

The Style Imperative

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"Do designers dictate hemlines?" the late style doyenne Diana Vreeland was once asked. "Only if you take dictation," she replied. With that remark, she exposed a rift the fashion world seldom flaunts. There is a vast gap between fashion and style. Fashion is about clothes and their relationship to the moment. Style is about you and your relationship to yourself. Fashion is in the clothes. Style is in the wearer. The distinction could not be more revealing.

Despite the proliferation of fashion, style has been out of style for decades. As the economy expanded, America embarked on a collective shopping spree. In place of style, we have honored merchandise, clothes. Style, on the other hand, doesn't demand a credit card. It prospers on courage and creativity. Style goes way beyond fashion; it is an individually distinctive way of putting ourselves together. It is a unique blend of spirit and substance—personal identity imposed on, and created through, the world of things. It is a way of capturing something vibrant, making a statement about ourselves in clothes. It is what people really want when they aspire to be fashionable (if they aren't just adorning themselves in status symbols).

In some quarters, it's fashionable, as it were, to trivialize style. It's true that style doesn't have life-or-death impact, but it isn't devoid of substance, either. "Clothes are separated from all other objects by being inseparable from the self," Anne Hollander writes in her classic