

## Design Aesthetics of Ralph Rucci

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### Abstract

Ralph Rucci, the first American designer who presented official collections at Paris Couture since Mainbocher, is known for his innovative dressmaking techniques and sculptural forms. Accompanied by literature survey, this study examines the aesthetics of Ralph Rucci's designs by content analysis of his works, Rucci's designs since his debut collection of 1994 until he left the Chado Ralph Rucci label in 2014 and his returning collection under the new label, RR331, in 2016. Ralph Rucci developed his creative designs by the following strategies: First, he reinvents the couture tradition of Balenciaga and Grès into progressive and functional American couture in that he gives consideration to a wearer's movements and comforts. Second, Rucci constructs architectural volume based on human anatomy and architectonic strategies, with the attention to three-dimensional quality of the space built between the body and a garment. Third, he conducts engineered construction summarized by his original 'suspension' techniques, which function as both ornamentation and construction.

### 1. Introduction

Ralph Rucci, the first American designer to officially present his collection during Paris couture week since Mainbocher in the 1930s (Joseph, 2006), is known for innovative dressmaking technique and his ready-to-wear line which features exquisite fabrics. Characteristics of Rucci's designs comprise inventive fabric treatments,

extraordinary surface decorations, artistic inspirations, mathematically calculated constructions, and most of all, his architectural garment structures.

Rucci is regarded to have learned from the works of great couturiers such as Cristóbal Balenciaga, Madeleine Vionnet, and Madam Grès (Bissonnette, 2005), and on the other hand, as fashion journalist Menkes (2007)

stated, while Rucci's approach is closer to Parisian couture in his way of forming the silhouette, his sporty side is clearly reflected in his couture pieces. In other words, Rucci's designs are considered to be progressive since he satisfies a wearer's needs while adhering to traditional tailoring and dressmaking techniques. Rucci gives priority to a wearer's movement using architectural techniques to take lifestyles of modern women into account. Moreover, he builds sculptural three-dimensional forms with a somewhat hard-line silhouette while also excelling in the embellishment of surfaces. As such, Ralph Rucci has been balancing seemingly conflicting design elements throughout his collections.

Accordingly, it is hard and rather unfair, to classify Rucci's designs into a conventional category, since American fashion has been known for its mass-produced apparel and the number of customers who recognize or appreciate the intricate construction such as Rucci's articulation is narrow and dwindling. Meanwhile, haute couture and its equitable prêt-à-porter lines have become a publicity-driven machine, as a tool to build a solid brand identity. Theatrical shows present extreme designs; this creates headlines in the press and ultimately promotes sales of accessories, cosmetics, and perfume. Therefore, Rucci's innovations in execution, which depart from negotiations to set or follow trends, would not appeal to most customers. Moreover, from a journalist's perspective, his trend-defying design aesthetics appears to be less-than-newsworthy (Steele & Mears, 2007). Furthermore, owing to the tendency to simplify collection coverage in fashion journalism, little has been acknowledged regarding his design aesthetics. Nevertheless, Ralph Rucci's innovative design aesthetics and architectonic techniques are worth paying attention to as a creative force in fashion design (Yim, 2014a).

Ralph Rucci has been invited to hold his retrospective exhibitions at the Kent State University Museum (2005), The Museum at FIT (2007), and the Phoenix Art Museum (2008), and his works have been included in dozens of survey shows worldwide: 'Goddess' exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2003), 'She's Like a

Rainbow: Colors in Fashion' at The Museum at FIT in New York and Rodin Gallery in Seoul (2005), 'Breaking the Mode' and 'Skin + Bones: Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture' at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (2006), 'A Passion for Perfection: James Galanos, Gustave Tassell, Ralph Rucci' at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (2008), 'American Beauty: Aesthetics and Innovation in Fashion' at The Museum at FIT (2009), and 'Extending the Runway: Tatiana Sorokko Style' at the Moscow Fashion Museum (2010).

This study aims to examine the design aesthetics in Ralph Rucci's collections by investigating his design philosophy, formative aspects, innovations in technique, and values of his designs in the fashion industry. In this study, using literature review and in-depth case analysis, we analyze the aesthetics of Ralph Rucci's designs followed by review of his career and accomplishments as a fashion designer. We investigate Rucci's designs from his debut collection in 1994 to the 2015 spring collection which was his last presentation under Chado Ralph Rucci label, and his fall 2016 collection under his new label, RR331. We examine his collections from the online collections at firstview.com and vogue.com, the catalogues of the above-mentioned exhibitions, his autobiography 'Ralph Rucci: Autobiography of a fashion designer' (Rucci, 2013), his dialogue with Ike Ude at The 92nd Street Y in New York, and articles from the newspapers including *International Herald Tribune*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*.

Although Rucci's designs have been explored in some exhibition catalogues, reported in fashion news articles, and briefly mentioned in an academic article (Yim, 2014b), his design aesthetics have not been examined in researches solely devoted to the subject; the need to analyze his designs and the aesthetics arises.

Ralph Rucci's designs may not be popular or commercially successful; they have been recognized more by fashion curators and industry practitioners than public. This study intends to investigate position and direction of Rucci's design aesthetics that execute couture garments in a progressive manner.

## II. Ralph Rucci's design career

Chado, the name of Ralph Rucci's company, was established in 1994. Chado is a reference to the Japanese tea ceremony which requires 331 meticulous steps. The name implies Rucci's mindful approach and intricate process to crafting his garments and that his works are created through the influence of Zen Buddhism and East Asian philosophy. Although Rucci had designed his ready-to-wear line with couture artistry, he was barely known to the public until he was invited by the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture Parisienne* to present a collection in 2002. His clients learned about him mostly through word-of-mouth, since few journalists attended his shows (Steele & Mears, 2007).

The situation began to shift after he showed his collection in Paris, the sole American designer to be anointed by *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture* since the WWII ("Strike It Rucci", 2002). Ralph Rucci, as the first American designer to present a couture collection after Mainbocher, got nominated twice as a candidate for 'Designer of the Year' by the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) ("Ralph Rucci Returns to New York Fashion Week", 2015). Fashion critic Givhan (2016) mentions that Rucci is an American designer close to a true couturier in the Parisian sense of the word.

Followed by his official debut collection of Haute Couture, Rucci's work has been substantiated and endorsed by fashion critics, such as Horyn (2010) at *The New York Times* and Menkes (2002) at *International Herald Tribune*. An issue of *Harper's Bazaar* (Middleton, 2004) carried a full-page editorial on his careers and designs. His exhibition was held at the Kent State University Museum in 2005. The next year his designs were presented at the design triennial of the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, followed by 'Ralph Rucci: The Art of Weightlessness', an exhibition celebrating his works at The Museum at FIT in 2007. The title of the exhibition came from an article by Suzy Menkes, which included "the whole idea is to take the structure, completely tailored with all the propriety of a

suit, but make it weightless" ("Ralph Rucci", 2006, p.13). The exhibition title implies the central aesthetics in Rucci's works. In spite of their imposing size, bold silhouette, and complicated seams, the garments are light and easy to wear (Joseph, 2006).

The works of Ralph Rucci are regarded to be achieved through technical virtuosity and progressive construction. Rucci's design process is closely related to the development of constructions; pattern making, cutting, and sewing (Figure 1). His graphic cuts and expressive surface decoration embody sculptural shapes, as well as provide improved fit.

According to Steele and Mears (2007), Rucci's collections are noted for their architectural/sculptural quality and incorporation of innovative construction techniques. He displayed little interest in following changes for seasonal trends or creating seasonal collections with dramatically novel themes just to publicize his brand with a transitory concept. For that reason, Rucci's work seems less accessible than fashionable styles that directly appeal to the look of the moment. His silhouettes and construction techniques have evolved so gradually that the changes are imperceptible to most (Steele & Mears, 2007). In a dialogue with Ike Ude at the 92nd Street Y in New York City, Rucci (2008) stated that his designs evolve one season at a time. In another interview (Joseph, 2006), he mentioned that fashion students should not think of what's happening in fashion currently but think of developing his or her point of view. Eschewing the theatrical spectacles of high fashion designers, Rucci concentrates instead on the steady development of his aesthetics ("Design life now", 2006). Since garment construction has been highly simplified in contemporary fashion, it requires a well-informed eye to appreciate Rucci's innovative and complex techniques.

Unfortunately in 2014, Rucci left the label, Chado Ralph Rucci, following the decision of the investors. They hired Sander Lak in his place. After a two-year hiatus, Ralph Rucci returned to present his F/W 2016 collection with his still valuable technique and experience. To mark his return to the industry, Rucci established his



**Figure 1. Cutter's Must, Ralph Rucci Studio**  
- *Ralph Rucci: Autobiography of a fashion designer*, n.p.



**Figure 2. Ralph Rucci, RR331 Collection, F/W 2016**  
- *The Washington Post* (February 17, 2016)

own art gallery in New York City and displayed his collection in a form of exhibition. Rucci named his collection 'RR331' –his initials combined with the number of steps in a Japanese tea ceremony–presenting his garments on mannequins with large-scale abstract paintings that he had painted hung on the walls behind his designs (Figure 2). Rucci's designs still exhibit the understanding of sculptural form and experiments in proportion and surface.

According to *The Washington Post* (Givhan, 2016), Rucci has decided that he will only create two collections a year instead of the multitude of collections the fashion industry requires, moving away from cyclical demands and corporate pressure.

### III. Design aesthetics in Ralph Rucci's collections

In this section, the design aesthetics of Ralph Rucci's works are analyzed in three categories: 1) American couture that innovates couture dressmaking to improve fit, movement, and shape; 2) architectural form with its abstract garment shapes that characterized Rucci's daring gowns; and 3) engineered construction which employs innovative construction technique such as 'suspension'. In analyzing the design aesthetics of Ralph Rucci, we drew on the following distinct traits of Rucci as the American couturier: One is how he balances the traditional techniques

of couture and practicality of American sportswear, i.e., merges couture techniques and functionality of dress. The other aspect is how he manipulates formal and spatial relationship of the body and dress; how Rucci articulates the architectural or sculptural aspect of dress. The categories are not mutually exclusive but partially share common characteristics; the cases are analyzed as the most representative features of each category.

#### 1. American couture

One of the most distinguished features in Rucci's designs is the association with traditional couture methods in garment construction. Rucci's works are results of enduring development, as in the cases of couturiers such as Vionnet, Balenciaga, and Grès. However, while emphasizing impeccable craftsmanship by referring to the great couturiers, Rucci also diverges from them. Rucci constructs an original structure against sartorial conventions by innovating dressmaking techniques.

Of all the couturiers Rucci refers to, his designs bear a similarity to architectural garments of Balenciaga. Their mutually shared feature is the accurate and strict execution in garment construction. Rucci frequently uses gazar, as Balenciaga did, a heavy silk organza which is stiff like silk and linen at the same time, probably since it has buoyancy and lightness (Joseph, 2006) besides sculptural quality. Both Rucci and Balenciaga embodied

dynamic three-dimensional shapes through creative garment construction while excluding decorative elements unless they were derived for structural reasons. To highlight the unity of form, both often use monochromatic color or blacks in tone-on-tone.

Another key couturier who informs Rucci's aesthetics is Madame Alix Grès (Steele & Mears, 2007). Grès has had great influence on Rucci's early experiments, so there are some engineering similarities between Grès and Rucci. His first collection was homage to the sculptural dresses of Grès; all the garments were cut on a bias and some were constructed applying a pleating technique known as 'fluting', the omnipresent elements of Grès's Greek-inspired gowns (Figure 3). Fluting ("The Grecian gown", 2008), a micro technique for pleating, is made by tacking highly concentrated pleats to a hidden ground fabric. This construction technique is taken in another direction in Rucci's design. For Rucci, fluting serves decorative and structural functions. His silk matte jersey evening gown for the S/S 2003 collection (Figure 4) was made from long and narrow strips of fabric sewn into tubes. The tubes are knotted to create the mesh which covers the bodice; the knots are released at the waistline, unwound into numerous panels of the gored skirt.

The cut and construction of Rucci's garments require complex seaming, both on the inside and outside. Often the most intricate workmanship and intensive labor are applied on the interior of a garment, as in an evening

dress that has box-pleated ruffles on the inside for anchoring the shape. As with many of Rucci's designs made completely by hand (Rucci, 2008), the most involved workmanship and intensive labor are virtually invisible from the paradoxically simple exterior (Hodge et al., 2006).

Some garments in his collections take three hundred hours to make, others as many as six months ("Design life now", 2006). Many steps are required to create his gown and craftsmanship is central in his design process. Figure 5 shows the bodice of a taffeta gown, with a strip of tulle shredded and sewn into place by hand (Horyn, 2010).

As is typical in a couture house, Rucci's studio has dress-forms for his regular clients (Figure 6). In order to yield the best fit, a couture atelier needs forms that replicate the clients' body. When a client's frame changes, the dress-form gets adjusted accordingly (Rucci, 2013).

While Rucci's designs show influences from the great couturiers such as Balenciaga and Grès, he approaches couture in his own innovative way. Instead of appropriating past trends, he explores techniques of couture and develops them to fit contemporary lifestyle. In general, American fashions are regarded as practical ready-to-wear. Some of the distinctive features of American sportswear are innovation in problem-solving and reflection of pragmatic lifestyle. American designer Rucci not only incorporates Parisian couture techniques



**Figure 3. Grès, Grecian Gown, S/S 1975**  
- *Madame Grès: Sculptural fashion*, p.84



**Figure 4. F/W 2003**  
- *Ralph Rucci: The art of weightlessness*, p.102



**Figure 5. FW 2004**  
- *Ralph Rucci: The art of weightlessness*, p.163



**Figure 6. Rucci's Sculpted Jacket**  
-<http://www.threadsmagazine.com>

but modernizes those in a utilitarian aspect. According to Richard Martin (1998), where traditional Parisian couture was authoritarian and imposing, American fashion addressed a democracy. Rucci's works are far from restricting a wearer's movement. Despite the state-of-art techniques in his garments, Rucci's designs pursue comfort and practicality. Rucci's innovations are derived from practical reasons, not merely for embellishment. His simplistic patterns are among the top five sellers of Vogue patterns (Rucci, 2008). In an interview (Calderin, 2013), Rucci has stated that as a fashion designer his medium is clothing and it might as well be useful and have a sense of purpose.

Many of his quintessential designs break from traditional tailoring or dressmaking. Rucci's garments are often sculpted as well as fitted with pieced construction and curved seams (F.I.T. & SADI, 2005). For a Rucci's jacket, for example, he seldom uses conventional construction for sleeves; he often combines arcs and curves that cut along a more horizontal plane to improve the fit from behind (Figure 5 & 6). The geometric cuts are often built up with gussets which allow a better fit, creating volume and unexpected shapes (Steele & Mears, 2007). Rucci's distinctive undulating cuts not only improve fit but also facilitate the wearer's movements.

By cutting organically along the curves of the body while referring to anatomy, Rucci emphasizes the beauty

of the human body and takes bodily movements into account. Rucci's dramatic and sculptural couture gowns neither confine the wearer's movements nor impede function. When worn on the body, his sculptural and seemingly imposing gowns react flexibly to body movements. Rucci's designs display impeccable craftsmanship and dressmaking technique equivalent to couture while also reinvents haute couture with the purposive approach. He embraces aspects of stylistic and technical elements of couture while also puts emphasis on practicality and function in dress.

## 2. Architectural form: Infanta gowns

Architectural fashion designers challenge conventional garment patterns for mass-production and aim to innovate dominant silhouettes. They explore unconventional forms and experimental structures. Among them, Ralph Rucci is a designer who attempts to solve spatial-structural problems in terms of architectural approach (Yim, 2014b). His strength lies in centralizing the formative potentials of dress as three-dimensional space around the body.

Ralph Rucci designs volume and form of garments in an architectonic manner. Though seemingly simple, his garments are built upon complex seaming; volumes of his garments are planned with carefully constructed seams. In order to represent his architectural designs,

Rucci favors stiff fabrics such as heavy matte jersey, duchess satin, faille, double-faced wool, silk gabardine, and most of all, gazar for its sculptural quality (Hodge et al., 2006).

He focuses on innovative construction and development of new techniques rather than following trends. He once explained his design philosophy in cut and execution, mentioning that every seam is for fit, not merely for pretty lines (Steele & Mears, 2007). Fashion critic Suzy Menkes (2002) commented that Rucci is a designer who is both a sculptor and a decorator, although it is rare to find a designer with both capacities. As Balenciaga once stated, a couturier must be an architect for design and a sculptor for shape (Polan & Tredre, 2009). Rucci builds space between a garment and the body, in a style that recalls Balenciaga. Rucci himself mentioned in an interview (Calderin, 2013) that he was conceptually influenced by Cristobal Balenciaga; Rucci regards garments as abstract sculpture as Balenciaga did.

Ralph Rucci's infanta gowns, in particular, show Rucci's architectonic structure distinctly. An infanta gown refers to a wide dress that a young Spanish princess, 'infanta', wore in the painting *Las Meninas* (1656) and *Infanta Margarita* (1664) by Spanish Baroque artist Diego Velazquez. Infanta gowns were supported by a pannier that expanded beyond the fingertips of the wearer's outstretched arms. The infanta gown has been

revived by couturiers like Jeanne Lanvin in the 1920s and then was redesigned by Balenciaga in 1939 (Figure 7); he designed the infanta gown as is known today (Steele & Mears, 2007).

Patricia Mears (2009) stated that the full breadth of innovation was not realized in the crafting of ball gowns in American fashion until the arrival of Rucci's infanta in the early 2000s. Rucci's infanta gown is constructed in heavy duchess satin using interior supports made of horsehair and interfacing. Instead of using a rigid understructure, which causes discomfort when moving, Rucci made each part of the skirt supported by organza and Filogil linings (Steele & Mears, 2007). Filogil is the brand name for marquisette which is tightly woven and stiff but lightweight. For his *Ripple Effect Infanta* (Figure 8), he did not use any heavy or rigid understructure; he used organza and sheer Filogil to support the voluminous dress. Filogil is too stiff to be bent into a seam but at the same time very light. Rucci and his pattern maker Gail Gondek cut Filogil smaller than the seam of the base fabric and then hand-stitched it to the organza layer (Mears, 2009). For his structural design, Rucci's strength lies in developing architectural structures rather than depending entirely on conventional techniques or experience.

Rucci's *Doges Infanta* gown (Figure 9) in black duchess satin has the high neckline and long sleeves. Historically,



Figure 7. Balenciaga, Infanta Gown, 1939  
-<http://vein.es>



Figure 8. *Ripple Effect Infanta*, 2002  
- *American beauty*, p.153

voluminous dark gowns were worn by academics, monk, nuns, and widows, as symbols of scholarship, piety, and sexual asceticism. As in the historical black clothing, Rucci's black *infanta* gown conceals the corporeal body and presents solemn grandeur with clarity of expression. Rucci's *Charcoal Infanta* comprises a set of interlocking circles and darts that creates volume and shape. Also made of duchess satin, the gown obscures the body contours in favor of presenting a sculptural form (Hodge et al., 2006).

*Tabernacle Infanta* (Figure 10) in amethyst duchess satin has a stand-away arced panel at the back. Rucci does not focus merely on the frontal view but carefully structures the whole three-dimensional quality of his garments. The shape of the dress changes dramatically rotating from the front, side, and back; the gown's frontal silhouette assumes a simple Empire-line dress, but an upright arch-shaped wing appears from the shoulder at the sides and the scroll-shaped obi from the back. *Tabernacle Infanta* is designed strapless, which requires an additional process of constructing a bustier inside. The bustier, which has its own separate zipper closure, is cut in closely woven silk taffeta and attached with fitted grosgrain waist stay. In addition, plastic stays are cut and melted with candle flames to be molded to the desired shape. The bustier is then attached to the outer

layer of the gown along the top edge. Rucci's strapless gowns are reinforced by a boning secured at the waist as in the structure of a suspension bridge (Mears, 2009).

Although Rucci recently has been presenting fewer grand ball gowns and softer draped versions, his distinctive *infanta* gowns have been consistently created. For his architectural gowns, in which the dressmaking process holds the center of creation, he highlights their forms and structures by using a single tone while avoiding surface decorations. Rucci once mentioned decoration as camouflage for the lack of integrity (Rucci, 2008). In Rucci's designs, decorations are results of construction, which serves form and function simultaneously. Moreover, Rucci adheres to minimalist color palettes such as alabaster, taupe, ivory, cream, beige, and black so that the colors are able to allow people to focus on the cut (Rucci, 2008).

With regard to structural characteristics of Rucci's architectural designs, Rucci's evening gowns have a three-dimensional quality with built-in space between the body and the garment. Rucci builds a garment that stands boldly away from the body and obtains its shape with the support of an understructure. As in architecture built around the body, a wearer's body moves in the interior space of a garment.



Figure 9. *Doges Infanta*, F/W 2002  
-<http://www.vogue.com>



Figure 10. *Tabernacle Infanta*, F/W 2003  
- *She's like a rainbow*, p.114



### 3. Engineered construction: Suspension

The most note-worthy construction technique of Rucci's designs should be the 'suspension' technique. His suspension technique is a complex engineering developed for composing and finishing of a garment. 'Suspension' refers to the way fabric pieces, joined together by nearly indiscernible layers of hand-stitching, appear to hang in a garment (Somersethouse, 2008). In his garments that are created by suspension, some of which contain nearly a hundred individual pattern pieces, the small pieces of fabric seem to be floating or be suspended. For articulation of a suspension, each piece is finished by hand and joined to others or fixed to a larger base fabric of a garment by braided threads or bullion-stitched links called 'worms.' The worms are thread connectors made from modified French knots that Rucci and his staffs developed specifically for suspension technique (Joseph, 2006) (Figure 11). The worms are spaced roughly between half to one inch from one another and are supposed to be visible by design (Steele & Mears, 2007).

Rucci stated that he came up with the idea of suspension looking at crustacean shells; he noticed that those shells were articulated among quadrants to facilitate movements (Joseph, 2006). He incorporated the segmentation of the shells into garment construction in

order to improve fit and drape. As stated by himself, 'obsession with weightlessness' (Rucci, 2008) lead to developing suspension technique instead of using a slot-seam. Rucci's suspension is not for decorative purpose or technical display but serves the function to advance fit and shape.

The size and placement of suspension pieces seem to be thoroughly calculated to emphasize the contours of the body. Suspension techniques reflect the shapes of muscles and structures of the body; it embodies the idea of articulation by fragmenting a piece of fabric and then assembling the pieces in reference to the anatomy.

The suspension only appeared in sections of garments in the beginning but Rucci made an entire suit constructed with the suspension technique later on. One of his engineered gowns, an infanta gown of 2006 (Figure 12), is constructed with suspension. The suspension pieces in ink black duchess satin are joined with smaller pieces in olive green; each abstract piece is connected with 'worms', chain stitches, and satin stitches. The double-faced wool pantsuit of 2004 (Figure 13) is another example that suspension technique is applied to build an entire garment. Most of Rucci's designs constructed with suspension are asymmetrical and include occasionally contrasting-colored pieces. *Ivory Suspension Suit*(Figure 14), a suit from Rucci's S/S 2005 haute couture collection, is made of double-faced ivory wool



Figure 11. Suspension Technique  
-<http://www.kent.edu>



Figure 12. Infanta Gown, F/W 2006  
- *American beauty*, p.156



Figure 13. Suspension Suit, 2004  
-<https://www.fitnyc.edu>



**Figure 14. Ivory Suspension Suit, S/S 2005**  
- *Skin+Bones*, p.194



**Figure 15. Stained Glass Dress, F/W 2004**  
-<http://www.vogue.com>

twill and has orange inserts. The jacket has areas that are broken into fragments and reconnected through 'worms' (Hodge et al., 2006). The suits are examples of the designer's suspension in which its technique improves fit and drape. Furthermore, Rucci's garments, which are constructed partially or entirely with suspension, create an aesthetic balance between symmetry and asymmetry.

The idea of suspension is further developed in garments such as the *Stained Glass Dress* for his F/W 2004 haute couture collection (Figure 15). A fretwork composed of joined serpentine pieces of black wool comprises the dress. More than a hundred pieces were mapped onto a pattern and placed symmetrically (Steele & Mears, 2007).

As such, Rucci rejects the formulaic way of fabrication but constantly explores new technology and properties of fabric. The creative construction seems to be the central theme Rucci's design philosophy, however, he also aims attention at traits of fabric; not only putting emphasis on the purity of cut and form, Rucci also considers color and embellishment as vessels of design elements. 'Cracked porcelain embroidery' (Figure 16) is a variation of the suspension technique. Rucci stated that he had been trying to create a surface on the fabric similar to the cracked surface of Chinese porcelain. He succeeded for his F/W 2011 collection after having experimented with the technique for many years (Rucci, 2013).

In the S/S 2011 collection, a white double-faced cashmere jacket shows a recently developed version of his suspension technique. A panel of silk tulle is inserted in the front and back of the jacket, on the top of which irregular suspended bars are attached. The knots, raised from the surface with horsehair inset added, are placed in the center (Rucci, 2013). In order to engineer a suspension jacket, dress, or gown, individual pieces of fabric are placed in a mosaic-shaped pattern on tulle. For the placement of the fabric pieces, a toile is used underneath the tulle, as a template or a guide (Figure 17 & 18). On the template, numbered shapes are mapped out corresponding to the each piece of fabric. After the fabric pieces are stitched onto the tulle, the template is removed from the garment (Rucci, 2013). This technique enables the garment to be partially see-through, appear to be weightless, and at the same time have depth by mindfully being executed in white tone.

In his designs engineered with the suspension technique and further developed versions of it, the engineering techniques function as construction as well as surface embellishment. By using the base fabric he both ornaments and shapes a garment at the same time, in other words, the construction becomes the garment's only ornamentation.

Below is the design aesthetics in Ralph Rucci's designs so far examined. (Table 1)



**Figure 16. Cracked Porcelain Embroidery**  
 - *Ralph Rucci: Autobiography of a fashion designer*, n.p.






**Figure 17. Rucci jacket, S/S 2011**  
 - <http://www.vogue.com>



**Figure 18. Engineered Construction**  
 - *Ralph Rucci: Autobiography of a fashion designer*, n.p.

**Table 1. The Design Aesthetics in Rucci's Designs**

Design Aesthetics	Distinctive Features and Implications	Examples
American Couture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·Reference to the traditional couture methods</li> <li>·Emphasis on craftsmanship</li> <li>·Influence of Balenciaga and Grès</li> <li>·Modernizing couture techniques in a utilitarian aspect</li> <li>·Innovating sartorial conventions and dressmaking techniques</li> <li>·Improving fit and facilitating a wearer's movement</li> <li>·Comfort and practicality</li> <li>·Purposive approach</li> </ul>	 Figure 5
Architectural Form: Infanta Gowns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·Architectural/sculptural approach to spatial-structural problems</li> <li>·Three-dimensional quality with built-in space between the body and the garment</li> <li>·Unconventional forms and experimental structures</li> <li>·Innovative construction</li> <li>·Monochromatic color without surface decorations</li> <li>·Complex seaming and stiff fabrics</li> </ul>	 Figure 10
Engineered Construction: Suspension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·'Suspension' technique: fragmenting a piece of fabric and reassembling the pieces by hand-stitching in reference to the anatomy</li> <li>·Accentuating the contours of the body</li> <li>·Utilization of new technology and properties of fabric</li> <li>·Improvement of fit, shape, and drape</li> <li>·Combination of construction and surface embellishment</li> </ul>	 Figure 14

\* Note: Sources of figures presented as example in Table 1 are presented on pages 6, 8, and 10.

#### IV. Conclusion

As examined so far, Rucci's designs do not necessarily appeal to certain fashionable looks, so it might be difficult to understand his works in some respects. Nevertheless, the leitmotif of Ralph Rucci's complex seams and innovative techniques is being recognized by knowledgeable eyes. At this point when the heyday of haute couture is waning, it certainly is worthy of notice that the innovative framework of Rucci's designs is still ensuring customers. He once mentioned, "my clients over the years have defined who I am, not the press, by quietly purchasing the clothes and wearing them in public situations." (Rucci, 2008)

This study has analyzed the design aesthetics of Ralph Rucci's collections, which strength lies in the following three aspects. Firstly, Rucci represents American couture: he purposively reinvents couture and challenges sartorial conventions to reflect contemporary lifestyle, while referring to the great couturiers such as Balenciaga and Grès with his refined craftsmanship. Secondly, he employs architectural forms with his attention to three-dimensional quality that stands away from the body by building the space between the body and a garment. Lastly, Ralph Rucci demonstrates engineered construction with his innovative suspension technique. By the labyrinthine seams in reference to the anatomy, he achieves both ornamentation and construction.

The methodologies that Rucci adopts exhibit his inventive attitude toward dressmaking. Based on the fundamental concept of building a three-dimensional structure surrounding the body, Rucci adheres to his own philosophy toward form while restraining unnecessary decorations. Rucci's designs are results of reinventing couture techniques, combining the anatomical features of the body with abstract forms, and expanding the potential of garment forms to mobile forms-in-space.

Rather than responding to superficial trends in fashion, Rucci presents designs drawing on his unwavering design philosophy. Although Ralph Rucci is not a representative designer with immense popularity or commercial success,

he has been contributing to creativities in fashion design by approaching couture in a progressive way. Rucci has been recognized with his solid aesthetics of architectural designs accompanied by his innovative construction techniques.

Although the research has reached its aims, some limitations might have occurred. First, as explained earlier, since we depended upon the information from the online collections, the exhibition catalogues, the autobiography, the dialogue, and the newspaper articles, it might be limited to capture the full richness of Rucci's designs and their receptions. Second, the architectural and sculptural qualities of his designs are distinctly presented in his couture collections which began in 2002 and lasted until 2007, hence the examples shown are centralized in the respective period.

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