

A Comparison of the Beauty of Costume in the Gothic and Renaissance Periods

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Abstract

This study aims to compare the beauty of costume in the Gothic with that of Renaissance periods. By analyzing the beauty of costume which reflects the ideal of the age, this study attempts to provide the insight which can predict the beauty of future costume.

The characteristics of Gothic costume is the form of the loose enveloping of the body, which can be accounted for from the influence of the Christian religion, and the emphasis on the vertical line influenced by the steeple in the Gothic architecture expressing the enthusiasm of the religion. The emphasis on height in the Gothic cathedrals was reflected in the hennin, pointed shoes, and lengthy sleeves of Gothic dress.

The beauty of Gothic costume lies in the form of slender, the emphases on the vertical line, the use of heraldry and parti-color, and pointed hat and shoe.

The Renaissance architecture shows a broad horizontal appearance. There is the similarity between the Renaissance costume and Renaissance architecture. The beauty of Renaissance costume lies in the form of the exposing body, the exaggerated silhouette, the emphasis on the horizontal line, the use of ruff and slash in order to display the beauty of human body and the beauty of cubic. The ideal beauty of Gothic and Renaissance costume was influenced by the spirit of the age and was in contrast.

Key words : the beauty of costume, Gothic period, Renaissance period, vertical line, horizontal line.

I. Introduction

The standard of beauty of costume depends on the culture. Fashion is a reflection of the culture, including the politics, economy, society, science, literature, architecture, art, and the taste of an age. James Laver believed that fashions of a particular period reflect the "spirit of the Age". A specific country and a specific age have a unique culture and a unique view of beauty of costume.

The creation of clothing is a form of expression of art to represent the emotion and image,

thus it has a close relation with the art of the age. Clothings are the ideal media which express the personality and suffice the creative desire. The social ideal of beauty changes with time, and the ideal appearance of a society is very different from that of the other society.

The absolute standard of beauty of costume does not exist, but it always depends on a specific culture. The ideal can represent the beautiful human body, beautiful clothing, and the beautiful relationship of human body with clothing.

Every society has developed the ideal of beauty of appearance. These ideal include the

human body as well as the clothing human wears. This study aims to compare the beauty of costume in the Gothic with that of the Renaissance periods. By analyzing the beauty of costume which reflects the ideal of an age, this study attempts to provide the insight which can predict beauty of future costume.

II. The Beauty of Costume in Gothic Period

The thirteenth century represents the summit of achievement for a unified Christendom - a synthesis of religion, philosophy, life, and art. The center of this development was the city, and the center of the city was the Gothic cathedral.

Large windows with stained-glass panes became the great glory of Gothic architecture. Structure and light were the twin drives in Gothic

architecture until ornament came to crowd out spiritual principles. All around Paris during the last half of the twelfth century, bishops and architects vied with one another in developing the new style, but the Cathedral of Notre Dame, begun in 1163, includes examples of all the various developments in early and high Gothic art (Fig. 1).

Just as the art of the period stressed structure, simplicity, and a graceful spirituality, so the clothing stressed proportion, graceful draping, simplicity, and a lack of the tensions and zigzag edges¹.

The robes are sprinkled in crests embroidered in gold, and the sleeves are cut fancifully into foliated and scalloped edges echoing the puff-ball decorative edges found in Gothic architecture. The serpentine line of garments and body poses reflect the swaying figures in manuscript illuminations, stained-glass windows, and statuary. Once again one is struck by the fact that the fashions of a period tend to imitate the art of the period, not the facts of daily living or the history of current events.

Gothic clothing burst into a new phase of decorative excess, marked primarily by the introduction of the *houppelande* and more variations in the use of dagged and foliated edges. It was also a period in which the flamelike motifs in Gothic tracery created an ornamental architectural style known as *Flamboyant Gothic* - an apt description, as well, for the costume fashions from 1377 to approximately 1425.

The *houppelande* was often sprinkled with the embroidered crest of the family, and the sleeves were lined either in fur or contrasting silk material with the favored dagged or foliated edges very much in evidence (Fig. 2).

One of the first decorative effects of this time that must be noted was the proliferation of heraldic devices on clothing (Fig. 3).

When these heraldic effects were adapted for



<Fig. 1> Chartres Cathedral. 15th Century Architecture. Long, narrow vertical shapes.
(From Mary Kefgen, Phyllis Touchie-Specht, *Individuality*).

¹ Douglas A. Russell, *Costume History and Style*, (New Jersey : Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, 1983) 128.



<Fig. 2> Houppelande with the Favored Dagged Edges.(From Francois Boucher, *20,000 years of Fashion*).



<Fig. 3> Heraldry Designed Clothing. (From Francois Boucher, *20,000 years of Fashion*).

use on clothing, the results were startling. Surcotes were often half one color and half another ; one hose might be a single color and the other



<Fig. 4> Hood with Dagged Edges.(From Francois Boucher, *20,000 years of Fashion*).

several different colors ; and the coat of arms itself might cover the entire back of a mantle or the full width of a skirt.

Another decorative form used on the hood and cape and later even on the hem of the cyclas was a scalloped effect produced by cutting into the edges of the garment an inch or two to make petals called dagges. This slight decorative innovation was to blossom into a rampant profusion of cut-edged decoration in the period of the Middle Gothic.

This effect, known as dagging or foliation, became dominant during this period and is sharply reminiscent of the crocket effects in Gothic architectural decoration.

A fantastic headdress, or chaperon, was also worn - the hood had the face opening placed around the head, the dagged edges of the collar fell down one side, and the long tail, or liripipe, of the hood was wrapped around the head and then draped over one shoulder. (Fig. 4) This exotic, almost Eastern look fully supported the fairy tale imagery prevalent in the arts of this period².

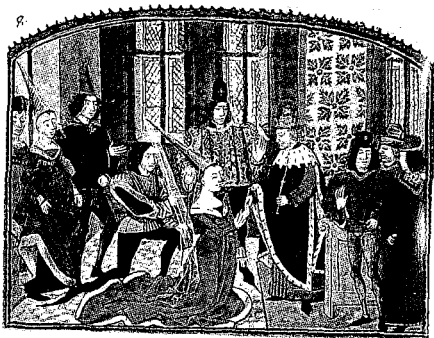
Due to the influence of the Christian religion, all during the thirteenth century, women's hair

² *Ibid.*, 144.

was more or less concealed by the wimple and neckcloth or gorget, which covered head and neck. Variations of these medieval headdresses survive today in many religious orders.

The hennin was brought to France by Isabella of Bavaria in the latter part of the fourteenth century and its vogue lasted one hundred years. There were many styles of the hennin, invariably draped with a veil, floating or with wired edge. They became so extravagant in size that the authorities found it necessary to regulate the height according to the social position of the wearer. The tall hennin was called the "steeple headdress"³⁾ (Fig. 5).

Shoes still had a soft sole, were low cut, and were laced or fastened with a button on the inside of the foot. The toes were exceedingly elongated, often up to ten inches ; six-inch pointed toes were common. These elongated shoes



<Fig. 5> Steeple Headdress, Hennin. (From Francois Boucher, *20,000 years of Fashion*).



<Fig. 6> Pointed Shoes, Crackowes. (From Francois Boucher, *20,000 years of Fashion*).

were called poulaines, or crackowes, indicating that the style was thought to have come from Poland (Fig. 6).

The fashion of wearing gloves spread and several small French towns specialized in the making of them. They were made of doeskin, sheepskin and hareskin. Perfumed gloves were most fashionable, especially violet-scented ones, which appeared around 1400⁴⁾.

III. The Beauty of Costume in Renaissance Period

In the 16th century the Renaissance brought many modifications to the fashions of the previous period. Lines and shapes changed from being predominantly vertical to horizontal. The lines used in architecture, furnishings and clothing created wider, flatter and lower shapes. The silhouette of the building has a less lofty feeling than 15th century Gothic structures.

The structural details of the 16th century Renaissance architecture is the use of flattened and widely spaced arches.

Reformation fashion is divided into two periods - from 1520 to about 1560 when German influences and ideals predominated, and from 1560 to about 1620 when Spanish styles were in the ascendancy. Both periods stressed an artificial distortion of the human body into a grotesque, ornamental encasement.

From 1520 to 1560 the emphasis was on a broad, horizontal, square silhouette for men and a conical, angular silhouette for women. The major elements in the silhouette were distortion and a padding of the body : the major decorative accent that created a sense of tension was the slashing - outer garments literally attacked with a knife so that lining fabric could be forced through the slits!⁵⁾

As always happens when a culture reaches a

³ R. Turner, Wilcox, *The Mode in Costume*, (New York : Charles-Scribner's Sons, 1958) 59.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁵ Douglas A. Russell, *op. cit.*, 200.



<Fig. 7> Codpiece of the Opening at the Front of the Hose. (From Francois Boucher, *20,000 years of Fashion*).

climax and then is plunged into dislocation and confusion by a rending of the unity that shaped that culture, the period after 1520 saw many of the balanced and physically beautifying attributes of High Renaissance clothing exaggerated and distorted by personal whimsy and social insecurity.

Two items vividly illustrated the change. One was the codpiece of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century which had been a practical, pleasing, sensuous covering of the opening at the front of the hose; after 1520 it developed into a grotesque, stuffed, beribboned appendage on the front of a man's costume. (Fig. 7) The other change was in slashing and puffing which had originated as a loosening of tight seams by lacing sleeves and jackets together over puffed linings or undergarments; in the later sixteenth century it became tight slits made in the outer fabric through which linings were forced in a tortuous, tense, uncomfortable manner.

The headgear between 1520 and 1560 was based on the flat beret with a stiff, flat brim, sometimes turned quite sharply up, but more often



<Fig. 8> The Ambassador on the Left is wearing the Ox-mouth Shoe, Wider and More Rounded than Earlier Styles. (From James Laver, *Costume & Fashion*).

only slightly slanted upwards or worn quite flat.

This period marked the shift from the balanced, relaxed, expansive beauty of the High Renaissance to the inward tensions and grotesque dislocations of the Mannerist Renaissance. It was one of the strongest periods in the history of clothing for antinatural, artificial silhouettes and surfaces; everything took on twisted, layered, interpenetrated, tense look. This first phase of the Mannerist Renaissance was marked by the bulk and angularity of the so-called German style, with great weight placed on the horizontal spread of clothing. (Fig. 8) Such antinatural clothing clearly marked a withdrawal from interest in the outer natural world to the imaginative, personal world within.

The body was still artificially distorted and treated in a variety of unnatural ways, but the stress had changed from the great width and triangular angularity of the earlier German style to a taller, vertical line with many rounded, exaggerated extensions down the body. Tight slashing and puffing were still a major accent, although tight panning often replaced slashing on sleeves, bodices, and doublets. Heavy metallic embroidery accented with sprinkled gems and jewelry was standard for aristocratic decoration,



<Fig. 9> Queen Elizabeth I Wearing Costume with Emphasis on the Horizontal Line. (From Francois Boucher, *20,000 years of Fashion*).

and all fabrics were stiffened with linings, metallic thread, or complex braided accents. Padding became tighter and more compact as did all the distortions and extensions from the normal line of the human body.

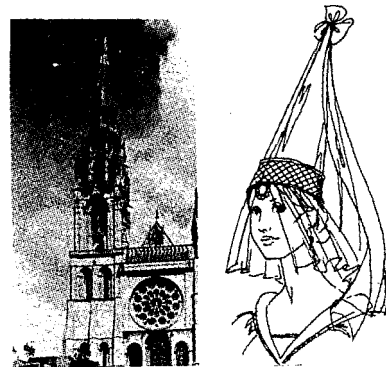
The elegant, artificial, almost grotesque human figures drawn by the artist in their rich, stiff, tortured fabrics and exaggerated costume lines demonstrate how clothing added its own mannerist embellishment to that of the architecture.

Feminine costume also stressed padded sleeves and hips and a very long and pointed waist, stiffened by the use of a rigid decorated stomacher that plunged from the neckline to the crotch or below. (Fig. 9) Iron corsets or absolutely rigid boning were part of the bodice of every gown. The farthingale that earlier had created a conical distention of the skirt was modified to give more fullness at the hips.

Shoulders were finished in rolls or wings, sleeves were padded, puffed, and slashed, and the ruff was used at the neck.

IV. A Comparison of the Beauty of Costume in the Gothic and Renaissance Periods

The characteristics of Gothic costume is the form of the loose enveloping of the body, due to the influence of the Christian religion, and



<Fig. 10> The Similarity between the Gothic Head-dress and Gothic Architecture. (From Marilyn J. Horn, Lois M. Gurel, *The Second Skin*).

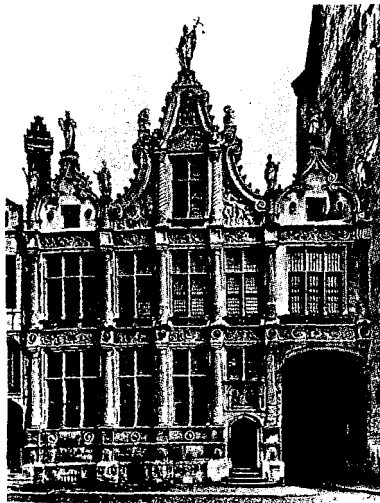


<Fig. 11> The Use of Ruff and Slash in Order to Display the Beauty of Human Body. (From Francois Boucher, *20,000 years of Fashion*).

the emphasis on the vertical line influenced by the steeple in the Gothic architecture expressing the enthusiasm of the religion. When religious values are dominant, dress tends to enshroud the figure in a relatively loose garment of simple design. The emphasis on height in the Gothic cathedrals reflected in the hennin, pointed shoes, and lengthy sleeves of Gothic dress. As <Fig. 5> and <Fig. 6> show, the pointed, elongated forms were considered the ideal, and Gothic costume went beyond the limits of the body - the crown of the head and the soles of the feet - to give an illusion of slenderness to the figure and an emphasis on vertical lines.

The aesthetic unity in the art forms of an era can be seen in the similarity between the Gothic headdress and its architectural counterpart, the spire on the cathedral. (Fig.10)

The length of Gothic clothing corresponds in form and spirit to the heights of Gothic architecture. The spire of the steeple suggested the hennin ; the pointed arches of doors and windows were echoed in the pointed toes of shoes and pointed sleeves ; the slim, soaring rib



<Fig. 12> Renaissance Architecture with a Broad Horizontal Appearance. (From Mary Kefgen, Phyllis Touchie-Specht, *Individuality*).



<Fig. 13> Henry VIII was a Leader of Fashion in 16th Century Europe. His Padded Doublet, Accentuated Shoulders and Codpiece were Worn to Project an Image of Authority and Masculinity. (From Francois Boucher, *20,000 years of Fashion*).

of the Gothic cathedral found a counterpart in the narrow, tightly covered human body, the magnificent beauty of stained-glass windows compared to the finely set Gothic jewelry.

As figures 7, 8, and 9 show, the beauty of Renaissance costume lies in the form of the exposing body, the exaggerated silhouette, the emphases on the horizontal line, the use of ruff and slash in order to display the beauty of human body and the beauty of cubic (Fig. 11).

In the Renaissance period clothing was designed to broaden the body. The wide, rectangular necklines, padded shoulders of detachable sleeves, and the bulky shapes of short cloak echoed the massive forms of Renaissance architecture (Fig. 12), (Fig. 13).

V. Conclusion

The dominant ideals that shape the thought

and action of a cultural period influence the character and direction of fashion movements. We see that every era had its characteristic line and form, very relevant to the Zeitgeist. The emphasis on height in the Gothic cathedrals was reflected in the hennin, pointed shoes, and lengthy sleeves of Gothic dress. The beauty of Gothic costume lies in the form of slender, the emphasis on the vertical line, the use of heraldry and parti-color, and pointed hat and shoe.

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The extremes of elongation observed in the late Gothic period in the form of tall hats and pointed shoes reached the opposite in the extreme width of the fashions of the Renaissance.

The ideal beauty of Gothic and Renaissance costume was influenced by the spirit of the age and was in contrast.

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