

BOOK REVIEW

***Dressing Modern Frenchwomen: Marketing Haute Couture, 1919-1939.* Mary Lynn Stewart.** Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2008; xvii +305 pages; ISBN 0-801-88803-4; \$55.00US (cloth).

The copying and production of counterfeit haute couture garments dramatically increased in interwar France. Copiers devised a series of schemes in order to get patterns, fabric swatches and notions from couturier(e)s: hiring women to attend collections and sketch dresses from memory, having women pose as customers and buy designs, and hiring seamstresses away from rival design houses. By the 1930s, this widespread problem led designers to develop their own affordable ready-to-wear lines. Copying is an example of a tension in the French fashion industry of the interwar period, between preserving the prestige and distinction of haute couture designs and a mounting demand for affordable, ready made Parisienne fashion. Stewart's *Dressing Modern Frenchwoman* documents this tension which resulted in the gradual democratization of French fashion in the interwar period. This story of French fashion's adaptation to modernity intersected with the appearance of a modern "new woman" in couture publicity and the subtle shifts she underwent in fashion periodicals and department store catalogues. Stewart characterizes this as a period of "hybrid" modernity where women negotiated their modern roles as consumers, workers and sportives in conversation with a more demure and passive femininity. Fashion and the fashion press were critical to this process of adaptation, offering new models of femininity and feminine dress, as well as advice on how to find or make affordable Parisienne garments. It is through this process of negotiation, between the buyers and sellers of fashion, periodicals and couturier(e)s, "new" and "traditional" femininities, that high fashion became accessible to a wider audience.

Stewart argues that fashion is a process of "refusal and acceptance": a dynamic relationship between producers and consumers who accept only those styles which fit their needs and budgets. In doing so, Stewart puts to rest the widespread (and well worn) assumption that designers and fashion periodicals impose their will on female consumers. Evidence from a range of periodicals shows that women of all classes consumed Parisienne style. Where elite periodicals were more likely to promote transgressive fashions of the 1920s, like Chanel's little black dress or Elsa Schiaparelli's West African motifs, their middle-class counterparts endorsed more moderate and affordable designs.

Further evidence of women's sartorial strategies is found in periodicals which counselled women on sewing, mending, and adding embellishment to extend the life of their clothing. Behind the scenes of couture houses, we see female workers of all classes negotiating,

and sometimes fighting, to work their way up the fashion industry's hierarchy. Stewart concludes with a crisp and engaging examination of the "new woman," a hybrid, sometimes feminist figure who incorporated masculine cuts and fabrics into her feminine wardrobe. Periodicals offer further evidence of the fluidity of the new woman's gender roles, endorsing feminine embellishments while at the same time emphasising the "practicality" of simpler cuts, colours and fabrics.

A discussion of the ways in which relations among women contributed to hybrid modernity would have further added to this study's analysis of women in interwar France. Overall, Stewart's book is suggestive of new methods and frameworks for exploring consumption, feminism and popular culture. She has demonstrated that women used fashion to negotiate modernity and the shifting gender dynamics of interwar France.

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