1 Fashion, Function, and Fine Art

> Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily.
>
> "They're such beautiful shirts," she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. "It makes me sad because I've never seen such – such beautiful shirts before." (—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*)

There is a reason, I suspect, that Daisy Buchanan's emotional response to Jay Gatsby's display of shirts contains volumes: *Beauty* is not typically the sort of description we assign to a shirt. Or, if this seems too strong a claim, it is at least peculiar that Daisy should settle on a pile of shirts as an object of beauty, when there are more obvious candidates for such appraisal available in her immediate vicinity. Gatsby's house itself, the view of the Long Island sound, even Daisy's own lavender dress seem to invite the description more readily than a collection of men's shirts. Despite their variety, they display, perhaps, too much functional uniformity to count as beautiful. One wonders: Would Daisy have had the same reaction to Gatsby's *socks*?

Of course, aesthetic judgments about clothing go beyond merely describing them as "beautiful": a sweater might be "cute," a jacket might be "sharp," and a pair of shoes might be "snazzy." In these contexts, many of these

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terms seem to take on a kind of extended meaning. When we call a child's sweater cute, we may not mean that it reminds us of a baby animal, exactly; rather, we are probably calling attention to similarities with more central instances of cuteness – for example, smallness, attractiveness, being non-threatening, being well cared for.[1] This last observation raises a further one, and this is that as soon as we interrogate our aesthetic judgments of clothing, we may quickly discover that many of these are not in the first instance *just* about articles of clothing but also about their wearers – thus, for example, a "sophisticated" skirt or a "sexy" pair of boots.

Nonetheless, we do often ascribe judgments of beauty to clothing. But there are at least two features of clothing that make such ascriptions of beauty sit uneasily. First, clothing is closely related to fashion. This poses a problem because beauty is often understood to involve a kind of *disinterested* judgment, whereas many aspects of fashion – fitting in, setting the next trend – are decidedly *interested*. Second, clothing may initially strike us as altogether too functional to be described as beautiful. Once we have considered whether these considerations stand in the way of beauty, the chapter concludes by considering a separate question, namely whether an article of clothing can ever be a work of art.

Fashion and Beauty

To begin, it will be useful to motivate the claim that judgments of beauty are disinterested. Suppose you and a friend are viewing a recently unveiled sculpture and discussing its aesthetic merits. You report that you think the piece is

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beautiful; your friend says she does not think it is beautiful. What should we say is going on in this exchange? On one interpretation, you are both simply reporting your subjective preferences; on that account, the exchange is similar to one you might have if you were trying to decide on the wine to order at dinner. You might say that you like white wine; your friend might say she prefers red. It's important to note that although you might be stuck or at a loss when it comes to knowing what to order, you are not really *disagreeing* with each other. You would be disagreeing with your friend if she reported a preference for red wine and you had some reason to dispute *her* reported preference. However, insofar as you are each reporting *your own* preferences, you are not disagreeing; preferences can differ without contradicting.

Now, it is not uncommon to hear people characterize aesthetic judgment in these terms – "to each his own," they might say. There are probably several reasons for this. First, judgments of beauty seem to be related to feeling, and feeling is a subjective matter. To extend that point, we may want to avoid seeming snobbish or superior by telling others how they "ought" to be feeling about a work of art or a scenic vista. Beyond this, even if we are inclined to think that judgments of beauty are not just statements of preference, it is difficult to say what, precisely, it is that makes something beautiful in our estimation. Compare how you might react if your friend asked you to justify your judgment that wanton cruelty is morally wrong. In that case, you might appeal to a moral principle that you both hopefully endorse. When it comes to beauty, it is less clear what such a principle would be. Nevertheless, the impulse to characterize judgments of

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beauty as merely a matter of preference comes at great cost, since it precludes the possibility of having a conversation about our judgments of beauty that amounts to anything more than a series of statements about subjective preference. But notice that this is not how we talk about the statue with our friend. In these kinds of discussions, we seem to be trying to *convince* our friend of something – perhaps by drawing her attention to features of the statue she had not noticed. And this last observation suggests that there is more to our judgment of beauty than just a statement of preference.

The preceding observations are related to a further observation that some philosophers make, and this is that judgments of beauty are disinterested.[2] To see how the points are related, note that, often, when we report preferences, we are reporting about what would satisfy our desires, broadly speaking. A preference for white wine can be thought of as a desire for white wine, or at least a disposition to want to drink white wine on certain occasions. But desires, as we all know, vary from person to person. All of this has led some philosophers to suspect – or at least hope – that judgments of beauty are based on something other than judgments about what we desire. This would be to say, in other words, that judgments of beauty are *disinterested*. What that something else might be is a difficult question, and we will encounter a few suggestions in the next section. For now, however, let us consider how this discussion relates to the observation that clothing and fashion are often of a pair.

The origins of fashion are typically associated with mercantile capitalism in the late medieval period.[3] This is

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not, of course, to say that any desire to adorn oneself began only then, or that the shape, details, and materials of clothing were unchanged before then. However, as Lars Svendsen notes, the general form of clothing remained largely unchanged from the Roman Age until the fourteenth century.[4] Variations in the details of clothing certainly also communicated things like rank or status: Vikings, for example, would wear a kind of comb on their belt to indicate rank.[5] But scholars would not count this as a kind of "fashion," since the practice remained stable. There is no evidence, in other words, that Vikings who had not achieved the requisite rank would begin to wear such combs in order to emulate those who did, or that those who did wear such combs felt any need to be protective of their symbolism. "Fashion" as we know it is thus a relatively recent phenomenon, associated with constant change, with an emphasis, perhaps above all, on *novelty*. One fashion begets another, and each new fashion is a response to the last. Fashion, in other words, does not aim at any kind of ideal or *telos*.[6] All of this is reflected quite visibly in the seasons and cycles of fashion: A color or cut may appear first on a runway during fashion week, is then filtered down through more mainstream designers and consumers, then becomes ubiquitous, or at least unremarkable, and is then replaced with the next fashion. Of course, since there are only so many visible colors on the spectrum, so many places a waistline can sit, or only so many ways a trouser leg can taper, old fashions inevitably become new again.

It is probably an oversimplification, however, to claim that fashion is interested in novelty merely for its

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own sake. Crucially, fashion is interested in novelty because it is bound up with status and standing. Certain styles, fabrics, and designs are worn by one group, usually to set themselves apart in some way, then imitated by others, thereby ultimately diminishing the exclusivity of those styles and creating a need for a new way of distinguishing oneself. Notably, the exclusivity at the top of the fashion cycle was, historically, often codified in law. So-called sumptuary laws regulated what types of garments, styles, fabrics, and decorations could be worn by which individuals in society. Officially, these laws often cited morality and the stability of the civil society as their justifications. Queen Elizabeth I, for example, issued a series of detailed regulations in 1574, citing the dangers that luxury posed to the young men wasting their resources on apparel, dangers that extend to going into debt, which, in turn, would undermine the security of the state:

> The excess of apparel and the superfluity of unnecessary foreign wares thereto belonging now of late years is grown by sufferance to such an extremity that the manifest decay of the whole realm generally is like to follow (by bringing into the realm such superfluities of silks, cloths of gold, silver, and other most vain devices of so great cost for the quantity thereof as of necessity the moneys and treasure of the realm is and must be yearly conveyed out of the same to answer the said excess) but also particularly the wasting and undoing of a great number of young gentlemen, otherwise serviceable, and others seeking by show of apparel to be esteemed as gentlemen, who, allured by the vain show of those things, do not only consume themselves, their goods, and lands

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> which their parents left unto them, but also run into such debts and shifts as they cannot live out of danger of laws without attempting unlawful acts, whereby they are not any ways serviceable to their country as otherwise they might be.[7]

A passing glance at the document that spells out these laws gives the impression, however, that these codes had more to do with preserving a distinction between noble and non-noble persons. Purple, for example, could only be worn by the king, queen, and the king's children (except in the case of dukes and marquesses, who could wear purple in doublets and coats). Woolen cloth "made out of the realm" (but in bonnets only) could only be worn by dukes, marquesses, earls, and their children. As one might imagine, these sorts of restrictions were both difficult to enforce, and typically served to make certain fashions all the more attractive.[8] Svendsen notes that other parts of the world, for example Greece, had these sorts of laws, too, but sumptuary laws like the ones in England and Italy tended to be much more "specific and comprehensive" and went hand in hand with an economically mobile population.[9] These laws were, in other words, more important for maintaining a distinction among groups when there was more fluidity among classes. And while the institution of laws regarding who could wear what was one way to enforce distinctions, there were – and are – less formal ways of accomplishing the same goal. Today, for example, we can see this pattern repeating itself with luxury brands and the patterns and shapes associated with them.[10]

In sum, fashion follows a model in which various new fashions and innovations are introduced among

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upper classes or select groups and then become more widespread as other groups attempt to copy these fashions. For those jealous of their standing, this may result in the sense that ever-changing fashions are needed to assert anew one's special status; for those emulating such fashion, what results is a sense that one is always catching up. With increasing democratization, fashion has arguably become less a tool for emulating upper classes and has instead become a tool for setting oneself apart from others – often by giving some sign or signal through one's clothing about the group that one belongs to or associates with. Either way, fashion has to do with desire – a desire to emulate others, blend in, or set oneself apart. Whatever pleasure we derive from accomplishing *these* goals, it is surely not disinterested.

Of course this is not necessarily how any one of us experiences fashion. When we shop for clothing, we usually think of ourselves as making individual choices that express our own tastes and sense of style. Generally, we don't enjoy being told that what feel like individual aesthetic choices are actually just small parts of a larger sociological mechanism. Fashion thus has a third-personal sense and a first-personal sense.[11] And, in fact, these two perspectives may often be at odds with each other, since to the extent that a person is trying to be fashionable in the third-personal sense, they will be missing the mark by trying too hard. The aim of fashion, from the first-personal perspective, would seem to be a kind of effortless style or fashion sense. From the first-personal perspective, in other words, the desires associated with the fashion cycle might be invisible.[12]

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Though it is difficult to prise apart clothing and fashion, it is also important to note that beauty and desire need not always be at odds. We might, for example, sometimes desire to acquire something because we think it is beautiful. If our desire to acquire a jacket or evening gown is like this, then it would be analogous to the desire of a person who visits an art gallery, judges a painting to be beautiful, and then decides to take it home. Conversely, it is possible in our judgments of beauty to cite features of an article of clothing that might make it desirable to us – in particular how well it performs a certain function – without thereby also concluding that our aesthetic judgment reduces to a desire for the possession of such an object. A beautiful chair might be one that allows a person to sit comfortably, but a chair's beauty does not depend on my wanting a place to sit down. In principle, at least, the two are distinct.[13]

Function and Beauty

William Morris famously offered the advice to "Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful."[14] The remark was about decorating one's home, but it could just as well apply to clothing. But his maxim hints at an uneasy alliance between function and beauty. The "or" in Morris' advice might sound disjunctive, as if to say that there are things we know to be useful, and things we believe to be beautiful, but that there is no overlap between the two. In the end, this is probably not his intended suggestion: He also observes that there is hardly anything "that we fashion, but it has always been thought to

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be unfinished 'till it has had some touch or other of decoration about it."[15] Still, a question about the relationship between function and beauty remains. To what extent can something functional be said to be beautiful? Does its function stand in the way of beauty, or might its function instead contribute to its beauty?

As with furniture or other household items, the force of this question is certainly felt when it comes to clothing, since the features of an article of clothing that are meant to make it beautiful are often – but not always – those that make it uncomfortable or diminish its fitness for use. Oscar Wilde (1846–1900) remarks in this vein that "the gorgeous costumes of M. Worth's *atelier* seem to me like those *Capo di Monte* cups, which are all curves and coral handles . . . that is to say, they are curious things to look at, but entirely unfit for use."[16] A similar observation may arise when we reflect on the kind of judgment we make when we make judgments regarding function, as opposed to when we make judgments regarding beauty. The former involves rational deliberation about means and ends. For example: Will these shoes keep my feet warm? Will this fabric dry quickly if it gets wet? Without prejudging the nature of aesthetic judgment, our judgments regarding beauty seem to be different: On the face of things, at least, these seem to relate more to sensation and feeling than to rational judgment.[17]

Thus, a skeptic about the relationship between function and beauty may conclude that there simply is none – or, in more formal terms, that function (or apparent function) is neither necessary nor sufficient for beauty. An article of

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clothing can be beautiful without being or appearing to be functional, and its function cannot simply make it beautiful. Note that we have already introduced a potential ambiguity – namely, whether by "function" we mean actual fitness for function or only *apparent* fitness for function. The pair of rain boots in the shop window might look like they would be just the thing to keep us warm and dry on chilly and wet autumn days, but we may later discover, much to our discomfort and chagrin, that they leak. On its face, the suggestion that function is neither necessary nor sufficient for beauty has some intuitive appeal, perhaps especially when we focus on clothing. After all, I may have items of clothing in my closet that I think are beautiful, but which I don't prize for their usefulness; a decorative scarf or pocket square might be an example. My favorite shirt would presumably do the job of keeping me covered and warm, even if it didn't have the same cut and pattern, but I might quite reasonably say that the shirt would lose something of its beauty if it lacked its shape and color. To take the point to its natural extension, there might be items of clothing in my closet that are very fit for function indeed – the old pair of gym shoes that conform perfectly to my feet, or the bleach-stained sweatpants I wear when I clean the bathroom – that could hardly be said to be beautiful because of this fitness. Indeed, in the latter case, one might argue that it is the fact that the sweatpants are already *ruined* from an aesthetic standpoint that makes them fit for "dirty work" like painting or cleaning the tub.

The philosopher Edmund Burke (1729–1797) has something like this view regarding the lack of connection

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between fitness for function and beauty. Burke tends to take his examples from the animal kingdom, rather than the wardrobe, but he makes largely the same point with regard to natural beauty. The swine with a "wedge-like snout" and sunken eyes is well suited to digging in the dirt, yet we do not find it beautiful. We can see almost immediately how useful the hedgehog's spiky quills are to its protection and defense, but we do not, on this basis, judge it to be a beautiful or elegant animal.[18] Burke does not deny that there is a kind of "satisfaction" in discovering a thing's fitness, but he is careful not to equate this with beauty.[19] Nor is fitness a necessary component of beauty: As Burke puts it, the "effect" of beauty is "previous to any knowledge of [a thing's] use."[20] Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), though arguing from an aesthetic theory distinct from Burke's, makes a similar point with the rather memorable example of a coffin-shaped door: This shape of door might be more functional in the sense that it fits the outline of a human body better, but we would hardly think it more *beautiful* as a result – presumably it would be awkward, if not downright eerie. Of course, Hutcheson's argument depends quite a bit on the assumption that it is only human bodies that we ever need to transport through doorways: The coffin-shaped door would be a functional failure were we to attempt to move a table from one end of the house to the other.

But if we pause for a moment, we might begin to notice that things aren't quite so simple. There is a question about how we ought to characterize function, especially when it comes to clothing.[21] The examples so far have privileged more or less physical function – keeping the

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wearer warm, dry, comfortable, and clean. Nevertheless, as we will see in greater detail later in this book, these are hardly the only reasons – or indeed even the main reasons – that we select and wear our clothing. A fan wears a jersey to a sporting event to support the home team, and a job candidate wears a suit in order to show the person interviewing her that she is serious about the job. The question about the relationship between function and beauty is complicated in the case of clothing, in other words, because a central function of clothing is communicative and expressive. We will return to this point throughout the book. The point, for now, is just that we should not think too narrowly about function in the case of clothing. And, to return to the earlier examples, we should also probably not dismiss any connection between function and beauty too hastily. Take, for example, a beautiful winter coat – I will let the reader imagine the details. When asked what makes the coat beautiful, we might be tempted to point to the texture of the fabric, the color, or its shape and the length. Indeed, we might even point to how well it fits its wearer. But now assume that the coat is terrible at keeping cold winds off its wearer's skin. This might not render the coat ugly, but it might, arguably, detract from the beauty of the coat. So perhaps there is more to the story.

Might someone defend the opposite view, that is, that function and beauty are *identical*? The old gym shoes and paint-covered sweatpants discussed earlier make this a difficult thesis to defend. Still, there are some philosophers who occupy a nearby conceptual space. Socrates (469–399 BCE), at least as portrayed in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*,

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perhaps defends a version of it, arguing that what unifies the concept of beauty is that the beautiful object performs its function well. So, for example, though the two are very different, a shield made well for defense and a javelin made well for throwing are both beautiful.[22] Socrates sticks to his convictions against objections like the ones we have already considered, insisting that even a basket made for carrying dung is beautiful if it looks fit for purpose.[23] It is important not to overstate the thesis, however. The term that Socrates uses in the dialogue is *kalon*, which is often translated as "beauty," but has a sense that is more expansive than the sense of "beauty" most of us probably have in mind, that is, as having to do with a specific kind of pleasant perceptual experience.[24] The term is alternately translated as "noble" in some editions.

George Berkeley (1685–1753) comes close to identifying function and beauty in his dialogue *Alciphron*. Berkeley begins by locating beauty in "a certain symmetry, or proportion, pleasing to the eye" and arguing that such proportion implies certain relations of size and shape that, in turn, befit the function of the object in question. He concludes that "the parts . . . in true proportions, must be so related, and adjusted to one another, as that which may best conspire to the use and operation of the whole."[25] He concludes, on the basis of these arguments, that beauty "is an object, not of the eye, but of the mind," since proportions are perceived "only by reason by the medium of sight."[26] And indeed, Berkeley continues to illustrate some of these points with a brief discussion of clothing. Beginning with the observation that "there is something beautiful in

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dress," he quickly locates this beauty in a style of clothing that is able to "cover the body without encumbering it, and adorn without altering the shape." Thus, the function of clothing, on Berkeley's view, appears to be both to cover and protect the body and to adorn or decorate it. He thus objects to "unnatural dress" – for example, women's dresses "pinched, and stiffened, and enlarged with hoops." Obviously expecting assent, he wonders:

> Whence is it, that the eastern nations, the *Greeks*, and the *Romans* naturally run into the most becoming dresses; while our *Gothic* gentry after so many centuries of racking their inventions, mending, and altering, and improving, and whirling about it in perpetual rotation of fashions, have never yet had the luck to stumble on any that was not absurd and ridiculous? Is it not from hence, that instead of consulting use, reason, and convenience, they abandon themselves to fancy, the unnatural parent of monsters? Whereas the ancients, considering the use and end of dress, made it subservient to the freedom, care, and convenience of the body, and, having no notion of mending or changing the natural shape, they showed it only with decency and advantage. And, if this be so, are we not to conclude that the beauty of dress depends on its subserviency to certain ends and uses?

In this regard, Berkeley clearly rejects the idea that clothing's expressive function, particularly as it relates to fashion, could ever be part of its proper use. More to the point, "fashion" often gets in the way of proper, rational, function. In this sense, Berkeley presages the view of the artist and architect Bernard Rudofsky, discussed in Chapter 3.

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Instead of maintaining that there is a relation of identity between function and beauty, another possible view would be to argue that a thing's function is one of several things about it that can cause it to be beautiful. This would be to claim that utility can be a sufficient condition for beauty, but not a necessary one. This view is the one held, for example, by David Hume (1711–1776), who argues that beauty in any object produces its own kind of pleasure. Not only does the observation of beauty produce a kind of pleasure, but beauty *just is* that experience of pleasure. Hume argues that this kind of pleasure can have several different sources; in particular, it can come about either from the appearance of the object or from some idea of its utility,[27] and, indeed, he appears to tip his hand in favor of utility, arguing that it is a "considerable" part of beauty."[28] Importantly, however, we can only derive pleasure from the idea of utility if the end toward which the object is suited is *itself* an agreeable one. Mere fitness for function, in other words, does not produce the distinctive pleasure of beauty, since being fit for a disagreeable end would not, on Hume's view, produce the pleasure associated with beauty. We might ask what this would imply about the bleach-stained sweatpants: After all, cleaning itself – though agreeable for some – is not the sort of thing we commonly think of as agreeable, though the end of having a clean bathroom may well be.

A final option is that functioning well, or being made or designed to function well, is a limiting condition on beauty. In other words, functioning well is not a sufficient condition for beauty, but rather a necessary component of that thing's beauty. This is the view advanced by Immanuel

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Kant's account of so-called adherent beauty. Kant agrees with Hume that judgments of beauty are based in pleasure, but he insists that these must be disinterested and posits that such pleasure originates in the activity of the mind associated with judgments of beauty. This activity is "the state of mind in the free play of the imagination and the understanding."[29] This definition can be difficult to unpack if one is unfamiliar with Kant's terminology; briefly, however, Kant's claim is that the pleasure associated with beauty arises from a particular interplay of the components of cognition. Unlike typical cognition, in which the figurative and conceptual parts of cognition work together to settle on a fixed concept (e.g., "this is an oak tree"), the experience of beauty arises when these figurative and conceptual parts of cognition are able to remain in "free play." An important implication of Kant's theory of free play is that there is no principle or concept that will give a "rule" to beauty.[30] This is just to say that judgments of beauty refer, ultimately, to the pleasurable activity that certain objects inspire in our minds, and not to some rubric that these objects fulfill.

The rejection of any type of "rule" associated with beauty may at first glance make Kant's theory look as if it would not be able to give an account of how functioning well could be related to beauty: After all, a thing's functioning well would seem to be the sort of thing that belongs to a rubric for beauty. But Kant allows for a type of beauty called "adherent beauty" that presupposes some "concept of [an object's] perfection" and so some idea of what it is to be a better or worse instance of that kind.[31] Some of Kant's examples are products of nature – for example, a human

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being or a horse. But Kant also includes several examples that are the product of artifice – for example, a church, a palace, a garden house, or an arsenal. So, for example, stained-glass windows may tend to beautify a church, but they would not add to the beauty of an arsenal. In both cases, the function of the building puts certain limits on what can be a beautiful instance of that building.

There are several interpretations available of what, precisely, Kant's account of adherent beauty is.[32] And in fact none of them rules the others out. One thing Kant clearly argues is that a thing's concept provides certain limiting conditions on its beauty. A winter coat made out of spun sugar might be an interesting art installation, but it could obviously never function as a real winter coat. To that extent, it fails as an instance of adherent beauty. Another interpretation of adherent beauty is that it is more or less additive, or a case of two types of beauty essentially operating side by side. So, for example, we might say that a pair of boots is beautiful, pointing to their shape and proportions, and note that they are also well suited to keeping their wearer warm and dry. Finally, we might read Kant as suggesting that the two elements of adherent beauty give rise to a new kind of beauty altogether, something like the beauty of something's form being particularly fit for its function.

So, on Kant's view, beauty is not identical to functioning well, nor is functioning well sufficient for beauty. This means that there will be objects (including articles of clothing) that serve their purpose quite well, but that will not qualify as beautiful – the stained sweatpants, presumably.

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However, some objects, like clothing, that have a function can be beautiful, and in these cases, their intended function plays an important role in the account of their beauty.

Clothing as Art?

Setting to one side the question of beauty, there is a further question about whether clothing can ever be considered a work of art in its own right. Indeed, under this heading, we might include the design of individual items of clothing in our inquiry, but also the activity of putting clothes together – for example, combining colors and shapes to create an overall impression.[33] Can any of these be considered works of art? Or, to put the question differently: Is the designer or stylist ever an artist?

Of course, we might ask this question about any type of artifact. Still, in the case of clothing, it is a particularly interesting question because of clothing's expressive power – something explored in more length in the following chapters of this book. In other words, because clothing has remarkable communicative power, we may also think that it has added potential as an artistic medium. And intuitively, at least, some articles of clothing seem to be obvious candidates: the avant-garde runway dress or the costume for a theater production, for example. Then again, we might think that these examples are *clothing* only in an attenuated sense. It may be more difficult to classify the clothing that we actually wear, even for special occasions, as works of art. Even the most beautiful item of clothing in my closet probably cannot be described as a work of art, except perhaps in

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the more or less colloquial sense that something that takes a good deal of effort or care to make might be praised as a "work of art."[34] After all, not everything that is beautiful is thereby also art.

There is, as one would expect, a well-established discussion amongst philosophers about how and whether to classify things as works of art, and there is unfortunately no way to do that literature justice here, for example, by holding clothing up against a survey of these theories. Still, we can get a grasp on the question by considering some of these.

One seemingly straightforward approach to consider would be that of so-called institutional theories of art. On the institutional theory, a work of art is an artifact, some aspects of which have been put forward by a representative of the "artworld" as a candidate for appreciation.[35] As one might expect, whether something falls under this description can be more or less clear. The painting that the museum director hangs in a gallery obviously qualifies, as does the dress we find on display at an art museum. But what about the dress that the fashion designer sends down the runway or the red carpet? When confronted by these more difficult cases, we might feel compelled to ask what features of clothing make it such that it should be taken up by the art world. But here, the institutional theorist will probably resist the pressure to offer such an explanation, since theirs is a descriptive account of what counts as art, and not a normative account of what *ought* to count as art. Second, however – and more pressing for the institutional theory – we may have a question about the boundaries of the art world itself

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when it comes to clothing and fashion, especially given the commercial nature of the fashion cycle. Is fashion week in Milan part of the art world, or is it too much a part of the fashion cycle and the quest for profit to qualify?[36]

Oscar Wilde, in his essay "The Philosophy of Dress," makes an adjacent observation that may give us pause before characterizing a runway design as art. There, he characterizes fashion as the "great enemy of art," drawing particular attention to the fleetingness of any particular fashion: "Fashion rests upon folly. Art rests upon law. Fashion is ephemeral. Art is eternal. Indeed what is a fashion really? A fashion is merely a form of ugliness so absolutely unbearable that we have to alter it every six months!"[37] Wilde is probably focusing on the wrong target by zeroing in on the changing nature of fashion. After all, art undergoes change, too: The walls of the modern wing of an art museum look very different from those containing Renaissance art. Indeed, the features of a work of art – say, in the case of portraiture – are arguably subject to fashion's influence. The problem, more likely, is that fashion demands change and novelty because of the needs and desires associated with the fashion cycle, as described earlier in this chapter. One way to put Wilde's point charitably, then, is that fashion is too subservient to the demands of fashion to allow for the creativity and expression associated with art. In creating a work of art, one might argue, the artist does something different than the designer who creates something fit for a particular purpose.

In particular, one might argue along the lines of various expressivist theories that art essentially involves

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or consists of the expression of feeling. Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), for example, describes art as "human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously by means of certain external signs, hands on to others the feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them."[38] The claim is probably more representative of some works of art than others, and later expressivist theories tend to be more accommodating of a broader range of cases. Benedetto Croce (1860–1952), for example, rejects the notion of "infectiousness" described by Tolstoy in favor of a more cognitivist theory according to which feeling is communicated *via* art.[39]

An expressivist theory would almost certainly characterize some articles of clothing as works of art capable of capturing and communicating feeling. Consider, for example, the wedding dress of Ruth Lengel, now part of the collection of the Smithsonian Museum.[40] The gown is made of the parachute that saved the life of the groom, Major Claude Hensinger, during World War II. The Smithsonian's description notes that Major Hensinger "used the parachute as a pillow and blanket as he waited to be rescued." Though a seamstress sewed the bodice of the dress, the bride sewed the skirt herself, rather ingeniously using the strings of the parachute to create a gathered skirt.[41] Quite plausibly, a dress like this one – and there were certainly other "parachute dresses" – is a work of art that successfully communicates feelings, for example those having to do with loyalty and love, or with luck and the fragility of life.

However, we might wonder if an expressivist theory captures every instance – or indeed *most* instances – of

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Figure 2 Elsa Schiaparelli's "Shoe Hat," designed in collaboration with Salvador Dali.
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clothing that we might think of as works of art. Take, for example, Elsa Schiaparelli's "shoe hat" – actually several hats, designed during her collaboration with Salvador Dali (Figure 2). Without prejudging matters, these are quite plausibly works of art. Indeed, on an institutional theory, they would certainly qualify as such, since one remaining example is in the collection of the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and another is in the

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collection of the Palais Galliera in Paris. But it is not obvious how one would account for this fact on an expressivist theory, since it does not seem as though the shoe hat arose from a particular emotional experience on Schiaparelli's part. The inspiration for the piece was a picture taken of Salvador Dali by his wife, in which Dali had placed a "woman's shoe on his head and another on his shoulder."[42]

In the case of Schiaparelli's shoe hat, we might be inclined to point to a kind of originality of vision in defense of its being a work of art. But clearly the kind of originality we associate with the shoe hat – or any art – is different from *mere* originality, or, for that matter, the kind of originality sought by the fashion cycle for the sake of profit. Indeed, in the latter case, *too much* originality can be counterproductive: Though the original shoe hat was offered for sale at one New York shop, another retailer "considered it too much of a novelty" and offered a "more wearable version" to its customers.[43] Here, perhaps, we can borrow a little from Immanuel Kant's account of fine art, according to which the artist exhibits a kind of "genius" that "gives [a] rule to art."[44] Originality, in other words, is a crucial element of fine art, in the sense that fine art does not follow a preestablished rule or pattern. Nor, however, is *mere* originality (or what Kant calls "original nonsense") thereby art. Kant's view is that the artistic genius is able to express an idea through art that we would otherwise find it difficult to have a concrete experience of. Quite plausibly, the shoe hat does this rather successfully with ideas of absurdity and disorientation.

How, then, might we characterize the clothing coming down the runway when it comes to its being art?

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As the preceding paragraphs suggest, intent might matter a good deal. A designer who describes her work primarily as expressing a kind of vision, for example, might be said to be expressing something like artistic genius. If other designers imitate the style, this is no mark against it as a work of art: Nothing speaks against a work being a product of genius if others see inspiration in it; indeed, this may be a mark of its genius.[45] All of this seems consistent with the way we might describe the work of some fashion designers, at least. In his autobiography, for example, the designer Paul Poiret remarks that he felt more of a kinship with painters than with the craftsperson who is primarily concerned with making a profit.[46] Indeed, a vignette from his early career underscores this partisanship with artists over merchants: Poiret began his career as a designer for the famous House of Worth, but recounts that he was compelled to strike out on his own creative venture after delivering a black cloak to his client, a Russian noblewoman, who exclaimed, "What horror; with us, when there are low fellows who run after our sledges and annoy us, we have their heads cut off, and we put them in sacks just like that."[47] If we trust Poiret's autobiographical account, then, we might have reason to think that his creative activity was primarily in service of the expression of some idea or vision, and not in service of satisfying the desires associated with marketability. In fairness, of course, the tension between the two seems to have bedeviled him throughout his career. Then again, this is probably the case for many artists who seek to make a living from their work.

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