Cloth is apparently something basic to civilization. Weaving is a skill of great antiquity, and it was well developed early in human history: the level of sophistication in the textiles of some "primitive" civilizations is very high. Postindustrial technology and modern chemistry have made cloth into an enormous industry; but it has been a thriving commercial enterprise, a fully developed craft, and part of the seemingly natural substance of life for as long a time as bread. The variety of possible fibers and possible methods of using them to form a fabric, quite apart from embellishment like printing and embroidery, makes cloth itself, like metal or stone, an essential material on which the artistic imagination may work. But beyond this basic potentiality is the visual appeal in the behavior of any cloth while it is being used. The history of art is full of representations or indications of cloth in use, chiefly, of course, as the dress of figures but also frequently as the dress of scenes. Thus a kind of visionary history of fabric is traceable through its poetic life in pictures and sculpture.

Representational art has always dwelt on the fascinating capacity of cloth to bunch, stretch, hang, or flutter, to be smooth or unsmooth under different circumstances, to be wrought upon and then restored, and wrought upon differently another time. The tailor's art makes use of this capacity directly, subject to fashion; and the tailor's art is apprehended and
appreciated through the same kind of visual effort that all art demands, from spectator and artist alike: the basic substance must be seen as expanded and elevated by its controlled, expressive use. Clothes, then, are objects made of fabric that convey messages beyond the power of the cloth itself to convey; but brute, raw fabric not directly in use by a tailor can yet be indirectly used by an artist, who will see in the bunched folds of a bed sheet the potential elements of a created fiction.

The appeal to the eye inherent in the workings of fabric is apparently as old as cloth itself. Constant idealization by artists has helped train the eyes of the world to take delight in it and create a desire to use it far beyond necessity. Fabric is thought to decorate and beautify, not only because of its direct appeal but because it has been shown to do so in an incredible variety of works of art since the remotest antiquity.

The original source and later justification for artistic drapery in the West has always been the variously interpreted example of surviving Classical sculpture. Late Roman sculpture and painting formed the drapery conventions used by the Early Christian artists; and these conventions for representing draped garments persisted into the Middle Ages, subject to merciless stylization but still recognizable. Classically draped figures, much modified but unmistakable, appear on sarcophagi and as architectural decoration, representing Christ and the Apostles in the clothes and attitudes of Roman statesmen and sages. A version of the costume of Classical times thus perpetuated itself and finally became codified into an enduring image of suitable dress for holy persons. This image was further developed by Renaissance artists, originally from the medieval examples but later in direct imitation of a reborn antiquity. The familiar long, loose tunic with wide sleeves and a cloak slung diagonally over it has been considered correct dress for Jesus down to the present day of plastic images. Saints and angels have worn it, too, whenever they have not worn ecclesiastical vestments, which, in their own fashion, are also much modified survivals from antiquity.

The formal peacetime costume of a Roman citizen, thus adapted for the Christian hierarchy by a wholly artistic tradition, is probably the single best source for all subsequent connections between draped cloth and lofty concepts or between the idea of nobility and the wearing of loose, flowing
clothes. There is no evidence that wearing full, draped clothing ever made anyone nobler or more courteous than wearing tailored tweeds does; and yet the association of the idea of drapery with the idea of a better and more beautiful life flourished, fed by the accumulated art of the past with its thousands of persuasive and compelling folds.

In sculpture the range of possible uses for drapery has been more limited than in painting, and the relation to past examples is simpler. Carved drapery has served a whole set of artistic needs for which no iconographic justification has been necessary. For example, students of Classical sculpture are quick to see how the drapery of the Venus de Milo gives a firmer base to the nude torso than naked legs would and how the marble cape of the Apollo Belvedere lends support to the outstretched arm. Drapery was given such subtle structural work to do by artists of all ancient periods. The vertical folds of the clothes worn by the Erechtheum maidens evoke the flutes of columns, and so do all the straight-falling draperies of the so-called "severe" style, which links the Archaic and Classical Greek periods. The garments of these figures seem not to clothe the bodies so much as to supplement them, indicating the position but not the shape of the legs, and they make the upright, standing figures seem to be bearing their stone weight as the folds simultaneously seem to support the body. The result, although it may present the image of a woman lightly clad in a sleeveless garment, is nevertheless monumental and impressive because of this tension between the plumb-downward drag of the marble cloth and the absolutely straight posture of the body, relieved only by the differing positions of the legs.

It has often been said that Classical drapery, besides performing such structural functions, also exists to reveal the body to advantage, emphasize its movements, and caress its contours. Actually the relation between the Classical body and its drapery is somehow always more complex and reciprocal than this. For example, the body of the Ceres in the Vatican Sala Rotonda is visibly distorted in some dimensions for the sake of displaying the clothes to advantage, rather than the other way around (I.1). The shoulders are broadened disproportionately and the breasts separated and set on an excessively wide chest so that the folds of the chiton may bunch around the tops of the arms without seeming to weigh down the upper body or be in danger of slipping, and the upper section of the dress may lie over the breasts to form a satisfying system of hills and channels. The identical body without the dress would look somewhat awkward, whereas a perfectly proportioned body could not wear such a fully draped costume without looking swamped and bouncy. Attempts to reproduce the dress
of Greek statues and photograph it on living models have shown how breasts tend to vanish under actual woolen folds instead of thrusting through them individually as those of the Ceres do. In this statue it is the clothing itself, supported by a body altered to display it to advantage, that is the primary element of expression; and so it is with many others.

Greek drapery, especially of the Classical period, has an obvious importance whether it is enhancing or enhanced by the body it accompanies or,
indeed, leading an elaborate life of its own. The free behavior of fabric did not apparently appeal to the imagination of the early Egyptians or the Archaic Greeks, whose use of it in art was always stylized, whatever it may have been in life. Ancient Minoan and Mycenaean art shows little interest in folds and pleats, stylized or otherwise: the clothes were evidently cut, fitted, and sewn. But the Classical Greek culture was able to develop its perception of informally draped woolen garments into an abiding source of aesthetic satisfaction, not only to themselves but to later generations of artists and art lovers who believed it could not be surpassed.

Woolen garments were created at home in ancient Greek households of all classes, through every stage from the shearing of the sheep through carding, spinning, and weaving. Clothes were woven into rectangles to fit the individual wearer according to length and width, so they were never cut to measure off a bolt. In the seventh century B.C. clothes were narrow and specially woven to fit closely, but they were never cut or sewn. Sixth-century dress was fuller and possibly the folds were pleated and held in place by glue, so the delicate formal folds of Archaic sculptured dress may be representations of actual pleats rather than attempts to stylize random folds. Later the rectangles out of which clothes were formed were larger and draped more freely, and they were occasionally sewn up the sides or across the shoulders; but the sewn shape was never more complex than a sack. Linen and cotton were used as well as wool and eventually silk, which in Hellenistic times provided artists with the opportunity to observe and record infinite varieties of thin, soft folds, often worn in layers. Underwear was not used. Sophistication, sexual allure, power, and austerity could all be expressed by the style in which simple rectangles woven of different stuffs were disposed around the body. Numerous and elaborate conventions developed, subsided, and coexisted—both for wearing these clothes and for representing them.

Awareness of cloth and clothes and firsthand knowledge of how to make them were thus universal among people of all regions and occupations. Artists and their public alike must have dwelt with pleasure on the beauty and plasticity of fabric itself, since everybody had direct experience of them every time he got dressed. The beauty of cloth must have had no less an appeal to the imagination than the beauty of the nude, which the Greeks are so famous for inventing. The dialectic of cloth and body is the secret of Greek art, as it may have been the key to Greek gesture and manners; and in those works of art in which no drapery appears, its absence is expressive. Nakedness and cloth together, whatever the logic of their connection, have maintained their quality of artistic rightness be-
cause of the absolute authority with which the ancient Greek artists dealt with every aspect of their combination. Complete nakedness in Greek art, without even the presence of a cast-off garment, is all the more striking, particularly when observed across the Christian centuries of discreet genital veiling.

Among the Greeks, modesty was an appropriate function of clothes for women but not for men. The absolutely naked female figure occurs in Greek art only rather late, and usually with drapery near at hand and with a forward-bending, self-protective posture (I.2). The Greek male nude stands upright and often abandons his drapery entirely or wears it down his back to display his bare beauty more emphatically. The drapery of the Apollo Belvedere (I.3) and the Meleager in the Vatican (I.4) hangs behind each of these famous nudes. Apollo’s cape, “spreading as it does in pleasing folds . . . helps to satisfy the eye with a noble quantity in the composition altogether, without depriving the beholder of any part of the beauties of the naked,” says Hogarth. Greek men evidently wore such garments entirely for the elegant effect and to emphasize frontal nakedness. Meleager’s does not hang and drape but flies out to the side in shell-like folds from the arm—a flight unjustified by any need to show motion or drama, since the figure stands calmly still. These folds exist for the pure pleasure of cloth celebrated in marble; and yet these draperies, like those in all ancient sculpture, are definitely clothing even though they do not clothe. The cape, or chlamys, the same one worn by the Parthenon horsemen, is properly fastened and has a recognizable shape.

Centuries later, impelled by ideals that demanded the draping of statues according to Classical precedent, the Neo-Classical sculptor Canova could nevertheless permit himself to hang an enormous, inconsequent swatch of cloth over the outstretched arm of his Perseus (I.5). This huge bath sheet was doubtless intended for dramatic effect and for emphasizing the body’s nudity, just as in the Apollo; but the long, heavy drape looks ridiculous over one slender arm. It clearly bears no relation to any actual method for creating real clothes out of drapery, has no reference to the vital facts of cloth, which are never absent from Greek art.

The problem of reconciling the flutter of cloth in action with the solidity of marble was an acceptable challenge to the Hellenistic Greek artist, who would have been schooled by centuries of a tradition based on rendering the one substance in terms of the other. Critics of later days have deplored the impulse, on the part of later Renaissance and Baroque artists, to yoke such different materials together under such difficult technical circumstances, although the Greeks remain exempt from criticism for it. The primitive, even vulgar appeal of carved flying cloth is undeniable,
1. 2  *Venus*, 320–280 B.C. (Roman copy)

1. 3  (below left) *Apollo Belvedere*, 350–320 B.C. (Roman copy)

1. 4  (below right) Attr. SCOPAS, 4th century B.C. *Meleager* (Roman copy)
even if aesthetic judgment might deem any given example a wretched and contrived piece of work. The technical feat is fascinating all by itself, partly because of the basic charm of plentiful folds—the “darling principle,” as Hogarth calls quantity in drapery.

The fluttering dress of the *Winged Victory* has received consistent praise for its expression of movement, the sense of the flying figure just alighted; but its more essential appeal is simply the cloth, the amazing stone folds. The vivid action needs no underscoring. The complex drapery of this and other Hellenistic statues has also been shown to exemplify the later Greek conception of sculptured cloth as plastic and fluid, with a variable surface catching a shifting play of light, in contrast to the smooth, linear treatment used in the fifth century and before. But besides this late, loose stylistic flavor, which the draperies share with Hellenistic flesh and hair, there remains the element of abstraction, which they have in common with the drapery of all Greek periods. The draped material, however naturalistic and random-looking, has not been copied faithfully from nature but designed. Attempts to reproduce in wool and linen what the folds do
in marble have proved that woven material will not behave exactly like sculptured Greek drapery. And yet nothing seems more "natural," even more inevitable, than the graceful hang and buoyant lift of these stone clothes. The blending of natural observation and skillful abstraction used by artists who were familiar with all the facts of raw cloth gave sculptured Greek drapery its immense and deserved prestige (1.6, 7).

Other, later schools of sculpture that have made dramatic use of draped fabric, such as the Gothic and the Baroque, have been censured not for excessive amounts of cloth or for the illogic of its presence but for its wild and "unnatural" habit of adopting a life independent of the body. So potent is the spell of those Greek breasts, elbows, and knees, breaking through the folds with such perfect timing, that wayward or enveloping garments that move without anatomical references seem suspect. And yet the drapery of Victory's clothes is as bizarre as that of any Bernini angel's. Sir Joshua Reynolds says, "Making drapery appear to flutter in the wind or fly through the air is an ineffectual attempt to improve the proper role of

1.6 Running Niobid
early 3rd century B.C.

1.7 Sophocles, 490–40 B.C.
(Roman copy)
sculpture.” And later, “The folly of attempting to make stone sport and flutter in the air is so apparent that it carries with it its own reprehension.” He goes on to scold Bernini, not only for doing this so that the drapery is a confusing element separate from the figure but seemingly also for being so good at it and making it so attractive.

This is one of many examples—as we shall see—of moral judgment about the rendering of cloth, wherein an implied “nobility” suffers for the sake of a detached delight in the possibilities of the stuff itself. In Reynolds’ day the Greek use of cloth was read as a method of enhancing the body—its beauty or its movement. The opposite emphasis, whereby the body is distorted to enhance the costume, or the drapery is worked up and made to engage the attention independently, was not recognized by late-eighteenth-century admirers of the ancients.

Some draped female statues of Hellenistic times show the effect of thin stuffs drawn over one another in layers, to form folds overlapping one another in opposite directions (I.8). The body, though always conventionally revealed by the thin fabric, is here not so important as the complex surface pattern formed by the clothes. The sense that such concentration on the phenomena of fabric is somehow decadent, whereas drapery subordinate to bodily form is pure, helps to perpetuate the idea that Hellenistic art is also decadent.

The Greeks’ interest in abstract drapery is, of course, most apparent in Archaic sculpture, in which bodies and clothes alike are wrought into patterns. The delicate, regular pleating of the dresses worn by sixth-century Kores challenges any effort to reproduce it in actual cloth, although attempts have been made for the stage, notably the costumes for Nijinsky’s famous ballet The Afternoon of a Faun; carefully stitched and pressed pleats were applied to a most un-Greek silk marquisette to approximate the Archaic woolen folds. There is always the possibility that the actual garments of the period were randomly draped and only the representations required such rigid formality, but the arresting elegance of the sculptured clothes makes this somehow seem unlikely. At any period, representations in art of fashionably dressed figures obviously have firm roots in some practical sartorial ideal; a high degree of stylization is never completely at odds with the actual contemporary mode of rendering cloth into garments. Archaeological study has unearthed the practice of finger-pleating wool, which by the sixth century was woven thinly enough to take such handling, the pleats then being stiffened with size or glue. The regular, wavy edge visible on the sculptured dresses may not merely be
1.8 APOLLODORUS OF PHOCAEA
second century B.C.
Draped Female Figure

stylized drift but may represent the finished weft edge of the cloth, where the warp threads are turned back into the weave and thus create a scalloped pattern.

The striking fact that Archaic male statues are often completely naked, whereas female figures are always completely dressed, also had its origins in custom. Since notions of modesty demanded clothes for women, artists had to develop separate techniques for representing the two sexes in sculpture. Male nudity became a subject on which the plastic imagination could dwell with great intensity, producing an evolving dynamic image charged with readiness for the changes it was to undergo. The hidden Archaic female body, on the other hand, a more static and simplified shape, was inseparable from its formal garments, somehow incapable of energy without the drapery. It is this female body, by custom requiring a concealing dress, that made drapery a sculptural necessity for the Greeks. Carved clothes for women began with solid, blocklike tunics almost devoid of folds and proceeded through the linear patterns covering the bodies of the Acropolis maidens to the amazing sophistications that begin
to develop in the fifth century. The male body, as we have seen, could
wear its drapery like a back cloth; but for centuries the female shape had
to show through clothes or not appear. The cloth, although fairly inde-
pendent of the male body, thus had to be used expressly to help model
feminine shapes, as anatomical realism for both sexes gradually gained as-
cendancy as a sculptural ideal. Then came the breathtaking variety of
draped female figures in Greek sculptures—Nikes and maenads in motion,
staid deities in repose, ladies wrapped for walking, women fastening
clasps, clutching skirts, drawing aside veils, and huddling in cloaks.

Male figures are, of course, frequently shown clothed, sometimes even
completely shrouded, and an even greater variety of garments appears on
them than on women. But for the male, who need not be covered, the
function of the drapery could be entirely to express the character and sta-
tus of the man. Therefore a naked man clothed only in his strength,
beauty, or divinity appears distinct from a naked man wearing ornamental
or supportive cloth draped over one arm or flying behind him. For the
Greeks, that drapery represented real clothing with specific meaning, and
the absence of all drapery was equally significant. For subsequent periods,
the attendant drapery of the nude in art was a visionary generalization in-
voking antiquity, not a reference to antique practice.

Pictorial representation of drapery in later Western art clearly derives
from the sculpture of antiquity and not from its painting. Separate con-
ventions existed in Classical art for the two-dimensional rendering of
drapery, as comparison of sculpture with vase or wall painting quickly
shows (I.9). Although related to the sculpture of each period, two-di-
ensional cloth in Greek and Roman art was conceived on its own terms
and never made to look as if it might have been carved. That habit was
reserved for later centuries, during which the attempts to render the
three-dimensional look of folds in sculpture were echoed in painting and
graphic art.

On the Greek vase paintings the lines indicating hanging folds or
bunched material appear unnaturalistic when compared with sculptured
solutions to the same problems dating from the same time. The vase
painters seem to have stylized the cloth more than the anatomy, for which
the use for foreshortening was developed in the fifth century without an
analogous technique for making the drapery seem more real. Three di-
ensions were evidently considered necessary for the fully developed nat-
uralistic rendering of cloth. In two dimensions obvious schemes of
stylization were maintained. There is often a certain lack of definition in
the course of the painted folds or the outline of the hems, although exe-
cuted elegantly and expertly, which the sculptor never permitted himself. Neo-Classical linear styles of drawing, which later imitated the antique, usually made the mistake of following through each fold with a thoroughness the Greeks reserved for sculpture. Free, delicate, almost calligraphic lines indicating drapery are to be found on Greek vases of all periods and show the persistence of a graphic tradition unadulterated by sculptural values.

We lack, of course, a sense of the colors and patterns of Classical Greek clothes. These were worn off the originally polychromed statues, which thereafter were perceived in monochrome by subsequent centuries. Patterns appear on clothes in vase paintings, but the abstract technique makes them difficult to interpret; and, of course, the colors were limited to black and red, some yellow and white, and only rare touches of green and purple at a late date. Thus a strong visual conception of the true colors of the clothes of antiquity has been denied to later generations; our eyes have been most commonly instructed by stone-colored fragments and red-and-black vases. Documents tell of colors that are somehow unbelievable without visual examples.