

Non-Western Dress in the West

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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

This paper investigates the reasons behind the exclusion of European folk dress from the history of fashion. First, I will provide background on how this division occurred; and second, I will consider Greek folk dress in terms of the fashion process.

Fashion versus Folk Dress

When I was beginning my dissertation research in 1980, a group of American academics had just completed a project entitled *New Perspectives on the History of Western Dress*. Supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, their aim was to create a humanistic approach to the study of dress (Schur 1980: 27). Several years of collaboration between professors and curators had produced a ninety-five-page handbook, slide set, and bibliography which was sent to American universities with departments where costume history courses were taught. The handbook, authored by Mary Ellen Roach and Kathleen Musa, with an essay by Anne Hollander, became widely influential in shaping the study of dress history in North America. At that time, the lead author, Mary Ellen Roach, was a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; she enjoyed a national reputation as a researcher and educator in the socio-cultural aspects of dress. Kathleen Musa, a costume historian, was also on the faculty there. Anne Hollander had just published *Seeing Through Clothes* (1978), a study of dress as depicted in Western art that was highly original for the time. Hollander was one of the first scholars to investigate dress history through the lens of an art historian, awakening interest in the subject among scholars in the arts and humanities. Both the reputation of the scholars and the support of the prestigious National Endowment for the Humanities guaranteed that this slim handbook would have a lasting impact on both teaching and research in dress history in the United States and Canada.

In the opening chapter, entitled 'Defining Western Dress,' Roach and Musa proposed that: 'the dress that can be defined as Western had emerged by 1300 A.D., a time coinciding with Western Europe's transition from being mainly recipient of cultures from Asia and the Mediterranean to being donor of culture' (Roach and Musa 1980: 1). They went on to explain that as the people of Western Europe explored beyond their borders and colonized other parts of the world, Western European influence reached 'Eastern Europe as far as Russia, to Africa, the Americas, Australia, the Near and Far East, and various islands of the world' (Roach and Musa 1980:1). Roach and Musa acknowledged that cultural exchange was not a one-way process, which led to what they termed 'mixtures' of non-Western and Western elements in dress. This, they said, makes it difficult to identify a particular item of dress as 'Western' or 'non-Western' (2). So already we see problems in clearly defining Western dress.

Roach and Musa pointedly excluded European folk dress from their study. They explained European folk dress as slow-changing garb that is bound in custom rather than the continual change that characterizes Western fashionable dress. They noted that rural dwellers used dress to 'identify with their own small groups rather than respond to changes in Western fashionable dress' (2). Therefore, the authors 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).

Roach and Musa's position reflects the scholarship at the time: they cite the French costume historian François Boucher, who, according to my research, is the first to claim that fashion began in fourteenth-century Europe (Lillethun, Welters, and Eicher 2012: 79). Boucher's *20,000 Years of Fashion* was published in English in 1966. Other authors quickly piggy-backed on Boucher's claim, including the noted French scholar Fernand

Braudel. Braudel was a key figure in the then emerging field of cultural studies. He repeated Boucher's assertion that fashion began in Western Europe among the elite around 1350 (Braudel 1981: 317). Braudel's stressed the changes in the form or shape of clothing. He claimed that 'changelessness' characterized the dress of India, China, and Japan, and in Europe during ancient times because the shapes and forms remained the same over long periods of time. This position widely influenced the new scholarship of dress and fashion including that of the French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky, who cited Braudel in his treatise on fashion called *The Empire of Fashion* (Lipovetsky 1994: 20).

The notion of fashion being Western and urban has influenced the study of fashion history ever since. Indeed, Phyllis Tortora and Keith Eubank's best-selling textbook *Survey of Historic Costume* reiterates the separation of folk dress from fashionable dress. This book, now in its fifth edition (a sixth is in preparation), is widely used in American classrooms. The authors state that: 'While folk dress has sometimes influenced fashionable dress and while fashionable elements may appear in folk styles, folk dress in Western Europe diverges from the mainstream of fashionable dress and is not covered in this book. Like non-Western dress, it is too complex and varied a subject to be included in a general survey of Western dress' (Tortora and Eubank 2010: 9). This position reflects the separation of folk dress from fashion history first advanced by Roach and Musa in 1980. Course titles at American colleges and universities reflect this division: 'history of costume' (or 'fashion') versus 'ethnic dress.'¹ It is worth noting here that Millia Davenport's *History of Costume*, published in 1948, takes a broader view of historic costume. She includes images of European peasants and the people colonized by Europeans.

The definition of fashion as both Western and urban, but not non-Western or rural, had crystallized by the end of the last century. Only in recent years have scholars begun to question these maxims. Inspired by the writings of Sandra Niessen (2003), Karen Tranberg Hansen (2004), and Jane Schneider (2006), I, along with Abby Lillethun and Joanne Eicher, proposed a redefinition of fashion as inclusive of the dress worn before 1350 and outside urban Europe. We argued that the dominant perspective on fashion history needs rethinking to acknowledge that fashion is 'global and diverse in its development, occurrences, and dimensions' (Lillethun, Welters, and Eicher 2012: 75). This conference is a testament to the rethinking of current fashion as existing outside the West. Our hope is that this rethinking also extends to the history of fashion.

Fashion in Folk Dress

My own research has gone through a similar metamorphosis. For most of my career, I have studied Greek folk dress. Over 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. In total, I spoke with almost 400 informants, mostly women. The informants drew on memories of what their lives were like in the first half of the twentieth century. They also remembered what older relatives had told them about the years before they were born. 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 the remainder of this paper, I examine the so-called 'traditional' dress of rural Greece in the last century in terms of the fashion process. My goal is to demonstrate that even within Europe, the alleged birthplace of fashion, rural societies responded to varied

stimuli and changed both the materials and forms of their dress. The change in dress happened more slowly than in urban Europe, but the fact is that dress was not static.

First, I should provide a definition of fashion as applied to dress. In the introduction to the second edition of *The Fashion Reader*, Abby Lillethun and I define fashion as 'changing styles of dress and appearance that are adopted by a group of people at any given time and place' (Welters and Lillethun 2011: xxv). In exploring the concept of fashion 'change' in folk dress, I begin with Attica.

Attica is a region of Greece that surrounds and includes Athens. The villages that I concentrated on for my fieldwork are south of Athens, and are known as the Messoghia villages. I also visited villages to the northeast and northwest of Athens. Because of their proximity to Athens, the Attica villages were visited by northern Europeans and Americans on the Grand Tour in the nineteenth century. Some of these visitors observed and collected the dress of the village women, providing us with temporal evidence. The outfits worn by the women in these villages consisted of long sleeveless dresses lavishly embroidered on the hem borders, sleeved over-bodices, and sleeveless wool jackets. I saw many of the embroidered dresses during my dissertation research and marveled at the variety in the embroidered hems. Although immediately identifiable as coming from the Attica region of Greece, the variations showed individuality. This observation sparked my first post-dissertation fieldwork project, to investigate the variables in color and design of these Attica embroideries. After studying museum examples and talking to villagers, I concluded that one of the main factors explaining the variety was that some designs were older than others (Welters 1988: 70). In other words, the preferred colors and designs changed over time. The embroideries could be roughly broken down into four time periods based on their design characteristics: late eighteenth century to the 1830s, 1840 to 1875, 1875 to 1910, and 1910 to 1935. When shown photographs of museum pieces, the interviewees themselves pointed out that some designs were older than others. They often described the changes in embroidery design as generational. As one woman explained, 'the dark colored embroideries were the ones worn by our great grandmothers' (Interview, village of Menidi, Attica, 7 July 1983).

The notion of generational change bears further consideration. In my subsequent research in other regions of mainland Greece, I constantly heard women explain their clothing choices as dependent on their generational cohort. They would say things like: 'these were the clothes of our grandmothers,' or 'this was worn by my mother's generation.' They would claim: 'My sister who was older than me wore that style,' but 'we didn't wear such things.' The custom of assembling a lifetime wardrobe around the time a woman married guaranteed generational change. Girls approaching marriageable age indicated their status through an item of clothing, typically a headscarf, or through color. They began assembling their dowries, which included clothing and household items, even before they were engaged. Great effort and expense went into young women's bridal attire, and the latest materials and styles were employed. After marriage, women wore what they had in their dowries, replacing worn pieces when necessary. Women with children wore age-appropriate clothing with subdued colors and embellishment. To summarize, it was the young women approaching marriageable age who were the change agents for their generation.

In Greek villages, it is important to note that the community influenced clothing choices. Young women wanted to look like the other young women in their village and nearby villages, and thus they conformed to the current ideals. The interviewees consistently

explained differences as driven by the changes around them and by what other girls were wearing. They noted fashion leaders in their villages. The following quote illustrates the role of style leaders in shaping village fashion. It came from a woman who had made a living as a tailor of bridal *grizes*, which are sleeveless wool overcoats: 'One woman wore a *mandili* (silk headscarf) without a *griza* and slowly the villagers got used to it.' She continued: 'One show-off came out and said she wasn't going to wear the *griza* and the others followed' (Interview, village of Koropi, Attica, 22 June 1983). Prior to its demise, the *griza* had gone through its own generational change. It began as a garment made from fulled homespun wool with modest dull-colored embroidery, eventually becoming a flashy overgarment made from red and white English broadcloth and embellished in gold thread. The propensity to add gold thread to the *griza* intensified in the early decades of the twentieth century; some *grizes* were covered in gold thread.

Change could also come from outside the community. Urban styles were modified and adapted in folk dress for short periods of time. One of these was the hoop petticoat fashionable in the West in the 1860s. Village women in Attica began wearing hoops under their bridal and festival dresses toward the end of the nineteenth century. Some of the interviewees criticized one of the museum post cards, complaining that the dresser had forgotten to put the hoop on the mannequin. The rounded shapes created by hooped petticoats disappeared later on. Another urban style that was incorporated into the Attica folk dress was the long frilly white apron. Numerous photographs dating from the early twentieth century show long white aprons covering the embroidered hems of engaged girls' chemises. This style might have been adapted from the popular lingerie dresses of the time, or from the aprons worn by maids in upper-class Athenian households. A third urban style that found its way into the village wardrobe was a blouse-apron combination that became fashionable during the 1920s and 1930s. Often these were made from pastel-colored crepe de chine. They were worn over a narrow-bordered chemise that had been cut at the waist to make a skirt. An abbreviated *griza* completed the outfit.

New dyes and fabrics also generated change. When aniline dyes appeared in the villages around 1890, the women quickly employed them to dye the silk threads they used to embroider the chemises. Soon the soft natural dye colors gave way to bright reds, yellows, and purples. Similarly, in the Peloponnesian villages of Argolida and Corinthia that I visited, the old hand-woven headscarves disappeared when printed cotton scarves became available. The older scarves were handspun from cotton, and they were meticulously embroidered along the ends. Their disappearance from village wardrobes began in the mid nineteenth century, and consequently they are quite rare in museum collections. Fifty years later in these villages, machine-spun cotton yarns became available, and women started weaving checked and striped cotton fabrics and sewing them into ruffled skirts and blouses adapted from paper patterns. They individualized them through addition of ribbons, bias tape, and rickrack trim, and by cutting scalloped edges on the hems. Women in these villages also commented on style leaders as the initiators of change. For example, one woman referred to local girls who wore the new ruffled skirts as 'the aristocracy' (Interview, village of Ligourio, Argolida, 12 November 1986).

Another feature of fashionable dress is that individuals think that they are expressing their uniqueness through their appearance. This occurs even though the styles worn by the individual resemble those worn by the majority. In each of the provinces that I visited, I heard this same thinking. I asked women how they decided which design to embroider,

or which pattern to weave. Repeatedly they told me that each woman embroidered or wove whatever she wanted. If they saw a design they liked, they copied it. In this way, the embroideries and woven patterns of the fabrics continually evolved.

Critics of fashion complain that people spend too much money following the latest trends. This was also a complaint in the Messoghia villages of Attica, where the amount of gold incorporated into the wedding ensemble became an issue. One interviewee explained: 'People were going to extremes and spent whole fortunes, all the money they had, on the costumes and jewelry' (Interview, village of Markopoulo, Attica, 9 July 1983). The brides who had the richest-looking ensembles, covered in gold, engendered jealousy among poorer brides. As a result, local authorities in one community passed a sumptuary law that prevented people from paying money to have someone embroider the *griza*, the sleeveless wool overcoat.

Men's clothing was not immune to fashion. In the Greek villages I visited, men more often than not were the first ones to incorporate Western styles into their wardrobes. This can be seen in paintings and dated wedding photographs. During the Turkish occupation, men were depicted in Turkish-style *vraka* (baggy breeches). After the Greeks won their independence from the Ottoman Turks, they adopted the full white skirt known as the *foustanella*. This was the dress of the fierce Albanian soldiers who helped the Greeks during the war. Grooms who married in the mid to late nineteenth century tended to wear the *foustanella*, which had become standard formal wear. By the turn of the century, men started wearing Western-style trousers with abbreviated *foustanella* shirts. As the twentieth century progressed, grooms gave up the *foustanella* and wore Western-style suits.

It would be remiss of me to omit mentioning that dress in the Greek village is governed by a number of factors other than fashion. In many of the communities, ethnicity was a major factor affecting dress. Because people with different cultural backgrounds resided in the same regions, dress helped differentiate the groups. For example, the Attica villages were almost exclusively inhabited by people who had emigrated from Albania centuries before, beginning in the fourteenth century during a period of unrest. Some of them still spoke a form of Albanian as their first language. Likewise, in the provinces of Argolida and Corinthia in the Peloponnese, the transhumant shepherds known as Sarakatsani wore markedly different clothes than the settled villagers as they travelled between their summer pastures high in the mountains and the winter grazing grounds near the sea. The settled villagers referred to the shepherds as 'tent people,' easily recognizable through their dress.

Location also affected the availability of materials and the diffusion of new styles. Those villages situated close to the sea had greater exposure to new ideas about dress than those in remote mountainous locations. This was not always the case, however, as demonstrated in the Messoghia villages of Attica. These villages are very near to Athens. Certainly the inhabitants of these villages saw the fashionable attire of urban dwellers, but chose to retain their local forms of dress as an expression of their ethnicity as Greek-Albanians.

Conclusion

For many decades, the study of fashion history has been limited to Western dress worn primarily in urban environments. In this paper, I have shown that Greek folk dress demonstrated some of the features of a fashion system, and thus should not be

excluded from the history of fashion. 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.

Note

1. For discussion of the terms 'costume,' 'fashion,' and 'dress,' see Welters and Lillethun (2011: xxvi).

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