



The perfect dress and its making:

A comparative study of the sartorial habits of Amsterdam women (1950s–2010s)

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Abstract

The shift from home and custom-made clothing to mass-produced ready-mades in 20th-century Europe has been the subject of studies from multiple disciplines and across various locations. Contributing to this field of studies, and extending the analysis until the present day, a group of female consumers living in Amsterdam in the 1950s and 2010s were interviewed about their sartorial habits. The study identifies a discrepancy between common manufacturing processes and values related to identity as a central cause of this shift. Furthermore it explores how such a discrepancy can be found again today, arguing that this divergence is leading to the re-emergence of customized production.

Keywords

Dressmaking, mass production, customization, craftsmanship, identity

Introduction

The rise of the apparel industry has been studied from a variety of disciplines including Economics, Business, Jewish and Labour History (see Godley, 1997 for a brief review). Some of the factors considered essential for its development and popularization in Europe and North America are the development of sizing systems, sewing machines, and, importantly, the growing prominence of fashion trends (Godley, 1997, 1999). The decline of previously popular ways of dressmaking, however, has received less attention. Most scholars see this as a gradual process of substitution of home and custom-made clothing by mass-produced ready-mades. They argue that, although this process took place at different times in different regions and concerned different categories of clothing, the development was overall similar (Kaipainen, 2009). For instance, Zakim (2009) reveals how the ready-made substituted the homespun in representing national values for American consumers during mid 19th century, Ugolini (2003) uncovers the tensions involved in the choice between tailor-made and ready-to-wear for early 20th-century British men, and Kaipainen (2009) points out that late availability of ready-to-wear in Finland extended this process until mid 20th century. Other authors, however, argue that the industrialization around the turn of the 20th century resulted not only in an increase in the production and consumption in the ready-made industry, but in an increase in the production and consumption of home and custom-made clothing as well (Burman, 1999; Fernandez, 1994). According to this rationale, the popularization of the domestic sewing machine and paper patterns enabled more people to pursue dressmaking activities for themselves, their family members and clients. However, if the consequences of industrialization for personalized clothing during the early 20th century are up for discussion, it seems beyond dispute that personalized dressmaking declined around mid 20th century. "It is only since the Second World War that mass-produced, ready-to-wear clothing has become the standard wear for everyone" argues Elizabeth Wilson in her influential "Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity" (2003, p. 89).

In this article we stress the significance of consumer values in this process, taking the city of Amsterdam as an example and contributing to the transnational debate. Home and custom dressmaking were the most common ways of making clothing in Amsterdam during the first half of the 20th century. However, as we will argue, these practices were not optimal in terms of what consumers wanted to communicate through dress, resulting

in a radical decrease in personalized clothing by mid 20th century. In the first part of this article we highlight the importance of fashion trends to 1950s Amsterdam consumers and how ready-mades were the most desirable way to look “modern”. Subsequently, we continue this perspective into the present in order to explain the current emergence of Product-Service Systems (PSS) offering personalized clothes on demand. Unlike in the 1950s, the consumers of today see adherence to fashion trends as something inevitable rather than attractive; individuality and personal style, however, are considered central. We argue that the divergence of these values with those of mainstream mass production is offering a fertile ground for emerging customization initiatives such as NikeiD or MiAdidas and transforming, once again, the way we design and make our clothes.

In order to investigate the issues introduced above, two groups of women were interviewed about their sartorial practices. The first group was asked about their experiences during the 1950s, when they were in their twenties and thirties. This first series of interviews was carried out in 2011 with eleven women. The eleven women in the second group were between 25 and 35 years old in 2015 and were asked to reflect on their present or recent practices. All names have been changed for privacy reasons.

“If you are in fashion you matter”

Drawing on the interviews with the first group, the 1950s can be seen as a transition period in the Netherlands, going from making clothes and visiting a dressmaker, to buying ready-mades in a store. This is more or less in line with the rest of the industrialized western world (Wilson, 2003). Most of the women in this group regularly made clothes for themselves and their family members, until ready-to-wear became more popular. Several interviewees stressed that professional dressmaking was a possibility only for higher classes and therefore not within reach for them. One of the respondents could only afford to buy second-hand clothing. However, three of the women happened to be professional dressmakers and defined their clientele as varied.

Not only the practice of dressmaking was popular among these women, they also transformed and remade garments, adapting them to changing body shapes and fashion trends. When Jacoba was 18 (in 1935) she bought her first ball gown. “[Black] always looked good on me so I bought a black dress. First it was a long dress and later I transformed it into a short dress, and then it lasted longer [...] You could change the whole look; for example [by altering] the sleeve of a blouse”. Ria, born in 1925, recalls transforming ready-mades regularly. “I bought this skirt and top, and made them into a dress. The skirt was pleated, but I changed it. Then I got a different effect.” Hendrika, a seamstress born in 1925, also used her skills to alter clothes: “By adding a small thing it would become a little different. It would become fashionable.”

Although widespread sewing skills at the time allowed for a complex and continuous process of design and manufacture resulting in the making and remaking of unique pieces, the stylistic ideals of these women were far from unique. When asked about the design process for dressmaking, both the amateurs and professionals stressed the role of ready-mades as a source of inspiration. Jacoba, who regularly made her own clothes at home, said she “looked for what was fashionable in magazines and in shop windows” to base her choices on. “Fashion was in the window displays,” Hendrika confirmed. Jantien, a professional dressmaker born in 1924, was aware that her services were second choice for consumers who had an expensive taste: “[People] came to me because it was cheaper than buying something”. They often told her what they had seen in the shop and she would base her designs on those ready-mades. “To see what was fashionable, I would sometimes go look at the shop windows. I was good at drawing, so I imitated what I saw”.

From the responses of these interviewees we can conclude that following given fashion ideals, to be modern and ‘fit’ into society, was considered essential. It was the responsibility of the consumer to keep up with the newest developments in order to be “well-dressed”. Clasina, born in 1925 and regularly sewing at home for herself and her children, would “try to join fashion as much as possible”. Similarly, Marianne (1925) recalls that “there was fashion and then I would try to follow it, of course”. The main reason to (still) do that according to Jachienke (1935) is that “it’s important to look good, and that was the case also then.” For Hendrika, the social significance of fashion transcends simple personal appearance: “if you are in fashion you matter”, she stresses.

The role of ready-mades as signifiers of fashion trends shows how they were highly desirable before becoming actually convenient, explaining the decrease in the popularity of personal dressmaking practices as soon as ready-mades became affordable to more consumers. Ready-mades were much more in line with the dress values of the time. The garments might not have been as durable and well-fitted as good quality custom and self-made clothing, but they were designed by professionals aware of the latest trends (Godley, 1997; Kaipainen, 2010; Marcketti, 2005). Although this article highlights the influence of consumer preferences in technological change, we

do not deny the role of mass production in spreading and consolidating those values. In our view, it was this mutual influence that made industrial clothing the best way to “be modern”.

“This is just...me”

The sartorial practices of the second group, young women working in Amsterdam today, differ in several aspects from the ones of the first group. To begin with, the great majority of these women have never made clothes for themselves or others. Only one of the respondents occasionally practices amateur dressmaking. They incorporate new clothes in their wardrobe in several ways. Buying ready-made clothing from physical shops and from online shops is the most popular way. Some of the respondents also exchange clothes or buy clothes second-hand. When asked about the criteria for choosing their clothes, they stress the importance of new items to match or complement the other clothes in their wardrobe. In many cases, it is this analysis that actually leads to a new purchase. Their wardrobe represents the spectrum of clothing that defines their dressing style.

Most of the women see adherence to fashion trends as something inevitable rather than important or appealing. “I don’t look to what’s in (...) but implicitly you take it into account because that is what is there [in the shops]. I buy what’s there, so automatically I’m following [trends], but maybe with a lag of a year or so”, says Susanne (31). Klara (33) is “not interested enough in fashion to pay attention to trends”. Sometimes, they explicitly resist falling in line: Ingrid (28) and Annemarie (34), for example, decided to avoid a trendy style of backpack that “everyone has today” when buying one for themselves. Lotte (28), conscious of the seasonality of the colours offered in shops, takes her chance to purchase a lot of garments when one of her favourite colours is trendy, so that she can also use them when they are out of style.

Overall, the inspiration of these women’s shopping decisions comes from their personal background, memories or character, and their direct surroundings. Sara (27) recognizes the influence that living in South Africa and attending swing and jazz dance lessons has had on her style, which she describes as “contemporary” but also incorporating “African-like” prints and a certain remembrance of the 1920s. Lotte (28) has “a very rigid colour scheme” consisting of “a lot of green, turquoise, brown and earth colours”, which goes well with the tones of her skin, hair and eyes, and Rosana (34) acknowledges the influence of native Ecuadorian aesthetics (her country of origin) on her style, “informal, with bright colours and accessories like rings or earrings”, which has been prevalent for many years and regardless of the season.

The significance of personal style for this generation can perhaps best be illustrated through the experience of Lotte. For Lotte, identifying her personal style with the help of a stylist friend was “an eye opener” and she recommends this experience to others; “at some point you discover your style, it is something that is not related to fashion, it is not related to your peers, this is just...me. And somehow it sticks and it crystalizes, and you say: Oh... this has been me for a long time, I will stick to this (...) OK, then all the other stuff I have just needs to go, because this is just... better.”

So if the personal and different are central values for this generation, does that mean that imitation and trends play no role at all? We think not. Based on the writings of sociologist Gabriel Tarde we argue that it is not that we no longer imitate, it is just that the way in which we imitate and follow trends has changed, resulting in an increasing intervention of the individual:

What is contrary to personal pre-eminence is the imitation of a single man whom people copy in everything. But when, instead of patterning one’s self after one person or after a few, we borrow from a hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand persons, each of whom is considered under a particular aspect, the elements of thought or action which we subsequently combine, the very nature and choice of these elementary copies, as well as their combination, expresses and accentuates our original personality (Tarde, 1903, p. xxiv).

In conclusion, the approach of the second group of women to dressing style varies heavily from that of the first group. While the first group identifies adhering to fashion trends as a key factor to dressing well, for the second group fashion trends are one element of style, an element with which they can play by incorporating, resisting and/or transforming it based on their own set of aesthetic values. These values are based highly on personal experience and are perceived as resulting from the individual.

Personalized production: An industry in the making

What the two generations of women have in common is that the prevailing manufacturing methods of their times do not correspond with the values they find important in dress. Whereas in the 1950s the women aspired to be in fash-

ion and follow a generic style, the most common manufacturing method was custom dressmaking. In the current day, now that dress values are inclined towards the personal or the particular, the material resources to realize them are highly generic. Women's relationships with clothes today is linear, consisting of buying, using and disposing, and rarely involves creating or modifying garments in order to create unique items. The lack of skills to do this is a major reason. Janneke (28), like most of these women, has never had a custom or self-made garment except from a scarf, she thinks "that would be too expensive or take too much time because I need to learn how to do it (...) now I really have to put effort to get them (...) I don't really see me doing something for myself".

Arguing that it was the divergence between the prevalent manufacturing processes and the values associated with dress that in the 20th century lead to the decay of home and custom dressmaking, it is not unfeasible that today's disparity between processes of making and dress values will lead to the proliferation of industrial practices that speak more to what consumers find important. For, while individuality and originality are major concerns for today's women, most of the clothing industry works on the basis of repetition.

The renewed interest in personalized clothing at a global level challenges the dynamics of traditional companies. Customized clothing requires reversing the whole production chain by starting from consumer demand and transforming production lines into service-based flexible systems (see e.g. Duray, Ward, Milligan, & Berry, 2000; Pine, 1999). Examples of such initiatives already in the market include that of big companies such as Nike or Adidas, who offer online platforms where customers can create their personalized sportswear based on combinations of pre-defined parameters, and small start-ups such as Knyttan, a shop where customers can walk in and use an interactive platform to create their sweaters to be knitted by the on-site cutting-edge manufacturing machine. The extent to which these emerging Product-Service Systems may substitute mass production in the future is not yet clear. In fact, these practices are still limited to a small group of early adopters. What is clear is that their popularization will depend, among other factors, on the values the consumer of the future associates with dress. Will individual style and exclusivity of dress become significant enough for consumers as to make mass production of clothing obsolete?

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Biographical note

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