

Fashion at the Museum.

An interpretation of the dress collections at the Design Museum of Barcelona

by TERESA BASTARDES, Head of Collections, Design Museum of Barcelona and SÍLVIA VENTOSA, Curator of Textiles and Fashion at the Design Museum of Barcelona

Photographs: ©Design Museum of Barcelona, LaFotogràfica

“Dress is therefore the most immense modification experienced by man in society; it weighs on his entire existence”

Honoré de Balzac

Abstract

The new [Design Museum of Barcelona](#) has opened its doors to the public with four inaugural exhibitions. Among them, *Dressing the body; silhouettes and fashion 1555-2015* provides a critical insight into how the outward appearance of the human shape has been manipulated throughout history, and highlights the absurdity of being a slave to one’s own body or to fashion. This reflection takes on special importance in our society in which the personal image plays such a powerful role in the creation of identity and in social communication.

The body and dress

Human beings are distinguished from other animals by a system of verbal communication – language – and by other nonverbal behaviours such as our gestures and the way we present ourselves to the world. Our outward appearance conforms to the canons of beauty, which intentionally alter our natural forms. The obsession with achieving a specific aesthetic ideal has given rise to the invention of exaggerated artefacts to modify the shape of the body.

In today’s world, speaking of the body and its modification is in fashion. At the same time, fashion is a key element of the post-industrial society. Changes in appearance and dress are continuous, cyclical, and increasingly accelerated.

According to Elisabeth Wilson (1985), the body is a cultural artifact. Its ornamentation expresses the aesthetics that modify our appearance: hairstyles, makeup, tattoos and alterations in the body, and especially our dress. While the concept of the body has been treated extensively in academic fields, the body in relation to clothing and fashion was largely ignored until the studies published by Joanne Entwistle and Elisabeth Wilson, especially *The Fashioned Body* (Entwistle, 2000) and *Body Dressing* (Entwistle and Wilson, 2001).





Dress is universal; it is a basic fact of social life in all cultures, transmitting information about its wearers and their social class, age, gender, their aesthetic tastes and their intentions: aggression, submission, transgression, seduction and power.

Body and dress are complementary. The content and the container form a symbiosis. Obviously, dress is not self-supporting; it needs a body to support it, but at the same time the body is covered with a dress. The dressed body could be considered as a dynamic relationship, a dialogue between the body, dress, and the social and aesthetic moral codes of an era or culture. In Western society the dressed body is the protagonist of our appearance, which is one of the major concerns of our time.

Furthermore, fashion can be defined as a collective belief that is manifested and becomes visible in clothing. In Western society the dressed body is directed by a system that arbitrarily and periodically introduces changes. Fashion lays down the ornamentation of the human body as the maximum expression of the individual personality to which we add an impersonal feature, the collective style. Fashion is not dress, the seen object, but a set of invisible elements included in the dress that give added value. Dress is what a person wears; it is the transfer of fashion into everyday life.

At different times in history, dress has artificially modified the body shape to create silhouettes and volumes. The silhouette, the visible contour of a dressed body, marks the entire shape of the body and creates its limits with respect to other bodies and to other spaces, either occupied or free. Three silhouettes have recurred consistently over the last few centuries; the straight tubular silhouette, the geometric silhouette with the basic forms of the triangle, the rectangle and the circle, and the silhouette that respects the anatomical shape of the human body.





The concept of the exhibition

Dress modifies the image of the body by compressing it or releasing it. Fashion tends to be cyclical, and over recent history the morphology of dress has gone through five phases: compression of the body from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, release at the time of the French Revolution, compression again in the nineteenth century until the First World War, release in the 1920s and 1930s, compression once more until the 1950s, and a new social revolution in the 1960s which has released the body again until today. This endless variation is the essence of fashion and its arbitrariness.

The main actions exerted by dress on the body are increasing, reducing, elongating, profiling and revealing. Increasing involves creating volume in the arms, shoulders or hips using interior structures or ample rigid fabrics: *tontillos*, petticoats, crinolines and bustles widen the figure. Reducing physically constricts the natural forms of the body, particularly the torso and waist: corsets, bodices, bras and belts. Elongating enhances the silhouette to make people seem taller, with stylized heels and platform shoes, hats, dresses with long tails. Profiling outlines the forms of the body without modifying it, with stockings, gloves, shirts and bodysuits. Finally, revealing uncovers parts of the body or suggests the figure with transparent fabrics, dresses, shorts and sleeveless T-shirts.

These effects are achieved in three main ways. First, the choice of fabrics: a flexible material like knitwear fits close to the body, while a rigid fabric like velvet separates the body from the dress. Then, with the techniques of patterning, cutting and sewing, the silhouette of the dress can either cling to the body with the use of darts and folds or be separated using pleats and ruffles or overlapping fabrics, trimmings, and lace. Finally, internal structures, either constraining the body or increasing it, help to give the desired shape: corsets to make the body appear smaller than it is, crinolines and bustles to separate the dress from the body, and brassieres to reduce the bust, leave it as is, or give it volume.



Museography

¹ Julia Schulz-Dornburg, exhibition design; Toni Rueda, lighting AAAA Pere Canals and Daniel Pujal, graphic design.

² The fashion collection of the Design Museum of Barcelona has pieces from all over Western Europe. It centres in particular on Spanish designers from the twentieth century onwards, especially those from the city of Barcelona.

Underlying the exhibition is the idea that presentation is as important as content. Its complex narrative is housed in a setting in which visitors can perceive it and understand it.

The museography converts something *a priori* intangible into something tangible. It is a transversal project involving expert professionals who have brought together their skills in curating, design space (including the display cases and cabinets), lighting, and graphic design¹.

The dresses are the protagonists. The pieces were carefully selected to represent all the materials and techniques used throughout history, but especially to ensure that all silhouettes characteristic of each moment should reflect the five actions that dress performs on the body, in accordance with the underlying concept of the exhibition. It was also decided that as many of the designers represented in the Museum's collection as possible should be chosen for the exhibition²: in all, 50 designers, from the nineteenth century to the present day.

The timeline presents the graphic and textual contents on the walls opposite the display cases. Inside the display cases are the pieces themselves, without any text except for the title and dates that link up with the graphic and textual information.

The exhibition is divided into ten periods. **The first, 1550-1789. The Gentleman and the Courtier. Dresses compress the body**, includes more than two centuries of costumes belonging to the aristocracy, and displays silhouettes that modify the natural lines of the body through the use of the corset and *tontillo*. **1789-1825. Dress and Revolution. The body set free** exhibits tunic dresses that allow the body to move and display itself naturally. Then, over the course of the nineteenth century, in the hands of the new industrial bourgeoisie,





fashion once again exaggerates the woman's body, compressing the torso and narrowing the waist with corsets and widening hips and rear with crinolines and bustles. These modifications of the body are shown in **1825-1845. Ethereal Women. The dress inflates the body**, which presents romantic dresses with rounded skirts and puffed sleeves; **1845-1868. The well-dressed bourgeoisie. Exaggerating volumes**, which increases the skirt with the use of crinolines; **1868-1888. The age of the bustle. What matters is at the back**, shows models that change ever more quickly, obliging continued change; and **1888-1910. "S"-shaped belles; clothes deform the body**, in which women's figures are grossly deformed. The first decades of the twentieth century saw the second major break in the history of fashion. **1910-1930. Clothes reveal the body. Corsets off!** During wartime, women are replacing men in the workforce, and dress become more comfortable, gradually shorter, revealing the legs for the first time in history; the waistline moves down from the chest to the hips. **1930-1960. Haute couture. The artificial silhouette** is a conservative period which returns to the past with narrow waist and wide hips. But the 1960s brought in new currents of freedom, as the younger generations began to impose their aesthetics. Soon designers and the industry adapted to changing times, and the democratization of fashion made it accessible to everyone. **1960-1990. Prêt-à-porter. The body on show.** A variety of silhouettes in comfortable unisex clothes for both women and men; trousers for women, as well as mini and maxi skirts. **1990-2015. Designers versus globalization. Clothes outline, wrap or reveal the body** shows that all the silhouettes are possible: large volumes live alongside minimalist models.

The dresses are arranged in large display cases that resemble rooms with a glass front to protect them from dust and the public. The dresses maintain a dialogue with each other, their similarities and differences enhanced by the display. Two large wall cabinets house the interior structures (corsets, bras and bustles) in an intentionally more abstract arrangement than the dresses. Finally a cylindrical glass cases contains the crinolines.

The lighting design obtains a theatrical effect since only the pieces and graphic information are lit; the visitor remains in darkness. Maintaining levels of 50 lux on the pieces at all times, the windows have a cycloramic background of soft colours. To enhance their volumes, spotlights are focused directly on the



pieces. The lighting reinforces the concept of the exhibition which includes both two-dimensional silhouettes and three-dimensional volumes and uses LED technology to comply with the requirements of conservation (neither infrared nor ultraviolet) and sustainability.

Each cabinet corresponds to a period with particular silhouettes and a particular concept of body modification. To illustrate the concept, a pattern is repeated throughout the exhibition, with four “characters”:

1. **Anatomical modification:** anatomical mannequins with joints highlight the body parts modified by clothing and draw our attention to how this is achieved in each period.
2. **Prosthesis:** a mannequin showing the interior structure that helps to achieve anatomical changes.
3. **Main character:** the costume that best represents the standard shape of the period of the time and the relationship with the body that wore it.
4. **Full Image** from the period, showing a person wearing the costume, the hairstyle, accessories and context. These supports are paintings from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries and photographs from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on a lenticular system that introduces a certain movement; and videos for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.
5. **Reference:** a gold mannequin in twenty-first century dress which formally recalls the silhouette of the period and helps to explain the historical costumes to the visitor.

The rest of the cabinet presents the different models of the period.



The mannequin, the artificial body is the support of the dress. The organizers of the exhibition deliberately opted for mannequins without heads, to give prominence to the dress, but with legs and arms when the model requires them. All mannequins required *mannequinage*: that is, the process to create the specific form that each dress needs. With innocuous materials, volumes are created on the mannequin to obtain the exact shape for each dress, giving volume where needed, filling in parts of the body. The costumes are assembled without modifications, without any folds or stitches, in order to favour their preservation.

The costumes in the collection belonging mostly to specific individuals and are therefore made to measure. The system of sizes did not arrive until the 1960s, the era of prêt-à-porter. Each dress tells us about the body of the person who wore it. We also know each model in great detail thanks to documentary sources as prints and photographs.

The modelled body: from the corset of the body to the corset of the mind

In contrast to the Museum's motionless mannequins, real bodies are a kind of capital that require major important economic and aesthetic investment, following the canons of beauty of each particular period. These canons oblige us to be permanently aware of our bodies and urge us to be slim, muscular, and healthy. Today's global fashion standardizes us; the differentiation occurs not only in the way we dress, but also in altering our skin and body shape. Our society "invites" us to diet and to do sport; "aesthetic" surgery proposes an ever younger figure, in the image of athletes, actors, singers and models. Our freedom of choice is reduced because social pressure makes us follow the aesthetic of the moment. *Dressing the body* aims to reflect this. ●

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BASTARDES, Teresa, VENTOSA, Silvia, «El cuerpo vestido». De la colección Rocamora al Disseny Hub Barcelona», *Heritage & museography Her&Mus*, No. 2, Gener, Gijón: Trea, 2009.
- BASTARDES, Teresa, SOLEY-BELTRAN, Patricia, TATAY, Helena, VENTOSA, Silvia, ZAZZO, Anne (2010), «The return of the absent body in the fashion museum: 'Dressing the body' exhibition», *Critical Studies in Fashion and Beauty*, volume 1, no. 2, pp. 255-269.
- Dressing the Body. Silhouettes and Fashion 1550-2015* (exh. cat.), Museum of Design of Barcelona, Ajuntament de Barcelona, Barcelona, 2014.
- ENTWISTLE, Joanne, *The Fashioned Body. Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000.
- ENTWISTLE, Joanne; Wilson, Elizabeth, *Body Dressing*, Berg, Oxford, 2001.
- FUKAI, Akiko (ed.), *Karada no yume: fashion or mienai korusetto / henshu Kyoto Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan*, Kyoto Fukushoku Bunka Kenkyu Zaidan (*Visions of the body: fashion or invisible corset*), Kyoto: The National Museum of Modern Art, The Kyoto Costume Institute, 1999.
- KODA, Harold, *Extreme Beauty, The Body Transformed*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2005.
- LUCINI, Carmen, *Bodyteca Històrica* Una investigació morfològica al servei de les col·leccions d'indumentària, Monogràfics conservació preventiva de teixits 4*, Centre de Documentació i Museu Tèxtil, Terrassa, 2013.
- RUDOLFSKY, Bernard, *The Unfashionable Human Body*, Anchor Press/Doubleday, New York, 1971.
- SALTZMAN, Andrea, *El cuerpo diseñado*, Paidós, Buenos Aires, 2004.
- VENTOSA, Sílvia, *Modelar el cos*, Altafulla, Barcelona, 2001.
- WILSON, Elizabeth, *Adorned in Dreams*, Virago Press, London, 1985.
- <http://www.museudeldisseny.cat/ca/exposicio/el-cos-vestit-siluetes-i-moda-1550-2015>.