In the visual arts, dress often indicates social status and economic position. Again, using Egyptian art as an example, priests were often represented wearing leopard-skin capes, while children of royal families were identified by their shaved heads and side ponytails called the lock of youth or lock of Horus. Servants and laborers can be identified because they are pictured wearing fewer and simpler clothes or even no clothing; however, regardless of their clothing, they were still dressed with shaved heads or wigs and collar necklaces.

The holistic role of dress in painting can be illustrated by examining one particular visual art, in this case Mughal miniature painting. During the Mughal Empire in India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries c.e., the art of miniature painting was at its height. Miniatures are paintings about the size of a sheet of photocopy paper that are rendered in extremely fine detail. Layers of paper made from bamboo, jute, linen, or silk were glued together and polished, which gives the final paintings depth and luminosity. Many different kinds of brushes, paints, and pigments were used to create portraits of Mughal rulers, their families, and courtiers. Some illustrations were narrative, depicting daily scenes, successful hunting expeditions, or the histories of great leaders like the fourteenth-century central Asian ruler Tamerlane. These paintings were created exclusively for the court and so never intended for consumption by commoners. Value was placed on being true to the facts of the subject or scene, which often led the artist to be attracted to unusual figures, such as the obese musician, the emaciated ascetic, or the Ethiopian with dark skin. This also meant rendering even the tiniest details accurately—the enamel work on a hair ornament or the setting and cut of a jewel.

In terms of dress, Mughal princes supported a host of court weavers, dyers, and other artisans whose job was to design and create cloth and clothing of such beauty and skill that the majesty of the royal household would radiate outward. These textile specialists created some of the finest-quality textiles in the world. Fabrics were woven with intricate designs in silver and gold thread. Finished fabrics were printed with detailed motifs in many bright colors that did not fade. Spinners spun cotton into threads so fine that the finished woven fabric was almost transparent. Indian muslins were said to be so sheer that when dipped in water, the fabric would seem to disappear. All of these details were reproduced in Mughal miniature paintings. In a portrait of Raja Jai Singh of Amber (1625–1668), his grandson wears a type of coat made of this sheer muslin fabric; the viewer can see the motifs and cut of the trouser fabric underneath. Exquisite textiles were also created for use as draperies, canopies, pillow and cushion covers, and carpets. Textile production in India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had to be extremely sophisticated to create such exquisite fabrics long before the days of the alizarin dyes, microfibers, and computerized looms that are common in the twenty-first century.

In Mughal miniature painting, dress and textiles are an important part of the subject and how the subject was presented. In court scenes, the raja, or king, is the focus of the painting, seated on a raised and cushioned throne. The throne sits on a richly patterned carpet, beneath an equally beautiful canopy. Often, rajas are wearing the finest textiles in the picture and are dripping...
with pearls. With all this majesty compressed into one image, the viewer is very clear about the powerful identity of the subject. Similarly, princesses can be identified in portraits by their elegant clothing, fine embroidery, and ornate jewelry. In contrast, villagers wear more utilitarian clothing, and soldiers wear helmets and armor. Even the Virgin Mary is easily identified in Mughal representations of Christian subjects by her blue mantle and halo. Each of these dress cues points to the kinds of wealth and social position that Mughal royalty and commoners held in medieval India.

In turn, the visual arts are important sources of information about dress. In Mughal miniature portraits and depictions of events, artists rendered the properties of dress in sufficient detail to communicate the type of fabric, the style of the garments, and what accessories of dress were worn to complete an ensemble appropriate for the wearer. Royal women wore voluminous bifurcated garments with overskirts and long scarves, bangles symmetrically balanced on each wrist, and bindis, or decorations, on the middle of their foreheads. The student of dress can see that women wore their hair long and covered their heads, a common practice among women in South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe at this time. The viewer can also see that, at least among royal women, modesty did not include completely obscuring the breasts, because their blouses were apparently often made of sheer fabric. Indeed, the cut of their blouses is so clearly rendered that a pattern maker could draft patterns to reproduce them. In addition, changes in styles of dress over time are evident in miniatures from 1570 to 1700. Thus, the visual arts are also a source of information about the time and place the artwork was completed.

Mosaics were popular forms of artistic impression from classical Greek and Roman times through the Byzantine Empire. The Villa Romana del Casale, on the island of Sicily, was constructed in the fourth century C.E. and is a UNESCO World Heritage site because it contains the richest, largest, and most complex collection of Roman mosaics in the world. One favorite mosaic is that of the “bikini girls”—a series of images of women engaged in various athletic activities. They wear bandeaux tops and briefs that look just like modern bikinis. Roman women have often been thought of as modest and well covered, but this mosaic shows that some Roman women engaged in sports—and in sports clothes.

Another series of mosaics illustrating dress and the times are those of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian and the Empress Theodora, created around 547 C.E. in Ravenna, Italy. Justinian is pictured with his courtiers and clergy. In what they are wearing one can see the styles of Roman Imperial dress, elements of which have been preserved in twenty-first century Christian ecclesiastical dress. Theodora wears a fabulous headdress and appears to be an early example of the “dripping with pearls” look that reappears from time to time throughout the history of dress, most recently evident in twenty-first-century designer Karl Lagerfeld’s collections for Chanel.

As a source of information about dress, painting is limited because figures are two-dimensional. Sculptures, however, are carved in the round, giving the viewer a better sense of the whole garment. For example, the Heniochus of Delphi is a marble statue of a Greek charioteer. His chiton, or tunic, is draped over his shoulders and fastened. The fabric of his garment is understood to be a lightweight cloth because of the small pleats it makes. The charioteer’s hairstyle is held in place with a band tied behind his head. Even though the charioteer is standing still, the style of his tunic and hair indicates that he is a man of action. As with this charioteer, sculpture documents dress practices that may no longer exist. For example, in many parts of the world, traditional body-modification practices are restricted by government legislation that seeks to present a more “modern” face to the world.

Detail of a mosaic in the Villa Romana del Casale, Piazza Armerina, Sicily, Italy (third–fourth centuries C.E.). The women depicted are engaged in athletic competitions and wear bandeaux tops and briefs, similar to the bikini beachwear worn by women in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Vincenzo Lombardo/Getty Images.
army men. Heavy-breasted women clad in gossamer-like draperies of white satin umbrellas and the brilliant decorations of the wedding: “The sun’s rays were caught and reflected by the thousands of white satin umbrellas and the brilliant decorations of the processions of merrymakers on their way to Rama and Sita’s wedding.” (Narayan 1972, 31). As the description continues, the reader is transported to this wedding of the gods.

U.S. author F. Scott Fitzgerald kept lists documenting the popular culture of the 1920s. In his writing, he drew from these lists to create vivid images of his characters or the action. For example, in his novel The Great Gatsby the title character is giving his neighbor and old flame, Daisy, a tour of his mansion. Gatsby appears to be at pains to impress his guests with his wealth. As they enter his bedroom, Gatsby opened for us two hulking patent cabinets which held his massed suits and dressing gowns and ties, and his shirts, piled like bricks in stacks a dozen high.

“I’ve got a man in England who buys me clothes. He sends over a selection of things at the beginning of each season, spring and fall.”

He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher—shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian blue. (Fitzgerald 1925, 83–84)

In this passage the reader understands that Gatsby must be nouveau riche—so newly wealthy that he does not really know quality or style in dress. He relies on the wisdom of a man from England, the source of tasteful men’s dress, who purchases his wardrobe for him. From phrases like ‘soft rich heap,’ readers surmise that the shirts are indeed high quality. And as Gatsby tosses ever more shirts into the air, he displays that he has much more than he needs. He is extremely wealthy, indeed.

Authors also use descriptions of dress to engage the reader emotionally. In Kiran Desai’s novel The Inheritance of Loss (2006), the police in a small northern Indian hamlet rummage through a family servant’s belongings following a robbery. The servant’s possessions include only a few clothes, a razor blade, a sliver of soap, and a broken watch with a knob that drops into the grass as the police search. This scene takes place early in the book and creates sympathy in the reader for the servant. Clearly, his employers do not know him very well, even after a lifetime of service. He is caught in the kind of poverty in which precious things have little value. And he has no more significance to the police than the wind-up knob lost in the grass. These characteristics of the servant are played out as the story progresses.

When descriptions of dress in literature are combined with details about other facets of everyday life, like food, housing, and the rhythm of family activities, the reader can glimpse a truth that goes beyond facts. Snow Flower and the Secret Fan (2005), by novelist Lisa See, tells the story of two women in a rural village in nineteenth-century China. They are laotong, or “old sames,” a kind of arranged lifelong friendship between girls. Included in the story of their friendship are descriptions of the Chinese practice of foot binding. Foot binding is such a dramatic body modification that Euro-American descriptions of the practice are often muddled with preconceptions and misconceptions. As a Chinese American author who spent time in rural China to research this book, See wanted to write about foot binding from the perspective of the women and girls who grew up with it. She tells the
story through the voice of one of the women friends. Her words, which carry the ring of truth, indicate that foot binding is one of many life-cycle rituals and daily routines that fulfilled social goals and created a life for many Chinese women not that long ago. A reader may reflect on the body modifications practiced in the twenty-first century that relate to cultural values.

Finally, in the literary arts, authors may use dress as a metaphor. The Persian poet Rumi (1207–1273) wrote eloquent poems on the human condition. In “Solomon’s Crooked Crown,” Rumi described how King Solomon’s inner thoughts were disrupting the community and how his crown kept slipping askew:

Finally, he began to talk to his headpiece.
“Why do you keep tilting over my eyes?”
“I have to. When your power loses compassion,
I have to show what such a condition looks like.” (Rumi 1995, 190–191)

The poem suggests listening when the crown speaks; when things go awry, one should look within oneself for the cause. In this case, the crooked crown is a metaphor for being out of touch.

Masks are an especially appealing art form because they are so self-contained. Masks are often about the size of the human face or at least no larger than an individual can manage without assistance. They have predictable features—eyes, nose, mouth, and possibly ears and hair. They almost always have a human expression. And a human is required to bring the mask to life. Within this standard framework, there is opportunity for infinite variety; there is variety within a unity. Thus, this art has a predetermined structure, and the viewer can appreciate the skill with which the mask conceals the identity of the human and captures the personality of the character.

Evidence of masking has been found in Paleolithic sculptures and cave paintings in southwestern Europe and northern Africa. Masks are made of a wide variety of materials, including wood, cloth, metal, clay, and stone. Vegetable fibers, hair, precious stones, and paint add color, texture, movement, and expression to masks. Mask carving is still an important aesthetic tradition in many societies where it is actively preserved.

Masks fulfill a number of culturally determined functions, such as entertainment and storytelling, communication with nature spirits, healing and community well-being, agricultural fertility, initiation and coming of age, and social control and leadership. For example, in Japan, the Noh drama originated with rice-planting and harvesting rituals and developed into theatrical performances that deal with relationships with supernatural beings, human relationships, and social concerns. The Society of Faces of the Iroquois uses masks to cure illness and to keep disease at bay. One type of mask among the Dan, in southeastern Liberia, is used to organize judicial decisions, law enforcement, criminal punishment, and the collection of fines. This type of mask is part of a hierarchy of masks and can take more responsibility for social control, if necessary.
Because masks serve cultural needs, they are created within a cultural matrix of ideas about what the mask is supposed to look like based on the role it plays. As such, even a fierce and frightening mask has an agreeable aesthetic unity. An article of dress, masks are also satisfying as a stand-alone art form. Because masks must fit the human wearer, they are a type of wearable art.

DRESS AS ART

The body, its dress, and the dressed body are legitimate forms of art in themselves. Scholars from many disciplines have written and published on the subject of body art, the decorated body, and the quest for human beauty. Anthropologists suspect that the oldest type of art was personal decoration, using ornaments such as beads, bracelets, pendants, and necklaces. Archaeological digs around the world often uncover ancient grave sites in which individuals are buried with bead necklaces and, if the body is preserved, body pigments or tattoos. Ötzi, a naturally formed mummy found in the Ötztal Alps between Austria and Italy in 1991, is about 5,300 years old. His preserved body includes tattoos and garments intricately woven, embroidered, or printed with fantastically detailed motifs. Even in the twenty-first century, the globe trotter is most interested in bringing home photographs that document amazing travel encounters. Even though many men in India wear Western-style dress shirts, jeans, and athletic shoes, travelers are usually far more interested in photographing the Rajasthani village man in a turban, heavily pleated white cotton jacket, and embroidered shoes; he is not merely more exotic—he is also a work of art, compared to prosaic everyday Western dress.

Dress is itself an art form and takes many shapes. One can study dress as art by breaking it down into its component parts, viewing the body, dress, and the dressed body all as canvases for artistic expression. When the body is viewed as a canvas upon which artistic creativity can be applied, dress is easily seen as modifications of or supplements to the body. All aspects of the body can be modified in a wide variety of ways, but the cultural aesthetic may vary. A British child might have his face painted at a carnival. An African Nuba youth paints his whole body in striking patterns that emphasize his physical strength, prowess, and male beauty. Japanese irezumi tattooing is very colorful and often covers most of the body, whereas a single-color sorority symbol might decorate a student’s ankle in the United States. Scarification changes the texture of the skin, but the results vary. Among the Tiv, scarification patterns were isolated to specific areas of the body, such as the face, and styles changed over time. For Ga’anda women in Nigeria, scarification patterns followed strict guidelines, emphasizing social unity. Hair can be shaved, cut, dyed, textured, and starched to create fascinating effects. Cosmetic makeup can assist in achieving a society’s ideals of physical beauty, while stage makeup can turn a South Indian dancer into a god. Each of these modifications is completed within a culturally defined aesthetic against which the skill level can be judged.

Dress is likewise a canvas for artistry. Everyday world dress, such as cowboy boots or jeans, can be embellished to an individual’s satisfaction. Silk and gold saris from Varanasi, India, are intricately woven into brocade patterns of many colors, with borders and palos, or draped ends, that sweep over a woman’s shoulder from front to back. The sari is certainly beautiful on the wearer, but it can also stand alone as a work of art draped on a wall. Similarly, geometrically cut Japanese kimonos are often embellished...
asymmetrically, with the design—perhaps a mountain vista or expanse of flowers—extending over the surface from one sleeve across the back to the other sleeve. Again, the kimono adorns the wearer, but the viewer can also appreciate the effect of the design when the kimono is hung by its shoulders on a rod.

The body and dress together—the dressed body—also form a canvas for artistry. The sari and the kimono are primarily flat fabrics draped on the body. The size and shape of the body are really not important. However, when the body is used as an armature, or framework, for dress, then the body becomes crucial to the final effect. For example, the Japanese designer Issey Miyake is known for his creative cutting and styling of fabrics (often synthetic ones) into garments that fold up into flat geometric shapes. The garments do not look like garments until they are placed on the human body. Then, they become works of modern art.

The embroidered shoes made for Chinese women’s bound feet offer a contrasting example. For about a thousand years, between the tenth and twentieth centuries C.E., it was common practice to bind the feet of young girls so as to drastically modify the shape of the foot and restrict its growth. The result was ideally a foot only three inches (7.6 centimeters) long, referred to as a “golden lotus.” Such tiny feet were considered both erotic and symbolic of chastity because a woman with bound feet was very limited in her mobility, restricting her to her home. Shoes were called “lotus slippers” and were made in a wide variety of styles and colors. Some styles were specifically for use during the foot-binding process, some for everyday wear, others for weddings; and still others were bed slippers, to wear at night over the bindings. The wearer almost always embroidered her own shoes, and great attention was paid to the symbolism of color and motif. Wedding shoes were a shade of red, from fuchsia to soft red-orange. Shoes for middle-aged women were subdued colors such as blue-gray or blue-green. Pattern books could be purchased with motifs drawn from nature, such as flowers, foliage, insects, and animals. The quality of the stitching contributed to the artistic success of the shoe—and to the marriageability of the girl. Golden lotus feet and beautifully made shoes spoke volumes about the personal qualities of the bride to her future in-laws. Author Beverly Jackson has recounted a type of beauty contest characteristic of certain villages in rural China where strict procedures were followed to ensure perfectly bound feet. At the same time, designers of original embroidery patterns were recognized for their artistry. Jackson has described the process of seating contestants behind screens, permitting only the exquisitely shod feet to be visible to the judges. As a result, a woman of any age had the same chance of winning as a beautiful young girl. Thus, it was the combination of the shape of the foot and the quality of the slipper that resulted in an artistic, aesthetic ideal.

Pageantry and celebrations of ethnic identity often call for and result in artistry in dress. Like saris and kimonos, these types of ethnic garments are frequently geometrical in shape, the better to fit a wide variety of bodies and be handed down and the better to act as a canvas for beautiful work. For example, dragon robes from imperial China, French court dress, and Russian Orthodox ecclesiastical dress exemplify some of the finest embroidery the world has ever seen. In contrast to embroidery added to fabric as decoration, Kalabari women artisans in Nigeria use a process of subtraction to remove the light and bright threads from Indian madras plaid cloth, superimposing fine patterns into the cloth and creating a sheer, draping fabric called pelete bite. Because pelete bite is unique to the Kalabari and symbolizes Kalabari ethnic identity, wrappers of pelete bite are used for the most important life-cycle rituals, from birth to motherhood to death and entry into the next life.

WEARABLE ART

When the beauty of a silk sari, a painted kimono, or a lotus slipper is appreciated, it is a short step from there to understanding dress as wearable art. Wearable art is also referred to as artwear or art to wear and usually consists of one-of-a-kind pieces of clothing or jewelry created as fine or expressive art. The deliberate goal of creating art to wear is a recent phenomenon. Some scholars have pointed to influences from modern art in the 1930s and 1940s, when artists like Pablo Picasso applied their creativity to everyday objects. Others see the 1960s counterculture with its “back to basics” values and a return to the handmade as a powerful influence. Wearable art often begins at the fiber level, relying on a deep understanding of the properties of the materials such as cotton, wool, and silk, and the effects of color and texture on the body. It is a form of art that combines the personal and the communal, requiring both the artist and the wearer to participate in its creation and appreciation.
as fibers, dyes, and pigments. Artisanship in handweaving, hand-knitting, and hand-needlework contributes to the creation of the final piece. When the wearable-art piece is designed for a particular person, the combination of the wearable art and the individual wearer can be powerful for the viewer.

Sometimes dress can be used as a medium of expression without being wearable. In other words, an artist may select dress as his or her medium just as another artist would select oil paints or clay or glass. One artist, Mary Barelli Gallagher, has created a quilt using bikinis as the motif. A brilliant sun fills one corner and an hourglass the opposite corner. Another artist, Victoria Fuller, created Shoe of Shoes, a sculpture composed of cast and welded smaller aluminum shoes. A third, Liz White, strung thousands of empty diet-pill capsules and used them to build a 1920s-style fringed flapper dress on a dress form as a comment on the U.S. obsession with thin bodies. On the University of Idaho campus, a student draped fabric printed with the U.S. flag upside down on a dress form as part of a wearable-art exhibit, to question the relationship between the United States and Iraq, making headlines across the state. In each of these examples, the artist takes dress as both the subject and the medium to make a personal statement others can interpret and to which they can react.

References and Further Reading


Sandra Lee Evenson

See also Dress and Art: Western; Dress as Costume in the Theater and Performing Arts; Flowers in the Art of Dress across the World.