

Pictorialism and Sartorial Symbolism: A Poetic Response to Modernity at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

With its focus on the achievement of painterly effects in photography, the international Pictorialist movement sought to employ various techniques and aesthetic approaches in order to capture images of landscapes and delicate feminine beauty within perfectly composed atmospheric settings. Facing the turn of the twentieth century, a time when the development of new media was closely linked to the demand for accuracy of recordings as well as to the industrialization of the society as a whole, the work of Pictorialist artists represented, at the same time, both an avant-garde and a conservative response to progressive photographic tendencies. In accordance with such values, the Pictorialist representation of human figure required the use of accompanying dress forms with the ability to convey idyllic elegance, innocence and performativity of its subjects. Through the analysis of intersections between dress and photography as related aspects of visual culture, the aim of this paper is to employ an interdisciplinary approach in order to reconsider particular sartorial forms of creative expression. Questions will be raised regarding certain departures from the restrictive conventional fashions as well as elements related to the presence of historical revivalism. Further on, the study will contextualize certain extensions of nineteenth-century concept of Artistic Dress and refer to sartorial expression of Pictorialist photographers from the aspects of marginal clothing discourses and anti-fashion.

Keywords: Pictorialism; dress; femininity; photography; body

As a form of aesthetic expression developed at the end of the nineteenth century, the softly focused camera approach of Pictorialist photographers aimed to establish a link between painting techniques and photography as a relatively new, but increasingly accessible technological medium of the day. At the time when the camera was praised for its ability to mechanically document reality and particularly linked to scientific and commercial projects, the Pictorialists manipulated their images in order to achieve media hybridization and elevate their work to the rank of fine art (Warner Marien, 2006: 96; Simonson, 2013: 152). Based on the iconography of past art forms, the artistic nature of their photography was generated through experimentation with a wide range of labour-intensive develop-

ing processes, such as homemade emulsions, platinum printing and gum bichromate. In addition to a unique use of light, these experiments allowed the artists to manipulate prints and render sentimental representations of atmospheric landscapes, elaborate tableaux vivants and romanticized pastoral scenes - an interest shared with many contemporary Symbolist painters (Fryer Davidov, 1998: 52).

Pictorialists' emphasis on nature accompanied with recurrent idealized images of female figures offered a particular view of clothed bodies. Visions of biblical, historical or mythical subjects were achieved by transforming the sitters with the aim of conveying various meanings, thus employing clothing as one of the most important vehicles in constructing ideals of feminine purity, vulnerability and sensuality. A distinctive style of costume consisting mainly of light-coloured flowing dresses as depicted in Clarence H. White's triptych *Spring* (1897) added to the overall dreamy impression and connotated the desired romantic effect. While such employment of sartorial expressions represented a stark contrast to restrictive late Victorian and turn-of-the-century fashions, the use of alternative clothing discourses should not come as a surprise taking into account that visual codes promoted by Pre-Raphaelite painters acted as an important source of inspiration for the Pictorialist movement (Wells, 2004: 257). Although Pictorialist photography became adopted by various international associations in Europe and the United States between mid-1880s and 1920s, experiments with similar techniques appeared almost two decades earlier in the work of the British photographer Julia Margaret Cameron. Her close relationship with the Pre-Raphaelite circle is reflected in her aim to pursue poetry and beauty by applying rules of pre-Renaissance iconography and addressing carefully staged religious, mythological and historical narratives (Warner Marien, 2006: 96).

In addition, it can be noted that the majority of Cameron's work exhibits a presence of similar alternative sartorial discourses employed by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and later on adopted by female members of their extended circle. Loose, simple-cut gowns made of light-weight, clinging fabrics whose absence of structure increased freedom of movement were not only specially designed for preparation of particular scenes, but were reported to have influenced the clothing worn by painters' models and friends (Wahl, 2013: 3). Such garments disassociated from the rigid principles of nineteenth-century female fashions and embedded a revival of historical styles that enabled nostalgic glimpses of idealized past as well as individualistic approaches to dress. In her extensive study *Health, Art and Reason*, Stella Mary Newton discusses the developments of Pre-Raphaelite Dress along the lines of dress reform movements that arose during the sec-

ond half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Newton, 1974: 27-35). Both artistic and medical arguments regarding harmful health practices and conventions of current fashions were employed in order to express concerns about the unhealthiness of contemporary heavily-layered clothing which not only restricted movement, but unnecessarily strained the body through the use of corsets and other silhouette shaping garments. Adoptions of clothing styles similar to those designed for painterly representations and inspired by classical, medieval and Renaissance fashions in everyday wear are analyzed in the works of Patricia A. Cunningham (2003), Kimberly Wahl (2013) and Elizabeth Wilson (2003) and discussed in the light of their later developments as Artistic or Aesthetic dress.

A significant part of garments presented both in Cameron's portraits and staged tableaux vivants relate to the characteristics of Pre-Raphaelite Dress. Similar to other Pictorialist artists, Cameron usually relied on close friends, family members or servants as sitters whom she dressed in soft, graceful and drapable garments with the potential to evoke eternal and romantic principles of beauty. Her depictions of Pre-Raphaelite model and painter Marie Spartali Stillman as Tennyson's Imperial Eleanore and Hypatia (1867) demonstrate the capacity of clothing to convey identities of mythological and classical characters while Stillman's portrait (1871) is considered one of the most representative examples of Aesthetic Dress worn by artists, art patrons and female audiences who "strategically mobilized clothing as a signifier of artistic sensibility and authority" (Wahl, 2013: XIV). Costumes presented in both photographs clearly challenge dominant cultural norms of their time thereby acknowledging Diana Crane's indication of the value of nineteenth-century dress when studying relationships between marginal and hegemonic clothing discourses. In her book *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender and Identity in Clothing*, Crane analyzes the symbolic boundaries of clothing understood as a form of non-verbal resistance. Since clothing discourses of a particular era incorporate both those groups that perpetuate conformity with the prevailing notions of status and gender roles as well as the groups that "express social tensions" by introducing new forms of clothing behaviour, sartorial opposition can be administered through alternative forms of dress which occupy a distinctive position within the public space of fashion (Crane, 2000: 100).

Such alternative approaches are supported by more marginal parts of the society consisting, for example, of intellectuals and artists, and make particular aspects of Julia Margaret Cameron's photography interesting when it comes to visual analysis of influential artistic challenges to contemporary dress forms. However, due to photographers' theatrical ap-

proach to their subject matter, a significant part of Pictorialists' work represents staged costumes rather than everyday clothing, which leads us to consider Lou Taylor's teachings regarding the suitability of artistic photographic images for dress history research. According to Taylor, when considering nineteenth-century photographs as analytical tools, artistic photography may act misleadingly in the sense that, by losing its touch with reality, it remains interesting because of its aesthetic qualities, but not as a legitimate source of study (Taylor, 2002: 160).

A great part of the work of Pictorialist artists was marked by theatrical display of sitters and thus heavily reliant on costume in order to convey elements of masking and play. As previously stated, sartorial modes of expression with the potential to enable such picturesque renderings of life included loose and comfortable, almost vaporous dresses, soft textiles and veils that allowed unrestricted movement of the body and contributed to the atmospheric nature of Pictorialist camerawork. In a time when fashion peaked as a form of symbolic communication that had the potential to convey messages about the social status of its wearer and impose an etiquette determining which garments were considered appropriate for various occasions and parts of the day, such alternative clothing discourses remained within the range of current interests in health and dress reform movements and the rise in physical self-consciousness at the end of the century (Kendall, 1984: 125). As Anne Hollander stresses in her critical study *Seeing Through Clothes*, we should remember that portrayals of the body are always closely related to current sartorial codes of a particular historical period and, therefore, observe and study garments "as paintings are seen and studied – not primarily as cultural by-products or personal expressions, but as connected links in a creative tradition of image-making" (Hollander, 1980: xvi).

These important roles within the imagery of a specific art movement highlight the significance of dress forms selected by Pictorialist photographers for their potential to connote fantastic and dreamlike scenarios in a world of increased mechanization and industrialization as well as to act as a vehicle to sartorial freedom. Recurrent depictions of the mother and child relationship within the work of Pictorialists, and especially within the art of the American photographer Gertrude Käsebier, represent the mother as an ideal figure and an embodiment of family values in the age of rapid societal changes (Fryer Davidov, 1998: 65). A vision of motherhood accompanied by a biblical reference is presented in Käsebier's platinum print *Blessed Art Thou Among Women* (1899) in which feelings of female purity and domestic environment are conveyed through paleness and transcendence of the gown as

well as its lack of boning and structure. In addition, the draping of the dress and the title itself complement the image of Annunciation set against the background wall. Since the portrait represents Käsebier's friend Agnes Lee, a poet and writer of children's books who was at the time married to the artistic photographer Francis Watts Lee, Glaze indicates that the use of such symbolism can be associated with family's dedication to Christianity as well as their support of the Arts and Crafts movement which encouraged rational Artistic Dress during the mid 1880s and 1890s (Gaze, 2011: 400; Cunningham, 2000: 11).

Similar departures from modern urbanization can be seen in images that present meadows, forests and lakes as leisurely environments in which female figures appear in union with simplicity and pastoral ideals. As Maria Morris Hamburg points out, images of women gathering flowers and fruit represent a recurrent subject in Pictorialist photography (Morris Hamburg, 1993: 338). Such themes can be seen in Clarence H. White's *The Orchard* (1902) and are recurrently present in the work of Constant Puyo, one of the initiators of the Photo-Club de Paris. Examples are found in his gum bichromate prints *Au Jardin Fleuri* (1899) and *Juin* (1899) in which a spirit of community and enjoyment of life is expressed through a flowing arrangement of softly-draped garments while the connectedness with nature is accentuated by flowers worn as romantic hair ornaments.

Even though trends in mainstream fin-de-siècle fashion expressed a tendency for lighter and softer garments accompanied with an abundant use of lace and crochet as well as a fondness for pale pastel tones, rigid corsetry remained the norm. The fashionable line formed by the S-shaped corset that pushed forward the bust and pulled back the hips defined a silhouette covered by long skirts, narrow-sleeved blouses, high wired collars, gloves and hats (Boucher, 1967: 400; Laver, 2012: 216-224; Ribeiro and Cumming, 1989: 196-199). Since such garments disabled movement and especially restricted work and sport activities, many performers, actresses, opera singers and dancers tried to find means to improve current dress and encourage the acceptance of a healthy body in its natural form. As observed by Elizabeth Kendall in her study *Where she Danced: The Birth of American Art-Dance*, American Pictorialists often explored the relationship between the human body, its gestures, rhythms and mobility (Kendall 1984: 124). This rendered dancers such as Isadora Duncan and members of the Denishawn Company as ideal Pictorialist subject matter. Early twentieth-century depictions of dance can be found in the work of Edward Steichen, Anne Brigman, George Seeley and Clarence H. White. Kendall further indicates that among the Californian artistic community of the

time, Aesthetic Dress was regarded as a sort of uniform that liberated the natural body through its Ancient Greek and Pre-Raphaelite inspiration and thus made its way into the wardrobe of the artistic family of Isadora Duncan. As an avid proponent of dress reform herself, Duncan often designed her own dance costumes by joining scraps of silk with cords or elastic bands (Koda, 2003: 27). Edward Steichen's images of Isadora and Therese Duncan taken at the Parthenon capture the dancers in modernized versions of classical Greek dress. The series manages to present graceful and unhampered kinetics in unstructured chitons with high waistlines that increased the performers' comfort and mobility and allowed them to express their philosophy of freedom.

Whether Pictorialists depicted other artistic and progressive colleagues or transformed sitters in order to stage painterly narratives, their desired ideals of ethereal femininity were achieved through appropriation of body coverings as important sources of semiotic reading. While sartorial expressions of prominent members of the artistic community such as Spartali Stillman, Lee and Duncan were related to their own interests in wider dress reform and artistic movements, other garments are known to have been thoughtfully arranged for photographic construction of meanings of which examples can be found in George Seeley's *The Burning of Rome* (1906) where costumes similar to those of classical Antiquity were prepared by the photographer's mother. As two intertextual strategies with the ability to produce images of the clothed body (Calefatto, 2004: 83), discourses of dress and photography intersect in the work of Pictorial artists and can be discussed as both avant-garde and conservative at the same time. Whereas Pictorialist imagery departed from the overall mechanistic progress of the medium rendering unique prints that challenged Walter Benjamin's notions regarding the loss of aura in modern photography (Benjamin, 2009: 435), their attitudes towards dress principles moved away from the rapidly changing influence of fashion towards a distinctive style of costume that referenced historical inspiration and disassociation from mainstream values. The aim of this paper was, therefore, to indicate these simple, but highly complex attitudes of photography and dress as inter-semiotic practices and offer an overview of the Pictorialist employment of social and aesthetic functions of sartorial codes within their own creation of a painterly vocabulary and perspective on the artistic role of photography.

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