

Form Follows Intent: Configuration of a Dragon Spirit into a Three-dimensional Dress Form

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Abstract

This paper documents a dress design process to demonstrate the theory that form follows intent. It includes a statement of the design context as a venue where the conceptual intent originated. The dragon icon became the subject, form, and content of the design project. The author's designerly endeavor is discussed with focus on reconfiguration of formal characteristics shown in the visual reference of the eastern dragon symbol into a dress design with the consideration of utilitarian, expressive, and symbolic issues. Throughout the process, the author was an active agent who created formal characteristics, manifested a thought into an object, and imbued a meaning to the dress, demonstrating the notion that form follows intent.

Key words : dragon symbol, form, intent, configuration.

I. Introduction

Clothing is a given form. In general, a form is defined as "the total appearance or organization" of visual elements.¹⁾ In clothing, a form is achieved through a physical representation of materials such as in fabrics and findings. That is, clothing form is the result of distinctive arrangement of lines, colors, shape, and textures of the materials used. These formal elements are recognized through the visual and tactile sensory receptors. The formal quality of clothing, as the perceivable features of the structural composition, is the concrete reality of clothing.

Previous studies^{2,3)} address that formal elements used to form an object possess emotional characters. Expressive qualities are inherent in all creative works due to the emotional characters of formal elements utilized in the creation. Both the creators and the spectators appreciate the form for arousing, reflecting, or lifting their emotion.

The release of emotion allows the creator to project a thought into an object. This play with ideas is an integral part of a creative process.

The emotions conveyed through the formal elements are further developed to symbolic meaning in the clothing and its visual elements. Assigning and interpreting the meaning of the abstract reality of clothes requires the cognitive process

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¹ Otto G. OcVirk, Robert E. Stinson, Philip R. Wigg, Robert O. Bone, and David L. Cayton, *Art fundamentals: Theory and practice*, 9th ed., (McGraw Hill, New York: NY., 2002), 4.

² Michael Hemphill, "A note on adults' color-emotion associations," *Journal of Genetic Psychology* 157, no. 3 (1996): 275-280.

³ Otto G. OcVirk, *Op. cit.*, 83.

of the participants being involved in the certain use context. This abstract aspect of clothes comes to be understood as essential, that is, more real than the physical aspect of the clothing itself. This dual aspect of concrete and abstract reality is immanent in representing a form. Langer claimed an abstract sense for form in connection with art, namely, form is "a whole resulting from the relation of mutually dependent factors."⁴ This Langer's theory, referred to as a "logical form," supports the notion that designing, an act of forming an object is a search for physical representation of ideas.⁵ It is the intent-the truth or essence of the thought-that constitutes the real values of a designed object. That is, form follows intent.⁶

This paper demonstrates the theory that form follows intent and the designer is an active agent who conveys the intent into an object by documenting a dress design process conducted by the author. A statement of the design context is introduced as a venue where the intent originated. It focuses on the reconfiguration of formal characteristics in the visual reference, creating a dress design that considers utilitarian, expressive, and symbolic issues.

II. Research Method & Design Development

1. Design Context

The dress design entitled "Dragon Flies toward the 21st Century" began with a concept. In 2000 when the author was planning a new design project, she sensed the coexistence of uncertainty

and the hope for the new coming century within the society. The author intended to project a wish for a bright future into a dress design. To deliver this design concept, the eastern dragon symbol was adopted as the pattern figure for the creation because of its auspicious symbolism.

The eastern sexagenarian cycle identified 2000 as the dragon's year. In the dragon's year entering into the 21st century, the appearance of dragon motif was overwhelmed in the Western fashion as well as the eastern one despite the fact that dragon delivers the devil spirit to western people.

In eastern culture, the dragon is perceived as a mythical creature, a symbol that brings with it abundance, prosperity, and good fortune.⁷ This eastern notion of the dragon was started in China about 5000 years ago and was introduced to the rest of Asia.⁸ It was believed that the dragon lived for the most part in water and sometimes flew into the sky, causing clouds, winds, and rains that wet the dried earth. Governing the weather for rain was important in the ancient agrarian society. Having the supernatural power of governing the weather was viewed as comparable to being an emperor or a saint.⁹ The symbol of dragon was perceived to represent an ideal creature with power, wisdom, energy, and beauty as the manifestation of people's desire for unfeasible happening. The flight of the dragon was perceived as a good omen. The dragon motif was frequently used as a pattern figure in various items for the emperor, such as a palace, a crown, a robe, and a throne. The legendary dragon spirit-beautiful, friendly, wise, brave, ener-

⁴ Susanne K. Langer, "Expressiveness," in *Contemporary Philosophy of Art*, ed. John W. Bender & H. Gene Blocker, New York: Charles Scribner (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall., 1957), 146.

⁵ Christina Acevedo, Nancy Blossom, and Matt Melcher, "Engaging meaning in the built environment through the design process," unpublished manuscript.

⁶ Nancy Blossom, (personal communication, March 2005).

⁷ The Chinese dragon. (n.d. [retrieved 21 February 2005]); available World Wide Web @ <http://www.fortunecity.com/roswell/goldendawn/102/Dragons/chinese.html>

⁸ Sang-Eun Lee, "The dragon design in China," in *KonKuk Art and Design Research Institute Journal* 2, (Seoul, Korea: KonKuk University, 1993): 124.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

getic, and optimistic-is deeply involved in the East Asian's arts, literature, poetry, architecture, songs, and many other aspects of their conscience.¹⁰⁾

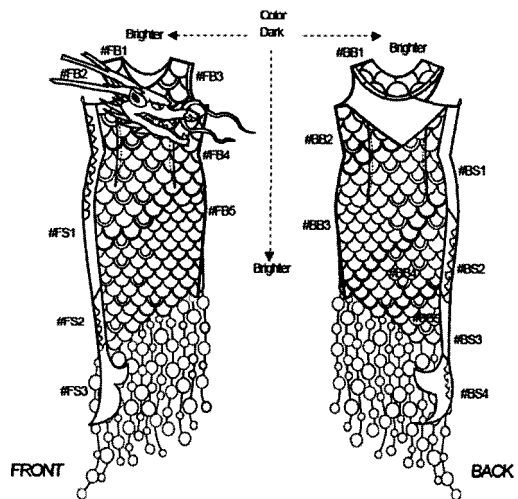
This auspicious symbolism of the dragon icon communicates the author's design concept which centers on wishing for a bright future for all human beings. Therefore, the dragon icon was perceived as an ideal pattern figure to express this wish. The dragon's year of 2000 was considered a good time to disseminate the rich symbolism of the dragon from the eastern philosophy to the rest of the world where the symbolism of the dragon is not well known.

2. Configuration of Dragon Spirit into a Dress Form

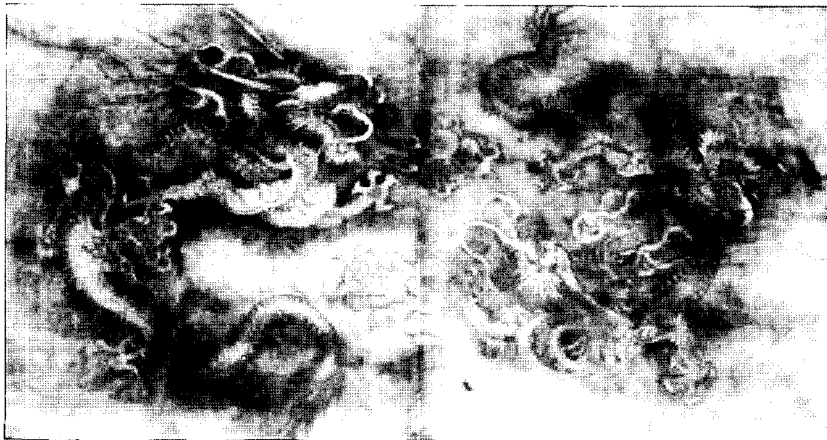
An ancient Korean painting with two dragons that symbolize the appearance of a wise emperor was used as the visual reference in extracting the formal structure of dragon for a dress design. From the painting, the author extracted four major visual impacts and transformed them into a dress design: the head energetic and roaring, the body wriggling, the scales shimmering, and the colors mesmerizing (Fig. 1).

The dragon icon was transformed visually to a three-dimensional dress form in a two-dimensional flat sketch format (Fig. 2). The dragon's

head falls to the bodice front, winding around the wearer's body and neck along the diagonal panel segment lines. The V-neck is a configuration of the dragon's body winding around the wearer's torso with the dragonhead on the front of the bodice. This visual transformation of the dragon's wriggling body results in the diagonal bodice segments with four panels in both front and back. The same color connection at the wearer's left side, where the diagonal panel seg-

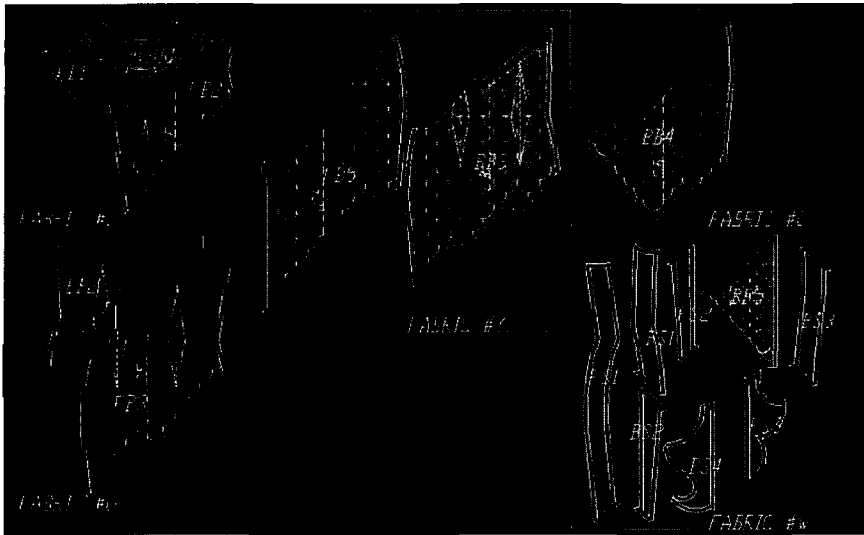


〈Fig. 2〉 Visual Transformation of the Dragon's Body Generated in Adobe Illustrator®.



〈Fig. 1〉 An ancient Korean painting of dragons.

¹⁰ The Chinese dragon, *Op. cit.*



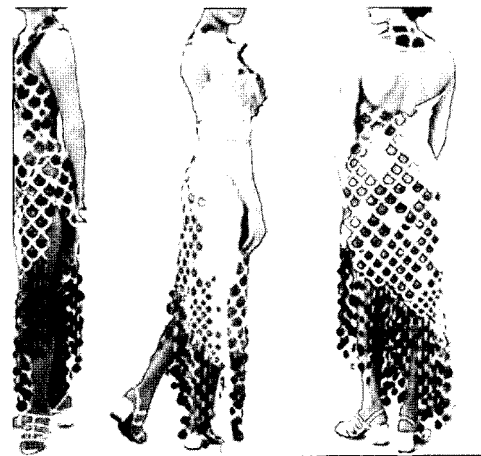
〈Fig. 3〉 Patterns for “Dragon Flies toward the 21st...” generated in AutoCAD®.

ment lines join, connects the back to the front visually. This arrangement allows the spectators to appreciate the dress as a three-dimensional form, not a two-dimensional form to be viewed only from one side either front or back. The front is composed of eight panels, five for the bodice (#FB1~5) and three for the side (#FS1~3). A total of nine panels compose the back: five for the bodice (#BB1~5) and four panels for the side (#BS1~4).

The flat sketch was the guideline in developing patterns of each segment of the design. Each panel is arranged on the fabric in a specific color, which was to exhibit a gradient effect throughout the dress (Fig. 3).

III. Discussion

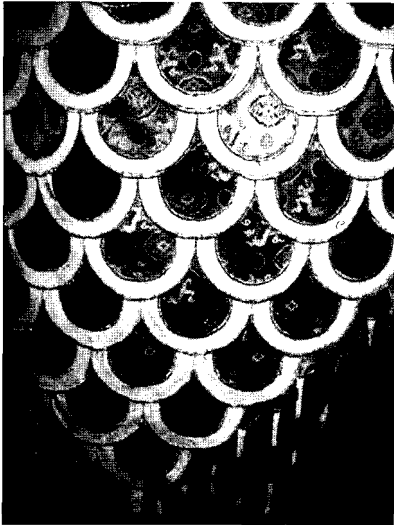
The dragon dress is a special occasion wear made of 100% polyester. It is shaped in a form-fitting style complimenting the wearer's body (Fig. 4). This dress is pleasurable to wear as well as pleasurable to see, respecting the wearer's body and her activity as well.



〈Fig. 4〉 An inspirational dress of “Dragon Flies toward the 21st Century” (Cho¹¹).

The line coordination and material selection creates visual lingering and bouncing rhythms, contributing to a delightful mood for special occasions. Scallop lines, representing the dragon's scales, are sensually arranged on the dress (Fig. 5). To achieve a form fitted style, the two waist darts in front and back were draped first, then

¹¹ KyeongSook Cho, of “Dragon flies toward the 21st century,” awarded “Pattern works international graduate student” at the 2001 International Textile and Apparel Association Design Competition, (November 12, 2001).



〈Fig. 5〉 Scallop pattern and embossed-surface with machine stitches.

scallop lines were featured over the folded darts to add flow and visual integrity to the piece. Brocade swatches in ginkgo leaf shape, with small dragon motifs, were placed within the scallop lines. The curved line at the bottom of brocade swatch echoes the scallop line. The embossed-surface created by the satin metallic-thread stitches along the scallop lines using metallic threads accentuates the line quality and enriches the overall formal quality of the design. The scalloped diagonal hemline was purposely featured to add visually interesting effects by expressing wriggling of the dragon's body wriggling.

The color coordination, juxtaposing different colored panels through progressing from darker at the top of the dress to lighter at the bottom, results in a gradient effect. The mixture of brown and green tonality used in the dress was chosen to visualize the dragon as a nature friendly creature living in the ocean and governing the weather for rain valued in the ancient agrarian society. The yellow and the white colors used in the lower part of the dress were an extension from green for an analogue color combination—choosing colors next to each other on the color wheel. These colors look harmonious as a group, giving complement for balance but creating a

variation as well. The color palette reflects the tonality in the painting that was used as the visual reference for this creative process.

The open structure, featured with strips having small-circled ornaments at the bottom of dress, invites viewers to an imaginary formal transformation when the wearer moves around. This open form is like a metaphor for the crowds or the raindrops that a dragon may produce on its flight into the sky. The open back creates a sensuous mood that may be anticipated in a special event.

The garment structure in a form-fitted style does not restrict movement. The wearer's arms are free in the sleeveless structure. The skirt length barely touches the wearer's foot, and an opening on the left side allows free movement as well.

While unity is necessary for a complete and aesthetically pleasing look, variety is of utmost importance to avoid the boredom generated by sameness. Placing brocade swatches within the scallop lines in an irregular manner, through a progression of sizes, numbers, and colors, larger at top of the dress, smaller at the bottom, and from more and darker brocade swatches on the right side to less and lighter swatches on left, lessens visual sameness. The vertical lines placed at the wearer's right side break the uniformity achieved by the scallop pattern throughout the dress. These vertical lines emphasize an asymmetrical view.

Two pieces of fabric shape the dragonhead.



〈Fig. 6〉 Bead embroidered dragonhead.

On the right side of the top layer, bead embroidery work outlines the dragon's face. Another dragonhead is sewn with narrow machine satin stitches to the top layer along the cut edges (Fig. 6).

IV. Conclusions

Inspiration for fashion design comes from a variety of tangible materials or intangible personal experiences. Designers interpret these experiences through the subconscious mind and extract a personal definition for a physical presentation of a form. The grouping of physical characteristics used to shape clothing and to determine the formal quality of clothes are also evaluated using the design principles of rhythm, change, emphasis, proportion, and harmony. A moderate level of complexity and novelty tends to enhance aesthetic quality.

In representing fashion design ideas, a designer's thought includes functional, expressive, and social issues as well as aesthetic ones. The designer's creativity and critical thinking facilitates a gestalt of these thoughts along with configurability of formal elements. Therefore, a work of cloth design requires the designer to work with two components: form as a physical manifestation of material and intent as its abstract aspect. Its formal structure is acknowledged by physiology. It is interpreted, understood, and appreciated by psychology.

The "Dragon..." design project showed that a dress design can begin with intent. The eastern dragon icon adopted as the major pattern figure for the dress design became the subject, form, and content for the author's design project. This dragon spirit, in the three dimensional form of a special occasion dress, reveals the visual and symbolic characteristics of the dragon icon. It allows utility, and, at the same time, permits the wearer to be active. The dress looks new but not revolutionary, unique but not exaggerated. The dragon dress form presents a mood of dignity, elegance, and friendliness to nature. It is a vi-

sual expression of the author's concept of ideal beauty. These emotional characteristics facilitate communication with those who appreciate the grace of the dragon spirit.

The configuration of the dress was followed by the designer's intent.

This dragon dress project provided an opportunity for the author to release her cultural beliefs in a felicitous sign associated with dragon and her wishes for a bright future in the coming century. The author's intellectual joy as a fashion designer was achieved through the physical representation of her expressiveness into a three dimensional form of dress. Throughout the process, the author played as an active agent who created formal dress characteristics, released her emotions, manifested her thought and mind into an object, and imbued meaning in her design. The dress may be appreciated for its formal, expressive and symbolic qualities. This dragon dress project demonstrates the notion that form follows intent.

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