

■ ARHS 550: The Vast "Waist" Land: Costume and the Body Ideal in Western Visual Culture

Shelly Nordtorp-Madson

Tuesdays, 5:30 – 8:30 p.m.

Cultures are measured by many means, some obvious and many less. All have a concept of an ideal of beauty, which is described in written sources and in the visual record. One such visual source, the micro-environment of dress, is a source that is at once public and intensely private, and allows insight into a culture that no other artform can. It is the design of the garment, reflecting the technology and aesthetic of the period that gives structure to the body, thereby creating the ideal of beauty of any given culture or age. The fact that finding actual material remains of garments is a relatively recent phenomenon demands a close reading of the pictorial representations to determine symbolism vs. accuracy and to place the works of art – and the concept of beauty – into their cultural contexts. Some of the topics we will deal with include background on body ideal and manipulation, such as iron girdles and topless women in the Minoan frescoes and Paleolithic string skirts. However, the main focus will be from the classical period, with examples such as: difference between Greek and Roman dress, was Giovanna Cenami of van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait pregnant or just fashionable, could you wear knickers and a vest in public in Great Britain, and what was a mono-bosom? Did Queen Elizabeth I's dresses really look like her portraits, and a brief touch on how previous periods – and our own – define our ideal of beauty today? Since we actually do not have garments from most periods, what can we rely on to give us a sense of how people dressed and what they considered to be beautiful?

This course fulfills an elective requirement.

This course fulfills the Western/European requirement for those beginning in fall 2009 and beyond.

Background Reading:

The History of Costume as an Art-Historical Discipline Source: The Burlington Magazine, Vol. 117, No. 868 (Jul., 1975), p. 433 Published by: The Burlington Magazine Publications, Ltd. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/878072>

The Modernization of Fashion Author(s): Anne Hollander Source: Design Quarterly, No. 154 (Winter, 1992), pp. 27-33 Published by: Walker Art Center Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4091263>

General Costume History books, such as those by James Laver, Milia Davenport, or Tortora and Eubanks. Looking through these books and others of their kinds will prepare class members to recognize general trends in dress. Also, searching databases for specific periods, or looking at Art History texts that include figures in dress, will form a good basis for the course.

