Dressing Modern Frenchwomen: Marketing Haute Couture, 1919-1939. By Mary Lynn Stewart. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. 328 pp. $55.00 cloth.

Much more than an analysis of the marketing of couture during the interwar years, Mary Lynn Stewart's *Dressing Modern Frenchwomen: Marketing Haute Couture, 1919-1939* is an exhaustive study of every conceivable aspect of the high fashion industry, from designers to seamstresses to factory workers; from fashion magazine covers to copyright laws; from the sanctified space of the showroom to the strategic chaos of the department store. What makes this multidisciplinary study most exciting is its fluid interweaving of history and feminist analysis and the way it returns, again and again, to representations of haute couture as they circulated in popular culture. Because Stewart's book takes as its subject one very specific aspect of modern fashion—the new silhouette of women's suits and day dresses—she has room to interrogate rigorously all the cultural weight carried by this simplified, slenderized vision of female dress. Variously seen as symbolic of a shift in gendered bodies, in class-based access to fashion, and in the manufacture and dissemination of that fashion, the modern silhouette emerges in this admirable study as more than able to bear the weight of all this cultural meaning.

The book is divided into four parts. The first two consider haute couture from the production side, the middle focuses on marketing, and the final part examines consumption. Part One, "Gender, Genius and Publicity, " discusses couturiers and couturieres from the 1860s through the 1930s; their strategies for branding their lines; and their decisions in regards to creating the clothes—materials, designs, accessories—and showcasing them in magazines and the popular press. In her analysis of the major houses' publicity strategies, Stewart offers a compelling examination of the relationship between designers and fashionable women, a relationship which betrays popular notions of designers imposing their will

on hapless consumers. Through a study of women's magazines—from high fashion monthlies to more modest weeklies—she theorizes a collaborative relationship between designers and the women who wear their fashions, a "shifting amalgamation of inspiration, imitation, and institutionalization" (47). Fashion magazines, as vehicles for not only disseminating fashion, but advising women on how to wear it, both confirmed and expanded women's notions of self. Stewart explains: "Fashion arbiters believed that readers liked the idea of presenting different personas but did not want to abandon the notion of a core self" (50).

Most interestingly, Stewart analyzes the evolution of the modern magazine cover as it was imagined and marketed toward an "ideal" reader, a reader that she convincingly demonstrates was in fact created by those covers. These cover models, athletic and non-maternal, engaged in adventures and daring pursuits, such as piloting airplanes, appear alone or with other women, and are never shown with male companions, reflecting modern conceptions of women as autonomous. More specifically, they show resistance on the part of contemporary French women to increased state pressure in the wake of the Great War to have and raise large families.

Part Two, "Business and the Workplace," looks at the manufacture of haute couture as well as ready-to-wear fashions during the interwar years. The first half examines the effects of World War I and economic crisis on the industry as it struggled first with war-time deprivation in terms of quality and quantities of available textiles, and then with the loss of export and domestic business during the Great Depression, when dressing to show wealth was considered in bad taste. The second half explores the human toil behind haute couture. There's nothing surprising in Stewart's account of the grueling working conditions of over a million people employed in the haute couture industry in the mid-1920s—the disparity between consumers of luxury goods and the people who make them has been well documented, and continues today. What makes her account so interesting is her detailing of the gender hierarchies of these factories, and efforts by feminist labor leaders to resolve gaps in pay between male and female laborers.

Part Three, "Democratizing Fashion," begins by describing the lengths to which couturiers/couturieres went in order to keep their fashions from being copied, including trying to get ordinances passed prohibiting the taking of color photographs of women wearing their clothing at public events, or of models in shop windows. As clothing became simpler, obviously, counterfeiting expanded exponentially, with sketch artists hidden in the crowds at fashion shows furiously copying designs and even stealing swatches of fabric or the fringe off of dresses in order to produce more faithful counterfeit garments. Unable to stem the tide of copies, haute couture ultimately acquiesced, Stewart explains, and designers began marketing their own ready-to-wear clothing. The development of the confection in-

dustry, then, brought haute couture-esque fashion to department stores, the history of which Stewart traces in one of the most fascinating chapters of the book. She shows how Parisienne fashions moved into the provinces via smaller branches of the major Parisian department stores like Au Bon Marché. Popular women's novels naturalized the connection between Parisienne fashion and sophistication through the trope of small town heroines adapting to metropolitan life simply by learning to dress the part. Would-be consumers unable to afford these fashions could sew them themselves, with the help of how-to columns and features on fabrics in women's weekly magazines ostensibly offered as tips to take to one's neighborhood seamstress. Stewart's narrative in this section brings together haute couture, confection, and textiles, showing the interdependence of the three industries and their mutual interest in each other's continued success.

Dressing Modern Frenchwomen's most important critical work happens in its final section, "Modern Women," which looks at cultural connotations of idealized modern womanhood. This section is not about the actual women who wore haute couture fashions; it is about the normative femininity modern haute couture promised access to for the women who desired and/or purchased it. However, the modernity of the New Woman, whose costume differed so dramatically from women of the Belle Epoque, immobilized by corsets and long, full skirts, was equivocal: "modernity implied active women with more opportunities and independence than their predecessors," but these women were emancipated only "as long as emancipation was understood in terms of economic and physical activities, not political rights" (157). As we all know, the mythical modern woman, whose bobbed hair and short skirts reflected newly found freedoms—political, sexual, and economic—existed almost exclusively as a commercial cultural construct; her "freedoms" had little impact on real women's lives. In this chapter Stewart interrogates this truism, digging through two decades of fashion press and advertisements for the phrases and buzz words most responsible for creating, commodifying, and circulating this fabled woman in popular culture.

Stewart describes the emergence of what she calls a "hybrid feminism" in Chapter Eight, "The Politics of Modern Fashion," as women who resisted identifying with feminists and suffragists nonetheless claimed the spoils of their struggles, living independently, having careers, eschewing motherhood, or at least identification with this single role. But it is in the next chapter, "The Gender of the Modern," that she gets to her major critical intervention, as she addresses a gap in feminist histories which overemphasize conservative male responses to the clothing of the New Woman. Whereas much has been made of the anxiety inspired by the "masculine" silhouette of the New Woman in post-war culture, as reflected in doomsday books with titles like *This Civilization Has No Sexes,* little attention has been

paid to what modern styles meant to fashion arbiters and to the fashionable Frenchwomen who wore them. The response Stewart culls from her survey of fashion writings is both surprising and obvious: fashion reporting and commentary by contemporary French women suggest that women embraced modern styles because they promised comfort and ease of mobility for bodies which had to move about cities, and participate in the public sector as workers. "Rather than lambaste the tubular look or lament its masculinizing effects, most fashion reporters described the new look as boyish, simple, and practical and defined emancipation as enabling bourgeois women to mount streetcars and walk city streets" (181).

Stewart ends her book with a complicated epilogue that flashes forward to the Vichy regime and the Occupation. Arguing that "Vichy fashion and representations of women overstate the contrast between fashions and images of femininity in the interwar years and under Vichy," she uses the epilogue to reach back into each preceding section and demonstrate a continuity in how fashionable women, the fashion press, and the fashion industry responded to the challenges and deprivations of the Great War, the ensuing economic crises, the Vichy regime and the Occupation. As a reader with an interest, but little training, in fashion history, I read this book with an appreciation for her comprehensive approach to interwar French fashion and especially, her focus on representations of women. The epilogue, however, transformed what I had perceived to be an exhaustive historical overview into a moving argument for the viability of fashion as a dense historical node, joining politics, material culture, gender relations, and art.

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