

# INTRODUCTION

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Once appreciated merely for its glamorous allure and regularly dismissed as frivolous and shallow, fashion is now thriving as a subject of serious academic inquiry that has attracted scholars working across a range of fields to explore dress in relation to culture, history, politics, and identity.<sup>1</sup> As Elizabeth Wilson has influentially observed, fashion is “a cultural phenomenon” and “an aesthetic medium for the expression of ideas, desires and beliefs circulating in society” (9). “Fashion may then be understood as ideological,” she continues, “its function to resolve formally, at the imaginary level, social contradictions that cannot be resolved” (9). Both the ideological functions of fashion and its power as an aesthetic medium are evidenced by the fact that, over the last several decades, dress has emerged as a dynamic catalyst for new approaches to literature, art, design, and related forms of representation. In the French context in particular, scholars have productively linked fashion to expressions of what is often described as “modernity,” a term that evokes rupture, a break with the past, whether actual or perceived.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the present volume

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1. Currently design colleges and museums are spearheading academic efforts to interrogate fashion’s myriad ideological, social, and historical functions. The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, for instance, has organized recent colloquia and published excellent exhibition catalogs on fashion’s intersections with queerness, black identity, and the environment, among other important and timely subjects.

2. The body of scholarship on fashion and French modernity is robust and reflects a wide range of disciplinary perspectives and ideological concerns. For reasons of space, the following list of relevant titles is limited to book-length studies only (full references given at the end of this introduction): Elizabeth Amann, *Dandyism in the Age of Revolution*; Heidi Brevik-Zender, *Fashioning Spaces*; Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims*; Alison Matthews David, *Fashion Victims*; Mary E. Davis, *Ballets Russes Style and Classic Chic*; Rhonda K. Garelick, *Rising Star*; Gloria Groom (ed.), *Impressionism, Fashion, and Modernity*; Susan Hiner, *Accessories to Modernity*; Simon Kelly and Esther Bell (eds.), *Degas, Impressionism, and the Paris Millinery Trade*; Marni Reva Kessler, *Sheer Presence*; Ulrich Lehmann, *Tigersprung*; Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché*; Philippe Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie*; Mary Lynn Stewart, *Dressing Modern Frenchwomen*; Hannah Thompson, *Naturalism Redressed*; Nancy J. Troy, *Couture Culture*; Caroline Weber, *Queen of Fashion*. Of note is Valerie Steele’s *Paris*



situates modernity as the era beginning with the philosophical interventions of the Enlightenment and lasting through the postwar 1920s, a span of years that were marked in France by radical social changes and transformations of thought that those living through the period, as well as those reflecting upon it later, often associated with the newness—the modernness—that fashion evokes and embodies.

*Fashion, Modernity, and Materiality in France: From Rousseau to Art Deco* mines the complexities of fashion—its artistic appeal, its problematic associations with superficiality and hypocrisy, its relationships to affective and corporeal human experience, to name a few—to create an intellectually significant interchange that uses dress to inspire new ways of thinking about the history of modernity, the body, material culture, and how they were represented in France during this period. Nine chapters illuminate reciprocal relationships between fashion and a range of media, including literary fiction, poetry, paintings, moral treatises, decorative arts, satirical literature, fashion magazines, mass-circulating newspapers, popular theatrical works, advertisements, and material objects. The research presented here revolves around a specific constellation of themes—fashion, modernity, and materiality from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries—offering historical coherence and depth of focus. At the same time, the chapters adopt a range of approaches, drawing on a variety of theoretical viewpoints including deconstruction, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, sociology, and gender theory. The book examines garments in connection to an array of subjects, from the performance of sexual identity to the trauma of war and efforts at post-war recovery, from the blurring of class distinctions to the gendering of different forms of labor, from evolving technologies of printing to modern techniques of painting and narrating. Several key questions framing this collection remain relevant today: What separates and connects clothing and the lived body? How do garments hold traces of the past and activate memories of human experience? What roles do clothing and adornment play in expressing gender identity? How does fashion help to define what it meant and what it means to be modern?

As the book's title indicates, the following chapters address in various ways fashion's *materiality*, that is, the fact that objects of dress are "things," as Bill Brown might term them, that are endowed with a physical, material presence. Recent scholarship in material culture studies has examined how people engage with objects to help situate themselves in society and also as a part of the formation of collective cultural memory. There is a reciprocal relationship between experience and objects in that, as has been argued, "matter (objects) can act upon subjects (people) through material and sensorial engagement as much as people can change and act upon matter" (Witcomb 44). In studying the impact of clothing on how individuals come into contact with the world, sociologist Joanne Entwistle (2000) understands

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*Fashion*, a landmark in the scholarly treatment of fashion, now in its third edition. See also the pioneering special issue of the journal *L'Esprit Créateur* entitled *Fashion and Fashionability in French and Francophone Culture* (1997).

the dressed body as “a discursive and phenomenological field” (326). For her, “the body and dress operate dialectically: dress works on the body, imbuing it with social meaning, while the body is a dynamic field that gives life and fullness to dress” (327). Linking the sociological with the historical and the art historical in her examination of the nineteenth-century crinoline, Lynda Nead (2013) writes that “time, history and memory are all folded into the meaning of clothes” and, following Entwistle, argues that clothed bodies “can evoke memories and the past, as much as the constant change of the present” (502). Dress is a trigger for memory in part because it is a material instantiation of the past.

As the present volume argues, the fact that certain fashions during the historical period in question were as familiar to cultural producers and consumers as the clothes on their backs contributed to fashion’s efficacy in invoking generalizable concerns. Accordingly, some chapters emphasize single items of dress that, during these years, would have been commonly encountered as a part of everyday life: chapter 2 is concerned with hats, chapter 3 examines gloves, chapter 6 explores veils, and chapter 7 considers military uniforms. In other essays particular dress items are highlighted as emblematic of specific forms of sexual, gendered, class, and racial identities, including the fop’s wigs and toiletries (chapter 1), spinning skirts and bonnet ribbons (chapter 4), garments made of cotton from overseas colonies (chapter 5), servants’ neo-aristocratic-age livery (chapter 7), and the modernist fedora (chapter 9). If the scholars in this collection understand items of attire in symbolic terms and approach them through literary, art historical, design, and cultural critique, they also draw on studies that focus on textile and garment manufacturing practices, as well as on historical developments in methods of production. Linking the material histories of clothing objects to their textual and pictorial depictions in art and culture, this book thereby forms a bridge between the important work accomplished by those who research material garments and those who take representations of them in novels, artworks, exhibitions, and plays as their primary areas of investigation.

The following chapters recognize fashion’s historical associations with luxury, with aristocratic and high-society lifestyles, and with elegance, pleasure, and beauty, but they are also attentive to the array of sobering concerns equally ingrained in this epoch of France’s past. If this was an exhilarating period characterized by thrilling forms of entertainment, advancements in technologies of communication and circulation, and creative revolutions, it was also a volatile time of labor and class struggle, gender and sexual discrimination, violent conflict, and national trauma. Against this backdrop, haute couture and the ready-to-wear clothing industries emerged as important markets and cultural exports just as their transforming production and consumption processes embedded themselves in France’s evolving habits, its relationships to its own history, and its emergent performances of gendered, sexual, and class identities. In her groundbreaking analysis theorizing an intersection of race and fashion at what she calls the “second skin,” Anne Anlin Cheng (2011) declares that “it may not be too much of an overstatement to say that

the material and metaphysical boundary of the human body—and, by implication, what constitutes the human—forms one of the central philosophical concerns of the twentieth century” (8). If Cheng’s study focuses on style and racial sexualization in relation to the (un)clothed body of Josephine Baker and is thus interested primarily with the period of modernism between the two World Wars, the present volume suggests that the philosophical concerns that Cheng cites had antecedents prior to modernism. As the authors in this volume show, the presence of dress in both demarcating and troubling categories of the human—as citizen, as man or woman, as living or uncanny, for example—were already informing the cultural production of modernity, when garments were called upon to conjure embodied anxieties, desires, and fantasies of the nation.

Practices and functions of dress, then as now, were far from standardized, given that fashions have diverse meanings that can be layered, shifting, ambiguous, and even contradictory. For instance, in chapter 8 by Áine Larkin, the form-fitting, buttoned, and braided livery donned by footmen in Marcel Proust’s magnum opus *À la recherche du temps perdu* emphasizes the ornamental but socially subordinate role played by these attractive male servants in early twentieth-century moneyed Parisian circles. At the same time, as Nicholas White reveals in chapter 7, similar types of decorated men’s garments, namely military uniforms, took on a radically different set of ominous, violent, and, as he terms it, “polymorphous” social and sexual connotations when worn by soldiers marching into battle, as depicted in the popular illustrated press, in Émile Zola’s 1892 war novel *La Débâcle*, and in paintings and mass-produced lithography. Pointing to discursive connections between servant and military uniforms, these chapters illuminate how two turn-of-the-century, tailored masculine fashion items with comparable ornamented appearances could in fact enact a number of contrasting modern concerns.

Another subject brought to the fore throughout this volume might be called “traces of the (in)human,” or instances where slippage occurs across the not-so-fixed categories of the living and the nonliving. Chapter 5 and Cary Hollinshead-Strick’s chapter 4 both perform close readings of fictional works that center on uncanny figures including beautifully attired corpses and mummies. These two chapters, examining Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and Théophile Gautier’s *Le Roman de la momie*, respectively, illustrate how representations in novels of human residue left on worn garments reveal an authorial attentiveness to tensions between the animate and the inanimate. They join Marni Reva Kessler’s discussion in chapter 6 of the spectral qualities of the veil and the unexpected way it may function simultaneously as both a presence and an absence; Susan Hiner’s examination in chapter 2 of *marottes*, artificial yet realistic-looking mannequin heads used in the creation of ladies’ hats; and Anne Green’s chapter 3 study of gloves as objects that, for some writers, caused hands to resemble statues and troubled boundaries between flesh and fabric. Pierre Saint-Amand’s opening chapter on the extravagantly dressed eighteenth-century petit-maitre fop shows that through his hypercivility, this paragon of male fashion was likened less to a man than to a kind of mechanized

puppet. As Saint-Amand reveals, the *petit-maitre's* distinctive, exaggerated physical gestures of self-beautification and identity performance led some contemporaries to compare him to a marionette, an automaton, and even a mechanical being from another world. Collectively these analyses suggest the ways in which conceptions of the organic and the inorganic had come to overlap in this period, reflecting preoccupations of an age informed by rising technologies that seemed increasingly to confuse distinctions between human and nonhuman, between (wo)man and machine.

Following welcome trends in scholarship to provide a balanced gendered perspective on fashion, an additional feature of this volume is its substantive treatment of both female and male attire.<sup>3</sup> In the case of the former, Marni Reva Kessler's analysis of Impressionist Claude Monet's painting *The Beach at Trouville* focuses on the veil, offering a detailed reading of the materiality of both veil and pigment in this image of the artist's wife Camille and her female companion. Kessler illuminates how Monet played with interchanges among skin, fabric, and shadow, and argues that representing this ladies' accessory and its effects was key to the artist's developing a hybrid haptic-visual expression in his feminocentric beach scene. Also concerned with womenswear, Susan Hiner concentrates on the figure of the *modiste*, or female hatmaker, a popular character on the vaudeville stage and in mass-circulating fashion imagery. Exposing the ubiquity of the *modiste* as a polyvalent symbol of modernity, Hiner's chapter teases out links between representations of hats and the women who wore and constructed them, calling attention to the overlooked *modiste* and demonstrating her relevance to the scholarship of both women's history and material culture.

Focusing on masculine attire, Pierre Saint-Amand examines the social anxieties provoked by confusions of gender and sexual identity performed by the *petit-maitre*, a precursor to later elegant male types such as the Italian *macaroni* and the Directory-era *incroyable*. For the Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and other moralizing authors of the period, this proto-dandy figure represented a disquieting intermingling of feminine and masculine traits. On stage, in literature, and in satirical texts the *petit-maitre* thereby came to be targeted as the embodiment of larger perceived threats, not just to modern virtue but also to the nation-state itself. Nicholas White, in his essay on military uniforms, turns toward displays of masculine identity that emerged against the tense backdrop of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Taking inspiration from theoretical writings on homosociality by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and on homoeroticism by Sharon Marcus, White explores a range of textual and pictorial examples of male soldiers, wherein nationalistic ideologies are complicated by homoerotic undertones that communicate deep fissures in the politics of Republican fraternity during the first decades of the Third Republic. In chapter 9, focusing on the Art Deco period, John Potvin calls attention

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3. Recent groundbreaking work by Rachel Mesch to examine clothing's relation to transgender identity in nineteenth-century France promises to enrich future research on connections between gender and dress.



to displays of menswear at the 1925 and 1928 World Expositions, examining the turn toward industrialism and rationalism in France's national restoration efforts following World War I. These efforts, Potvin reveals, drew on attempts to increase consumption of French-made men's fashions, whereby objects of masculine attire, such as the iconic fedora, came to represent in material form France's presumed cultural preeminence as well as its postwar ambitions for economic expansionism.

The labor of fashion is another theme considered by multiple chapters in this collection. Susan Hiner's discussion of the *marotte*, a *modiste's* essential tool of production, concentrates on the liminal status of the female laborers who were the primary manufacturers of hats but were also those most subject to commodification by a fashion system that simultaneously employed and objectified them. Anne Green's chapter examining gloves as material objects and as symbolic items in literature includes a discussion of the evolution of glove construction and its impact on the demographics of work. Green traces how an explosive rise in consumer demand for gloves throughout the 1800s provoked a range of changes, including glove-manufacturing jobs for provincial women, a nationwide need for more leather (and thus livestock farming), and the fabrication of new inventions such as glove sizing, cutting, and folding machines. The history of glove making, which was predominantly artisanal before the nineteenth century and became one of mass production in the following era, represents trends occurring more generally to social labor practices in the increasingly industrialized French economy.

In her chapter, Cary Hollinshead-Strick links work to literary creation, examining how fashion served as a longstanding leitmotif in Théophile Gautier's reflections about the transforming labor of writing. As a journalist Gautier profited firsthand from innovations such as the rotary printing press, a technology adopted from the fabric-decorating industry that enabled increased production of inexpensive mass-circulation newspapers. The recurrence of fashionable spinning women in Gautier's fiction and poetry echoes the whirl of the industrial printing press, a trope through which Hollinshead-Strick tracks the author's ambivalence about ever-blurring lines between "high-art" literary production and what he viewed as the nonaesthetic business of commercial journalism. For Áine Larkin, tensions between the labors of art and of domestic service are central to Marcel Proust's fashion-laden representation of alternately rigid and shifting social stratifications in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Citing social theory by Proust's contemporary Thorstein Veblen and expanding the concept of work across gender lines and to include different categories of laborers such as the high-class prostitute, footman, cook, and maid, Larkin uncovers the ways in which Proust's nostalgic anxieties about social instabilities manifest in classed spaces—vertical staircases and horizontal railway platforms—and through outfits that both democratize and reinforce social and economic privilege. In his chapter John Potvin underscores the work of Parisian tailors to produce elegant garments for the modern man of the 1920s and to position themselves as leading manufacturers of menswear against the dominance that had traditionally been held by British suit makers. By capitalizing on the rational, stabilizing, industrialized

aesthetics of masculine fashion following the war, Potvin demonstrates, French government officials, journalists, and tailors sought to tap into the male garment industry in an attempt to enlarge their cultural and commercial predominance in national and international markets.

Questions of race and ethnicity in relationship to spectacle, performance, and the fashioned body are also central to this volume's organization. These overlapping issues, here termed "ideologies of color" with a nod to the volume's sartorial subject matter, were informed by global encounters that took place as international travel for pleasure and its criminal twin, colonization, soared to unprecedented levels during this period of French empire building and border crossing. Under these conditions dress increasingly operated to bring issues of race and ethnicity to the fore. They come into play, as the chapter by Pierre Saint-Amand demonstrates, in Michel-Étienne Descourtilz's travel narrative *Voyage d'un naturaliste* (1809) featuring the Haitian petit-maître Joseph, whose black skin further destabilizes the opulently dressed fop's already ambiguous sexual identity. They are seen, Susan Hiner indicates, on the vaudeville stage, in the upending presence of a blackface (and cross-dressed) actor in *L'Art de ne pas monter sa garde*, a nineteenth-century farce set in a milliner's studio. They are alluded to, Cary Hollinshead-Strick submits, in racially essentializing caricatures of Chinese visitors to the 1867 Paris Exposition, which connect by way of a popular hairstyle to modish Parisian women and illuminate links between Gautier's orientalist fiction and his writings on modern fashion. And they are present, chapter 5 shows, in George Sand's 1832 novel *Indiana*, in which the title character's creole maid dons her white mistress's dress, wearing it "incorrectly" and then suffering a tragic end portended by the incompatibility between her racially coded body and her borrowed ball gown. The fact that ideologies of color emerge across this volume rather than appearing in a single isolated chapter demonstrates both their cultural presence during the period in history that the book examines and their broad inclusion in current academic discussions.

Finally, several chapters explore the notion of representation itself, delving into the ways that fashion served as a potent catalyst for period reflections on the very processes by which literature and art were imagined and executed. How did authors and artists conceptualize the methods by which they produced their works? Where in the final creation might the writer or painter leave evidence of his or her own aesthetic engagement and concerns? Marni Reva Kessler cites Sigmund Freud's concept of the contranym to unravel Monet's depiction of the veil as both a material item and an absence, as a garment as well as its own ineffable shadow. In this way, Kessler shows, Camille's veil captures Monet's interrogation of the art of painting itself, a form of visual expression that on one hand comprises physical substances such as pigment and stretched fabric and, on the other hand, materializes an endlessly signifying set of meanings for painter and viewer about the subjects that the work concomitantly represents. Chapter 5 draws on Jacques Derrida and Walter Benjamin to examine "the fashion trace" in novels by George Sand, Gustave Flaubert, and Guy de Maupassant. This work explores how depictions of marks on dress were used to



embed storytellers into their stories, suggesting a practice on the part of nineteenth-century novelists to use clothing less to achieve Baudelairean ephemerality and more to access the eternalness available in realist narration. In Anne Green's chapter, the force of the literary metaphor itself is made evident in the striking evolution of symbolic meaning that gloves undergo throughout the 1800s. If fiction writers first depended on gloves to suggest distinction, propriety, and honesty, by the end of the century the same accessories conveyed fears of violence, political unrest, and moral degeneration, amounting to what Green terms a "dystopian vision" of modern society. As writers of the period understood, it was the special potency of the figurative, the very symbolizing impetus of artistic expression itself, which enabled the articulation of their powerful social commentaries.

Invoking fashion's innovative spirit, this volume provides a new forum on dress in French modernity. As such it seeks to inspire future cross-disciplinary conversations in the scholarly study of dress that will continue to build on fashion's exceptional position at the junction of modernity and materiality.

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