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SPACE AGE

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“THE FUNCTIONAL MUST BE THE SOUL OF A DRESS, ITS COMPOSITION, ITS INTERIOR RHYTHM ... AESTHETICS IS THE ENVELOPE.”
(ANDRÉ COURRÈGES, 1967)

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The drama of the space race was heightened by the fact that television had, by the early 1960s, become widely available. It was impossible not to be moved and inspired by live, action footage of hero-astronauts; their closely cropped heads, five-o'clock shadows, and silver suits became every bit as emblematic of their daring as the leather blouson and aviator glasses donned by Lindbergh. Fashion tuned in right away.

In 1961 the Russian Yury Gagarin became the first man to orbit the earth and André Courrèges opened his Paris fashion house. Within a few years, Courrèges designs would epitomize the glamour of space exploration. In lieu of moon boots, his aficionados wore go-go boots; his tennis ball-like sunglasses had eye slits that looked like what an alien might sport, and module-colored sequins sparkled on his laboratory-white frocks.

Space-age fashions did not so much reject traditional materials like wool, silk, and cotton as they emphasized the man-made—particularly plastic. From the Lucite heels of Beth Levine's stocking shoes to the clear bubble helmets worn by Pucci-clad Quantas stewardesses, plastic was the wave of the future. Biodegradability not yet being a concern, part of plastic's appeal was that it was disposable. What a lark to buy one of Betsey Johnson's clear vinyl minidresses, decorate it with the decals provided, wear it once, and then toss it aside. See-through plastic was also a way of flirting with nudity, part and parcel of a utopian, gender-free future. Rudi Gernreich featured clear vinyl panels down the fronts and sides of his minidresses and used them to hold his bathing suits together.

Shiny Mylar, reminiscent of astronauts' suits, was a boutique favorite. Even better than metallic fabric was metal itself, used for the harness halters of Pierre Cardin dresses and the spring coils that held Gernreich's necklines together. There was an armor aspect to all this metal, and no one brought chain mail more up to date than Paco Rabanne, who pieced together mini dresses and body coverings out of metallic discs and circlets.

Most intriguing about space-age fashion was the idea of unisex—lack of gravity seemed to level the playing field. In futuristic movies and television shows, as well as on the runways, both sexes wore versions of unitards, jumpsuits, tunics, and leggings. Cardin dressed men and women alike in rounded helmets, flat, plastic eye shields, sturdy ribbed unitards, and jumpsuits with industrial zippers. Many of his designs featured the abstract motif of a band ending in a circle. Often trapunto stitched, this futuristic decorative element had no gender background (like flowers for women or pinstripes for men).

In space, clothing needed to perform and was not intentionally decorative—it solved problems. Man's ingenuity coped with tight quarters, temperature extremities, and troublesome blast-offs and re-entries. If man could walk on the moon while snacking on freeze-dried ice cream, anything was possible. Space-age fashions greeted the future with open arms.

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