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Contemporary Art Characteristics of Original Costume Design

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Abstract

Like artistic creativity, original costume, as a microcosm of culture, embodies the cutting-edge thoughts of the times. The new generation of original costume designers becomes more and more like artists, and costume design has become a tool for designers to explain their personal ideas. Instead of collective consciousness, they focus more on their own position and experience in daily life. Collection of original costume design shows the characteristics of contemporary art that are anti-rational, anti-centered, and experimental, and focus on local traditional culture.

The Basic Characteristics of Contemporary Art

Having been influenced by modernism and postmodernism since the 1990s, thoughts in art finally fall into contemporary art. Contemporary art^① has integrated various art forms including modernism, structuralism, cubism, Dadaism, and surrealism, as well as traditional Chinese culture. Croce, an Italian philosopher who has profoundly influenced contemporary art, denied that art was form of practical activity and pointed out that art was purely intuition. Croce once said, "Art was not a physical fact, or a utilitarian, moral, conceptual, logical activity...Art focuses on the human spirit and soul."^[1] This account has relieved the cultural burden and shadow of traditions on art, and driven contemporary art towards highly free and personal expression. American scholar Fredric Jameson, who has a great impact on postmodernism, also believes that contemporary art is a state of decentralization and fragmentation of the subject and focuses more on self-entertainment and free release of feelings.^[2] Contemporary art has shifted from focusing on collective consciousness to on artists' personal position and experience in daily life, and then entered into the public eye with a comprehensive characteristic of being close to life, pleasing mind, and enjoying a high degree of freedom.

As the epitome of the culture, art, and thoughts of the times, costume design bears a close relation to artistic trends and social development. Especially the new generation of original costume designers^②, the most forefront representatives of social thoughts of art, is sensitive to art just like contemporary artists, and their works represent the sensitivity of the times. Such group of designers roughly emerged in China in the early 1990s, and was also impacted by the storms of modernism, postmodernism and varied artistic styles with a time gap with Western clothing development^③. The 21st century has seen a new generation of original fashion designers whose works oppose rationality, centrality, and secular aesthetic experience, pay attention to local traditional culture and art, and choose materials and ways to express through experiments, all of which are distinctive features of contemporary art.

Anti-rational and anti-central Inclination of Original Costume Design

No cultural burden and shadow of traditions

Contemporary art does not have explicit artistic propositions or distinctive forms of art, as its very



open concepts have led to its diversified forms. Contemporary art creations completely break the boundaries of cultures and discard the burden of traditions. Any former artistic style could be seen as the elements of contemporary art. For new original fashion designers, holding on dreams of creativity by sticking to a certain art form or reviving a certain culture may not be the focus of their design activities. They often place themselves in an ambiguous state between the past and the future, aggressiveness and convention, centrality and marginality, and rationality and irrationality, and tap into greater artistic possibilities by dissolving artistic styles and themes.^[3] All forms of art at all times and in all over the world are elements for their creativity. Compared with collective dream for creativity, they more value their own ideas.



Figure 1 Shangguan Zhe's collection of spring/summer 2015 men's brand show at London Fashion Week^④



Figure 2 Zhou Xiangyu's collection in the London Fashion Week autumn/winter 2015^⑤

As a new domestic fashion designer and founder of SANKUANZ, Shangguan Zhe's works have their own special traits. His design highlights his subtle feelings of life, and the capture of momentary emotions, and is full of a strong sense of mixed styles. "Bohemian" is often used to describe Shangguan's design, and his intrinsic love for "ego" is reflected in the ample visual and language elements he employs. Elements such as Indian braids, blazing patterns of popular art, sports, dolls, aliens, and Chinese characters could be mixed up and appear. Any cultural icons and design elements can be designed in his works in a relaxing and harmonious way. Zhou Xiangyu is another typical designer who perfectly knows that he uses clothes as a medium of values and self-expression. He associates design with the lifestyle of today's young people, so what they like and what they think is cool are very important to Zhou. Zhou excels at taking the all kinds of elements in culture and life that he has encountered as design elements in his works. He states, "Design is international, and designers should not be constrained by their nationality."^⑥

For the new generation of original fashion designers, culture or tradition is part of what they concern, but is definitely not a design guide. Besides, cultural boundaries do not exist, and cultural elements of different styles are often found in the work of the same designer. A wide range of elements are combined at random, and the design activity itself has also become a means for designers to materialize their own concepts of art and express their experience.

Oppose secular aesthetic experience and emphasize innovation

Compared with a certain noble meaning and content, creativity is so important to the new generation of fashion designers, and ability to create has gained great attention and recognition from them. Croce said that "Art is a liberator." As a state or a mindset of the new designers, creativity is more significant

than anything for them. Design activities gradually change from serious and rational activities to a relaxing game which is just aimed at creating a new style. The materials for creativity can be diverse. Styles, cultures, and even any symbols in life at any time and in any nation can be put into the design of garment. Having left behind former serious culture, philosophy and logics, original design activities put more emphasis on free expression and self-entertainment. It is a game of chance to determine decorative elements and styles. The decorative elements, forms, and structures of clothing are constantly changing during creation, and the materials, techniques, and shapes are also full of uncertainties.



Figure 3 Wan Yifang's collection of Industrial Revolution and Fashion^⑦

In 2010, in the graduation collection at the Central Saint Martins, the cradle of modern fashion designers, the rising star Wan Yifang won the attention of worldwide fashion media with a set of design works called Industrial Revolution and Fashion. Her design works dismiss traditional standards of fashion aesthetics, and look neither elegant nor exquisite. Oversized and simple, her clothes are made from plain fabrics. Stereoscopic huge wooden decorations are her design's impressive part. Later in an interview, Wan said, "The problem I will meet is innovation. The so-called innovation is unprecedented."^⑧

Focus on personal position, experience in life, and high degree of freedom

In general, contemporary original costume design features great personality and liberty, which is consistent with the frontier of contemporary art. Li Xianting pointed out, "Contemporary art is above all an artistic attitude and cultural standpoint. The priority of contemporary art is to really face current experience and feelings of life and living environment.^[4] The new designers put a high value on their own position and life situation, and their design activities on the combination of culture and experience, instead of previous collective consciousness of aesthetics. From initial design concept to selection of materials and color combinations, from structure and overall shape to selection of patterns and processing methods, his expression methods and designs always keep emerging, revealing the highly free creative state of contemporary original costume design.

For designer Wang Yiyang (one of China's most prestigious designers and the founder of women's fashion brand Zuczug), his inspiration comes directly from daily life. Wang is a designer with novel ideas. He once led his design team to visit vegetable markets in Shanghai where they collected common symbols such as fish, kitchen knives, carrots, cabbage, various fruits and vegetables as well as pig trotters and hanging ducks which have presented as design elements in his collection of Vegetable Market 1 and Vegetable Market 2. In addition, Wang published the Tea Mug collection based on life in the 1970s, and the Barbershop collection inspired by street barber shops. In an interview, Wang said, "I observe daily life in China and then think about how to apply it to fashion design."^⑨



ZUCZUG /

Figure 4 Collection of Vegetable Market 2^⑩理发店
ZUCZUG/SS14 2014Figure 5 Barbershop collection¹¹

Focus on Local Traditional Culture and Art

A feature of contemporary art is that traditional art elements ^[5] get attention, presented in the focus on expression of traditional Chinese art and of “Chinese style” in Western art forms. This is the same as the new original clothing design. Recreating China’s local cultural elements in a Western design style has become a hot spot. Ji Cheng, a representative designer of the group, is the founder of JICHENG, and a China’s local designer rooted in Shanghai. Her designs often upend the traditional Chinese style and mix Chinese elements with elegance and hippie. In 2014, Ji released a fashion item Crane Shadow which adopted the traditional pattern of crane’s wings together with embroidery and three-dimensional feather-like decorations in the hoodie design. Ji said, “I think perhaps only those in a quiet world can feel the frequency of vibrations at the moment crane’s wings spread out gently.” ¹² The oriental mythological animals, such as suanni, bi’an, kylin, and qiuniu, were displayed through traditional embroidery and three-dimensional tailoring in her 2016 collection called Mythological Animals on Mountains. In October 2017, her collection Dancing Phoenix in Garden adopted a three-dimensionally embroidered phoenix totem with metallic color. Ji incorporates obvious traditional cultural elements and likes to reinterpret the traditional culture in a destructive way. For example, the decoration of phoenix tail, facial makeup in Beijing opera, and the shape of goldfish tail in traditional paintings all present in clothes in an innovative way. Her design deconstructs traditional Chinese symbols, and at the same time features a clear style of Western design. Western tailoring coupled with Ji’s unique understanding of Chinese elements is typical Chinese style, but not traditional one.

Hu Sheguang is another representative who focuses on local traditional culture. In March 2015, he released the autumn/winter collection with the theme of cotton-padded jackets of Northeast China. The wonderful contrast between red and green prints has strong local features, and is highly recognizable. His innovation and mash-up can also be seen in the models’ look and makeup on the scene. With the expression of fashion, he infused cotton-padded jackets, the soul of Northeast China, with a new life of fashion. Hu said, “I use a fairly grounded inspiration to show people’s emotions. This is also a release of my own feudal thinking as a child. The fabrics, colors, and patterns are all very traditional but displayed in a very different way.” ¹³



Figure 6 Hoodie in Crane Shadow¹⁴



Figure 7 Hu Sheguang's collection in 2015 autumn/winter show¹⁵

Experiments in Materials and Ways to Express

Another important feature of contemporary art is experimental, which is in tune with that of original clothing design. Experiment guarantees innovation. More and more like artists, the new designers spend more time in the laboratory to tirelessly do various experiments on fabric effects, printing patterns, structure, and appearance.

A very important factor of the quality of contemporary fashion designs is materials that decide the success of a design work. Therefore, designers have a keen interest in trying different materials and doing innovative experiments. Many designers are committed to experimenting with various materials, which involves not only quality, texture, and patterns but basic constituents, approaches to decoration, effect of expression of materials. The continuous experiments of materials provide designers with a constant stream of design elements, and fresh inspirations that in turn will propel designers to continue their experiments on materials to seek new materials.^[6] Liu Qingyang, the founder of an original clothing brand Chictopia, is a representative in clothing material innovation. She is very bold in the use of colors. The patterns and color combination in her design works are featured by art deco. Chictopia 2014 spring/summer collection was inspired by the pioneering art style of the 1920s, and combined geometric abstraction, cubism, and art deco. Liu's designs are filled with big eye patterns, huge abstract half a face patterns, as well as asymmetric tailoring and simple geometric shapes. Besides, the breakthroughs of structure and abstract patterns combine with a deviant visual effect, emanating a strong experimental sense.

As high-tech technology is constantly updated and applied, clothing materials can produce more novel visual effects to present more diversified features, and make materials more artistic. The use of new materials can reflect various changes of design in details, so using novel materials means that a good design is half done. In order to create fashionable designs and keep them cutting-edge, contemporary designers are interested in pursuing visual effects and attributes of new materials. In recent years, the

application designers have drawn inspiration from a collection of many innovations, such as composite scuba knitting fabric and its updating, application of 3D printing technology, three-dimensional texture fabrics, avant-garde luster, and fashionable sense of straightness. Masha Ma, a new original fashion designer, uses obvious fashionable fabrics in her designs, and is not limited in any form or material. She hopes to find a new way to express “modernity” — a sense of texture but not luxury.



Figure 8 2013 autumn/winter collection of Masha Ma¹⁶



Figure 9 Qiu Hao's collection in 2013 autumn/winter show¹⁷

The experimental feature of original clothing is also prominently manifested in shapes and structure which are the most crucial factors apart from novel materials and pattern designs. Creating a seemingly casual and stylish structure is also important in the experiments by original clothing designers. Practical and creative shapes can bring sense of fashion. Asymmetric design, misplaced structure, exaggerated sections or decorative details are common tactics that original designers employ. They always make various attempts to seek new forms to break former aesthetic concept. Qiu Hao, the founder of Qiu Hao, is good at design and tailoring of oversized clothes. His effort in structure can be seen all over his works, such as jointed cloth scraps, hyperbolic sleeves, details of binding, and huge collars. Qiu has always been designing fashionable clothes in experimental methods in hope of finding something different.

Conclusion

Original costume design is facing the collapse of the traditional aesthetic order. As with contemporary art, all the old experience in aesthetics in clothing design is broken up, and the criterion for collective aesthetics of clothing are deliberately cast away by the new generation of original clothing designers. Designers regard fashion design as a means of expressing design ideas. And original designers use it to express an individualized attitude about fashion that focuses on personal growth experience and details in daily life. Anti-centrality, anti-rationality, and the use of experimental methods are the characteristics of the new fashion designers' creation. Elements of different cultures are employed as they please, and new forms and technologies are constantly springing up. For original clothing designers, new and more personalized aesthetic standards are taking shape. More like artists, the new generation of original costume designers interprets costume design with contemporary artistic creation, and costume trends in modern times in a more free and personalized way.

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