

Non-Western Dress in the West

Linda Welters, Professor
University of Rhode Island
lwelters@uri.edu

Abstract

*Over 30 years ago, when I was beginning my dissertation research, Mary Ellen Roach and Kathleen Musa had just published a handbook entitled *New Perspectives on the History of Western Dress*. In the opening chapter, the authors explained European folk dress as slow-changing garb that is bound to custom rather than constant change as in Western fashionable dress. Therefore, they chose to 'omit European peasant dress from the definition of Western dress' along with all dress styles originating outside of Europe (Roach and Musa, 1980: 3).*

The authors' position reflects scholarship at the time: they cite François Boucher, who, along with others, claimed that fashion began in fourteenth-century Europe. This position influenced the study of fashion history for decades, and only in recent years have scholars begun to question these maxims.

My thinking about my own research has gone through similar changes. For most of my career, I have studied Greek folk dress. For a period of twelve years in the 1980s and 1990s, I conducted field research among elderly villagers who lived within a 150-mile radius of Athens about the dress of their youth. Villagers spoke mostly about the first half of the twentieth century. Although these villagers resided in Western Europe in the country that gave the world classical dress, the clothing they wore has been categorized as non-Western.

In this era of globalization, when localities around the world display an infinite number of riffs on the fashion process, the notion of changing styles of dress (e.g. 'fashion') and its association with urban Europe needs to be re-examined. In this paper, I will examine the fashion process as applied to the so-called 'traditional' dress of rural Greece in the last century. Key points include the following: (1) clothing systems in rural Greece were never static; and (2) clothing systems throughout Greece were localized depending on various factors including ethnicity and location.

Keywords: fashion, Greek folk dress, traditional dress, ethnic dress

Roach, Mary Ellen and Musa, Kathleen Ehle. *New Perspectives on the History of Western Dress: A Handbook*. New York: NutriGuides, 1980.