

# Questionnaire

1. When someone labels your love for clothes as frivolous, do you respond,
  - a) “Is *not*,” and stick out your tongue?
  - b) With a whimper?
  - c) “A little frivolity is good for the soul,” and smile mysteriously?
2. What frivolities do you allow yourself?
3. What do you consider too frivolous to indulge in? Why?
4. What, if any, frivolities do you long for but deny yourself? Who suffers for it?
5. What allows you an experience of grace? If you moved through life like a swan moves along the surface of the water, what would you wear?



# *The Personal Politics of Frivolity*

*Dress is a very foolish thing. Yet it is a very foolish thing for a man not to be well dressed.*

—Lord Chesterfield, 1745<sup>1</sup>

Personal style consultant Barbara Jay comments, “Clothes have not always been considered so frivolous. As Alison Lurie, who wrote *The Language of Clothes*, says, clothes have been a function of cultural status. The slaves in Egypt weren’t allowed to wear any clothes at all, and we can see how, at various points in the history of clothing, people have been more or less elaborately dressed to indicate their status.” We can see this in the sumptuary laws issued throughout history by royalty to prevent people of certain social classes from wearing, for example, ermine, purple, or specific kinds of fabric. Jay continues, “It’s still with us to a certain degree because the work of the very best designers and the very best and most opulent fabrics can only be afforded by those who have means.”

The kind of status employed today by the lucky few who can afford couture has a profoundly different impact than the sumptuary laws of yesterday did. When the finest clothes were associated with royalty, mocking the love of luxury could result in death. Napoleon was known to criticize women of his court if he saw them more than once in the same dress on the same day, asking, “Madame, is that the only dress you possess?”<sup>2</sup> and thus controlling them by sending them scurrying for new clothes. He wanted to make France the center of the fashion industry and, more importantly, knew that if he could make the court obsessed with clothing, it would distract them from politics and allow him to rule unimpeded.

Today there is no court, no emperor, and he has no new clothes; anyone with money can buy fancy clothes. And everyone is free to criticize. It’s useful to note that the expression “fashion victims” was coined by the very industry rag that created them, *Women’s Wear Daily*. Their in-and-out lists are the closest we come to any sort of fashionable court today, outside of the mini-courts formed by our private circles. And their lists only attend to the very rich, connected, or famous. Maybe our discomfort with the fall of the hierarchy, with the difficulty in discerning who is to be respected by the way they dress, is reflected in our dismissal of clothing as frivolous. Democracy, by definition, would seem to eliminate or disdain such categories. With all people created equal, how do we determine what is acceptable, who is superior? How do we establish criteria?

While status ambivalence may contribute to accusations of frivolity, Judeo-Christian teaching may also add fuel to the fire. Some fundamentalists bawl that by loving clothes, ornament, and show, we align ourselves with the biblical harlots. For example, Isaiah 3:16-24:

Then the Lord said: Because the women of Zion hold themselves high and walk with necks outstretched and wanton glances moving with mincing gait and jingling feet, the Lord will give the women of Zion bald heads, the Lord will strip the hair from their foreheads. In that day the Lord will take away all finery.<sup>3</sup>

What the women are doing seems innocuous. Yet to the author it seemed deserving of contempt and punishment. This leads the reflecting mind to note with amusement the value the male writer(s?)

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of this text placed on a full head of hair. Perhaps the male author(s) of this text could think of no greater suffering than the baldness nature had inflicted on him (them).

Centuries after the Bible was written, prohibitions emigrated to America for religious reasons with the Pilgrims. Barbara Jay sees a correlation between the accusation of frivolity and this aspect of our history when asking why an interest in dress is considered silly: “Why is it such a put-down? Traditionally, clothes have been considered very frivolous. We live in America. This is a Puritan culture.” The Puritans had rules regarding modesty in dress. People were outcast, and later, at Salem, were burned at the stake for disobeying rules. Jay continues:

So we are very moralistic. On one hand, one’s image is not supposed to be very important because of this heritage. On the other hand, we’re totally image-oriented in this culture. So much is surface. Women are really caught between a rock and a hard place, particularly women who are shopping compulsively, women whose self-esteem is not intact. For some reason, they’re considered frivolous because they are interested in something so “stupid” as clothes.

Simplicity in dress (as opposed to love of adornment) was also celebrated by the early patriots for political reasons. They sought to encourage American independence, to influence people not to want Europe’s goods. Fashion historian Caroline Rennolds Milbank notes that before American fashion there was an American style which had its roots in “the patriotic determination, after the Revolutionary War, to wear home grown, home spun, and home sewn clothes.” George and Martha Washington, as well as religious groups such as the Amish and the Quakers, set the example. “Simplicity in dress celebrated both self-sufficiency and the freedoms inherent in a democracy.”<sup>4</sup>

As America prospered, love of dress and finery grew more popular. Until the Industrial Revolution, among the wealthy, both men and women participated with equal enthusiasm in indulgence in fine clothing. Many men, now remembered for other things here and abroad, were known in their time as great dandies, among them naturalist John James Audubon, writer Charles Dickens, and statesman Benjamin Disraeli. Most wealthy men renounced fashion in favor of the uniform business suit at the dawn of the Industrial Age. These men seized the world as their oyster, and gave women the home and wardrobe—a bad trade. As the new possessors of fancy dress, women were only allowed expression in realms judged frivolous or secondary to the important men’s activities; at that time these included secretarial work, and still include contact sports. Limited to such a small sphere of expression, women’s clothes grew more and more intricate. Davis notes:

Women, having to manipulate a more complex code, could more easily (through mismatches, exaggerations, neglect or obsessive preoccupation with detail, etc.) “make mistakes” and be thought gauche, fussy, dowdy, vulgar. . . .<sup>5</sup>

Laws made by men kept women in this narrow sphere of expression, and then ridiculed them for using that sphere. Writer Iris Young comments:

Misogynist mythology gloats in its portrayal of woman as frivolous body decorators. Well trained to meet the gaze that evaluates us for our finery, for how well we show him off, we then are condemned as sentimental, superficial, duplicitous, because we attend to and sometimes learn to love the glamorous arts. The male gazers paint us gazing at ourselves at our toilet, before the table they call a vanity.<sup>6</sup>

Even in the second half of the twentieth century, some take this viewpoint to its most illogical extreme. Former *Women's Wear Daily* publisher John Fairchild said that “. . . the whole Women's Lib thing is silly. A woman can get anything she wants by being charming.”<sup>7</sup>

The fashion illustrator Vertes urges a more moderate overview of the issue:

Fashion must not be examined indifferently nor yet with an eye that is too critical. Now that men no longer wear frills or satin breeches, they are inclined to frown at the mere mention of Fashion. Come, gentlemen, show a little indulgence for masterpieces in silk and lace! Don't lose your temper over a few feathers and ribbons!<sup>8</sup>

Every woman with whom I spoke about her love of clothes and/or shopping apologized because she's afraid that she sounds obsessive, saying to me, “You must think I'm . . .” or “I'm sorry that I'm talking so much. . . .” Not a single man did. The men talked about the topic with pleasure and confidence. One man, having just shown me his blue lace ball gown, commented, “Somehow I didn't think about it until just now how exposing and strange this is.” He didn't apologize. I told him I wasn't shocked. (I wasn't.) And he responded, “I figured. I don't have lace panties or anything.” And then he went on to discuss his athletic socks.

Men make fun of women, of what they don't understand. Do I understand? Recently, I saw a billboard on La Brea Avenue in Los Angeles: “The problems of the world do not include what to wear. Protest.” Part of the perverse deliciousness of this message is that it's not clear if this is an ad or a hijacked billboard. It tells us that fashion is trivial relative to the *real* issues. True, clothing is not health care or homelessness, but it matters. You have to wear clothes every day. The ambiguity of the source of the message on La Brea reflects the current political slant on the judgments about people involved in fashion. Is this itch to dress beautifully merely one of society's ways of preventing us from examining what's important? Are we being controlled? Joanne Finkelstein, author of *The Fashioned Self*, believes interest in appearance and dress lecherously saps the energy available to make a difference in the world, and to make meaningful connections with others: “To focus so closely on one's style of appearance is to become distracted from concerns that are more morally transcendental, such as involvement with the politics or injustices of the day; such attention to self-adornment has the effect of curtailing or closing off social and political consciousness.”<sup>9</sup> Later she continues, “Human sociality becomes a trade in fashionable items; it is emptied of its spontaneity and easy companionship to become dominated instead by the necessity to display material goods, control impressions and cultivate reputation.”<sup>10</sup>

Does an excessive interest in clothes numb? Sure, there are people overinvolved with the

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fashion/image industry, mindless simps wandering from one plastic surgeon to the next,<sup>11</sup> but there are, and have always been, vigorously engaged political people who love clothing. Queen Elizabeth I was extremely interested in clothes. Former head of Planned Parenthood Faye Wattleton is a fabulous dresser. And I could devote a whole chapter to Hillary Clinton's hair. Clothes lover Jeremy Stone comments:

Men can spend a lot of money on cars and symbols of their masculinity and stereos and CD players and sports events. Men are allowed to spend all of this money on special equipment, special things, clothing associated with different sports, but when it comes to women and clothes that they actually wear to work and in their everyday life, clothes that have to do with them feeling positive and comfortable in their bodies, it's a subject of jokes, ridicule, and sarcasm by men.

(A really good baseball glove costs over \$200. For that kind of money you don't even get a pair!) Many of the traditionally "female" areas of recreation still get trivialized overtly and covertly in our society, as if women don't need to relax or rest, as if doing two-thirds of the world's hourly labor is not enough.<sup>12</sup>

What is it about fashion that brings up strong feelings? What so frightens men that they have to marginalize love of clothing and shopping? Perhaps, in part, they fear the power of transformation. In sport, the uniform remains a constant. It's easy; you know who your friends and enemies are. You know whom to root for. There's our team and their team, and they're the bad guys. There are better players and worse players, and the great players. There are fixed rules to the game, and referees to tell you if you've gone out of line. Sport is easy; you always know where you stand. It ends when the game is over.

Clothes and fashion say that you can't tell your friends from your enemies by looking at them. You have to look deeper. Anyone can buy the look, the gang's uniform. Life is about looking deeper.

Fashion involves a shifting wind of opinion, and playing with it involves sensing that change before others do and risking demonstrating the excitement about how beauty expresses itself in the next week, month, or season. Fashion requires making personal choices that affect how you feel and are perceived all the working hours. It is a game with some consequences, a game which does not end when you put down the magazine. Fashion is harder than sport, because there are no written rules that everyone has agreed to follow. Rather, there is an agreement that the rules constantly change, and that is part of the fun. Winning the game of fashion is defined differently by different "authorities," but who is defined as an authority varies from culture to culture and person to person. Perhaps this frightens some people.

It's also peculiar how women turn against women on this issue. A great many of us forget our history, and don't know our possibilities. Today women call fashion frivolous, too, with the idea that just wearing old jeans and T-shirts is a way around it. *Beauty Secrets* author Wendy Chapkis asks the question, "How did women's *liberation* end up on the side of the sensible over the sexual, the 'efficient, upright and honest' over the colorful and fun?"<sup>13</sup> We broke fashion's unilateral power

over us during the feminist revolution. No longer were dictates from on high obeyed with a “charming docility.” Shari Benstock and Suzanne Ferriss comment:

Feminists of a generation ago, echoing their suffragist precursors, taught women that interest in dress and beauty was the result of a socially produced false consciousness that placed women in league with patriarchal and capitalist power structures. High fashion signaled (hetero)sexual and social oppression, and even “real clothes”—what we wore every day—cinched waists, smoothed out curves and bumps, and constrained our movements. What a relief to unhook brassieres, unzip girdles, and step out of the cage of Jackie Kennedy box suits. Letting our hair down, we proclaimed *Our Bodies Ourselves*. If our shoes pinched, we went barefoot.<sup>14</sup>

The feminist insistence on clothes that actually were comfortable was part of what changed fashion forever, supporting a new multi-channeled course of fashion. Yet somehow sisterhood incorporated a stance of disapproval. Carol Ascher speaks to this disapproval, asking, What if self-decoration gives women a sense of potency to act in the world? Responding to a feminist moralism she hears in her head, Ascher says, “The idea that clothing ought to yield a magical shift in one’s feelings about oneself stems from an austere, prudish rationalism in which one does not allow oneself any comfort or pampering that goes beyond the logical ‘necessity’ into that unreasoned wild place where we all ultimately live.”<sup>15</sup>

All this brouhaha leads to the popular stance that a deep interest in clothes is unnatural. Fashion is scorned as superficial. We are not supposed to care about pleasing the eyes through bodily ornament the same way we can love beautiful music, wonderful food, the scent of roses and rain, the feel of worn-soft wood or a cat’s back. Somehow the desire to show others’ eyes beauty when those eyes are looking at you in clothes is a vain, dishonest waste.

Laurel Fenenga takes the criticism to its logical extreme: “Well, let’s bomb the Louvre while we’re at it.” Closer to the essence of our subject, architecture expert Witold Rybczynski observes:

The notion that what is artless must be better than what is not requires a precarious leap in reasoning, but for all that it carries great weight with the American public—at least judging from the dozens of advertisements that extol “being natural.” It is a shallow conceit. A little reflection shows that all human culture is artificial, cooking no less than music, furniture no less than painting. Why prepare time-consuming sauces when a raw fruit would suffice? Why bother with musical instruments when the voice is pleasant enough? Why paint pictures when looking at nature is satisfying? Why sit up when you can squat?

The answer is that it makes life richer, more interesting, and more pleasurable.<sup>16</sup>

While design can be awful, there’s something deeper about the visual. As Laurel points out, you wouldn’t accuse someone like Cézanne or Rembrandt of being superficial because they only work in a visual medium (“So two-dimensional of them!”). Why can’t we see ourselves as wondrous, transient,

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three-dimensional works of art? What will let us allow ourselves to play in peace? What will give us some measure of acceptance of the things we truly love?

If we have a love of clothes, we're really stuck with it. Those of us who love clothes do so despite the haranguing of those less than sympathetic to our passion, the limits of our budgets, and our inner critic.

Maybe the anger and criticism our culture dumps on fashion and the love of display is a misplaced anger about other things. Laurel Fenenga comments:

Our anger with fashion is a little bit like in a marriage: they say couples fight most about who left the cap off the toothpaste tube, the unwashed dishes, or who picks up the socks. Those are very small things. If you're fighting a lot, there's really something big that everybody's dancing around.

The bitching about fashion is a little bit like dancing around the other things in your life that you don't really want to fix. You say, "Oh, these designers, they just design for young people."

It is true that the most visible fashion in magazines is shown on the young. However, because there are many clothes out there that suit people in all age groups, the anger behind this comment might also reflect a lack of peace with the changes wrought by time on a face and body. Laurel suggests the anger could also reflect "an overall frustration where you have an itch and you can't scratch it." She comments that in her generation, "growing up, everybody felt that they were going to be Grace Kelly or whoever. I wanted to be a princess like her." She laughs about the anger that may bubble up about such a frustrated expectation.

How do women get serious about clothes without self-recrimination? The climate is shifting; women are beginning to take a stand for their interest in clothes. Perhaps we claim our seriousness about clothes while differentiating ourselves from "most women." Daphne Stannard, for example, comments: "Clothing is serious for me in a way that isn't typically female. I don't spend all day thinking about my clothes." We acknowledge that an interest in fashion and clothes can be nourishing in other ways, as Iris Young observes: "I find three pleasures we take in clothes: touch, bonding, and fantasy."<sup>17</sup> We acknowledge that while it is not the Bomb, it's important. And we are selective about whom we share our love with. Clotheshorse Susan Zeidman comments, "When my boyfriend asks, 'Is that a new dress?' because I know he's critical about spending on clothing, I always answer, 'No.'"

Personal style consultant Joan Songer doesn't see an interest in wardrobe as frivolous at all:

Like it or not, our culture pays back to women more dividends for looking good. When we talk about women going shopping, I think it's the opposite of frivolous. There's tremendous pressure for women to look good. And if you don't want to do it, then you pay a price. That's okay, too, particularly here in California, where women have a lot of choices. But the woman who does know how to dress herself beautifully whether she chooses to do it all the time or not has more confidence available to her.

A survey agrees with Joan, showing the shift in other ways. According to a national telephone poll, “American feminists see pride in their appearance as central to their self-respect. . . . Considering how busy women’s lives are, taking time and money to care for yourself requires high self-esteem.”<sup>18</sup>

How else do we counteract the outer and inner voices telling us our passions are ridiculous or trivial? Primo Levi wrote movingly of how, when people in the concentration camps were stripped of garments, their characters were fractured. They were deprived of something fundamentally human.<sup>19</sup> Clothing is integral to our sense of who we are. Who can look at the photos of the piles of glasses or shoes at Auschwitz and not be moved by the thought of the human beings who once wore those objects, who are no more?

Our clothes tell us and others that we are part of the mass of society, that we belong. When the yellow star accessories identified Jews as outcasts in World War II, King Christian of Denmark is believed to have said that if the gold star were introduced, he would be the first to wear one. This story illustrates the humanity of the people of Denmark, from the top down.<sup>20</sup>

With our clothing choices we can literally and symbolically do beautiful things. Style consultant Kathryn Hoover comments: “To express as much beauty as you can tap into within yourself is not an unholy thing to do.” Besides, how can a little self-indulgence be that bad? We know it destroyed the Twelve Caesars, but then we don’t have absolute power. We just have some loose change to pick up a lipstick every once in a while. *Women’s Wear Daily* publisher John Fairchild redeems himself by concurring: “I know that self-indulgence is frowned upon these days, but I don’t see how anything that gives life a romantic lift and a little joy can be put down as wrong.”<sup>21</sup> While he has a financial interest in saying this, we still need to know who we are, and ornament is a way of exploring this. It’s a time-honored reassurance as well as ridiculous good fun. Jeremy Stone comments:

Vanity’s a wonderful thing, especially as you get older and realize that there are a lot of things in life that you have to do for yourself, things that bring you pleasure, and you’re lucky enough to be in touch with the fact that they bring you pleasure. There are very few things in life that bring pleasure these days that are not going to cause you to die of a disease.

Why else ignore the cry, “It’s frivolous”? In her autobiography, *Me*, actress Katharine Hepburn shares her mother’s advice for dealing with the tormentors who would have us forgo our passions for more “serious” pursuits: “Don’t forsake those duties which keep you out of the nuthouse.”

We can have it all. Artist Annabelle d’Huart insists that her preoccupation with her appearance isn’t frivolous. “It’s deliberate,” she says gravely. “It’s my way of resisting the ugliness, vulgarity, and aggressiveness of the world around me.”<sup>22</sup>

This reminded me of an encounter I had a few years ago. The seed for this book was planted on a cold spring day in Boston in 1982, as the clear afternoon light slanted through the venetian blinds in my Italian professor’s office. For a moment I looked up from my textbook and admired his attire. He, a kindly elegant gentleman of perhaps fifty, with a shock of white hair and a goatee, wore a simple wool sweater and a pair of wool pleated trousers and loafers. Color, weight of fabric, texture, and cut blended into a gift to the eye. His sweater fit him perfectly and was always in some subtly altered shade, perhaps still blue, but a grayer blue than expected, or a brown with some green

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in it. His trousers were also of extraordinary fabric, and his shoes were beautifully yet simply designed. I asked him the question that preyed on my mind: “You always dress beautifully, and what is that all about?” After thinking for a moment, he responded seriously:

I am flattered and also embarrassed by your compliment. Thank you. I will tell you. I knew from an early age that the world can be a terrible place. In the war—World War II—I saw things so terrible I cannot mention them here. I realized then that if there are simple things I can do that can make life easier for other people, these things I will do. Among them, I dress so that people will look at me and see something pleasant to look upon, perhaps beautiful. So much of life is difficult. I want to do a small kindness. It is important to bring harmony and beauty back to this troubled world. I do not feel I am the most beautiful person on earth, but rather that it was important to me to give in this way, to know that I am making a contribution.

I think of him walking down the streets of Boston in his pleasant and simple clothes, and he seems to blend eloquently with the old stone buildings and the trees budding in spring. It seems to me that he was on to something.

The business of dressing is important, not just because the clothing industry is huge—what Barbara Jay calls “one of the great chug engines of this country”—and not just because the reason that people quested out from their tribes in the first place was in pursuit of food and cloth, but because dressing beautifully and harmoniously in a way that expresses your essence is a world-changing, world-defining act, a positive contribution, and—despite the negative hype criticizing fashion as frivolous, shallow, and vain—a public service. Beauty uplifts, inspires, and touches people who see us, people whom we will never know.

Notes:

1. Bell, Quentin. *On Human Finery*. Page 18.
2. Anspach, Karlyne. *The Why of Fashion*. Page 42.
3. Davis, Fred. *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*. Page 168.
4. Milbank, Caroline. *New York Fashions*. Page 8.
5. Davis, Fred. Page 41. Lawrence Langer adds the useful reminder, “Immodesty is seldom attributed to the male. He can display torso, arms, legs, and indeed practically every part of his body except one.” [Langer. Page 74.]
6. Benstock, Shari and Suzanne Ferriss, Eds. *On Fashion*. Page 203. Should I remark about the chip firmly lodged on her shoulder, or just let her be?
7. Kelly, Katie. *The Wonderful World of Women’s Wear Daily*. Page 57.
8. Vertes, Marcel. *Art and Fashion*. Page 7.
9. Finkelstein, Joanne. *The Fashioned Self*. Page 113.
10. Finkelstein, Joanne. Page 119.
11. See the searing British television comedy *Absolutely Fabulous*.
12. In this world, women perform two-thirds of the hourly labor, receive ten percent of the income, and hold one percent of the property according to Gayle Binion in “Human Rights: A Feminist Perspective,” in *Human Rights Quarterly*, volume 17, number 3, August 1995, pages 509-526.
13. Chapkis, Wendy. *Beauty Secrets*. Page 131.
14. Benstock. Page 4.
15. Gaines. Page 6.
16. Rybczynski, Witold. *Home*. Page 80.
17. Benstock. Page 203.
18. Sandroff, Ronni. “Surprise! Feminists wear more makeup.” *Glamour*. September 1993. Page 119.
19. Finkelstein. Page 111.
20. This is an urban legend. The Nazis never attempted to force badges on the people of Denmark because they knew how strongly the public sentiment was against such a measure. [*Encyclopaedia of the Holocaust*. Israel Gutman, Ed. Macmillan, New York: 1990. Volume 1. Page 142.]
21. Fairchild, John. *Chic Savages*. Page 35.