Questions of Fashion

Lilly Reich
Introduction by Robin Schuldenfrei
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This article, titled “Modefragen,” was originally published in Die Form: Monatsschrift für gestaltende Arbeit, 1922.
Introduction

In “Questions of Fashion,” Lilly Reich (1885–1947) introduces readers of the journal *Die Form* to recent developments in the design of clothing with respect to problems of the age.¹ Reich, who had her own long-established atelier in Berlin, succinctly contextualizes issues that were already mainstays for the Werkbund, the prominent alliance of designers, businessmen, and government figures committed to raising design standards in Germany, of which she was a member. Beyond design and fashion questions, Reich also presents a fleeting but vivid image of the rapid change the period was undergoing in the spheres of industry, finance, and society. At the time of writing, 1922, Germany was still recuperating from World War I and in the throes of the upheavals wrought by the inflation of its currency due to war reparations (which can be detected in the lingering nationalist tone in her essay)—and yet Berlin was in the process of becoming a thriving metropolis that would soon reach a cultural and industrial zenith in the late 1920s.

At the time of the writing of this essay, Lilly Reich had a flourishing practice in Berlin that produced clothing designs and accessories, window displays, exhibition installations, and interiors, including furniture and finishings. Born in
Berlin, Reich had been trained in embroidery and had journeyed in 1908 to Vienna, where she worked in the studio of Josef Hoffmann, a leader of the Wiener Werkstätte. Upon her return to Berlin, she became a student of Else Oppler-Legband, another early Werkbund member, and through her, Reich came into contact with leading Werkbund figures, such as Hermann Muthesius and Peter Behrens. As early as 1912 she was established enough as a designer in her own right to be extended Werkbund membership by its board of directors. At the age of twenty-nine, in 1914, she opened her own independent atelier. And in 1920 she was the first woman elected to the governing board of the Werkbund.

Reich possessed a rare combination of artistic and organizational skills, which allowed her to maintain an active atelier and oversee the timely construction and outfitting of major exhibitions, the scale of which required contact with—and coordination of—a vast number of participants. By the time she wrote


this essay, she had already designed the interiors and furniture for thirty-two rooms of a Youth Center (1911); been one of the exhibition designers (with Oppler-Legband and Fia Wille) charged with the overall aesthetic conception and physical layout for the large-scale exhibition *Woman at Home and at Work* (1912), for which she also designed a model apartment for a working-class family and two stores; participated in the design of the “House of Women” section for the major Werkbund exhibition in Cologne (1914); acted as artistic director in 1920 for the exhibition *Fashion Craft* (*Kunsthandwerk in der Mode*) for the Association of the German Fashion Industry; and been predominately responsible for the selection of 1,600 objects of German design sent by the Werkbund for exhibition at the Newark Museum in New Jersey (1922). From 1924 to 1926 she worked for the Werkbund House in Frankfurt am Main, selecting objects and organizing the displays that represented the Werkbund and German design at the Frankfurt International Fair, and also relocating her own atelier to Frankfurt. This previous experience would be the foundation for the leap in creativity and organizational scale that her work would take in partnership with the architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, whom she met in 1924 and with whom she moved back to Berlin. Their collaboration produced the truly innovative modern designs for which Reich is now best known. The projects undertaken together with Mies demonstrate a dynamic use of materials, new forms and conceptions of space, and new models for dwelling, as can be seen both in major private commissions, such as the Tugendhat Villa (1928–30), and in large-scale exhibitions that displayed full-scale living spaces and modern industrial products, such as *The Dwelling* exhibition, which accompanied the Weissenhof Siedlung in Stuttgart (1927) and the German Building Exhibition in Berlin (1931). But it is in the larger nexus of culture and design in 1922, and of Werkbund ideas and practice, that this essay by Reich can be most fruitfully examined.

**Craftsmanship and the Machine**

Reich’s essay appeared in the initial year’s run of the journal *Die Form: Monatschrift für Gestaltende Arbeit* (Form: Monthly Journal for Work in Design), which was edited by a key Werkbund protagonist, Walter Riezler, and published under the collaborative sponsorship of several cultural agencies, including the Werkbund. Just five issues would appear in 1922 before it would cease publication. *Die Form* would emerge anew in 1925, under a slightly different subheading (*Zeitschrift für Gestaltende Arbeit*; “monthly journal” has been replaced simply by “journal”), featuring a strikingly modern graphic redesign and a new...

Above: Street clothing designed by E.J. Wimmer (left), and sporting outfit designed by Fritzi Pracht (right), both for the Wiener Werkstätte and used to illustrate Reich’s essay “Questions of Fashion,” Die Form 1, no. 5 (1922), figs. 5, 6.
Winter sports clothing, *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* 34, no. 1 (January 1, 1925).
editor, Walter Curt Behrendt, and published under the auspices of just two associations, the Werkbund and the Verband Deutscher Kunstgewerbevereine (Federation of German Arts and Crafts Associations).

The theme of the issue of Die Form in which Reich’s “Questions of Fashion” appeared was “Die Mode,” or “Fashion.” It opened with a long essay titled “Fashion Sense” by Walter Riezler, the journal’s editor, which counterposed healthful reform clothing to the constraining, traditional German peasant costume, contextualizing an already long-standing debate in German reform movements. Riezler called for fashion to reflect the new spirit of the modern age—and to do so in a cultured and tasteful manner (a perennial concern of the Werkbund). Reich’s article followed Riezler’s essay, in a sense bringing the discussion up-to-date in terms of specific stylistic issues and production. Reich criticizes the widespread use of imitative materials and superficial construction techniques, modern business practices, and the rapid pace of change as they manifested themselves especially acutely in clothing design. Her criticisms can be read as a call for more self-assuredness on the part of German design: a slow and steady organic development that is less wasteful, less dependent on Paris for trends and sales, less snobbish, less a “slave of supply and demand,” and still able to stand up to the pressures of the market. She advocates for fashion that remains “attractive and charming” but also functional, and she accepts the age’s need for mass production without giving up the role of handcraftsmanship or denigrating it by machine imitation.

The subsequent five articles then issued calls for artists to solve the problem of aesthetic form in light of modern manufacturing realities (of both the factory and the continued endurance of the workshop, where work was produced by highly trained hands), each author tackling specific techniques or types of textiles: printed fabric patterns, lace manufacture, and the fabric processes of indigo blue printing and batik. Across the issue’s essays, several key themes emerged that mirrored larger period design concerns, especially Werkbund reform priorities, namely the quickening pace and worsening quality of machine output, the problem of a ready market of consumers who welcomed this flood of inexpensive and ever-changing fashion, the corresponding over-production of cheap novelties, and the accompanying erosion of consumer desire for long-lasting, quality wares. In the face of these pressures, the essays’ authors urged designers to consider the relationship of materials to form in clothing design, rejecting the use of imitative materials, inexpensive printing techniques, and shortcuts in production.
Without offering a concrete solution to the stubborn problem of market realities, the authors collectively appealed to artists to accept machine production processes while simultaneously asserting, unambiguously, that handcraftsmanship still had a place in textile design. Acknowledging that the machine was to be a permanent fixture of German industrial production, the authors tried to establish a place for handcraftsmanship in the discourse of modern design and through the introduction of processes such as indigo blue printing and batik. They also noted, in several instances, that handcraftsmanship in clothing design was a particularly good outlet for the employment of women designers. Women’s craftwork, such as embroidery and lace, still maintained a place in women’s fashion in the 1920s. And despite machine production, women also still sewed their own clothing. For example, Dada artist Hannah Höch was employed by the Ullstein publishing house to design patterns for women’s fashions, embroidery, and lace that were offered to readers in each issue of its women’s magazines.

Many of Reich’s ideas in “Questions of Fashion” are exemplified by her own clothing design, which was simple, even dowdy, compared to Parisian wares, but which evinced careful attention to materials and craftsmanship, especially in its fine details. Two years earlier, Reich had also demonstrated these ideas in her selection of the best examples of Germany’s fashion and accessories for the exhibition Fashion Craft, held at the Arts and Crafts Museum (Kunstgewerbe-museum) in Berlin. In an article published prior to its opening, Reich laid out her underlying goal for the exhibition, which was to bring together artisans and large-scale firms, not just through the display of outstanding examples of quality workmanship, but also through a promotional information office set up to facilitate contacts between artisans and industry. She articulated industry’s economic constraints, namely supply and demand and the pressure to present new designs each season, while describing the individual craftsman at work, in William Morris–esque terms, as an artist who is propelled by a “love of material, joy in work, will to form, and not practical and economic considerations.” Reich lamented industry’s “tasteless,” “barbarian misuse” of forms of handicraft, such as in the mass production of batik or hand-painted fabrics (both to be a subject of articles in the same issue of Die Form), as a bad example of bringing together the artist and industry; machine work, she countered, could not have the same goals as handwork, but rather technology and materials needed to be reconciled, and technology’s products needed to be bestowed with their own proper allure. Reich concluded with a call for the handicraft artist to join the factory workshop in order to come to understand industrial processes and positively influence designs ultimately to be produced by machines.
Werkbund Concerns

Members of the Werkbund sought to contend with realities of their age while channeling design toward desired outcomes. The issues Reich raises in “Questions of Fashion,” and in her other work of this period, take fashion as a starting point but quickly move to the larger Werkbund preoccupations of manufacturing, economy, and quality of domestic design in an increasingly international market. The situation that Reich describes in clothing production—surrogate materials and “sham solutions,” decoration or ornament thoughtlessly and superficially applied, inexpensive imitations of quality design—was analogous to the shortcomings in production of other types of goods, such as furniture and household objects, the production of “cheap and nasty” machine-made articles, that Werkbund protagonists, especially Hermann Muthesius, sought to address. Attention to organic and honest form, an ideal that had already been articulated by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century dress reform movements, was given new urgency with Werkbund concerns over taste and the effects of mass production.
Frederic J. Schwartz has illuminated the importance of Style (Stil), positioned polemically against Fashion (Mode), for Werkbund members. Style was seen as capturing the true common spirit of the age and also described a positive theory of form in contradistinction to what they viewed as the culturally hostile influence of the capitalist commercial economy.13 Fashion was Style’s antithesis; not only in clothing, it described the quick production and turnover of consumer commodities.14 Reich voices these crucial Werkbund concerns in “Questions of Fashion” when she writes, “Fashion from the previous eras had style, since it grew out of long-existent living conditions and societal prerequisites. . . . Fashion today has no style; it is merely always fashionable.” As Schwartz aptly argues: “To members of the Werkbund, Fashion came to be the central concept of a theory not only of the loss of Style, but of the decadent nature of visual form under conditions of laissez-faire capitalism.”15 Reich’s statements mirror this larger period concern: ever-changing fashion represents a loss of style and connection to society, an instability that is driven by transitory, commercial motivations alone. One solution, put forth by the Werkbund for many categories of objects,
and by Reich for fashion, was recourse to standard types (Typisierung) for which appropriate forms could be developed, such as was evidenced, she argued, in street clothes and sportswear.

Werkbund protagonists were not the first to address the problems posed by fashion for design and society. Prominent cultural critics and theorists, such as Ferdinand Tönnies, Heinrich Hübsch, Gottfried Semper, Adolf Loos, Werner Sombart, and Georg Simmel, all wrote with concern about fashion and the general, rapid (over-) production of cheap goods and the effects of accelerated capitalism on an eagerly consuming, undiscerning mass public. Simmel, for example, had earlier described the “blasé attitude” adopted by the metropolitan dweller in response to modern urban life’s constant nervous stimulation, and recognized the need of the individual to maintain his “independence and individuality” in the face of external culture. Reich provides a vivid parallel description of the situation in which fashion products are reproduced “to a mania” leading quickly to “fatigue,” and in which the wearer’s “own spiritual life is empty and banal” (for Simmel “the core of things” was hollowed out), and Reich similarly urges the individual to “be what she is.”

Unease about the fast pace of change in clothing production was symptomatic of a deep apprehension concerning the acceleration of modern life more generally; mapped onto fashion—a prime mode by which such concerns could be literally and figuratively embodied—were the same anxieties about identity that were expressed about the conditions of modernity more widely.

Self-Fashioning

But what was the fashionable woman of 1922? That moment, as the openness of the Weimar Republic unfolded, offered unprecedented opportunities for self-definition for women, which would be reflected, negotiated, and even constructed by the fashion of the period. Clothing set a visual trope that actively mirrored the rapidly changing world of 1920s Berlin—whether representing an embrace of hyperfemininity or gender neutrality, sporty girl about town or devoted mother, lady of leisure or shopgirl, actress or aspiring star, the “copy of some Asta Nielsen” that Reich cites. Technological advances allowing for quick output and small variations in designs, as well as the ready supply of workers moving to Berlin from the countryside, supported this change, as amply charted by period observers, such as Georg Simmel or Siegfried Kracauer. In Kracauer’s study of the salaried masses, for example, one observer points out that “everybody wants to appear more than he is.” This was precisely Reich’s main concern: the need to overcome fashionableness and replace it with stable, honest form.
Reich seeks to identify what women are—objectively, spiritually, nationally—then to find forms of clothing that reflect those qualities. She concludes on a clear opposition, one that has larger philosophical underpinnings, namely the distinction between a woman’s being (Sein) and superficial appearance (Schein); she “does not want to appear as what she is not.” And how is woman’s Geist, or true essence, to be expressed? Not by fleeting fashion and the women who are seduced by it, not via Paris, or German imitation thereof, but rather through true form.

In “Questions of Fashion,” Reich has turned her attention to one of the arenas that she, at that point in her career, knew best: the economy and production of fashion. With conviction, and in a concise and approachable format, she provides a view into the issues of the day and the terms of the debate, which has wider ramifications for considering the development of modernism in 1920s Germany.

— Robin Schuldenfrei

Notes

1 Lilly Reich, “Questions of Fashion” (“Modefragen”), Die Form 1, no. 5 (1922): 7–9. For images of clothing designed by Reich around this period, see, for example, figures 22 and 25 in the unpaginated section of photographs at the end of the issue of Die Form in which her essay appears; F. S., “Angelika an Ursula,” Neue Frauenkleidung und Frauenkultur: Zeitschrift für persönliche, künstlerische Kleidung, Körperkultur und Kunsthandwerk 22, no. 1 (1926): 7, fig. 8; Else Hoffmann, “Von Wäsche und Kleidern,” Neue Frauenkleidung und Frauenkultur 22, no. 2 (1926): 39–41, figs. 17–22; Karl Wilker, “Von Blumen,” Neue Frauenkleidung und Frauenkultur 22, no. 6 (1926): 153, fig. 3.


4 Undeniably, the quality and innovation of the major exhibitions and interiors produced in collaboration with Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in the late 1920s and early 1930s overshadow Reich’s prior and later independent work. Although the Museum of Modern Art in New York holds more than nine hundred of her drawings, the full extent of Reich’s creative work will never be known due to the bombing of her studio in 1943 and the fact that Mies did not consistently give her credit in their collaborative work (a practice absolutely standard in the period, and continuing to some extent today in architecture offices in terms of master architect–employee relations).


7 Höch also designed patterned fabrics and embroidery panels, as well as writing about needlework, for example, a short piece titled “The Embroidering Woman,” accompanied by a photograph of an example of simple, modern needlework. See Höch, “Die stickende Frau,” Stickerei- und Spitzen-Rundschau 20, nos. 1–2 (October–November 1919): 22, and other articles by Höch in Stickerei- und Spitzen-Rundschau from 1918 and 1919, as well as Maria Makela, “By Design: The Early Work of Hannah Höch in Context,” in Peter Boswell, Maria Makela, Carolyn Lanchner, and Kristin Makholm, The Photomontages of Hannah Höch (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1996), 48–79.

8 Designers, participating ateliers and their locations, and a listing of the wares on display (which included examples of batik, fabric designs, knitwear, hand and machine embroidery, lace, hats, umbrellas, clothing, and underclothing) as well as a short introductory essay by Peter Jessen can be found in the small exhibition catalogue Kunsthandwerk in der Mode: Ausstellung des Verbandes der deutschen Mode-Industrie (Berlin: Kunstgewerbemuseum, 1920). See also McQuaid, Lilly Reich, 13–14.


10 Ibid., 209.

11 Ibid., 210–11.

12 Ibid., 211. See also Droste, “Lilly Reich,” in McQuaid, Lilly Reich, 51.


14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 27.


Questions of Fashion

The German fashion industry has developed dramatically in the last several years. Its productivity has radically increased, particularly from an international perspective. The export of basic goods (*Stapelware*) as well as high-end, one-of-a-kind creations is higher than ever before. All workshops of the fashion trade are at peak production. The atmosphere created by this business is electric, pulling everything into its rhythm. There is scarcely another industry that can generate so many productive achievements, technical ideas, and gleaming new materials, and have at its disposal such skill and taste—and then, in a matter of a few months, despite all this effort, emerge with a result that is unsatisfying. It begs for opposition.

For whom does this industry labor? For whom do these luxury workshops exist? What results are produced by the limitless workforce, the vast amounts of materials, and the enormous sums of money involved? From a populist economic standpoint, the situation may be very welcome because the resulting capital, in the form of output and assets, is felt even on an international level. But this is not the question that will concern us here.

What is of issue here is the intellectual spirit (*geistige Bild*) that becomes visually apparent in the fashion trade and the questions of how, or if, our time is reflected in it and has found its form.

Fashion is international: this is a statement that shall not be disputed here. But it is certain that despite this international focus, its form and production processes are impacted by national considerations. It has always been known that our fashion industry is dependent on Paris, and this remains as true today as it was before the war. All efforts to create using our own powers and for once to follow through with our own ideas and materials were abandoned by the rag trade the moment Paris became accessible again. Within the last several years this dependence on imported ideas has coupled with the dependence on exported sales. The work of the fashion industry is determined within the greater economic sphere (*Komplex*) and has become a slave to supply and demand.

Following the impoverishment of the general population in the last several years, the circle of people in our country who can consume the top creations of the
fashion industry has become very small. This circle consists of women from the
now quite small “great world,” plus a few more actresses and film divas, and many
more ladies from the very large demimonde. These are the women who set the
conditions for national production and who issue the first response to the ideas
imported from abroad. All others are shut out. They are offered only the finished
product—the mass-produced wares that are only poor copies of the models cre-
ated by those mentioned above.

The economic development of the postwar era with its increased exportation has
spurred the tempo of production dramatically. It has led to a precipitous escal-
ation, driven largely by the purely commercial motivations of the moment—which,
in turn, prohibit any stability or calm organic development.

The result of this overheated situation is that most issues related to the creation
and construction of the individual piece are neglected. Any dress design that
gives expression to decorative and ornamental fantasy is denigrated to a mere
trace that is scarcely evident in its final production, even at our best factories.

The organic unity of the cut is misunderstood and is replaced with some kind of
simulated solution to the construction, so that pleating is created artificially with
snaps or basting stitches. The impression is consistently bewitching, and the very
preciousness and beauty of the material is seductive. The aesthete is satisfied, and
the snob even more so. But the creation is nothing but a vain exterior skin.

There is no other industry that wastes so much in materials and labor, as well as
steals and destroys ideas with the same carelessness and thoughtlessness. Any
attempt at a real achievement—manifest in one beautiful creation—runs out of
steam rapidly within a few weeks. Meanwhile, at breakneck speed, thousands of
so-called new patterns of lace “à la Vénitienne” are manufactured by machines
and then just as quickly and inorganically stuck onto dresses. This same treat-
ment is given to fine and organically conceptualized embroidery or printed
fabric. The designs ape other ideas without spirit or sense, so that hundreds of
variations of some good idea inspired by fabric from yesterday or today becomes
available for purchase the day after tomorrow. And it is the whole appearance,
not just the clothes, that is schematized and imitated. Every third woman is a
plagiarization of the first, and this first one is just a copy of some Asta Nielsen.
Instead of changing every couple of years or decades as in ages past, the Procrus-
tean bed of fashion shortens or lengthens the body of the woman within just a
couple of months.
Fashion from previous ages had style, since it grew out of long-existent living conditions and societal prerequisites. It was always national, and yet also international in its basic lines. Such fashion developed slowly and organically. Fashion today has no style; it is merely always fashionable.

The design that is singled out and rises through the quickest repetition to a mania provides a purely external decoration. The emptiness of this decoration leads soon to fatigue, and serves only to encourage further masquerade. Restlessness and greed and flighty vanity are in evidence, and everything is a perplexing, momentarily diverting shell. Fashion responds to the worst instincts of our time, and for its own part, calls these worst instincts to the fore. Fashion is not burdened by the poverty of our time and remains untouched by the problems of our time.

The culture of the wearer is limited to the exterior of her own body. The culture of her environment is one of highly snobbish taste; her own spiritual life is empty and banal. Her lack of tradition leads to an uncertainty about her role in life. Here again, the sign of the times is chaos.

This is not to say that fashion is a matter of the petty bourgeois or a playground for individual moralistic attempts. Fashion should remain what it is: a woman full of humor and elegance, attractive and charming. She remains separate from any doctrine. Thankfully laws and norms are not able to constrict fashion, since it is probably the most lively type of creation, and the most lively force of expression of an individual personality, of a class, and of a people. Clothes are objects of use, not artworks. They are subject to the requirements of the day. And yet clothes can produce metaphysical effects through their inherent orderliness, their peace and restraint, their coquettish gaiety and liveliness, their playful grace, their healthy simplicity, and their dignity. Clothes must and can merge with their wearer to become an organic, inseparable whole. They can give a visual form to her spirit, be an expression of her soul, and enhance her feel for life. But this service that fashion can provide must adhere to the necessities of life and reflect the requirements of the time: fashion must have discipline.

An example of this discipline already exists in street clothes, which have remained the same for years with only slight variation. Sportswear is another example of finding an appropriate form (Beispiel für eine gefundene Form)—although it has also begun to betray some whimsical and snobbish influences. Both street clothes and sportswear provide good, organic solutions in the form
of a standardization (Typisierung) of clothing that everywhere must adhere to the same objective (sachlichen) prerequisites.

Our time cannot avoid the standardization (Typisierung) of mass-produced goods (Stapelware) or get by without the existence of mechanized production. They are necessary because of our general poverty and dearth of time. But it is essential that this type of production be recognized and organically integrated, and not disguised as an imitation of handicraft. It is certain that work by hand, the high-quality handicrafts, cannot be given up, especially in the field of fashion; it is precisely in this field that we find the highest caliber of handicraft today. But we should not put all of our faith in handwork merely out of sentimental reasons.

Who knows how the path to a new form will be found? Definitely not along the path of those circles that presently define what is fashionable. Good things take time. In fashion, too, it will be essential that the spirit (Geist) of the woman comes to the fore: the spirit of she who wants to be what she is—and does not want to appear as what she is not.

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