

# A 19<sup>th</sup> Century Rhetoric of Fashion

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## **Abstract**

The present paper highlights a few aspects of the Romanian urban society fashion during the long 19th century. The Revolution of 1848 brought forth a new social paradigm, visible in changes at all levels. Intricate relations with power and with authority, in the classical sense, accompany fashion as a daily element of social existence. It implies tradition and innovation, attitude, mentalities, psychology, technology and technique, art, taste etc., it acts like a dynamic, interactive, hierarchic and segregation phenomenon. In semiotics it is considered a paradoxical semantic system as its goal is «to deceive its meaning elaborated so extravagantly» (cf. R. Barthes, *Système de la mode*, 1967, p.10). As a symbolic sign, fashion betokens culture. It states a permanent celebration of the Otherness, which means it advocates an endless dialogue between systems and between individuals. Perception allows a continuous reinvention of the human body, a matter of concept able to create forms. And such forms helped the Romanian society to build patterns to integrate itself into the European culture, a priority at the time. The people's flexible engagement in a European discourse stimulated valuable perspectives of shaping and maintaining a meaningful lifestyle. Fashion was called to bridge these two systems and to configure the context for modernity.

Our analysis relies on artefacts, plastic signs and visual icons as figurative objects of reading, produced by the Romanian society during the long 19<sup>th</sup> century. They made possible a semiotical approach of the phenomenon which underwent a gradual process of unification of its code after having transferred almost its entire range of cultural conventions from a central model, the Parisian fashion. These icons make us witness vestment signs and variations of shapes which exerted an important influence on mentalities, proxemics, on behaviour mechanisms and pragmatic usage until the people reached massification in terms of clothing.

Body reshaping through vestment has extensively been an outcome of social regulations within the various systems in the history of mankind. Hierarchy had to be marked by easily recognizable tokens which had to be both functional and representative as nothing is insignificant in apparel. Its geometry, colours and textures provide mental clues to value motivation, to the wearer's status and occupational role as well as to conformity to the group expectations. Fashion statements create reference to the world outside itself. Paris was the place in target in the case of the Romanian society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In its pursuit of modernization in order to keep the pace with the European advanced societies, the Romanians strove to rapidly adopt the Western new clothing style. And it proved to be a quick and rather efficient method, accompanied by all the others in the human fields, of integrating in the global tendency of the time.

Paintings, photos and reproductions have connected us to the respective past traceable in journals and reviews and in personal archives as well. Both means, text and image, have completed each other in order to highlight the concepts involved.

Through its capacity of linking the biological to the social, fashion has always exerted a pregnant influence on the individual. Under the sartorial sign people have always empersonated characters in casual or exceptional instances and in maskerades so frequent with the wealthy urban high class.

At the beginning of the century the old Phanariote style in attire was prevalent in the Romanian recent heritage. Scenes or portraits of prominent personalities of the time reveal origin, class, position, event as well as other supplementary indexes. Nevertheless, the icon shifts to symbol in many cases. What the Oriental style garment means for the society of The Principalities was similar to what the image of the top hat, the coat tails, the gaiters, the crinoline represent for the 19<sup>th</sup> century Western fashion. Portraits of our ancestors in lavish ceremonial Byzantine dress help us make distinctions of status considering items like: the fine striped aneriu, the furry fermenea or djubea, the princely gugdjuman of zibelline, the dashing taklit etc. in male fashion or the vapourous shawls, fezes, fermeneas, the exquisite tchupags with all the accompanying precious decorations in female fashion rendered in miniatures by painters like Anton Chladek, Giovanni Schiavoni, Charles Doussault, Joseph August Schoefft, Carol Szatmary, Constantin Lecca and so on.

White bottom of the great ishlik indicates, as we have learned from texts, the status of The Head of the Principalities, purple or red bottom ishlik was an index of a 1<sup>st</sup> rank boyar while darker hues of red, green, blue for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and a dark coloured lid over the ichlik meant a 3<sup>rd</sup> rank boyar in this strictly marked hierarchy.

Age is defined in the costume of a beizade, a young prince, who, besides the caftan, the femenea and the tarabolus wears trousers instead of shalvars and a scarf tied in front and car-

ries an umbrella, signs of modernization in a period of transition in terms of fashion. It is an example of a Hybrid, an alotopic sign in praesentia (by interpenetration). The same happened with women's dress which preserved old elements and added others gradually.

A distinction between generations based on regression, so typical in fashion, is also evident in photos of the second half of the century where the couple illustrates two different tendencies belonging to distinct paradigms, The man wears the old-fashioned tradesman anterior while his wife exhibits a modern crinoline. The clothing incongruence was the result of the husband's interest in giving evidence of his social position with the risk of being catalogued as anachronic while the lady, enjoying more freedom in expression, wanted to display her fashionable style. On the contrary, some old women preserve the Oriental style while their husbands wear modern costumes.

Tight or larger tailcoats, stiff stocks, cylindrical collars or lavallières, tubed or half top-pers mainly put on by young men could offer details about a definite European period of time, therefore they are redundant in chronology marks. They also point out the monochrome register in complete contrast with the previous Oriental one.

Motif decorations are sources of many similar semiotic facts. Elegance, bourgeois extraction, tendency of the time are signalled by the Greek pattern of the meanders in women's dress, for instance, relevant in finding a precise historical interval (1866-1867) being worn only for a short period of time.

The appearance of the Romanian «dandies», as male fashion is of a British inspiration mainly, suggests originality turning the visual icon into a real documentation field. The tentative of escaping massification about which we read in memoirs and chronicles had led to the breaking of the norm upheld by a few personalities, mainly artists, who showed off original clothes and accessories, imposing a new narrative scheme, liberating the body or, on the contrary, constraining it. Names like G. I. Ionnescu-Gion impeccably dressed is taking up a pose, as fashion demands posture, never missing his white gloves and his precious walking stick, Al. Odobescu with his natural elegance in silk lampassed gray trousers, Theodor Aman, the Renaissance-like elegant painter with his multiple pleated sleeves out of a black velvet redingote, Gh. D. Mirea, the painter in an ample caped mac'ferlan and many, many others imposed their taste in the elitistic social circles they frequented. Beautiful and smart Romanian women expressed their class and taste, as it is the case with Martha Bibescu or Aglae Ghyka. Their aesthetic ideals did not match the general lack of individuality in the outfit and they became a sort of fashion icons of the bucharestois life. They operate a conversion within the ample conversion of signs by reinventing received forms.

Other figures' portraits are easily identified from suggestive caricatures, metaphors deciphered contextually as they are, semiotically speaking, substitutions of the referent: the flared crown of the top hat makes the painter C. Stancescu look like a mad hatter in his ground touching redingote and Mishu Vacarescu, the fashion chronicler, plays a risorial character in his laced knickerbockers. Their recognition lies on the negative humorous connotation trait leaving aside attributes of regular vestment articulation and syntax, a remark valid for other caricatures as well.

Putting on clothes, beyond the basic need of protection, was similar to taking an attitude which advocated the daring bourgeois spirit of the epoch. The continuous use of old, traditional

Romanian blouse, the *iia*, or using the local genuine fabrics, a sort of indigenous home spun, particularly worn by important figures like Queen Elisabeth (Carmen Sylva) and her maids of honour as well as, later on, by Queen Mary demonstrated the unconventional way such objects could be treated, not only the idea of manifesting national authenticity.

Romanian women took interest in monumental crinolines in the sixth decade, and later in trains and bustles although they had hardly been trying to get rid of the heavy mass of clothes of the earlier times. The evolution of the fashion code experienced again a typical recall of certain items, like huge pelisses, inflated skirts, large capeleria or, on the contrary, corsets, cuirasses, long hobble skirts which reiterated restrictions in body movements. The former costume had related to discomfort by heaviness and soft amplitude, the modern cut by tightness or rigid swelling causing immovability.

Journals played a huge role in spreading fashion novelties, they sent innumerable messages. Women's fashion was constantly under the interpretation of narcissism and allusion to immorality. Their way to emancipation was more visible in their courageously adopting male pieces of garment, even military adornments: redingotes, trousers, tunics, vests, gaiters, decorative elements as centurion belts and buckles, passementerie elements as brandenbours, lampases, tresses or panaches, egrettes and all sorts of hats like cannotiers, panama, top hats, claques etc. and the shape of some male pieces of habillement as the jockey cap, for instance, inspired them in creating a special epaulette, a metaphor based on similarity of form.

A vestment code invaded Romanian language and its evolution could not be controlled, therefore its continuous re-learning was an initiation of the whole people. Barthes, in *Elements of Semiology* (1970: 557), asserts that images cannot, ultimately, communicate independently of language. The text «*suppresses this freedom, but also removes this uncertainty; it translates and imposes a choice, orders the reader to stop his perception of this dress here (...), directs our gaze to the fabric a dress is made of, or the belt or accessories with which it is worn. Thus the text has a function of authority*» he concludes (SM: 24).

But since neither the shape nor the significance of the dress is very stable in any culture, we have a permanent need for words to understand and express the message, and it is, to some extent, the fashion journal which solves this need. The iconic message is able to translate and direct the perception to the extent the text can impose on the meaning of the image reading. The text can also provide information on name, on certain details the image cannot render, using an unstable lexic, sometimes already historical for two reasons, it is neologic and belongs to fashion.

In the case of visual icons we must benefit sometimes of both front and back image to discern between a *talma* and a cloak in general, slightly different pieces worn by women. Besides, lexicographical definition lacks accuracy in creating the right concept in the mind of the language user, if the *diferentia specifica* were not clearly stated.

Visual iconicity can prove helpful in disambiguating the topic and in creating functional oppositions in a homogenous paradigm.

Within the paradigm of fashion there could be either transitory or lasting oppositions, for instance, the hood is opposed to collar but also to the lack of it in the case of the cossack mantle and the collet. Elements of stability in fashion acting as prototypes, such as skirt, blouse, dress, cloak, trousers, hat etc., are representative entities defining in the highest degree the class of basic items while others depend on the association with them: berthes, balayeuses, jockeys

or epaulettes, colerettes, lapels, jabots, bavolets are both autonomous entities and pending of principal pieces.

When the word *peignoir* was used, it implied bourgeois home reception of guests, that is, home entertainment. And it has managed to preserve its meaning adding a symbol to it, that of femininity.

The apron signifies femininity as well but also home duties, professional outfit in the case of white aprons of the nurse uniform and even elegance when it is simulated on a gown as a trimming.

The enveloping *sorties de bal* and algériennes, rich vests *à la zouave*, long gloves, stylish dresses and graceful silk shoes just like the courtly tails, refined shirts, delicate scarfs in male fashion all connote luxury, class affiliation, over-interest in self-image, wealth or superficiality, vanity, showing off, infatuation etc. making the semiotic reading and decodification multiple.

If the rules of adequate variety are crossed, the interaction between users is compromised. People wear the clothes they think others expect them to wear. And in fact incorrect clothing leads to role conflict as far as ruggedness is sanctioned, for instance.

When fashion is perceived as commonplace it ceases to be distinctive, then it is replaced and the cycle is taken over.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the contrast of forms was so radical in the Romanian countries that the codes were sometimes misunderstood and in a clash with mentalities. Moreover the new French lexic often seemed artificial and it was ridiculed on many occasions.

The use of the «bouffant» in skirt, see the crinoline, the tournure or, in sleeves, see puffed out *à gigot*, *à l'imbécile*, *pagoda* sleeves or the heavy adornment in large brimmed hats or the «chiffonné» or «soufflé» so en vogue on women's hats, all create reference to a semiotic centered on deformation.

Exaggeration and extravagance in volume make the attire the central character annihilating the person wearing it. It triggers a higher role of the ornament and of the non-utility playing a dynamic part in the social perception. And the word «fashionable» adds a connotation expressing the value.

From a different perspective one can imagine that excess of form acts upon proxemic rules. Indeed so it happened as inflated shapes demanded a widened space between the lady wearing such items and the surrounding people/ leaving her without the usual male companion. There was implied an entanglement of problems like door opening or armchair enlargement and a carriage society developed to make possible displacement since travelling plays a dominant role in fashion which always refers to an elsewhere. The importance of these codes is clearly seen in the correspondence of the laws of projecting the significance on the context which should be shared, otherwise a communicational failure occurs. Between stability and novelty there is a permanent fight, fashion is no exception, it is an indication of the progress in society and, as an artistic act, turns the non-significant into a significant. Its semiotic character lies in its perception as creative art because its information is surprising, frequently unaccepted by the public at the beginning because of its capacity of shocking.

It is also said that the sign is the result of an act of segregation (JK 2004: 54). This is more visible in the case of the semiotic of visual icons when only certain elements are representative to ensure their recognition and they turn into symbols only when they become cultural,

theoretical not empirical models. We could illustrate this by reminding two original Romanian items of female fashion of the epoch with symbolic weight: the Griwitza or Dorobantsi cap and the tchepken, both inspired from military uniforms.

Democratization of fashion implied institutionalization in many cases. Uniforms for clerks, priests, lawyers, professors, medical staff, ceremonial clothes etc. incorporate also respectability and authority. They bear the decoration and the indexes of the respective field which distinguish them. The longer skirt than usual was specific to equitation women's costume, the brassière and the white apron for nurses and the white havelock for male military doctors, the jambierres for hunters' costumes, the robe and tocque for magistrates.

In the second half of the century the outfit continued to have a strict purpose for use: for morning, evening, for promenade, for sports etc. and it should respect all set-up rules. Women's costume underwent many transformations in order to receive the name of sports gear. The adoption of male trousers started early in the 60' in England but it took almost half a century for the Romanian women to use them. They adopted rather quickly the tailor costume after 1995 and later the trousers or the knickerbockers. But a sports gear could be both feminine and sportslike if suitably presented and I refer to the photo of Princess Mary in her equitation costume.

The eclecticism of styles: Empire, Directoire, Regency, Baroque, Gothic influences shows the interest taken by the people in other people's taste, etiquette and achievements driven by the aim of having a favourable social image. Relations between vestment entities attribute them new qualities out of which new meanings emerge. Toposyntax in these visual icons organize all these relations from an anthropomorphic and anthropocentric perspective.

A bird's eye view over the 19th century Romanian fashion allows us to draw the conclusion that the upper classes, subsequently followed by the whole people through cultural affinities foremost, managed to modernize in an unprecedented state of spirit the rather recent history of a people changing it completely in order to build a new lifestyle paradigm.

Icon semiotics of the 19th century Romanian fashion shows the destiny of a code, the importance of this particular phenomenon on diatopic (spatial variation), diastratic (social variation) and on an accelerated diachronic (time patterns) levels with implications on mechanisms able to restructure attitudes during the fashion lexis implantation process.

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