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Elizabeth L. Block, *Dressing Up: The Women Who Influenced French Fashion*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2021. 296 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$34.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780262045841. \$21.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 0262045842.

Review by Sophie Kurkdjian, American University of Paris.

*Dressing Up: The Women Who Influenced French Fashion* “examines the influential and discerning clientele of elite women who bolstered the French Fashion industry” (p. 3). By giving voices to the actors, places, and processes that are often overlooked in the study of fashion, Elizabeth Block adopts a new perspective on the worldwide dissemination of French fashion in the late nineteenth century. Her book thus makes a unique contribution to the field of fashion studies, moving the cursor from the *grand couturier* to a multitude of other actors in the development of French Fashion over the course of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century.

Relying on the seminal work of Yuniya Kawamura, Joanne Entwistle, and Elizabeth Wilson especially, who wrote a history of fashion, considered as a sign of social, economic and cultural distinction, but also on the work of Louise Crewe and John Poitvin on fashion and geography, Block proposes to look at the history of fashion through the lenses of labor, gender, particularly “women’s consumerism” (p.4), and space and performances.[1] She focuses, moreover, on the daily lives of dresses, “Follow the dresses” (p. 4), rather than on the creativity of the *grand couturier* or the production of textiles. Decentralizing the study of fashion in this way—that is, shifting the historian’s attention away from the role of “genius” in order to focus on the *role* of the clothes—Block makes the designer “just one of the participants in the broader system” (p. 5). She thereby highlights the part played by all the other elements in the production of fashion: hairdressers, milliners, perfumers, actresses, and wealthy clients in the dissemination of French fashion. Indeed, one of the major contributions of this book is to highlight the overlooked responsibility of these personalities in the development of the fashion industry and thus move the cursor from the grand couturier to a multitude of other, but no less important, actors in the flourishing of French Fashion over the course of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century.

Decentering of fashion history in this way, Block also raises the essential question of the role played by global migrations in the development of Paris fashion. Expanding the work of Nancy Green on fashion and immigration, for example, Block draws our attention to the role of overlooked women designers in the history of French fashion who came from Austria, Switzerland, Poland, and especially Germany.[2] This part of the book is a very interesting reminder on the role played by these foreigners in the French fashion industry and more

generally in the fashion industry. While highlighting the key role of these encounters, Block also explores the different spaces where fashions were put on display, such as at international exhibitions, in the development and success of French fashion abroad.

Block's book is structured in three main parts. The first one, entitled "Power Dressing," introduces the topic of the book and presents the diverse tastemakers who promoted French fashion in the United States over the course of the second half of the nineteenth century. We find among them independent dressmakers and milliners, often from Paris, who had settled down in American cities. As ambassadors of French fashion to American consumers, these expatriates not only imported French products, they also provided American customers with critical information about which fashions were available in the U.S., and which had to be imported from Paris. Some importers specialized in bringing French fashion in the U.S., while department stores from 1870s forward started to send buyers in Paris to discover the latest fashions. Going beyond a simple description of the history of department stores, Block shows how a *grand magasin* like Le Bon Marché "fits into the tastemaking network for French goods in the middle of the century" (p. 25). Supported by the fashion press, which also promoted French fashion in the USA, department stores, like magazines, were not only media and vectors of consumption and shopping, but also places where American women developed their taste for French fashion.

The second part of the book, "Paris as the Center of Haute Couture and Coiffure," examines how Paris became the center of fashion and coiffure and how those industries were internationalized at the end of the nineteenth century. Instead of focusing only on haute couture, the author also shows the importance of hairdressers, such as Guillaume Louis Lenthéric (p.40), and perfumers in the development of fashion by describing "their mutual reliance and shared business concerns" (p. 39), while at the same time exploring the tensions between them. Both perfume and hair participated in the presentation of French fashion, and the fact that they often shared the same place in international exhibitions revealed their close collaboration. This was the case for British fashion designer Charles-Frederick Worth and the hairdresser Auguste Petit, to give but one example among many examined by the author, who shared the same building on 7 Rue de la Paix and had many of the same clients, including Princess Pauline von Metternich.

In this same section Block probes the role of international exhibitions, demonstrating how those events, then as now, were crucial for French couturiers, perfumers, milliners, and hairdressers trying to promote their goods and attract a new clientele. At the crossroad of culture, economy, and diplomacy, those international events were so essential for some of those actors of the luxury industry that they led some businesses to bankruptcy. This is the case of La Maison Félix after the Exhibition of 1900 (p. 79).

In chapter five, Block moves to the other side of the industry: the consumption side. She investigates the role of royalty, socialites, actresses, and singers who were the principal clients of French haute couture as part of an international network of clients who gathered at theaters, opera houses, race courses like Longchamps, and seaside resorts on the Riviera, and who constituted, in effect, an international fashion elite. Members of the demimonde wore fashion, too, and were part of this network. As the author shows, there existed under the Second Empire a new mix of genres, a new "openness of the couture market...allow[ing] different nationalities and classes of people to participate" in the fashion industry (p.88). This new access to fashion was achieved especially by social and cultural developments within French society and governance, but also by the nineteenth-century transportation revolution—railroads, ferries, transatlantic

ocean liners, which facilitated in-person shopping trips—and by the expanding fashion press, which was disseminated not only throughout Europe, but as far away as Japan, Turkey, the United States, and South America. The vastly increased circulation of French magazines helped create an international French fashion visual language, as the author writes. Theatrical performances, and actresses also played an important role in the democratization of the access to fashion. Wearing haute couture dresses on stage, but also in their daily lives, actresses such as Sarah Bernhardt became the best publicity for French couturiers. What Block shows is that this “democratization” of fashion, as more and more women outside the elite classes began to wear these clothes, did not lessen wealthy Americans’ devotion to haute couture. Studying more precisely some prominent American clients of French couture, among them rich socialites like Bertha Honoré and Frances Macbeth, Block offers an incisive look at the couture houses and *grands magasins* where elite women shopped, at the kind of dresses they bought, and at the steep prices they paid.

In the third part, “The U.S Market for French Fashion,” Block investigates more broadly the role of American clients and the life of French fashion on American soil. First, she focuses on the clients of the Maison Félix—European royalty, aristocrats, European and American society dames and stage performers—that she identifies as being “key to the success of a couture house” (p. 119). The author then shows how the success of the Maison Félix, and of French couture houses more generally, depended on the close collaboration between couturiers, perfumers, hairdressers, and their clients. She points, in particular, to the ways that couturiers sought to adapt their offerings to their clients’ needs. This point again allows Block to recall that the fashion system did not follow a “traditional top-down model of imperious couturiers deigning to take US business,” but involved constant negotiations between couturiers and clients, or what Block calls “an equilibrium” (p. 121).

In chapter seven, Block investigates the penetration of French fashion into America through the fabrics that came to decorate the mansions of rich Americans in the Gilded Age, where both clothes and interior space served to display the wealth and status of elite hostesses. She draws on the work of Louise Crewe and John Poitvin on fashion and spaces, but also on the pioneering work of Johanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson on embodied practices, to show how interior spaces became showpieces of their owners when they were “activated by the bodies, heat, and fabrics of the guests who actually warmed the house” (p. 162). In other words, the book illuminates the efforts of elite arbiters of American taste to deploy French fashion to promote themselves, while at the same time assuring the prosperity of the industry.

In chapter eight, concerning the crossroad of economics and politics, Block proposes a very interesting analysis of prices in the market for French fashion and how the U.S government tried to regulate them in order to curb the importation of French luxury goods and to encourage domestic production. In chapter nine, she explores the secondary life of French fashion in the U.S.A. and the dissemination of reused and recycled Parisian dresses by legal (but also by illegal) channels, such as outlets, second-hand markets, counterfeiting, and outright thefts. Here Block expands on the work of Nancy Tory with respect to the central role of the couturiers in the business of fashion,[3] to show that consumers also played a very important part in it, through strategic practices beyond simply shopping and by forcing the couturiers to “adapt to the new markets forces” (p. 187). To be precise, the author explains how, on the one hand, French couturiers tried to fight directly—and in vain, as it turned out—against American counterfeits, and, on the other, how instead of continuing to fight this losing battle, designers such as Worth

began to sell American department stores and local couturiers the right to legally copy their models. In other words, couturiers were forced to change their business practices by supplying licensed goods to answer consumers' demands for French fashion and to exert some control over diffusion of French fashion in the US.

The scope of Block's study is broad; in less expert hands it could have been too broad. However, the author's use of a great variety of archives from international exhibitions, publicity, photographs, and private documents gives the reader a precise and lively idea of how French fashion was disseminated, bought, and sold at the end of the nineteenth century. The diversity of perspectives the author brings to her study only adds to its richness and insight. In particular, her use of the personal archives and letters of wealthy American women allows readers to better understand who the clients of French couture were, where exactly they shopped, and how they wore their expensive and fashionable clothes. Block thereby puts consumers, and women, at the center of the fashion system.

## NOTES

[1] Yuniya Kawamura, *Fashion-ology: An Introduction to Fashion Studies* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018); Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashionable Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2015); Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson, eds., *Body Dressing* (Oxford: Berg, 2001); Louise Crewe, *The Geographies of Fashion: Consumption, Space, and Value* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); and, John Poitvin, ed., *The Places and Spaces of Fashion, 1800-2007* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

[2] Nancy L. Green, *Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

[3] Nancy Troy, *Couture Culture: A Study in Modern Art and Fashion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

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