

RASA: SERENITY, VALOR, LOVE

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The focus of this thesis is the conveyance of moods through clothes, the communication of feelings through fashion. The thesis illustrates how clothes speak, and the tools used to communicate a visual message. Three moods are used as examples: Serenity, Valor and Love.

The thesis presents the author's design ability, creative personality, cultural background and technical skills. Sources of data range from personal experience to books on cultural studies, armor and mask making, Indian/Asian dance and theatre, fabric design, fabric manipulation and websites on related topics.

The chapters discuss background information of the author and the topic of research, and present each ensemble created to support the thesis. Through design details and photographs of the nine ensembles, the thesis demonstrates different techniques of achieving visual communication through clothes.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Art is a language. Every form of art has a vocabulary- a set of tools that suggest a meaning. Education, environment, experience and personality, among other reasons, provide each of us with a vocabulary to understand art in our own personal language. Fashion is a form of art. It creates a connection, builds a story, represents ideas and communicates feelings. This notion of an individual's personality being expressed through their clothes has been termed "clothes speak". This paper suggests the fundamental motive of clothing as a "sign", a personal signature and state of mind.

The language of clothes is based on the artist's ability to express moods and feelings through fashion. The concept presented in this thesis is derived from information on moods from the performing arts of India. Music, dance, drama and poetry are based on the concept of *Navarasa* (nine sentiments). *Nava* means "nine". Literally, *Rasa* means "juice" or "extract", but here in this context, it means "emotion", "mood" or "sentiment". The *Navarasa* comprises of the nine emotions of love, anger, fear, serenity, valor, sympathy, laughter, awe and disgust. All other emotions are considered to be combinations of these nine basic ones.

The style and form of a garment (its color, texture and design) communicates the emotional condition of the person wearing the garment. Colors represent meanings. Each color has a meaning. For example, red suggests passion and gray expresses grief.

Simplicity of form in the garment suggests a simple state of mind, while a complex form and texture conveys a complex mood.

I have been a theatre artist perhaps just as long as I have been in the world of fashion. Inspiration for this thesis comes from my fascination with theatre. As a graduate student of fashion, this is an opportunity to study expressions, emotions, feelings, moods and characters and their successful communication through clothes.

Statement of Problem

The focus of this thesis is the conveyance of moods through clothes, the communication of feelings through fashion. Interpretation of character-mood through physical appearance is also evaluated.

The language of clothes is a critical subject to understand for a designer when creating a character for the theatre or the movies. This thesis illustrates how clothes speak, and the tools used to communicate a visual message.

The thesis explores the creation and communication of mood associated emotions using variables (tools) such as color, pattern, form, fabric and texture. Three moods are used as examples: Serenity, Valor and Love. A presentation on these three moods through nine ensembles (three for each mood) will be made for the MFA exhibition. Makeup will complete the visual presentation of each mood. Illustrations and photographs will enhance and support the presentation. The thesis seeks to address the following questions:

1. How do clothes speak?
2. How do color, pattern, form, fabric and texture work as tools to convey mood?

3. How effective is the overall design in communicating the moods of Serenity, Valor and Love?

Methodology

A body of work will explore the communication of moods through clothes. Each mood will first be visualized as a character in an imaginative setting, and an ensemble will be designed for the character. The garment will communicate the mood suggested by the character.

The aspects of color, texture, silhouette (form), design and presentation methods will be worked on. The collection will be a personal understanding and expression of moods through fashion. Journal entries and working illustrations will be a reasonable part of the research. A variety of fabrics, colors, texture and surface design techniques will be used, based on the mood to be conveyed and its visual requirements. Finally, each ensemble will be assessed, developed and presented.

CHAPTER 2

ARTIST'S CHARACTERISTICS

My interest in visual storytelling is almost as old as me. As a child, my awareness of people, their character, their moods, expressions and personality was strong. A keen interest in forming opinions of people, to understand them as characters has developed over time. An extensive theatre background was developed through school and university as an actor, culminating in the “Best Actress Award” at Mount Carmel College in Bangalore, India. Additional experience was obtained through Indian Classical and Folk music and dance at College as the president of the Music Club.

The inspiration for *Rasa* is a conscious combination of my background in performing arts and an Indian background. Does this mean the topic of research before start was selected and worked on, or the work resulted into the selection of *Rasa*? The answer is a natural progression.

The undergraduate design collection was based on raw form of nature - its textures, earthy colors, basic geometric forms and the nude body. Cotton knits were used for fabric. My graduate collection in Nottingham, England was children's clothes inspired by clothes for adults. The fabrics used wool and silk where the focus was simple sewing and seam details. Over the last three years my work towards an MFA at UNT has been diverse, yet based on fabric manipulation and surface design through sewing techniques. The MFA collection highlights my design ability, creative personality, cultural background and technical skills. The topic of research is just as important as the

wearability and practicality of each ensemble. The collection reflects my personality, enjoyment by versatility of moods and balance of creativity with practicality.

Background Information

Why design clothes to reflect moods? The basic idea of this research is to understand how a costume designer should work to dress a character in a theatre, movie, or any other style of performing art. Thus, arriving at the statement that clothing is a language, and is used to communicate.

For example, consider we see a Japanese student in the United States in a Kimono. Firstly, we read that the student is from Japan, and she wants to communicate this. Secondly, we understand that she might be more comfortable with the Japanese way of life. This is one kind of communication.

Again, if we meet a student in rags, torn shoes and unkempt hair - we guess his/her financial and social status. We also form an opinion – he/she belongs to a rebellious social sub-group. Based on our visual reading of him/her we choose to associate with him/her or not. These readings are something we do all the time when we meet or see someone. Every individual consciously or unconsciously tries to find people with similar likes, dislikes, desires, future plans, and even similar background and nationality. These readings of other people, while primarily visual, form our opinion of others.

What about communicating how one feels and what kind of a character they become through clothes? This kind of communication is used in performing arts such as dance, theatre and film. Each character is carefully analyzed and is given a certain visual appearance.

According to Indian traditional dance forms and folk art, characters present nine moods, subtle combinations of which identify each one of us. The nine moods are called *Navarasa* and are: love, anger, fear, serenity, valor, sympathy, laughter, awe and disgust. This research is based, firstly, on how clothes can visually communicate these moods. Secondly, on how color, texture, pattern and form work as tools to communicate. The manner in which these tools can be used in costumes for characters presenting certain moods is outlined.

Navarasa is explained as: Indian aesthetes identify the ‘*navarasa*’, the nine sentiments as the basic emotions to be expressed through various genres of art and literature, including dance. *Nava* means nine; *Rasa*, literally, means juice or extract, but in this context, means mood, emotion or sentiment. The nine sentiments being: *Shanta* (serenity), *Aashcharya* (wonder), *Hasya* (ridicule), *Shringar* (love), *Bhayanak* (fear), *Veer* (valor), *Raudra* (anger), *Karuna* (pathos) and *Beebhatsa* (disgust). All other emotions are considered to be subtle combinations of these nine basic moods. All classical dance forms and theatre in India work with the concept of *Navarasa*. Various characters are presented and perceived based on this concept.

This thesis has used *Navarasa* to create a character conveying a mood, which is visually communicated through the character’s clothes. The concept that clothes do speak is presented through this collection. This visual speech uses visual tools such as color, form and texture, to successfully create a visual connection between the character and the viewer.

CHAPTER 3

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF WORK COMPLETED FOR THE PROBLEM

Following are nine ensembles representing the three moods of Serenity, Valor and Love. I have termed each ensemble as a piece, such as a piece in a play, and each piece suggests a character. The first paragraph of each piece creates the character and places it in a setting signifying a mood and the following paragraph(s) gives the visual and technical details of the garment for the character.

My work is diverse in terms of fabrics, colors, techniques and silhouettes. Each piece has been independently worked. Although each mood is represented by three ensembles and is put together as a collection, each individual outfit is strong.

Piece 1: Serenity 1

While the world toiled to find out the reason for life, worked on scientific advancements, loved, killed and grieved, she stood peaceful and content. Her world was within herself and she was totally at peace with it. She was the zenith of serenity. Cool as water, calm as soft circular ripples that span out from the center of life. Not still, but calm. Others saw her, unnerved by her peace and tranquility. They wanted her to get out of her world and be like one of them. They felt they had a reason, a supreme purpose for life. She continued to be serene.

The character presented above wears the first garment for Serenity. The ensemble consists of a boxy blouse and a sheath skirt. Both pieces are simple in form, and least complex in terms of pattern.

The blouse is made of pure silk fabric, hand painted in different shades of blue to create a visual feel of water. Extremely fine tucks have been used as a sewing technique,



Figure 1: Serenity 1

in irregular lines following the different shades of blue, to enhance the painting. Although the pattern is geometric, the fabric softness makes it comfortably drape body curves. Form simplicity is maintained through the sleeveless blouse with a jewel neckline with a small slit down center front for wearing ease.

The skirt has a straight sheath fit and is made of organza with shapes in different shades of blue appliquéd to it from the reverse side. The blues for the skirt are matched to the blues of the blouse. The shimmer of organza adds to the visual affect. The organza, being transparent, conveys the character as transparent like clean water, with nothing to hide.

The blouse was designed first. I decided on the colors but did not design the visual pattern (motif) to be created on the fabric. This procedure is personally preferable since it allows spontaneity. The silk was painted, steamed and washed; ongoing surface texture applications were being planned. Minimum use of texture continued to keep the visual feel serene. Pin-tucks running along the different blue lines are interesting yet quite subtle.

The design of the skirt was a continuation of the blouse. The idea for the skirt followed the painted pattern and colors of the blouse. Decision to re-use organza elsewhere was made in advance. The outcome is a simple form, that projects serenity yet has plenty of design interest.

Piece 2: Serenity 2

In the midst of the oceans of fantasy, surfaced the small islands with white sand, transparent blue water, lush green vegetation and birds flying around free and happy. She is like the islands. She is pure, serene and a beautiful part of nature.



Figure 2: Serenity 2

This is a single piece A-line garment, in organza, inspired by islands and the ocean. A serene look is achieved through the use of different blues, and the design detail is to reflect the character's story and enhance visual appeal.

The outer layer of the dress is organza and cotton. Four different shades of blue are quilted onto the organza from the reverse side in irregular shapes to create the feel of the ocean and islands. The four colors used are sea green, blue, navy blue and purple. Shapes from the cotton fabric have been cut out to leave only the translucent organza in those areas. Cording, beadwork and hand stitching have been used for design detail. This garment is simple in its form, but with a lot of design interest. It gives an overall feel of serenity, contentment and happiness.

While serenity as a mood might sound quite simple, it is as complex as any of the other eight moods. A serene person is calm and at ease with everything around them with no expectations. But at the same time, a serene individual is not without emotions. Emotions are conveyed through the various surface details.

Piece 3: Serenity 3

She is as vibrant as a stream flowing over tiny round rocks, pure and clear as if just born. Filling the atmosphere with a soft murmur, like giggles of a child. Running around, creating some splashes here and there, she is playful and fun. She knows no evil, she has no pride; her heart is pure and clean. She is the most serene vision to me.

This garment is an ankle length special occasion dress. A shallow stream, and splashes of water on rocks at its banks inspire it. This outfit has an asymmetrical design with one shoulder, one sleeve and an asymmetrical hemline. Crepe has been used for its soft hand and drapeability. This garment presents an extensive variety of surface design



Figure 3: Serenity 3

and texture.

The choice of color for all three ensembles for Serenity is inspired by water in its different forms and attitudes. Hence, different shades of blue have been used for this particular outfit. Sky blue, blue and blue-green are the main colors. Accent colors, such as purple and yellow, suggest water splashes on pebbles and reflection of light. Significant amounts of hand sewn cording have been used to create the visual effect of streams and islands. The cording is diagonal in irregular lines and follows the silhouette of the female figure. The placement of the islands is visually balanced. Balance has been achieved by making the garment longer on its right side, with a sleeve for the left arm. The island of pebbles are hand-painted in irregular shapes, representing splashes of water, further enhanced by multi-color beads. Blanket stitches on a large section of the garment add to the overall appeal.

This garment is extremely successful in terms of communication of the theme. Additionally, it uses a large variety of techniques that work well with each other. Most of the garment is hand sewn, illustrating various sewing techniques, achieving balance of design.

Piece 4: Valor 1

Endowed with wisdom, giving up the fruits resulting from actions, attaining self-realization and freed from the bondage of birth, wearily she goes to that abode which is free from evil. She understands her duties, not worrying about the results. She fights evil, even if it means for her to fight her own family, relatives and friends. She walks into the sunset with her head held high, and the enemy to humankind at her feet.



Figure 4: Valor 1

This ensemble is made up of four pieces. Going from top to bottom is the helmet, a blouse, the bustier, the skirt and the underskirt. For this collection, leather and knit fabrics have been introduced. The basic color is gold with black, animal print fur and metallic buckles as accents. Surface texture detail is achieved through cutwork, quilting and cording.

Starting with the helmet, it is made of gold leather with an elaborate cutwork band collar. Metallic buckles are used for fastening at center front. Some cutwork is done at the ear area to not block any sound. The next piece, the blouse, is in shades of gold with a subtle animal print woven into it. The material is a knit of synthetic and metallic yarns. This fabric is to remind the viewer of the material called chain mail. It is semi-transparent, in a fashionable halter style, with a long funnel neck. The bustier has the visual effect of, and represents, feminine modern armor. It is made of leather, with extensive cutwork, to create an overall rich and strong image. The underskirt is made of black net in simple layers and ruffles. The outer skirt is in gold leather, has an asymmetrical placement of cutwork on panels. The basic form of the ensemble is of an evening gown to suggest beauty. The use of gold as the primary color personifies strength and power.

Piece 5: Valor 2

She walks with confidence and grace. She is not proud, not ambitious, and not cruel. She is the brave one, who performs her duties without expecting any rewards. She personifies victory of good over evil. Her strength shines like the sun - her beauty as soothing as moonlight.

This ensemble consists of four pieces: collar, bustier, skirt and the overskirt. The



Figure 5: Valor 2

inspiration for the design is from armor made of chain mail. Chain mail is identified as one of the most work-intensive methods of constructing armor. Metal links are connected to form the fabric and garments are made out of it. It is worn over layers of cotton garments. In this design, the collar and the over skirt are made of black leather, shaped as rings, connected by metal rings. The overskirt wears like an apron, with a waistband and buckles at center back. This piece is worn over a quilted skirt, which is hand-painted in shades of gold. The quilted skirt is mid-thigh length, with zipper on both side seams. The bustier is made of gold leather with thick cording, resembling strong metal bars.

The guiding principal is the ability to design a collection where one piece can be used in multiple ways to create different looks. All three pieces of the Valor collection have been designed such that they can be mixed and matched.

Piece 6: Valor 3

She is intelligent. She knows her strengths and weaknesses. She is aware of her duties as a person. She is brave, agile and smart. She watches every move of her opponent and plans to counter them. She is not afraid of failure; she knows that failure is a great teacher. When she speaks - everyone listens.

This ensemble has a knit blouse with fur collar; a fitted knit dress; ankle length polyester knit skirt and a leather mini skirt with cutwork. The design and form of the dress is very fashionable and wearable. Moving away from the concept of armor, this dress uses animal prints, metallic colors in knits and a leather accent piece. It matches the rest of the collection and is an integral part of present day fashion. The ensemble is designed in layers and levels. The pieces can be mixed and matched with the rest of the collection. It conveys the strength and sensuality of today's woman. Animal prints



Figure 6: Valor 3

suggest strength, while the colors and fabric accentuate the strength of the figure wearing this piece.

The blouse is made of black polyester knit, with a shine of patent leather. A stole attached to the neckline works as a collar that wraps around the neck and hangs at the back. The dress, made of synthetic and metallic yarn, has a semi-transparent chain mail appearance, is calf length and fitted with a single slit on the left. The ankle length skirt is A-line in silhouette, and has a metallic shine on the surface. The short leather skirt worn on top is in two pieces, connected by straps and metallic buckles. The cutwork suggests decoration on the metal.

Piece 7: Love 1

In an imaginary wonderland, we see a beautiful angel charming him with her graceful stance, as if performing a dance. Her figure, as beautiful as a flower, swaying to the rhythm of his mind, one moment she is so close that he can almost touch her - the next he is unsure if she is a fragment of his imagination. She is dancing, singing with the birds, and looking as radiant as the sun shining down.

This character of the angel wears the garment inspired by a day lily. It signifies the love between the beauty of the flower, and the person admiring it. The viewer's mind develops true love for such beauty in nature. The garment is a wedding gown made of a shell and four large petals that project the visual image of a day lily. The color is soft peach, almost nude, with significant design detail.

Satin has been used for the shell, and organza for the petals. Each petal covers one quarter of the body. The petals are made of two layers of organza with a layer of semi-stiff fusing in between. Using muslin, each petal was first draped on a dress-form for



Figure 7: Love 1

development of the pattern. Then the bottom layer of the petals was cut out of organza, fused, and kept aside. Each top layer was cut out with ample ease. Surface texture was sewn onto the layers, and then cut for perfection. Finally, the two layers were sewn together. The surface texture using irregular lines of pin tucks represent the veins on the petals. The shell was stitched separately and the petals were attached to the shell with hand sewing. The bottom of the petals is rolled up by hand sewing a milliner's wire to the edge of each petal. Further design detail is through the use of beads to visually distinguish between each petal; a string of beads extend on each shoulder as support straps. Flowers are cut out of a fabric with printed floral motif, sandwiched between two layers of organza and patched on in an asymmetrical manner to add beauty and interest to the outfit. The overall design communicates the extreme beauty of a flower, which has been used for a character who is the true love of its creator.

Piece 8: Love 2

While she softly touches each flower, I hear every rustle of her fragile wings. Her love as pure as can be. She is like a lover whose presence is romance. I sense every movement of her elegant dance. She occupies my sleepless moments and sings her love songs on nights, quiet and warm. Her charm is without bounds and it spreads with the wind.

This garment is white in color and comprised of two pieces - the dress and the wrap. Inspired by a butterfly, the wrap holds the shape of a pair of butterfly wings. The dress represents the body of the butterfly. The major focus of this garment is to keep a balance between costume and practical clothing.



Figure 8: Love 2

The form of the dress has been designed to be simple and sensuous. It is a white, cotton knit, figure-hugging dress, with cut away shoulders to give a halter look. A long funnel attached to the neckline works as the neck of the garment, while continuing as the hood. The dress is knee-length, the hemline being just above the knees. Some hand-sewn silver beads represent moonlight reflecting from the shiny scales of a butterfly's body.

The wrap is made of white organza shaped like butterfly wings, with extensive sewing detail and beadwork. The detail is in paisley shapes with off-white thread representing the veins on the wings. The paisley pattern on the wrap is a freehand drawing inspired by Indian motifs and decoration styles. Silver beads and freehand drawing (using silver glitter paint) enhance the overall visual appeal.

This ensemble works as a costume successfully presenting the theme. The dress, worn without the wrap, works as a practical garment for any special occasion.

Piece 9: Love 3

She is like the cloudless, starry night – romantic, charming and mysterious. She visits me everyday in my dreams. She sits with me and softly speaks about the wind, flowers, birds, people and everything. As she speaks, my room and my heart fill with the fragrance of flowers. She wraps her lovely arms around me like a beautiful garland and everyday I hope to find her by my side when I wake up.

This ensemble presents Night in all its beauty. For The Night character, I have created an ensemble using a dress, a skirt and a blouse worn over the dress. The colors are burgundy and black. Red is a color that represents love, and is thus used in this garment.

The skirt is simple sheath, ankle length, in black silk. It has slits to the knee on



Figure 9: Love 3

both side seams. The dress is made out of lace with floral designs in burgundy and black. This figure hugging knee length dress has a big round neckline and short sleeves. The edge of the sleeves and hem has an irregular pattern original to the fabric. The blouse on top is in black silk with a highly textured front. The texture is through sewing techniques that I have developed during the course of my MFA. Overall appearance of this costume is Asian with a “Nehru” collar, knotted buttons and sheath skirt with long side slits.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

My journey through the M.F.A. has been a great learning process for a career in fashion. The M.F.A. has added to my knowledge, experience, capabilities and confidence. Besides experiencing the fashion industry in the United States, I have also gained experience and insight into American teaching methods. The research has provided knowledge on a very interesting aspect of fashion – visual communication through clothes. Each of the nine ensembles represents a mood and successfully communicates it to the viewer. Color, pattern, form, fabric and texture work as tools to convey the mood.

Work on each individual piece was exciting. I enjoyed the variety of form, fabric, design details and color. The Serenity collection (piece 1 through 3) is very elaborate in terms of surface texture and techniques. It also presents a gradual and steady growth in expertise in the development of the mood. The Valor collection (piece 4 through 6) is successful in the communication of the mood and simultaneously presenting a practical and commercially viable collection. It is very strong in its choice and variety of fabrics. This collection uses knits, leather and fur. The Love collection (piece 7 through 9) presents a totally different design technique where the garment has the shape of its inspiration. For all three moods, the entire process - from design to sewing details and finish - was challenging and fun.

My work process is a little different from most designers I know and have worked with. I start with an idea but keep working on and modifying the design details until personal satisfaction is reached. My initial design never looks exactly like the finished product. Draping precedes the design, and I make surface design samples before incorporating it into the design and applying it to the garment.

In terms of surface design techniques through sewing, I consider the Serenity collection most successful. It demonstrates a large variety of possibilities, starting from hand painting to appliqué.

This body of work exhibits well-balanced sense of design detail, creative and practical design ability. As a designer, it is important to maintain balance between quality, craftsmanship and practicality combined with true spirit, tradition and humor.

Techniques explored in this thesis will be invaluable for designers looking forward to a career in theatre, movies, fashion survey, documentation and high fashion. No matter who one designs for, be it a character in a film or a client, understanding the personality of the customer and extending that personality further through his/her clothes is successful design. This thesis shows different techniques of achieving communication through clothes. Literal interpretation, such as the Love ensembles or suggestive design through the Serenity collection, embodies the idea of practicality.

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