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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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11 WEST 53RD STREET, NEW YORK 19, N. Y.

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TRADITION CHALLENGED IN MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

EXHIBITION, ARE CLOTHES MODERN?

In opening to the public on Wednesday, November 29, its exhibition Are Clothes Modern? the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, hopes to stimulate a fundamentally fresh approach to the problems of apparel. Although the exhibition does not offer specific dress reform and is in no sense a fashion show, its original and graphic analysis of the function of clothes indicates directions toward intelligent change now that ideas and conventions of dress are undergoing modification because of the war. It is the hope of the Museum that the exhibition, by stimulating a re-examination of the subject, may have a beneficial effect on dress comparable to that already accomplished by the modern analysis of function in the field of architecture.

The exhibition, directed by Bernard Rudofsky, noted architect and designer, has a special installation designed by Mr. Rudofsky in the first floor galleries of the Museum and is arranged in ten general sections which, however, sometimes overlap or flow imperceptibly into one another. These are the Unfashionable Human Body, Excess and Superfluity, Trousers versus Skirts, the Desire to Conform, Posture Causes and Effects, the Abuse of Materials, Wisdom in Period and Folk Dress, American Pioneers, the Revival of the Rational, and the Domestic Background of Clothing.

Monroe Wheeler, the Museum's Director of Exhibitions, comments on Are Clothes Modern? as follows:

"In presenting this exhibition the Museum of Modern Art has no specific dress reform to expound or advocate. The purpose of the exhibition is to encourage creative thought about the problems of modern apparel.

"Dress is an aspect of human expression governed largely by ancient habits and subconscious sensibilities. It constitutes the field in which the greatest number of people manifest their esthetic sense, for better or worse.

"Because of this universal concern, it seems worth while to illumine some of the mysteries of irrational likes and dislikes so that the individual, with increased self-knowledge, may be encouraged to dress economically, sensibly, and with esthetic satisfaction.

"The exhibition throws light upon a great number of mystifying, humorous or shocking habits. It shows the present

overburdened by the past, a needless waste of materials, and a superfluity and obsolescence of detail, as well as arbitrary or barbarous malformations. It all forms a maze of the irrational and the accidental--a maze from which it is time to escape.

"Certain improvements are suggested, but these are entirely tentative for we realize that any real progress depends upon enlightened public action.

"Mr. Bernard Rudofsky was chosen to direct the exhibition because his fourteen years' research on the subject have enabled him to analyze the superstitions, traditions and conventions by which we are subconsciously bound, and to clarify the fundamental principles which should govern clothing in a democratic age and country."

The exhibition consists of diagrams, photographs and enlargements, articles of clothing and ornament, and models. Along the corridor leading into the exhibition are representations of the human form from cave drawings through Renaissance wood engravings, to modern fashion pictures. This continues into the first section, the Unfashionable Human Body and the three basic reasons for clothing: decoration, modesty, protection.

Decoration is subdivided into various phases such as:

- Painting: body, face, hair, nails
- Tattooing
- Cicatrization
- Mutilation and deformation: head binding, shaving, slit and stretched ear lobes, civilized waist and foot deformation, savage stretched necks.

The topography of modesty is presented through two eight-foot human figures, male and female, in diagram form. Strings attached to various parts of the body lead to objects and photographs depicting facets of modesty demanded by place, time or fashion.

A small corridor serves as a shrine for Body Idols--four small plaster figures, designed by Rudofsky and modeled by Costantino Nivola, which show a woman's body as it would have appeared had it fitted the clothes of four fashion periods: the dowager type with the shelf-like overhanging mono-bosom; the concave boyish form of the '20s; the Grecian urn figure of around 1910 which appeared to have but a single leg dividing like the end of a fish's tail into two flippers or feet at the bottom of the hobble skirt; and the lady of the '80s whose figure literally conformed to her tremendous bustle. This last was too heavy a strain on mere plaster, therefore the artist who modeled it added two extra legs to hold up the lady's posterior, thus turning her into a charming lady Centaur.

The exhibition covers such a vast field with so many ramifications and such a multiplicity of fascinating and thought-provoking detail that only a few phases of it can be mentioned here. For example, there is a brief investigation into the arbitrary

distinction between the sexes as shown in their dress--the Western identification of the skirt with femininity and the trousers with masculinity, and the Oriental reverse of this.

Symbolism is shown by the exhibition to be as slavishly observed in civilized dress as in the paraphernalia of any primitive tribe. The elegant exterior pockets of today which would be ruined if put to practical use are chiefly a symbol of past function, i.e., the pocket in which something was actually carried, while in American men's and women's service uniforms the employment of fake pockets and useless buttons is compulsory.

Patterns come in for merciless dissection and analysis. Pattern machines of several generations ago and adjustable dress-makers' dummies with a bewildering array of mechanical gadgets to fit the pattern to any figure are displayed. Patterns from 1544 to 1943 are traced on the walls of the exhibition and resemble modern abstractions by Miro or Arp. A brief bow is made to Amelia Bloomer and Isadora Duncan as pioneers in the simplification of dress. There are also pictures of the imaginary clothes dreamed up by fashion forecasters, one of whom in 1901 designed the "clothes of the future" to be worn in 1915--guesses actually not too far off the mark and which had some features to recommend them.

Enlarged photographs of four contemporary garments (two dresses, two coats) designed and executed by Irene Schawinsky are shown as examples of clothing which can be made without mutilating the material by cutting a complicated pattern which almost requires an engineering degree to decipher. Each of these contemporary garments is composed of one or two pieces of material ingeniously joined. All four of the garments demonstrate that beauty and simplicity of line and fabric transcend the dictates of any period, style or fashion.

A similar triumph over the tyranny of fashion is achieved by an array of sandals and sandal-shoes designed and executed by Mr. Rudofsky himself, which will be on display. These sandals are asymmetrical to conform with the shape of the human foot, and combine both beauty and utility.

The final section of the exhibition is composed of specially built models which indicate some of the ways in which clothing and footwear designed on entirely new and rational principles might influence the floors and furniture of a house and eventually the architecture of the house itself.

Even a brief description of the exhibition would be incomplete without comment from Mr. Rudofsky himself as its director.

He says in part:

"Is it not astonishing that clothes, one of the essentials of life, have withstood any rational investigation such as we apply to food or shelter? It is all the more puzzling when we consider certain striking similarities of dress and architecture.

"The purpose of this exhibition is not to extricate the monstrosity of modern dress from the mass of confusing tradition, but rather to show its tremendous power in dominating and conditioning all phases of life. Quite apart from its psychological effect, which the wearer experiences directly, dress still dictates our behavior. Most of the discomforts of our homes and furnishings, of our routine of working, relaxing, sleeping, eating, bathing, playing, traveling, etc., can be traced back to our unfortunate but well-established ideas of bundling up our bodies. The inventions of the last century have brought innumerable blessings into daily life; our garments, exquisitely inconvenient though they were, stayed on with minor variations.

"It is strange that dress has been generally denied the status of art, when it is actually a most happy summation of esthetic, philosophic and psychological components. While painting, sculpture and dance have very definite limitations, dress at its best not only comprises notable elements of these arts, but its sovereign expressiveness through form, color, rhythm--it has to be worn to be alive--its intimate relation to the very source and standard of all esthetic evaluations, the human body, should make it the supreme achievement among the arts."

In assembling the material for the exhibition Mr. Rudofsky has had as his assistant Anne Tredick of the Museum staff, and has received the generous cooperation of The American Museum of Natural History, The Brooklyn Museum, The Museum of Costume Art, Laverne Originals, George Platt Lynes, Saks Fifth Avenue, Barbara Sutro, and the Traphagen School of Fashion, who have contributed objects, time and help.

Other lenders to the exhibition include Mrs. Anni Albers; Boston Quartermaster Depot; Mrs. Edward Brennan; The Butterick Company, Inc.; Capezio, Inc.; CAVU Clothes; Celanese Celluloid Corporation; Cluett, Peabody & Co., Inc.; Clyde Associates; Jacqueline Cochran; Emil Corsillo, Inc.; Rene d'Harnoncourt; Mrs. Augustin Duncan; Fifth Avenue Coach Co.; Toni Frissell; Gotham Carpet Co.; The H. W. Gossard Co.; Dorothy Gray, Ltd.; Merry Hull; Julius Kayser & Co.; Knox Hat Company; Ewing Krainin; Lewis and Conger; Helen Liebert; Eugene, Inc.; Mrs. Bryant McCampbell; The McDowell School; I. Miller & Sons, Inc.; Alan E. Murray Laboratories; Claire McCardell; The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Mrs. Sherman Rogers; Helena Rubinstein; Dr. Scholl's Foot Comfort Shops; U. S. Plywood Corporation; Susanne Wasson-Tucker; and Warner Brothers Co.

Bernard Rudofsky, born April 13, 1905 in Zauchtel, Moravia, was graduated in 1928 as architect and engineer from the Polytechnic Academy (Technische Hochschule) of Vienna, and in 1931 received a doctor's degree from the same institution. He practiced architecture in Austria, Germany, Italy and Brazil.

Since 1922 he has traveled extensively in Europe, Asia Minor, North and South America, and has designed stage sets, exhibitions, furniture, shoes and clothing, with exhibitions of architectural photographs and paintings in Europe and South America.

A nine-month study trip brought him to the United States in 1935-36. He has been living in New York since 1941, when he took out citizenship papers in this country.

An architect friend of Mr. Rudofsky, Felix Augenfeld, has written the following engaging sketch of him:

"Bernard Rudofsky is of the disapproving kind. His disapproval of the institutions of this world reaches a very unusual degree of intensity, a degree which makes his keen displeasure turn into creative impulse. And since he disapproves of many more things than the average person, he finds that, at the age of 39, he has been successfully active in a number of varied fields. He is, or has been, an architect, engineer, industrial designer, stage designer, editor, musician, actor, fashion designer, shoemaker, archeologist, photographer and typographer. He considers human dwellings the crowning failure of mankind and has therefore made architecture his main profession.

"Like every Viennese he likes music and the stage. His other passion is traveling on which he has spent one-third of his time and every single penny he could spare. Thus he became acquainted with the Balkans and their primitive ways of living, with Asia Minor and Greece, where money is non-essential, with Switzerland, France, Scandinavia and the old Weimar Germany. He has come to the conclusion that people fight and quibble because of lack of privacy, dress stupidly, eat badly, and drink only to stop worrying.

"In 1931 he left Berlin and his architectural work to go South and find out how to enjoy life, to build and to work intelligently. For the next five years he indulged in his passion for living on remote Mediterranean islands like Procida, Ischia, Capri. A house he designed for himself was forbidden by the Military High Command since it was windowless and of such unusual design that it aroused suspicion.

"Mr. Rudofsky has frequently exposed himself voluntarily to the refreshing experience of starting life in a new country. He is in the habit of arriving there without any money in his pocket and of leaving for another country the very moment he is threatened with financial success. He had his narrowest escape in Milan, Italy, where in 1937 he was planning hotels radically different from today's pattern and where he was editing and writing for a magazine of art and architecture.

"In 1938 he settled in Buenos Aires, but the winter climate drove him to tropical Rio de Janeiro. During three years of architectural work in Brazil he built some houses which in Europe were considered the best on the American continent. Of his work Sacheverell Sitwell said, '...in the space of three years he built a pair of private houses that in their way are among the greatest successes of the whole modern movement. The Arnstein House...has been described as the most beautiful house in the entire American continent.'

"He came to the United States three years ago when he won a prize in the Industrial Design Competition sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art. After learning his fifth language, he worked for a year as associate editor and art director of an architectural magazine.

"Most of Mr. Rudofsky's time is spent on what seems to everyone most unrewarding and impractical--study and reading, collecting material in support of his favorite idea: that modern architecture is just another kind of failure. He believes it is bound to be so because architecture is the most integrated expression of our way of living. In order to create good architecture ways of living must be critically investigated. Thus a revised scale of values has to be applied to the functions of our daily life, such as eating, drinking, sleeping, dressing, music making, recreation and social life. Architecture in the broader sense in which he conceives it has to be approached by readjusting the elements on which it is based."

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PARTIAL LIST OF LABELS FOR EXHIBITION ARE CLOTHES MODERN?

WARNING

This is not a fashion or dress reform exhibition. It aims to show how and why we dress as we do, and how greatly clothing influences our behavior. It examines clothing as the chemist analyzes food and as the architect studies shelter. It shows the maze of the irrational clothing habits from which it is time to escape.

We hope that it will help you to ignore the appeals of advertisers and fashion editors and demand clothing which is sensible, economical, esthetically gratifying and appropriate to our democratic age.

"Nothing resembles Man less than a man." (Balzac)

Man has always been bored with his anatomy. He considers it only a point of departure for his creations.

The changing ideals of beauty are hard to live up to.

Modesty is not so simple a virtue as honesty.

Modesty is conditioned by age, habit, custom, law, epoch, time of day, country, surroundings, climate.

The more helpless a woman, the more attractive she is supposed to be to man. To keep her from moving freely, he hampers her walk with anklets, stilts, hobbleskirts and heels.

"Until public demand for more intelligent help is definitely aroused, any forward change within the industry will be held subservient to financial profits..."

"There is no proper model of shoe for all varieties of feet, unless we revert to the loosely fitting moccasin or sandal..."

"...the shoe trade has been permitted to profit enormously from the public's confusion and helplessness."

Dudley J. Morton, M.D. in Shoes and Foot Health, Journal of Home Economics, Jan. 1941

The natural shape of the human foot has not changed since prehistoric times. With infinite patience we try all our lives to reshape our feet to an ideal established by shoe manufacturers in the form of the "last."

Women passionately defend high-heeled footwear because the deformation of foot and walk constitutes a focus of erotic attraction.

We do not need to carry the filth of the streets into our homes on our shoes. Orientals have solved this problem satisfactorily. With panel-heated floors we shall not need footwear for warmth and it may become purely decorative.

Garments and footwear should be designed with a view to the way they are cleaned and kept, as well as to the way they are worn. Luggage could be made to hold the transparent drawers in which our clothes are kept at home.

This is an extreme example of an UNEVEN FLOOR. Its advantages:

1. It conserves the tactile sensibility of our feet, which flat surfaces and modern shoes have destroyed. In nature, the only perfectly flat hard surface is ice.
2. It offers new possibilities to the sculptor who could make it a work of art to be touched as well as seen.
3. It excludes conventional furniture and hard-soled footwear.
4. It might be more agreeable to sit on than a flat floor.

The ultimate triumph of contemporary clothing is the symmetrical shoe; our deepest regret is our inability to develop a symmetrical foot.

Body deformation is closely linked to moral concepts and therefore becomes a symbol of respectability; hence our present acquiescence to the deformation of the foot.

We don't know any better way of using a fabric than cutting it to pieces. These pieces put together in the cabalistic art of the tailor becomes our clothes.

Instead of turning out simulated tailor-made clothes, industry could produce intelligent garments, designed for machine production and for machine production only. These would be modern clothes.

In the clothing tradition of highly civilized peoples, cutting is disdained.

Machine-made imitations of hand-made articles have never been acceptable to people of good taste. Yet we still tolerate the mass-produced imitations of individually tailored clothes.

Fake pockets symbolize efficiency; real pockets are not meant to be used.

Fattening of young girls precedes marriage among some African tribes. The reverse procedure is practiced in our civilization.

Thirty years ago people thought of the whalebone corset as a kind of physical and moral armor, like Joan of Arc's. Isadora Duncan helped to strengthen the public belief that the lack of corset and shoes was a sign of depravity.

Human monsters have always been a source of morbid interest. The follies of historic costume and our own readiness to adopt absurd clothing and body fashions can be traced to this fascination.

The cultivation and embellishment of man's hair was always considered an agreeable duty. It was looked upon as a symbol of man's virility. Our puritanism has disdained nature's gift, and has invented ingenious machinery to eradicate it.

The glamorous uniform as the outward sign of martial character is gone forever. All pretension of radiating confidence through ostentatious clothes has here been dropped.

If we are to have real comfort while eating, we should have fewer eating tools: the spoon of the convict may conquer the table of the gourmet.

The free use of color - blue hair, green eyelids, orange or purple lips, red nails - exemplifies an irrepressible desire to correct nature.

Modern woman does not need the painter's canvas; her own body serves as well.

Clothes made from geometric shapes - squares, triangles, rectangles, and circles - have eminent advantages over conventional dress:

They eliminate complicated piecing and sewing.

They can be easily folded or rolled without losing shape.

Their simplicity and adjustability do away with our expensive and wasteful systems of sizes.

Since they can be manufactured inexpensively, more and better clothes can be purchased.

They would end our artificial categories (white tie, black tie, afternoon, etc.). They can fulfill any number of functions.

We shall again become aware of the inherent beauty of uncut materials.

"That men in a modern age will tolerate such clothing indicates, to say the least, an insensitivity and a stupid fear of change that is alarming. Can a worth-while new world come of such a herd of asses? It begins to seem doubtful."

From Baker Brownell: Art is Action, 1939.

The modern tendency in dress is toward elimination. Man seeks comfort; the young woman seeks attention.

The tubular clothing of modern man derives from the clowns' costumes of the Commedia dell'Arte. It was adopted at the time of the French revolution and has scarcely changed for five generations.

The quantity of paint on the female body is steadily increasing.

Probably more men wear skirts than women, and more women wear trousers than men.

Painting, tattooing, cicatrization, deformation and mutilation are not restricted to primitives.

By dividing the body into erotic zones we can easily see the complexities of modesty.

Anthropologists agree that clothes are not primarily for protection or concealment. Our strongest impulse is the desire for ornamentation and display.

What glass beads are to the savage, buttons and pockets are to the civilized.

Period and folk dress have been interminably ransacked for ornamental detail. But their ingenuity and wisdom have yet to be understood.

A change in dress from the irrational to the rational will bring about a parallel change in our surroundings and will permit better living. The exquisite inconvenience of modern dinner dress has made us forget that reclining is the most comfortable and healthy position for dining.

"The dress industry is the only industry in the country that produces its goods with no regard for the demands of its customers."
(H. Stanley Marcus)

Here is the full absurdity of our clothing taboos: the shirt to the right is the correct attire for social gatherings; the one to the left is not tolerated in polite society.

"The consciousness of being perfectly dressed may bestow a peace such as religion cannot give." (Herbert Spencer)