IS FASHION AN ART?

NORMAN NORELL
LOUISE NEVELSON
IRENE SHARAFF
ALWIN NIKOLAIS
ANDRE COURREGES
Is fashion an art?
Norman Norell, one of America's most renowned fashion designers, hesitates, then gives a qualified yes. “The best of fashion is worthy of the name art.” Norell picks Grès, Chanel, Vionnet, and Balenciaga as the artists of fashion of the twentieth century, declines to make any judgment on fashion as an art historically. “It's hard to say if you didn't live in a period. Pictures don't mean a thing... even the clothes themselves don't. What counts is how clothes look in life. Take New York today. A woman who is all dressed up looks awful. With the way our buildings are, the woman who is overdressed looks like a fool.”

How would you define the art of fashion?
“Well, if you're talking about fine stitching or intricate detail, about some great thing that took weeks and weeks to make, that's not what I mean by the modern art of fashion. Anyone can sit around and sew for days and days. It doesn't prove a thing any more. Modern fashion is more direct and simple.”

Still, for Norell, elegance and quality are the two attributes of fashion that count the most. “Quality means a lot to me. I like to think about people wearing their clothes a long time. It was drilled into me when I was young. There's no getting around it: good quality looks great. The other stuff never looks any more than just okay.”

Norell considers the period just before World War I as the most elegant era in modern fashion, but paradoxically it is Chanel, the designer who did the most to displace that tradition of elegance, that he cites as the most influential force in twentieth-century fashion.

“Everything that's going on in fashion now really started in the twenties. The seeds are all there. The main thing that happened was that all of that changing stopped... one dress for morning, another for lunch, another for tea, etc., etc. Chanel pared it down to one dress or suit to wear all day plus that rag of an evening dress for parties. I still remember that evening dress. If you didn't have that dress on, you were out. Every chic woman wore it, but, of course, each one did something different with it. That was the fun of it. My idea of chic is that everyone in the world would have the same dress and the chicest woman would be whoever could do the best thing with it. The main trouble with fashion today is that there are too many clothes designed, too many choices. Look at colored stockings. They just give women another pit to fall into.”

How do you feel about what's happening now in art, design, fashion?
“It's not my era. I'm sixty-seven years old and I go along the best I can, but really I'm just hanging on. I would love to have an additional room in my apartment simply to put modern things in. A few very good modern things from the thirties and forties as well as from today. For instance, I recently saw a huge modern painting that was all red and black and white. In front of it there was a mass of fresh red flowers. It was marvelous. “As for fashion, yes, I think short skirts are fine. Why not? They suit the times. I'm tired of all this talk about bad legs. After all, there are a lot of ugly faces hanging out. Look at the young kids. They don't care whether they have good legs or bad legs.

“Actually, I think fashion has been a little behind art for some years now, but we're catching up.”

How would you describe the direction of modern fashion?
“More and more practical, fewer and fewer things. I think more and more people will keep what they need and drop what they don't need. Already it's obvious that hats and jewelry in the traditional sense make a woman look older. When I went to Palm Beach recently for a few days I took two pairs of pants and a few shirts, and I only wore one pair of the pants.”

Norell thinks that the new practicality and paring down will have far-reaching effects on the field of cosmetics, too. “Women will use cosmetics for fun or they won't use them at all except for health.” (This is in contrast to the present main purpose of cosmetics, which is to tint, paint, or simulate youth.)

Norman Norell takes the current explosions of young fashion with a grain of salt, but he is not enraged by them. “There is something about the new fashion that lacks roots or permanence. You feel like, ‘Okay, we've had this for three months, what are we going to do next?’ But I think it's a good thing. We'll all come out of it much better off. It's a heck of a big physic.”

Interview by Priscilla Tucker
Culotte suit with wool jersey blouse, spring 1965, by Norman Norell

Embroidered absinthe evening dress with forest green velvet coat, fall 1965, by Norman Norell

Roman-striped wool trench coat, spring 1967, by Norman Norell
Is fashion an art?
Modern sculptor Louise Nevelson says no. Mrs. Nevelson, a pioneer of environmental sculpture, thinks that to qualify as an art, fashion must be an expression of the wearer and must relate to her environment. She dismisses the concept of fashion being a designer’s idea or a fleshless sketch.
“Today it’s the designer who gets all the attention. I was reading about an art opening and every woman—even the ones who had collected all those beautiful things—was identified by who designed her dress, not by how she looked or what she did. It’s insanity to negate these ladies, reduce them to a label. I’m much more interested in knowing something about them than I am in knowing what label they wore.
“Fashion could be an art, but it isn’t. On earth at any time there are few people who understand themselves well enough to bring themselves to a high art. Today many rich people are living at such a pace, busy from childhood partying and traveling all the time, that they are not interested in developing themselves, so they lean on designers, hairdressers. I’m not sure they’re not right—but that’s not art.”

How do you choose your own clothes?
How do you like to wear?
“Being ‘well dressed’ is not a question of having expensive clothes or the ‘right’ clothes—I don’t care if you’re wearing rags—but they must suit you. If you think you’re not put together well, you can’t confront the world. I don’t go in for dresses as such. Even as a young girl I felt that kind of fashion was too temporary. I look for something that suits me, something more permanent. I like wearing lovely things around me in the daytime, old lace dresses, Japanese robes. When I buy something new in a store I may not wear it for a year until I get used to it. Often I find I have to create my own clothes.” Mrs. Nevelson produced a box of her own jewelry, heavy, thick chunks of wood worked dimensionally so you could look into them just as you look into her intricately pieced-together wall-sized sculptures.
“The main trouble with fashion today is that it takes too much time. I usually wear something around my head because I can’t be bothered going to have my hair done. It’s a production. I’m concerned with economy in time. My day is filled with my work and my interests—dance, exercise, comparative religion. I can’t have my brain in a million little pieces.
“I don’t like chiffon—too pretty for the way the world looks today. I saw two adorable girls on the street, but they were too feminine. Twiggy looks right, they didn’t. (Or I should say Twiggy in photographs. Did you see her in person? She wasn’t like her photos at all.) The way the world looks, we need a new approach to fashion.”

How does the world look to you?
How does the world look to you?
“Science fiction is becoming science fact. The new architecture and furniture are making New York into science fact. You can’t have that romantic look any more. Take beautiful antique furniture. A house filled with beautiful antiques is a period piece; it’s not a home. Most of America is living in the nineteenth century. Look at San Francisco—it bores me. They think they’re the elite, but we went through all that years ago.
“I feel I am gearing into my time. I’m more contented and feel better with the present day, from architecture to furniture to the way we set our table. The casual way we do things now is more gracious than all that silver and china and glass. I’d like a wall-less house, one not divided into rooms for special functions. A house used to be history and decoration; now it’s structure and form.
“We are working toward a total unity and that would include clothes. It won’t be so unique, but it will be ordered. The way we live now clutters the mind. We abuse ourselves because we don’t know the toll we take. We don’t have meters on our minds and senses.”

What happens to the individual in this new world?
What happens to the individual in this new world?
“Man has become the cheapest thing on the market. In the old days we had more individualism but not necessarily more art. There’s not much place for the original or personal. Take minimal art; I’m not for it or against it. But I am all for outer space. Man has explored this earth. He has new worlds to conquer, new visions. Man is already expanding his mind to outer space.”

Design sketch by Irene Sharaff for the Integration Ballet of Hallelujah, Baby! Copyright © 1967 by Irene Sharaff
Irene Sharaff, one of America’s busiest and most successful designers of theatrical and movie costumes, says definitely yes, fashion is an art. “Of course it depends on what you mean by art, but the creative part of fashion has always worked alongside the creative forces that have defined and colored a decade, an era. As much as art, fashion is a manifestation of the times — of its psychological, social, political, visual existence.”

Miss Sharaff, whose career began with Eva Le Gallienne’s Alice in Wonderland for the Civic Repertory, is currently working on Barbra Streisand’s costumes for the movie of Funny Girl. Nearly every assignment in between — uncounted plays, including West Side Story and The King and I, and eighteen movies, including the Taylor/Burton Cleopatra—has begun with serious research into the life and times of the period.

In the context of history, what do you think future generations will see as the most important force in fashion today?

“The American way of life. Although Paris is still powerful for economic shock value (for instance, if everyone in Paris suddenly lowered hems ten inches a lot of women over here would panic), in fact Paris is no longer top banana on the banana tree. Our greatest export is the American way of life. Everyone wants to lead the kind of casual life we do, and naturally this is having a great impact on clothes.” Miss Sharaff herself wears Norells (“I’m most comfortable in them”), plus skirts and sweaters or Puccis for working.

Is there a difference between designing costumes for the theater or movies and designing clothes for real life?

“Yes. Most costume designers are not dealing with contemporary life. They are historians with a sense of poetry.”

But Miss Sharaff thinks that the movies in particular have already had considerable influence on everyday clothes and that the gap between theater and life, art and life, is narrowing all the time. “Clothes are no longer clothes today, they are costumes. There are too many collections, too many designs.” As for today’s kids, she says they are play acting all the time, playing one role after another. “After all, they get a world tour simply by turning on TV.”

As an example of her own influence from stage to fashion she cites the color palette of The King and I. “I was the first to use Thai-bok silk. I had seen a photo of the fabric in Art News and finally tracked it down to a tiny hole on East Sixty-first Street. That was in 1951. I don’t think people were aware of the Asian color palette before then.”

How would you describe the direction of modern fashion?

“I think that great femininity is coming in. A woman’s place has changed economically, and she is more and more on an equal footing with men. Aggressiveness is no longer necessary to succeed, and I think that is already reflected in clothes.

“I won’t gamble on silhouette, but I think these days just about anything goes. What is more important is the perfection of the instrument of the garment. Shoes, stockings, underwear all have been perfected so that they are comfortable to wear, easy to care for. Things work better.

“One of the things that have always fascinated me in my research is the tremendous influence that inventions have had. When power weaving came in, the whole concept of fashion changed. Now we are in the midst of an era with all kinds of wonderful new inventions. Look what electronics has done for music. We listen calmly to music today that would have sounded very strange even three years ago.”

Although Miss Sharaff thinks that the influence of new technologies on fashion will be enormous in the next decades, she is no partisan of the throw-away revolution. “I think man by nature likes to keep things. More people are collectors. I think people will collect old things and use them in new ways, much as Picasso used a tin can for his goat sculpture or an automobile for the head of his monkey.” She says that what the English kids are doing in their forays on Portobello Road is to “use their past to exist in the present.”

An art student and painter before she was a designer, Miss Sharaff is still a dedicated Sunday painter. She finds modern sculpture more imaginative than modern painting, feels that clothes and art are moving closer together all the time. With all the wonders of modern technology, “we no longer need the protection of animal skins. Freed from utilitarianism, fashion is now free to be more of a form unto itself.”

Interview by Priscilla Tucker
Is fashion an art?
Alwin Nikolais, whose Henry Street Dance Theater has been a leading avant-garde force in the dance world for the past decade, says definitely no.
"Fashion is not an art because women rely so much on other people to design them. Most women wear what sort of fits. Clothes should state yourself. After all, creativity is a statement of self, so for clothes, fashion, to be an art, a woman would have to design herself. Last summer in Utah I saw a kid go by on a motorcycle. He was wearing a crazy long fur coat and a hat. It was the most compelling thing, particularly against that landscape. But even in Southampton I saw a typical 'well-dressed' woman — you know how they dress out there — walking down the street followed right behind by a teenager. The teenager really looked much better. Everybody could be beautiful, really, but most women present themselves so awkwardly. Women should set themselves forth attractively but innocently, like a cat. A cat is never a presentation, but an innocent happening. I've always liked what the Navajos say when they part. They never say 'Goodbye.' They say 'Go in beauty.'"
Although reviewed by dance critics, Mr. Nikolais has always insisted that what he is after is an experience of total theater. He writes his own music, does his own scenery and lighting, and makes his own costumes.

When you design costumes what are you aiming for?
"My costumes are part of a total stage design, action, or painting. The idea is not to see each body separately. My stage designs are a theatrical abstraction of the way I see man — not as an ego, but as part of a socio-economic mechanism, an agreeable but not a central part. I have been in revolt against the whole Freudian thing. I have often been accused of dehumanization of the dancers. It's not that, it's de-egoization. I see a bigger state of being for man. Man has to learn to design himself into the total environment, to see himself as a relatively minor part of the whole universal thing. We need to have the experience of living in a world of motion, sound, color, and action, and having it affect us and us affect it."
In his dance-theater productions Mr. Nikolais has pioneered many materials and techniques and concepts just hitting the fashion world now.
What are some of the new materials that you have used for costumes, and new techniques you have experimented with, and what were some of the problems?

"In Kaleidoscope (1956) I colored the dancers’ hands and faces so that the figures wouldn’t look decapitated. What interested me most was that as I watched one of my dancers painting one side of her face blue and the other side green, I really saw her for the first time. She was much more beautiful than I had thought."

Mr. Nikolais has always found fabric useful in abstracting the human figure into sculpture or shape. “Some of our earliest experiments were with wool jersey, forms moving inside the jersey rather than using the jersey to drape the body. It was an idea I later noticed was being used in fashion. I began using ultraviolet fabrics three years ago, and recently we have experimented with boning very light fabrics in such a way that the figure gets fatter or thinner as it gets up or down. One of the biggest fabric problems is that materials are so periodic. It often happens that we can no longer buy the material we need. For instance, light-reflecting silver Helanca was all over the place a couple of years ago, then last spring we couldn’t find any.

“Some of our most difficult experiments have been with the use of light. In Prison (1957) I used lights projected on the dancers to break up the bodies. For example, one dancer’s costume was bright salmon and white stripes on which I then projected stripes of light. It gave him the look of being fragmented. I was entranced by the optical effect. Since then I’ve used movie projectors, slide machines with wide-angle lenses, light bulbs. Last winter in Somniloquy the dancers carried globes designed to reflect both on themselves and on the environment. Designing with moving light forms is very difficult. The light is never bright enough. The problem is to get enough intensity of light without heat.”

The charges of gaudiness and vulgarity that are often leveled against the current avant-garde in fashion (mod, op, psychedelic) have also often appeared in reviews of your dance-theater pieces. How do you feel about these charges?

"I’ve never understood what they meant. Just look at the world around us. I only hope it’s lack of breadth of vision in the reviewer and that I’m seeing what’s really there. Not that I reject the old. I love antiques, for instance. They give you a way to communicate with the past. But there is no need any more to be locked into time or space. Man can go backward or forward at will. In one short trip I went from modern New York to Spoleto, then do a TV program in a London studio, then the next day to Athens where I saw a play done exactly as the ancient Greeks would have done it. And that thing everyone complains about, TV. It’s marvelous. Turn it on and there’s India.

“Most reviewers have a literary approach to the theater and most dance critics see dance purely in terms of kinetics. It’s their training. But all of that is changing. Kids don’t trust words much any more. They feel the need to sense everything more strongly. No, I’ve never taken LSD — I need Miltown to keep my expanded consciousness down — but I can understand why people take it. Today you need to see and hear with your teeth.”

Interview by Priscilla Tucker

Scenes from Sanctum and Vaudeville of the Elements, dance-theater pieces created by Alwin Nikolais.
Photographs: Ken Kay, Faludi
Is fashion an art?

“I would certainly not affirm that fashion is not art,” says André Courrèges, whose first collection, in 1963, opened up a new fashion era. “But this is something for others to judge. The profession of fashion designer for me is simply a job like that of any artisan who attempts to introduce taste and proportion into the object he is creating, exactly in the way an architect tries to build a harmonious structure.

“I have always liked to paint and, being a staunch admirer of Le Corbusier and Saarinen, I might have become an architect had my family been able to finance my studies. They were not, and so couture has become the best way I’ve found to formulate my ideas. The frivolous, superficial aspects of my profession do sometimes offend me, since for me couture is not an end in itself. I truly want to bring solutions to the problems of modern women. Designing a building and making a dress have much in common. The principal concern of both is to give the impression of grace and harmony while at the same time being practical. My designs are simple and functional like modern architecture. I have always tried to consecrate an important part of my work to the functional aspects, to have real contact with life. Fashion today is too often divided into tough chic and froufrou. I consider neither of these mine. It is the woman who wears the clothes, their details, coloring, seaming, and cut that make for femininity, not miles of frills and chiffons. To me it is the woman who is important, not the dress — what she does, how she moves, how she lives. Her clothes should not be chic abstractions. They must be rational and logical. It is not logical, for instance, to work all day on three-inch heels. No woman is born with three or even two inches under her feet. Heels are as absurd as the bound feet of ancient Orientals.

“My aim is to dress women to permit them to live and to live with a piece of clothing, to take into consideration their real needs, which are indivisibly functional and aesthetic. The purely functional can be very ugly. But the functional must be the soul of dress, its composition, its interior rhythm, and its sense. Aesthetics is the envelope. I do not believe that a true designer can conceive a dress in the abstract. Each work of art, if you want to call it that, must have its ‘raison d'être.’ Useless, luxurious art for me is a thing of the past. It’s dead. “Until relatively recent times, after all, the ‘artist,’ as we now term him, was an extremely functional being. I even doubt that the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century painters were thus designated. A fashion designer is an artist to the same extent as a cabinetmaker, a ceramist, a carpenter — or an architect. Ancient Egyptian furniture was studied and comfortable. It was also very beautiful. The Romanesque capitals were sculpted by master craftsmen. We called the cathedral builders masons, and the
cathedrals had very specific functions. They were constructed to serve many purposes, induce meditation, call in and unite the masses, and, as the spirit of the Church changed, so did the function of the cathedral. See how soaring Gothic makes you raise your eyes to the sky in adoration, as low Romanesque makes you bow your head in humility.

"Be it the construction of a house according to the needs of a family or the construction of a dress, the problem is the same — how best to fit into what I call 'the modern grand design.' Listen to the music of Shönberg, Berg, Xenakis, or look at kinetic art and you will see what I mean.

"I cannot dress everyone. I cannot dress the Chanel woman and I think she still exists. It is a question of age and habit. Chanel was a great creator, well ahead of her time, especially from 1925 to 1935. She was at the forefront of modernism, functionally and aesthetically.

"It is all a question of modernism. Look at cars. It is always interesting to study old models. During all periods there are decadent forms and real forms. Today, if most automobile design is decadent, it is because aesthetics is in the airplane, in the purity of aerodynamics — like sharks. Fish are particularly aesthetic.

"I think that during each period what we call art is produced when (as today with airplanes) the worker applies the maximum of his taste to the maximum in technological and sociological advances of his time. If any one of these lags behind, something inaesthetic happens. When the artisans building the cathedrals applied the purity of their art to the most advanced techniques, what they created was beautiful. Look at pure Gothic, then how it deteriorated with flamboyant, and downward when unnecessary decoration was applied simply for ornamentation and not in relation to any additional structural need.

"In all periods of fashion, interesting and beautiful things have been done. The court and château costumes were extremely valid when women were on show as sumptuous decorative objects.

"But then I rarely look back into history. I prefer to look ahead [while so many other couturiers haunt museums, rummaging for inspiration in engravings and old manuscripts, Courrèges picks only an occasional idea from one of his pet passions, rugby, auto racing, or the like]. Using past dress as inspiration is as ridiculous as trying to perfect a spaceship by studying the steam engine.

"Like an architect, I work on my drawing board with my models and my fabrics. I don't need to see the woman who will wear my clothes any more than an architect needs to build a house before he decides where he's going to put the windows. We can do all that on the plan. I am a technician, and drawing is my manner of philosophizing, of reflecting.
“My models are of different types but always beautiful, more beautiful than most of my clients. Using their proportions I create a prototype—a certain norm of modern woman, an aesthetic canon. In the salon on my tall girls, skirts are exaggeratedly short. Because of this, my clothes very often fit almost any woman.

“In any case, it is perfectly ridiculous to focus on hemlines, to be obsessed by length. It’s all a question of proportion. Wearing my clothes is above all a matter of spirit, not of knees. I myself know how rare are those beautiful knees, those designed in the exact continuation of the thigh line and mostly found on Negroes. [Courrèges generally has at least one Negro model.] Ultra-short dresses help to balance long torsos. But there are no rules. I never stop testing, adapting, thinking about each woman I dress. Each is an individual problem. If women who buy my dresses are shorter, the skirt can be lengthened to create the harmony, but generally the prototypes are such that the models that fit my five-foot-ten mannequins also fit even my shortest clients.

“I cannot tell you why I think certain proportions are right before I work them out on paper. Then I always know. I know, for instance, that on my models and most of my clients, the relation of leg to torso is such that the body looks right in short skirts with boots or high socks completing the silhouette, preventing it from being top-heavy. But, with my preoccupation for the functional, I first shortened skirts for freedom, then added the boots to keep women warm in compensation. It was only then that I discovered boots to be indispensable aesthetically. My hats are something else. I called the old ones ‘Calder stabiles,’ but now I find that they were a purely aesthetic touch with no functional reason for being. Why keep them simply because of convention, when a woman’s own natural well-brushed hair is generally sufficient to complete the volume? Now I create hats only for rainwear or very functional ones for winter.

“The predominance of white in my collections has often been viewed as purely aesthetic. But I have chosen white for its functional qualities as well. After all, it is considered the most functional color in hot climates. We dress babies and small children in white. For me white means health and cleanliness, which I in turn associate with beauty. Men wear white shirts, not black. Black soils as fast as white, except that the dirt on black shows less. But is it modern to be dirty? What thought could be more ugly? White is the universal color, synthesis of all the others. It harmonizes with all other colors, puts all other colors into motion. It is flattering to a woman’s complexion, gay and lively.

“I have said that my clothes aim to liberate the spirit as well as the eyes. Don’t forget the body. The woman who interests me does not belong to any particular physical type. But she does live a certain sort of life. She is active, moves fast, works, is usually young and modern enough to wear modern, intelligent clothes. She is often American, quicker to pick up new ideas than Europeans.

“A woman is truly beautiful only when she is naked and she knows it. So why all the hypocrisy anyway? Why not liberate women from girdles and bras, just as their mothers were liberated from the infamous ribbed corsets? Without a bra, a girl loses a few inches of her bosom. So what? Our fathers loved beauties for their caged-in, tortured, twenty-inch waists. Our ancestors worshiped the Hottentot Venus. Now we giggle when we see her, so why not accept the inevitable evolution, the liberation of woman’s body in our hectic space age. The trouble is that, although couture could be up there at the forefront of our times, along with serial music and kinetic art, the public in all these domains lags behind. I often have to design space-age clothes with fabrics that haven’t changed since the eighteenth century. I simply am not drawn to silks, which I do not consider functional, except occasionally when they are incorporated with other materials. I prefer flat-faced tattersalls, linens, gabardines, heavy cottons, and synthetics. I find enough of these to satisfy my needs, but I know we could go much farther if we, and the fabric manufacturers, knew that the public would buy.

“I suppose we shouldn’t complain. Wozzeck and Moses and Aaron are just reaching public comprehension now, decades after they were composed. This is probably normal. A musician or a painter spends fourteen hours a day working out his solutions, whereas a listener or viewer devotes only an hour now and then to the consideration of the same problems.

“Unfortunately we must dress woman now. Our creations are temporal. Not manuscripts or canvas, they cannot be stored until the public consciousness is ready. Luckily there are those happy few who do live with their times, and one thing is certain. Women have become liberated little by little through thought, work, and clothes. I cannot imagine that they will ever turn back. Perhaps they will continue to suffer occasionally to be beautiful, but more than ever they seek to be both beautiful and free.

“If the function of art is to bring joy through harmony, color, and form, perhaps we can, after all, by dressing a woman to feel younger and to participate fully in life, bring her joy comparable to that she experiences in contemplating a painting.”

*Interview by Betty Werther*