

Feature

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—Illustration: Maren Esdar

—It is said to be fashion's supreme Holy Grail: the minimalist aesthetic. In its rejection of artifice and adornment, it is incontrovertibly the simplest, clean-cut fashion mode. Both timeless and constantly evolving, as a fresh yet subtle direction of dressing, sartorial minimalism has significant surplus value. Yet, when unveiled of its austerity, ascetics and sleekness, it is worth deciphering what subversive ramifications of the minimalist style lie beneath. In intricate ways, then, the minimalist fashion genre owes considerable debt to the visual arts.

“Elegance is refusal.”

— Coco Chanel —

S a r t o r i a l

M I N I M A L I S M

In an Age of Excess



Minimalist fashion has significantly helped blur the boundaries between fashion and art.



For most fashion-adepts, minimalist clothes will conjure archetypal images of spare, monochromic and understated creations, supposedly by Jil Sander, Calvin Klein or Helmut Lang. De facto, however, its incarnations over the past century have been far more differentiated. From Yves Saint Laurent's iconic Mondrian dress, a classic crisp white button-down shirt, a tailored Crombie-style coat, to the avant-garde sculptural creations of Japanese maestro Yohji Yamamoto: Minimalist axioms manifest in a broad variety of reductive lines, surfaces and structures. As

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such, there is no out-and-out pure definition or uniform designer ethos. Historically, the minimalist movement can be said to hark back as far as the early twentieth century. During the Roaring Twenties, after years of complex construction, women's clothes gradually became pared-down, plain and practical. With her dictum of 'elegance is refusal', Coco Chanel was the first to liberate women from the formal and constricting Edwardian dress by offering comfortable simple line designs, embodying the androgynous garçon style like no other. Similarly, Madeleine Vionnet's sophisticated yet revolutionary approach to couture and her infamous bias cut championed the effortlessly chic minimalist look. It was not until the Swinging Sixties that minimalist dress was again ushered in and materialised by the angular, futuristic space-age shifts of André Courrèges, Rudi Gernreich and Pierre Cardin. In the psychedelic Flower Power decades that followed, the minimalist movement remained in the margins of the fashion hemisphere, with the exception of functional basics such as T-shirts and jeans that swiftly attracted attention to become essential wardrobe staples.

When in the 1990s a new standard of non-committal, stark simplicity was introduced, sartorial minimalism's heyday reached an unparalleled peak. Although there were efforts by some designers to keep the flag for pretty dresses and the glamorous femme fatale look flying, by the end of the decade the notion of ostentatious finery had visibly lessened. Veering towards a monk-like minimalism with lots of black and neutral tones, downplayed luxury and a quiet, understated type of formal 'anti-fashion' became dominant modes of dress.

Today, still informing by way of shape and silhouette, the minimalist genre favoured by fashion houses Céline, Raf Simons, Junya Watanabe and Haider Ackermann, amongst others, has evolved into a softer, more feminine and even romantic style.

Minimalism's elimination of artifice and adornment does not automatically imply an eschewal of artfulness or art. Au contraire, minimalist fashion has been hugely swayed by the avant-garde visual culture of the twenties and sixties. During both of these epochs, the streamlined, clean-cut shapes so rudimentary to the minimalist arts began to noticeably crystallise in the fashion arena. In view of this, minimalist fashion holds its artisanal roots in the abstract ABC art movement that gained prevalence in New York in the early 1960s, with Donald Judd's infamous steel boxes, Frank Stella's 'Black Paintings' and Carl Andre's linear, grid-format sculptures setting the minimalist tone. In an attempt to create disjunction with the environment, and in reaction to the formal overkill and pretentiousness of the Abstract Expressionism movement, they reduced their paintings, installations and sculptures in their purest form to the smallest number of colours, lines and textures.

On a similar note, the sleek architectural constructions and geometric celebrations by Le Corbusier, as well as other works associated with the modernistic Bauhaus movement of the 1920s, have equally induced the 'less is more' predicament in fashion. Contemporary minimalist fashion, as a form of 'new austerity', continues to be influenced by these minimalist art forms' experimental treatments of shape and space. As recent international fashion weeks illustrated, voluminous, oversized forms (Stella McCartney, John Galliano), stiff monochromatic bodices, rounded geometry (Balenciaga, Louis Vuitton) and dull-coloured, straight cuts simplified to a fault (Maison Martin Margiela) were reigning supreme on the catwalks. Ergo, minimalist artistic values of sleekness, simplicity and progress have come to define minimalist fashionability. In the process, minimalist fashion has significantly helped blur the boundaries between fashion and art.

The relationship between art and fashion is a century-old, complicated love affair. The minimalist fashion genre, more than any other fashion realm, has managed to bridge the longstanding gap between the two. In tandem with the persistent modernistic 'high culture / low culture' dichotomy, fashion was long deemed a frivolous, superficial and ephemeral commodity, regulated to the material domain of the body. Inversely, the fine arts are inherently valorised as a noteworthy avant-garde form, being classified in the hierarchi-

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cal superior and spiritual sphere of the intellect and psyche. Relating the traditionally autonomous arts with commercial value, as one would with the fashion trade, was long considered a disgrace. In the 1960s, however, the rigid duality between fashion and the arts gradually loosened. Under the lucrative realm of Roy Lichtenstein and

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Andy Warhol's parody and pastiche-obsessed pop arts, the visual arts drew closer to fashion as the arts underwent an unprecedented commercialisation. Notwithstanding, fashion and art's confluence began to reach its real apogee lengthy decades later, when interdisciplinary fashion biennales started to mount at distinguished art museums, exhibiting artists and fashion designers side by side. In so doing, the schism gradually dissolved and conceptions on art and fashion broadened.

Gripped by the provocative and expressive power of clothing, fashion as such became a central concern of a growing group of artists. Conversely, particularly typical minimalist designers became increasingly engaged with the intellectual and conceptual approach so inherent to artistry. Further obscuring the borders between art and fashion, a segregate of minimalist designers began to increasingly position themselves as 'sculptural artists'. As a result, more than any other fashion strand, the minimalist fashion aesthetic has become exceedingly interlaced with the arts. Hence, the increasing dialogue and alliance between fashion and the arts is greatly manifest in the minimalist, sculpture-esque creations by designers such as Rei Kawakubo for Comme des Garçons, Issey Miyake, Hussein Chalayan and Martin Margiela. Yet, there's more to it. On an implicit level, sartorial minimalism can be reckoned with as a symbolic antidote to the excess, embellishments and 'hyper luxury' inherent in substantial parts of the fashion industry. In particular minimalism's apex in the 1990s marked a clear fracture with the prevailing fashion image of the time. With ascetic simplicity, architectural purity and an almost perversely sober palette, the minimalist look was a decisive response to the fashionable over-the-top glamorous style with its materialistic enslavement to 'status dressing'. Contiguously, it can be deciphered as a subversive counteraction to the 'logomania' craze and the excessive expansion of luxury brands and the designer market alike. Dressing down stood, both literally and figuratively, in sharp contrast to the elaborate and flashy consumer trends with its overwrought, overtly frilly styles, seen in designs by Italian fashion houses Dolce & Gabbana, Versace and Cavalli.

Analogously, the significant vogue for minimalist fashion can today equally be considered a distaste, if not sheer rejection of fashion's status quo. Excluding every clichéd notion of what glamour should be or what a fashionable silhouette should look like, minimalism discloses

a contrary, alternative approach to fashion. In its reduction of design, simplistic shape and bare essentialism, a minimalist, non-definable outfit has in effect almost certainly more longevity than a short-lived seasonal fad. In defying its rationale, it's also a striking back against the fast-fashion industry's rapidly accelerating seasonal cycles, its squandering nature and the irrational, consumerist mindset that we would constantly need more and bigger. And although it's certainly questionable to what extent minimalist fashion is less consumerist, less environmentally wasteful or less luxurious even, the auto-critique on the fashion system chiefly denotes to a conceptual objection to fashion's role and function.

As a reducing of pattern to its fundamental parts and a cutting back on superfluous details, it can similarly be reflected upon as a symbolic rebellion and antidote to the growing complexity, saturation and fast-paced mode of living today. More importantly, through this lifestyle superfluity can lure around virtually every corner. In this millennium era of excess overload and complexity, minimalism is, in its diverse array of guises, above all a derivative of simplicity, reduction and a return to the essential. As the ultimate pursuit, simplicity has become the adage, serving as an interesting signifier of its time. Paradoxically, in its attempt to create the ultimate antithesis to its environment, minimalist fashion thrives in an age of sartorial excess.



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