



Vanishing Beauty: The Art of Draped Clothing

In an age of commercialised global monoculture, many people are working to preserve our vulnerable cultural heritage of ancient arts and crafts. Of these, the beautiful art of draped clothing is especially at risk. Draping is ephemeral--a draped garment loses its unique form the moment it is taken from the wearer's body. Draping is also almost entirely unrecorded: the techniques exist only in the minds and hands of skilled individuals, and are passed on by demonstration alone. The Institute of Draped Clothing exists to preserve this ancient body of knowledge, now swiftly vanishing, and to convey to the world the beauty, practicality and unique individuality of draped clothing.

Draped clothes are not stitched or cut to fit, but wrapped around the body, using simple panels of cloth arranged according to the tastes and needs of the individual wearer. Drapery can be trim and practical, flowing and elegant, or anything in between.

In the ancient world, whether in Rome, Greece, Egypt, or Mesopotamia, draping was considered the most civilised way to dress. It was the art of the elite to gracefully arrange the folds of elegant togas and other draped garments. This tradition survives today in the unequalled grace of the sari. Yet at the same time, draped clothing has been the daily working attire of ordinary people, from the old 'great kilt' of Scotland, to the sarong and dhoti of southern Asia.

This art and craft is vanishing today. Not only do most people suppose the word "drape" to mean only "curtain" (a quite recent sense of the word), but many suppose that the ancients wore unstitched clothes merely because they did not know how to stitch. This was not true in Classical antiquity, and certainly never true in India, where the art of draping has flourished as nowhere else.

Hindus, Jains and Buddhists committed themselves to draped clothes not only as an expression of taste, but as a religious duty--they felt an aversion for needles, because needles could be used as weapons. The simpler drapes (such as the Roman toga) though elegant, were unsuited to daily work. Hence, these ancient Indians developed more practical drapes such as the dhoti, which neatly wraps each leg separately and looks like a pair of trousers. Indians devised other draped clothes as well, such as the veshti (which became the sarong when brought to what is now Indonesia) and the Buddhist cloak, which is not unlike the toga.

Draped clothes were widespread as far North as Scotland, and are still worn by millions all around the world. They form an important part of mankind's cultural heritage, and give clues to ethnic origins, beliefs and living conditions. Their incredible variety is a tribute to human creativity.

Despite this rich history, the art of draping clothes has been totally ignored or even disparaged: no institution on Earth teaches, researches or even records the art of draped clothes. There are numerous books and studies on every other aspect of textile arts--weaving, stitching, embroidery, knitting-- but nothing about draping clothes. This fragile art, which can be transmitted only by gestures, has never been recorded with even a minimum of scientific precision.

There exist extremely sophisticated draping techniques known only to the few who wear them--techniques that are vanishing with their aging practitioners. With skill, one can create any shape with the proper draping of a rectangular cloth. As a matter of fact, draping techniques are arguably more complex and diverse than stitching techniques. For instance, there are more ways to create a "trouser-shape" with drape than with cutting and stitching!

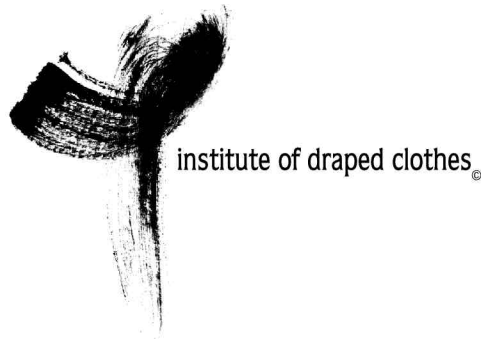
Until draping clothes is widely studied and taught, people who try to recreate draped clothes, while understanding only the principles of stitched, tailored clothing, will be easily misled. This challenge faces, for instance, those trying to recreate Roman or Celtic drapes, which are now sadly long forgotten. People in textile arts, costumes, fashion and even anthropology--who should be most interested--inevitably assume that draped clothes are very simple and do not depend on any particular technique.

Chantal Boulanger's research into Indian draped clothes, which is the first serious study of draping techniques, has more than proved this assumption wrong. It has revealed a world of complex techniques, fascinating insights into ethnic origins and views of the body, and above all, a multi-dimensional craft which remains basically unexplored.

Is this very substantial part of mankind's cultural heritage so unimportant? Why do we allow this essential part of our costume history to vanish into oblivion? Doesn't it deserve some attention, some research, some study?

Better still, draping deserves to thrive. Once we understand the techniques, we can not only preserve classic forms, but create new drapes suited to today's needs and tastes, and adorn ourselves in these most elegant and graceful of garments.

The few researchers of draped clothes, and many enthusiasts from all over the world, together have formed the "Institute of Draped Clothes".



1. WHY?

Unlike all other textile arts and crafts (embroidery, knitting, stitching, weaving, etc.), the art of draped clothes has been entirely overlooked. There is no ongoing research on this art & craft, no teaching, no recording or preservation.

Draping clothes is a volatile art. It relies entirely on personal knowledge and creativity. We are not sure, today, how people in antiquity draped their costumes. Many ancient ways of draping saris are forgotten today. If no institution starts research today, the art may soon vanish completely.

Draping is a most ancient and widespread form of clothing, used by billions of people all over the world. It is part of mankind's heritage. We must give it its right place and recognition.

Draping is fun! Draping is an accessible and rewarding creative endeavour. There is no reason why it should not develop and reenter fashion today.

2. WHAT?

The institute concentrates on researching draped clothing as it still exists all over the world.

From the techniques learned in the present, the institute will help rediscover how to drape ancient costumes. The institute will find ways to preserve both ancient and contemporary draping techniques, and publish manuals of instruction.

The institute will analyze draped clothes techniques, study their cultural meanings, and publish the results.

By learning the sophisticated techniques of draped clothes, the institute will help create and promote new drapes as an element of modern fashion.

3. HOW?

Besides maintaining a web site, we are creating national branches of IDC, as non-profit organisations. We publish a monthly newsletter, encourage research, and make available all kinds of material via links from the web site.

We can help in planning lectures, courses on draping techniques, exhibitions, etc.

Our members who do research in draped clothing can pool their knowledge to create the first world-wide database of draping techniques. Individuals and institutions can easily gain access to it by becoming members.

We contact institutions such as art schools, museums, libraries and others to convey the need for documentation, research and courses in draped clothes techniques.

We hope to be recognised as a worthwhile charity, and have donations declared tax-deductible in as many countries as possible. To achieve the Institute's goals we will need money.

We need your help and support. We need contacts, we need institutions to adopt our aims. Without the help of everyone supporting our cause, little can be done.

Would you like to help and support our work? Become a member today.

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