

THE PHILOSOPHY OF DRESS
BY OSCAR WILDE.

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There has been within the last few years, both in America and in England, a marked development of artistic taste. It is impossible to go into the houses of any of our friends without seeing at once that a great change has taken place. There is a far greater feeling for color, a far greater feeling for the delicacy of form, as well as a sense that art can touch the commonest things of the household into a certain grace and a certain loveliness. But there is also a whole side of the human life which has been left almost entirely untouched. I mean of course the dress of men and of women...

I have been sometimes accused of setting too high an importance on dress. To this I answer that dress in itself is a thing to me absolutely unimportant. In fact the more complete a dress looks on the dummy-figure of the milliner's shop, the less suitable it is for being worn. The gorgeous costumes of M. Worth's *atelier* seems to me like those Capo di Monte cups, which are all curves and coral-handles, and covered over with a Pantheon of gods and goddesses in high excitement and higher relief; that is to say, they are curious things to look at, but entirely unfit for use. The French milliners consider that women are created specially for them by Providence, in order to display their elaborate and expensive wares. I hold that dress is made for the service of Humanity. They think that Beauty is a matter of frills and furbelows. I care nothing at all for frills, and I don't know what furbelows are, but I care a great deal for the wonder and grace of the human Form, and I hold that the very first canon of art is that Beauty is always organic, and comes from within, and not from without, comes from the perfection of its own being and not from any added prettiness. And that consequently the beauty of a dress depends entirely and absolutely on the loveliness it shields, and on the freedom and motion that it does not impede.

From this it follows that there can be no beauty of national costume until there is a national knowledge of the proportions of the human form. To Greek and Roman such knowledge came naturally from the gymnasium and the palaestra, from the dance in the meadow and the race by the stream. We must acquire it by the employment of art in education. And knowledge of the kind I propose would soon become the inheritance of all, if each child were taught to draw as early as it is taught to write...

And if a child does study the human figure it will learn a great many valuable laws of dress. It will learn, for instance, that a waist is a very beautiful and delicate curve, the more delicate the more beautiful, and not, as the milliner fondly imagines, an abrupt right angle suddenly occurring in the middle of the person. He will learn again that size has nothing to do with beauty. This, I dare say, seems a very obvious proposition. So it is. All truths are perfectly obvious once one sees them. The only thing is to see them. Size is a mere accident of existence, it is not a quality of Beauty ever. A great cathedral is beautiful, but so is the bird that flies round its

pinnacle, and the butterfly that settles on its shaft. A foot is not necessarily beautiful because it is small. The smallest feet in the world are those of the Chinese ladies, and they are the ugliest also.

It is curious that so many people, while they are quite ready to recognize, in looking at an ordinary drawing-room, that the horizontal line of frieze and dado diminishes the height of the room, and the vertical lines of pillar or panel increase it, yet should not see that the same laws apply to dress also. Indeed in modern costume the horizontal line is used far too often, the vertical line far too rarely, and the oblique line scarcely at all.

The waist, for instance, is as a rule placed too low down. A long waist implies a short skirt, which is always ungraceful as it conveys an effect of short limbs, whereas a high waist gives an opportunity of a fine series of vertical lines falling in the folds of the dress down to the feet, and giving a sense of tallness and grace. Broad puffed sleeves, again, by intensifying the horizontal line across the shoulders, may be worn by those that are tall and slight, as they diminish any excessive height and give proportion; by those who are small they should be avoided. And the oblique line, which one gets by a cloak falling from the shoulder across the body, or by a gown looped up at the side, is suitable to almost all figures. It is a line which corresponds to the direction of motion, and conveys an impression of dignity as well as of freedom. There are of course many other applications of these lines. I have mentioned merely one or two in order to remind people how identical the laws of architecture and of dress really are, and how much depends on line and proportion. Indeed the test of a good costume is its silhouette, how, in fact, it would look in sculpture.

But besides line there is also color. In decorating a room, unless one wants the room to be either chaos or a museum, one must be quite certain of one's color-scheme. So also in dress. The harmony of color must be clearly settled. If one is small the simplicity of one color has many advantages. If one is taller two colors or three may be used. I do not wish to give a purely arithmetical basis for an aesthetic question, but perhaps three shades of color are the limit. At any rate it should be remembered that in looking at any beautifully dressed person, the eye should be attracted by the loveliness of line and proportion, and the dress should appear a complete harmony from the head to the feet; and that the sudden appearance of any violent contrasting color, in bow or riband, distracts the eye from the dignity of the ensemble, and concentrates it on a mere detail.

Then as regards the kind of colors, I should like to state once for all there is no such thing as a specially artistic color. All good colors are equally beautiful; it is only in the question of their combination that art comes in. And one should have no more preference for one color over another than one has for one note on the piano over its neighbor. Nor are there any sad colors. There are bad colors, such as Albert blue, and magenta, and arsenic green, and the colors of aniline dyes generally, but a good color always gives one pleasure. And the tertiary and secondary colors are for general use the safest, as they do not show wear easily, and besides give one a sense of repose and quiet. A dress should not be like a steam whistle, for all that M.

Worth may say.

Then as regards pattern. It should not be too definite. A strong marked check, for instance, has many disadvantages. To begin with, it makes the slightest inequality in the figure, such as between the two shoulders, very apparent; then it is difficult to join the pattern accurately at the seams; and lastly, it distracts the eye away from the proportions of the figure, and gives the mere details an abnormal importance.

Then, again, the pattern should not be too big. I mention this, because I happened lately in London to be looking for some stamped gray plush or velvet, suitable for making a cloak of. Every shop that I went into the man showed me the most enormous patterns, things far too big for an ordinary wall paper, far too big for ordinary curtains, things, in fact, that would require a large public building to show them off to any advantage. I entreated the shopman to show me a pattern that would be in some rational and relative proportion to the figure of somebody who was not over ten or twelve feet in height. He replied that he was extremely sorry but it was impossible; the smaller patterns were no longer being woven, in fact, the big patterns were in fashion. Now when he said the word fashion, he mentioned what is the great enemy of art in this century, as in all centuries. Fashion rests upon folly. Art rests upon law. Fashion is ephemeral. Art is eternal. Indeed what is a fashion really? A fashion is merely a form of ugliness so absolutely unbearable that we have to alter it every six months! It is quite clear that were it beautiful and rational we would not alter anything that combined those two rare qualities. And wherever dress has been so, it has remained unchanged in law and principle for many hundred years. And if any of my practical friends in the States refuse to recognize the value of the permanence of artistic laws, I am quite ready to rest the point entirely on an economic basis. The amount of money that is spent every year in America on dress is something almost fabulous. I have no desire to weary my readers with statistics, but if I were to state the sum that is spent yearly on bonnets alone, I am sure that one-half of the community would be filled with remorse and the other half with despair! 80 I will content myself with saying that it is something quite out of proportion to the splendor of modern dress, and that its reason must be looked for, not in the magnificence of the apparel, but rather in that unhealthy necessity for change which Fashion imposes on its beautiful and misguided votaries.

I am told, and I am afraid that I believe it, that if a person has recklessly invested in what is called 'the latest Paris bonnet,' and worn it to the rage and jealousy of the neighborhood for a fortnight, her dearest friend is quite certain to call upon her, and to mention incidentally that that particular kind of bonnet has gone entirely out of fashion. Consequently a new bonnet has at once to be bought, that Fifth-ave. may be appeased, and more expense entered into. Whereas were the laws of dress founded on art instead of on fashion, there would be no necessity for this constant evolution of horror from horror. What is beautiful looks always new and always delightful, and can no more become old-fashioned than a flower can. Fashion, again, is reckless of the individuality of her worshippers, cares nothing whether they be tall or short, fair or dark, stately or slight, but bids them all be attired exactly in the same way, until she can invent some new wickedness. Whereas Art permits, nay even ordains to each, that perfect liberty which

comes from obedience to law, and which is something far better for humanity than the tyranny of tight lacing or the anarchy of aniline dyes.

And now as regards the cut of the dress.

The first and last rule is this, that each separate article of apparel is to be suspended from the shoulders always, and never from the waist. Nature, it should be noted, gives one no opportunity at all of suspending anything from the waist's delicate curve. Consequently by means of a tight corset a regular artificial ledge has to be produced, from which the lower garment may be securely hung. Where there are petticoats, there must be corsets. Annihilate the former and the latter disappear. And I have no hesitation in saying that whenever in history we find that dress has become absolutely monstrous and ugly, it has been partly of course through the mistaken idea that dress has an independent existence of its own, but partly also through the fashion of hanging the lower garments from the waist. In the sixteenth century, for instance, to give the necessary compression, Catharine de Medicis, High-Priestess of poison and petticoats, invented a corset which may be regarded as the climax of a career of crime. It was made of steel, had a front and a back to it like the cuirass of a fire-brigade man, and was secured under the left arm by a hasp and pin, like a Saratoga trunk. Its object was to diminish the circumference of the waist to a circle of thirteen inches, which was the fashionable size without which a lady was not allowed to appear at court; and its influence on the health and beauty of the age may be estimated by the fact that the normal waist of a well-grown woman is an oval of twenty-six to twenty-eight inches certainly.

As one bad habit always breeds another, in order to support the weight of the petticoats the fardingale was invented also. This was a huge structure, sometimes of wicker-work like a large clothes-basket, sometimes of steel ribs, and extended on each side to such an extent that in the reign of Elizabeth an English lady in full dress took up quite as much room as we would give now to a very good sized political meeting. I need hardly point out what a selfish fashion this was, considering the limited surface of the globe. Then in the last century there was the hoop, and in this the crinoline. But, I will be told, ladies have long ago given up crinoline, hoop and fardingale. That is so. And I am sure we all feel very grateful to them. I certainly do. Still, does there not linger, even now, amongst us that dreadful, that wicked thing, called the Dress-Improver? Is not that vilest of all diminutives, the crinolette, still to be seen! I am quite sure that none of my readers ever dream of wearing anything of the kind. But there may be others who are not so wise, and I wish it could be conveyed to them, delicately and courteously, that the hour-glass is not the ideal of Form. Often a modern dress begins extremely well. From the neck to the waist the lines of the dress itself follow out with more or less completeness the lines of the figure; but the lower part of the costume becomes bell-shaped and heavy, and breaks out into a series of harsh angles and coarse curves. Whereas if from the shoulders, and the shoulders only, each separate article were hung, there would be then no necessity for any artificial supports of the kind I have alluded to, and tight lacing could be done away with. If some support is considered necessary, as it often is, a broad woollen band, or band of elastic webbing, held up by shoulder straps, would be found quite sufficient.

So much on the cut of the dress, now for its decoration.

The French milliner passes a lurid and lucrative existence in sewing on bows where there should be no bows, and flounces where there should be no flounces. But, alas! his industry is in vain. For all ready-made ornamentation merely makes a dress ugly to look at and cumbersome to wear. The beauty of dress, as the beauty of life, comes always from freedom. At every moment a dress should respond to the play of the girl who wears it, and exquisitely echo the melody of each movement and each gesture's grace. Its loveliness is to be sought for in the delicate play of light and line in dainty rippling folds and not in the useless ugliness and ugly uselessness of a stiff and stereotyped decoration. It is true that in many of the latest Paris dresses which I have seen there seems to be some recognition of the value of folds. But unfortunately the folds are all artificially made and sewn down, and so their charm is entirely destroyed. For a fold in a dress is not a fact, an item to be entered in a bill, but a certain effect of light and shade which is only exquisite because it is evanescent. Indeed one might just as well paint a shadow on a dress as sew a fold down on one. And the chief reason that a modern dress wears such a short time is that it cannot be smoothed out, as a dress should be, when it is laid aside in the wardrobe. In fact in a fashionable dress there is far too much "shaping"; the very wealthy of course will not care, but it worth while to remind those who are not millionaires that the more seams the more shabbiness. A well-made dress should last almost as long as a shawl, and if it is well made it does. And what I mean by a well-made dress is a simple dress that hangs from the shoulders, that takes its shape from the figure and its folds from the movements of the girl who wears it, and what I mean by a badly made dress is an elaborate structure of heterogeneous materials, which having been first cut to pieces with the shears, and then sewn together by the machine, are ultimately so covered with frills and bows and flounces as to become execrable to look at, expensive to pay for, and absolutely useless to wear.

Well, these are the principles of Dress. And probably it will be said that all these principles might be carried out to perfection, and yet no definite style be the result. Quite so. With a definite style, in the sense of a historical style, we have nothing whatsoever to do. There must be no attempt to revive an ancient mode of apparel simply because it is ancient, or to turn life into that chaos of costume, the Fancy Dress Ball. We start, not from History, but from the proportions of the human form. Our aim is not archaeological accuracy, but the highest possible amount of freedom with the most equable distribution of warmth. And the question of warmth brings me to my last point. It has sometimes been said to me, not by the Philistine merely but by artistic people who are really interested in the possibility of a beautiful dress, that the cold climate of Northern countries necessitates our wearing so many garments, one over the other, that it is quite impossible for dress to follow out or express the lines of the figure at all. This objection, however, which at first sight may seem to be a reasonable one, is in reality founded on a wrong idea, on the idea in fact, that the warmth of apparel depends on the number of garments worn. Now the weight of apparel depends very much on the number of garments worn, but the warmth of apparel depends entirely on the material of which those garments are made. And one of the chief errors in modern costume comes from the particular material which is always selected as

the basis for dress. We have always used linen, whereas the proper material is wool. Wool, to begin with, is a non-conductor of heat. That means that in the summer the violent heat of the sun does not enter and scorch the body, and that the body in winter remains at its normal natural temperature, and does not waste its vital warmth on the air. Those of my readers who play lawn tennis and like out-door sports know that, if they wear a complete flannel suit, they are perfectly cool on the hottest day, and perfectly warm when the day is cold. All that I claim is that the same laws which are clearly recognized on the tennis ground, flannel being a woollen texture, should be recognized as being equally suitable for the dress of people who live in towns, and whose lives are often necessarily sedentary. There are many other qualities in wool, such as its being an absorber and distributor of moisture, with regard to which I would like to refer my readers to a little hand-book on "Health Culture," by Dr. Jaeger the Professor of Physiology at Stuttgart. Dr. Jaeger does not enter into the question of form or beauty, at least when he does he hardly seems to me very successful, but on the sanitary values of different textures and colors he speaks of course with authority, and from a combination of the principles of science with the laws of art will come, I feel sure, the costume of the future.

For if wool is selected as the basis and chief material of dress, far fewer garments may be worn than at present, with the result of immensely increased warmth and much greater lightness and comfort. Wool also has the advantage of being almost the most delicate texture woven. Silk is often coarse compared to it, being at once harder and colder. A large Cashmere shawl of pure wool can be drawn through a tiny ring, indeed by this method do the shawl-sellers of the Eastern bazaar show to one the fineness of their goods. Wool, again, shows no creases. I should be sorry to see such a lovely texture as satin disappear from modern dress, but every lady who wears anything of the kind knows but too well how easily it crumples; besides it is better to wear a soft than hard material, for in the latter there is always a danger of harsh and coarse lines, whereas in the former you get the most exquisite delicacy of fold.

We find, then, that on the question of material Science and Art are one. And as regards the milliners' method of dress I would like to make one last observation. Their whole system is not merely ugly but useless. It is of no avail that a stately lady pinches in her waist in order to look slight. For size is a question of proportion. And an unnaturally small waist merely makes the shoulders look abnormally broad and heavy. The high heel, again, by placing the foot at a sharp angle bends the figure forward, and thus so far from giving any additional height, robs it of at least an inch and a half. People who can't stand straight must not imagine that they look tall. Nor does the wearing of a lofty headdress improve the matter. Its effect is merely to make the head disproportionately large. A dwarf three feet high with a hat of six cubits on his head will look a dwarf three feet high to the end. Indeed height is to be measured more by the position of the eyes and the shoulders than by anything else. And particular care should be taken not to make the head too large. Its perfect proportion is one-eighth of the whole figure...

But I know that, irrespective of Congress, the women of America can carry any reform they like. And I feel certain that they will not continue much longer to encourage a style of dress which is founded on the idea that the human figure is deformed and requires the devices of the milliner

to be made presentable. For have they not the most delicate and dainty hands and feet in the world? Have they not complexions like ivory stained with a rose-leaf? Are they not always in office in their own country, and do they not spread havoc through Europe?

Appello, non ad Caesarem, sed ad Caesaris uxorem.

OSCAR WILDE.