

THE SANDS OF TIME: HISTORICISM AND ORIENTALISM IN ARMANI'S DESIGNS FOR WOMEN

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Few clothes speak more eloquently of modern life than those of Giorgio Armani, who has defined professional dress for both sexes for a quarter of the twentieth century and beyond. His influence is immeasurable. An Armani suit, with its almost palpable allure, has something of the power of a talisman. Yet behind the contemporary simplicity and ease of his clothes (even at their most minimal), there often lies a hint of *autre temps, autre mœurs*. Sometimes the reference is ambiguous: a curved line might suggest anything from a suffragette's suit to a Polynesian pareo. Occasionally the translation is direct, providing a new screen through which to view another time or a seemingly distant culture.

Well before the first fashion designer existed (and most agree that Charles Frederick Worth created the profession when he opened his couture house in 1858), fashion often invigorated itself by looking to the past. Such borrowing was the essence of fancy dress, a rage that spanned centuries and continents (and that is the ancestor of Halloween and pre-Lenten celebrations today). Donning a costume has never stopped having the appeal of stepping outside one's own skin temporarily. And there is romance in wearing an article of contemporary fashion that features revived details from some time ago. In fashion, a dress made in one period in homage to another offers a look at both times, emphasizing the similarities, differences, or just plain tension between the two.

Historical references in Armani's clothes provide a bridge between a lost world—whose elegance can be viewed in retrospect as oppressive—and a contemporary reality, in which sterility can be the price paid for greater freedoms. Combating some of the harsher elements of the brave new world are Armani's winsome details from the past. Frogs that might have marched in formation down the front of a hussar's uniform lie sinuously across the front of one of his crepe de chine blouses. Bias-cut cuffs flutter languidly like eighteenth-century *engageants*. Evening skirts, in tulle and chiffon, have the fragile heft of those worn by Edgar Degas's bronze ballet dancers. Jackets evoke the medieval doublets or pages' tunics of Florentine painting, not just in their shape and line, but also in



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their mien: Armani's clothes share a stillness and precision with figures in a painting by Giotto.

It is almost impossible for a fashion designer not to be indelibly marked by the era of his youth. For Armani, the 1930s were formative in defining his spare, elegant, fluid aesthetic. Any one of his bare, almost liquid evening dresses summons the time vividly. But it is the use of men's clothes from the golden age of male elegance—the period between the two world wars—to inspire women's dress that is the dominant theme of Armani's work. At his most playful, he reinterprets articles of male attire entirely. A man's tie, untied, becomes a barer-than-bare evening blouse, the old school stripes rendered in sequins and beads. French cuffs comprise the entire strapless bodice of an evening gown. A man's bow tie forms the bodice of another evening gown, or hangs like a watch fob from a woman's pocket.

Menswear is the source of such favored materials as chalk- and pinstripes and plaids (a gray plaid with a black-and-white grid is to Armani as black-and-white houndstooth was to Christian Dior). These might visually resemble their tweed and woolen forebears, but, updated in blends of wool, silk, and rayon and other synthetics, they suit an increasingly atmosphere-controlled, seasonless life. Shirts are often interpreted for women in soft silks. Joining the traditionally male silhouette and materials in Armani's designs for women are an almost relentlessly neutral palette and details of men's tailoring, including besom pockets, band collars, and plays on classic lapel treatments.

Besides the transposition of elements from male uniforms to women's clothing, a juxtaposition that has zigzagged alluringly across the twentieth-century fashion timeline, there can also be found in Armani's oeuvre the influence of boy's clothes from a bygone era. A Depression-era schoolboy might be the source for elegant ensembles of knee-length shorts, short cardigan-style jackets, cut-in sleeveless T-shirts, and visored caps. Rounded, soft collars, a frequent leitmotif, date back to turn-of-the-century productions of J. M. Barrie's play about the boy who never wanted to grow up: Peter Pan.

Starting perhaps with the nineteenth-century English firm of Redfern, known for exquisitely tailored riding habits, many couturiers and designers adapted aspects of men's clothes for women. Usually this took the form of imposing male elements upon the female silhouette. How Armani transformed the way women dress has to do not so much with the specific elements he has appropriated, but with his particular way with fit. Jackets draped seemingly casually—like those sported by big-band leaders in the 1930s and later—have just as much insouciant swagger on women as on men today, serving to remind us of the contrast in dress of the sexes just seventy years ago, a period when only the most daring toyed with androgyny and women borrowing men's clothes borrowed their formality as well.

By dressing both men and women in pants, jackets with broad shoulders, and flat shoes, Armani accomplished seemingly effortlessly what was a quest for many twentieth-century designers: the desire to devise a unisex uniform. Earlier experiments by designers from Pierre Cardin to Rudi Gernreich can be viewed in hindsight as quaintly futuristic: riffs on bodysuits, jumpsuits, body jewelry, and shaved heads in helmets. What made Armani's new uniform succeed was its relaxed, unstructured shape. By softening the tailoring of the jacket, the keystone of the male work uniform for at least 150 years, Armani came to clothe the end of an era in the most comfortable armor ever made.

Armani didn't stop with revolutionizing classic business attire. Acknowledging the changes being wrought by the third industrial revolution, he went on to expand the vocabulary of what constitutes a suit. In 1989 the designer told *The New York Times* that he wanted to "change the form of things." His aim, he said, was to make designs that looked "as if a woman took a piece of fabric and threw it over her body in a natural gesture."¹ He accomplished this by turning away from traditional Western tailoring methods and toward the East. Place traditional garments of European and Eastern origin side by side on a table and the most obvious difference between them becomes instantly clear: one is constructed of variously shaped pieces of fabric sewn together to encase a figure, while the other is likely to be made of a flat piece of material with minimal cutting and stitching. The sari, for example, is worn the way it comes off the loom, and the *burnous* (a hooded cloak worn in parts of the Middle East) is rectangular and can be laid flat. When a flat garment is put on a rounded figure, the result is that the fabric hangs in soft folds. Armani successfully melded this sense of *fiou* into a vernacular based on Western tailoring.

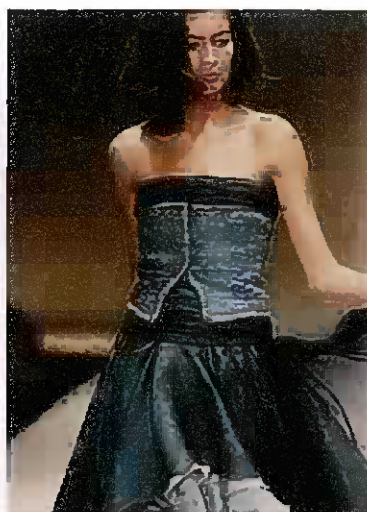
In his logical progression from the soft jacket, Armani has experimented with various elements and proportions that point East. Alternatives to the classic pantsuit of blazer and trousers include ensembles made with vests over tunic shirts reminiscent of standard male dress from, among other places, India. Other tunic shirts acquire the presence of a jacket with the addition of bib fronts, like those of Northern African djellabahs or Moroccan caftans. Knee-length or longer tunics or coats worn over pants could have stepped out of a Persian miniature painting. Wrapped jackets recall short informal men's kimonos from Japan. Single-breasted jackets buttoning down the front and stand-up collars are Armani Nehru, and many of the soft suits take the Mao uniform into the realm of luxury.

Eastern effects provide not just softer lines, but also specific shapes and patterns: harem skirts appear on evening clothes as well as on such tailored day pieces as a camel-hair coat; batik birds, cloud scrolls, and chrysanthemum petals decorate jackets, pants, and skirts; the use of transparency recalls piña cloth; Zouave braid, simplified (as are most of these references), adorns clothing and accessories. While historically orientalism has painted Western design in brilliant palettes and patterns, Armani is drawn most often to the simplest of Eastern wear, the subtleties of rough, plain, coarse, worn peasant clothing having more appeal (and more workable modernity) than court clothes.

Eastern clothing having a modernizing effect on Western women's dress goes back to the nineteenth century. To escape the binds of corsets and voluminous crinoline skirts, a handful of daring women—activists and/or actresses—began to adopt the daringly shocking wearing of pants.



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(In an age when legs were known as limbs, clothing that defined them was almost unspeakable.) The first commonly worn ensemble based on pants for women was modeled after Turkish trousers (full and modestly gathered at the ankles); these came to be known as bloomers after their most renowned wearer, the American reformer Amelia Bloomer. As a revolutionary statement the look didn't last long, although bloomers continued to be worn for active sports, which were becoming increasingly popular. Curiously, it was not until high fashion turned its attention to Eastern effects, including harem trousers, with no more intent than to transform women into exotic birds of plumage, that the real seeds of modern fashion were sown.

The fertile moment was 1910. Suffragists were giving solemn speeches wearing masculine bifurcated costumes when the theatrical costume and set designer Léon Bakst turned the world of fashion on its ear with his zeitgeist designs for the Ballets Russes production, in Paris, of *Scheherazade*. Couturiers, master jewelers, and artisans of all sorts were profoundly affected by the exhilarating palette and radically diaphanous near-nudity of the dancers' harem costumes. Bold socialites, having already dipped a toe in the water by wearing Persian fancy dress, bought versions of the new look from Bakst, Paul Poiret, and others.

In 1990 Armani paid homage to this turning point with a group of Bakst-inspired designs, including a version of one of the most riveting designs of the twentieth century: the Persian tunic designed for Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney by the Russian costumer. Heiress, wife, and mother, as well as artist, patron, and museum founder, Whitney became in effect a work of art herself in 1913 by posing wearing her Bakst-commissioned ensemble four times: she was photographed by Baron Adolf de Meyer, sculpted in silver by Emanuele de Rosales, painted life-size by Howard Cushing in a mural he installed in her Long Island studio, and drawn by John Singer Sargent. Like such contemporaries as Rita de Acosta Lydig, Natasha Rambova, Mata Hari, and the Italian beauty the Marchesa Casati, Whitney was presenting an avant-garde artistic self to the world when she dressed this way.



Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney,
photographed by Baron Adolf de Meyer
in 1913.

Armani seems to appreciate that while the past holds allure for the present, this attraction is often tempered by mixed feelings. Sending out his pared-down ensembles on his light-box runway, he often gives the models the finishing touch of gloves, the one accessory (with the possible exception of the fan) associated most strongly with Victorian etiquette. As the punctuation to clothes that can go from a business meeting in one time zone to a soccer meet or benefit in another, these serve as touching reminders of just how far women have come. For the very elegant ground-breaking Whitney, wearing trousers would remain a part of her downtown, artistic, woman-of-accomplishment identity; her uptown heiress-wife-mother-hostess self wore proper ladylike skirts. In reviving her most artistic look and translating it into the easiest of evening ready-to-wear more than seventy-five years later, Armani reminds us of how, thanks in no small part to him, these selves today can be and are one and the same.

Note

1. Bernadine Morris. "Huzzahs for Armani's Soft and Silithery Collection," *The New York Times*, October 13, 1989, p. B20