

Creating Women's Identity in Fashion: Objectification Within Norman Norell's Classic Silhouette

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Abstract

An analysis of American designer Norman Norell's 1951 dinner dress and Norell's classic silhouette at the Texas Fashion Collection led to the examination of the mid-twentieth century and how misogyny related to the society during this time. The investigation of misogyny in the fashion industry began with the evaluation Joanne Entwistle's article "Fashion and the Fleishy Body: Dress as Embodied Practice" which provided the preliminary understanding of femininity, women's identity, and fashion. By understanding social theory, feminist theory, and the history of the mid-twentieth century, I am able to reinvestigate Norell's work as a perpetuating factor of misogyny in fashion. Beyond observations and analysis of Norell's relationship to feminine identity in fashion, I explore modern fashion and the changing nature of misogyny in the industry since the classic silhouette of Norman Norell in core fashion areas like *Vogue* magazine.

Keywords

Norman Norell — Fashion — 1950s — *Vogue* magazine

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Introduction

Fashion has an extensive influence on the way that people are perceived. Whether it be importance or gender, clothing dictates one's identity within a society.[1] During the 1950s, Norman Norell exemplified the fashion identity phenomenon through a silhouette that he favored in his design style. His fashion pieces objectified women; rather than being seen as people, they were utilized as tools. Throughout Norell's career, his classic silhouette has demonstrated misogyny in the fashion industry. Norell developed an identity for women as mannequins to display his clothing, keeping women within the societal identity he created. By creating his particular classic silhouette and demanding a strict body type as the frame for his clothing, Norell created a standard that women are treated as second to the fashion object; designers succeeding Norell perpetuate this misogynistic trend.

1. Norell and 1950s Fashion

Called the "Dean of American Fashion," Norell and his designs have obtained their first major retrospective this year at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York.[2] Focusing on the end of his career and the American glamour he created during this time, FIT's exhibit and accompanying book, *Norell: Master of American Fashion*, are among the first extensive studies on Norell. Unlike the retrospective, this study has focused on Norell's early style; his classic silhouette. This silhouette depicts how Norell's thoughts surrounding clothing, designing, and those who wore his designs have influenced the characteristics used in his designs. The silhouette consists of a tight bodice made of jersey or knit materials, a belted, shashed, or otherwise accentuated waist, and a flowing skirt.[3] Figure 1, Norell's dinner dress, depicts the classic silhouette from 1951. By using a similar design pattern and limited sizing for each item of clothing that he designed, Norell created a recognizable brand.

The ideology Norman Norell used where he created an unachievable standard for women, employed an identity for them as bodies to simply display his clothing; as hangers. As a highly sought after American fashion designer during the mid-twentieth century, he was noted for creating a sophisticated, classic, and trend-setting Manhattan style that led to his induction into the Fashion Hall of Fame as the First Immortal in 1956.¹ As seen through interviews, Norell is very specific

¹The article by Stanley Frank, "Style King of Ready-to-Wear" is extremely



Figure 1. Norman Norell Dinner Dress 1951 courtesy of the Texas Fashion Collection

when it comes to the types of silhouettes he designs, as he attempts to “protect women from their poor taste.”[4, 76] He explains that he thinks that clothing is meant to fit a woman’s body perfectly, his designs only fitting women that have a slim figure. Known for creating clothing for women weighing less than 135 pounds, anyone falling in higher size range were told to lose weight to make his designs fit them.

Norman Norell created designs that he and consumers viewed as simple and elegant, but also comfortable to wear

important to this research paper as it contains many quotes from Norman Norell in addition to it having images from the time period in which he was designing. The article showcases his opinion on designing through quotes and interviews with him, which are significant to the argument of this paper in that it shows the identity and feeling that he has towards women within the fashion industry.

for the modern, active American woman.[2] Norell’s classic silhouette would have been more comfortable for women to wear than previous fashion as the construction of the garments now incorporated thinner, more stretchy material. The thin materials that made Norell’s clothing more comfortable also meant these dresses had no structural material like boning or a corset used in women’s clothing in the recent past.² Thus, the women’s feminine silhouette would be created by the shape of their own body, aided by structural undergarments.[5] This juxtaposes the 1930’s ‘V-shape’ which placed emphasis on the corset to create the shape.[6] Norell knew that in order to keep the feminine silhouette that he was wanting, these dresses could only be made in sizes in which the wearer’s body was the thin shape he needed to be the frame for his designs. Giving women the identity of live hangers to display these dresses, the designer was able to dictate who could wear his dresses and what shape they would be, thereby knowing exactly how his designs would look on each woman.

In “Fashion and the Fleshy Body: Dress as Embodied Practice,” Joanne Entwistle explores the relationships between garments and those who wear them, focusing in particular on the means by which clothing imparts social identity on its wearers.³ In the section “Dress and Embodied Subjectivity,” Entwistle addresses the concept of identity and how dress, through the social world, gives the wearer an identity. Entwistle argues that since society places identities on a person using clothing, no matter the identity, the person feels compelled both socially and morally to perform this identity. Entwistle’s fashion theory can be used to explain Norell’s misogyny within his garments so long as one considers him to be a part of the women’s society. Within the argument of this paper, the fashion industry and fashion itself can be considered to be a large part of women’s society, including Norman Norell as a designer. Therefore, when Norman Norell created an identity for women as second to the fashion object using his classic silhouette, he is able to culturally anchor and mark these women as belonging to a group in which he is the major part of society demanding this identity.[1]

Understanding that fashion is a part of women’s society, one must then look at sociological theory in order to grasp the connection between society, identity, and roles. In the section of “Fashion and the Fleshy Body” titled “Dress and Habitus,” Entwistle discusses Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological theory in relation to dress. According to Bourdieu’s study, habitus is defined as dispositions that organize the way that people categorize and understand society.[7] Entwistle states that using habitus links individual and social embodiment, allowing for an explanation of how both influence each other. Aforementioned, Norman Norell as a designer is considered

²Although Norman Norell’s designs in his classic silhouette did not have structural material like corsets or boning, women did wear highly structured undergarments. These undergarments helped for the women to be able to fit into the perfect silhouette that Norell wanted for his clothing.

³Within this article by Entwistle, the term ‘dress’ is a term used for the term ‘fashion’; all clothing within the fashion industry, rather than just the garment of clothing we call a ‘dress’.

to be a part of the society of the women who purchase and wear his dresses. The concept of habitus explains that the social roles that women hold are given to them based on their societal position; but these roles are also maintained because the actions of these individuals continue to embody this role.[1] The societal position and identity that Norell believes that women hold is as an object to display his clothing. Because of the relationship between the individual and the social, women's role as display object is perpetuated not only by the society of the fashion industry, but in turn also by the women by wearing the clothing that is the badge of this role. Entwistle explains that exceeding the role given to women is not an easy task in that societal roles are highly gendered. Because of this, women are located within their bodies rather than transcending the body as males have, because males are able to act in a way in which women are not. Because of the misogynistic practices of Norell and his classic silhouette, women are unable to transcend the societal roles that the fashion industry has given them due to their inability to act against it.

In order to comprehend the societal roles that clothing puts on women, there must also be an understanding of why designers created their respective clothing styles. During the years following World War II, there were several fashion designers that decided to move away from the more "utilitarian" clothing that women wore, to more feminine designs.[8] This new clothing was meant to emphasize the women's feminine qualities evoke the romantic history of women's clothing. After the war, designers were recreating the 1930's style of women's clothing which in turn was removing women's individualism and ability to act for themselves that was gained during World War II. Norman Norell's classic silhouette is only one example of a designer no longer treating women as active individuals. He is rather replacing it with the gendered and feminized role wherein they are individuals to be dressed in his clothing. Another well known example of this Christian Dior's 'New Look,' created in the late 1940s. The 'New Look' that Dior pioneered consisted of tight jackets, nipped waists, padded hips, and an A-line skirt.⁴ Although this style was welcomed back by some men and women who believed that clothing was meant to express their femininity, other women felt that it was oppressive and removed women's independence of action.

Neither Norell nor Dior devised their ideas for their respective styles in a vacuum. The two designers worked using the history of fashion and the context of the time in which they were creating.[9] The two designers recreated a fashion style, silhouette, and identity for women similar to the corseted dress styles of the 1930s.[6] Feeling that Dior's designs were regressive, feminists protested the 'New Look.' [10] Protest signs asked women to "join the fight for freedom in the manner of dress!" Even other designers felt that Dior had gone

too far with this new style. Fellow designer, Coco Chanel, stated that Dior did not dress women but rather "upholstered" them.⁵ This idea of upholstering women is very important when it comes to misogynistic ideas within his clothing. Dior looked at women as objects that he could dress, sites on which he could display clothing on. Much like the mannequin identity Norman Norell gave the women that he dressed, Dior, as a part of these women's society, gave them an identity as hangers who were to wear his clothing and make the pieces look beautiful.

During the mid-twentieth century when Norell was designing, he was selling his clothing to department stores as ready to wear items. Because of this, he used fashion shows to showcase his designs. One of the most commonly used practices that Norell employed during these fashion shows was to create a live mannequin like quality for his models. He used makeup on them to create a pale, blank look so that these human canvases could be the structure for his clothing designs. Norell felt that by having the models look more impersonal that people would look only at the clothes before buying.[4] Not only did he employ this in his fashion shows, but also in the advertisements that he used. He typically had advertisements with models' faces obscured or vacant looking, which created a blank canvas identity for these women. This practice has become more commonplace for high fashion editorials and advertisements following Norell's practices.

Misogynistic ideas displayed by both Dior and Norell in the mid-1900s, can be explained through Entwistle's theories of dress, embodied subjectivity, and habitus. The identities and ideals that these designers bestowed upon women can be seen today in clothing produced, opinions of designers, and advertisements. Advertisements are very important in today's fashion industry, as these photos are the first of the clothing that women see. In prominent fashion magazines, like *Vogue*, designers will use these advertisements as a promotion of their designs and also, whether they mean to or not, of their opinion on fashion and their societal view of women.

In the fashion magazine *Vogue*, the house of Fendi shows a dress design from 2017 that has similar characteristics to both Dior's 1930s New Look and Norell's 1950s classic silhouette. The Fendi dress, like those of Norell and Dior, is made in the subdued color of black with a flowing skirt and an accentuated waist. The overall silhouette of the dress is very important to note in that the design style from the mid-twentieth century has continued, flourished, and adapted with the times. Unlike the dresses of Dior and Norell, the Fendi dress is much more revealing. Rather than being tight, the bodice of the dress is revealing the silhouette of the wearer, showing the skin beneath the lace design.[11] In this dress, there is no boning

⁴Because Christian Dior has much more scholarship published about his 'New Look' style and its similarities to Norman Norell's classic silhouette, I will be looking at the scholarship about Dior in relation to women, the fashion industry, and feminism in order to draw connections between these two designers and the misogyny associated with these styles.

⁵The quote from Coco Chanel that is being used here regarding her stating that Christian Dior 'upholstered' women is not simply an attack on a rival, but rather as a feminist means of protest. This quote and the protestors showed that other designers were creating clothing to display on women. Chanel is important to note because she was making clothing that was meant to aid women in their actions and independence, whereas here she is critiquing Dior for not doing so as he used women as tools to display his clothing.

or corset like in the 'V-shape' style from the 1930s, or fabric to cover structured undergarments to aid in the creation of the silhouette seen in Norell's classic design from the 1950s; rather this is removed, and the physical body of the wearer is what actually determines the silhouette of the dress.

The Fendi dress advertisement displays a model wearing the dress; arms open as if presenting the fashion object to the viewer on her body. The identity of model as a tool to advertise the dress is something that came from both Norell and Dior's opinions on designing and displaying clothing on women. The face of the model is not the focal point. She is not smiling, nor is there anything particularly distinct about her. What is important in this advertisement to notice is simply the dress. The body of the model is to be used as the mold that fills out the dress in the precise way that the designer wanted it to be shown. By perpetuating this identity created by Norell, theorist Entwistle states that this creates an inability for women to act against societal roles and move beyond a display tool in the fashion industry. This advertisement, and others like it, is crucial to understanding that the misogynistic trends, ideas, and characteristics from the mid-twentieth century have been continued today.

Despite these trends having continued, it is important to note that there are also many changes in the fashion industry that indicate a forward, positive stride in modifying the misogyny of the fashion industry. These changes include offering a wider range of clothing sizes, focusing on advertising real women, and focusing on body positivity, rather than a potentially un-achievable look.

Many high-end designers in the 2010s have been making clothing for plus sized women. Higher end clothing stores, like Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue, are offering plus sized sections both in stores and online, allowing for a wider range of women to purchase these clothing items.[12] Unlike Norell's ideas in the 1950s that women over a certain size will ruin his clothing design style and silhouette, these designers are instead offer clothing for a wider audience as it is a sign of them propelling the fashion industry into an age in which size and silhouette is not the basis by which fashion is deemed beautiful or well made.⁶

Important countries in the fashion industry are now putting policies into place that mandate that models be a certain weight and retouched photos be labeled as such (Friedman). These countries include India, Israel, Italy, Spain, and most influential in the fashion world, France. Despite India, Israel, Italy, and Spain preceding the policies of France, France's policies are the most radical in the sense that it has always been an important center for fashion, being home to many design houses, models, and fashion shows. Ensuring that models have a normal body mass index, are in good health overall, and requiring fines and/or jail time for those who do

not disclose retouched images or hire unhealthy models is very important to keeping this un-achievable image out of the public.

Although America has not passed laws like these, there are some brands that are focused on creating a more inclusive environment through engaging with body positivity. One company dedicated to not retouching their images is Aerie. Although it is not a high-end design company, their campaign "#aerieREAL" was able to gain a lot of press causing other companies to take notice of what they were doing with their un-retouched photos, promotion of "the real you is sexy," and using 'real' girls rather than models.[13] Another company moving away from the rail thin models is Victoria's Secret. This company has made a change from the use of very thin models to more fit models, focusing a lot on the strength and training that these models go through in order to achieve their lean, muscular bodies. Along with this change, they began to offer a much wider variety of workout clothing with sayings like "train like an angel," promoting a fit and active lifestyle rather than an unhealthy obsession with the impossibly thin bodies of models.[14]

2. Conclusion

Despite all of these positive changes, there are still ways that the fashion industry can improve and continue to move forward. Although more plus sized clothing is made, there is still a void in the editorial department in terms of plus sized clothing and models. This phenomenon could be because of designers and the "ideal," thin model image. However, it could also be because of the magazines not wanting to change their look; the intention of *Vogue* is to be aspirational to the women who view the magazine. This could be the reason for *Vogue* having minimal to no instances of plus sized models but rather a plethora of thin models. Models have always been people that women strive to be, therefore by having the thinner models be the focal point of *Vogue*, a slimmer figure is what women are determined to look like. Since Norell was showcased in *Vogue* in the 1950s, there have been few inclusions of plus sized models in this high-end fashion magazine.⁷ As for the plus sized clothing sold in high end department stores, there are still minimal advertisements made with plus sized models in the stores and even on some websites. Using thin models depicts Norell's misogyny where he belittled women of a larger size, sexualized the bodies beneath the tighter bodices, and used them as hangers to display his clothing. These identities used by Norell in the mid-twentieth century have continued to be used, especially through the use of thin models rather than plus sized models.

There have been a number of changes put forth in the fashion industry by designers, department stores, and policy

⁶The Niemen Marcus site where there is plus sized clothing for sale actually has images of the clothing on the thin, 'normal' models rather than on plus sized models. This illustrates that the fashion industry is still resistant to the use of plus sized models in high end fashion.

⁷Examples in *Vogue* of plus sized models are Ashley Graham in several issues like April 2007, September 2016, and March 2017 as well as Kate Dillon in the April 2010 issue. In 2002, there was only one mention of 'plus-size' in *Vogue*, no mentions in 2003 and 2004, whereas in years 2007 and 2010 the mentions of 'plus-size' were in the double digits.

makers; yet more needs to be done to move the industry in a positive direction in order to remove misogyny and misogynistic thinking from clothing and the fashion industry overall. Both the classic silhouette of Norman Norell and his opinions on the identity of women are of a repressive ideology that fashion designers may have gotten away with in the past. However, with the increase in feminist theory and feminist movements, especially in fashion, theories like dress and embodied subjectivity and dress and habitus have been studied in order to attempt to understand and minimize the amount of oppression that women go through. The creation of a feminine identity by designers through their clothing and ideas about women's place in society began long before Norell and Dior were designing in the mid-1900s and has continued long after as well. In order to bar the perpetuation of misogyny in fashion, there needs to be more positive thinking and forward movements made by those deemed important and successful in the fashion industry with hopes that others will follow.

Author Biography

Tess McCoy is currently an undergraduate scholar at the University of North Texas. She is majoring in Art History with a minor in Anthropology. She presented the research in this article at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute as well as at the University of North Texas Scholar's Day. Currently Tess is the Vice President of the Art History Society, where students of all disciplines come together to share in their love for the history of art. After finishing her undergraduate degree at UNT, she will go for graduate studies at the University of New Mexico in the Art of the Americas program, focusing on Contemporary Native American Art.

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