

## Sources for Fashion History

Review of:

Peter McNeil, *Fashion: Critical and Primary Sources*, Berg, Oxford, 2009, Four Volumes. £550 hardback. No images. ISBN 978 1 84788 292 9

This mammoth four volume series, endorsed by the University of Technology, Sydney and Stockholm University (where McNeil has based his fashion history teaching in recent years) offers a clear, thoughtful and useful source book for studying the academic development of the field of dress history and fashion studies, with an emphasis on current critical debates. McNeil, explaining the function of this publication, notes the increasing numbers of students now undertaking university fashion history courses at all academic levels. This explosion of interest offers a clear commercial opportunity that the publisher, Berg, has long recognised.

McNeil clarifies that his intent in these volumes is firstly to show that the field has long had its own historiography, which he dates to 1860 and, secondly, that, today, fashion history/fashion studies is based across a series of academic spaces — social and economic history, anthropology, art history, sociology, marketing, feminist studies, queer theory, Victorian studies, psychology and psycho-analysis and more. The eye view is very largely Euro-American, with a glance towards Asia via India, China and Japan, with just one, well known, African - based text by Karen Tranberg Hansen, on the second hand clothing market in Zambia. McNeil explains the rationale behind text choices: either they 'synthesize dress and costume scholarship with broader understandings of historical time', or else offer current examination of a topic whilst also providing a methodological innovation, or opening up 'a significant new perspective on an established subject'. McNeil lays emphasis on the debates of the generation of historians, sociologists and economic historians who took up the issue of the function and social role of fashion in the early twentieth century and thereafter: Jacob Burckhardt, Weiner Sombart, Georg Simmel and Matilda Hain. McNeil writes that his texts are 'offered as a critique of the 'triumphal' mode of dress history which creates a type of Darwinian lineage of rapidly changing modes, lines and silhouettes'. This he abandons, seeing it as 'very partial'. Instead he offers a series of 'studies useful for comparative purposes, including sociological analysis of fashion dating back to the 1890s'. McNeil will be very familiar with these debates and sources. He is a well established dress historian. His books include *Shoes from Sandals to Sneakers*, 2006, co-written with Giorgio Riello and the 2010 Routledge *Fashion History Reader*, published just one year after this series.

This four volume Berg source book is a *tour de force* of collating and selection. There are more than one hundred texts set in their specific period and thematic place here. McNeil writes that '(r)ecently, the history of clothing has been the subject of intense scholarly interest, but there has been a shortage of source material available. This four volume collection redresses the balance, bringing together rare documents and unpublished manuscript material in both reset and facsimile form'.

## The Four Volumes

Each volume starts with the same introductory general text which explains the rationale for the series, whilst each volume also has its own period introduction by McNeil. Thus, sensibly, each individual volume can stand on its own. In line with his rejection of chronological style study, McNeil is clear that: 'Fashion is a field that should more often refuse periodisation and instead allow perspectives from other eras, cultures and domains of knowledge to influence thinking and writing'. These volumes are inevitably arranged in a basic chronological order but beyond that each volume contains a series of key selected themes on the functioning of fashion, its shifting social role and cultural meanings, both written in the time period of each volume or thereafter. The hundred or so specialist authors McNeil has selected are well established, well published figures. Many of the texts are key and many familiar.

Volume One, *Late Medieval to Renaissance*, begins with Part 1, 'Graceful or Magnificent: Fashion and Aesthetics', with an initial 1992 text by Braudel, from his study of *Civilisation and Capitalism*, emphasising a theme which colours the entire four volumes, namely that 'at the very deepest levels of material life, there is at work a complex order, to which assumptions, tendencies, and unconscious pressures of economics, societies and civilisations all contribute'. This volume ends with an article by John Carpenter on the Kabuki aesthetic in Early Edo painting, with fascinating and unexpected comparisons to the male 'swagger' portraits of the period of Charles 1<sup>st</sup>.

Volume Two, *The Eighteenth Century*, also starts with critical theory on fashion of that century in its social and wider cultural context, with texts by Werner Sombart, 'an activist economic historian', Norbert Elias and Daniel Roche on the ideas of Diderot. McNeil lays stress in his introductory text on the notion that: 'fashion carries a highly significant aesthetic dimension that drives social change'. He notes that the fashion for printed cotton chintz (very well researched lately by Giorgio Riello with Parthasarath Prasanna and Rosemary Crill, Curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum, for example, though these texts are not included here) reflects a serious shift in behaviour towards the 'elegant but mannered simplicity of Enlightenment polite society'. McNeil acknowledges properly the art history based research of Aileen Ribeiro and Katie Scott and the meticulously researched, innovative social/economic history research of Beverly Lemire and John Styles. Despite McNeil's own stress on aesthetics, this volume as a whole contains very little on garments and style. It is of course a problem to deal with this when the entire four volumes have no images.

Volume Three, *The Nineteenth Century*, is laid out in three parts: Part 1 deals with 'Fashion and Urban Life'; Part 2, 'From Love of Finery to Honest Cloth' includes the role of dressmakers, dress reform, fallen women and fashion and ready-made menswear. Part 3, 'Nineteenth Century Fashion as Female Culture', deals with aspects of the cult of mourning, fashion journals, the *femme fatale* and the inevitable, oh so inevitable, corset debate, which seems to relentlessly fascinate. Thus the tight lacing debate of 1977 published in *the Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, is rehashed. It was proposed by Helene Roberts, based on the view that that most women conformed 'to the submissive ideal that men demanded' and that

many practised tight lacing to please them. This view was rebutted by David Kunzle, the same year and in the same journal. He declared tight lacing to be enjoyed only by a 'sadistically inclined minority of men'. Instead of exaggerating the historical importance of this debate, I would have preferred critical texts on issues of wider significance - the commercial expansion of Paris couture into a global trade by 1900 or something on dress and poverty – both of which are missing.

For Volume Four, *The Twentieth Century to Today*, McNeil highlights 'the social role of fashion in modern life', and starts with a run through the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century debates on the function of fashionable dress from Simmel, Flugel, and later from Bourdieu and Blumer, amongst others. Veblen is deliberately left out, with an alert critical explanation of this decision in McNeil's introductory text. Bogatyrev's 1937 text (which is unfortunately referenced to 1971, the date of its reprint by Mouton in The Hague) on *the Functions of Dress from Moravian Slovakia* is however included, a text which has proven to be lastingly important. It deals in depth with the specific functions of peasant dress in Central Europe, but sits here oddly as there is no coverage of nineteenth and twentieth century peasant, or regional dress in these volumes.

### **The value of Readers and Source books**

There has been a recent commercially-driven publishing fever for producing course and subject readers, though none in the fashion history field as general, all encompassing, and consequently costly, as this one. We have, for example, *Art History and Its Methods*, by Eric Fernie, *The Visual Culture Reader* by Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Film Studies Reader* by Peter Hutchings, *The Fashion Reader* by Linda Welters and Abby Lillethun, which covers fashion from pre history to global style in couture salon and high street, at £75 hardback. Since this huge Berg source book was published, McNeil has also co-edited with Giorgio Riello, a far more compact and cheaper Routledge text titled *the Fashion History Reader – Global Perspectives*. At £550, this Berg hardback four volumes set is clearly intended for library reference.

McNeil declares that his target readers range from teachers, researchers, under and post graduates to 'designers and in the case of this series to anyone interested in the field'. He adds, and this is clearly a truth, that his volumes 'will be of use to researchers from other fields such as social history, who want a closely directed entry route into the history of debates about fashion and dress'. The lack of images in these four volumes will disappoint many, including 'designers', but overall there is no doubt that these source book volumes will indeed provide teachers and students at all academic levels with a gold mine of research sources and triggers for essential critical discussion.

The eye view here is largely European, with a related thread of themes and period relationships with Asia and the inclusion of one well known text by Tranberg Hansen on the second hand clothing trade in Zambia. Across all four volumes McNeil embraces critical approaches drawn from sociology, economic and social history, semiotics, Victorian Studies, Feminist writing, Queer theory, art history, film studies, literature studies and more. This breadth of ransacked fields is an inevitable response to the blossoming of fashion history and fashion studies over the last twenty years within all these academic areas. McNeil is to be congratulated on his

courage in tackling and ordering all these texts into such one informative and useful coherent whole.

### Missing?

I have my whinges. Above all, McNeil chooses to leave out research methods and critical approaches based on material culture. I am biased here because my own dress history base lies in material culture analysis of the historical 'stories' to be pulled out from examination of the materiality of objects of clothing (sometimes even if they do not survive in the flesh.) Despite McNeil's statement that these volumes 'aim for a balance between some object-based studies informed by material-culture methodologies', only a few of his selected texts fall into this category and the term 'material culture' barely features throughout the four books. There are here no selected texts that explain what such an approach might be, nor what positives it adds to fashion history research.

Embedded in this absence is a lack of text which analyses the central role of the collecting, display and interpretation of dress within the development of the field of dress history, which I find entirely surprising. Most of us gain our visual image of the past of clothing through these sources. This failure to pay proper due to the critical work of museum curators and others who work from object assessment is sad to see. Published research by Lesley Miller, now at the V. and A. and Alexandra Palmer, from the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, for example, deserved space here. Thus information based on historical and current debates around collecting and curating is thin on the ground here too. One example worth retelling is the spat about tight lacing which took place in the 1930s and 40s period, between two leading English dress collectors, some thirty years before that of Roberts and Kunzle. This can be unearthed in books by Dr. C.W. Cunnington and Doris Langley Moore, two leading English dress collectors. Cunnington's Freudian-based fascination for the 'pelvic' role' caused by Edwardian corsetry and women's 'mating instinct' was set against Langley's Moore's view of tight lacing as simply 'somasochist fantasies'. In 1937, Cunnington provided historical examples of fashionable dress, including period corsets from his vast collection for use in the first ever BBC fashion history series of 1937. The garments were worn by live models. The graphic artist, Pearl Binder, (the mother of the writer of this review) sketched in front of the camera as the programmes were broadcast. She privately drew a cartoon of Dr. Cunnington's over enthusiastic interest in costume fittings, as models were being laced into Edwardian corsets. (The cartoon was presented to the BBC series producer, Mary Adams, see Figure 1.)

McNeil writes that fashion history 'constitutes an already large and sophisticated field of academic research, with contribution both from trained scholars and amateur writers'. He loves the term 'scholars' and uses it frequently. One wonders who the 'amateurs' are. Does it include oral historians, whose enlightening approaches to history and contemporary fashion research are also left out? Another term McNeil avoids surprisingly is 'interdisciplinary sources'. In reality, as his own eclectic and alert choice of texts verifies, that is the root of much of the lively, significant and current discussion he lays before us here. That such a compilation should today still largely leave out established material culture

approaches, which encourage students to go one step further and look closely at surviving garments and textiles, and related archives is finally a disappointment. Apart from that gap, however, this is a worthy and clearly useful publication. It will sit on the shelves of university libraries as a key and lasting reference source for fashion history for many years because, as intended it offers a valid, serious, orthodox, academic pathway into text-based fashion history research.



Figure 1 with kind permission from Sally Adams.

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