

# Fashion Design as Material Culture

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## Abstract

*This study researches fashion design as material culture, focusing on the identification of design elements as emissaries of cultural values, ideas and knowledge of the designer as representative of the cultural context where he/she belongs. Under this viewpoint, two creations of the English designer Vivienne Westwood, from different collections, are examined. The methodological approach is Material Culture, with data collection by means of the method devised by Jules Prown. It is found that Westwood's designs change from the counterculture expression to the adoption of English renowned tailoring techniques, encompassing diverse cultural contexts.*

**Keywords:** *fashion design; culture; material culture; design de moda; cultura; cultura material.*

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## **Conceptual Framework**

### **1. Culture**

The term “culture” is etymologically derived from the Latin word *colere*, meaning cultivation of the ground, which remains literal. This meaning was expanded by metaphor to the abstraction of ideas and to the growth and development of the mind. Culture has an interchanging meaning with civilization, the secular process of human development throughout history. Culture also means fine arts (Baldwin *et al*, 2006; Richardson, 2001; Williams, 1976).

These meanings presented above suggest that this concept is dynamic and has increased in complexity, as seen in Jenks (1999), who defines culture as the holistic appraisal of the ways of life of a people, their beliefs, rituals and customs. This is the definition adopted for the present study. Jenk’s concept is pluralistic and related to the shared wholeness of a given community, which characterizes it as distinct from another group and makes its people identify themselves as a culture. Additionally, McCracken (1990) states that culture is the ‘lens’ through which all phenomena are seen, implying that every given community will have some specificity in its ways of seeing life, while assimilating experiences, and in its turn this will determine how life will be shaped. The initial and the derived meanings of culture as applied to this research reach a common ground when they are seen as the result of the development of the human mind.

In the debate of high and popular culture, Lury, (1996) proposed an art-culture system with two main categories for classifying objects: cultural artifacts and works of art. However, it is possible that objects in the first category achieve the status of fine art if they are viewed as singular period pieces and the same may happen to art masterpieces if they are classified according to a cultural or historical context. In this system, mass-produced goods or unusual objects are not considered valuable, but they may acquire value according to current definitions of what is beautiful or interesting, usually provided by experts and collectors, and thus achieve the status of art work or cultural artefact. In this way, it is possible to see, for example, Westwood’s designs at the Victoria & Albert Museum, in London, UK. Her garments were selected out of mass culture, identified as period styles, such as Punk, and moved into a higher category in the art-culture circuit, acquiring different semiotic characteristics and becoming honoured and cherished icons due to their association with British culture.

Furthermore, it is the way culture is experienced that adds a crucial aspect to its concept. This involves symbolism, or the attachment of meanings to any event or object and the understanding of such meanings (Richardson, 2001). There is a relentless transition amongst cultural meanings and forms. According to McCracken (1990), cultural meanings constantly flow to and from their locations in the social world. Consequently, a consistent approach to cultural studies should consider this floating aspect in the complexity of meanings regarding time, space, nature of the object, in this case fashion, and person.

The symbolism of cultural forms varies significantly. The symbolism of language is clearly transmitted and learned due to its regular patterns. However, the symbolic meaning other cultural forms carry may not be as clear, although this does not diminish their amount of meaning. Language as a system of signs (Saussure, 1983) has its own internal grammar made of constant rules; in the same way as spoken language, it has been claimed that there is the nonverbal language of dress, with its own grammar (Lurie, 1981). Westwood expresses the potential clothes have as a way of individual expression, saying that it is possible to say everything through tailoring (Vermorel, 1996). Although both verbal and nonverbal languages

are forms of expression, the two types depart from each other when the nature of their rules is considered: a crucial point for limiting the metaphor. McCracken (1990) says that the context dependency of dress is the vital difference between the two languages. However, more than the context dependence, the spoken language has fixed and regular rules, making it possible to be taught, which cannot be said about the nonverbal language of clothes. So far, there are no known fixed rules to teach how to read garments. This is understandable when considering their uncountable variations and contexts, which may complicate the communication of a message.

Nonetheless, there should be guidelines flexible enough to follow the variable meanings of clothes, and this is one of the principal concerns of the present study. The lack of a regular pattern of communication in the language of clothes makes the identification of what and how much meaning is enclosed in them a very complex task. Geertz (1973) considers both the semiotic aspects and the interconnections of meanings man makes. According to him, the way to scientifically interpret such meanings is to look for them rather than for any possible law they may enclose. The use of the word law should be, wherever possible, in the sense that the search for meanings in the analysis of culture encompasses both semiotics and the mind from where such signs and symbols were conceived. This approach increases the reliability and scope of the study of fashion as cultural manifestation, and enriches its transmission to new generations.

## **2. Fashion**

The word fashion is related to the Latin word *factio*, which means faction or political division (Barnard, 1996); it also derives from the Latin *facere*, which means to make or to do (Kaiser, 1999). *Factio* implies separation, which can be an individual or group separation. *Facere* is itself a process; it suggests dynamism, construction and development. The confrontation of *factio* and *facere* encloses the idea of separation and, at the same time, unification; it means that a group is united by similarities in what it makes, does or believes; and differs from others for making, doing or believing differently, a very close parallel to the complexity of fashion today. Fashion can also be a synonym for clothing or dress (Barnard, 1996).

Fashion is complex and sometimes paradoxical, ambiguous, and context dependent. Kaiser (1999) states that fashion is the prevailing style or mode accepted by large numbers of people at a given time and place. In this view, fashion is not only style and collectivity, but it has an explicit relation to time and space. Therefore, styles in fashion have an unbreakable line of occurrence, attached to a time sequence, and looking at a current style in isolation will certainly be an impoverished view. A look at a prevalent style in relation to its history is an imperative (Miller, 2005).

For Entwistle (2000), the approach of fashion as a historically and geographically particular system of dress is definitely important. It can also be understood that it is possible that these variations happen in a diverse way in each time and place as well, concomitantly. Changes in fashion are a variation of themes and some subtle changes can make a fashion seem livelier. Thus, some styles may last longer than others, but still be about essential and constant differentiation related to time and place. At this point, the concept of fashion shares an essence with the concept of culture; it is dynamic and historically built. It is not related to a point in time only; it is a constant and lively process, a cultural form.

Hoelterhoff (1978) explains that what lies beyond the appearance of clothes is the revelation of an individual's personality and society's mores and preoccupations. Fashion is,

therefore, not only material, it is an abstract force, undoubtedly related to the symbolic nature of culture.

Following the symbolism potentially associated with clothes, there is certainly a purpose for each symbol, even the ones not always visible, yet felt. Some of the meanings clothes may have are shared in a collective sphere. Dress, as an aesthetic expression, is part of people's lives. Thus, the understanding of a dress depends on the awareness between the cultural context and the individual presentation, as Kealpinohomoku (1979) stated, "You wear your culture."

Usually, the fashion industry makes use of cultural properties according to its own interest. Goodrum (2005) explains that cultural assets, when commodified by the fashion industry, influence the popular perception of nationhood. Therefore, fashion carries cultural assets and at the same time is a source of input to cultural delineation. A good example is the work of Westwood. Born in England and internationally known, she could take her country past. The style she created became famous as a synonym of English fashion (Mulvagh, 1998; Vermorel, 1996); she is the representation of a collective sphere of a culture in a single person.

Since 1997, the journal 'Fashion Theory', edited by Valerie Steele, has given important contributions to the critical analysis of fashion as cultural production. There have been some substantial works on clothing as material culture, viewing dress as an object, its meaning and use as a way of producing knowledge. One of the most important studies related to this present research was carried out by Miller (2005), who sees integration between the distinct material of clothes and the social sphere and states that "the dissection of clothing into pattern, fibre, fabric, form and production is not opposed to, but part of, its consideration as an aspect of human and cosmological engagement."

### **3. Vivienne Westwood**

Vivienne Westwood was born on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April 1941, in Tintwistle, England. In 1957 her family moved to London and in 1966 she started a partnership with the impresario Malcolm McLaren. He was the mentor and Westwood, although having no formal education as a fashion designer, translated his ideas into clothes. As post war rebels, their main interest was to annoy English people, adapting items of clothing in ways that were calculatingly outrageous and often physically hideous to British values (Brampton, 1988; Krell, 1997).

In March 1981, Westwood and McLaren designed the "Pirate" collection; it proclaimed the very English seagoing robbers, and was presented in their first catwalk show. It featured eighteenth-century dandified frills, along with sumptuous colours and fabrics and a looser silhouette, with no conventional sewing techniques such as exposed seams in rough fabrics. "Pirate" brought Westwood international recognition (Golbin, 2001). As one of the consequences of this international notoriety, Westwood visited many countries and cultures. When she first visited Brazil, she stated that the world without Brazil would be like her life without McLaren (Vermorel, 1996).

Since the Pirates collection, Westwood's ideas and forms developed significantly. She had no more interest in rebelling against the system; instead, she wanted to jump over it and continue her career as an independent fashion designer, according to the fashion calendar. In 1990 she showed the Portrait collection, a play with cross-dressing and gender ideas, which is among her finest and strongest designs and the turning point of her career, expecting that they would inspire an appreciation of high culture. Her sensibilities had been refined by her exposure to works of art such as the baroque and rococo opulence and her designs became

characterized by richness, formality and attention-seeking features, contradicting current fashion (Mulvagh, 1998; Wilcox, 2004).

Westwood continues to rework British sartorial traditions and historical styles with a combination of irreverence and sophistication. On the video presented at the exhibition of her work at the Victoria & Albert museum in London in June 2004, she stated that as long as there is a past to be researched she will never run out of inspiration. Westwood has received many awards, including the OBE, the Order of the British Empire, from HM the Queen, and also from many other countries, and was considered one of the six most creative designers of the world by the Fairchild Publishers in New York (Mulvagh, 1998). In January 2008 she went to Brazil, to the Sao Paulo Fashion Week ([www.spfw.com.br](http://www.spfw.com.br)) and launched one of her classic shoe styles in partnership with a Brazilian shoe company.

### **3. Research Methodology**

The current research adopts the Material Culture methodology approach. The expression 'material culture' refers to artefacts, bodies of material, and structures produced by a given people (Prown, 1982; Milller, 2005). Using material culture study as tool of research makes it possible to study fashion design elements as means of cultural manifestation, as it focuses on material objects, but its goal is the understanding of the mind. The artefacts can be used actively as evidence rather than passively as illustrations. This goes beyond traditional fashion design studies, which are usually centred on the use of design elements, the problems of how to make clothes according to trends, pattern development or the manufacture for niche markets.

The method devised by Prown (1982), which embraces all kinds of objects for any cultural focus a researcher may have, is the method here applied as a way of collecting data. This methodology has been used by Steele, who simply by measuring corsets could demystify the memorable 16-inch waist as typical of the XIX century; in this project, she did not mention any weakness in Prown's methodology (Steele, 1998). For the present research, two designs by Westwood were examined under the cultural aspects which may have influenced the choice of colour, cut and texture, in order to evaluate the Prown methodology when applied to investigate how a culture is manifested in fashion design elements.

#### **3.1 Data Collection Method**

The Jules Prown method is composed of three phases: description, deduction and speculation, which must be undertaken in sequence (Prown, 1982). The analysis starts from *Description*, recording the internal evidence of the object itself; the second step is *Deduction*, a move from the object itself to the interaction between the object and the observer; and the third and last step is *Speculation*, which takes place in the mind of the analyst, to develop *theories* and *hypothesis* that might explain what could be observed and felt from the object, to develop a *Program of research*.

#### **3.2 Validation**

The validation of the internal data is assured by the strict employment of Prown methodology, checked by external evidence found in the published literature related to the garments under analysis, as stated by Prown.

## **4. Presentation of Data**

The data collected followed the method presented above; however it is not entirely presented below due to its size. The following is only a summary of the most important points for this paper.

### **4.1 The Pirate Collection Outfit**

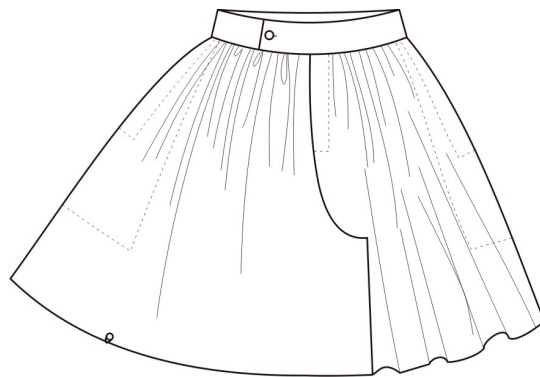
The first outfit is a unisex knee length shirt with sash and knee length trouser, 100% flat cotton canvas, patterned of parallel narrow stripes in this following sequence: purple/saffron/white/blue/saffron/navy blue, vibrant colours, from the autumn/winter 1981-2 Pirates Collection London, England, as inspired by the sea robbers (Mulvagh, 1998) and reproducing the cut and construction of their historical dress. The label on the neck centre of back reads: “Worlds End / McLaren Westwood / Born in England”, the evidence of double personalized authorship and unique and specific nationality.

The knee length loose shirt is draped around the front and back neck, with the large sleeves gathered around the armhole and cuff, creating an inflated effect. The sash, a kind of rectangle measuring 146cm x 96cm, with a plated and rolled tassel made of the same fabric hanging in each of the four “V” ends, is four times folded in the length and worn around the waist, enhancing volume and adjusting the garment to the body. The knee length trouser has inner waistband cord which allows for adjustments. The large width is gathered around the waist, creating the same inflated effect of the draping in the shirt.

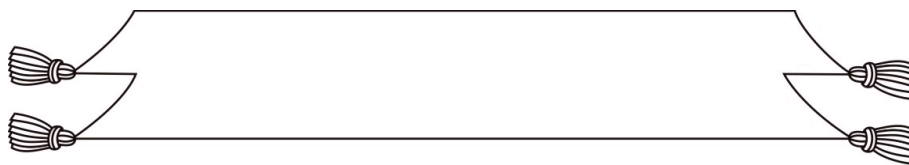
The whole outfit superimposes draping fabric of stuffed appearance, and, at the same time, delineates a flat silhouette of bust, waist and hips.



Pirate Collection – Shirt



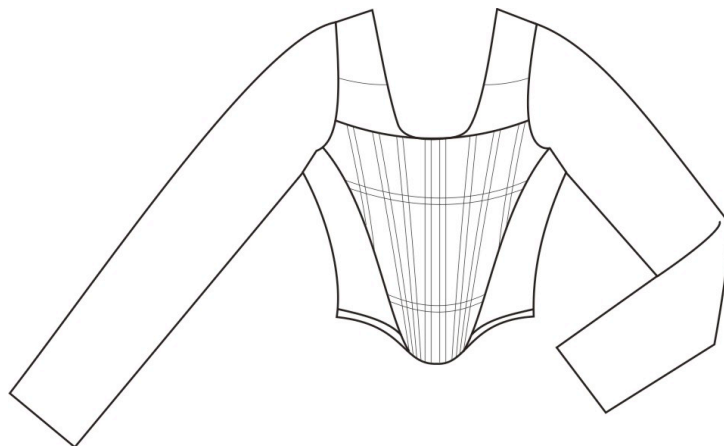
Pirate Collection – Knee Length Trouser



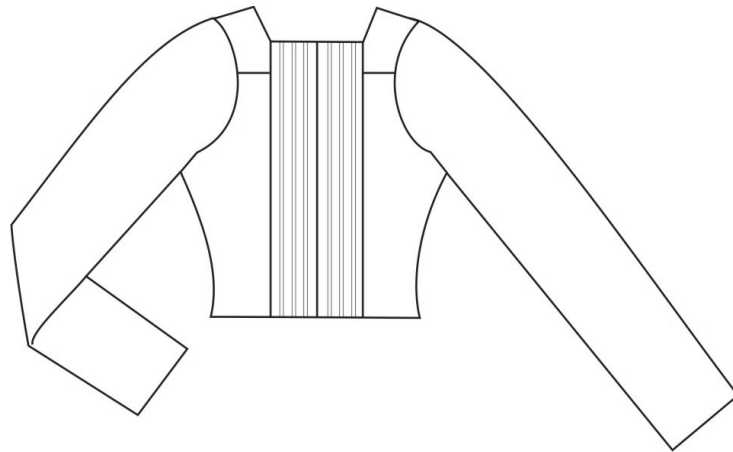
Pirate Collection – Sash

## **4.2 The Portrait Collection Outfit**

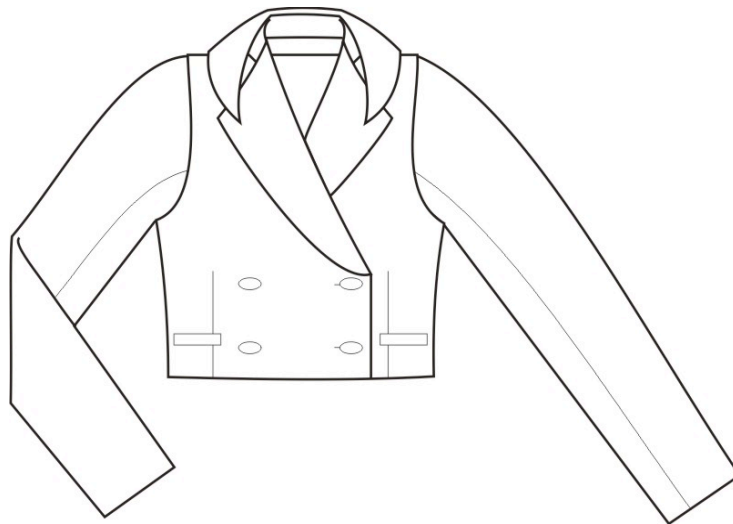
The second outfit is composed of a black viscose satin jacket, matching skirt and basque, Autumn/winter 1990-1 Portrait Collection, London, England, inspired by the high-fronted jackets of the 1810s usually seen in portraits of the time (Wilcox, 2004). It has long cuffless sleeves, wide revers and a pointed peak collar, 2 pairs of oval gilt buttons stamped with the Vivienne Westwood logo, fully lined with black satin with a label on the left inner side. The waisted skirt, bias cut, has side seams, back darts and left side placket and zip; fully lined with black satin with a label in the centre of the back. It is fitted to the three dimensional forms of the bottom of the body through precise, body-form tailoring. The waist is marked by the darts in the back, adjusting the garment to the contours of the body. The basque has a firm front panel in stiffened black velvet, which suppresses the stomach and waist, lifting up the bust, remodelling these body parts and exposing a maximized upper bust. It has long sleeves in black wool jersey and a low, shallow and scooped neckline dipping in a round point at centre of front.



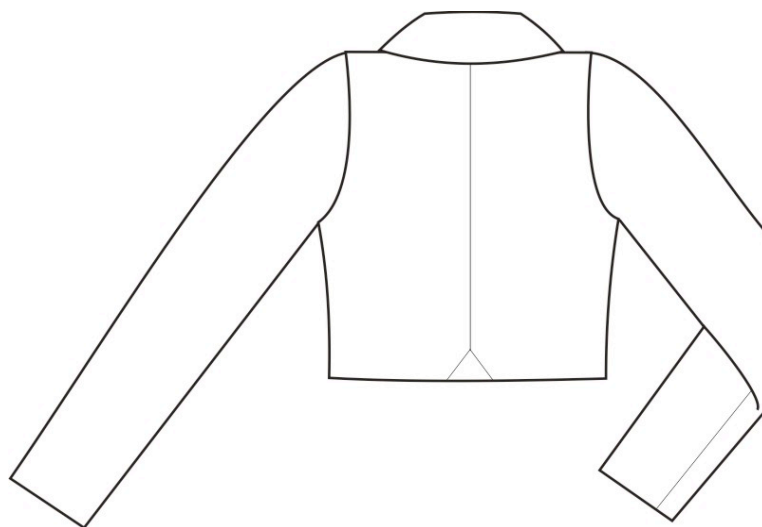
Portrait Collection – Basque – Front



Portrait Collection – Basque – Back



Portrait Collection – Jacket – Front



Portrait Collection – Jacket - Back



Portrait Collection – Skirt – Front and Back

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Designs**

These designs are marked by cultural and political coding. The Pirates garment examined uses the shapes and construction of pirate's clothes, for the reasons confirmed by the literature. They mean to protest against prevailing English tailoring, by then marked by sameness in dressing. Westwood took as her idea the past of her country in the expression of rebellion against the British. In doing so, the style she created became known as her style and a synonym of English fashion. The creation of the Pirates collection was a sartorial statement of not being aligned to the ordinary way of dressing, suggesting a critical view of English society in the early 80's. It represents a different philosophy when facing life, rejecting the institutionalized ideology and proposing a new approach to social behaviour.

Nine years later, in the same British culture but in a different time and social context, differing cultural aspects were explored. Westwood's Portrait Collection was inspired in the images from old master paintings, from fine arts, mostly of French nationality. Therefore, it is not only distinctive historical elements that characterize a design as national expression; it is implied that national borders can be pervaded when it comes to fashion design. However, latent cultural traits inevitably come into play, and this may be the differing point between belonging to a culture and merely using cultural forms as a theme to be explored in design features. In the Portrait collection, the renowned English tailoring techniques, previously contested, were then essential and used as a reference of high culture in order to reach the high fashion market, and it succeeded. Contested or adopted as technique, the English tailoring is the reference.

The approach to body forms is equally revealing in both designs. The Pirates garment delineated a silhouette which diminishes apparent differences between female and male body

shape with its loose cut and adjustable sash and cord, a sartorial attempt for unification of both sexes in the rebellion of prevailing norms. This does not find any likeness in the very appealing feminine outfit of the Portrait collection, constructed in order to fit an idealized female body, through an accurate body-shape tailoring, which makes more evident the different measurements between bust, waist and hips. The Portrait design is an interpretation of historical masculine style directed to feminine costumer, exploring feminine body features, a clear cross gender statement.

More significant changes can be observed in the use of fabrics: the Pirates collection, with the simple 100% colourful and dull cotton canvas evokes the insubordinate and dissident attitudes the pirates are famous for; later, this gives place to the smooth and sensuous black satin, in order to infer sophistication. The first implies informal occasion, the second formality, glamour and elegance. Both are designed to attract attention to the wearer, to be seen and distinguished; the Pirate by a rebellious attitude and the Portrait by evidencing good financial standard and privileged social class. However, in both cases, the accurate cut and construction of the garment, faithful to the source of inspiration is a confirmation of historical research. The good quality of the design, being it an extravagant cut or a traditional tailoring, the ideal combination of silhouette, colour, fabric, finishing and trimmings are indications of designs skills.

To have the past as inspiration is, mainly, an evidence of knowledge and culture. It is an indication of favourable historical research conditions, which evidences the facility of accessing information from historical facts in official sources such as museums of art and costumes, in addition to an extreme ability to contextualize information brought from the past into present fashion design, facilitated by the familiarity with ancient and contemporary culture in a daily basis. All these considerations are also evidence of a cultural environment which allows for freedom of expression.

## **5.2 Methodology**

Prown method of collecting data has showed efficiency in extracting primary data from the designs, as an effective way of using the design as source of information. Although efficient, some weaknesses could be identified. These are the lack of indication to systematically identify each garment, what may implicate in the lack of accuracy when more than one garment is analysed. The second issue is the lack of visual registration, either by drawings or photographs, so that the data collected is visually identified when related to design features. The third weakness is the lack of generation of qualitative data. In this study this primary data was easily supported by abundant literary sources on the subject, which is not always available, specially when related to other countries where the fashion design history is not as strong as England or is too recent to be identified in the design features. In order to overcome such weaknesses the researcher recommends an additional step for identification before the first step of Description; a graphic representation of the garment or/plus its registration with photos due to the visual nature of fashion; and the inclusion of interview as a research technique in order to allow for gathering qualitative data in cultural studies of contemporary fashion design.

## **6. Conclusion**

Culture does affect fashion design, what can be identified by the analysis of design elements of a given garment, always analogous to time and local conditions. The Prown method is efficient for the study of fashion design when examined under the cultural viewpoint; the method can be improved with the addition of a systematic identification of the

garment, its visual registration with drawings or/and photos and with the addition of interview as a way of generating qualitative data for contemporary cultural fashion design studies.

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