

Elements of Style: Fashion and Form at the Beinecke

An Exhibition at Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library
January 19—March 27, 2010

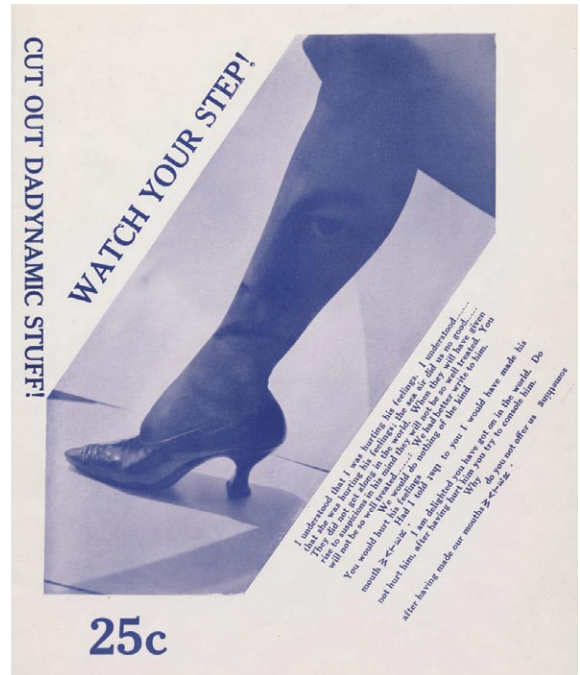
The “allure of fashion,” as the author, illustrator, and designer Maira Kalman phrases it in her whimsical and philosophically inspired book *The Principles of Uncertainty* (2007), is openly acknowledged in the direct relationship that emerges between clothing as craft and the visual arts, especially photography, yet the myriad connections that exist between fashion and literary culture often go unremarked. “Elements of Style” takes seriously, then, the idea of “style” as it relates both to sartorial expression and prose/poetic form, not only in regard to dress and accessory as literary concerns, but the way in which fashion itself is so dependent on language—on written descriptions of its very being. In this regard, we might trace the



related motifs of language, dress, and

style, back to the latter word's etymological roots in the Latin *stilus* or *stylus*: a pointed instrument used for incising letters on a wax tablet, or for engraving, such an act being transformed over time into the contemporary notion of pen and ink on paper. Similarly, we might consider the way in which English colloquial usage is saturated with idiomatic phrases pertaining to clothes as behavioral metaphors—“If the shoe fits, wear it”; “to speak off the cuff”; “to skirt about the issue.” And, further, if “clothes make the man,” to follow Mark Twain, then we discover an area of cultural interest ripe for wide-ranging investigation—what clothing in its various contexts might indicate about historical understandings of gender and sexuality, the racial or ethnic associations often forged between

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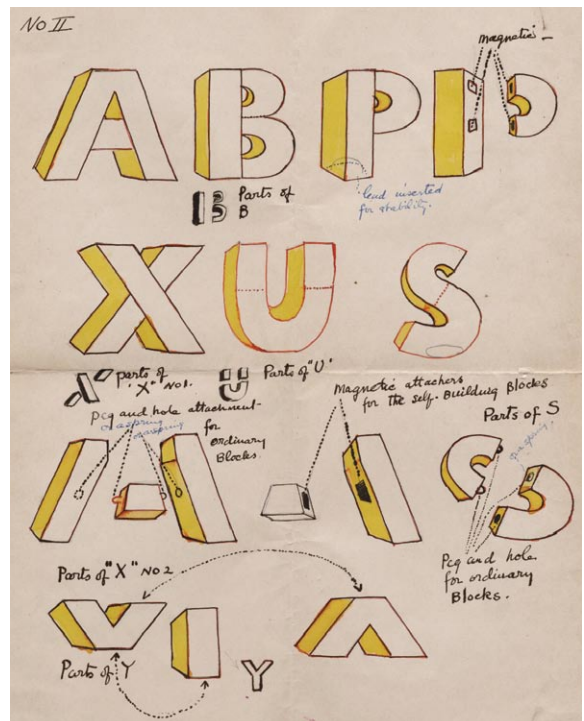
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black style and a “cool” aesthetic, the interplay of class or national identity, as well as the role of creativity and the disjointed connections forged between quotidian life and the artistic imagination.

As a playful homage to Strunk and White’s now classic grammar primer *The Elements of Style*, or the “little book” as it has come to be known, this exhibition pays particular attention to the idea of the “modern” as understood, largely, in regard to 20th and 21st-century American and European books and material objects. Such modernity is embodied, for example, by Gertrude Stein, an American expatriate, experimental writer, and prose stylist par excellence, who, along with her partner Alice B. Toklas, was an early patron of the French fashion designer Pierre Balmain. The transatlantic con-

nections forged between modernity and an energetic sense of “newness” (fashion as fad, or an ever-changing trend) is similarly exemplified by the New Negro movement—“when Harlem was in vogue”—and those avant-garde collectives such as the Italian Futurists and other Surrealist circles who closely aligned component parts of dress (the body as collage) with the act of artistic performance. Such movements and their attendant manifestos are archivally documented by way of texts, ephemera, and literary artifacts. While contemporary artists’ books (and other object-driven publications) often draw upon the rich association between paper and fabric, text and texture, “narrative thread” and the art of sewing or embroidery, a writer’s collection of Papers is also rarely confined, in simple terms, to reams of manuscripts or daily correspondence. Rather, the exhibition highlights the “extra-literary” nature of the repository, and how items of adornment from hats, to shoes, to gloves, and handbags, help us to envision a particular social milieu. The writer or artist as a biographical subject and the subject of clothing as an enduring motif in book arts and literary life are displayed here in tandem—the evocative relationship between literature and material culture readily revealed.



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