

Book Reviews

Comptes rendus de livres

Alexandra Palmer, *Couture and Commerce: The Transatlantic Fashion Trade in the 1950s*

SARAH JOHNSON

Palmer, Alexandra. *Couture and Commerce: The Transatlantic Fashion Trade in the 1950s*. Vancouver: UBC Press with Royal Ontario Museum, 2001. vii + 351 pp., illus., paper, ISBN 0774808276; cloth, \$65, ISBN 0774808268.

Alexandra Palmer begins her seminal new study, *Couture and Commerce: The Transatlantic Fashion Trade in the 1950s*, by attributing memory and feeling to clothing. The ephemerality of these associations has limited the scope of previous studies in what has been variously termed costume, dress, or fashion history. Palmer readily combines object-based analysis of garments employed by museum curators with a full-scale historical interpretation of the production, exportation, consumption, and in some cases, re-use of European couture by English-Canadian women in Toronto from 1945 to 1960.

The maturation of material culture studies has provided the framework that this new type of scholarship embodies, and moves away from less critical approaches. A brief bibliographic review for this essay underscored the need for solid, contextual analyses and focused case studies, not rambling volumes of dress history, covering thousands of years in the most general terms. Elizabeth Ann Coleman's 1989 publication, *The Opulent Era: Fashions of Worth, Doucet and Pingat*, was a major departure from Ruth Lynum's 1972 *Couture: An Illustrated History of the Great Paris Designers and their Creations*, and provides a marker for how far scholarship has developed. Palmer's research will clearly raise the bar for scholars of couture, by providing a model for future interpretive studies.

Palmer cited some of the models of interpretation taken by previous scholars: the lives and lifestyles of couturiers; the artistic design process; celebrity clients; couture fashion photography; fashion as art; and designer as artist. She has

improved upon these interpretive models by providing substantive, meticulous historical research driven by nuances found in garment analyses, and left out of fashion history books that have been written with a more popular, gossipy tone. The tides are turning, as books such as *Couture and Commerce* add to the 2000 Rhode Island School of Design publication *From Paris to Providence: Fashion, Art, and the Tirocchi Dressmakers' Shop, 1915-1947*, another extensive study of the transference of European couture to North America in the twentieth century.

By focusing on "what garments meant in the context of international fashion systems after World War II," Palmer provides archival evidence to document each step in the complex process from fabrication to re-use. In doing so, she challenges previous, especially Marxist-based assumptions that couture garments were frivolous, disposable consumer items to the women who wore them. What she discovered was the role that these clothes played in society women's working lives, albeit unpaid voluntary positions in the arts and social services. Oral histories of women who wore these clothes give voice to a generation silenced and sequestered by class-based appropriateness of behavior. In this way, Palmer gained entry into the world of couture, which has been carefully cloaked in mystique, which translates into objective scholarship.

Good interdisciplinary studies approach their subject critically and from numerous perspectives. Indeed, this book's chapters work their way through the life span of couture — from its manufacture in the European houses, through the exportation regulations of luxury goods, to retail marketing of it in North America, passed on to the Canadian women who consumed these clothes, and what their consumption expressed locally, in terms of socio-economic stability and personal taste. As Palmer notes, many previous studies in the

history of clothing isolate an aspect of clothing — its designer, its aesthetic value or style, its advertising — without the context of the cyclical nature of the production of a commodity, seen through to its consumption. Business history is rarely visited as an aspect of fashion history, as if the magic of “*la mode*” will dissipate if the practical realities of production and merchandising are exposed. Palmer’s study is an excellent example of bringing all aspects of couture together, and while the study is limited in its historical and geographical scope, it overwhelmingly succeeds as a focused case study of a post-war luxury market.

The post-Second World War period of Palmer’s study witnessed enormous transformation of the clothing industry, as more women chose *prêt-à-porter*, or high-end ready-to-wear clothing in favour of the time-consuming fittings and financial investment required by orthodox couture. In many ways, couture is about as anti-modernist a cultural form as possible, based on the customization

paradigm of production. So, couture spun in an age of rampant post-Second World War modernism expresses Palmer’s theoretical chutzpah. In *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), Andreas Huyssen argues that women have historically been associated with mass culture and men with authentic culture (p. 47). Indeed, this stance would explain why women have so pervasively been interpreted as mindless consumers, historically. What Palmer clearly states in her work is that couture was not simply “imposed from above” (Huyssen, p. 48) within the patriarchy of couturiers but rather carefully chosen to reflect personal and regional sensibilities. It is ironic that even within celebrity-obsessed popular culture, there exists a love-hate relationship with society women and by researching and writing this book, Palmer rescues these women from almost invisible status as couture consumers.

Linda B. Arthur, ed., *Undressing Religion: Commitment and Conversion from a Cross-Cultural Perspective*

PAMELA E. KLASSEN

Arthur, Linda B., ed. *Undressing Religion: Commitment and Conversion from a Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Dress, Body, Culture Series. Oxford, New York: Berg Publishing, 2000. xiv + 220 pp., illus., paper, £14.99, ISBN 1859734804; cloth, \$100, ISBN 1859734758.

Undressing Religion: Commitment and Conversion from a Cross-Cultural Perspective is a collection of essays about the significance and uses of dress in situations of religious contact, conflict, and change. From a range of methodological and disciplinary perspectives including anthropology, costume history, clothing and textiles design, art history, and museum studies, the articles treat a wide selection of topics including the clothing of the *Iwa* (spirits) in Haitian Vodou, the “dress magic” of the Catholic Marist Brothers, and the intersection of religion and class in Afghan women’s dress practices under Taliban rule. As part of Berg’s growing Dress, Body, Culture series, *Undressing Religion* offers further testimony to the valuable utility of dress as a site for the analysis of gender, class, and cultural identity (among other issues) in religious contests over meaning and power.

The volume begins with a short introduction by the editor, Linda Arthur, and moves quickly to a collection of twelve articles, which I will describe briefly. Elisha P. Renne’s “Cloth and Conversion: Yoruba Textiles and Ecclesiastical Dress” considers the blend of traditional Yoruba textiles with Roman Catholic dress codes, arguing that post-Vatican II nuns who use traditional textiles in European-style habits are seeking a balance between Yoruba and Catholic identities. In contrast to Renne’s field work based perspective, Shannen Hill utilizes museum collections, as well as ethnographic and contemporary autobiographical writings, to argue that dress and ritual displayed the continuity of BaKongo cosmology in the independent Christian movements associated with African prophets Simon Kimbangu and Simon Mpadi. In Hill’s argument, cloth, colour, and gesture carried meaning in unspoken ways, conveying religious continuity despite Kimbangu’s overt repudiation of BaKongo religion. In the last African-related essay, Susan Tselos discusses the significance of ritual garments as symbols of unity and markers of the *Iwa* in Haitian Vodou.

The next two essays also deal with Christian themes, and offer a helpful comparison to the