

# Clothing as beauty, pleasure and creativity

*Maureen Fullam*

## *Clothing: The medium is the message in art*

**T**HE PAINTING *ST LAWRENCE RECEIVING THE TREASURE OF THE CHURCH* by Giovanni da Fiesole (Fra Angelico) shows St Lawrence beautifully dressed in magnificent vestments of intricate design and pointed symbolism. Lawrence's chasuble is a splendid scarlet. Woven into the chasuble's fabric are glorious golden flames. The design at once reveals Lawrence's role as a deacon, his holiness of life, and prophetically signals his martyrdom by fire. Lawrence's death was terrifying, but the vestments are not frightening; they are striking. They manifest the inner beauty of this person and the destiny which is part of his identity.

Even Fra Angelico's spiritual beings, his angels, are magnificently dressed. How else could he do them justice? The 'Angelic One' painted as a means of prayer and, over the centuries, his art has touched the hearts and spirits of people, for they point to a beauty beyond themselves. You need not be an art scholar to experience this reality. A tour through the San Marco Museum in Florence will give a visitor the opportunity to behold some of the most beautiful paintings in the world, rendered on monastery walls for the benefit of monks at prayer.

His attention to the colour and details of the clothing in his paintings makes them a window to the transcendent and invites us to pray with him. His 'textured' colour captures the beauty of God's creation in a way which attracts us, draws us to the painting, and points us to a further horizon. In the art of Fra Angelico, clothing communicates a profound message.

## *Real clothes as iconography*

It is commonplace for artists to use clothing to communicate their creative impulse and spiritual messages. Clothes, however, are iconography in and of themselves. Certainly, clothes are a very ordinary part of the human experience. They are a basic necessity, the human person's primary protection and shelter from the elements. We take them for granted. It is safe to say, however, that in no place, in no culture, and among no people are clothes merely protection and shelter.

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From the earliest time, human beings have used their ingenuity to produce clothing which was comfortable as well as functional, and beautiful as well as comfortable. All over the globe, the beauty of clothes catches people's attention, the originality of their design and execution invites admiration, and the very thought of wearing them gives delight. The opposite is also true. Forced uniformity in dress, as in China during the days of the Cultural Revolution, invites a judgement on the culture and is deadening to the spirit.

There is no easier way for human beings to register the importance of events or the significance of positions and roles in society apart from attention to clothing. This is true whether it is the Queen of England in her impeccably hand-tailored suits and gowns, the noble chief in Africa in a leopard-skin hat, a native American in beaded vest and eagle-feather headdress, or the investment banker sporting his pair of novelty braces.

### *Clothing: connection through the creative energy of relationships*

Follow me as I reflect on my experience to suggest the power in clothes to be the vehicles of beauty and of pleasure, and as expressions of human creativity.

For more than twelve years I was a merchandise buyer and product developer of men's accessories, ties and casual shirts departments for Saks Fifth Avenue. My responsibility was to find and acquire the best products to offer in these departments for fifty Saks stores throughout the United States. I had the opportunity to travel the globe in search of luxurious fabrics and exclusive designs which would delight the Saks customers. Our stores had an elegant and discerning clientele, accustomed to wearing only the most fashion-forward and high-quality garments.

In my mind's eye I still can see and feel the wonderful fabrics which I bought. I remember the places I visited around the world, and the people who designed the cloth, or made the materials, or who managed the businesses. They were entrepreneurs, artisans and artists: ordinary and extraordinary people.

### *An exercise of the imagination*

I envision the splendid places I visited to purchase the infinitely varied fabrics and materials that found their way to the elegant showcases of Saks and on to the bodies of millions of customers. I see again the people I met: the designers in Milan and London, the retail stock people

in New York, the factory owners in Hong Kong, the leather craftsmen in Florence, the fabric makers in Tokyo and Osaka.

Images of bolts of lustrous silk crêpe de chine, crisp linens, superb lawn cottons, glimmering pinpoint oxford easily come to mind. As I enter into this exercise of imagination, I can almost hold again these extravagant fabrics and judge their worth. My work meant that I was always engaged in seeing, touching and contemplating anything I would buy. Of course the successful buying of fabrics for the retail market necessitated planning and budgeting, but, almost more important, was my sensing in a – literally – tactile way, what my customer would enjoy wearing next to his skin.

Designs and textiles can be so striking, the execution so exquisite, that superior creation, whether technologically or hand-created, captures my attention. What a painter creates with oil and canvas, what a sculptor does with chisel and mallet to stone or wood, a fabric designer does to cloth. They produce a work of art in cloth that a person can wrap around their body rather than just admire from a distance. An artist reflects an aspect of creation on canvas, stone or wood. So does a clothing designer. I enjoy looking at fabric as I would a canvas, and I enjoy knowing that someone will really wear it some day. As in a painted or sculpted image, the potential for new and exhilarating combinations is infinite in fabrics and points to a beauty beyond themselves.

Fabrics can evoke in us feelings of comfort, elegance, beauty. We can feel more comfortable, more elegant and more beautiful in a garment that appeals to us. Clothing can be a source of beauty, especially because clothes can mirror the harmony and magnificence of creation and the work that men and women do with their hands and through the miracle of modern technology.

### *Touching the sacred through relationships in the rag trade*

While the retail clothes business is sometimes pejoratively referred to as the 'rag trade', I realize that much of my work was sacred. I was intimately engaged with the mystery and wonder of the human person and human needs, with human creativity and with the production and appreciation of the beautiful. Buying and styling ties, shirts and accessories is certainly not the same as painting timeless frescos for people to appreciate for centuries to come. However, I was engaged in an industry that brought beautiful products to people, and I experienced that as a privilege and responsibility. The quality and style of these

products was based in large part on the quality of my relationships with the hundreds of people along the long, fabled trade routes of merchandising.

On a daily basis, I had the privilege of seeing and buying fabrics created by and for God's beloved creatures. I was immersed in handling material goods, assessing their qualities: how a tussah silk would absorb colour, how a new blend of wool and cotton would appeal to a customer, whether a wider tie would co-ordinate with European tailoring. With my hands I was literally writing millions of dollars of purchase order transactions that would affect the incomes of the people that worked in hundreds of mills and factories.

As I became more involved in what I was doing, I was finding God showing up in places I had never expected. I would find myself praying as I rose in the morning and before I retired at night: for the people I met, for the choices I would make each day, that I did not overspend on my budget, that I remembered the names of all the vendors I would meet that day. As the days and months passed, I began to use the line from the psalm for my morning prayer: 'Oh Lord, give success to the work of our hands'. I found the work of people's hands and the hand of God influencing my daily life and the way I lived it. In retrospect my spiritual director had picked a ripe time to begin guiding me through the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius.

As a buyer I was always building important relationships with designers, artisans, owners of factories and mills, fabric-suppliers, presidents of fashion houses, management personnel of factories, and transportation workers. These people could collaborate with you in finding the fabrics or designs, or assist you in developing your own creative idea. These were also the people responsible for producing the merchandise and getting it to all fifty Saks Fifth Avenue stores on the contracted delivery date.

### *Finding God in all things . . .*

Typical buying trips would include visits to Como, Milan, Florence and Rome, London, Tokyo, Hong Kong, San Francisco, Los Angeles. In Florence, the Ferragamo family would welcome me to their showroom located in a thirteenth-century palazzo. The environment was evocative and quickly disposed anyone with a modicum of imagination towards buying their exquisite and finely tailored merchandise in leather or silk. You could almost see and hear in your imagination the original thirteenth-century owner, Prince Strozzi, striding through the ancient

archway and up the stone steps of the palazzo, delighting in his soft, supple, thigh-high boots. You could estimate the weight of his silk shirt by the careless abundance of its drape.

At Ferragamo I would make large purchases of neckwear designs, thousands of ties, and give styling suggestions for next season. The Ferragamo family and Saks had a very solid, long-standing business relationship and an essential part of doing my job was to continue building that relationship. But I was also enjoying growing in a more significant relationship: greater intimacy with Christ as I moved joyfully through the Second Week and prayed that, like Inigo, I would be accepted under Christ's Standard.

In the 1980s, Como in Italy was the destination for any merchant looking for interesting and original designs and luxurious neckwear fabrics, especially silks. I would spend days visiting the mills, combing through yards and yards of silk patterns and fabrics until I found the perfect ones. These would be patterns and fabrics which I judged would satisfy and delight our customers in the United States. It was essential that I not only find the newest and most appealing designs: as a Saks buyer, I also needed to negotiate, within feasible and legal limitations, an exclusive purchase of the designs.

While there, I would usually visit the Bianchi Mill. Mr Bianchi would take pride in personally showing me the assortment offered by his firm. Grenadine and silk satin were his specialities. The fabrics at his mill were the most luscious I had ever seen: cardinal red grenadine, white jacquarded satin, black silk moiré. Mr Bianchi, always with a flourish, would display his fabrics and remind me for whom many of them were made. He supplied the Pontiff himself. I admit that I was impressed and delighted. Images of Pope John Paul II wrapping himself in these luscious materials touched me as very holy and very human. Many of our neckwear and scarf fabrics were made here. Back in the US, we would tell customers: 'Let me show you this beautiful silk evening scarf with handsewn fringes; it is made at the same mill that weaves the vestments of the Pope!'

Seeing skilled tailors at work in Hong Kong was a pleasure in itself. They were simply wonderful to watch as they made speciality shirts; watching them was to watch artists at work. They were very proud of what they did, of the perfection of their skills, and the number of stitches to the inch that they could masterfully accomplish. Many of these men and women had escaped with barely the clothes on their back from mainland China years before and this thriving island was a haven of vibrant free enterprise. Millions of people had an opportunity to earn

a fair wage, develop their skills and enjoy a more comfortable standard of living. I became more conscious of the justice issues involved and asked more questions of the owners to be certain that the wage was fair.

I would often spend weeks 'shopping the markets', which could mean visiting several fashion showrooms in one day, travelling through the hills of Italy searching for novelty gift items for the holiday season, visiting England or Scotland for the finest cashmere scarves in the world, or shopping in the avant-garde boutiques of Tokyo for new weaving ideas and styles.

After returning to the New York store and receiving shipments of finished merchandise from around the world, I would be in communication with department managers to hear about sales and customer reaction. I would spend time with the stock people as they transported the merchandise through the store. They would good-naturedly poke fun at me by imitating the ritual I had of always touching the fabric and rubbing the material between my fingers after it had arrived to be certain the polish and finish were acceptable to our customers. We laughed together.

When we say grace before meals, we pray in gratitude for those who were instrumental in getting our food to the table: the cook, the kitchen staff, the men and women who grew and harvested the fruits and vegetables that reach our table, ripe and ready to eat, by which we nourish our bodies and spirits.

When we rise each morning and dress for work or for some special occasion do we, I wonder, ever pray for or even think of those who created, manufactured, bought, or transported to use the clothes we wear? It would never have occurred to me to do so until the weavings of my life became intertwined with men and women of the garment industry, both colleagues and customers. It is these people who have turned me toward the Holy.

### *Sacramental encounter at the sales counter*

One afternoon while observing customers at Saks Fifth Avenue in New York City, I noticed a young man about fourteen years old come to the sales counter. He wanted to purchase a tie as a Father's Day gift. I heard him say to the salesman: 'I'm here to buy the best tie in the store for the best Dad in the world'. The salesman was dismissive: 'Kid, the cheap ties are on the self-service racks at the end of the counter. Go and help yourself.' I could not believe what I heard. I was tempted beyond my control, moved the salesman out of the way, and intervened. I apol-

ogized to the young man for the poor customer service and proceeded to help him choose a tie.

We talked about his father's colouring, what kind of shirts and suits he wore, how tall and broad he was. What was his favourite colour? Did he enjoy sports? His father enjoyed golf and liked blue so he decided upon a conversational tie of navy-blue silk with gold and red golf-clubs boldly woven into the design. The fabric had come from the Binda Mill in Como. The tie, though not expensive, was attractive and a personal expression of this young man's love for his father and his desire to please him with something special.

As I placed the tie in the bright red Saks gift box and tied it with luxurious gold cord, the young man said: 'It's a gift fit for a king!' As a retail merchant, I had done my job. I had forged a loyal customer relationship and in addition had the deeper satisfaction of sharing in his joy. I also reflected later on another King and hoped that the decisions I was taking in my life were pleasing to him.

### *Saks Fifth Avenue 'Suscipe'*

It is the beauty shining through creation, through the people, places and products made by the work of many hands and sophisticated machines that have given me a more open posture toward all of God's created things and the people involved in making them. It is the creative energy that I have experienced that has attracted me to the Source of all creation. It is the delight of spending twelve years seeing, touching, holding so many beautiful items and getting to know the people involved in manufacturing them, in buying and selling them, that moved me closer to the Spirit. All of these unique relationships have connected me more closely to Christ and the world and have given me the desire and boldness to offer myself and the tapestry of my life to the One who is the origin of all that is beauty.

As a follower of Christ I personally feel called to subordinate the great goods of beauty, pleasure and creativity to the greater goods of justice, generosity and self-sacrifice. I also came to realize, in seeing and touching so much beauty woven through my years of working in merchandising, that I could offer these experiences to God as well.

In the spirit of the 'Prayer over the Gifts' at the eucharist, I too can offer myself with the One who gives himself at the altar, to the One who is all Beauty:

Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation.  
Through your goodness we have this beautiful, delightful,  
material to offer,  
which earth has given and human hands have made.  
IT WILL CLOTHE THE BODY OF CHRIST.

In the Third Point of the 'Contemplation to Attain Love', at the end of the Spiritual Exercises, St Ignatius invites the retreatant to consider '... how God labours and works for me in all the creatures on the face of the earth ...' and how the creative energy of God is continually labouring in the universe.

I know, through my own experience, how true and real this is through the people I have met, through the places I have been, through the products I have touched and how Beauty has touched me. And all I can offer is my total response of love and the privilege of labouring with him in the vineyard.

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