



THE HISTORICAL AESTHETICS OF EMPIRE, ROMANTICISM, VICTORIANISM, AND ART NOUVEAU AS INSPIRATION FOR CONTEMPORARY SUSTAINABILITY IN FASHION DESIGN

Professional paper
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ABSTRACT: The study examines the possibilities for combining sustainable fashion design with historical aesthetics. A design experiment created seven women's garments inspired by the Empire, Romantic, Victorian, and Art Nouveau styles, using zero-waste approaches and biodegradable materials. The results show that sustainability does not limit but rather stimulates creativity and cultural reflection in fashion design.

Keywords: sustainable fashion design, aesthetics, Zero Waste, Piñatex, deadstock materials, biodegradable textiles, design experiment.

ISTORIJSKA ESTETIKA AMPIRA, ROMANTIZMA, VIKTORIJANIZMA I ŠECESIJE KAO INSPIRACIJA ZA SAVREMENU ODRŽIVOST U MODNOM DIZAJNU

APSTRAKT: Studija ispituje mogućnosti kombinovanja održivog modnog dizajna sa istorijskom estetikom. Dizajnerski eksperiment je stvorio sedam ženskih odevnih predmeta inspirisanih stilovima imperijalnog, romantičarskog, viktorijanskog i art nuvoa, koristeći pristupe bez otpada i biorazgradive materijale. Rezultati pokazuju da održivost ne ograničava, već podstiče kreativnost i kulturnu refleksiju u modnom dizajnu.

Ključne reči: održivi modni dizajn, estetika, bez otpada, pinjateks, materijali od ostataka, biorazgradivi tekstil, dizajnerski eksperiment.

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary fashion design, there is an increasing awareness of the need to rethink production practices in the context of global environmental challenges. Sustainable fashion is no longer perceived as a niche trend but as an ethical and innovative approach that aims



to minimize the negative impact on the environment through the use of biodegradable, recycled, and deadstock materials; the implementation of zero-waste strategies; and the creation of long-lasting products with a conscious life cycle.

In parallel, in recent years there has been a return to historical styles as a source of inspiration and cultural depth in design. Styles from the Empire, Romanticism, Victorian, and Art Nouveau eras offer a rich visual and constructive base that allows for contemporary interpretation through sustainable practices.

The present study aims to explore the potential for the relationship between historical aesthetics and sustainable design by creating seven contemporary women's clothing pieces inspired by the above-mentioned styles through a design experiment. The goal is not only an aesthetic reconstruction of the past but also a functional adaptation to current ethical and technological standards in the fashion industry.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

This research uses a qualitative methodological approach, which aims to explore the interaction between historical fashion styles—Empire, Romanticism, Victorianism, and Art Nouveau—and the implementation of contemporary sustainable design practices. The methodology combines design experimentation, visual analysis, and principles of applied art design.

For this project, innovative and sustainable textile materials such as Piñatex (pineapple fiber textile), regenerated tulle and lace, deadstock silk, and organic satin were considered. Organic silk, linen, and cotton. Eco-alternatives to leather (incl. materials from grape waste). Bamboo viscose and Tencel. These materials were selected based on the principles of environmental friendliness, biodegradability, and visual compatibility with historical aesthetics.

Piñatex is an innovative textile created from pineapple leaf fibers, which is a sustainable alternative to leather. This material was developed by Ananas Anam after a five-year research process and is presented as a revolutionary product that “challenges the textile market” through its biodegradability, as well as ethics and functionality [5].

Other sustainable materials considered in this study are textiles made from food waste. These materials include Piñatex (pineapple fiber), apple skin, banana textile, and other biodegradable alternatives that demonstrate the potential of waste resources as a basis for ethical fashion innovation [6].

Other textile materials such as Tencel and cotton blends combine the advantages of natural and regenerated fibers. As shown by Badr et al. [1], these blends improve the UV protection, moisture absorption, and mechanical resistance of the fabrics, making them particularly suitable for modern sustainable clothing [1].

The present study applies the principles of sustainable fashion design, with an emphasis on the use of deadstock fabrics and zero-waste tailoring. As Gjoni et al. [4] emphasize, these strategies not only reduce textile waste but also stimulate creativity, promote a circular economy, and offer an ethical alternative to conventional production. In the current project, deadstock fabrics are used both in the main construction of the models and in decorative

and transformable elements, which is consistent with the principles of resource efficiency and aesthetic sustainability.

Seven models of contemporary clothing were created as part of an applied design experiment, using inspiration from historical fashion eras. Through careful selection of materials and the application of sustainable and zero-waste design approaches, an emphasis on aesthetics and functionality is achieved, transforming traditional lines in the context of sustainable fashion. During the creation of the models, the principles of sustainable fashion design were applied with an emphasis on zero-waste approaches through careful planning of the patterns, modular construction, and the implementation of residual textiles in decorative and constructive solutions. Similar to the concept presented by McQuillan [2], where zero waste practices are explored. This study examines the application of these strategies in contemporary pattern design and their interaction with historically inspired silhouettes.

With the help of a previous study [3], where historically stable forms of clothing are studied, a visual-morphological analysis is applied, which examines the specific elements of clothing for the studied Empire, Romanticism, Victorianism, and Art Nouveau styles of clothing. The analysis is based on observation, description, and comparison of the characteristic elements of clothing.

The graphics software MediBang Paint Pro (MediBang, Inc., Tokyo, Japan) was used to create the sketches.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a result of the design experiments, seven models of contemporary women's clothing were created, demonstrating the successful connection between historical inspiration and sustainable design practices. Each of the models is individually structured, built on the basis of the style characteristics of the specific fashion era. At the same time, the principles of sustainable consumption, zero-waste approaches, and the use of innovative materials are reflected.

Figure 1 presents developed models of contemporary women's clothing combining sustainable design with an emphasis on the past.

Figure 1(a) presents Model 1 of a contemporary dress with historical references and the use of sustainable materials. The model presents a complete vision of an evening dress that draws inspiration from fashion styles from different eras—Empire, Romanticism, Victorian, and Art Nouveau. At the same time, the principles of sustainable fashion and zero waste design are integrated. The upper part is inspired by the Victorian style, presented in the form of a corset made of recycled leather or pineapple fibers (which imitate leather). It emphasizes the shape of the body, but without using hard seams or metal or plastic underwires. The waist is high, typical of the Empire style, and is emphasized by soft drapery, conveying elegance and dynamism of the silhouette. The sleeves are long and widen towards the wrists. They are made of regenerated tulle and recycled lace, aiming to convey a romantic effect characteristic of romanticism. The lower part is presented as a

flared floor-length skirt, made of organic silk and regenerated linen, which provides freedom of movement.



Figure 1: Contemporary women's clothing with elements of the historical styles Empire, Romanticism, Victorian and Art Nouveau applying modern innovative sustainable materials and design methods

The structure of the skirt gives a smooth movement, typical of the classic elegance of the Empire style. The train is long but presented with a modular construction, which allows reuse and adaptation according to needs, ensuring functionality and durability. The train can be removed and at the same time be part of the skirt or used as a pearl. The model

features hand-embroidered floral motifs inherent in Art Nouveau, using natural threads. The principles of zero waste and minimal textile waste are applied, transforming them into 3D embossed floral decorative accents. The main colors of the model are cream-beige and ivory, which are a reference to classic elegance. Accents of pink, orange, and light blue are noticeable as a soft contrast in the embroidery. This model presents an innovative approach to historical aesthetics, combining modern ecological standards. The incorporation of sustainable materials and adaptive design makes the dress not only visually striking but also functional in the context of aesthetic fashion.

Figure 1(b) shows Model 2, which is an innovative evening dress that implements a sustainable textile strategy. The upper part is presented in an asymmetrical shape inspired by Art Nouveau. It is presented in the form of a bodice made of deadstock silk with a delicate sheen. Its shape emphasizes the silhouette in a sophisticated and modern approach. The asymmetry adds a geometric artistic character and dynamism. The sleeves are shaped with a balloon volume and are made of unused organic satin. They are dramatic and theatrical, giving the spirit of Romanticism, bringing softness and movement to the upper part of the model. They can also be a separate part of the outfit. The lower part of the model is represented by a multi-layered skirt made of several layers of recycled chiffon and deadstock lace. The construction is asymmetrical and conveys the effect of a dancing silhouette when the body moves. The main color solutions are the light pastel ranges of turquoise, peach, lavender, and champagne. Model 2 demonstrates an intelligent and responsible approach, implemented through the use of deadstock and recycled materials. Combining the historical references of Art Nouveau and Romanticism, together with the principles of sustainability, it offers a balance between artistry and ethics. Here, not only is waste reduced, but at the same time it inspires new ways to creatively reimagine models through the prism of modernity.

Figure 1(c) presents Model 3. This is an evening dress with historical references, using biomaterials. The upper part is shaped like a bodice, which structurally resembles a corset, thanks to the constructive-decorative seams. The corset imitates leather textiles, but without the use of animal materials. Pineapple fibers or an alternative to leather, which is made from grape waste, are used. The sleeves are long, freely expanding towards the wrists, inspired by romanticism. They are made of regenerated tulle. They are decorated with embroidered floral motifs along the edge, which gives the look a delicacy. The lower part is represented by an asymmetrical long skirt, inspired by the Art Nouveau style. It is built of several layers of Piñatex, simultaneously combining dynamism and experimentalism with sustainable materials. Thanks to the asymmetry applied to the structure, artistry and volume are observed, while the shape remains feminine and attractive. This model is finished with a long modular train that follows the principles of zero waste in construction. The color solutions for this model are caramel shades. As accents, bronze shades are noticeable, which are derived from the decorative style of Art Nouveau. There are also accents in black, which are a reference to the dark elegance of Victorian fashion. This model demonstrates a contemporary vision, combining the aesthetics of history with the implementation of an innovative approach and the use of sustainable materials.

Figure 1(d) presents Model 4. It combines both the romantic elegance of the Empire style with the minimalist sustainability of contemporary fashion. The upper part of the model follows the high waist, which is typical of the Empire silhouette, located just below the bust. From there, the dress freely unfolds into a freely falling A-line skirt. The overall cut is developed according to the principles of zero-waste cutting. The shape and volume are modeled through gathers, folds, and tightening. The sleeves are slightly gathered with a length to the elbows, which is typical of Empire-style dresses of the early 19th century. They are constructed from a rectangular piece of fabric, gathered at the shoulder, and finished with a cuff from the remaining pieces of fabric. The vision has a slight historical reference while at the same time respecting modern principles of functionality. The skirt is made of long rectangular panels that are joined with fine external seams, which emphasize the geometric purity of the design. For additional volume and freedom of movement, wedge-shaped inserts from leftover fabric are also included as an expression of careful resource planning. The material suitable for making this model is organic cotton, linen, or twill. The color solutions for the model are earthy colors, such as champagne, ochre, or powder, which emphasize the natural texture of the fabrics and at the same time give a muted elegance.

Figure 1(e) presents Model 5. It combines the sensual romanticism of the 19th-century style with the sustainable concept of contemporary fashion. The upper part of the model has a defined waist, shaped by a textile belt or tightening straps, without the need to cut the fabric. The silhouette is feminine and flowing, with volume in the sleeves and lower part, achieved by gatherings and ruffles. The overall construction is developed according to the principles of zero-waste cutting, with all elements being composed of rectangular and trapezoidal shapes. The sleeves have a characteristic “bouffe” shape, long to the wrist and gathered at the shoulders and cuffs. They are made of long, straight panels, finished with a decorative band of leftover textile stripes. The skirt is multi-layered, freely falling, and made of ribbons and ruffles, which are also constructed from leftovers between the main cuts. The look has a historical reference to Romanticism, while at the same time the model can be worn as a dress, tunic, or long top. Suitable fabrics include organic muslin, recycled viscose, and light silk. The color palette is pastel: rose ash, misty blue, and vintage gold with anthracite, which enhance the ethereal and nostalgic character of the look.

Figure 1(f) shows Model 6. It combines the austere elegance of Victorian style with the minimalist sustainability of contemporary zero-waste design. The upper part of the model includes a high stand collar, inspired by Victorian corsets, which is constructed by folding a rectangular panel. The sleeves are shaped like “leg of mutton,” which are voluminous at the top and narrowed towards the wrists. They are constructed from long rectangular parts with a gather at the shoulders and long cuffs made of leftover fabric strips. The silhouette in the upper part is shaped without a real corset but through the application of strategic gathers and fastenings that emphasize the figure. The skirt is long and flared, made of trapezoidal and rectangular panels. For additional volume, wedge-shaped elements obtained from the remaining material during cutting have been added. The vision has a clearly expressed historical stylistics but is adapted to modern times; this model can be worn as a dress or unbuttoned as a cloak. The fabrics used are heavy organic cotton,

recycled micro tulle, and thick linen. The color range includes rich, noble shades, such as burgundy and red, as well as inky blue.

Figure 1(g) shows Model 7. It combines the organic sophistication of the Art Nouveau style with a contemporary zero-waste aesthetic. The upper part of the model has an asymmetrical or wavy neckline, inspired by the natural forms of Art Nouveau, formed by folding and tightening fabric. The sleeves are long, with a slight cutout at the wrist, and are decorated with textile applications in the form of stylized leaves and flowers cut from remnants. They are composed of diagonal or straight panels so as to use the entire width of the material. The skirt is medium to long, with a free, “wavy” silhouette, built from radially arranged triangular and trapezoidal panels. The remnant pieces of fabric are used as decorative inserts or second layers. The model can be transformed and worn as a tunic, dress, or with an inverted front and back panel. Suitable fabrics for the model are Tencel, bamboo viscose, organic silk, or light hemp fabric. Color schemes include coral, aquamarine, and emerald green—tones that enhance the natural aesthetic of the design.

Applied to each of the models, visual-morphological analysis proves that historical aesthetics are not only not opposed to contemporary sustainable practices but can also be their ally. With their capabilities for functionality, the ability to transform, modularity, and the use of biodegradable and reusable materials, the thesis is confirmed that fashion can be ethical while also being innovative, beautiful, and culturally significant.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the connection between the styles of the past and contemporary sustainable design practices is not only possible but also extremely fruitful in terms of innovation in the fashion industry. With the seven models created, the designer illustrates how, through careful selection of materials, the application of sustainable and zero-waste principles. Also, with the strategic influence of the Empire, Romanticism, Victorian, and Art Nouveau styles, a balance between aesthetics, functionality, and ethics can be achieved.

The results confirmed that sustainable design is challenged with a new level of creativity and cultural awareness. With modularity, transformation, and intelligent integration of textile resources, the importance of design as a means of social and environmental responsibility is affirmed.

In the future, similar approaches can be extended to fashion design education programs, industrial practices, and sustainable production policies, which will help build a new world of haute couture where innovation goes hand in hand with respect for the past and care for the future.

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