

## ART HISTORY: FROM A GREEK STRESS ON SEX TO SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF WOMEN'S FASHION



Figure 1: The word “stiletto” is from the Greek *stylos* or *pillar*. Above is a high-fashion stiletto, designed by Nicholas Kirkwood, whose elegant curves call to mind a Greek aesthetic ideal of geometric simplicity. The simplicity is often typical of avant-garde and even deviant fashion. The fashion is likened by Kirkwood to cutting-edge architectural designs. The photo is by Richard Stow with kind permission for its use by Chris Suarez, Commercial Director of the Nicholas Kirkwood Studio in London, England.

Though my title may seem to ignore many influences on art and fashion, from social revolutions to religion, some of the influences are noted precisely by way of sex and social construction. And although the latter profoundly affect us, their provoking nature has intimidated candid analyses. Eroticism is a taboo topic, despite a sex revolution, and the constructions are protected by political correctness. Let me add that male fashion is not addressed in order to be succinct and on the assumption, without either being sexist or begging the question about a sexual basis of fashion, that women more than men have tended historically to highlight their bodies by stylistic trends (Mears 2007). Hopefully the trends can illustrate the relevant themes of fashion in both the Greek and current eras. The eras of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, from Christian Dior gowns to transnational avant-garde styles, may especially clarify the themes. Consider them by first examining social construction.

### *Social construction versus sex*

Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge (2003:135) describe the worldview of social constructionism held by gender feminists. In denying any major biological differences of men and women, a denial follows also of traditional notions such as “family” and “gender”. Gender would be a mere social construct where what is proper to women is relative to culture. This cultural relativism means that claims about their proper dress

may be both true and false either in the same culture at different times or at the same time in different cultures. So fashions based on any unchanging gender differences are bogus. But to infer the bogusness, say Patai and Koertge, is to accept a bidenial.

The bidenial led to fashions favored for women that neutralize gender differences. These range from pants to short male-like haircuts that became *au courant* in the 1970s with an escalation of the women’s liberation movement. This movement, evolving in academia into gender feminism, has surely influenced women’s fashions. But has it generally sustained a genderless style? If not, further questions ensue. Were the styles not sustained due to either whimsical changes or natural desires of women to appear distinctively feminine?

A feminine nature conflicts with the constructionist view of fashion. Fashions that are not gender neutral are said by many social constructionists to be associated with unhealthy behaviors in order to attract men: underarm shaving that, coupled to carcinogenic deodorants, causes breast cancer (Thomas 2007); leg shaving that, in tandem with tanning, can lead to precancerous actinic keratoses; post-surgical problems of implants to increase breast size; botox injections, paralyzing facial muscles, to reduce wrinkles; caesarian surgery to avoid



Figure 2: This image of a woman with a short male-like hairstyle, that became *chic* with an androgynous feminist ideal, does not negate a stunning erogenous feminine beauty. This photo is courtesy of fashion-trend photographer Clarita of Rome, 2009.

tearing genitalia in child birth for cosmetic concerns of ordinary women as well as models (Cook 2006); using makeup with toxic parabens and suntan lotions with melanoma-inducing oxybenzone to replace unsightly white colors in safer zinc-oxide lotions; anorexia that, induced by the fashion industry, can result in death such as the deaths of models Ana Reston of São Paulo or Uruguay's Luisel Ramos in 2006; and wearing stiletto heels that injure backbones and feet (although this is disputed by J. Dawson, M.D., and others [2003]), exacerbated by foot surgery for accommodating the heels, called "tart trotters" by the late Princess Diana.

Diana's remark, foreign models and medical quandaries suggest an intercultural recognition of the apparent effects of erogenous fashion. But the alleged patriarchal effects are not necessary results of the fashion and indicate its predominance, if not its being grounded more exactly in women's sexual nature. This nature is exemplified by high heels that have been a perennial fetish item, in Eastern and Western cultures, and that highlight sensual appearances of leg-muscle tone. Can concern for this tone and other anatomical features be bifurcated from a mutual attraction of the sexes and sex-related morphological differences? Bearing on the differences in terms of foot fetishes is Platonic humor, illustrated by a story

that creatively extends Plato's idea of love between the two sexes being an attempt to regain their original wholeness (Plato 1971b: 180e-192). Initially coupled by women's *feet* being joined to men's heads forming a wheel, they rolled happily until they hit a bump and broke apart. And they have been trying to get back together again ever since!

Less comically, Plato related our psychobiological natures to beauty by noting that women seek a masculine beauty they lack by sexually coupling with men and men a feminine beauty by mating with women. For "Love is always the love of something, and that something is what it lacks" (Plato 1971b: 200e). And what it lacks ultimately is Beauty *per se*. So men and women do not merely desire a transient superficiality of sex but the aesthetic fullness of Beauty itself. This quest for Beauty evokes St. Augustine's *aide-mémoire* that men who embrace their wives or prostitutes because of their beauty should consider the beauty of God Himself (Augustine 1985: 67). But this does not mean that Plato either disparaged sex or women's limited beauty. His point is that Beauty itself must *be*: It must *be* a fully real Being, a really real Form that is not material. For all material things are less than perfect and change. And to say changing things are *real* is to be able to say what they *are*. But since they are continually changing they would already *not be* what they were just said to *be*. So there must be an unchanging, immaterial, universal and perfect Form of Beauty that, unlike only partly real physical things, permits their true aesthetic comparisons.

The comparisons are possible since many beautiful things limitedly share in Beauty itself. This induces us (*aitia*) to love beautiful things and to seek through them that ideal standard. The standard is Beauty as a flawless Form. In being really real in another eternal world, this Form renders coherent our saying that one thing is really more beautiful than



Figure 3: The above photo illustrates a softened avant-garde fashion, seen sometimes at Model Mayhem, that often amplifies erogeneous bodily areas with clothing. The photo is used by courtesy of Clarita of Rome, 2009.

another and that beauty adds to our psychobiological fulfillment. Yet the point of this fulfillment, for Plato, can be missed by pursuing sex and stimulating fashion for their own sake. And this caveat about pursuing them for their own sake became an apologetics for modern societies to proscribe legally by sanctions and morally by traditions, at times overzealously, the use of clothing (or its lack) for seduction and pornography—from the Greek *porni* for “prostitute”.

Finally, Plato taught the young Aristotle who nonetheless rooted the formation and wellbeing of the state, not in Plato’s political types of individuals, but in harmonious male and female sexual natures via the natural family. The family’s wellbeing was both a practical and theoretical concern in later traditions that mandated how sexuality should influence fashion. And this fashion mandate is inconsistent with a relativistic Sophism as well as with today’s sophisticated social constructions.

In sum, this construction’s relativistic gender-neutral concepts exclude a moral scope of aesthetics, an *ästhetische moral* where beauty is not an arbitrary concept but rather has a moral role of enhancing our wellbeing (Onfray 1993). Can constructionist truth-claims be moral if they are incoherent and trivial? They are trivially true and say nothing about reality, including real beauty, if “truth” has for its truth-condition the different cultures. For all cultural truth-claims would follow necessarily. And the claims are incoherent as well since the constructions permit true contradictory claims (Villadsen 2003). The Platonic-Aristotelian tradition, by contrast, roots beauty in our psychobiological fulfillment. And the latter does not exclude sexually alluring fashion. Today, there is a moralistic belief imposed anachronistically on Plato. A naïve idea, warns Lydia Amir (2001), is that Plato admits of only loving unions without sex.

Bearing on sex, the Greeks regarded the naked body in awe as an aesthetic *magnum opus* of Nature wherein art is linked to love and loving the sensual (*erôs*). Myron’s famous statue of the Discus Thrower (*Discobolus*), for instance, symbolizes sensuality, grace, balance, harmony and artistic elements of architecture (as a sort of *frozen music*) that classical Greece idealized. Ideal fashions that are sensual to both sexes, where the erotic is related to beautiful art, involves art that aids our moral and intellectual ascension to Beauty itself in the case of Plato. And for Aristotle sensually alluring fashions, despite the modest public dress of most Greek women, who even so used cosmetics to attract men (Kluth 2001), would better induce men to court women without which formations of families by marriage could be impeded. And widely ignored is that this impediment is noted tacitly by St. Thomas (2009). Calling Aristotle “the philosopher,” he





Figure 4: Though this photo illustrates a Christian Dior Gown that is typically modest, similar to some modest gowns of ancient Greece, it has a graceful feminine contour. The photo is by courtesy of fashion photographer Tammy Manet of California, 2009.

states that only those “women who have no husband nor wish to have one,” or in situations “inconsistent with marriage, cannot without sin desire to give lustful pleasure to those men who see them, because this is to incite them to sin.”

*Was Plato’s aesthetics reactive or innovative?*

Plato was innovative as shown alone by his *Republic*, the heart of his theory of Forms and foundation for all his ideas. The ideas range from knowledge to human nature to virtue and how virtue bears on political ideals. These ideals are superbly expressed in his cave story by three political classes. The most elite class consists of the aristocratic philosopher king. Dwelling outside the cave in the sun—the sun denoting an ultimate triune Form of the One, Good and Beautiful, the king has a rational faculty and the virtue of wisdom by beholding this ultimate Form. It imparts perfection into a hierarchy of lower more specific Forms that include those in which visible things share. So all women share in the Form Woman and this *one* Woman, partaking of the One, Good and Beautiful, has a perfect beauty in which the *many* flesh-and-blood women share. And since women may partake of different aspects of the Form Beauty, diverse forms of feminine beauty are

able to enamor men.

Beauty’s seductive power is echoed in the Scriptures, starting with the seeming sensual power of Eve over Adam after who ensuing generations of men are tempted to love women more than God. Hence men are warned against having an inordinate lust for women’s erotic beauty. Echoing this sentiment on beauty is the prophet Sirach (2009) who counsels men, “Give no woman power over you to trample upon your dignity.” Here, the dignity of men is held by some vain women to be inversely proportional to the self-esteem of women. Accordingly, these women have pride and the men lust, the lust being induced by these women for power. The feminine power can be avoided, says Sirach, by men averting their eyes from a comely women through who’s “beauty many perish, for lust for it burns like fire.” Bearing on this fiery desire, a Vatican official stated recently (Glatz 2009) that research showed men to be more tempted by lust and women by pride. Yet pride need not burden all beautiful women because God employs the Godly woman Judith to defeat an Israelite enemy (Judith 2009). The enemy was a military leader who, enraptured by her erotic sandals and alluring festive attire, lowered his guard that enabled her to cause his death.

A specter of death aside, the erotic was generally held to enhance life and, in many ancient cultures, was expressed optimistically in fashion as a mode of art. An artistic realism, held by Plato, reflected both views since he eschewed creative fantasies. Political states should model art on reality. Negatively, the really real Forms as ideals for art would prevent it from descending into surreal decadent copies of things in this flawed physical world. In this world, natural things are *copies* of Forms and have an inferior status of being not either real or unreal, unreal insofar as they do not share in Forms. Ignoring the Forms diverts us from fulfilling our nature and hastens our death, with a rising sense of unreality and emptiness, by



Figure 5: Beauty may be integral to a basic *form of life* on one interpretation of the later Ludwig Wittgenstein, which is universal or “common [to the] behavior of mankind.” So without any cultural relativism, the beauty may challenge more superficial conventional *boundaries* such as one between formal and informal affairs. Is it senseless to speak of the affairs as permitting changing *borderline* modes of beautiful fashion that might include the bikini-like “trikini suit” shown above? The beautiful photo is by courtesy of Tiago Chediak of Rio de Janeiro, 2009.

biological appetites and whose virtue, at best, would be a temperance that must be enforced by real guardians. The guardians in question are greedy pretenders who frequently have this status due to a democratic egalitarianism, scorned by Plato, who do not guard the state’s good. This lack of good usurps a republic that thrives only if a wise ruler rules aesthetically cultivated guardians who model fashion on real beauty. Moreover, the guardians must have the courage to socialize desirable tastes even if the tastes are initially unpopular.

Unpopular good fashions become popular fads when, by repetitive shadows, citizens opine that if most people look a certain way, they should too: the monkey-see-monkey-do syndrome. This syndrome calls to mind the Athenians who, due mainly to the Sophists, put Socrates to death. Even death can result from behavior based on bad fads. One need only recall more and more Americans driving sports utility vehicles (SUVs) as the fad accelerated, notes A.J. Nomai (1998). Despite its dangerous high center of gravity, mounting accidents,

the demise of reason and beauty. Positively, Beauty is present to all existence as imperfect instances of these essences (Amir 2009). So the more the essences are copied or shared in by visible things, the better they can enhance life and inspire persons to seek the Good. And hence good fashions, being beautiful and buoyed by the ruler, would improve the wellbeing of its citizens. How are citizens and fashion related by the ideal state?

While the ideal state is ruled by a virtue of wisdom since the king has philosophic and scientific *knowledge* of the Forms, the lower virtue of courage typifies the guardians with a lesser scientific *understanding*. The latter is enough to protect the state, however, ensuring that the king’s wisdom is exercised about partly real physical things. These things are denoted by statues paraded by a fire at the cave’s center that casts shadows on the inner cave wall. And by this wall in darkness, symbolizing ignorance, the lowest class of citizens (the multitude) sits in shackles forcing them to behold the shadows that are opined to be reality. So unreal shadows that flicker are beheld by flickering unstable minds, without understanding, of sophistic opinion. And this opinion would beget fanciful fads of fashion that presage today’s relativistic social constructions. And while constructionist-like sophistic opinions can be replaced only by other opinions, given the multitude’s debased nature, true opinions should reign in virtue of more realistic fashion-related statues.

The “statues” for fashion today are often paraded for the mere sake of money. Money alone motivates culturally crass marketers who, as the multitude, are subject psychologically to

vulgar box-like design and appalling gas mileage, the “new fad, all the rage among yuppies, suburban families and seemingly testosterone unbalanced males, is the [SUV].” Bearing on silly trends in fashion, “its true purpose was abducted by “Madison Avenue.” But those caught up in the fad “throw away all... reason in order to be part of a trend.” In these senses Plato’s thought is proactive and reactive by providing reasons for being pessimistic about fads when they lack intelligent origins.

*Aristotle’s aesthetics as reactive and innovative*

Whereas beautiful fashions would be known by recollecting the Form Beauty, for Plato, Aristotle would infer beauty from an experienced reality since forms are entirely in visible things. Innovative influences on art, and on artistic fashion, include Aristotle’s novel attention to our psychobiological nature. The natures of men and women are the same in some ways but also different, different biologically because women have nurturing eggs, wombs and breasts that induce them psychologically to have a more caring emotionality than men. And men are the principle of motion in the sex act with active sperm, having a more kinetic biology that makes them more muscular, aggressive, command oriented and authoritatively rational. This rationality does not mean that men are more intelligent than women but that women may often employ their intelligence differently. But men and women are the same inasmuch as they share certain organic functions. These include breathing and heartbeats (part of a vegetative *psyché* or soul), capacities of sense (sensitive soul) and cognitive aptitudes (rational soul or faculty) with a proviso that this faculty, as noted, will often be exercised differently by the different genders.

Gender differences arise from the overall relation of our rational faculty to the sensitive and vegetative souls wherein a principle of *symmetry* suggests that these souls are related to and inform that faculty, as well, on artistic fashion. Fashions of women can fulfill aesthetic norms of males and females in virtue of the female’s complementary form with its nurturing appendages being accented amorously and mathematically by clothing, enhancing its beauty. This beauty implies a beauty of the female form without clothes and erotic nudity having aesthetic status. This status *is not to say* we should go around nude, that being nude is always proper and never riskily stimulating, that non-erotic dress cannot be beautiful with other mathematical ratios, or that modesty alone is not often suitable. It *is to say* that erotic beauty fulfills our psychobiological nature and finds rightful expression in many profound modes of art. This art, in terms of current research, holds also for a male form’s beauty to women despite their less acute attraction to other bodily ratios (Maisey et al 1999: 1500). And the erotic ratios’ effects can be increased by genetic and/or paternal traits such as an affinity for children that bears on a long-term attractiveness (Roney et al 2006: #4). In short, the attractiveness is related to mathematical ratios and these to beauty. Beauty as size and order is, for Aristotle (1941c: 1450b | 1078b), reminiscent of a rationality of mathematics and his *Metaphysics* (1941a: 1078b) where “The chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry” that “the mathematical sciences demonstrate in a special degree.”

Thus the reactive element of artistic fashion is Aristotle’s criticism of the Sophists who would deny that artistic truth is discovered. The discovery means that art is good apart from the wishes of persons. But persons decide truth for the Sophists. The Sophist Protagoras held, for example, that each person is the sole measure of what *is*. Yet this relativism is trivially true and incoherent for the same reasons as social constructionism. And besides the illogic, the relativism lacks a cogency of Aristotle’s view. His view explains conspicuous causes of good art and why it is not either an arbitrary cultural construct or fabrication of imagination. Given the nonsense of beauty being an imaginative concoction, can we not reasonably infer by its shared qualities of balance and harmony that it is rooted singularly in

similar qualities of our psychobiological nature, especially since our nature benefits from art? If so, the claim is false that a fashion can be beautiful in one culture and not in another. And although a beautiful fashion might be improper in some cultural context, say today by wearing a well-designed bikini at an indoor formal affair, this affair's borderline for proper dress might be unclear in terms of Ludwig Wittgenstein (2001: #206). While it is beyond my purpose to expand on Wittgenstein, beauty could be integral to a primal *form of life* common to human behavior. Is it senseless to say that this behavior may result in beautiful fashions that border more superficial conventions?

*Conclusion: the erotic having aesthetic status*

Beauty is related inescapably to sex (*erôs*) as illustrated by the sinuous curves and proportions on Greek paintings, painted vases and sculpture of ordinary persons. These persons are acknowledged in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (2009) that refers to sensuous women in their homes "clad in diaphanous garments of yellow silk" and to transparent clothes at Amorgos where "women appear almost nude." Regarding the nude and erotic, K.L. Ross notes (2009) that the ancients, especially Greeks and Romans, were "more comfortable with explicitly erotic images than most moderns." He adds, the "*horative*, as part of ethics, is what is good for human life" and "If the erotic is a matter of the beautiful and the sublime, as well as the good life, this earns it aesthetic status." This status, accepted by Dr. Valerie Steele of the Fashion Institute of Technology (Jernigan 2008), led her to suggest that the erotic may be resisted because of a moralizing strain of Puritanism in the Protestant Anglo-American middleclass culture, unlike older cultures more influenced by Catholicism in Europe or, say, Hinduism in the East (Kamat 2009). A disdain for erogenous femininity is now worsened since social constructionists are rife in academia (Bauchspies et al 2002). In denying the femininity, these academics *disavow* modes of art that fulfill our nature and *avow* a biodenial that puts women at medical risk. They incur more risk *directly* from breast to cervical cancer, by ignoring healthy behaviors of their sex (Collaborative Group 2002: 187 / Novak 2005: 328), than from sexist-related ailments such as underarm shaving or anorexia related *indirectly* to feminine fashion. Reacting to fashion healthfully, most women accept sexual, economic, psychological and other realities. In terms of this realism, Aristotle and Plato would be gratified that the fashion trades do not entirely manipulate style.

**Image Acknowledgments**

1. High-heel Stiletto designed by the Nicholas Kirkwood Studio, shown at Studio website <http://www.nicholaskirkwood.com>, 12 March 2009. Photo by Richard Stow with permission to use by Christopher Suarez – Commercial Director of the Nicholas Kirkwood Studio, London, per email ([studio@nicholaskirkwood.com](mailto:studio@nicholaskirkwood.com)) 12 March 2009.
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