
The Mechanical Smile: Modernism and the First Fashion Shows in France and America, 1900-1929 is a treasure trove of documentation on the birth of the fashion show. Professor Caroline Evans tells the history of modeling in a series of fascinating anecdotal bits, which unfortunately seem to suffer from their overabundance. Often details and analysis are missed in favor of the next great archival find.

The book purports a chronological review in the first half, with deeper analysis in the second half; the introduction states that the story of fashion modeling finds meaning through "its commercial and cultural structures." However, the book fails in its claim to provide a technical discussion of economics and labor. The abrupt references to Benjamin and other cultural theorists, and their modernist concepts of replication and anonymity, seem tenuous without a broader context of the times.

The popular image of the "carefree" female mannequin is contrasted well with her slavish daily labors: she comes across like any modern service-industry worker, affecting a mood one does not feel after eight monotonous hours on one's feet. In other places the writing skims over contradictions: models created unique identities through stylized movements (p. 191), but simultaneously "effac[ed] their own personality" in the performance of a dress (p. 199). Deciding whether the job left mechanized labor and approached creative skill is left to the reader: the few mannequins quoted leave this question unanswered.

Fewer than ten pages are devoted to male modeling: in fact, men were the first living bodies of fashion, predating our viral marketing by over a century. Strangely, the male who had "to rent out his body" (p. 12) isn't rationalized or modernized in The Mechanical Smile: the history of the working mannequin reads as gendered by omission. In fact it was the gains in women's purchasing power at the time that made female modeling a career, ironically one that subjugated other women into anonymity and objectification.

At times, clarification is needed: for example, the book associates a decree by the haute couture board of Paris with its establishment in 1910-11 (p. 32), then later seems to indicate its issuing in 1945 (p. 256-7). Citations do not shed light on the ambiguity.

The Mechanical Smile shines as a compilation of primary sources in anecdote and image: magazines, advertisements, films, letters, and memoirs by designers. This book is a useful reference and lays the groundwork for more nuanced discussion. This project would be well served by a website: users could interact with the archival materials, appreciate the imagery in detail, and dig deeper into the stories that were merely touched upon in this printing.

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