The Restrictive Dress, Experimental and Modern Take on the French Revolution

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Design Mentor Statement

The primary goal of the mentorship was to guide the student in creating an original design collection. The mentorship process included researching the inspiration for the collection, sketching designs from the inspiration, pattern making using two- and three-dimensional techniques, constructing prototypes, altering fits, creating the final garment, and disseminating the student's creative scholarship to the public. The goal of the mentorship was successfully met by communicating with the mentee throughout the creative design and extensive garment development process. This dress was selected for submission because it precisely captured a victim's emotions during the Reign of Terror in the student designer's modern interpretations. It was difficult to put into words the emotions that one experiences in front of a guillotine, but the dress illustrated these feelings that language could not. Furthermore, the Restrictive Dress was successfully completed by testing numerous prototypes using different materials and construction techniques.

Design Statement

Statement of Purpose

This outfit was part of a four-look collection called "Newveau Coup." The inspiration for the collection was the French Revolution, especially the Reign of Terror. In 1793, the ruling Committee of Public Safety suspended libertarian rights and terror became the government's official voted policy ("Reign of Terror", 2021). During the Terror, 17,000 French citizens were officially executed, and more than 10,000 died in prison or without trial. Many members of the royals, aristocrats, bourgeoisie, and sympathizers of the revolution were sent to the guillotine to be executed (Young, 2020).

The Restrictive Dress was inspired by a drawing in the Musee du Louvre: "Marie Antoinette Led to Her Execution" (1793) by Jacques-Louis David. It depicted the last moments of the queen as she was seated on a wooden plank in white simple chemise with her rough haircut, robbed of her wig and corset, looking miserable but calm. I wanted to formulate how a victim felt before getting decapitated via guillotine. From my research, I aimed to design a dress that is beautiful but also restrictive, as victims were tied down before being decapitated. The restrictive dress could only be taken off with assistance and must be untied at the top of the gown to be loosened up. This action represented what victims felt when they were restricted, as only their executioners could set them free. The purpose of the dress was to create an imaginative take on what the victims felt and experienced with the blade of a guillotine.

Aesthetic Properties, Visual Impact, and Cohesion

This outfit applied the elements and principles of design throughout the dress to illustrate the feelings of the victims, while conveying my sense of modernity. The off-white, warm grey, and brown colors were chosen to represent a white chemise turned into muddy grey after a long period of imprisonment. The muted color palette symbolized the loss of their grand outer garments after the Revolution. The sequence of light, medium, and dark values of color brought cohesiveness. A repetition was achieved by the lines of the horizontal panels, of which the horizontal stripes were an exploration of where the blade of the guillotine would cut the body. Ribbons around the neck were suggestive of decapitation. The vertical panels of the train were juxtaposed to create imaginary cut lines to continue the idea of slicing the body, but vertically instead of horizontally.

The restrictive dress consisted of a hoop cylinder dress with a long train and an outer knitwear dress. The hoop underdress structure was made of magenta and red cotton fabrics. They were chosen to represent the blood of the victims. The design elements referenced the past but in a new and avant-garde manner. For styling, I hand cut a wig for my model to represent how prisoners were forced to cut their hair before execution to ensure that nothing interfered with the blade of the guillotine.

Process, Technique, and Execution

My design process started with ideation from historical research of the French Revolution. I experimented with different techniques for making a hoop underdress. Through intensive prototyping, I was able to problem-solve and worked on my design through the construction process. Polyvinyl chloride (PVC) pipes were finally chosen to hold up the weight of the outer knitwear dress. Horsehair braids were sewn to the top opening to strengthen the understructure. Thus, the hoop structure was supported on top of the wearer's shoulders.

The materials of the dress were primarily sourced from vintage and deadstock yarns and fabrics. The benefits of using existing materials were sustainability and that they came with a story. When acquiring the materials, I met with suppliers face-to-face and learned about their knitting experiences, where the materials came from, and what the yarns meant to them. A strong connection to the people was what the French Monarch needed to do to survive. The yarns being vintage and from another person's life brought more life to the garment, contrasting with the many lives taken by the guillotine. The restrictive dress was intended to communicate the decapitating idea from the past with a blend of beauty and avant-garde. Each design element and detail were specifically selected to illustrate the history and emotions felt when faced with the guillotine. The design of all the pieces came together collectively to create a new take on the past.

References

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