

The Style Imperative

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"Do designers dictate hemlines?" the late style doyenne Diana Vreeland was once asked. "Only if you take dictation," she replied.

With that remark she exposed a rift the fashion world seldom flaunts. There is a vast gap between fashion and style. Fashion is about clothes and their relationship to the moment. Style is about you and your relationship to yourself. Fashion is in the clothes. Style is in the wearer. The distinction could not be more revealing.

Despite the proliferation of fashion, style has been out of style for decades. As the economy expanded, America embarked on a collective

shopping spree. In place of style we have honored Merchandise. Clothes. Style, on the other hand, doesn't demand a credit card. It prospers on courage and creativity.

Style goes way beyond fashion; it is an individually distinctive way of putting ourselves together. It is a unique blend of spirit and substance—personal identity imposed on, and created through, the world of things. It is a way of capturing something vibrant, making a statement about ourselves in clothes. It is what people really want when they aspire to be fashionable (if they aren't just adorning themselves in status symbols).

In some quarters, it's fashionable, as it were, to trivialize style. It's true that style doesn't have life-or-death impact, but it isn't devoid of substance, either. "Clothes are separated from all other objects by being inseparable from the self," Anne Hollander writes in her classic *Seeing Through Clothes*. "They give a visual aspect to consciousness itself." Through clothes, we reinvent ourselves every time we get dressed. Our wardrobe is our visual vocabulary. Style is our distinctive pattern of speech, our individual poetry.

Fashion is the least of it. Style is, for starters, one part identity: self-awareness and self-knowledge. You can't have style until you have articulated a self. And style requires security—feeling at home in one's body, physically and mentally. Of course, like all knowledge, self-knowledge must be updated as you grow and evolve; style takes ongoing self-assessment.

Style is also one part personality: spirit, verve, attitude, wit, inventiveness. It demands the desire and confidence to express whatever mood one wishes. Such variability is not only necessary but a reflection of a person's unique complexity as a human being. People want to be themselves and to be seen as themselves. In order to work, style must reflect the *real* self, the character and personality of the individual; anything less appears to be a costume.

Lastly, style is one part fashion. It's possible to have lots of clothes and not an ounce of style. But it's also possible to have very few clothes and lots of style. Yes, fashion is the means through which we express style, but it takes less in the way of clothes to be stylish than you might imagine. That's why generations of women have coveted the little black dress, a garment so unassuming in line and perfect in proportion that it is the finest foil for excursions into self-expression.