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Armor Elements on Women's Wear

The Evening Jacket designed by Elsa Schiaparelli in 1938 is a decorative evening suit that incorporates armor elements through the usage of mirror glasses. The "Broken Mirrors" Ensemble from Yves Saint Laurent in 1978 further explored the armor elements and exaggerated the curly shape pattern as the frame of a mirror on the back of the jacket, setting contrast with the soft texture of fabrics. Their incorporation of armor elements in women's wear challenge the traditional social expectation of women by their differentiation of texture, silhouette, and content from conventional clothing; this inspired me to develop a two-piece ensemble with exaggerated sleeves and patterns that explores the texture and facade of a mirror.

The texture and materiality of armored clothing oppose the conventional soft and smooth fabrication of clothing, breaking the past stereotypes on women and diversified women's figures in society. In the 1930s, dresses made with "satin" were prevalent in the evenings. (Reddy, 2020) This kind of fabric is especially light and sleek, highlighting the social norms for women as gentle, and lack of physical power. [fig. 1] Schiaparelli's design of decorative jackets went against the fashion trend, and became popular in the mid to late 1930. (Bolten, 2020) This jacket she created in 1938s explores the body armor in women's apparel, as shown in [fig. 2], it "features two hand mirrors, formed by rectangles of mirrored glass affixed with star-shaped rosettes." (The Met) The usage of sharp-edged patterns and rigid materials expressed Schiaparelli's opposition to the traditional generalization of women. Also, the silver lines of the frame almost looking like

the embedded plates of mail, presenting “an integral part of societal posturing and negotiation in terms of power and status.” of the “Military paraphernalia” (Sacks, 2002) This incorporation inspired me to form clothing with splicing technique to illustrate different possibilities of the texture of women’s apparel. [fig. 3] The evening jacket created by Yves Saint Laurent further combined elements of armor into textures and materials. As shown in the right of [fig. 2], “the back of the jacket becomes a canvas for an expansive mirror worked in wedges of silver foil fractured by lines of crystals and framed by gleaming gold strip.” (The Met) The idea of forming the texture of the substance using other materials fascinated me, and I used the insulated bags to imitate the reflective feature of the mirror to shape a corset. [fig. 3] This material choice is also linked tightly with the protection function of armor, in my case, to keep warm the essential parts of the body. These armor elements together give new insights such as persistence and sturdy to the past ideal women figures.

Elsa Schiaparelli and Yves Saint Laurent’s incorporation of armored elements expanded the unitary close-fitting silhouette on women, and inspired me to create a silhouette that protrudes design instead of body shape. In the early 1930s, women’s wear generally consisted of “simple lines”, but “the overall effect was one of complete sinuous femininity with a natural waist and skirts flaring out slightly at the ankle”.(Reddy, 2020) This feature of women’s wear promotes slimness and sexual availability as beauty standards for women. The elongated silhouette also limits women's action, expressing women’s role as compliance to men. [fig. 1] The jacket from Elsa Schiaparelli and Yves Saint Laurent’s uses a black and loose-fitting silhouette to highlight the mirror design of the jacket. Putting less pressure on women’s bodies, shifts

the viewer's attention to clothes themselves rather than the body shape of women. [fig. 2] The silhouette of these jackets incorporated armor elements of wide and full sleeves to allow the wearer's actions without any restrictions, which shatters the past limitation on women's action by producing tight hourglass silhouettes. It also made viewers relate with the "doublet and the breastplate" that "emphasize a man's shoulders," to illustrate that women could display the strong features of traditional male figures. (Hadler) The silhouette of the jackets follows the shape of the exaggerated mirror pattern, highlighting the characters of courage and confidence, which challenges the traditional obedient figure of women. In addition, Schiaparelli's unconventional silhouette also links with her past experience "In 1911, she published a collection of overtly sensual poems, *Arethusa*. When her parents learnt about it, she was sent to a convent in Switzerland, where she left again after going on hunger strike." (Schiaparelli) The limitation on women in the 1900s affected her life directly, she rebelled against these restrictions of women using hunger strikes to her parents, and design gave her the power to spread her perception through visual languages to pursue social equality for females. Based on this research, I developed wings-like sleeves in my design, inspired by the loose-fitting and bold silhouette of body armor. This type of silhouette spreads the message of acceptance to all kinds of body shapes, and shifts viewers' focus to the materiality and design element of clothing. [fig. 3]

Besides the texture and the silhouette, the mirror content of the decorative jackets that explore body armor further redefines women's role in society, and helped me develop the patterns on my ensemble pieces. "This evening jacket by Elsa Schiaparelli features two hand mirrors, formed by rectangles of mirrored glass affixed

with star-shaped rosettes, that evoke the mirrored panes of the Salons of War and Peace at either end of Versailles's Hall of Mirrors." (The Met) The mirror linked tightly with the past success in warfares of France, Schiaparelli connected this idea with women's jackets to admire the virtue of soldiers and also denoted women could also distribute to the society as men. According to Bolten 2020, "It was made just before the war. These broken mirrors took on the symbolism- almost, they become talisman, I suppose, of hope, courage, and even determination for the war that was to come." This insight adds to Schiaparelli's redefinition of the meaning and purpose of women's wear, not only on unitary beauty standards. In my design, I reconstruct Schiaparelli's mirror pattern into a reflective corset that remains her contour of the mirror, carrying forward her redefinition of women.[fig. 3] "For Saint Laurent, Schiaparelli's fashions lent women "originality, insolence and assurance," and the boldness of this design projects a similar daring and confidence." (The Met) The reconstruction of Schiaparelli's Jacket by Saint Laurent further explores this armor element of the mirror into the jacket that illustrates the broken mirror. The figure of a broken mirror expresses both designers' message of shattering social limitations and stereotypes on women. Moreover, armor elements "advertises lineage and thus inscribes the individual in a system of male power relations" in that past (Springer, 162) The pairing from Elsa Schiaparelli and Yves Saint Laurent resist this line of thinking from patriarchal society by combining women's apparel with the past representation of male power. This combination also helps reduce the physical gap between women and men, since armored clothing usually functioned as protection of the weakness of the body. As Breiding suggests in 2010, armor previously appeared "in the Mesopotamian city of Ur, where onagers, used for pulling

battle carts, seem to have been protected with chest defenses,” which relates how Schiaparelli used mirror glasses to “frame the breast of the wearer” and how Saint Laurent frame the mirror on the back of the wearer, to protecting the body parts that are possible to be attacked or are frail. Therefore, I mainly focused on the elements of the mirror in the pairing. I iterate the gold frame of the mirror and curved lines in the pair into the soft transparent sleeve and the selvage of the skirt, contrast with the crystal-like pattern on the skirt gradually fading away at the end, matching with the concept of “broken mirror”. The top has a stiff waistcoat link to the tight-lining; this differentiation of texture highlights the armor feature of the apparel. [fig. 3]

The pairing from Elsa Schiaparelli and Yves Saint Laurent shatters stereotypes of women by their incorporation of armor. This illustrates how designers could use visual languages to spread their perception to the society, and point out the unequalized and unjustified social beliefs. My design of the ensemble pieces continues this line of thinking through its reconstruction of the original pairing, with my understanding of the body armor. The fabrication of hard materials, textile with distinct textures, loose-fitting silhouette, and the mirror content distinguished armor elements from traditional apparel, and together they expanded the personal values and characters of women. This led me to further understand how innovation in combining different elements adds to the function of fashion, and how it will move the fashion industry forward in helping society.

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figure 1 McCall's Magazine. *Evening Dresses*, October 1935. Source: Flickr



figure 2



figure 3

