Stylistic Elements of Asian Dress as Used in 20th Century Fashion Design

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper was to analyze stylistic elements of Asian dress that 20th century fashion designers have borrowed from. The objective was to provide an overview of how Chinese, Japanese, Indian and Korean traditional costumes have influenced Western 20th century fashion.

Keywords
Orientalism, Asia, Western, designers, fashion

Disciplines
Fashion Business | Social and Cultural Anthropology | Sociology of Culture

Comments
Stylistic Elements of Asian Dress as used in 20th Century Fashion Design

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The term “Orientalism” is used to describe the “West’s fascination with assimilation of the ideas and styles of the East” (Martin & Koda, 1994, Pg. 7). Orientalism refers to the Western world's stereotypical views of both the Near East and the Far East (Martin & Koda, 1994; Yu et al., 2001). Whenever forms of informational exchange occur among different cultures, ideas or artifacts, dress is most often the earliest sign of the new trend (Martin & Koda, 1994; Maynard, 2004; Yu et al., 2001).

The purpose of this paper was to analyze stylistic elements of Asian dress that 20th century fashion designers have borrowed from. The objective was to provide an overview of how Chinese, Japanese, Indian and Korean traditional costumes have influenced Western 20th century fashion. Studying stylistic elements of Asian dress that have influenced Western design is important because cultural interactions and exchanges are part of everyday life and dress is a highly visible symbol of cultural interchanges (Yu et al., 2001). It is also important for fashion designers and historians to better understand the ways in which various forms of Eastern dress have impacted and influenced Western ideas of aesthetics (Kim & DeLong, 1992).

Another important outcome of this paper is to show the potential of utilizing a consumer study framework as adapted to historic research. In the Journal of Consumer Studies, Yu et al. (2001) examined post 1980 fashion designers as influenced by Asian ethnic dress identifying eleven Asian-inspired design elements including “shape, garment type, silhouette, color, features of fabric, surface pattern, trimming, how to wear, accessories, hair-style and make up” (pg.309). The researchers utilized historic dress textbooks to analyze the ways in which 20th century fashion designers were influenced by Asian design elements including silhouette, shape, color, and features of the fabric, and surface patterns.

Silhouette and shapes In the early 20th century due to the influence of Asian dress, there was a remarkable change from the hourglass silhouette to the closely fitted bodice and floor length skirt, to a columnar silhouette with loose-fitting draped body (DeLong & Wu, 2005; Kim & DeLong, 1992). The impacts of silhouettes and shapes of Chinese and Japanese ethnic dress were apparent in Western fashion; however, such was not the case for India and Korea. Japanese influences included the V-neckline, the rectangular shaped sleeve related to the silhouette of the kimono, the dropped shoulder, and the collarless neckline in the loose and simple lines of robes, along with the contrasting wide waistband. The Chinese characteristics included “round neckline, a straight and tubular sleeve, banding effect, a loosely defining waistline, and loose pajama look in robes” (Kim & DeLong, 1992). India’s traditional dress, the sari, did not capture the attention of Western designers because the formality of the traditional cut of the sari, a single piece of cloth wrapped around the body, made it difficult to adapt and develop (Martin & Koda, 1994). As for Korean ethnic dress, it was not until the 21st century that designer Carolina Herrera was so
influenced. An explanation of why the Japanese style in Western fashion was more frequently and popularly adapted to modern Western fashion is the overall shape of the *kimono* can represent Western modernist principles (Martin & Koda, 1994).

**Colors** Traditional colors of Asia, particularly of China and Japan were the predominant design elements used in modern fashion inspiration (Yu et al., 2001). In the 1910s, the old pale pastel colors were swept away and replaced with striking, garish colors characteristic of Orientalism (Laver, 1995. Pg.114). Motifs, colors and patterns were frequently used as symbols of Eastern influences, such as Chinese lapis blue, Chinese jade green, yellow, lacquer red and black from China and blue, gold, silver, Japanese lacquer red, black from Japan (Kim & DeLong, 1994).

**Textiles and surface patterns** It was Japanese and Chinese surface patterns that had the most significant impact on 20th century Western fashion - perhaps because of the long history of trade between the West and China, Japan, and India. Traditional fabrics of China: silk satin, brocade, and damask, were widely used to express the exotic look of Orientalism. The traditional Chinese geometric pattern called “eight precious objects” had religious meaning, which was missed when it was transformed into Western designs. The only aspect of Korean textiles that could be influential to Western dress was fabric, such as organdy, ramie, and silk satins. India was the source of numerous textile materials, including muslin, cotton, and silk as well as paisley.

References


