
Exchanging Clothes is the second volume of four from the series Habits of Being. As with the first volume, Accessorizing the Body, published in 2011, this publication includes articles translated and culled from those published in Abito e Identità: Ricerche di storia letteraria e culturale. The series is deliberately varied to appeal to a multicultural and interdisciplinary range of readers with the touchstone from which all these essays spring being fashion. Cristina Giorcelli in her final essay sums it up succinctly when she writes that the volume is about the “semantic valence of dress: its ability to speak out and speak up” (p. 259).

The initial introductory essay, written especially for this volume by Paula Rabinowitz, seeks out to loosely unite the disparate themes under the umbrella of what Karl Marx describes as “circulation of commodities” (p. 5). This idea of circulation swirls around exchange of clothes, exchange of accessories, exchange of eras, but most important, exchange of ideas. These thirteen essays range from Laura Montani’s discussion of clothes as their importance is perceived in the works of Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Ariosto to Katilin Medvedev’s deconstruction of a successful thrift store in Minneapolis.

Clothes can take on many meanings. They can empower an individual to move away from her traditional role as a wife and mother and experience an extraordinary day, as Christina Giorcelli illustrates in her scrutiny of Kate Chopin’s short story, “A Pair of Silk Stockings.” They can change a young life from girlish expectation to sophisticated poise as in Alice Grace Chase’s essay analyzing Audrey Hepburn movies from the fifties set in Paris. They can prove that a young journalist, Nelly Bly, can travel alone around the world with one small bag and one thoughtfully designed dress in less than eighty days, as described by Cristina Scatamacchia. They can provide an interesting tale of evolution as illustrated in Nello Barile’s essay on the history of the tie as a fetish in one age as a symbol of power in another. They can be used as illustrations on paperback covers of lesbian pulp fiction as a manual of how to dress and understand the undertones of particular types of dress that bring nuanced meaning to those who recognize it (essay by Paula Rabinowitz). They can delight by exploring the meaning of how a safety pin migrated from one of the accessories of punk rock culture to a Versace gown worn by Elizabeth Hurley in Vittoria Caratozzolo’s essay.

The above descriptions just touch upon the variety of provoking essays brought together in this volume.

The series is recommended for academic libraries and those institutions where Fashion is a serious discipline.

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