

Designing Clothes

Culture and Organization
of the Fashion Industry



Veronica Manlow

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Transaction Publishers
New Brunswick (U.S.A.) and London (U.K.)

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This book is printed on acid-free paper that meets the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials.

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2007020871

ISBN: 978-1-4128-0903-0

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Manlow, Veronica.

Designing clothes: culture and organization of the fashion industry /
Veronica Manlow.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4128-0903-0 (E-Book)

1. Clothing trade.
2. Fashion design.
3. Clothing trade—Case studies.
4. Fashion design—Case studies. I. Title.

HD9940.A2M36 2007

338.4'7687—dc22

2007020871

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Preface

Ian Griffiths (2000), a fashion designer at Max Mara and a professor of fashion design at Kingston University, points out that the “fashion academy”—those who study fashion from one or another academic perspective—often miss something essential about the industry. Were fashion designers to write their own narratives (and not just those who are household names), or were those writing about fashion design to simply ask designers and others who work in fashion to explain what they do and why, perhaps we’d get a more accurate portrayal of the fashion system. In this study I try to follow Griffiths’ recommendation. To begin with, however, I discuss theoretical approaches to understanding fashion—none of them originating from those who have worked in fashion. I discuss fashion as a global industry and the rise of the designer. As the study progresses, I try to give the reader a view of the world of fashion from the perspectives of those who know it best, and to let the analysis flow from the empirical data. When I decided to study this world, encompassing business, art, culture, and society, I felt the best way to do so would be to gain access to a fashion firm. I wrote to about one hundred firms—many well-known and others less so. I heard from two firms: Leslie Faye and Tommy Hilfiger. John Pomerantz, the then CEO of Leslie Faye, invited me over for a day. He spoke to me about the industry, his own firm, and arranged for me to speak to several designers and others in various positions in the firm. It helped that I knew someone in an executive position at Tommy Hilfiger who recommended that I be allowed to do this study and agreed to help me in my activities while at the firm. Nevertheless, it is quite surprising that a firm would allow a sociologist full access without knowing exactly what I would do with the knowledge I acquired. I was set up as an intern and given an employee identification card and access pass, an email account, a desk, and a computer. This arrangement allowed me to operate from *inside* the firm rather than coming to the firm in a much more formal way to conduct interviews, observe people at work, etc.

My primary interest was to learn about the significance that fashion design had for the people who were a part of it; to find out what the experience of fashion design was like—how it was organized, what kind of organizational culture existed, and how Hilfiger and others managed the firm. After completing my research I expanded my scope to include other firms in the fashion industry both from interviews with designers and others who worked in these firms and from secondary data from various sources. I hope—in some way at least—I have been able to provide a window into the fascinating world of fashion design and that I have shown how this world deeply affects society.

Fashion has become a major industry with complex economic, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions. Fashion's scope is ever-widening both as a global force and in terms of its reach into different sectors of life. Designers have become celebrities in their own right and many celebrities endorse fashion—and sometimes even start their own line. Shopping has become a major leisure activity; though some seem to approach it in such a strategic manner and with such determination that it hardly seems like a diversion. People plan vacations around shopping, and some relationships seem to revolve around shopping. There are “pop-up” temporary stores ranging from *Commes des Garçons* to J.C. Penney. In New York City there is even a mobile fashion boutique called Shop Caravan that will bring up-to-the-minute designs to your door. Ralph Lauren's Madison Avenue store once featured an interactive shopping window with a touch computer screen embedded into the display window glass. Credit cards could be swiped, at any hour, through a device affixed to the window. Retailers such as Wal-Mart and Old Navy are now advertising trendy clothes in *Vogue* magazine. There are cable TV stations, magazines, Internet sites, and blogs devoted solely to reporting or discussing fashion. Newspapers devote more prime coverage to fashion as a business and cultural phenomena than ever before. There is fast fashion for those who can't wait for the next season's offerings; there are limited-runs and designer exclusives sometimes sold only in one boutique; and of course, there is couture for the truly advantaged. For those who can't afford a status purse and don't want a knockoff there's Bag, Borrow, or Steal—a Seattle-based company that rents designer bags to members online. There are fashion museums and exhibitions on fashion at major museums, galleries, and sometimes even in stores: e.g., the 2004 Vanessa Beecroft installation at the Prada store in SoHo. *Women's Wear Daily* reports that the Museum of Fine Arts Boston is getting ready to present “Fashion Show: Paris Collections 2006”—a departure from the more studied ap-

proach usually taken by museums (Bowers 2006: 14). Charles Bennett, senior corporate vice president of the sports management corporation IMG which now produces *Fashion Week* throughout the world, says of his decision to expand into fashion, “Fashion is followed by women the way sports are followed by guys” (Chozick 2006: B6). And, of course, sports matches sometimes double as fashion showcases with sponsorship deals in the millions of dollars. For example, Ralph Lauren became the first official outfitter for Wimbledon in 2006 (Conti 2006: 3) and Puma sponsored 12 teams in the World Cup (Beckett 2006: 2). The United Parcel Service signed on as a sponsor and even had a tent at New York Fashion Week in September 2005 in which UPS fashions designed by ten emerging designers were modeled (Chozick 2006: B6). For those who wish to turn away from more blatant forms of consumerist fashion there is the emerging category of eco-fashion—recycled and environmentally sustainable clothing—accompanied by what Samantha Skey of Alloy Media & Marketing refers to as “socially conscious brand marketing” (Seckler 7/12/06: 12).

We see fashion all around us, we can buy it, read about it, and take courses on it; yet unless we work in the industry, we may know little about fashion as a business. In this book I will consider the broader significance of fashion in society. I will look at the creative process of fashion design and its’ unfolding in an organizational context; this is, after all, where designs are conceived and executed.

Fashion firms are not just in the business of selling clothing with a variety of sidelines; the firm must also sell a larger concept around which people can identify and distinguish themselves. The four main tasks of a fashion firm are: creation of an image, translation of that image into a product, presentation of the product, and selling the product. These processes are interrelated and require the efforts of a variety of specialists that are often in distant locations. The design and presentation of fashion is influenced by changes in society: both cultural and economic. Information about past sales, reception of items, as well as projective research will inform design, manufacturing, sales, distribution, and marketing decisions. Products are sold at a variety of price points and must be positioned to appeal to a target customer. New ideas must systematically be put forward by the firm, yet the identity of the brand must maintain a coherent representation in the minds of consumers. In addition to taking account of the contingencies of the market, fashion firms must be attuned to what other firms are doing; the moves of any one significant firm will influence other firms. It can be said that there

is a flow and counterflow, or feedback loop, which occurs between all these “sub-systems” in the larger fashion industry.

There are certain imperatives that drive fashion design in a corporate environment, and adjustments must be made so that it may remain a creative endeavor. Leadership, organizational structure, and organizational culture take on certain forms conducive to meeting what are often thought of as contradictory objectives—bureaucratic formality and creativity. The three basic tasks that must be accomplished within every firm—creation, production and presentation of fashion—will then be achieved under certain conditions of leadership, organizational structure, and organizational culture.

I will look at the influences under which creative decisions are made leading up to the creation of actual styles. Various cultural and historical factors—both internal as they relate to the firm, and external as they relate to the larger culture—contribute to the image that a firm has constructed and continues to impart to its products. One can ask, relative to decisions that are made, how is a brand identity created and sustained across multiple products? Put another way, what informs the core symbolic meaning of products created within a firm, and how much flexibility occurs around this constant? Extending this somewhat, one can ask a related question; what contribution do fashion firms make in upholding, challenging, or redefining the social order?

Ideas must be translated into products. Issues of leadership, managerial practices, division of labor, interpersonal communication patterns, and technology will all come into play in how negotiations are carried out. There are certain policies and procedures, networks through which information flows, and informal processes that influence outcomes. The question is, then, what are the organizational procedures by which a brand’s style is defined and a product line manufactured? Marketing research, daily analysis of sales figures across various product categories, and various means of tapping into consumer responsiveness are taken into account by the firm when deciding whether to go forward with particular designs (as are many other factors).

In order to understand how a firm in the fashion industry is structured and how it integrates its creative function with its business operations, issues internal to the firm as well as outside of the firm must be addressed. To begin with, a particular firm needs to be situated in a larger historical, social, cultural, and organizational context. I set out to look at fashion as it occurs in industry rather than looking at it primarily as social psycho-

logical phenomena or as a form of collective behavior. Fashion, as it is experienced and enacted by people, is of course connected to the way it is handled in the industry; but this will remain in the background while the industry's role remains in the foreground.

In the world of fashion many contradictory forces must be balanced all of which involve change versus stability; such as the drive for creative expression with the need for rational strategies in the interest of profitability, and the anchoring of the brand's identity in the face of social, cultural and market shifts. Within fashion firms, we find adaptations and conflicts connected more broadly to the human condition: the need to belong and identify with collective meanings and the desire to be different. The leadership and culture of the firm provide the blueprints for ways of being within that environment and for managing the work that needs to be done. As this unfolds, we see not only a workplace but a dramatic production where some characters are playing heroic roles not only in the firm, but on the global stage.

In Part II of this book, names of fashion designers, executives, and others that I have interviewed, with the exception of Hilfiger himself, have been changed—as have division names. This is done in the interest of protecting the privacy of those mentioned in the book.

The reader should note that the information in this book represents the opinions and assessments of the author, and should not be construed as representing the policies and practices of the company studied. In addition, many of the executives and designers interviewed are no longer with the company studied, and the company is no longer a public company.

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Part I

The Fashion Industry

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Clothing, Fashion, and Society

The invention of symbolism was a crucial moment in the history of the human species. The ability to use symbols indicates an ability to think abstractly; when such symbols are created with artistic intent, they indicate the ability to appreciate “beauty.” Recently archeologists have discovered two ochre ornaments, engraved with geometrical symbols, at Blombos Cave in South Africa. These artifacts are more than 40,000 years older than the more advanced cave paintings found in France’s Grotte Chauvet (McFarling 2002: A1). These symbolic expressions are precursors to more complex representations found once social organization reached a more advanced phase.

Different aspects of the structure of appearance “are consciously manipulated to assert and demarcate differences in status, identity and commitment—for example (support or protest) at the level of personal, national and international relationships,” observes Hilda Kuper. She claims the “rules of that structure are assimilated over time together with other rules of thought and behavior,” and though they may have “received less analytical scrutiny, they are as ‘real’ as rules of kinship, of land tenure, of spatial interaction, or any other rules of social communication” (1973: 348-349). Similar claims of the importance of material culture—particularly clothing—in understanding society have been made in sociology by Georg Simmel, Herbert Blumer, Gregory Stone, Erving Goffman, and Fred Davis among many others.

Kuper (1973: 349) maintains that the term “clothing” should be used in an inclusive sense and differentiated further into “dress,” used on everyday occasions; “uniform,” used for ceremonial occasions; and “costume,” clothing with a mystical or sacred quality used for rituals/performances. Fashion is the term that should be used to refer to the modern manifestation of clothing. Stefania Saviolo and Salvo Testa (2002: 6) argue that the etymological connection between *moda*, the Italian word for fashion,

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and *modern*, is not pure chance. They quote an Italian author who says that “fashion is a universal principle, one of the elements of civilization and social custom” (2002: 5). As Christopher Breward (1995: 5) puts it, introducing commerce into his definition, fashion is “clothing designed primarily for its expressive qualities, related closely to the short-term dictates of the market.”

Clothing, then, is an important element of social life and consists of taking natural or synthetic materials and converting them into wearable items. The fabric and the cut of clothing enables or confines the body’s movement and causes the wearer to be received in a certain way. Clothing is both a material and a symbolic item made by human intervention. The question then is, who makes clothing and how does it receive its symbolic significance? Clothing, its management within the household, and its tailoring has been an essential aspect of “women’s work.” In poorer households, women made clothing for the men and children of the house as well as for themselves. In more affluent households, women were able to hire other women to make clothing. These dressmakers followed traditional patterns and did not introduce any radical innovations of style and manner into their designs.

Eventually these domestic arrangements, organized by women, were superseded by the emergence of clothing making as a “cottage” industry. This industry was organized according to the guild system; though individual tailors, seamstresses, and dressmakers too were to be found. In the guild system, a master-tailor for example, worked with a few apprentices and journeymen; the latter eventually emerging as masters in their own right. Another system for the production of clothing was the “putting out” or “out work” system in which a merchant-manufacturer would send materials to rural producers who would work in their homes. The finished garments were returned to the merchants, and the workers were paid on a piecework basis. The demand for skilled custom work existed alongside this cheaper, less skilled, and more exploitative form of labor (Gamber 1997: 87). Wendy Gamber (1997: 4-5) points out that many labor scholars assume that artisans and the apprentice system were exclusively male, and that once clothing was no longer a home enterprise women were excluded. Dressmakers, seamstresses, and milliners (more often than not) learned and practiced their skills in the workshop. Well into the twentieth century, women continued to provide custom services as well as work in factories.

Producing dresses, uniforms, and costumes in this manner eventually gave way to factories; though vestiges of the “putting-out” system

remain in the “sweatshops” that some manufacturers use today. These clothing makers did not employ designers and did not typically make substantial changes in style to the clothing they produced. This form of mass production was best suited to the making of identical products with variations only in size.

These industries, owing to the emergence of more complex, class-based societies, grew into the fashion industry whose task it now was to produce not just clothing in the traditional sense but signs by which different and newly emerging classes, status groups, and parties could be distinguished. The latter word here describes organized structures of people seeking to exercise social and political power or influence, i.e., military systems, voluntary associations, religious orders, etc. The task of the fashion system was to provide clothing that was to be used to make distinctions between people on economic, cultural, aesthetic, and political levels. Once these signs were made available to make distinctions, they became accessible also to be used as *signs of domination*; people who could wear more expensive clothes, visibly more sumptuous, or rare items could dominate those who wore more ordinary clothes. Furs, silks, well-tailored clothes, or clothes with elite markers of one kind or another could trump cotton and ill-tailored clothes by anonymous makers.

To cater to the needs of the new elite who wanted signs of distinction (instruments which would legitimate their domination that had not been officially assigned to them) the fashion designer was born. It was his or her task to produce clothes that made it possible for wearers to distinguish themselves and dominate others—subtly or overtly. In creating these specialized clothes, designers drew themes from current cultural or historical sources and in effect became both creators of new cultural elements as well as disseminators of these items.

As the middle class expanded and found itself with disposable income, more people sought signs of distinction. Fashion designers took markers of elite status and adapted them to a mass audience providing, again, a means of domination through clothing; though this one was more symbolic than real. New markers of status, such as the logo, emerge providing a currency that can be easily read. Lou Taylor (2000: 137) refers to them as “*talismanic symbols of glamour and desirability.*” There is an irony here. As fashion becomes more “democratic,” by extending its reach to groups that were formerly excluded, it does not necessarily become less hierarchical. Fashion remains, despite its democratic embrace, a vehicle which marks distinctions and displays group membership or individuality. Many people are able to enter into the “game” of distinction, and the

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fashion cycle accelerates. Signs are commodified. Individuals are able to use these signs according to their own interests. As greater numbers of people are drawn into the democracy of fashion, there is a greater need for low wage laborers to work in this ever expanding system. These inherent contradictions, though, are not limited to fashion, but are also a feature of all industries that separate production from consumption and rely on just-in-time flexible production (Ross 1997: 15).

Fashion and clothing are a means of linking the individual to collective life—although in strictly differentiated ways. Gianni Malossi says of fashion products that they are “material goods with cultural content,” similar in many ways to “film, pop music, or software” (1998: 156). Clothing refers to “established patterns of dress” (Rubinstein 1995: 3). The cultural content of clothing then refers back to tradition. Certain types of clothing, such as the sari, are ethnically or religiously defined and socially regulated in response to a relatively fixed system of easily recognizable codes. In extreme cases no innovation may be allowed. Amongst the Amish, for instance, religious ideology demands an almost total uniformity. The sari, in terms of how it is worn and what kind of fabrics and designs are used, is often considered a garment that embodies caste prohibitions. Emma Tarlo (1996: 141-143, 149), an anthropologist who has studied Indian village women in Gujarat, seeks to extend established ideas about the straightforward relationship between clothing and caste. Instead, she points to the influence of diffusion among regional styles due primarily to marriage practices and trade; in the larger Indian context, she draws attention to the incorporation of elements of European dress (such as a blouse or jacket worn in addition to the sari) and the use of foreign fabric (e.g., synthetic materials) and patterns. Economic status and not caste, she argues, is more clearly expressed by the “fineness of fabric,” and sometimes by the amount of material used than by the style of the sari worn. In any case, she concludes that when “constrained by both caste and veiling restrictions few village women have more than one style of clothing from which to choose at any given time” (1996: 326). The sari can be compared to the tunic dress of ancient Egypt, the peplos in Greece, the Roman toga, and the Japanese kimono—all of which remained essentially unchanged for centuries (Lipovetsky 1994: 19). Douglas Gorsline (1952: 3), in discussing the clothing of the Egyptians, comments: “The ancient world was one in which the rulers, nobles, priestly castes, and warriors maintained themselves in absolute power over the great masses of people. It was thus a society in which one general style of clothing could survive for thousands of years.” For

many Indian women today there will be a much freer range of choices not only in the sari but also among other forms of dress. Some Indian fashion designers have experimented with the sari in various ways, but mainly for the consumption of women outside of India. We can see in this example the incomplete transition between clothing and fashion—one moored in absolutes, the other variable—as well as fashion’s connection to modernity.

The Western suit and dress are prototypes of clothing that are much more responsive to the current ideas of appearance and the desire for novelty, and thus have fully become fashion. From these basic types emerge different forms: skirts, jeans, shorts; in turn these types are amenable to trends: miniskirts, “hot pants,” low-rise jeans, etc. In fashion, the end result may bear little resemblance to the clothing form from which it is derived. Fashion, unlike clothing, is amenable to reinterpretation. By nature it is unstable and therefore elusive. Fashion does not change, as clothing might, in response to diffusion or for practical reasons alone. It can change just for the sake of change.

Many scholars of fashion (e.g. Breward 1995; Hollander 1993; Lipovetsky 1994; Laver 2002) place its origin in the fourteenth century. Valerie Steele (1988) argues that fashion, as a system of variations in acceptable styles, can be traced to Italian cities in the early Renaissance. Baldassare Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier*, written in 1516, provides instruction on comportment for the Italian court. Castiglione presents a conversation on the issue of how the courtier should dress. Various fashions common to certain regions and dispositions are considered. The courtier is presented as having a choice in “what manner of man he wishes to be taken for.” Castiglione (1528/1959: 123) cites one Federico as saying: “a man’s attire is no slight index of the wearer’s fancy, although sometimes it can be misleading; and not only that, but ways and manners, as well as deeds and words, are all an indication of the qualities of the man in whom they are seen.” This is a shift from a system of dress based entirely on status to one in which the wearer begins to exert an influence on how he or she will be perceived. Saviolo and Testa (2002: 11) discuss an important catalyst in the “second acceleration” in the development of fashion in Europe: “The diffusion of rich merchants around Europe encouraged the creation of a new dressing code no longer conditioned by ostentation (the nobility and clergy), poverty (farmers), or usefulness (the army), but by the search for social legitimacy.”

Fashion—*mode*—exists fully only with the advent of modern cities where a connection to traditional culture has, at least, been partially