

**Study of Fashion Theories by James Laver**

**Laila Abdel Rahim El Maghraby**

**Instructor, Department of Readymade Garments, Higher  
Institute of Applied Arts, 5th Settlement, New Cairo  
Institutes of Science and Arts**

**Abstract:**

Laver's approach to clothing forms was based on his belief, that there were no accidents in the history of clothing, and when examining the previous fashions, it was found that, the forms of “clothing depended primarily on the designer. As it is highlighted in the culture or civilization of this age, which affects the form of clothing in the social, and political structures of each era, as it is evident in his book "taste and fashion" from the French Revolution to this day, as confirms James Laver that, the presence of fashions is evidence of the impact of the place. It is clear that the fashion process has two aspects. First: Objective rhythms: change style clothes. Second: Personal subjective: which depends on the aesthetics of change in taste varies from costume to another.

**Key Words:**

Fashion- Drawings and Paintings- The Ladies of Hampton Court- Modesty in Dress- Romantic

**Introduction:**

Laver's approach to clothing forms was based on his belief that there were no accidents in the history of clothing, and when examining the previous fashions, it was found that the forms of "clothing depended primarily on the designer.

As it is highlighted in the culture or civilization of this age, which affects the form of clothing in the social and political structures of each era, as it is evident in his book "taste and fashion" from the French Revolution to this day, as confirms James Laver that the presence of fashions is evidence of the impact of the place. It is clear that the fashion process has two aspects.

First: Objective rhythms: change style clothes.

Second: Personal subjective: which depends on the aesthetics of change in taste varies from costume to another.

**Research problem:**

- 1) The basic problem of research is the multiplicity of fashion and fashion theories, which need to be further clarified
- 2) There is a lack of studies to clarify the theories of fashion and the laws of James Laver ..
- 3) There are many laws that deal with the economic, political and social factors affecting the life cycle of fashion.

**Research goals:**

- 1) To analyze the theories of fashion at James Laver and linked to the fashion life cycle.
- 2) To Clarify the concepts and terms related to fashion design from the standpoint of the laws of James Laver.

**The importance of the research topic:**

1) simplify the laws of James Laver in fashion design and linked to the life cycle of fashion.

**Search assumes:**

The application of the James Laver Fashion Laws enriches the designer's mind with new ideas and vision in fashion design.

**Research Methodology and Plan:**

The research follows the descriptive and historical analytical method of studying the theories of fashion at James Laver. To achieve the objectives of the research, it is necessary to study the following:

- 1-fashion and Time by James Laver laws.
- 2-styles and fashion at James.
- 3- Factors affecting Fashion.

**James Laver's biography:**



James Laver was one of the main researchers in fashion and costumes in the 20th Century. He was the author of over one hundred publications, including papers, articles and books on varied subjects, and among those *Costume and fashion*, from 1969, is still one the most used books in fashion schools<sup>(8)</sup> - he was born in Liverpool England in 1899 - and was critic, art historian, and museum curator who acted as Keeper of Prints,

Drawings and Paintings for the Victoria and Albert Museum between 1938 and 1959.

He was also an important and pioneering fashion historian described as "the man in England who made the study of costume respectable<sup>(1)</sup> , his initial interest in dress grew out of the need to date accurately the pictures in his care<sup>(10)</sup>. His instrumental relationship to costume quickly changed, and, as he writes in his autobiography in 1963 "Having studied the What and the When, I began to wonder about the How and the Why" then he became one of the most prolific authors in the English-speaking world to write on the history of dress and fashion as well as on the sociology of those topics , he didn't only recast the conventional narratives of European high fashion, but he also wrote about non fashionable forms of attire, such as school and military uniforms , and sporting clothes.

Laver wrote or edited seventy books between 1921 and 1972, at least twenty- seven of which had to do with dress or costume. He explored a variety of topics, from poetry to art to the theatre. He was also the author or coauthor of seven plays<sup>(2)</sup>. He died in 1975.

Laver analyses in his book *Costume through the ages*, in a very simplified manner, that documentation is the key to understanding the past. (14) he states that “I began to assemble a file of fashion. I found that I could date any picture to within a year in the nineteenth century, to within two years in the eighteenth century, to within ten years in the seventeenth. I could, that is, if there was a fashionable woman in the picture.”(10)

Painting and portraits, individual or collective, are represented all the time in Laver’s work and show his very specific viewpoints of fashion. It is the case of Image 2, a historical



portrait of the Countess of Falmouth (1645-1679), circa 1645. The piece is in the book *The ladies of Hampton Court*, from 1942.(8)

Image 2- Mary Bagot, the Countess of Falmouth. Source: LAYER, 1942,

Laver was a very connected man to his time and photography wouldn’t take long to be part of his publications. One good example of that is Image 7, from one of the latest books written by Laver: *Modesty in dress*, from 1969.

**James Laver quotes:**

- Ten years before its time, a fashion is indecent; ten years after, it is hideous; but a century after, it is romantic.

JAMES LAVER, attributed, 20,000 Quips & Quotes- Nothing is more revealing of an age than its hypocrisies.

JAMES LAVER, "Fashion: A Detective Story", Vogue Magazine, January 1, 1959- When women take off their corsets and heighten their skirts it always means high inflation and low morals. JAMES LAVER, attributed, Sûrya India, vol. 12.

Today, if you travel the world, everything is the same. If you stay in one spot for a year, however, practically all the women change their hats. We have exchanged the tyranny of place for the tyranny of time.

JAMES LAVER, "Fashion: A Detective Story", Vogue Magazine, January 1, 1959 Poor Englishwomen! When it comes to their clothes--well, the French reaction is a shrug, the Italian reaction a spreading of the hands and a lifting of the eyes and the American reaction simply one of amused contempt.

JAMES LAVER, New York Times, 1963 - Clothes are never a frivolity: they always mean something, and that something is to a large extent outside the control of our conscious minds. JAMES LAVER, attributed, Obsessed by Dress

If we could understand the full significance of a woman's hat we could prophesy her clothes for the next year, the interior decoration of the next two years, the architecture of the next ten years, and we would have a fairly accurate notion of the pressures, political, economic and religious that go to make the shape of an age.

JAMES LAVER, "Fashion: A Detective Story", Vogue Magazine, January 1, 1959 Every style seems completely appropriate to its epoch. We cannot imagine Madame de Pompadour, or the Empress Josephine, or the early Victorian lady in anything but the clothes she actually wore. Each represents completely the ideals of her time: elegant artificiality or post-Revolutionary morals, or the prudery of the rising middle class.

JAMES LAVER, "Fashion: A Detective Story", Vogue Magazine, January 1, 1959

The erogenous zone is always shifting, and it is the business of fashion to pursue it, without ever catching it up.

JAMES LAVER, New Society, February 2, 1984 Clothes are inevitable. They are nothing less than the furniture of the mind made visible.

JAMES LAVER, attributed, Quote Unquote. A generation ago it was the fashion to declare that we should not look for any meaning in a picture, we should be content with its "significant form." An artist was praised for painting his mother as if she had been a piece of cheese. But the human mind is strangely recalcitrant to such theories. It persists in taking an interest in the "subject" of a picture.

JAMES LAVER, Models and Muses

When seen in retrospect, fashions seem to express their era. Although it is more difficult to draw conclusions from contemporary clothes, the same principles which hold for the clothes of the past must hold for clothes of the present and the future.

JAMES LAVER, "Fashion: A Detective Story", Vogue Magazine, January 1, 1959<sup>(7)</sup>

### **Laver and fashion**

Laver is perhaps best remembered for his contributions to the field of fashion history, an interest in which emerged through a desire to date images accurately through the clothing depicted within.<sup>(4)</sup> Laver defined the relationships between dress design and other applied arts, and discussed the influence of economic and social factors upon the development of fashionable taste. In 1962, Laver received a Neiman Marcus Fashion Award in recognition of his work in the field of fashion history. In 1937 Laver, with Pearl Binder, co-presented the first television program to be dedicated to fashion history.<sup>(3)</sup> Clothes-Line, a six-part series, was so successful that in 1938, Laver and Binder reunited to present a revised re-tread (in three parts) of the program, this time called Clothes Through The Centuries.<sup>(3)</sup> Fashion is a game of hide-and-seek played between seduction and modesty with moves so rapid , this is exactly what fashion sets out to do. In one period it emphasizes the smallness of the waist in another the smoothness of the shoulders in another the grace of the legs <sup>(9)</sup> .

He made his own theories about fashion and clothing which are :

- Hierarchical Principle = dressing to indicate one's position in society
- Utility Principle = dressing for warmth and comfort
- Seduction Principle = dressing to attract the opposite sex.<sup>(4)</sup>



### **Dress and Time**

Laver was fascinated by the effects that the passing of time has upon people and their works. He was greatly influenced in his theory of time by a notion of zeitgeist, or "time spirit," a concept taken from nineteenth-century German philosophy. Zeitgeist proposes the existence of a collective psychological, or spiritual, entity that imparts a distinctive pattern of aims and emphases to a culture, nation, or historical epoch. Drawing on this idea of cultural unity, Laver concluded that every aspect of social life is permeated by the emotional and intellectual dispositions lodged within the zeitgeist. He broadened the scope of the original idea of the "time spirit" by aligning it to a theory of modernity, arguing that all things human are increasingly subject to dictates of "time consciousness." Clothing is one of the things most sensitive to changes in the zeitgeist. In dress, it is found an immediate physical manifestation of the patterns of the time spirit (style), while in their rapid changes (fashion) can be observed the ever widening influence of the modern form of time. As Laver observes, "Nothing illustrates the Triumph of Time more clearly than the growing dominance of fashion" (11).

### **Clothes and Style**

Laver's approach to the forms of clothing was based upon his belief that there are "no accidents in the history of dress" and that "all clothes are inevitable" (12). He explains this assertion so:

In every period costume has some essential line, and ... [when examining previous fashions] ... we can see quite plainly what it is, and can see ... that the forms of dresses, apparently so haphazard, so dependent on the designer, have an extraordinary relevance to the spirit of the age<sup>(13)</sup>.

The task is to understand the meanings of this "essential line" as it insinuates itself into the dress styles of a culture or epoch. Some of Laver's most controversial assertions are to be found in the connections he makes between the social and political structures of an age and in the details of its dress, as indicated in his book "Taste and Fashion from the French Revolution until To- day".

The aristocratic stiffness of the old regime in France is completely mirrored in the brocaded gowns of the eighteenth century. ...Victorian modesty expressed itself in the multiplicity of petticoats; the emancipation of the post-War flapper in short hair and short skirts<sup>(5)</sup>.

Laver wrote a book about the French physician and astrologer Nostradamus (1942) and also A Letter to a Young Girl on the Future of Clothes (1946). At times, he came close to seeing the interpretation of clothing and its changes as being akin to clairvoyance. He names this apparent ability of clothing to anticipate the future "the wisdom of forms." When, later in life, he became a media personality, he would shock audiences by asserting that links exist between the fluctuations of the stock market index and a propensity for women to abandon corsets. In his book Style in Costume (1949), Laver describes his method for drawing these conclusions as "to take some dominant shape of dress—a hat, a trouser-leg, or whatever it may be—and to place it beside some form of architecture or interior decoration of the same epoch, and to note the parallelism, if such exists, between them"<sup>(12)</sup>.

For example :

It is generally agreed, for example, that the dominant architectural shape of the Middle Ages was the sharply pointed lancet arch. Sharpened still further, it is the pinnacle or the steeple on a church. Similarly, in the fifteenth century, men's shoes were so long they sometimes had to be turned back and tied to the knees. The female headdress, the hennin, was correspondingly steeple-shaped. By 1500 the lancet arch was blunted, and became what we call the Tudor Arch. When Henry VIII came to the throne in 1509, his shoes were not sharp and pointed like those of his father.

Henry VII, but blunted. The headdress of his wife, Catherine of Aragon, was blunted too just like the Tudor Arch.

In the eighteenth century, the dominant architectural motif of the period the French call Louis Seize and the English, Adam Brothers, was the neo-classical pilaster. One can see the same motif as it was interpreted in fashion, in the costumes of Empress Josephine. Simple, straight, her dress is typical of what I call the post-crisis style. After a great social upheaval like the French Revolution women have a burst of emancipation, sometimes only momentary. When about ten years have elapsed and fashion settles down into a post-crisis style, women's clothes become 'little girl' clothes. They are subconsciously designed to 'to down' the olderwoman.<sup>(10)</sup>

### **Clothes and Fashion**

Laver stressed that in modern life things are increasingly subject to change, and the existence of dress fashions is evidence of the extent to which time has displaced place as the major influence on clothing. He saw the process of fashion as having two aspects. There are the broad, objective rhythms of style change in dress and the subjective, but shared, aesthetic dispositions (taste) that incline groups to prefer one type of clothing to another. Laver was convinced that neither of these sorts of change is accidental or arbitrary, and in his book *Taste and Fashion: From the French Revolution to the Present Day*(1945), he attempted to describe and explain the regularities he noticed in both these areas<sup>(13)</sup>.

Laver's approach to taste is novel because, rather than focusing on why certain types of clothing are deemed fashionable, he instead asks the question: How can it be that what was thought of as fashionable becomes grotesque and can then start to appear charming as time passes?

The answer is his law of fashion that will be explained below. Laver encountered more serious intellectual difficulties in explaining the objective shifts in dress styles. As he investigated forms of attire such as uniforms and professional dress, he realized that not all clothing changed at the same rate. To explain these different rates of change or, in some cases, their complete absence, he began to supplement his ideas about the relation between zeitgeist and dress with those of Thorstein Veblen and J. C. Flügel.

When Laver published his book *Dress* in 1950, he explained changes in dress styles using a version of the "three motives" model of the nineteenth century. Laver argued that clothing both expresses and is shaped by three fundamental principles: the hierarchical principle, the attraction or seduction principle, and the utility principle. The seduction principle plays the most significant role in fashion change, particularly as it affects women's clothes. Laver theorizes that the seduction principle is the most important because "our clothes are dictated by the fundamental desires of the opposite sex." (1950, p. 15). He goes on, "Men still choose their mates by their physical allure; that is why women's clothes follow what might be called the Attraction Principle; they are designed to make their wearers as physically attractive as possible" (15)

Women, according to Laver, have to compete with one another through their appearance, and wherever there is sartorial competition there will also, he argued, be fashion.

**Laver's Law of fashion:**

Laver's Law was an attempt to compress the complex cycle of fashion change and the general attitude towards any certain style or period into a simple timeline  
, It was first appeared in his book "Taste and Fashion" in 1937<sup>(5)</sup>.

Indecent	10 years before its time
Shameless	5 years before its time
Outré (Daring)	1 year before its time
Smart	'Current Fashion'
Dowdy	1 year after its time
Hideous	10 years after its time
Ridiculous	20 years after its time
Amusing	30 years after its time
Quaint	50 years after its time
Charming	70 years after its time
Romantic	100 years after its time
Beautiful	150 years after its time

**Applying James Laver's fashion law :**

Christian Dior's New Look as an example, as it seems to be in fashion for next season. The New Look was launched in 1947, but since it wasn't considered "current fashion" until a bit later, I'll place it the year before, when it was "daring."

### 10 years before its time: Indecent

1937: Indecent? Perhaps not... but certainly desperately out of fashion during the 30's when everyone was wearing long, lean bias cut silhouettes.



### 5 years before its time: Shameless

1942: War time, it certainly would have been shameless to wear new clothing in this style, when everyone was “making do and mending”, not wearing skirts made out of 20 meters of fabric.



### 1 year before its time: Daring

1947: The launch of The New Look by Christian Dior took the world by shock. I've put it as a year before its time, because all designers are ahead of their time. By 1948, it was "Current Fashion." so it will be smart .



1 year after its time: Dowdy

1949: Well, according to this image, the skirt certainly slimmed down a lot.



.10 years after its time: Hideous

1958: Would the New Look have been hideous? Probably, as the silhouette had changed dramatically.





20 years after its time: Ridiculous

1968: The New Look would have definitely looked ridiculous in the Swinging Sixties.



30 years after its time: Amusing

1978: During the late 70's, a full skirt and nipped in waist would certainly have been amusing.



50 years after its time: Quaint

1998: Quaint is a great word to sum up how we would have felt about the New Look as we neared the turn of the millennium. Nostalgia would have kicked in too.



I haven't quite gotten to 70 years after its time (charming), 100 years after its time (romantic), or 150 years after its time (Beautiful.) But I can certainly tell you that 60 years after its time, right now, we are certainly back on track to wearing the New Look.



Louis Vuitton Fall 2010, a modern New Look      Prada      Fall 2010, nipped waist and full skirt.

Another application of Laver's law made on legging pants in the picture below, Laver's Law definitely makes sense. I looked at leggings, and they made fit in with Laver's Law, although I'd hate to think leggings will be considered beautiful in 150 years.



1998: 10 years before their time, leggings are certainly indecent.

2003: 5 years before their time, were leggings shameless? I guess so, although we were heading towards them as the skinny jeans trend started to kick in.

2007: 1 year before their time, I would definitely say leggings as pants were daring, before them became an acceptable fashion.

2008: Leggings are current fashion.

2009: 1 year after their time, leggings are starting to look a bit dowdy (although Lindsay Lohan is still wearing them.).

### **Analytical Study:**

Trend cycles are complex...if a whole style or trend is to be regenerated, it has to have become inappropriate for the generation that originally consumed and wore it .

James Laver, in his 1937's book " Taste and Fashion " describes how fashion trends evolve and revolve over time , in his point of view a trend needs several years to be ready to revolve in the fashion life cycle again .

Original wearers of a style will not re-adopt it because it has become unsuitable for their current lifestyle stage... the more common form of style regeneration occurs where a consumer moves from one lifestyle stage to the next and as style they used to wear eventually returns to be worn by a younger generation. In the ten years there have been many fashion and textile trends so many in fact, the analytical study of this research will depend on choosing only one key trend per year to pick the ones that went mainstream:

ones that, at some point, ‘everybody’ wore; trends that formed part of popular culture. Each of these trends lasted for a few years, so it was picked the year most representative of the trend ,providing a brief overview of the trend’s development , together with a selection of images .

The trends discussed are a selection among many that emerged during this period , among the ones that have been selected not to include are: fur; leather; harem pants; dropped crotch pants; colour blocking; biker jackets; varsity jackets; wrap dresses; lace; black on black, black and texture; grunge; jumpsuits , mixed media clothing (especially coats and jackets); shorts .

popularity of the styles represented by modern first ladies and members of royalty; simplicity; boyfriend jackets; oversized; big shoulders; and inspirations from the wardrobes of Michael Jackson, Amy Winehouse, and many other celebrities.

2004: Skulls



The skull print trend actually started in 2003, its popularity launched by the Alexander McQueen spring/summer collection of that year. The scarf was worn by such celebrities as Johnny Depp, Nicole Ritchie, and Cameron Diaz.

The year 2003 was also the year when the first Pirates of the Caribbean film had its big-screen release, the Telegraph newspaper also named skulls as one of the trends of 2006, the trend continued to grow and by 2009 skulls were everywhere, including childrenswear. This reveals something of the long incubation a trend might go through before it hits the mainstream fashion market.

### 2005: Boho-Chic



The Fashion over last 10 years loves to combine opposites and give names to new styles , one of the new expressions that came into the popular fashion vocabulary was Boho-Chic , this trend became popular in 2005 , when Sienna Miller was seen wearing clothes in this style. As usual, the popularity of the trend did not coincide with it's first spotting .

In 2004, Stella McCartney designed a capsule collection for H&M that included Boho-Chic dresses. Then this trend develop over the following years, appearing in the DKNY autumn/winter 2006/2007 collection; autumn/winter 2008/2009 Gucci collection; and the collections of Anna Sui and Marc Jacobs.

### 2006: Skinny jeans



Skinny jeans were a huge trend in 2006 and still noticeable on the streets today, worn by everyone from celebrities and royals, to teenagers.

The skinny-leg look influenced the huge popularity of leggings and led to the emergence of the term ‘jeggings’ which means an easy generally flattering item of clothing , the popularity of skinny jeans has proved long and strong.

The trend started emerging in spring/summer 2005 collections; and even now in spite of culottes and flared trousers becoming fashionable skinny jeans have not been totally abandoned.

### 2007: Neon revival



2007 collections, including Jill Sander’s spring/summer 2007 catwalk, conspicuously featured very bright colours: vivid pinks, intense fuchsia, vibrant oranges, and bright turquoise. Also in 2007, Reebok made a vibrantly coloured trainer,

and other sportswear brands embraced the neon trend for their footwear. Vivid colours were widely seen on This trend reached its peak in 2012 and 2013, when neon colors were omnipresent, appearing in the collections of Christian Dior, Raf Simons, Proenza Schouler and Alexander McQueen.

2008: Tweed



The tweed trend was seen in many autumn/winter 2007/2008 collections, including Marc by Marc Jacobs, Balenciaga, Gucci, and Paul Smith. This traditional material comes back again and again, so much so that it is practically emblematic of the lengthy, durable trend for all things vintage .



2009: Digital printing

Thanks to development of this new technology, digital printing has been a huge trend. Both 2009 collections of Mary Katrantzou (spring/summer 2009 and autumn/winter 2009) ingeniously featured digital printing , bulky jewellery prints on dresses gave the impression of real 3-D jewels;another featured perfume bottles cleverly printed on dresses to affect an optic narrowing of the waist.



Her engineered prints are unique , both ideas were original, hugely popular, and inspired many brands .Other fashion houses that applied digital printing in 2009 included Tempest and Alexander McQueen.

In 2009, a different take on the digital printing included the use of photographs of icons such as Marilyn Monroe (Dolce & Gabbana).

Today you can go to Topshop and the company YR can digitally print selected items for you in store.

2010: Ethnic prints



In fashion trend guide spring/summer 2010 trends . In 2010, most ethnic inspiration came from Africa. The approach evolved to feature a mixture of prints from various parts of the world: African, Aztec, Indian, and others.

And there we have it: 6 years on and again some form of “Boho-Chic” is a current trend and this proves that fashion goes in cycles like Laverne stated. Perhaps it is more like a spiral, which keeps returning to the same points, but on different levels, in the newest version of a trend, the styling is different, more sophisticated, simplified, with new influences added or mixed up.

**References:**

- 1- [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)
- 2- [www.encyclopedia of clothing and fashion.com](http://www.encyclopedia of clothing and fashion.com) 3- Lou Taylor : Establishing dress history , 2004 .
- 4- Velarie cumming , Understanding fashion history ,2004. 5- James Laver : Taste and Fashion ,1937.
- 6- [HTTP://SEARCHINGFORSTYLE.COM/2010/07/LAVERS-LAW/](http://SEARCHINGFORSTYLE.COM/2010/07/LAVERS-LAW/)
- 7- [http://www.notable-quotes.com/l/laver\\_james.html](http://www.notable-quotes.com/l/laver_james.html)
- 8- Fausto Viana : Museum collections as support for research on dress and fashion , the case James laver , Moda Documenta: Museu, Memória e Design , 2015
- 9- James laver : Fashion , Art and beauty , The Metropolitan museum of Art magazine , 1967 .
- 10- James Laver : Fashion a detective story , Vogue Magazine, January 1, 1959 . 11- James laver : Triumph of Time, In Contemporary Essays , London 1933 12- James laver :Style in Costume. London: Oxford University Press, 1949.
- 13- James laver new edition of Taste and Fashion from the French Revolution to the Present Day, 1945.
- 14- James Laver : Costume through the ages , New York: Simon and Schuster,1961.
- 15- James Laver :Dress: How and Why Fashions in Men's and Women's Clothes Have Changed during the Past Two Hundred Years. London: John Murray, 1950.
- 16- Heba Mohamed Okasha Abou ElKamal, Effect of Implementation 5s Methodology in Warehouses at the Egyptian Textiles & Apparel Factory (Case Study), International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Art and Technology, Vol. (1), Issue (1), 2018, 68 – 81.
- 17- Laila El-Maghraby, Theoretical Study of Wearable Electronic Technology and its Applications in Fashion Design Field, International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Art and Technology, Vol. (2), Issue (1), 2019, 53-70.