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## Art and Fashion: Schjerfbeck's Modern Women

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The relationship between art and fashion is an extremely timely subject. In recent years, museums and art galleries around the world have staged major shows on the work of *haute-couture* fashion designers, such as the blockbuster exhibitions held in New York (2011) and London (2015) on Alexander McQueen. A different perspective on this theme is reflected in the recent exhibition on the work of Sonia Delaunay (Paris and London 2014–2015), which presented her fashion designs and textiles alongside her radically abstract paintings. In Helene Schjerfbeck's oeuvre, the combination of art and fashion can be seen most clearly in the portraits of modern women that became a central part of her output in the 20th century.<sup>1</sup>

Schjerfbeck often discussed clothes and fashion in her letters to her cousin's daughter Dora Estlander. She mentions modest and practical French fashion periodicals intended for middle-class women, rather than glamorous *haute-couture* publications. The elegant, aloof, and impersonal appearance of the women illustrated in them, with their bright red lips, long necks and slender limbs, was integrated into an image of modern womanhood that was expressed in her art. Schjerfbeck's relationship with fashion reflects the processes of modernisation and democratisation that were taking place around the turn of the 20th century. Many of the women she portrayed were independent working women whose elegant and stylish looks embodied the new type of fashionable modern woman. These images are infused with tensions deriving from the interplay of popular culture and high art, the personal and the social, nature and artifice, modernity and timelessness.

These fashionable women, with their mask-like faces and hollow eyes, may be understood as illustrations of the alienation and spiritual emptiness of modern people. Their artificial appearance gives the impression that they are completely estranged from nature. However, with a closer look, one begins to see glimpses of something uncontrolled concealed beneath the surface. Some of these women even resemble what in literary studies has been termed an 'abhuman subject', a not-quite-human subject, characterised by its mutability. This notion is related to the Darwinian narrative of evolution, according to which there was no definitive distinction between humans and animals, and any transfiguration of bodily form could be possible. In addition, it is also connected to the new models of the subject that arose with the discovery of the unconscious. This modern subject was fractured, discontinuous, and fundamentally alienated from itself.<sup>2</sup>

The sensuality of Schjerfbeck's modern women appears as a destructive and disintegrating force, and is intimately connected with death and the futility of human existence. Here we may establish an affinity between Schjerfbeck and Alexander McQueen. Both were aware of the sinister side of fashion and modernity, both explored the animalistic aspect of our being, and both employed the metaphor of fashion in order to combine the animal and instinctive with the artificial and contemporary.

<sup>1</sup> 'Art, Fashion and Modernity' in Köchling, C. (ed.), *Helene Scherfbeck*, Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Hurley, K. *The Gothic Body: Sexuality Materialism and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle*, Cambridge University Press 1999.