important factor in the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries. Not only did the trade fairs provide a place to buy and sell textiles and other supplies used in fashionable dress, but they also gave the traders, who generally went from one fair to another, an opportunity to determine what styles were being worn. This was one more way that information about fashions could be communicated from one area to another.

Garments could be acquired in several ways. They could be made in the home by the women of the household. This was probably true for many less-affluent households. In a wealthier household they could have been made by seamstresses or tailors who were trained to a higher level of skill. These artisans could have been a permanent part of a household or might have been brought in for particular jobs. Paintings depict tailor shops and tailors sewing garments. Some legends tell of saints giving clothing to the poor, indicating that the giving away or selling of used clothing was another method of distribution.

As the guild system developed, specializations arose. Craft guilds organized those making elements of dress (shoemakers, furriers, jewelers, and hat makers) and regulated not only entry into a particular guild but also the quality of goods produced. Guilds continued to play a role in manufacture until about the time of the Industrial Revolution.

The earliest writings about the consumption of fashion proposed what has been called the “trickle-down theory of fashion adoption.” This is taken to explain not only why fashion change occurs but also how fashion markets are created. The adoption of fashion, in this view, begins with an elite upper class that adopts a particular style. Individuals of a slightly lower class attempt to emulate the upper class by adopting these fashions, thereby giving themselves the appearance of higher status. Those on the next-lower rung of the social ladder then copy those above them and so on, until the elite upper-class individuals notice that those of much lower status are dressed in the same clothes and consequently adopt a new style. The new style, in turn, goes through the same process, and the result is fashion change. In such a situation, a shrewd merchant can propose new styles, finding a willing market.

Sumptuary laws, which are laws regulating expenditures on luxury goods including dress or elements of dress, would appear to support this theory, as they attempt to restrict types of dress according to rank or status. These laws differed from one city to another. Often the regulations limited use of certain types of fur; pearls, silver, and gold; or luxurious varieties of fabric, such as silk. Many historians have pointed out that these laws were likely to be ignored and rarely enforced.

The focus on elite dress as the engine of fashion change has been challenged by those writing in the late twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. However, for this earlier period, it may have validity in explaining the origins of the styles that became fashionable.

Landmark Changes Affecting Fashion

By the time of the Renaissance in Europe (ca. 1400–1600), fashion change was unquestionably present. There were regional differences, but styles from one national region could be adopted by people in other areas. Names of styles often attest to their far-off origins. The long, pointed-toed shoes that Orderic Vitalis complained of in the twelfth century came into and out of fashion over subsequent centuries. They were known as *poulaines*, after the country of Poland, or *crackowes*, after the city of Krakow in Poland, where they most probably originated. Intermarriages among European royal families helped to carry the styles popular at one royal court to another. For example, Catherine de Medici, an Italian-born queen of France in the sixteenth century, is said to have introduced perfume to the French court.

Another important factor that stimulated the dissemination of information about fashion was the invention and use of movable type in the second half of the 1400s. With the printing press it was possible not only to print text but also to include printed pictures or drawings. From this point on, printed material could show fashions.

A cotton gown and petticoat, England, about 1785. Printed cotton fabrics, especially lightweight muslins, became a fashion craze in the eighteenth century. Supplies of cotton were not plentiful, so these fabrics were expensive and the gowns something of a status symbol. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. www.vam.ac.uk

Louis XIV became king of France in 1643 and died in 1715. Not only the length of his reign but also his political skill, his encouragement of the arts, and the importance he placed on ceremony and lavish display gave France a central place on the European stage. As a result

Paris became known as a center of fashion. Until the fall of the monarchy in the French Revolution, the French court maintained its fashion leadership. Fashion plates showing the latest French styles of the 1700s were printed, hand-colored, and distributed throughout Europe and in North America. Fashion dolls wearing miniature dresses of the latest French style were circulated. Even after the French Revolution and up to the twenty-first century, France has remained a center for innovation in fashion.

European efforts to engage in trade with countries far to the east (India, China, and Japan) had limited success until the Portuguese reached India and Japan by sea. The Dutch East India Company achieved a severely restricted trade arrangement with Japan in the early 1600s, but full access to Japan was not available until the nineteenth century. Efforts to trade with India and with China were more successful. Chinese silks and silk fabrics with Chinese decorative motifs were enormously popular in the eighteenth century. Delicate white cotton muslins from India were made into dresses for upper-class women and children. Imported, colorful, printed cotton fabrics from India became a fashion craze. These cottons were expensive, as cotton was not readily available outside of India.

The southern regions of the British colonies in North America were ideal for growing cotton. The colonists established cotton plantations, and the slave trade brought enslaved Africans to North America to work in cotton production. The demand for textiles grew as more and more men and women became intent on acquiring fashionable dress. Some European countries restricted the importation of Asian fabrics in attempts to protect their domestic textile industries. At the same time, innovations in textile-manufacturing technology were eagerly adopted in order to allow European textile firms to compete with the foreign goods. This eager embrace of new methods of spinning yarns and weaving cloth by using mechanical power instead of human power meant that textile production was one of the earliest industries to see the benefits of the Industrial Revolution. Cotton prices decreased as greater supplies of the fabric became available.

Throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many people assumed that the desire to be fashionable was a feminine trait. The art of the past that depicted men in dress as elaborate and fantastical as that of women was overlooked, or it was assumed that modern men were not nearly so frivolous as men of the past. It is true that the men's clothing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was simpler and more subdued in color than in previous centuries. When dress and other historians have examined the question of why men's clothing changed so dramatically, they have tended to see the answer in the political attitudes of the Western world and also in some practical realities.

The political event that has been cited as a related cause is the French Revolution and its goal of equality. No longer was there to be a chasm between the dress of various classes. The simple dark-colored suit became a virtual uniform for men. Moreover, given the increased soot produced by the machinery of the Industrial Revolution and manufacturing, as well as the requirement that even affluent men should go to work in an office each day, dark colors were more practical. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, the distinctions in men's fashions were to be subtle. Upper-class men's suits were made of finer fabric, with elegant detailing, by the best London tailors. When it came to prestige and quality, London was to men's dress what Paris was to women's. Men did have more leeway in clothing choices for leisure time. And in the 1960s and after, a greater emphasis on higher-fashion styling, more imaginative design, and color did return to men's dress. Well-known designers produced lines of menswear and displayed them in fashion shows. The fashion aspect of men's clothing had become more visible again.

Changes in the Operation of the Fashion Process

The relatively elite status of fashionable behavior in the Middle Ages and after has led some scholars to propose that fashion did not really begin until the eighteenth century. This would perhaps be a legitimate argument if one defined *fashion* as a preference accepted by *all* of the individuals in a given society for a relatively short period of time, given that in earlier periods fashionable dress was largely worn by the more affluent.

By the nineteenth century, Europe and North America had seen the social class structure open sufficiently that, even though extraordinary circumstances were sometimes required, individuals

could advance up the social ladder. As a result, except for the abject poor, the enslaved, or those who were outside the general population by virtue of their religious or other beliefs, the vast majority of the population were enthusiastic followers of fashion. Dress historians have noted that in the nineteenth century, periods during which a similar silhouette predominated lasted about twenty years until around 1890, after which the periods were more likely to be about ten years and even less. The speed of fashion continued to accelerate.

Except for prominent individuals such as Queen Marie Antoinette of France, who had her own milliner, Madame Bertin, or the Empress Josephine, wife of Napoleon Bonaparte, whose clothes were designed by a man named Leroy, there was no such profession as “fashion designer” or “couturier” until after the mid-1800s. Tailors made suits for men, and dressmakers made clothing for women. Charles Worth, an Englishman, went to Paris in 1845, because he felt there were more opportunities there for anyone who wanted to work with fabrics and fashions. Beginning as a salesperson in a textile establishment, he married a French colleague and designed clothing for her to wear. When she wore these dresses in the store, they were admired; soon Worth set up his own atelier and was making clothing for fashionable women. His work came to the notice of the Empress Eugénie, and by using innovative publicity and merchandising techniques, he attracted clients from all over the world. Worth is considered to have been the first couturier. His sons joined the business, and in 1868 they founded the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture*, a selective organization of the most highly regarded Parisian fashion designers. This organization, which sets the rules for the haute couture fashion shows in Paris, continues to function in the twenty-first century.

Although Paris had always been seen as the most important fashion center for women, the establishment of haute couture set up a specific system through which fashion ideas originated at a central point. Clothes were sold to rich customers, but they were also depicted, the depictions were circulated, and professional or amateur seamstresses attempted to reproduce the new designs. Although the technologies for making and communicating images of the latest fashions have evolved, the basic idea of presenting collections to potential customers and the press through fashion shows has continued into the twenty-first century.

The equivalent center of fine tailoring for men developed in England in a section of London called Savile Row. As early as the 1600s, this street had been the home of a fashionable tailor, Robert Baker. But the area did not immediately become the primary location for this trade. That happened in the early nineteenth century at about the same time that George “Beau” Brummell became a leader in men’s fashion. His impeccable taste helped to make British tailoring famous throughout Europe. A rage for British styles or Anglomania swept the continent. By the middle of the century, London and Savile Row were seen as the place for well-to-do men to have their clothes made.

Women who made clothing for their families purchased sewing supplies and fabrics from dry goods merchants. Seamstresses or tailors who produced the clothing for individuals and families took orders and sold the finished products to their customers. Some specialty shops made and sold items such as shoes or hats. In addition, it had been possible for centuries to buy used clothing from merchants who dealt in secondhand clothing, and some ready-to-wear clothing had been available from specialty stores that sold specific items. However, a major separation of the merchandising of elements of dress from their production came about in the nineteenth century, and from the mid-1800s on, a new type of merchandising gained importance with the rise of department stores. A number of department stores have claimed to have been the first of their type. The *Bon Marché* department store in Paris is frequently suggested as the first large building that housed a store that was organized into departments and sold a large variety of goods. At the end of the century, these establishments could be found in cities large and small in countries all over the world.

Ready-to-wear clothing was available earlier for men than for women. Some ready-made items of dress were to be found in the department stores. The more elite stores still had their own made-to-measure departments in which men and women could have clothing made for them. Seamstresses and tailors continued to ply their trades, and women still sewed at home, although if they lived in an urban environment, they probably bought the fabric and sewing supplies in a department store.

The first merchant to engage in distance selling of items of dress, more commonly called mail order, was probably Aristide Boucicaut, founder of the Parisian Bon Marché department store. His first catalog was published in 1855. Beginning in 1872, residents of rural areas in the United States and Canada might buy clothing and other items of dress from a mail order catalog published by the U.S. firm Montgomery Ward and, after 1884, from the Canadian Eaton's catalog. Others, such as Sears and Roebuck, followed about ten years later. The result was that current items of ready-made dress were available not only in the cities but throughout the rural areas as well.

A young woman wearing a Goth-style outfit. Styles adopted by fans of music groups or other identifiable "style tribes" such as Goth style often illustrate the concept of "bubble up" fashion, in which fashion trends originate not with the haute couture but in so-called street style. High-fashion designers often adapt these design ideas, and they may become part of mainstream style. Stephen Stickler/Getty Images.

The Unique Contribution of the United States: Mass Production

Throughout the nineteenth century, major changes in the silhouette and structure of women's dress were occurring about every twenty years. More subtle, evolutionary changes could be seen within these periods. There is a popular misconception that the fashion industry "makes" individuals reject old styles and adopt new ones. In the nineteenth century, however, there was no monolithic fashion industry, no mass production. The stylistic changes of the period from about 1870 to 1890 serve to rebut the suggestion that fashion changes are imposed by a fashion industry. Dress historians call this period "The Bustle Period": It was characterized by a silhouette with fullness concentrated at the back of the garment and supported by a structure called a bustle. From about 1870 to 1878, bustles on skirts were created by manipulating the drapery to achieve a "waterfall" effect, with a support under the softly draped skirt holding out the fabric. From about 1878 to 1883, skirts fitted tightly and smoothly over the hips, and the skirt fullness was relocated to below the knees at the back. In 1883 the bustle changed again, this time becoming shelf-like and rigid. Within this twenty-year period, three distinct bustle styles had come and gone. No mass fashion industry existed as yet to promote, produce, and sell the changing styles. It was up to women to find a way to adjust their skirts to fit the evolving styles.

The development of a mass fashion industry was, however, but a short time ahead. Technological developments played a major role, beginning with the sewing machine. Although other inventors had worked on a machine that could stitch fabrics together, Isaac Singer from the United States is generally credited with developing and marketing the first commercially successful sewing machine. His patent dates to 1851. Men's and boys' suits and coats, women's cloaks, and hoop skirts were among the first ready-made items to become more available because of the ease of making them with sewing machines.

The development of sized paper patterns and of cutting machines had an effect as well. Ebenezer Butterick was the first to patent, produce, and sell paper patterns in different sizes. The concept of making various sizes was a cornerstone of mass production. In addition, when each garment had to be cut by hand, it was not possible to work quickly. Cutting machines, although at first somewhat cumbersome, could cut multiple layers of fabric. Once electricity was used to power the machines (ca. 1890), efficiency increased so that eventually as many as one hundred layers could be cut at once.

Demographic changes in the United States also helped to stimulate mass production. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, huge waves of immigrants were entering the country. Many were women with good sewing skills or men trained as tailors. The emerging garment industry had need of these employees.

The manufacturing system used was unique. By breaking down the operations within the production of one garment, workers could become particularly skilled in one step of the work. This method, known as piecework, relied on having each worker handle one aspect of

construction: One attached collars, another set in the sleeves, and yet another sewed the long seams. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the mass production of clothing items was established and continued to be the economic backbone of the U.S. fashion industry until the latter part of the twentieth century. Styles were generally based on what was being shown in Paris. In the first half of the twentieth century each decade generally had a predominant style line that was reproduced throughout the Western world and in other areas where Western styles were being adopted by some segments of the population.

The customers of the North American fashion industry came from all socioeconomic levels. Wealthy North Americans had traveled to Europe in the nineteenth century and patronized the haute couture system. They continued to do so in the twentieth century, and some still do in the twenty-first century. Others became customers of upscale department stores that had their own designers and made clothing to order. Still others shopped at the most exclusive specialty or department stores for more expensive ready-to-wear and imported couture items. Ready-to-wear manufacturers aimed their products at consumers who shopped at different price levels.

The manufacturer's name was often on the label of the garment, while the designer frequently remained nameless. For lower-priced lines, the designer might be sent out to sketch the clothes in the windows of the most exclusive department stores, then come back and make a "knockoff" or copy of what he or she had seen. Until World War II when Paris was occupied by the Germans and haute couture was closed to the outside world, it was rare for a U.S. designer to gain national recognition, although a few did. During the war, with no styles coming from Paris, U.S. fashion magazines began to feature U.S. designers, bringing them to public attention. The major center for design noted by the fashion press was New York City, along with Los Angeles in particular and California in general for sportswear.

At the end of the war and into the 1950s, attention once again focused on Paris, and the tendency for a single, predominant style line for women's dress returned. At the same time, other cities began to be known as design centers. The first were Florence and Rome in Italy and London in England. Some couturiers began to create not only lines for haute couture but also for ready-to-wear, in French *prêt-à-porter*, and over time almost all of the haute couture firms began to participate in shows of prêt-à-porter designs. Throughout the remainder of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, more and more internationally known designers emerged from areas such as Japan, Ireland, Belgium, and Spain. The era when all new fashions and ideas were thought to come from Paris had ended.

Elite Fashion of the Past and Mass Fashion in the Twenty-First Century

In examining the transition from elite fashion to mass fashion, one can ask, "How did the masses acquire the ability to imitate the elite?" That answer is simple. Mass production of dress and the economic advantages of globalization of production have brought the cost of items of dress to a level where even those with meager means can afford to buy fashionable dress. In the 1960s, sociologist [Michael Harrington](#) pointed out, "Clothes make the poor invisible. America has the best-dressed poverty the world has ever known."

However, if one focuses instead on how the origins of the ideas that drive fashion change have developed, the discussion goes in another direction. The dress styles of Western fashion from the early Middle Ages until the second half of the twentieth century do seem to have their origins in the styles of an economic and/or political elite, an idea advanced by proponents of the trickle-down theory of fashion diffusion. Occasional exceptions can be seen, such as the suggestion that the puffs and slashing of upper-class Renaissance dress originated with the ragged dress of soldiers after a battle or the adoption by Queen Marie Antoinette and the ladies of her court of styles based on a romanticized version of the dress of French peasant shepherdesses.

Rokumeikan Serenade by Chikanobu, 1889. When non-Western countries came into contact with Western countries, fashions from Europe and North America were often adopted by some

of the inhabitants. Japanese prints of the mid-nineteenth century often depict Japanese people wearing Western fashionable dress, such as these tailcoat- and bustle-wearing musicians from the 1880s. Collection of Kyoto Costume Institute.

But any review of the popular styles of the late twentieth century will find not only styles that “trickle down” but also others that have been described as “percolating” or “bubbling” up. The “percolate up” theory of fashion (also called the “bubble up” theory) describes the beginnings of styles that originate with small groups that are not part of mainstream culture. Examples are numerous: the dress worn by fans of music groups, jeans first worn by anti-Vietnam War student protesters, or shoes worn with laces untied that originated with inner-city African American youth.

Furthermore, the single monolithic fashionable silhouette was also gone. Sociologist [Diana Crane](#) has differentiated between the older pattern of “class” fashion and a newer fashion system that she calls “consumer” fashion. She divides consumer fashion into three types: luxury fashion design, industrial fashion design, and street styles. Luxury fashion design originates with high-fashion designers in certain cities and countries, industrial fashion design comes from large manufacturers that produce similar types of dress and sell these items on large, international markets or from smaller companies that may have smaller, more local markets, and street styles generally originate with smaller subcultures.

The styles that “percolate up” from subcultures are originally confined to a particular segment of society. Anthropologist [Ted Polhemus](#) has coined the term *style tribe* to describe the followers of these alternate fashions. But the designers and manufacturers in the luxury fashion market and in the industrial fashion market are always looking for sources of inspiration for their styles; as a result, they may, in some cases, develop couture or mass-produced designs that derive from the dress of a subculture. This is one of the major changes in the operation of fashion since about the 1970s and has led some writers to declare the end or death of fashion. In fact, it is not so much that the fashion process is dead but that a gradual movement has occurred away from past periods when a single silhouette predominated and all dress types had enough similarities that one could identify at once the time period in which it originated. Instead, fashion in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries is segmented, and clothing choices are more likely to reflect what is accepted fashion within a particular reference group. The fashion-following affluent women who are photographed for the society pages of major newspapers will not be dressed in the same way as the young women waiting to enter a rock concert or the older women gathered for dining in their retirement communities. Nevertheless, each will follow the fashion accepted by their peers.

Fashion in the Non-Western World

Whether fashion is a characteristic of non-Western cultures remains debatable. In her study of fashion in medieval France, [Sarah-Grace Heller](#) has argued that fashion is a conceptual system, not a visual one. She goes on to identify ten criteria for determining whether fashion is present in a culture. The points she makes may be useful when looking at cultures and historical periods and trying to determine whether the fashion process is operating or has operated there. She says that: (1) Fashion produces a “relative disqualification” of the past, as opposed to a valuing of the traditional. (2) In fashionable cultures there is a society-wide value placed on change, and this is neither “sporadic nor irregular.” (3) Fashion provides a means of individual expression but within a framework of social imitation. (4) Where fashion is present, “consumption and appearance play a significant role in the emotions and the subconscious.” (5) The changes that occur are in the more superficial areas; attempts to impose more radical change tend to meet resistance. (6) Conspicuous consumption involving excess and exaggeration is present. (7) A crucial role is played by verbal expression in giving and denying fashionable value and it is therefore essential to study fashion through texts as well as visual representations. (8) Within the society the rejection of the past and the constant changes inherent in fashion arouse criticism. (9) Pleasure is valued in a fashion system. (10) Finally, a major goal of the fashion process is “consumption at the greatest possible level.” This, she believes, contributes to democratization and moves a society toward equalization.

Only those who are intimately familiar with a particular culture are likely to be in a position to determine whether [Heller](#)'s criteria are satisfied. Some authors have looked for and found

fashionable dress in non-Western settings. One region for which evidence of fashion has been suggested is China. In a publication about the Chinese dress held in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, curator [Verity Wilson](#) has pointed out areas where fashion, though differently expressed, may possibly be part of Chinese dress.

At the same time, she has noted factors that would argue against some aspects of the fashion process. [Wilson](#) sees the isolation of the Chinese rulers and high-status women as a barrier to communication about fashion. Furthermore, she notes further that until the development of photography in the nineteenth century, the rulers, who did not travel, were not in a position to influence fashion. Nonetheless, she raises questions about what constitutes fashion. For the Chinese, the surface and decoration of fabric, not the fit, confer importance on garments. Her analysis of garments and other records indicates that from the mid-thirteenth century to the early seventeenth century, it is possible to see “a surprisingly wide variety of styles.” Examples from literature suggest that information about royal styles could have been spread by people approved for visiting relatives in the court (in the case cited, sisters of an imperial concubine). Another literary source is the eighteenth-century poet Yuan Mai, who speaks of a hat and robe he had worn as a young man that became fashionable again thirty years later. [Wilson](#) has also noted that during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), those with money and the inclination to be trendsetters could find published style guides.

[Dorothy Ko](#), a Chinese historian, has presented an interesting perspective in relating the following story about reports from eighteenth-century European travelers who visited China. They were familiar with paintings of Chinese dress that were done thirty or forty years earlier, and when they arrived in China, they expressed amazement at the lack of change in Chinese dress over this time period. But, as [Ko](#) has observed, it could well be that the visitors were expecting to find the differences in particular areas such as silhouette, hairstyle, and even garment names, whereas a Chinese person might focus on changes in other areas.

Iroquois (Eastern Woodlands) moccasins, 1900–1915. These moccasins from the early twentieth century show the process of “cultural authentication” in their mixture of foot coverings that originated with the native people of North America but are ornamented with beads that were brought to North America with the earliest traders. Many North American Indians and First Nations peoples added beading to their dress—to a considerable extent beads replaced the porcupine quills that were used in the precontact period. McCord Museum M1078.9-10.

Other authors define fashion somewhat differently and believe that viewing dress through a Western perspective interferes with the ability to perceive fashion in other cultures. [Jennifer Craik](#), working in the cultural policy studies area, has argued that the view of fashion as modern high fashion may predominate in discussions of contemporary fashion but that numerous other fashion systems “co-exist, compete, and interact” with it. In her book *The Face of Fashion*, she defines a fashion system as denoting acceptable codes and conventions, setting limits and prescribing clothing behavior, and revising what is accepted by many individuals as appropriate dress for a specific period of time; [Craik](#) views the shaping of what is fashionable as related to the culture, rather than the time period, in which it exists. In time this viewpoint may lead to valuable reappraisals of studies of fashion and expand the knowledge base on which fashion studies rest.

The Globalization of Fashionable Dress

Looking at fashion in the twenty-first century, it is clear that although dress from previous historical periods in non-Western regions is not easily identified as subject to a fashion process, individuals across the world are wearing some items of Western-style dress in the twenty-first century. The reasons for this globalization of dress are many and complex.

The adoption of Western dress by non-Westerners is not a new phenomenon. Japan opened to the West only in the mid-nineteenth century, but by the 1880s Japanese art depicted Japanese men in business suits or tuxedos and women wearing Western bustle-style gowns. Colonization by Western powers introduced fashionable dress to many regions. The decision to wear this clothing was not always a free choice. Westerners’ standards of modesty often differed

markedly from those of the colonized, and conformity to these standards was imposed on individuals who had regular contact with colonists. Westerners often viewed local dress styles as either picturesque or “primitive.” In more recent decades, the choice to wear fashionable dress has been facilitated by the internationalization of communication and of commerce. [Margaret Maynard](#), writing about globalization and dress, has pointed out “the global belief that the [Western two-piece] business suit is the necessary garment for the conduct of business.”

The globalization of the fashion industry has also contributed significantly to the spread of Western dress styles. After World War II, Paris’s role as *the* major fashion center was undermined by a number of factors. Many of the couture houses found that the cost of producing a Paris original (defined as a garment made in the couture house but not necessarily a one-of-a-kind garment) skyrocketed. It was difficult for couture houses to make a profit solely on their haute couture sales. Sales of their auxiliary projects, such as perfumes, scarves, and other accessories, were more lucrative. They also turned to licensing as a means of generating income. Retail outlets in major cities and tourist destinations all over the world could, under license, sell products carrying a couture house or designer label. In addition, couturiers produced lower-priced ready-to-wear lines. Customers for the true couture end of the business were largely wealthy foreigners.

Ready-to-wear gained increasing importance, especially when prêt-à-porter shows in Paris garnered as much interest as haute couture. Designers from many countries began to participate, and other cities began to hold their own shows, attracting the press and fashion followers. In 2006 a book called *Fashion’s World Cities* included articles not only about the European centers of Paris, London, and Milan but also about New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Shanghai, Moscow, Tokyo, and Dakar, in addition to featuring India as a developing center.

A further factor is the globalization of the manufacturing of fashionable dress. Not only have European and North American fashion industries taken advantage of the lower costs of manufacturing overseas, but local fashion industries have also begun in developing countries. More often, though, garments are designed in one part of the world, manufactured somewhere else, and sold or worn in a third country. The marketing of used clothing from more affluent countries makes fashionable dress available to even the low-income residents of poorer nations.

The fashion industry is constantly looking for new ideas. As a result, Western and non-Western fashion designers incorporate elements of the dress of other cultures into the dress they produce. Asian dress has contributed elements such as the standing collar called a “mandarin collar” and the kimono. Kente cloth from Africa became a fashionable fabric in the 1960s and has continued in use since then. Designers from countries such as India produce Western lines, ethnic lines, and lines that are a fusion of both. At the same time, individuals in non-Western countries that have ready access to Western dress often combine the traditional dress of their region with elements of Western dress to create what scholars Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Kathleen Musa call “mixtures.” This process of incorporation, which anthropologists [Tonye Erekosima](#) and [Eicher](#) have called “cultural authentication,” involves a step in which some change or transformation of the original style is made. If the transformed style becomes the predominant style, accepted by a large number of people but only for a short period of time, then perhaps this is a way of participating in the fashion process on a local level. However, if the authenticated dress becomes a fixed and permanent form of dress that does not change, can it be considered “fashion”? This remains an open question with the answer, ultimately, depending on the definition of *fashion*.

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