Everybody knows what fashion is; it hits us in the eye every time we go into the street. And most people are convinced that they know what art is, although they would be hard put to define it. Beauty then! For it is the obvious purpose of art to produce beauty; and it is the obvious purpose of fashion to make women beautiful. Fashion, art, beauty must surely mean the same thing, or so nearly the same thing that we can swallow them all in one gulp and rest content.

Yet when we begin to consider the matter we find it is not so simple. The three terms shift their shape and change their meaning. Let us take beauty first. Myself when young did eagerly frequent the aesthetic philosophers in search of some acceptable definition. I learned from St. Thomas Aquinas that “beauty is that which, being seen, pleases”; a dictum that fails to distinguish between a painting by Titian and a jam tart. And, more important, leaves open the pertinent question: pleases whom, and for how long? From Ruskin I gathered that beauty was an essential attribute of “Nature” and that “truth to Nature” was the goal of art. But when we examine the paintings Ruskin admired we find that by “truth to Nature” he meant truth to local color, ignoring altogether the intervening layers of air that turn a brown hill in the foreground to a blue mountain in the far distance. Ruskin was also of the opinion that art should have an uplifting effect and teach a moral lesson; and this doctrine was pushed to the extreme by Tolstoi, who came in the end to believe that any picture of a lifeboat was necessarily a good picture.

Whistler and his school repudiated all such notions, and so did the great French impressionists, for what moral lesson does a landscape by Monet teach? Then came Clive Bell with his theory of “Significant Form,” which turns out to be an argument in a circle. “Why do you like that picture?” “Because it gives me an aesthetic sensation.” “Why does it give you an aesthetic sensation?” “Because it has Significant Form.” “How do you know it has Significant Form?” “Because it gives me an aesthetic sensation.” There was no salvation here for the earnest inquirer. And, say some other theorists, perhaps the end of art is not beauty but expressiveness; this makes the cloud of unknowing more impenetrable still, for one is compelled to ask, expressive of what?

When we turn to fashion the problem becomes even more complicated. Let us consider the word in its narrow sense as meaning the clothes people (especially women) wear. “What a beautiful dress,” we say, when we see a woman in the latest creation of some great couturier. It is therefore a fashionable dress, which means it is attractive in the context of contemporary taste.
But now a very disconcerting thing happens. The dress we thought so beautiful goes "out of fashion," and then we do not think it beautiful at all. In fact, we think it hideous. It seems to us outrageously ugly, and we cannot imagine how or why anybody ever thought it anything else. It would be easy to multiply examples, but perhaps one may suffice. The first edition of *Vanity Fair* was illustrated by Thackeray himself and, in his foreword, he remarks that "of course" he could not bear to clothe his Amelia in the "hideous" clothes of 1815 (which, after all, was his plain duty), and he calmly proceeds to clothe her, and Becky Sharp too, in the mode of 1838.

An amusing game can be played with the family album. Show any young woman a photograph of her own mother in the dress she wore when she was young, and the modern girl will cry "Hideous!" with complete conviction. Go on turning the pages until you come to a photograph of the girl's grandmother. The reaction is not so violent; the clothes worn are likely to be dismissed as "quaint." Great-grandmother's clothes are likely to seem more attractive, "romantic" even; and great-great-grandmother's clothes will in all probability be pronounced "beautiful." They have, in short, entered the realm of "historical costume" and we question them no more.
This is surely a most extraordinary state of affairs. If our judgments in the matter are so completely subjective, and subject to a time scale beyond our control, are we justified, when we are looking at clothes, in using the word beauty at all? There is a further complication. Whatever else art may be, it surely involves a certain harmony in the parts. But mere harmony is not enough; it is apt to be dull, or, as Francis Bacon, with his acute insight, put it, “There is no excellent Beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion.” This is the exaggeration à propos in which some have seen the essence of art. But if art is exaggeration à propos, fashion seems very often to be exaggeration mal à propos.

If we think that the female body is itself a beautiful object (and only Schopenhauer will disagree with us about this), what are we to think of what fashion has done to it? In the Elizabethan epoch it cut off the legs altogether, so that every woman became a mere torso emerging from a drum. In the early eighteenth century, by means of panniers, it made the female body look extremely wide when seen from the front and extremely narrow when seen from the side. The mid-nineteenth-century crinoline made it seem immensely wide all round. The bustle that followed gave every woman the colossal buttocks of the Hottentot. The early twentieth century sliced her in two at the waist and pushed the upper part several inches out of true. The 1920s abolished the bosom as effectively as previous epochs had abolished the legs.

The psychologists have attempted to explain this by the theory of “the shifting erogenous zone.” According to this theory the female body is attractive only within certain limits, indeed at certain seasons, as can be seen among savage tribes whose women go about in a state of nudity. The only way in which it can be made permanently attractive is to shut off, so to speak, its total impact and to emphasize one beauty after another. This is exactly what fashion sets out to do. In one period it emphasizes the smallness of the waist, in another the smoothness of the shoulders, in another the grace of the legs. Fashion says: “Look! Here is something you had forgotten about for a decade, or perhaps for a century; here is a form neglected too long, here is a beauty too much concealed.”

Fashion is a game of hide-and-seek, played between seduction and modesty, with moves so rapid that, from one minute to another, no one can tell which, or who, is “It.” New fashions are always “daring” because our attention is being directed to a part of the female body that, having been hidden for a generation, has been able to accumulate erotic capital and has now all the attraction of novelty; recent fashions are always “dowdy” because our attention is being directed to a beauty that is already familiar and of which we have begun to grow tired. This is all very satisfactory as far as it goes, but it does not seem to have very much to do with art or beauty.

Are we then to throw in the sponge and admit that no purpose is served by attributing either to the clothes people wear? This would seem to be altogether too pessimistic a view. Once a fashion has emerged from the “gap in appreciation” that inevitably follows it (and during this period any judgment we pass upon it is necessarily invalid), once it has passed through the stages we have mentioned and we can look upon it as historical costume, we are surely entitled to call it “beautiful”—if it is.
For it would be to abrogate aesthetic standards altogether not to admit that the clothes of some epochs are beautiful in a sense in which others are not. When we turn over the pages of any well-illustrated history of costume (and there are dozens of such books available today), we find our eye resting with pleasure on a hundred examples of paintings that are not only beautiful in themselves but depict people in what we have no hesitation in calling beautiful clothes.

There is no lack of documentation. In Egyptian wall paintings and bas-reliefs we can admire the close-fitting diaphanous dresses of the court ladies and their wide collars of gold and bright stones. In Assyrian and Babylonian carvings we can see the fringed garments with which both men and women were clothed. In the figurines and frescoes of ancient Crete we see women represented in startlingly modern costumes, with tight waists, flounced skirts, and daring décolletages. One of these creatures in a fragment of a fresco in the Palace of Knossos is so elegant that she is known as “La Parisienne.”

The beauty of ancient Greek costume was entirely in the draping of oblongs of woolen cloth, and what effects could be obtained by such simple means a thousand statues testify. Who can deny the dignity of the Roman toga and not marvel at the elaboration of the ladies’ headdresses and the simple grace of their flowing gowns? But as yet there is little or no hint of the use of materials rich or beautiful in themselves. With the rise of Byzantium all that is changed. To this day, in the Church of San Vitale at Ravenna, we can see, translated into glittering mosaic, the costumes worn by Justinian and Theodora; the cloth of gold encrusted with gems, the jeweled fibulae, the collars of precious stones, the red leather shoes. But the clothes of both sexes are still draperies; there is no attempt to reveal or to exploit the shape of the human figure.
Roman copy of a Greek statue of the III century B.C.
Marble. Gift of Mrs. Frederick F. Thompson, 03.12.9.
Photograph: Stephen L. Murphy

The Empress Theodora. Mosaic from the Church of San Vitale,
Ravenna. Byzantine, VI century. Photograph: Alinari-Art Reference Bureau
Then came the long eclipse of the Dark Ages when the costume of all classes was reduced to its simplest terms. And so it remained until the Crusades introduced the men of western Europe to a degree of luxury and refinement they had never dreamed of. They came back from the Levant with the rich stuffs of Damascus (hence the word damask), with materials patterned with the strange beasts that were to become heraldic emblems, with fine linen and purple cloth enriched with thread of gold. And then, toward the end of the fourteenth century something that we are entitled to call fashion begins to appear.
It arose in the luxurious courts of France and Burgundy, where, in a single generation, the three main weapons of fashion were discovered. These were: décolletage, tight-lacing, and head-dresses of striking design. The veils with which women had concealed their attractiveness for centuries now took on a life of their own, rose on wires and assumed the shapes of steeples and horns and butterflies. They no longer tried to hide the face but to draw attention to it. Devil’s work indeed, as the monkish moralists proclaimed; and, if beauty be a snare, no doubt they were right, for some of the late medieval fashions are seductive even to the modern eye.

By comparison, the modes of the sixteenth century seem modest enough, and when we reach the age of Elizabeth most people would agree that the shapes of women’s clothes are among the ugliest ever devised. For they almost abolished the female form altogether, and presented the appearance of an icon instead of a woman. The only beauty to be found was in the materials used, which have never perhaps been richer, with glittering brocades, elaborate embroideries, and jewels set along every seam. Added to all this was the fantastic ruff, that strange exaggeration of the simple device of a drawstring at the throat, which none the less is capable of extreme beauty, with its layer upon layer of fine linen edged with lace, putting, as it were, a frame round the face and adding to the hieratic effect of the whole costume.

When the ruff lost its stiffness and fell upon the shoulders, and when the skirts and bodices assumed more natural lines, the result was a very beautiful costume: that worn by the ladies of the Cavaliers of the time of Charles I—and by the Cavaliers themselves. Most people would agree that the 1640s produced some of the most attractive clothes for both men and women in the whole history of costume.
Madame Favart, by François-Hubert Drouais (1727-1775), French. 1757. Oil on canvas, 31\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 25\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. Mr. and Mrs. Isaac D. Fletcher Collection, Bequest of Isaac D. Fletcher, 17.120.210

Portrait of the Artist with Two Pupils, by Adélaïde Labille-Guiard (1749-1803), French. 1785. Oil on canvas, 83 x 59\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. Gift of Julia A. Berwind, 53.225.5
The rest of the century saw a falling off, and another high point of beauty was not reached again until about 1740. How enchanting is any costume à la Pompadour! The neat, powdered head, the little bow round the throat, the deep square décolletage, the embroidered stomacher or beribboned corsage, the half-sleeves with their froth of lace, the ample but not distorting skirt, the tiny red-heeled shoes—it is the acme of elegant artificiality, a worthy witness to the stylistic homogeneity of the rococo.

The age of Marie-Antoinette spoils the picture by the excessive size of the headdress, and yet there was a new désinvolture in the clothes of the 1780s that is not without its charm. The dresses were less rich, the materials more flimsy, the embroideries more widely spaced. There is a general air of lightness, or rather there would be if it were not for the top-heavy hats.

The Revolution swept it all away, and what emerged afterward was a style that restored harmony and proportion by letting the beauty of the body speak for itself. In spite of Thackeray’s opinion, most people today find the Empire gowns, depicted in the newly invented fashion plate, attractive enough. With their straight lines and high waists they at least avoided the absurd exaggerated sleeves of the 1830s and the essential dowdiness of the following decade. And then, in the 1850s, fashion flowered again with the many-flounced skirts that finally became so ample that the crinoline had to be invented to support them.

Madame Desbassayns de Richemont and Her Daughter, Camille, by Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825), French. About 1800. Oil on canvas, 46 x 35⅜ inches. Gift of Julia A. Berwind, 53.61.4
Of course the crinoline was an absurdity, but it gave wide scope to the designer, and surviving sketches by Worth show what a couturier of genius could do with it. Its successor, the bustle, was infinitely less attractive, and it is hard to decide which was the uglier, the bustle of the early seventies or the bustle of 1885. Balloon sleeves in the middle nineties, and perhaps we find them acceptable only because we see them through the eyes of Toulouse-Lautrec.

Madame Charpentier and Her Children, by Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), French. 1878. Oil on canvas, 60 1/2 x 74 1/6 inches. Wolfe Fund, 07.122. Madame Charpentier’s dress was designed by Worth


Detail of Madame Thadée Natanson at the Theater, by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901), French. 1895. Gouache on cardboard, whole 24 1/2 x 29 1/2 inches. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard Rodgers, subject to a life estate in the donors, 64.153
So we come to the swirling skirts and dripping lace and picture hats of la belle époque, to be followed by the Oriental fantasies of Paul Poiret. More recent fashions are perhaps too near to us to be the object of any valid judgment. But when we look back over the whole pageant of costume, we can surely agree that there has been much art and much beauty and that fashion has frequently (if not always) given them their chance.

*Designs for three dresses. Plate 3 from Paul Iribe, Les Robes de Paul Poiret (Paris, 1908). The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 59.591.2*