

*Seeing through Clothes*. "They give a visual aspect to consciousness itself" (451). Through clothes, we reinvent ourselves every time we get dressed. Our wardrobe is our visual vocabulary. Style is our distinctive pattern of speech, our individual poetry.

Fashion is the least of it. Style is, for starters, one part identity: self-awareness and self-knowledge. You can't have style until you have articulated a self. And style requires security—feeling at home in one's body, physically and mentally. Of course, like all knowledge, self-knowledge must be updated as you grow and evolve; style takes ongoing self-assessment.

Style is also one part personality: spirit, verve, attitude, wit, inventiveness. It demands the desire and confidence to express whatever mood one wishes. Such variability is not only necessary but a reflection of a person's unique complexity as a human being. People want to be themselves and to be seen as themselves. In order to work, style must reflect the *real* self, the character and personality of the individual; anything less appears to be a costume.

Lastly, style is one part fashion. It's possible to have lots of clothes and not an ounce of style. But it's also possible to have very few clothes and lots of style. Yes, fashion is the means through which we express style, but it takes less in the way of clothes to be stylish than you might imagine. That's why generations of women have coveted the little black dress, a garment so unassuming in line and perfect in proportion that it is the finest foil for excursions into self-expression.

It's tempting to think that style is a new invention, open to us only now because we particularly value self-expression and because an extraordinary range of possibilities for doing so is available to us. But Joan DeJean, a professor of French language and culture at the University of Pennsylvania, contends that style has its well-shod feet firmly planted in the seventeenth century; it was the deliberate creation of Louis XIV of France, the Sun King. He was, she says in *The Essence of Style* (2005), history's greatest exemplar of it. DeJean sums up the style that Louis created in a word—*sparkle* (174). Louis bedecked himself in diamonds for their sheer dazzling impact, his vision of power and prosperity reflecting on the state itself. He greeted visiting royalty and other heads of state in a black velvet suit encrusted with virtually every diamond in the possession of the crown. Louis didn't just impose his grand sense of self on his clothes and his court. He transformed Versailles from a hunting lodge to the resplendent palace