

# The Language of Clothes: Visual Codes and Messages



Railing against the tailors who *'tempt poor soules to styles which tend to vice'*, the sixteenth century Puritans viewed clothes as potentially dangerous 'tools of the devil'. Whereas Louis XIV of France described fashion as *'the mirror of history'*. Whatever the historical context, clothing and fashion have been used to denote wealth and status, or to differentiate between social groups as fashion statement/anti-statement and to display disaffection or affiliation, often interpreted through complex and subtle visual codes.

Whether it be the widely ignored Sumptuary Laws of the medieval period, the eighteenth century protectionist taxes prohibiting the import of 'wicked foreign' luxury goods, or the tyranny of the contemporary designer logo and corporate brand, humans will always use dress as a means of creative self expression in the visual arts.

This lecture encompasses a widely ranging historical selection of paintings, portraits, male and female dress, photographs and advertisements accompanied by extracts from letters, journals and literature to explore meanings and historical context. Contemporary examples and issues will also be included. An informative, entertaining and challenging 'ideas' lecture designed to encourage new ways of looking at this fascinating subject.

*'The apparel oft proclaims the man'* **Hamlet, William Shakespeare**

*'Fashion is not something that exists in clothes alone; fashion is something in the air. It's the wind that blows in the new direction, you feel it coming, you smell it. Fashion is in the sky, in the street, fashion has to do with ideas, the way we live, what is happening'*. **Coco Chanel**

*'Fashion is that by which the fantastic becomes for a moment the universal'*. **Oscar Wilde**

*'A man of sense ... dresses as well, and in the same manner as the people of sense and fashion of the place where he is. If he dresses better, as he thinks, that is more than they, he is a fop; if he dresses worse, he is unpardonably negligent ..'* **Lord Chesterfield**

*'Dressing is so hard to get right ... meaning clothes that make you feel comfortable and confident, when the rest of your life feels insecure'* **Donna Karan**

*'Fashion is neither a whirligig of meaningless change, nor a blank mirror reflecting the spirit of the time. Rather fashion is itself part of history, providing valuable evidence of the way people thought and behaved in the past'.* **Valerie Steele**, Fashion & Technology Institute (FIT), New York

*'The more apparent the designer label, the lower the self-esteem of its wearer is likely to be'.* **Oliver James**, British psychologist, author of *Affluenza*





