

## When costume became fashion in Victorian dress: An exploration of historicity, exoticism and convention in E.W. Godwin's 'A Lecture on Dress' and Lady Clementina Hawarden's 'Study from Life'

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**Abstract:** Many modern day ideas about women's dress in fact have their origins in concepts that began in the Victorian era: beauty and utility, historicity and conventionality. As a result, it is important to look at the two poles of adornment and how they framed a battle over woman's dress that would impact the way future generations viewed the subject. This essay will explore the many ways in which they converged in Victorian design through the examination of two works by two notable Victorian artists: 'A Lecture on Dress' by Edward William Godwin and a selected image from Lady Clementina Hawarden's black and white photographic series, 'Study from Life'. This essay will also argue that the blurring of the lines between historic costume and contemporary dress led to a permanent transition in personal display and adornment.

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'You look at paintings from whatever century, but you can only date them by the clothes. That means fashion is important', the couturier Karl Lagerfeld told *Women's Wear Daily* recently.<sup>1</sup> His statement is true for perhaps every period of art history but the nineteenth – specifically its latter half, when public dissatisfaction with the fashions of the day gave birth to a revolutionary movement. As the historian Gilles Lipovetsky put it, 'Fashion as we understand it today emerged during the latter half of the nineteenth century'.<sup>2</sup> But it was a general frustration with the contemporary dress of Victorian England that led to a transformation that would allow fashion to become what Lagerfeld calls 'important'. Ironically, this displeasure was birthed within artistic circles as the arbiters of taste increasingly found Victorian fashions unsuitable for their work.

Painters, designers and literary figures such as Edward William Godwin (Figure 1), William Morris, the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and Oscar Wilde criticised the popular, perennially rotating trends that, according to Godwin were 'under the despotic sway of the French milliners and west-end tailors'.<sup>3</sup> Morris noted that the fashion of the period sat at 'the lowest depth' of 'the degradation of costume'.<sup>4</sup> 'The lesser art of dress' was routinely debated in public forums, private forums and journals.<sup>5</sup> In particular, controversial trends such as the imposing crinoline skirt, which the couturier Charles Frederick Worth and his patron the Empress Eugénie of France popularised, and the tight-laced corset, which Victorians widely accepted as the cornerstone of any respectable woman's ensemble, were condemned and mocked by cultural critics, contemporary artists and dress reformers alike. However, closer study demonstrates that the subject of dress was also more seriously discussed.

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Karmizadeh, 'WWD CEO Summit: Karl Lagerfeld', in *Women's Wear Daily*, (January 9 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky and Prof Richard Sennett, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> E.W. Godwin, 'A Lecture on Dress' in *Against Fashion: Clothing as Art*, Radu Stern, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), p. 83.

<sup>4</sup> William Morris, 'The Lesser Arts of Life', delivered before the Birmingham and Midlands Institute in Birmingham, 21<sup>st</sup> of January, 1882.

<sup>5</sup> Morris, 'The Lesser Arts of Life'.

As the author Margaret Beetham put it, ‘Dress and fashion were, of course, central to the construction of the Society Lady...’<sup>6</sup> This made dress a subject of great interest for visual and literary arbiters of taste, appearing with loaded meaning throughout the work of Victorian artists and sparking a national dialogue.

As ideas about the way women should dress began to change, the spirited debates and reform crusades that followed generally reflected two schools of thought, that of beauty and that of utility. Together these polar ideas laid the framework for fashion’s evolution from being driven simply by style to taking in more social and artistic considerations. That change yielded the Victorian revolution in women’s fashion – specifically, the style of dress that emerged in the Arts and Crafts and PRB circles and converged to become artistic and aesthetic dress. This essay will explore that process through two artefacts, Godwin’s ‘A Lecture on Dress’, given in an unknown public setting in 1868, and a selected image from Lady Clementina Hawarden’s black and white photographic series ‘Study from Life’ (Figure 1), which is believed to have been created in 1863 or 1864. Through the examination of these works, this article will explore how they reflected an important blurring of boundaries between historical costume and contemporary dress that would lead to a permanent transition in personal display and adornment.

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<sup>6</sup> Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own: Domesticity and Desire in the Women’s Magazine*, (Psychology Press: 1996), p.195.



Figure 1: Lady Clementina Hawarden, 'Study from Life', 1863-1864, albumen print from a wet collodion negative, 236 mm x 20.4 cm, Victoria & Albert Museum, London

But first, we must consider the cultural backdrop against which these works were created, most notably the beginnings of aestheticism. In many ways Godwin was a pioneer of aesthetic dress. Arthur Lasenby Liberty, the most influential purveyor of artistic dress of his day, appointed him director of his eponymous department store, Liberty of London, which served as the unofficial outfitter of the aesthetic circle.<sup>7</sup> There, Godwin established a philosophy about personal adornment and the manufacture of clothing that would influence a progressive subculture of artistic and literary men and women, including Oscar Wilde. While little is known about Lady Hawarden's life outside of the expansive oeuvre she left behind, it can be inferred that she identified with the creative groups of the day. A mother of ten, she photographed her adolescent daughters for personal pleasure. Though she displayed her works in two public exhibitions with the Photographic Society of London, winning a silver medal at both in 1863 and 1864, she was largely considered an amateur.<sup>8</sup> The majority of her oeuvre, which encompassed more than 800 images, ended up pasted to family photo album pages, until they were later ripped out and donated to the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1939. Her work never achieved the same popularity enjoyed by her contemporary Julia Margaret Cameron, though was greatly admired by a small number of creatives of the day including Lewis Carroll and Oscar Gustave Rejlander.

Whether or not Godwin and Hawarden's paths ever crossed among Victorian England's artistic circles remains unclear, but their work is steeped in the same dogma, which emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and was advanced by the Arts and Crafts and Pre-Raphaelite Movements.

As Victorian England grappled with the turmoil of an increasingly industrialised society, the certainties in life became a figurative anchor to hold on to. And so a heightened sense of nostalgia pervaded the air, its perfume permeating the stench of overall discontentment with the state of things. Godwin's lecture reflects this mood and how it was most plainly mirrored in dress, which was ingrained in the fabric and identity of nineteenth-century culture. Whether it was the cut of a sleeve or the gold trimming on a robe, Godwin's lecture freely referred to 'the days of old' as the standard to which contemporary dressmakers should have aspired.<sup>9</sup> He repeatedly looked to the past as the golden age of dress. He wrote: 'One thing however worth noticing is that both in classic and mediaeval fashions the shape of the arm was almost always maintained either by being left bare or, as in the middle ages, by tightly fitting sleeves at least from the wrist to the elbow'. He went on to catalogue with great detail the various articles of thirteenth-century dress before later noting that 'the almost Greek simplicity, purity and grace of the 13<sup>th</sup> century gradually disappeared in the 14<sup>th</sup> until it was ultimately lost in the full tide of the restless luxuriousness of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and it was not until then that tight lacing in the sense we unfortunately know it became a general fashion'.<sup>10</sup>

The Victorian revolution in women's fashion – specifically, the style of dress that emerged in the Arts and Crafts and PRB circles and converged to become artistic and aesthetic dress – not only provided the historical and cultural context for Godwin's lecture and Hawarden's image, but the impetus for the work as well.

In a way, the artefacts explored in this article began out of a desire to return to the uncomplicated beauty, ease and grace of bygone eras. Godwin's lecture explicitly called for this,

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<sup>7</sup> Patricia A. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850 – 1920: Politics, Health and Art*, (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2003), p. 126.

<sup>8</sup> 'Lady Clementina: Themes and Styles', V&A Museum, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/l/lady-clementina-themes-and-style/>

<sup>9</sup> Radu Stern, *Against Fashion: Clothing as Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2004), p. 83.

<sup>10</sup> Stern, p. 87.

while Hawarden's image implied it. Note how Hawarden chose the relatively new medium of photography, which at the time was not capable of capturing colour, to make her artistic statement. The choice of black and white photography, specifically, the popular method of albumen print from wet collodion negatives, coupled with the simple title, 'Study from Life', gives the artwork a sense of minimalism that underscores the historic, unfussy beauty on display in the image.

Morris stated that Victorians should 'have nothing in your houses which you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful' and that 'all art starts from this simplicity'.<sup>11</sup> As the more progressive members of Victorian artistic circles turned their attention to the decorative arts in their homes, dress became a natural extension of this philosophy. It has been well-documented that the Pre-Raphaelites were consumed with achieving historical accuracy with the costumes they created for their works, because as one historian put it, 'What would infuriate an artist more than that his picture might seem out of date merely because the sitter's clothes had dated?'<sup>12</sup> The PRB solved this dilemma by paradoxically seeking out even older costumes. But this preoccupation with historic dress was present in other corners of the Victorian artistic world as well.

Lady Hawarden's image features medieval, Grecian and Orientalised costumes that were loose and uncorseted in characteristic aesthetic manner. The clothes aptly underlined the goal of artistic and aesthetic dress summarised by Godwin in his lecture: to be beautiful in its simplicity, transcend all trends and seasons, and highlight the natural lines of the female form, in a way not unlike the sculptural drapery of classical Greek dress.<sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup> Though as pointed out by The Costume Institute's Harold Koda, 'Drapery of the classical and Hellenistic periods of Greek art sometimes appears purely as a foil for nudity, clinging and spiralling around the body'.<sup>15</sup>

In the selected image from her 'Study from Life' series, Lady Hawarden's daughters are fully covered in reams of drapery. Rather than rely on the restrictive tight lacing and capacious crinolines that bound Victorian women and defined contemporary fashion at the time, Hawarden dressed her adolescent daughters, Clementina and Isabella Grace, in historical costume that lent the work a certain timelessness and heightened sense of the erotic. From the drapes that hang from the walls, creating a 'tent-like'<sup>16</sup>, harem-esque atmosphere, to the voluminous folds that hang from their shoulders, Hawarden's daughters are literally engulfed in material, which paradoxically draws the eye to the stark nakedness of their necks and Isabella's arm (pictured left). To quote the departmental notes at the V&A where the image is on display, '... Orientalist genre made it possible to depict sensuality on the premise of presenting quasi-ethnographic information about the customs of the East'.<sup>17</sup> Note how Clementina could almost be mistaken for a Greek boy in her cropped wig, its short length drawing the eye to her bare neck, which becomes an erogenous focal point. In the same vein, the two sisters could be mistaken for lovers. When covered in exotic drapery, the familial act of holding hands becomes Sapphic.

In fact, the costumes, worn within the safe, private confines of Hawarden's emptied out, drawing room-turned-studio, perform a function that Victorian contemporary dress could not. The exotic dresses provided enough of a disorienting sense as to allow Hawarden to make artistic

<sup>11</sup> William Morris, *Hopes and Fears for Art*, (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), p. 110.

<sup>12</sup> Stern, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> *The Berg Companion to Fashion*, ed. Valerie Steele, (Oxford: Berg, 2010), p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Harold Koda, 'Classical Art and Modern Dress' in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-. [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/god2/hd\\_god2.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/god2/hd_god2.htm) (October 2003)

<sup>16</sup> 'Study from Life', V&A museum departmental notes

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*.

statements that fashionable Victorian dress could not. Would the subtle manner in which Clementina, at the forefront of the image, grazes her sister's hand read as a seductive gesture if the two were robed in stiff satin corsets? Would the image seemingly invite the viewer to imagine one sister caressing the other's neck if both were covered in demure, high collars?

And so we see the general dissatisfaction with Victorian dress reflected in Hawarden's work. She used exotic and historical costume, not contemporary dress, to fashion identity in the imagined, sexually charged world of her photographs. In an article for *The New Yorker* comparing the use of costume in Hawarden's work to that of contemporary artist Cindy Sherman, editor Ingrid Sischy asks, 'Is it the dressing up that makes the pictures of both these women so powerful? Is that what's so haunting about what they do? And in the idea of dressing up, is there something especially meaningful to women?'<sup>18</sup>

In fact, 'the dressing up' in Hawarden's images foreshadowed a blurring of the line that divided costume and contemporary dress during the aesthetic and artistic dress movement. Godwin advocated this change in the introductory thoughts to his lecture:

Now in art, if we omit altogether the barbarism of academic blankets, there are only two systems of dress. The one historical, the other conventional. The one by clothing a person represented in a habit as he lived when he belongs to a past age involves the study of archaeology; the other by clothing him in the fashion of the artist's own time (which last may also become historical when the person represented is contemporary with the artist) involves the study of the fashion of the day. This last system was almost invariably adopted in past times under all conditions. It is manifest that the more perfect course, (that indeed which we should take) is to adopt both systems, the first for the representations of the past, the second for the portrayal of the present. From the science of archaeology diligently followed we may certainly learn one system<sup>19</sup>.

And with these words, the initial seeds of a revolution were planted, introducing the idea that costume – long the stuff of historical fancy dress or personal indulgences within safe, private places – could be conventional. Godwin not only spread his message through his lectures, illustrations and writings, but through his work overseeing the production of historically-inspired dress for women and children at Liberty of London. In his lecture, Godwin declared that artistic dress was meant to uphold 'simple graceful forms', and 'subtle harmonies'.<sup>20</sup> It was unfussy. In her article, 'The Artistic Aspect of Modern Dress', the Victorian dress designer and reformer Alice Comyns Carr wrote, 'the most successful dresses are generally the simplest'<sup>21</sup>

As a result, the loose, freeing drapery found in Hawarden's 'Study from Life' began to boldly inch its way out of the parlour and onto the street through the period's leading women artists including Jane Morris, Ellen Terry, Effie Ruskin and Elizabeth Siddal.<sup>22</sup> Even though venturing out in public without the proper undergarments and stays to uphold one's dress, would,

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<sup>18</sup> 'Lady Clementina Hawarden: Related photographers', V&A museum, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/l/lady-clementina-hawarden-related-photographers/>

<sup>19</sup> Stern, p. 84.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Alice Comyns Carr, 'The Artistic Aspect of Modern Dress', *The Magazine of Art*, January 1882, p. 243.

<sup>22</sup> 'Artistic Dress', *Berg Dictionary of Fashion History*, (Berg Fashion Library, 2012), <http://www.bergfashionlibrary.com/view/bdfh/bdfh-div10466.xml>

to quote, Patricia Cunningham, ‘suggest wantonness, or worse yet, that the woman was a prostitute.’<sup>23</sup> Artistic dress became an act of shocking rebellion.

In his lecture on dress, Godwin noted that it was the public’s perception of artistic and aesthetic dress that prevented dress reform from spreading at a faster rate:

If the English nation were not so rude, if our men and boys could allow people whose dress was slightly different from others to pass unmolested...the obtruding ugliness of crinoline would long since have quite disappeared but the low observations of street boys and the rude stares of many both in the lower and in the middle classes which the absence of popular ugliness evokes require to be met with more courage than is perhaps consistent with that tenderness which is such a special attribute to the gentle life.<sup>24</sup>

An article in the magazine *Bow Bells*, meanwhile, featured an anecdote in which a married woman wore a silk artistic dress only to be met with dismay by her husband. “‘Why’, said he, ‘I wouldn’t walk down the street with you in that dress for a month’s income. We would be the laughingstock of the town’”, the article reads.<sup>25</sup>

Oscar Wilde, arguably the most famous proponent of aesthetic dress, echoed Godwin’s beliefs that the woman’s natural line must be revealed rather than masked. He extolled ‘the laws of Greek dress’ and ‘the exquisite play of light and line that one gets from rich and rippling folds’.<sup>26</sup> In short, his vision for dress reform included the historical references of Godwin’s lecture and the unfussy, freeing silhouettes exemplified in Hawarden’s image: ‘...So from a continuation of the Greek principles of beauty with the German principles of health will come, I feel certain, the costume of the future’.<sup>27</sup> Wilde later echoed Morris, Godwin and Carr in the article, ‘More Radical Ideas upon Dress Reform’, writing, ‘There is a divine economy about beauty; it gives us just what is needful and no more...’<sup>28</sup>

Wilde’s references to Godwin did not stop there. Godwin’s lecture made an early case for dress ‘being raised to the dignity of art’ stating that if one was to develop an understanding of architecture, one must first seek to understand her garments. Wilde shared Godwin’s belief that dress must ultimately be an extension of art and advanced the costume historian’s philosophies decades later: ‘There is not, for instance, a single delicate line, or delightful proportion, in the dress of the Greeks, which is not echoed exquisitely in their architecture’.<sup>29</sup> His lectures highlighted the value of ‘beautiful and rational designs’ in ‘all work’ and advocated a shift away from modistes and towards trained artists for the craft of dressmaking.<sup>30</sup> But he also advanced Godwin’s notion that fashion could be more than a fleeting fad, stating that ‘one should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art’.<sup>31</sup>

In her ‘Study from Life’, Hawarden positioned her daughters to do both. And it is this idea, more than any other talking point that emerged from the dress reform movement that was

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<sup>23</sup> Patricia A. Cunningham, *Reforming Women’s Fashion, 1850 – 1920: Politics, Health and Art*, (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2003), p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> Stern, p. 84.

<sup>25</sup> A.H., ‘Women’s Dress Reform’, *Bow Bells: A magazine of general literature and art for family reading*, Oct. 9, 1891, p. 346.

<sup>26</sup> Oscar Wilde, ‘Woman’s Dress’, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 40, no 6114 (October 14, 1884).

<sup>27</sup> Wilde, ‘Woman’s Dress’.

<sup>28</sup> Oscar Wilde, ‘More Radical Ideas Upon Dress Reform’, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 40, no. 6224 (November 11, 1884).

<sup>29</sup> Oscar Wilde, ‘The Relation of Dress to Art: A Note in Black and White on Mr. Whistler’s Lecture’, *Pall Mall Gazette*, February 28, 1885.

<sup>30</sup> Oscar Wilde, ‘House Decoration’, May 11, 1882, Gutenberg Files, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14062/14062-h/14062-h.htm>

<sup>31</sup> Oscar Wilde, ‘Phrases and Philosophies For the Use of the Young’, *The Chameleon*, Vol. 1, December 1894.

perhaps the most radical of all – that clothing could be a work of art. One could say that dress reform began in the artist's studio with the PRBs' historical costumes. But it wasn't until Aestheticism took hold of Victorian England's creative circles that historical costume became a conventional form of dress and elevated to a higher art form – or as Lagerfeld noted centuries later, 'important'.<sup>32</sup>

Aesthetic dress, with its loose, flowing references to classical costume, began to become gradually less associated with shocking ideas of loose morals and more so aligned with artistic circles of rarefied taste. In short, dress was elevated to a higher form of art, equally as important to one's personal aesthetic as the paintings collected to hang on the walls and the handcrafted furniture purchased to decorate the rooms. A woman's artistic dress became an essential part of the decorative accoutrements in the Aesthete's home. The sinuous Grecian drapery that lightly grazed her waistline said as much about her taste level as, say, the exotic Japonaise textile that hung in her drawing room as evidenced by Hawarden's costume tableaux, which frequently featured 'pretty objects' that she collected over the years such as an Indian travelling cabinet or a concertina.<sup>33</sup> This was also reflected in the writings of the day, most notably the *Art at Home* series of guidebooks which tellingly included the manual, *Dress*, alongside other guidebooks titled *A Plea for Art in the House*, *Sketching from Nature*, and *House Decoration*. Under the influence of Wilde, Haweis, Oliphant and Pember-Devereux, women such as Hawarden began to use dress as not only a conduit to beauty, but a source of personal agency.

In the words of Oliphant, 'just as there used to be a class of *précieuses* who went into ecstasies over the verses of the popular poet, there is now a class who dress after pictures, and ask, when they buy a new gown, not, like Mrs. Siddons, 'Will it wash?', or 'Will it wear?' with Mrs. Primrose; but 'Will it paint?' Perhaps this is more worthy inspiration than the senseless pursuit of mere fashion...'<sup>34</sup> Aesthetic dress, with its more refined, classical leanings and freer, liberating structure, became a powerful source of self-expression for women looking to assert their personal taste in ways other than the upholstery on an arm chair. This is particularly apparent in Hawarden's 'Study From Life'.

Victorian dress reform has influenced the way modern-day society views fashion more than any other movement in dress and costume. The notion of wearable art that serves as a foundation for many contemporary fashion houses from Alexander McQueen to Christian Dior stems directly from the debates of the Victorian era and the period's merging of what Godwin called 'the historical and conventional' forms of dress.<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, Victorian dress reform was an unwieldy movement with various permutations that would have a long-lasting impact on future generations. In their unique views of historical costume, Godwin and Lady Hawarden may not have accurately predicted the way that we dress today, but they undoubtedly helped shape the way we think about it.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Stern, p. 84.

<sup>33</sup> Carol Mavor, *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden*, (London: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>34</sup> Margaret Oliphant, *Dress*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1878), p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Stern, p. 87.

<sup>36</sup> Wilde, 'Woman's Dress'.

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