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Maude Bass-Krueger and Sophie Kurkdjian, eds., *French Fashion, Women, and the First World War*. New York: Bard Graduate Center. 2019. viii + 520 pp. Illustrated chronology, French fashion houses active during WWI, select French fashion magazines, timeline captions, checklist of exhibition, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780300247985.

Review by Holly Grout, University of Alabama.

An outgrowth of, and companion piece to, two important exhibitions: *Modes & Femmes 14/18*, held at the Bibliothèque Forney (February 28-June 17, 2017) and *French Fashion, Women and the First World War* sponsored by the Bard Graduate Gallery as part of center's twenty-fifth anniversary celebration (September 5, 2019-January 5, 2020), Maude Bass-Krueger and Sophie Kurkdjian's excellent edited collection offers the first "comprehensive," book-length study of French fashion during the Great War (p. 43). In addition to two director forewords that position the text in dialogue with the related exhibitions, *French Fashion, Women, and the First World War* provides a fifteen-page illustrated chronology, contains ten thematic chapters, several of which offer intermittent "case studies" devoted to salient fashion themes (nurses' uniforms, mourning dress, workers' overalls, and *costume tailleur*, for example), supplies an annotated guide to wartime French fashion houses and to select French magazines, incorporates a captioned timeline of events as well as an exhibition checklist, and includes a lengthy bibliography and user-friendly index. Not only do the authors provide a vast array of expertly compiled resources, but they also, according to Bard gallery director Nina Stritzler-Levine, propose a "different way of doing history"; one that forges "new ground by using fashion as a means of producing knowledge about the shifting attitudes toward women and their changing identities during the First World War in France" (p. 12). Whereas other scholars have examined women's relationship to war and fashion in article-length essays or as part of larger works interested in the ways in which the war upended social norms, mobilized women for service to the state, or accelerated cultural changes already underway in 1914, the authors in this collection center fashion and woman's connections to it to analyze how, as a "political force" fashion "broadens our understanding of war culture" (p. 486).

Concerned not only with what French women wore and how what they wore changed during wartime, but also with how society attached meanings to women's clothing, the authors aim to "weave analysis of French fashion through existing wartime historiography" (p. 43). Drawing upon a rich base of archival sources, including national and departmental archives; police and department store archives; documents, iconography, photographs, and textile swatches held by Musée des Arts Décoratifs; previously unexamined wartime registers of the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne and of the Syndicat de Défense de la Grande Couture Française; and

numerous periodicals, postcards, works of fiction, and diaries produced during the war, they tell the stories of “nurses, widows, elegant Parisiennes, humble midinettes, and hard-working women” who “used fashion to shape their identities,” even as “fashion was...used against them as a reflection of larger social anxieties” (p. 43).

In her eloquent introduction to the volume, co-editor Maude Bass-Kreuger explains that the purpose of the book is to evaluate how and why the transition in the woman’s silhouette occurred, to understand how women “negotiated the tensions between fashion and war,” and to discern how they navigated the “ideas, attitudes, and social mores [that] were projected onto” them (pp. 38-39). During the war, women were expected to be elegant but not frivolous, to consume but not to flaunt their financial independence, to look seductive to soldiers without being confused for prostitutes. This “double standard,” Bass-Kreuger maintains, applied to all women—nurses, widows, and charity workers were as likely as *midinettes*, munitions workers, and Parisiennes to come under attack for their sartorial choices. Indeed, women were to be neither too elegant nor too shabby, too feminine nor too masculine in their attire; they were expected to dress appropriately for both their station and their nation.

In the context of war, however, there was very little consensus as to what exactly constituted “appropriate” attire for women. In the book’s first chapter, “French Women and the First World War,” Great War historian Margaret Darrow examines the ways in which the seeming irreconcilability between “women” and “war” generated competing images of womanhood (p. 72). In the war zone for example, the idealized war waitress envisioned by some as the soldier’s sweetheart was reviled by others as a war profiteer, or worse, as an uninvited interloper who made herself vulnerable to sexual assault (p. 76). Celebrated as heroines of the 1914 harvest, female agricultural workers were “later vilified as shirkers and blamed for high prices and shortages,” (p. 81) while charity workers, urban workers, and even nurses could be touted as patriots one minute and disparaged as hypocrites, usurpers, and seductresses the next. Although the war offered social, economic, and political opportunities for some women, the anxieties surrounding women’s wartime activities lingered long after the armistice. The war was, Darrow concludes, ultimately more of “a parenthesis than a life-changing experience” for most French women (p. 56).

The second chapter, authored by another familiar Great War scholar, Susan Grayzel, examines the militarization of women’s domestic labor, focusing on how activities like knitting and sewing were propagandized to reinforce gender roles while supporting the war effort. Offering transnational comparisons among French, British, and American women’s domestic labor for the war, Grayzel argues that “images of women of all ages sewing and knitting...became a shorthand for what women were doing at home” (p. 140). Various forms of wartime propaganda, including songs, poems, and postcards, connected women’s work intimately to the national war effort and the woman’s needle, like the soldier’s bayonet, she contends, was both a weapon of war and a symbol of national solidarity. Yet efforts to reconcile women with war remained fraught. For soldiers like Siegfried Sassoon, for instance, such images reinforced rather than foreclosed the “fundamental divide between home front and war front,” and, in so doing, reiterated rather than resolved the equally fundamental divide between the sexes (p. 166).

Whereas the first two chapters contextualize the uneasy relationship between women and war, the remaining chapters more explicitly examine how fashion articulated those tensions. In chapters three “Fashion, Gender, and Anxiety” and four, “Photographing the Working Woman:

The Excelsior Archives at Roger-Viollet,” Bass-Krueger and Kurkdjian respectively explore the ways in which fashion discourses revealed male anxiety regarding the erosion (perceived and real) of established gender norms. In her analysis of caricatures, postcards, and other wartime fashion writing, Bass-Krueger examines how competing images of wartime womanhood, even those like the *Fantaisies patriotiques* which postcard publishers manufactured explicitly to represent woman’s “steadfast devotion to her absent soldier as well as to her nation,” fueled anxiety, even resentment, among men at the front (p. 190). Alongside the cosmopolitan Parisienne who preferred the foreign officer to the lowly French poilu and the working woman whose masculine attire concealed her sex and revealed her encroachment into the male labor market, the *Fantaisies patriotiques* offered another way for men to “vocalize their fear” about the war’s effects on gender roles (p. 200). Kurkdjian reiterates this message in her examination of the *Excelsior* newspaper. The first daily to regularly include photography, the *Excelsior* featured images and stories from both fronts. However, censorship restrictions, designed to protect national morale, meant that the journal could not include photos of bodies, battles, or daily hardships. In light of these limitations, *Excelsior* offered numerous images of working women. Although attired for work, even decked out in *combinaisons de travail* (overalls), laboring women were always depicted wearing jewelry, high-heeled shoes, and draped in other decorative accessories. By adding these adornments to the female work uniform, the *Excelsior* used fashion to allay male fears that wartime work would irrevocably de-feminize women and permanently upend gender norms.

A series of alternating essays between the volume’s editors, chapter five focuses squarely on the fashion industry. Before the war, Parisian couture, the luxurious face of France’s second largest economic sector, employed one-third of the country’s working population and accounted for one-third of the nation’s exports. Acknowledging the industry’s role in stabilizing the national economy, its instrumentality in meeting wartime textile demands, and its potential to galvanize public morale, the state maintained a vested interest in its success while fashion houses themselves adapted to wartime conditions (p. 252). In the first years of the war, patriotic seamstresses agreed to “war wages” to ensure that fashion houses remained financially solvent. Meanwhile, couturiers offered two new silhouettes, the bell-shaped “war crinoline” and later the “barrell silhouette” which reduced the amount of necessary fabric to produce a garment and enabled woman’s ease of movement (p. 262). The destruction and occupation of France’s thriving northern textile industries facilitated other adaptations as couturiers traded woolsens for Lyonnais silks to meet wartime demands. Additionally, fashion houses adapted to prohibitions placed on German dyes by marketing the available blues, reds, greens, grays, and beiges as “patriotic” and they managed to stay financially afloat by proactively developing foreign markets for French goods (p. 280). Benefitting from a lack of government intervention, rebranding their goods as “wartime” fashions, and pursuing international markets, the fashion industry ensured its survival (p. 281). These adaptations notwithstanding, the authors point out that while the choice of textile, trimmings, or color might have been influenced by wartime conditions, that many of the alterations undertaken by the fashion industry (like the new silhouettes, for example) were well underway before 1914. In many cases, so-called “war fashions” were products of the war in name only (p. 263).

Chapters six through nine, again authored by Kurkdjian (chapters six and seven) and Bass-Krueger (chapter eight and nine) investigate how the fashion industry, through the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne and the Syndicat de Defense de la Grande Couture Française (SDGC) battled counterfeiting and state efforts to nationalize fashion at the same time that it

confronted growing discontent among female workers. Kurkdjian's chapters examine how the French fashion industry responded to foreign efforts to copy and counterfeit French fashions. As fashion "became an economic imperative (exports) and a social imperative (labor and employment)" (p. 376), the *Chambre* and the *Syndicat*, she demonstrates, pursued efforts to curtail foreign competition by excluding foreigners from garment work, prohibiting the circulation of original designs abroad, implementing new commercial rules for suppliers, and proposing an official trade union seal to indicate French authenticity. At the same time that these unions endeavored to safeguard French designs they also battled counterfeiting schemes undertaken by no fewer than forty German, Austrian, and Belgian magazines. Since the eighteenth century, foreign competitors copied and counterfeited French fashions. However, the war, Kurkdjian argues, intensified the rivalry between Germany and France over fashion counterfeits as now such efforts threatened to enhance Germany's economic status and prestige in its already booming ready-to-wear industry (pp. 416-417). Promoting magazines and fashions as "French" not only gave counterfeiters greater visibility in international markets they also devalued the French brand (p. 421). Although concerns about copying and counterfeiting predated the war, it was the war that provided the catalyst for unity among French couturiers who now proffered a (mostly) united front against international competitors.

In chapters eight and nine Bass-Krueger situates industrial adaptations and trade union activities within the broader context of the war. She recounts how the war's economic strain forced the French government to pursue national fixed-price fashion and she illuminates the hardships faced by women workers in the garment industries. In response to immense loss, chronic food shortages, economic inflation, striking workers and mutinous soldiers, by 1917, Bass-Krueger contends, the French government intervened in the fashion industry. To alleviate the cost of woollens, shoes, and work garments, the government promoted a fixed-price ready-made clothing scheme. Despite this "patriotic" effort, the scheme failed to attract manufacturers who could not produce at such low profit margins. It also lacked appeal for consumers who were unimpressed by the drab colors and banal designs, and it did not appease soldiers who continued to criticize the "need" for new civilian clothing altogether (p. 437). Tensions among female garment workers, who continued to work for reduced wages, and fashion manufacturers, who seemed to flourish during the war, erupted in a series of strikes in May 1917. For eleven days, 10,000 *midinettes*, representing thirty-two different couture houses, took to the streets in protest to demand higher wages and an English week (p. 454). Portrayed as a peaceful female act rather than as a feminist attack, the strikes won public support and initiated new labor legislation; a feat attempted but not achieved until the war.

In the volume's final chapter, the editors "return to the gender question" to revisit the politics of wartime fashion and to assess the extent to which wartime fashions liberated French women. Like Darrow, they conclude that the war marked only a temporary shift for women; afterwards French women were "returned to home and France returned to a rigid gender binary" (p. 482). Building on the work of Mary Louise Roberts, they contend that while women's political and economic gains may have been limited after the war, that fashion nevertheless became heavily invested with political meaning and provided women new forms of agency (p. 479). Given the scope and breadth of this terrific volume, it is a bit disappointing that rather than offer new insights into how the war experience reshaped the relationship between French women and French fashion, that the authors resurrect the old question of liberation. Perhaps future scholars will use this collection to pursue new questions regarding the woman/war binary and to offer new insights into how women mobilize fashion for personal as well as political ends.

Despite this shortcoming, the book does deliver on its promise of offering a “different way of doing history.” The authors’ insistence on centering women and fashion in wartime and the volume’s comprehensive approach to its subject matter as well as the text’s unconventional formatting, achieve the authors’ stated goal of defying convention to make room for new voices. Writing a new narrative of the Great War, the authors suggest, requires not only a new perspective (fashion) but also a new set of voices (women’s). To this end, not only are the majority of entries authored by women, but the typography of the book itself, designed by Irma Boom, endeavors to “tell an author’s story graphically...by manipulating the relationship between word and image on the page” (p. 13). Boom’s radical typesetting, blending and blurring paragraphs, use of excessively narrow margins, and unusual indentations that sometimes make words appear to be running off the page, can be unsettling, even off-putting to some readers. One hazard of this approach appears on p. 221 where it seems an entire segment of text has been lost. However, if we accept the volume’s broader premise that it is necessary to destabilize both the text and the reader to open space for new, female voices to be heard, then her typographical resistance offers a compelling way to center the female voice in history’s narration. Perhaps in future scholarship these new voices will not only unearth underutilized sources, engage in innovation formatting, and compile an amazing resource reference but also pose new questions that will shed further light on the complicated relationship between women, fashion, and war.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Margaret H. Darrow, “French Women and the First World War”

Johanne Berlemont & Anaïs Raynaud, “Nurses’ Uniforms”

Susan Grayzel, “Needles En Avant!': The Militarization of Women’s Sewing and Knitting during the First World War in France, Great Britain, and America”

Maude Bass-Krueger, “Fashion, Gender, and Anxiety”

Maude Bass-Krueger, “Mourning”

Sophie Kurkdjian, “Photographing the Working Woman: The Excelsior Archives at Roger-Viollet”

Jérémie Brucker, “Overalls”

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Maude Bass-Krueger, “The Evolution of the Fashionable Silhouette, 1911-19”

Maude Bass-Krueger, “Selected Designs Registered for Copyright, 1917-19”

Sophie Kurkdjian, “Jeanne Paquin, Jeanne Lanvin, Jenny, and Gabrielle Chanel, 1914-18”

Michele Majer, “The Costume Tailleur”

Sophie Kurkdjian, “Restructuring French Couture, 1914-18”

Sophie Kurkdjian, “‘Copying is Stealing!’: The French Press and Counterfeiting”

Maude Bass-Krueger, “The Crisis of 1917: ‘National Fashion’ and American Textile Restrictions”

Maude Bass-Krueger, “Midinettes on Strike”

Maude Bass-Krueger and Sophie Kurkdjian, “Returning to the Gender Question”

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