

‘FREE-FROM’ FASHION ILLUSTRATION: free from established canons

Authors

Anamika Debnath and Deepak Goswami,

Anamika Debnath,
National Institute of Fashion Technology, Kolkata, India

Deepak Goswami,
Amity University Kolkata, Kolkata, India

Corresponding Author: deepak.a.goswami@gmail.com

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Abstract

Breaking away from tradition and normalised practices, as well as resistance to them, is not unusual in fashion. Some of the newer fashion illustration techniques are defying conventions and growing into a more expressive and intuitive style. The 9-heads canon does not appear to concern new practitioners as much as they do to the fashion illustration educators who follow a traditional curriculum. Fashion illustration has long outlived its primary function of cataloguing fashion looks. It now boldly and brazenly crosses paths with a variety of fine arts disciplines. We can now claim that the transformation has occurred, and fashion illustration now sits quite comfortably interacting with art. It doesn't shy away from the interactions of art, design, and fashion; rather, it thrives in it. It revels in the constant flux that it is exposed to, much like fashion. Nick Knight's ShowStudio has been instrumental in identifying new domain practitioners and formally publishing their work on their website, thereby giving them some validity. The collaboration between fashion illustrator Rob Unett and Nick Knight for Vogue China March 2020 was another pivotal event, stretching the domain's bounds beyond accepted definitions. Contemporary illustrators such as Rob Unett, Helen Downie, Richard Kilroy, and others have broken free from the constraints of 'heads,' which were established much earlier and are still in use in academic curricula around the world. These illustrators have established a new specific space for themselves and fashion illustration in turn, aided by the democratic character of social media. While fashion illustration can come from clothing items, it can also stand on its own. An identity, other than fashion, within fashion. This paper looks into the emergence of fashion illustration styles that appear to be free of curricula's traditional canons, which we refer to as 'free-form' fashion illustration. It will also explore the dissociation of

contemporary practice and pedagogy and the ‘flux’ tied with it. We would want to position this paper as a ‘catalyst of conversation’.

Zeitgeist

Virgil Abloh stirred, inarguably, the discourse surrounding diversity in fashion from the very top before his untimely demise. His Men's Fall Winter 2021 collection, *Ebonics* - presented as a multi-disciplinary artistic film directed by Josh Johnson; was steeped in spoken word and performance. Sarah Mower quoted him in her Vogue article—

Well, he says: "I have a responsibility. We said we want diversity, didn't we say that in 2020? Making change means making these changes. I don't want to look back and say I turned a blind eye. But you know," he concludes, "I'm an optimist. The future is yet to be decided."

Fashion's preoccupation with a certain colour, race, and body-type is not unknown. It is more evident in the light of recent dialogues and debates around body positivity and inclusion. The lack of tangible actions of the fashion realm in this regard has been widely criticised for the longest time. However, going by the latest shows from the likes of Louis Vuitton, Balenciaga, Valentino, and others, the world of fashion does appear to be on a course-correction.

A varied group of people, including Elliot Page, were included as official models at Demna's Summer-2022 couture presentation for Balenciaga, which was paired with a bespoke episode of the 'The Simpsons'. The innovative 'photocall' format of the show shifted the focus to real images and notions of the body. In her article 'Balenciaga Takes Springfield,' Rachel Tashjian wrote in GQ about the show—

"a new inclusive, egalitarian approach to fashion, broadcast from the highest echelon of the industry."

'We're All on the Red Carpet Now'—Venessa Friedman titled her NY Times article to mark the phenomena, writing that Balenciaga held the 'smartest show' of the week.

The undercurrent continued when Alexander Fury, fashion features director at 'Another' magazine, made a firm point about it in his Jan 28, 2022, Financial Times article; he wrote —

"Diversity is an overused trope in fashion — but Piccioli's Valentino catwalk defied fashion's tokenism, his protean talent engineering clothes to embrace and celebrate a truly diverse cast of models, in ages ranging from early twenties to septuagenarians. They looked incredible."

It could be said that the diversity discourse is 'un-masked', quite glaringly so, amidst the pandemic, within the infamously 'elitist' rungs of the fashion system.

Is fashion being cancelled? By itself? —We wonder.



Figure 1. Louis Vuitton A/W 21, by Uzo Hiramatsu

Method

The idea of this paper germinated from our combined teaching/learning experiences in the fashion illustration domain, our continual interest in evolving styles and narratives, our desire to align the pedagogy with the various degrees of students' skills/abilities, as well as the bigger shifts in the fashion world.

We have observed that giving students some freedom from the conventional canons in their explorations of technique, media, and form can lead them to discover their own visual language. It sometimes results into surprising outcomes even from the ones considered less skilled. This statement is anecdotal but has acted as the springboard for this conceptual paper.

In this paper, we will look into the emergence of fashion illustration styles that appear to be free of curricula's traditional canons, which we refer to as "free-form" fashion illustration. We also hope to draw attention to some of the 'dots' and would want to position this paper as a 'catalyst of conversation'.

The methodology is drawn from contemporary visual references and experiential approaches to teaching and learning.

Fashion Illustration: Art?

Fashion illustration has been equated with the fine arts before. For example, the argument and the examples in Liard Borrelli's books on fashion illustration. 'Fashion Illustration Next', published in 2004, needs a special mention in this context where she says—

“Once the Cinderella of the art world, considered the competent but lesser product when compared with a ‘finished’ painting or sculpture, a process rather than an art, drawing now has the credibility and cachet. Fashion illustration, however accomplished, is generally ignored by the arts establishment.”

Cally Blackman also expressed similar thoughts in her '100 years of Fashion Illustration', published in 2007—

“Despite the fact that many well-known artists have reflected its cultural and aesthetic power in their work, fashion illustration has often been dismissed as trivial, or at best, a ‘Cinderella’ art. Falling between fine and commercial art, it has only recently been revaluated as a significant genre in its own right.”

The sentiment is more pronounced in the statement by Carlos Aponte in 'Fashion Illustration Next'—

“I don't believe in fashion illustration but art, maybe fashion art if you want to label it. The work you see around in the last decade doesn't much resemble that term. I hear the word fashion illustration as I visualize a long-lost era.”

It is to be noted that in contemporary practice, fashion illustrations, mostly, are a part of the artists' larger body of work. The term may prove limiting in capturing the essence of their practice, as we will find in the references discussed in the paper.

Free-Form: Advent

In January 2020, in the first issue of the decade, Vogue Italia released a series of seven variants of illustrated covers by different artists, with the caption - 'No photoshoot production was required in the making of this issue.' This was a defining celebration of contemporary fashion illustration. It is believed to be the first time a Vogue magazine has gone photo free since photography was invented, as shared by Emanuele Farneti, editor-in-chief of Vogue Italia in an editorial published on the magazine's website.



Figure 2. Cassi Namoda for Vogue Italia, January 2020. Ambar Cristal Zarzuela in Gucci



Figure 3. Vanessa Beecroft for Vogue Italia, January 2020. Female figure in Gucci.

For its March 2020 cover story, Vogue China took a different approach to working with a fashion artist. Nick Knight of famous SHOWstudio captured singer/actor Chris Lee inside a perspex box while fashion artist Rob Unett peppered the box with his quick illustrative marks which interacted with the poses of the model. The illustrator became part of the image-making process. Rob Unett shared in an interview with Hetty Mahlich—

“Conceptually, this was a journey into how photography, illustration, light design, fashion, beauty, styling and set design all amalgamate to create moments of visual art... I wanted my marks to react to everything on set, from Chris Lee, her poses and the fashion, to the lighting.”



Figure 4: Rob Unett on set, Vogue China March 2020

Nick Knight has been known to push the boundaries of fashion image. His collaborations with Alexander Lee McQueen resulted in several iconic images. The cover photo of Japanese/American model Devon Aoki, shot for Visionaire, in 1997, remains one of the most striking.



Figure 5: Devon Aoki in Alexander McQueen by Nick Knight for Visionaire magazine, 1997

He founded SHOWstudio in November 2000, an award-winning fashion website that bills itself as ‘the home of fashion film’. It has created visionary online content that explores fashion through moving image, illustration, photography, and the written word. A total of 85 fashion illustrators are listed on the website’s artists’ section at the time of writing this paper. A few of those artists’ works are explored in the next section.

Finding ‘Free-Form’

Rob Unett is known for his brave instinctive style. He also shares his action painting like process through his Instagram account. In his abstracted figures, he investigates gender, sex, power, and suffering. His nonconformist style constantly reveals new bodily forms.



Figure 6: Prada A/W, by Rob Unett



Figure 7: Gucci S/S 20, by Rob Unett

Hellen Bullock’s illustrations have an impression of spontaneity with her loose strokes and lines. The figure is not the svelte fashion ideal. The fuller body forms are frequently blobby, sometimes ‘awkward’ and far from the coveted ‘9 heads figure’.



Figure 8: Trussardi, by Helen Bullock



Figure 9: Versace 1996, by Helen Bullock

Julia Soboleva explores the notions of family, taboo, and generational trauma mediating between the themes of madness and reality. Her figures take on personalities and have backstories.



Figure 10: Christian Dior A/W 19,
by Julia Soboleva



Figure 11: Vetements A/W 19,
by Julia Soboleva

Lara Lancaster's (née Mackenzie Lee) subjects are greatly abstracted, interpreted and reinterpreted in her unique construction/deconstruction of shapes and colours, sometimes obliterating the need of body in an illustration. She shows no goal of emulating the ideal fashion figure in her practice.



Figure 12: Fashion East A/W 17,
by Lara Lancaster



Figure 13: J. W.
Anderson A/W17, by Lara

The forms in Rome-based **Marco Rea's** illustrations are nearly photographic in nature since he stays loyal to the existing pictures and works with body proportions that aren't unnaturally elongated. Faces lose their features and re-materialise in a void in his work. His characters appear to be carrying secrets reverberating with a sense of unease.



Figure 14. Kenzo S/S20,
by Marco Rea



Figure 15. Heron Preston S/S20,
by Marco Rea

Helen Downie (Unskilled Worker) has developed a significantly individual style. Her paintings are minutely detailed, but the forms are away from the traditional canons. On the other hand, Richard Kilroy fuses the academic style of drawing effortlessly in his suggestively incomplete illustrations in a 'non-finito' approach.



Figure 16. Protection 2019, by
Helen Downie



Figure 17. Maison Margiela Menswear
A/W 18, by Richard Kilroy



Figure 18. Illustration by Jasjyot Singh
Hans from his series 'Big in Fashion'



Figure 19. Illustration by Jasjyot
Singh Hans published in the beauty
section, Elle, India, July 2018

Jasjyot Singh Hans, a National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad and Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore alumnus, is an illustrator who chronicles the themes of body image, sexuality, and gender quite overtly in his work. His illustrations explore nuances of the fashion industry and subvert its perception of beauty and body image. Full bodied and olive- skinned, his women tell a story and redefine the ideals of beauty and the pre-set ideas of body image. He says – “I love drawing big women; women with marks on their body and oil- soaked hair. It’s about staying true to what I have seen around me, and taking from it what seems beautiful to me and putting it out through my work... ‘I think it’s important to have an alternative voice, so people don’t have to give in to the predominant ideas of what fashion and beauty is. My work is a more inclusive view on fashion and body image; it is a celebration of the everyday and seeing beauty in diversity.”

In the Indian context, there is a rise in a fashion illustration practice which situates at the intersections of art, activism, ideologies, and function which can be found in the works of artist like Aditi Jain, Sweta Malhotra, Easternlight Zimik, Manjit Thapp, Annesha Das, among others. Their work gets disseminated in real time by the social media applications and reaches many in a democratic manner.

The contemporary practice is full of numerous narratives and engaging techniques of storytelling. The shift in the notions of the body is obvious in its depictions. There is a clear departure from the norms both in terms of the figure and the techniques. The new illustration is a free exploration of diverse ideas.

The explorations of the body defy established rules and structure, resulting in an amorphous aesthetic—a ‘free-form’ illustration style.

Canons

The figure/human form is central to fashion illustration. The conventional fashion drawing calls for the elongation of the figure, which uses ‘9-heads figure’ as a fundamental canon. This long-standing practice has been, sometimes, attributed to the raised catwalk ramps of the past, which caused the illustrators to work from a low angle viewpoint. It's possible that this angle resulted in smaller torsos and longer legs, and subsequently the 9-heads fashion figure. This method also allowed for more aesthetic excursions in terms of stylization and gave the illustrator more room to explore the clothes' intricacies.

Most books written on fashion illustration establish the fashion figure in the very beginning. Bina Abbing’s book ‘Fashion Sketchbook’ establishes it in chapter one ‘Fashion Figure Proportions’, so does Elisabetta Drudi and Tiziana Paci’s ‘Figure Drawing for Fashion Design’. The books we swore by. ‘Fashion Drawing’ by Michele Wesen Bryant acknowledges today's diversity in fashion proportion practice yet establishes the ‘Traditional Fashion Figure Proportion’ in the first chapter, ‘Drawing Women’. This practice is widely accepted in the fashion design curricula around the world.

In India, National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) has spearheaded the fashion education since it was set up in 1986 by the Government of India in collaboration with New

York's Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT). FIT's inputs included development of the guidelines, curricula, training Indian faculty at New York and supporting with infrastructure and resources. Initial batches were taught by visiting professors from FIT like Eva Bernard Nambath, Theresa Reilly, and others. The '9 heads figure' appears to have been a part of the curricula since; a few of the illustrations were published in an article in SPAN magazine in August 1988.



Figure 20: Fashion Illustration based on 9-Heads canon by the first batch of NIFT students in article by Rehana Sen, published in SPAN magazine in 1988

The Conflict: Flux

The unrealistic/distorted representation and severe objectification of women's body has been a point of contention in fashion for a long time. Director Tim Piper's 'Evolution', Dove Campaign for Real Beauty, for Unilever was launched in 2006. It showed the heavy image editing process through photoshop or transform an image of a real girl into a glowing and slender fashion ideal, very clearly unreal. It ended with a statement, "No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted. Fashion's obsession with idealised beauty standards and curricula's supposed fixation with the '9-heads canon' may also have contributed to the larger construct of the distorted body-image.

The curricula's dissociation with the contemporary practice is apparent when both are compared. The traditional pedagogy focuses on traditional methodologies of fashion illustration and largely leaves the narrative-centred approach out of the curricula.

Are we guilty of carving distorted notions of the body in the young minds of fashion students?

Do the fashion curricula need to rethink the conventional fashion illustration canons? In what ways fashion illustration could address the real issues of the world?

Last week, Demna showed that fashion must not be afraid of grappling with the toughest realities of the world. He was on the verge of cancelling the Balenciaga show, until he realized that "canceling this show would mean giving in." and he ended up creating perhaps the strongest reaction to war, fashion has seen in recent times. Vanessa Friedman's tweet about the show happens to summarize the larger fashion zeitgeist -

"His subject isn't silhouette, it's the human condition."

Fashion embraces overlaps and conflicts and thrives in the flux. We hope that the change, which is being ushered in by the likes of Virgil Abloh and Demna, will make fashion more democratic, more conversational, more inclusive, and unapologetically reactive.

We hope to see the same spirit in fashion art/illustration/drawing.

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