Landscapes on the Body
Flowers and Nineteenth-Century Fashion

Keywords: artificial flowers / evening dress / landscape

Abstract

This paper will explore how representations of nature were worn on the body as fashion in the nineteenth century. At a time when urban life began to replace the rural as the dominant experience of many, how did nineteenth century fashion 'artificially' re-enact the natural world on the body? 'The landscapes of the body' as described by Walter Benjamin are 'traversed by paths which lead sexuality into the world of the inorganic.' Fashion in this instance is allied with fetishism and the object. The artificial flower is poised within these symbolic languages and the corporeal suggestiveness of the flower can be read as emblematic of sexual desire. An iconography is revealed in cultural fantasies of nature spirits, and fairy creatures depicted wearing wreaths, flowing organic robes and adorned with petals. Whilst in the drawing rooms of cities, women performed their social rituals accessorised by both fresh and artificial flowers. Surveying three terrains – the domestic and public interior, the garden or rural landscape and the body, this paper will examine the cultural fascination of the floral in the popular use of artificial flowers and foliage in fashion.

Elementals

> 'A NOVEL "rose dress" has just been made for an American belle who wished for a toilette composed entirely of flowers. The skirt is made from roses of different hues, and rosebuds comprise the bodice, while a veil of white tulle, spotted with crystal is thrown over the dress to imitate morning dew.'[1]

The artificial flower in nineteenth century fashion eroticised and transformed the body – when worn on evening dress and inside the sheltered confines of the ballroom - as a site beyond the everyday. The flower's narratives and poetics crowded the bodily surface with meanings. These floral forms sought a return to the auratic gloss of original nature; the growing flower and its landscapes. This research asks can the body become a representation of a *hortus conclusus* (enclosed garden) or a wilderness where elementals dance their frenzies, whilst the cultivated garden becomes a home to tame domestic 'angels' in the nineteenth century imagination? This paper will explore this historic imagination through poetry, popular print culture, advice literature, fashion plates and reportage. These

sites have characterised the flower phenomenologically through perfume, texture, colour and its location on the body, but also via a 'symbolic contract'[2] with the familiar cultural themes of gender and sexuality, nature and the super-natural.

This paper takes its title from a quote by Walter Benjamin – who metaphorically describes fashion as a corporeal landscape. What is uncovered in 'the drunkenness of passion' are 'the landscapes of the body.' The body is a topography covered in woods and rock, lakes and valleys leading into the realm of the inorganic - the 'realm of matter' – and the material of fashion. What is of interest here is the union of the sexualised body with a natural landscape as two congruent regions that are applied or projected - one upon the other. The body becomes a terrain. This objectification is dematerialised and reconstructed as desire and is invested with meanings that are 'no longer animated, yet are still accessible to the eye', vaporized to become fetish.[3] It is through the eye that this landscape is surveyed although the wearer experiences it against flesh. Fashion is its hermeneutics and this body performs within other landscapes of city, garden and wilderness.

Fashion theorists such as Anne Hollander have defined dressing as a type of 'picture-making'.[4] But fashion as a dialogic expression of a public and private identity operates within a system where the self is an 'illusory identity'. This 'picture-making' is complicated. Within the private lexicon of selfhood are other communications that are complex exchanges between a 'fantasy' self and others.[5] Nineteenth century social and cultural differences were articulated against these understandings and also inside the rituals of etiquette and social performance; such as sexuality and class allegiance. The irrationality and randomness of the fashion aesthetic is here conjoined with other needs. Finding moments of collusion or correspondence assists this paper's attempt to locate how floral fashions were entwined with social fads, scientific reasoning and spiritual searching. While it does not proclaim a universal language of floral symbolism, it does investigate similar moments of image-making bracketed between the cultural borders of Queen Victoria's 'empire'.

Figure 1. Floral Postcard, 1900 ca. German. Private Collection

Benjamin's quotation suggests the landscape of a paradise or an arcadia. Arcadia is a category of paradise and a rustic pastoral ideal - whilst paradise is a 'region of pure bliss' and has religious meanings. Paradise, when framed in male narrative texts, embodies feminine notions of 'beauty, grace, peace and love'.[6] It is a gendered landscape of rolling hills, groves, shelters and abundance. And both these myth landscapes are culturally dreamt as fecund states of pre-lapsarian innocence. These realms are also mythic places. As a symbolic topography, these sites have their own internal psychological logic, providing sublimation, repression and catharsis - succour from pain and horror - they subdue the cultural nightmares of Thanatos or destruction. According to psychoanalytic perspectives, what lies beneath the beauty and the calm are darker realms and demiurges. These 'super-natural' otherworlds survive as archetypal conventions - where the meaning of a landscape can be contained in the kernel of a symbolic object or upon a decorated body as an antidote to anxiety – and as described later in this paper - these landscapes also contain temptation and sexuality, using the related language of 'floral femininity'.

Earth

Industrial capitalism has been defined as 'humanities fall from grace'– a narrative that links with the paradisaical imaginings of Eden. 'Among these dark Satanic mills'[7] nature was portrayed as bound to humanities will. The social condition of 'carboniferous capitalism' contributed to the relocation of the majority of the rural English population into an

urban/suburban environment in the nineteenth century. This perceived loss created a sentimental longing for 'nature' - for a *rus in urbe* or nature in town. These values criticised the urban experience as a scape that disconnected the individual from the natural world and from the divine. What reclamations could occur were symbolic or attempted re-alignments with nature. Rudyard Kipling's fairy Puck - 'sounding like William Morris' - claims 'the smoke of the factories poison us; there are hardly any forests where we can lurk; no rivers but are foul with refuse.'[8] Cultural historians have interpreted these re-alignments as symptomatic of the era's cultural preoccupation with the 'romance' of natural history. Colonial emigration or exile complicated this reductive naming via nostalgia for 'home' landscapes and ambiguity toward the 'unfamiliar', but sometimes through an active engagement with the new landscape, for example the discovery and collection of plant specimens[9] - or an aesthetic appreciation of the environment in art or design such as the work of Melbourne's Kalizoic society.[10]

The Victorians urge to pierce reality and 'press up tight against the taut skin of the visible world'[11] was a search to understand and classify - it was an intellectual and scientific 'devouring'. It also paradoxically featured in aesthetics as a representation of the world in its 'reality' - following Ruskin's dictum 'truth to nature' and the Pre-Raphelite manifesto.[12] Scientific or spiritual explanations of nature were sought. Whether Darwinian evolution and its unsettling of 'man's self esteem' or genteel plant classification and the theological defence of the divine presence in nature – natural history provided epistemological frameworks to engage with world. Women were not excluded from these searches and domestic applications of natural history occupied the leisure hours of women across the 'Empire'. A further cultural fascination with organic forms of ornament and rustic decoration saw a full-scale reception of natural motifs into and onto the urban domestic space, and the dressed body. Instruction manuals and lessons in flower making were part of a repertory of skills that as 'mirrors of Victorian society'[13] located the vegetal world as a sphere central to women's cultural influence. Discovered in books, such as J.H. Mintorn's 'Lessons in Flower and Fruit Modelling in Wax' – journals, and the miscellanea of collecting and making, flower making kits, purchased and preserved specimens, this cultural assemblage was stable within a domestic configuration and when expressing a reconnection with the natural world, but it was also accompanied by an ambivalence and unease when 'possessed' by other interpretations.

Nineteenth century angst and fear have been interpreted by social historian Carole Silver, in her study on fairies and Victorian consciousness, as arising from a combination of the loss of religious faith, the dominance of the scientific paradigm, the changing status of women and

urban dis-location.[14] Belief in alternate manifold worlds was said to have infiltrated every aspect of Victorian life, and this consciousness of other realms and kingdoms shaped a landscape fraught with the unknown and unseen. The scientific positivism and reliance on observable empirical phenomena ruptured into a pseudo-scientific methodology explaining the presence of the supernatural. The unseen was framed within systems of social and scientific structures. One nineteenth-century occult theorist explained the utilitarian purpose of Elemental fairies. As flower makers – they were responsible for the life force of plants and nurtured them from seed, providing colour and form as artisans of the spirit world. They were also depicted as clothed and decorated by their makings and productions.[15] This super terrain or landscape, at a microscopic level, attempted to instil mystery into the mechanics of scientific theory. This merging of the biological with the supernatural formed two worlds or systems within the one regime of nature. [16]

Air

The Victorians had a particular fascination with female elves and fairies that was described in other cultural forms such as music, ballet and the visual arts. This 'enchantment' with female fairies reached its peak in popularity when women began experiencing new freedoms and the notion of 'spheres' was being fractured by social changes. An un-cited observation in Valerie Steele's text *Fashion and Eroticism* claims that fairies were one of a list of inspirations of Victorian fashion.[17] This trope was used to personify women clothed in evening dress throughout the century. Adjectives such as diaphanous, lightness, and gossamer portrayed women draped, and reflecting light with silver sequins as dew drops, and garlanded with flowers within a visual vocabulary of the air and perfume - the incorporeal. The fashion editor of the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* exclaimed, 'At no previous season do we recollect having seen such elegant and fairy-like materials … ' [18] These representations were part of the same creative language used to depict fairies. According to Katherine Briggs author of *The Dictionary of Fairies* - 'in the more literary descriptions of fairies from the 16th century onwards, they are said to wear clothes made of flowers, of gossamer spangled with dew and silvery gauze.' [19] This language is textural and describes both the sensation of wearing and the literal observation or direct gaze. The body is made visually insubstantial – ethereal via an onomatopoeic descriptive scheme. By looking the part - perhaps as a romantic expression of sexual distance and yet suggestive of availability - the woman as fairy figure was implicated in this metaphor, as a feminine ideal. The fairy trope as fantasy 'landscape' shares a common allegoric language with floral femininity as a related decorative construct and this imagery was typical of Victorian idealistic representations of fairy figures.

Water

Figure 2. 'Waterlilies' from *Flowers of Loveliness,* 1837, England, From the collection of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) Como Historic House and Garden.

The floral rhetoric of purity and idealised femininity was palpable and documented in popular print culture throughout the nineteenth century. Published the year Queen Victoria ascended the throne *The Flowers of Loveliness* included a dedication to the young queen – a presentiment of the floral preoccupations that dominated her reign. The images contained in this text are sentimental and the book opens with the quatrain:

> "In flowers and Blossoms, Love is wont to trace,
> Emblems of Women's virtues and her grace;
> Both pure, and sweet, both formed with curious skill.
> The quaint analogy surprises us still."[20]

A tone of demure female goodness is weaved throughout the text and images, which operate within the conventions of nineteenth century female sexual beauty and wearing fashionable clothing – imbecile sleeves and floral wide brimmed hats. The women are viewed with bare shoulders or naked - bathing in pools with water lilies – or within enclosed gardens and spaces. Maternal imagery is interspersed with figures of young love and

passive female resignation – awaiting the events of their lives to 'unfurl'. Gazing out of windows, with female companions [many images are of female pairs], and including young children and babies, the women await the absent male - presumably the consumer of this visual imagery. But the text had a female audience too.

Figure 3. Bouvier, A J 1851, 'Lily of the Valley' engraving Charles Holl. Published by Lloyd Brothers & Co. London. From the collection of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) Como Historic House and Garden.

This edition is housed in the National Trust collection of Como Historic House and Garden. It is part of a collection of floral imagery owned by the original owners of the estate – the Armytage women. The Como collection also includes a suite of engravings taken from the art of Augustus-Jules Bouvier. The flowers these works represent are rustic wildflowers. These women are depicted in a sensuous way – exposed arms, décolleté, feet and calves. The cultivated rare flowers featured in the *Flowers of Loveliness* are here counter-pointed by the unsophisticated nature of the 'Heather Bell' or 'The Wild Briar'. These images date from between 1849 and1851 and are overt in their sexual symbolism. These women do not wear flowers they are flowers – outside of fashion - wearing countrified clothing. In comparison an altogether more explicit personification was achieved by J.J. Grandville in his *Les Fleurs Animees* whose petal-skirted women/flowers wear the imagery of their species and the latest fashion.

The rhetoric of sexual competition, selection and rejection has been defined as a masculine practice that controlled the experience and protected the social sphere from pollution by 'unsexed' women – women who acted outside their prescribed gendered conduct. Flowers adorned the fashionable female body as a socio/sexual practice - one shared with peers from which a suitable mate could be selected, where even the unsuccessful were called 'wallflowers'. This selection occurred in spaces such as ballrooms and during liminal times – or at night. But the selection protocol was not a one-way process but was 'cross pollinated' across the sexes as a courtship practice. The nineteenth century 'trope of woman as flower, man as bee' portrayed men as journeying to court the female. As a destination, women were embedded or 'rooted' they awaited the world to come to them.[21] When Charles Darwin identified the pollination of the common red clover by the bee his observation found its way into the poetry of American writer Emily Dickinson. In her poem 'The Clover's simple Fame' (1860), Dickinson portrays her flower as an active agent in her immobility she enacts a queenly role. In this her flower is complicit as a sexual predator – a passive yet aggressive condition. Her stasis is not a hindrance to her achieving her ambitions but a form of power. Another reading of this same skill of attraction is found in the novel *Middlemarch* (1872). George Eliot parades Rosamond Vincy as a beguiling blooming beauty pursuing social advancement. Although writing in the 1870s Eliot sets her novel in the 1830s when ideals of womanhood and beauty were contrasted with the robust femininity of later nineteenth century ideals. Eliot guides Rosamond's behaviour within a contradiction. Rosamond controls her situation with skilful passivity - and manoeuvres the attentions of her suitor while she colours and shades in harmony with her adornments and her rose tinted flesh. Eliot describes her effect:

> 'She blushed and looked at him as the garden flowers look at us when we walk forth happily among them in the transcendent evening light: is there not a soul beyond utterance, half-nymph, half-child, in those delicate petals which glow and breathe about the centres of deep colour?"[22]

This appeal of a woman as flower is warped via the trajectory of the narrative to expose Rosamond's intent as she is revealed and transformed into an evil fairy or an Undine. The lure of Rosamond is the lure of a youthful bloom contained within the promise of her name. She is performing a competitive Darwinian struggle within the drawing room and its romantic court. Her social mobility is similar to Dickinson's clover but her social ascent is a descent into an elemental state that corrupts her into an evil fairy.[23]

Fire

The fashionable nineteenth century woman described in this paper is the one contained in etiquette manuals or ladies journals - the aspirational female body and the fictive imagined self. The meanings of nineteenth-century fashionable clothing are ambiguous shiftings between the expression of female sexuality and its exaggeration or denial. The pull between allure and 'prudery' is an obvious tension, as evidenced in the idealised examples above and works in the same framework as the elusive fairy. Valerie Steele places her argument in *Fashion and Eroticism* within a moderated framework somewhere betwixt and between – whilst her argument undermines the stereotyped sexual conservatism in attitudes to the body and the imagined self. This scaffold of sexual fear, anxiety, repression and the leakage of subconscious sexual energy via that 'instrument of seduction' the body reduces our understandings of nineteenth-century fashion. They remain inchoate as assumptions lurking to ensnare us when we try to piece together the general from the specifics of example. Descriptions in fashion reportage in society papers and local commentary did narrate anxieties about the status of the female on display, but also an understanding of the pleasure associated with this spectacle. For example the author of Fashion Jottings attempts to re-address the debate on low décolleté and she rails against a Miss Cleveland who had 'revived the famous old versy about *se decolletant'* in a letter to a Boston newspaper 'a fashionable woman's low neck need not ever be immodest. If it is so, it is because she prefers it to be so.' The writer ends with claiming that there is a 'trifle of goody-goodyness in this, then common sense.'[24]

Figure 4. Evening Toilette, 1884, Victorian Fashions and Costumes from Harper's Bazaar

Female displays of shoulders and décolletage were legitimised within the secure environment of circumscribed evening entertainments accompanied by members of their own caste. The display was a contained and rarefied costumed performance. As a privileged viewing of the erogenous female body it was defined as an 'aristocratic' practice – connoting a certain sexual permissiveness. Flowers worn during the day were located on hats framing the face and clichéd advice in fashion reports recommends their use in spring. Alternatively the body at night was garlanded by flowers especially on the corsage, shoulders, at the waist, trailed and festooned around the bustle and skirt. Fashion plates from the decades 1870 –80 depict the tournure as a perfect platform for ornamental floral decoration. One description from 1886 proclaims 'For ball dresses, trails of flowers four yards in length are the correct thing in Paris. These meander in and out of the folds of dresses, and terminate in a large spreading fan of foliage ... These are all supposed to be real blooms; but there is really a kind of cruelty in bringing all of these flowers into the heat and crush of the ballroom … many practical minded persons will [use] artificial flowers.'[25] But theses efforts were sometimes under appreciated - misogynistic writings interpreted these 'burlesques' as 'smothered with flowers and vegetables that make the wearer of each more hideous than the last.'[26]

Evening dress was worn within ornamented private theatres – the ballroom, the drawing room or public entertainments - the opera – each a scape as a social parade. In a description of a Ball at the Melbourne' Town Hall - 'The sight was like a parterre of flowers waving in the wind'[27] a garden of social spectacle. Echoed by Paul Poiret in his autobiography he recalls the view of a 'parterre really … a flower garden' of women at a Paris theatre.[28] The fictive scenery of the garden contained imagery that ''according to a well-established tradition of erotic literature' [provided] 'metaphors to describe bodies, genitals, and sexual desire.'[29] A garden vocabulary of shrubbery, grottos, underwoods, hot beds, not to mention flower beds are the vegetal themes of this erotica and explicitly link the flower with female genitalia. Ornamental gardens – and the artificiality of their designs - were 'expensive and fantastic' and this type of invective made vehement analogies between an extravagant woman and the ruin of a productive estate, with obvious connotations with consumption, fashion and luxury. Other garden imagery spoke of a different view of the feminine and nature and the *hortus conclusus* as an enclosed garden has obvious associations with virginity.[30]

Figure 5. Primrose, from *Flowers of Loveliness,* 1837, England, From the collection of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) Como Historic House and Garden.

The interior spaces in which evening events were staged were themselves attributed with landscape comparisons, for example 'A GRAND ball … The decorations are to be on a magnificent scale. … according to the announcement, a representation of the Garden of

Eden.'[31] The abundant use of flowers and potted plants within bourgeoisie interiors and public entertainments, included conservatories, terrariums, Wardian cases and aquariums, strategies that fashioned a 'natural' backdrop. Providing scenic backdrops such as a 'Moonlight Garden Party'[32] or a ball such as the one described by Mrs. Eastlake as:

> 'perfect fairyland, marble, gilding, mirrors, pictures, flowers; couches ranged round beds of geraniums and roses, every rare and sweet oddity lying about in saucers, bouquets without end … and the dresses too were beautiful and so fantastic …. With long creepers of flowers interwoven with diamonds hanging as low as the dress behind'[33]

The ballroom was a space where the sexes could touch during dance. Where flesh was seen and where rivalry and 'assassination by dress' operated within assumptions about challenge, competition, and selection. This mise en scene relied on the ambience of attraction, if not obvious seduction. Taking the logic of the syllogism that woman is flower – the surface of the petal has obvious connotations of the flesh – of skin and its colour - and colour as a form of attraction. The appearance of fresh flowers under gaslight was an important problem to resolve, which extend to the appearance of the skin and clothing beneath artificial light with a yellow/golden cast. Blues and purple hues turned brown when illuminated under gas or candlelight.[34] The author of *Domestic Floriculture* insisted that '[S]ome flowers are much more effective than others under artificial light, and it is well to bear this fact in mind when arranging bright-coloured bouquets for ball-rooms or wreaths for ladies hair.'[35] This careful 'arrangement' displaced onto the flowers and fabrics the quality of the surface of the flesh and the body perfumed and tinted.

The artificial flower was decorative strategy that connected floral imagery with the body and then extended out into the surrounding environment. The immediacy of this wearing inscribed meaning onto clothes worn at social entertainments and could be read within a system. These cultural moments offer possibilities to unlock the tenons of other systems as terrains in which the body performed – the ballroom or the garden. Sexual, social and aesthetic paths here traverse the body as a landscape, an ordered parterre that also accommodates the weeds of anxiety and troublesome projections. The fashionable female body becomes a garden, a paradise or a fearful wilderness.

Endnotes

[1] Fashion Jottings *Table Talk* 14 May 1886, p.8.

[2] Kristeva, J 1981, 'Women's Time', *Signs,* vol 7., 1981, p.200.

[3] Benjamin, W 2002, *The Arcades Project,* 1st edn, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, p.69-70.

[4] Hollander, A 1978, *Seeing Through Clothes*, Penguin, New York.

[5] Finkelstein, J 1998, *Fashion An Introduction*, New York University Press, New York.

[6] Daemmrich, A.E 2003, 'Paradise and Storytelling: Interconnecting Gender, Motif, and Narrative Structure', *NARRATIVE*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp 213 - 233.

[7] Blake, W 1804, Milton, Selected Poetry, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p.161.

[8] Silver, C.G 1999, *Strange and Secret Peoples – Fairies and Victorian Consciousness*, Oxford University Press, New York, p.200.

[9] This collecting was fraught with ideological assumptions about the landscape and its acclimation, appropriation and usefulness.

[10] Bonyhady, T 2002, *The Colonial Earth,* Paperback edn, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

[11] Neve, C 1971, 'But Are They Happy in Fairyland?'', *Country Life*, December 23, p. 1769.

[12] Spencer, R 1972, The Aesthetic Movement, Studio Vista, London.

[13] Scoruse, N 1983, *The Victorians and their Flowers,* Croom Helmn, London, p.p.9 – 27.

[14] Silver, C 1999.

[15] Silver, C 1999, p.52.

[16] The supernatural manifested flowers in more otherworldly ways with examples of aported flowers produced during séances made from spirit stuff – ectoplasm- lasting a few ephemeral days before disappearing into the spirit-matter from which it was made. See Warner, M 2004, 'Ectoplasm', *Heat*, 5. p.62.

[17] Steele, V 1985, *Fashion and Eroticism*, Oxford University Press, New York, p.55.

[18] 'The Fashions',1862, *The English Woman's Domestic Magazine*, Vol V., S.O. Beeton, London, p.92.

[19] Briggs, K 1977, *A Dictionary of Fairies*, Penguin, London, p.111.

[20] Langdon, L E And Bailey, T H 1837, *Flowers of Loveliness: Thirty-six Groups of Female Figures, Emblematic of Flowers,* Ackermann and Company, London, p.10.

[21] Guthrie, J. R 2007, 'Darwinian Dickinson: The Scandalous Rise and Nobel Fall of the Common Clover', *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, Vol. XVI, No.1, John Hopkins University Press, Maryland, pp. 73-91.

[22] Eliot, G 1994, *Middlemarch*, Penguin, London, p. 352.

[23] Ibid, p.115

[24] 'Fashion Jottings' 1886, *Table Talk*, 21 May 1886, p.8.

[25] 'Random Jottings', *Table Talk*, 8 January 1886, p.7

[26] 'Random Jottings, *Table Talk*, 8 January 1886, p.6

[27] *Table Talk*, 23rd October 1885, pp 7-8.

[28] Cited in Boxer, M 1982, 'Women in Industrial Homework:: The Flowermakers of Paris in the Belle Époque', *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3. Spring, p.401.

[29] Lloyd, S 2006, 'Amour in the Shrubbery: Reading the Detail of English Adultery Trial Publications of the 1780s', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, Vol 39, No. 4, p.428.

[30] Alexander, A 2002, 'The Garden as Occasional Domestic Space', *Signs: Journal of Women in Cultura and Society,* vol.27, no.3, University of Chicago, Chicago.

[31] *Table Talk*, 1 April 1886, p. 10.

[32] 'Moonlight Garden Party', *The Australiasian*, Dec 22, 1893, p.1142.

[33] Steegman, J. 1971, *Victorian Taste*, MIT Press, Massachusetts, p.312.

[34] Audlsey, G A 1902, *Colour in Dress: A Manual for Ladies*, Sampson Low, Marston and Co. London. p.36.

[35] Burbidge, F W 1874, *Domestic Floriculture: Window-Gardening and Floral Decoration*, William Blackwood and Sons, London, p.121.

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