

The Voice of Clothing



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How I See Others; *How Others See Me*

Did you ever sit in a bus, train, or plane terminal and watch people come and go? Did you form opinions about the individuals you saw? What helped you form these opinions?

We tend to classify strangers, using their appearance as a guide. We rely upon clothing to help us form our first impressions about others, just as others observe our clothing in forming opinions about us.

Some impressions are formed instantly. We recognize whether an individual is a man or a woman, a boy or a girl. Age may be indicated by the style or type of clothing and its fit. From clothes, we draw conclusions about whether an individual is well-to-do, penniless, or in between.

Clothes may be a guide in determining the individual's occupation. Work uniforms provide helpful, immediate impressions for distinguishing policemen, mailmen, nurses, waitresses, and so on. Uniforms worn to signify membership in organizations of a religious, social, athletic, or other nature also provide direct clues about people. Can you imagine trying to distinguish players in a football game, or veterans in a Fourth of July parade, without their uniforms or insignia?

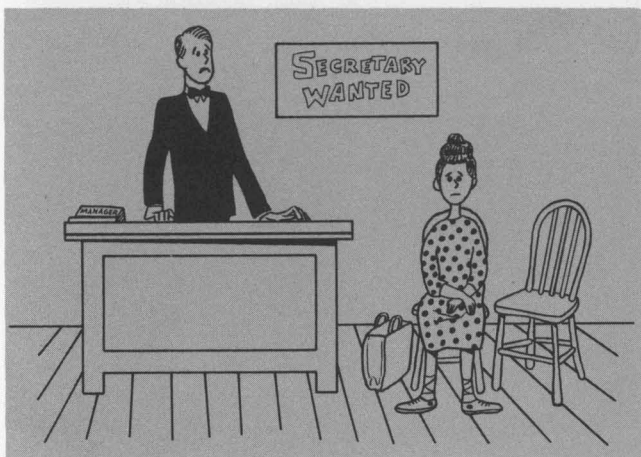
First impressions help us recognize friends in a crowd, and may help us perceive a person's immediate plans so we can adjust our behavior accordingly.

Less obvious first impressions are also created by clothing. It may signal something to us about one's personality as well as his values and attitudes. When we become better acquainted with a person, his clothing may even tell us something about his mood.

How accurate are the first impressions we form about people? Usually, these impressions are formed rapidly, and we have a strong feeling that they are right. Accuracy, however, depends upon the characteristics being judged. Studies show that we are very likely to make errors in quick judgments of such characteristics as intelligence and personality. Accuracy al-

so depends upon our interests at the time. We will observe a stranger calling at our front door more closely than an individual we pass on a crowded city street.

Regardless of the accuracy of first impressions, they have important influences on our lives. For example, a first impression may determine whether or not a



person is hired. One executive is said to judge applicants by their "threshold effect," that is, the impression they make on him when they enter his office for the first time. In this manner, clothing often speaks before or in place of the spoken word.

Why We Dress As We Do

Many people have theorized why man first ornamented his body with a leaf, a shell, or a twig. Was it for decoration, modesty, protection, or a combination of factors? No one knows.

Today, in most cultures, wearing some form of dress is an accepted habit; indeed, clothing may be required by law. Man, however, has freedom of choice as to how he shall comply with the law or with society's demands for clothing his body. He is limited only by his means and his imagination. Consequently, individual clothing choices differ. Why?

Status

Everyone has status, that is, a place or position in society. But present day use of the word status implies

the seeking of prestige or striving for a higher position. Status, to some, may even mean a position of power or control.

Status seeking is not new. Primitive man sought recognition within his tribe through the display of animal skins from the hunt and trophies from battle.



Throughout history there continued to be people who displayed symbols of status or rank, and others who then aspired to acquire and display similar symbols. Clothing, because it is one of the most convenient and most visible means of display, came to be used by people as a status symbol.

Sometimes the elite or upper class guarded its clothing status symbols by issuing laws restricting the dress of lower classes. Medieval London had detailed specifications on the amount of wealth necessary before a person could wear ermine, cloth of gold, or silk. Even as late as 1890, etiquette books in the United States were cautioning people, "Never dress above your station . . ."

For many years the elite not only made use of clothing as a means of displaying wealth, but also used it to demonstrate independence from work; their costumes were too cumbersome and elegant for much physical activity. In the early 18th century, voluminous hooped skirts with flounces, panels, lace, and other trimming marked women of leisure, while men wore ruffled shirts and powdered wigs, and carried lace handkerchiefs and swords. In the late 19th century, bustles

and long trains limited women's activity; stiff, celluloid collars could be tolerated only by men in "white collar" jobs.

Today, class barriers have blurred; the effectiveness of clothing as an indication of leisure and wealth has weakened. The work week has been shortened and more people enjoy free time. Mass production and mass marketing make possible an infinite variety of fine goods at various price levels. Objects which once were symbols of status, such as sheer hosiery and silk-like lingerie, are now available to all and may even be considered necessities.

Still, merchandisers exploit people's desire for importance and recognition. Fashion magazines and other publications promote new styles in clothes and accessories as symbols of status; brand names are given an aura of distinction. People follow these appeals with varying degrees of enthusiasm, depending upon the occupation or social climate in which they find themselves.

Belonging

The assurance of belonging is vital to each of us. We do not live in isolation; everyone needs some bond or tie with society. Clothing is one means we use to achieve this tie. In our wish to belong, we conform to the dress of the group.

The group may be of national origin, and the individual may be influenced by allegiance to dress in the manner of his country. Even a local neighborhood, wherever its location, may call for a certain type of clothing for those who live there and want to feel they belong there.

The group may be occupational. Where uniforms or insignia are required, as in a Red Cross Corps, the uniforms strengthen the feeling of belonging. They may give the wearer a sense of unity and pride in the group, perhaps even helping him to perform his tasks more efficiently. Aside from those jobs requiring uniforms, various positions are symbolized by a style of dress. A salesman, for example, usually wears a business suit or slacks and a jacket, with a dress shirt and tie.

The group may be a civic or social organization such

as a Rotary Club, a parent-teacher group, or a local bowling league. People who seek membership in these organizations as their tie with society will tend to dress like the other members.

The group may be as broad and encompassing as all the followers of a popular jazz or singing combo whose admirers will copy the dress of their idols. Or, a particular age level may be the desired group. Many older people would like to identify with youth; fashion designers capitalize on this desire, stressing the youthful look in their collections.

Reference groups, or groups with which people want to be associated, may change throughout life, as will the intensity of the desire to belong. This desire is felt most keenly by teenagers. Their need for self-security and for acceptance is most intense. Thus teenagers have an almost overpowering desire to conform with their reference group in style of dress. Even when the wardrobe must be limited, some conformity that is acceptable to the parent and the youth may be possible,



and is desirable. Dressing like the group may not always bring recognition, but it may give the individual confidence.

Beauty

People respond to beauty; they find pleasure and enjoyment in the aesthetic. A chief concern about clothing is whether it is pretty. When we look through dresses on a store rack, we reach for those which are

attractive enough to cause us to pause and examine them more closely. For some people, the aesthetic appeal is so important that they choose clothes for beauty's sake alone.

Clothing is an art medium for the couturier or designer. He "paints" or "sculptures" with cloth to create works of art in dress. Persons with less ability, but who also have artistic urges, may enjoy gratifying these desires in the selection or making of clothes.

No two people share exactly the same sense of beauty; different kinds of taste help to account for variety in clothes.

Practicality

A practical attitude toward clothing may give rise to such questions as, "How much does the garment cost?" "Will it wear well?" "Will it be useful in my wardrobe?" "Is it comfortable?"

If we are practical, we will be selective in making purchases, and may eliminate garments which seem wasteful and of little use. Watching the bargain counter at special sales emphasizes the high value many place on economy in clothing.

Durability may be an important criterion for every garment, and yet, how valuable is durability in a formal evening gown as opposed to durability in casual sports wear?

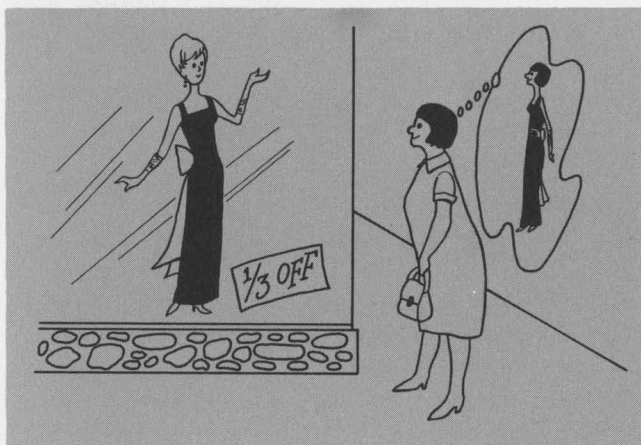
Comfort may be the foremost consideration in clothing. What is comfort? It may mean loose-fitting garments with considerable ease; this need not necessarily be synonymous with baggy or ill-fitting clothes. On the other hand, firm support and trim fit may bring comfort to others. One psychologist suggests that people who feel insecure and lack confidence are psychologically supported by clothes more constricting in fit.

One factor of practicality may be more important to an individual at one time than at another. In any case, mental reassurance follows from knowing that a garment fits well, feels comfortable, and makes the desired appearance.

Myself As Seen By Me

It has been said that each person is composed of three parts: the body, the soul or the inner self, and clothes. This indeed expresses the intimacy—the continuous, close relationship—of clothing to both the mental and physical aspects of our beings.

Each person has her own idea or picture of her physical self. She also has her own idea of her inner self, of what her character and personality traits are like. These images influence her choices of the so-called third part of her person—her clothing.



A person's ideas about her physical self relate to her body shape, facial proportions, coloring, and so forth. These ideas or pictures, whether good or bad, may be quite different from one's actual physical characteristics. For example, a person may think she looks excessively large, when in reality she is the correct weight for her stature. Consequently, she will try to choose garments which she believes are slenderizing.

The inner self may be thought of as the "you" who lives in the physical body. One may view her inner self as being shy or bold, carefree or conservative, motherly or of the siren type. But whatever the image, it will influence her selection of clothing whether she is aware of it at the time or not. For example, a person may feel that she is a dramatic sort of individual and thus may dress in strikingly bold, unusual garments.

The concepts of physical self and inner self exist together within the individual, interacting to form a complete picture of the kind of person one thinks she is.

An individual may be more successful at one time than at another in selecting clothes in keeping with her total self-image. When she feels she has successfully presented her "self" through a particular garment, she feels confident about future reactions to it and enjoys wearing it. This may explain one reason why we have favorite clothes we wear often, and others that just hang in the closet.

When we make such comments as, "This dress just isn't me," or "Me . . . in that?" our self-concept is speaking, exerting its influence on our clothing choice.

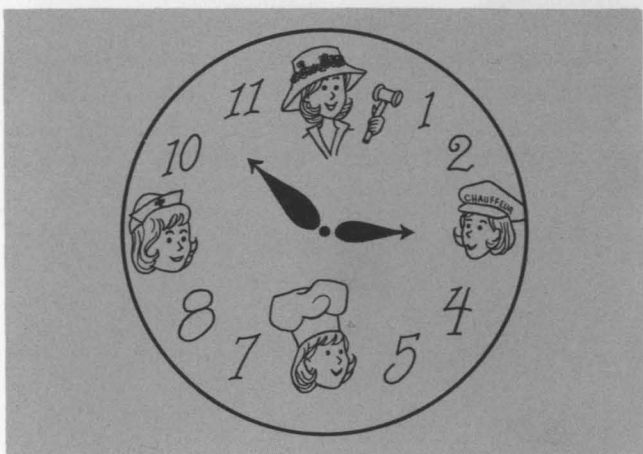
Role

Each of us, either consciously or subconsciously, assumes several different parts or roles within a single day. Society prescribes the way we should play each role, according to our circumstances. A young school teacher, for example, will behave and dress differently in the classroom than she will when on a picnic with her fiance.

Specific types of clothing are often symbolic of certain roles. If you were to call to mind the picture of a tourist, chances are you would visualize a person in colorful casual wear, sporting camera and sunglasses.

Shirtwaist dresses, suits, and separates have become popular because they are adaptable to several different roles, all of which may be a part of one person's day. A homemaker may be a mother, an errand girl for her family, a club member, a hostess, and a part-time employee. For each of these positions or activities there are roles or sets of behaviors that are expected of her, and she may feel social pressure for dressing the part.

Shakespeare wrote ". . . apparel oft proclaims the man." Sometimes the opposite is true. When we put on certain clothes we change our behavior and aspects of our individuality. A child wearing a new garment may be more demure for a while; a woman will feel more feminine in a formal gown than when wearing slacks or a suit.



Appropriate clothing makes role-playing easier and encourages social participation. Dressing correctly is critical when an individual enters into new situations which are especially important to him. He may purchase new clothes to help take on the new role. Examples of such new beginnings are starting a new job, getting married, preparing for travel, and returning to civilian life from military service.

Regardless of the degree of importance of clothes to the individual, they are of continuing importance to society as a whole. We can arrive at a better understanding of ourselves and others and of the world in which we live, past as well as present, through the silent but forceful voice of clothing.

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