

Fashion Classic?



This was written in response to a request than I explain further what I meant by a fashion classic.)

Dear

Thanks for asking me to elaborate further on the idea of a Fashion Classic. At first sight it would appear that to refer to something, as a 'fashion classic' is a glaring contradiction. On the one hand lies the world of fashion, that is something characterised by constant change. Indeed, take out the element of change and most of us would feel that we are no longer in the presence of

fashion. Against this is the idea of a classic that is something that exhibits a degree of formal continuity over time. It is something that seems to be above the very changes that define fashion. How to bring them together? The answer, I think, lies in the fact that if we examine the idea of a classic more closely we will see that it is a place where change and stability are at work simultaneously. Excluded from this are the kinds of clothing that James Laver called ‘formalized and fossilised dress’, as well as the short-lived bodily decorations worn for festive events such as Carnivals, Mardi Gras, etc. (1) Fashion classics are those garments where novelty and continuity are held together in a stable union. Move too far either way and the beauty of the garments will be lost either to the preposterous or to the mundane.

When we talk about a fashion classic we don’t mean something that simply remains the same. What we mean is a ‘something’ capable of being reinterpreted over and over again. That ‘something’ is a set of dress principles that can be found at work either in a single garment or, as is more likely, in a sequence of clothes spread over time. For instance, the standard male suit is an excellent example of a classic in that it has changed in its details (two button/ three button.) but whose overall principles have remained the same. So, paradoxically, a classic is a place where a deal of change can take place just so long as it doesn’t violate the fundamental principles of a particular garment, or ensemble. Each of these sets of changes can be seen as variations that take place around the core principles

of, in this case, the male suit. In this sense they are similar to a set of musical variations that are played around a common theme.

Not every piece of unchanging clothing can be said to be a fashion classic. Garments and outfits that are determined by ceremonial, military, ritual, and other traditions, are not classics. The fashion classic has to be able to freely change and remain the same without the force of law and convention. In that sense, a fashion classic is the creation of democratic, consumer oriented societies where a high level of individual choice in goods, such as clothing, is encouraged but where the *forms* of much of our clothing display a degree of inertia towards any disruption of their fundamental principles. The fashion industry may encourage what we might call frivolous change so as to boost its sales but the principles of dress may persist beneath the breaking waves of novelty.

The fashion classic will tend to be a garment, or ensemble, that steers clear of extremes. For instance, styles of clothing which play with asymmetry will usually be short-lived. Tops tend to have two sleeves rather than one. Clothing that elaborates on an already stable form will tend to quickly fade. For instance, flared trousers (pants) will always tend to return to a middle width. Certain dress forms seem to be more complete, more coherent than others. They appear to be resistant to the forces of fashion, which are constantly trying to break down existing garments and recast them anew. In

short, they are forms of clothing, which replay the human body to us as a balanced and coherent whole, rather than treating the body as something upon which isolated individual pieces may be hung or attached. The classics I have in mind here are jeans (Levi 501's) and white T-shirt or the 'little black dress'. The dresses of Jean Muir. A sure sign of a fashion classic is that it never becomes a source of ridicule, as is often the case with more extreme fashions.

Hope this is of use,

Best wishes

Michael Carter

- (1) See James Laver, *Modesty in Dress*, 1969. Chapter 4, 'Formalized and Fossilized Dress'

Further Thought

Contrary to appearances, stability is not sufficient enough to define a fashion classic. For instance, I have a favourite pair of slippers, which have changed only as a result of the wear they have received over the years.

But this stability does not make them a fashion classic. 'Fashion Classic' is something that has to be confined to the clothing we wear when we go out into the world rather than the clothing we choose when we are relaxing in private. It presupposes public visibility and an appreciation of the ways in

which its core principles are handled. The meanings of *fashion* and *classic* are, before all else, indications that they unfold within a public dimension.