

## All Walks Blog Post

### The Fashionable Body: Illustrated

How can we equate the emaciated, naked, vulnerable, weak and sexually submissive figures in some of today's fashion illustration with the idea of an 'aspirational' figure? It hardly seems likely that anyone would aspire to such a fate; surely this obviously unhealthy image cannot be perceived as aspirational – or even attractive?

It has even been suggested that the role of the fashion illustrator is no longer merely to reflect the trends of the moment, but that illustrators now have the power to dictate fashion, to direct trends: '...illustration is booming as never before. The power of their work has given the artists a new authority; today's illustrators don't just depict trends: they set them.' (Borelli, 2004 p185/back cover)

Ever since the beginning of the 20th Century, when the contorted 'S' bend silhouette was in vogue, fashion illustrators have routinely exaggerated the shape and dimensions of the natural body in order to communicate the silhouette of the 'fashionable body'.

Of course, the 'fashionable body' itself – however represented - has always been subject to distortion according to the whims of fashion: consider the unhealthily cinched waists of the Victorian era where Victorian women, unable to catch their breath, frequently suffered from 'the vapours' and rib-cages were malformed due to tightly-laced corseting. This extreme 'hourglass' body shape was followed by the equally extreme 'pushed and pulled' contortions of the 'S' bend silhouette at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and later still by the flattened busts of the 1920's.

And as the 'fashionable body' itself was distorted, whether hourglass, 'S' shaped, or flat-chested, fashion illustrators emphasised these distortions still further, the better to communicate the fashionable silhouette and underline the fashion zeitgeist, the mood of the moment: is the 'fashionable body' boyish (1920s)? Feminine (1950s)? Youthful (1960s)? Powerful (1980s)?

Fast-forward to the present day, and the 'fashionable body' is, we are led to believe, long and lean. And in fashion illustration, if tall is good, then taller is better. If thin is good, then thinner is better.

In an era where fashion photography seems intent on depicting the fashionable woman as thin (sometimes to the point of malnourished) weak and vulnerable, it is perhaps inevitable that a trend has emerged in fashion illustration to exaggerate still further the depressing characteristics of an all-too-literal fashion 'victim'.

While some fashion illustrators lend deliberately 'comic' overtones to their work presumably to parody – in the manner of 'Punch' cartoons - the ridiculousness of exaggeratedly elongated fashion figures (see Kerstin Wacker, Carlotta and Robert Wagt), more worrying is the appearance of illustrations where the fashionable figure is depicted as unhealthily emaciated, with ribs on show and exaggeratedly long, bony legs. Indeed, given that in many of these fashion illustrations garments are indistinct, pushed to one side or altogether absent, it stands to reason that the only 'fashion' message being communicated is about the body itself – that this is a 'fashionable' – therefore aspirational - body.

In 'The Great Big Book of Fashion Illustration' (Dawber, 2011), numerous illustrated figures are either naked or semi-naked, in provocative poses or in an obvious state of arousal. With titles such as 'Sex Girl' (Charlene Chua, p348), 'Camp Slag and Drag' (Jo Cheung, p354) and 'Mind Fuck' (Jesse Auersalo, p62), the message here is neither subtle nor suggested. While for decades fashion illustration has been used to convey sensuality, this message is sexually explicit, the often faceless figures obviously sexually available. Images such as these seem to be nothing more than artfully-executed pornography – yet they are to be found everywhere now under the banner of 'fashion illustration'.

Could it be that these images too are intended as parodies of a ridiculously unhealthy and undesirable aesthetic? It seems not. In 'Fashion Illustration Next' (Borelli, 2004), illustrator Nawel states: 'I try to take the things that touch me most from each period... a mixture of past and present, ancient and modern.

'... I love it when the points of reference fade away and what remains is something impalpable and hard to name; that's what I'm trying to express, something like a sense of the immaterial' (Borelli, 2004 p116). These hardly seem the words of an illustrator with tongue firmly in cheek.

Of course, it can be argued that this is the specific role of fashion illustration; that since the rise and rise of fashion photography, fashion illustration is no longer required to depict a faithful representation of the fashions of the day (as required in pre-photography days). The role of a fashion illustrator goes beyond that of a fashion photographer; the illustrator has the means to create a narrative within their illustrations, to use visual means to express a mood, or an idea. A fashion illustrator can - and perhaps should - use their artistic licence to depict the 'fashionable body' in ways that extend beyond the natural in order to communicate the 'essence' of a trend, the 'mood of the moment', the 'fashion zeitgeist'.

In 'Fashion Illustration Next', author Laird Borelli observes: 'Inevitably, these [fashion] artists are connected to the fault lines of the collective psyche, for 'fashion', New York-based designer Miguel Adrover reminds us, 'says something about the moments in which we live'. Thus their work reflects our times. The often joyously satirical observations on fashion and its idiosyncratic milieu ... have given way to more inward musings. As the spectre of terrorism and the reality of economic dislocation set the mood, it is not surprising that the resulting images are darker and more psychologically nuanced than what we have seen before' (Borelli, 2004 p6)

As a 'collective psyche' therefore, are we as a society responsible for determining the thin and vulnerable 'fashionable body' of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century? Does it follow that difficult times inevitably result in depressing depictions of the fashion figure?

Historically, this has never been the case. Even during the most difficult of times – for example during WW1 and WW2, and periods of massive economic decline – fashion illustration always depicted figures that were obviously aspirational: happy, successful, often wealthy, always fulfilled.

How can the emaciated, naked, vulnerable, weak and sexually submissive figures in some of today's fashion illustration possibly be considered 'aspirational'? And if, as has been suggested, illustrators have the power to dictate fashion and direct trends, can they be held responsible – at least in part - for the 'Cult of Thinness': fashion consumers' unhealthy obsession with striving to achieve the

‘perfect’ (impossibly long, exaggeratedly lean) fashionable body – and the increase in self-loathing felt by those who can never hope to achieve it?

Who is served by such a message?

Not even the fashion industry itself, it seems. Recent research has shown that endless homogeneous depictions of young, thin, white models leave many fashion consumers feeling alienated, and where diverse bodies (varying in age and ethnicity as well as size) are used to promote a brand, increased sales follow: ‘When Dove launched its ads with “real women” in the United States, sales increased by 600 percent in two months ... contrary to long-held marketing wisdom, fashion ads don’t need to lead women to aspire to an unattainable ideal to sell products. Instead, women will buy fashion when models convey a realistic, attainable image and make them feel confident; they will continue to demand the products to maintain the advertised look and their feelings of empowerment’ (Barry, 2012)

It appears that greater diversity in the representation of the ‘fashionable body’ equates to greater inclusivity, a broader consumer base and increased profits. It therefore stands to reason that one single elitist representation of ‘the fashionable body’ equates to exclusivity, a narrow consumer base and reduced profits. Irrespective of the ethical issues - the health and wellbeing of the fashion consumer - in these difficult economic times is the perpetuation of elitism and exclusivity really a commercially viable option for the fashion industry?

Whether or not a fashion illustrator has the power to shape trends in fashion is a question that is open to debate - it is true that commercial illustrators are rarely free to set their own brief - but whoever sets the illustration brief, whether designer, design company, advertising agency, art director, editor, author, publisher, or the illustrator themselves, surely greater diversity in the representation of ‘the fashionable body’ – a wider range of sizes, shapes, ages, colours and creeds, reflecting the diverse range of bodies in the global community – would make sense both ethically and commercially –even aesthetically - and better serve both fashion industry and fashion consumer as a result.

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