



## Studies in Visual Communication

---

Volume 7  
Issue 2 *Spring 1981*

Article 9

---

1981

### Hollander: Seeing Through Clothes

David Kunzle

*University of California, Los Angeles*

---

#### Recommended Citation

Kunzle, D. (1981). Hollander: Seeing Through Clothes. 7(2), 94-96. Retrieved from <https://repository.upenn.edu/svc/vol7/iss2/9>

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. <https://repository.upenn.edu/svc/vol7/iss2/9>  
For more information, please contact [repository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:repository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

## Hollander: Seeing Through Clothes

**Anne Hollander.** *Seeing Through Clothes.*  
New York: Avon, 1980. 528 pp. \$8.95 (paper).

**Reviewed by David Kunzle**  
University of California, Los Angeles

As a means of visual communication, the living, corporal, unique one of clothing has been subject to innumerable descriptive historical essays and many different interpretive systems — social-historical, sociological, psychoanalytic. The history of costume has also been linked to the evaluation of styles in art, architecture, and domestic decor. Details of costume are used as a tool for the precise dating of paintings, and drapery folds identify a period style and even individual artists. But dress has never, until now, been treated as an artistic language in itself, couched within but operating to a degree independently of the great art-historical tradition.

Hollander presents audaciously and seductively the theory that:

The aesthetic alterations within fashion have a visual autonomy that is granted by that of art itself, which in turn is generally granted — despite all its connections with religion, politics, and the wealth of princes or nations. The history of dress or the study of clothes has no real substance other than in *images* of clothes, in which their visual reality truly lives, naturalized, as it were, by the persuasive eye of art.

The persuasive eye of art — and the persuasive art of language. Hollander's language is very persuasive, but her theory rests upon a fundamental disregard of the historical nature of the "language of art." Art is not autonomous, but the product of historical forces. Art-history itself, that most conservative of disciplines, is beginning at last to abandon the theory of artistic autonomy and deal with the very historical questions Hollander deems extraneous.

Let us begin, in the traditional manner of art-historical criticism, by looking at the form and style of this book, before we consider its ideological implications. Hollander's language is rich, evocative, and beautifully crafted, with hints now and then of the baroque metaphorical swag, but always under intellectual control. Descriptions of drapery and nudes are both opulent and nuanced:

In the hands of Rubens, the bodies of women came alive in eddies and whirlpools of nacreous paint. Nameless anatomical bubbles and unidentifiable waves agitated the formerly quiescent adipose tissue under the mobile hides of nymphs and goddesses as they simultaneously agitated the satin sleeves and skirts of the newly fashionable free-flowing clothes. [p. 106]

Rubens was always the muse of art-historical lyricism. The originality of Hollander, however, lies in her exfoliation of the adage: like clothes, like flesh (and vice versa). Here are the nudes of Boucher and Fragonard, who "wear their skin and flesh fashioned into a delicious union suit, made half out of juicy, childish innocence and half out of self-conscious sexuality. The somewhat narrow shoulders, the round heads, and the short legs give them the infantine look they share with their attendant cupids" (p. 116). A pity only that the concepts "infantine" and "baby-flesh" are not developed, and that the difference from Rubens' ideal adult (but comparatively geriatric) female form is not enlarged upon to encompass the historical change of a century.

Hollander's style, with its periodic swings into rapture, recalls the great tradition of art-critical emotionalism that stretches back to Ruskin and Diderot. The adjectives are stitched into place with the precision and delicacy of a lace trimming; the book as a whole is structured with the formal assurance of abstract architecture, the social purpose of which we do not inquire into.

Some of the best parts of this book are about the reciprocity of relationship of body to clothes, and vice versa. The conjunction, which Hollander treats as resulting in an autonomous visual language, is made up of parts each of which have been treated as autonomous. But both body and clothes are function as well as form. Art and art history have regarded the human body as the primary vehicle of aesthetic values — as an end in itself. This vision, which is little less than an ideology, has been attained by detaching the body from the concept of economically productive physical labor, which has been its primordial function throughout history. But art and art history, serving a ruling class that prefers ruling to working — training for the former rules out capacity for the latter — prefers to see the body as form rather than function. Work is sublimated in ruling class art as well as in life, with the male body illustrated in war, and the female body in sex and passive domesticity.

How have art and clothing expressed and indeed enacted this sublimation? They have disguised the primary uses of the body as a machine built for the purpose of performing physical labor. In the female, the appearance of hard bone and muscle has been suppressed in favor of smooth skin and round flesh. The physical mobility necessitated by most traditional forms of labor has been literally repressed by bulk and tightness of garments. As her labor-association value has been reduced, woman's sexual (and aesthetic) value has been enhanced. Even — or especially — the idealized nude or naked female form reveals this process of sexual enhancement, and the signs by which clothing "works" symbolically but actively upon the body to dissociate it from ideas of physical labor. Hollander

makes fine formal analyses of examples of this process from various facets of post-Renaissance art, although she avoids developing them along the lines indicated here.

Her perception that the unclothed body tends to bear the marks of clothes discarded, her insistence that the artist cannot escape the recognition of the "natural" state as the dressed, not nude, should make us all—especially art historians who talk loosely and broadly about "classical nudity" in the abstract and absolute—read afresh and more carefully the physiognomics of body contours, poses, gestures, with reference to physically absent clothing. The nude body is usually coded with the social specifics of dress. "All nudes in art since modern fashion began are wearing the ghosts of absent clothes, sometimes highly visible ghosts. . . . People without clothes are still likely to behave as if they wore them." This statement should be heeded by all who treat the process of idealization as if it were a linear progression away from reality. In fact, it is often the case that the more idealized the nude figure, the more demonstrably "fashionable" is its shaping—Goya's *Maja Desnuda* is an example succinctly analyzed by Hollander.

It is, according to Hollander, the peculiarity of Western art and costume to compel an integrated vision of clothes and body. She thereby sets herself against the current doctrine of dualism, to be found in such writers as Broby-Johansen (*Body and Clothes*) and Rudofsky (*The Unfashionable Human Body*), which views body and clothes if not as actually antagonistic (Rudofsky), then as complementary and separable entities. Hollander correctly terms the relation of body and clothes, and the resultant erotic charge, a *dialectic*; but she does not deal with the concept of contradiction that such a term summons up. Historical analysis will prove that clothing expresses resolves and hides contradictions not only in the aesthetic (e.g., loose/stiff) and moral (e.g., revealing/concealing) but also social realms. The "quirks of fashion" (its formal extremes, its changeability) are symptoms of the social flux. According to the particular social circumstances of time and place, clothing can serve as an attempt to stabilize this flux, to control it in the interests of a particular social class, to fend off an invasion from another class (laterally as well as vertically), and to announce such an invasion. Sumptuary laws were designed specifically to repel the invasion of aristocratic preserves of upwardly mobile middle sectors.

Under capitalism, clothing has served the social and commercial struggle. The complexity of fashion differentiation is related to the complexity of the forms this struggle has taken. The critical tradition, of which Hollander's book is a consummation, which insists on

seeing clothing primarily as a form of aesthetic pleasure, as an autonomous artistic language, as a "self-perpetuating visual fiction" functions, whether consciously or not, to conceal not only the nature but the very existence of the class conflict, of the social struggle that is the stuff of history. While one can honor any attempt to raise dress, so often relegated to the status of "minor art" and "superior craft," to the status of Art, one cannot welcome its total excision from the historical process.

Now, Hollander does not deny the existence of social and economic forces in determining the form of dress and the flow of fashion. Indeed, one suspects she knows a great deal about them. She makes glancing references to the economic staple of northern Europe, the wool trade, as a major determinant of all those eloquent "cloth gestures and drapery phrases" in northern Gothic and Renaissance art. But she is evidently more comfortable with other kinds of connections, those of art to art. She speaks evocatively about the idealization of cloth at a time when comparable idealization of the human body (Italian Renaissance style) was not possible. "The beauty of precious cloth came to nourish imaginative lives, but the riches of the body's beauty were not seen in the same light." Drapery not only hid but replaced the body, in those "angels buoyed up not by wings, but gloriously wrought masses of bunched skirt, which do not clothe but appear to replace unangelic and awkward limbs." A fine visual observation; but does this not suggest that the patrons of these pictures were moving away from belief in the supernatural, and religious or magical thinking, toward a rationalism based on the acquisition and exchange of material goods: the spiritual riches of the angel could only be conveyed by the material riches of his drapery? And why drapery rather than jewelry? Why, at this same time, is it becoming improper, or unnecessary, to put real jewels, to use real gold in pictures? How does it come about that the pictures themselves eventually acquire an exchange value more potent than that of jewelry? Costume history as much as art history needs to explore economic factors. One must watch the swing in the price of wool, as Hollander follows the swing in the folds of wool.

The behavior of wool may be followed through various stages of production, distribution, and consumption (or assumption). All the stages are surely connected and may be shown so. Economic history tells us about its commercial behavior; art history about its aesthetic behavior; social history, or the history of manners and costume, about the way it behaved in real life, in specific social situations. What evidence do we have, apart from that conventionalized in pictures, that a woman in 1434 commonly stood holding drapery like the bride of Giovanni Arnolfini—a cloth merchant, be it noted—in the famous Van Eyck painting? How far is the gesture ritual, how far is it a practical necessity?

Were skirts commonly so arranged? Or only for important ceremonies? Or only in pictures? To answer such questions, one turns to literary texts.

In the later period, potential sources such as memoirs, novels, and etiquette books abound. Hollander ignores them not because she does not appreciate their potential. Her culling of texts as diverse as Shakespeare, Austen, and Goethe within a few pages in the chapter on mirrors, for instance, points to the resources at the command of a writer whose breadth of learning cannot be in doubt. She does so as a matter of strategy, to preserve her terms of reference largely within the supposedly "autonomous artistic language" of clothes-in-painting. Exceptionally, she considers at one point the evidence for pubic depilation in real life: it is recommended by Porta's *Natural Magic*, 1558 ff. The question of whether it was normal in 1830 for young women of the lower as well as upper classes to shave armpit hair becomes of some moment when we consider the hostile reaction to Delacroix' *Liberty Leading the People* (Liberty is visibly unshaven).

It is Hollander's thesis that what might be experienced as ugly and socially unacceptable in reality alone becomes beautiful when transmuted in painting, and thence admired in reality. Changes in social attitudes and behavior are secondary: "The tight-laced waist, the periwigged head, and the neck collared in a millstone ruff...have all been comfortable, beautiful, and natural in their time, more by the alchemy of visual representation than by the force of social change" (p. xiii). The first part of this sentence implies the need for a historical explanation of past styles rather than one couched in modern aesthetic prejudice; the second part denies the necessity or primacy of that historical explanation. Are we to conclude that the tight-laced waist was approved in its time because the wearer herself and those who looked at her imagined her as a painting?

Can we believe that this practice, which according to its numerous critics was not only unnatural and pernicious but also wicked, could simply be "visually alchemized" into the comfortable, beautiful, and natural? This is to put the cart before the horse. Life never actually imitates art, although it may sometimes appear—and be felt—to do so. Reality comes first; art reflects, interprets, mediates, and masks it.

Artists represented ladies with slender waists because such waists were admired in reality—not for aesthetic (or sexual) reasons alone. The example of the corset, which shows art—and technology—as reshaping reality *in* the reality, is particularly illuminating, for it can be demonstrated that its use always, and especially in its exaggerated form (tight-lacing), corresponded to a historical nexus of social competition, sexual repression, sex-role redefinition, and even economic and political anxieties, rather than some a priori aesthetic preference. The hostility expressed toward tight-lacing by artists as well as physicians and clerical reformers was always moral and social before it was aesthetic. The "alchemy" that rendered tight-lacing admirable—actually, stimulating rather than comfortable, interesting rather than beautiful and natural—was made up primarily of moral, psychological, and social components. Aesthetic rationalizations were invented afterward. The alchemy is not that of visual representation alone or primarily, but that of the fusion of all kinds of historical variables.

It is commonly recognized that dress in the West has been an extraordinarily sensitive barometer of historical change. That attempts to read the infinite calibrations of that barometer have remained rudimentary, incomplete, and unsatisfactory does not mean we should give up trying—the very opposite. Nor does it mean we should not take the next step, that of considering dress as a historical cause as well as effect.

Hollander's insistence on the pharmacy of clothes as an art-form and art-language may be viewed as undercutting the historical interpretation. But, given the book's self-proclaimed bias, it will, let us hope, act also as a stimulant toward historical interpretation by encouraging us to take clothes more seriously—as seriously as we take Art and Sex. Dress not only bridges these two great domains of historical investigation, it actively partakes of both. And just as the language of art and the language of sex are historically determined, so is the language of dress.