

BOOK REVIEWS

Fashioning the Gilded Age

Block, Elizabeth L. *Dressing Up: The Women Who Influenced French Fashion*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021. 296 pp. \$34.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0262045841.

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The new HBO series *The Gilded Age* revolves around a rivalry between “Old New York,” represented by the fictional character of Agnes van Rhijn (played by Christine Baranski), and the Russell family, led by George Russell (played by Morgan Spector), who stand in for the era’s “New Rich.” While business dealings serve as background to the story, the show’s main focus is the social intrigues of its women in a world where appearance, etiquette, and social networks capture the audience’s attention.

Like *The Gilded Age*, Elizabeth L. Block’s *Dressing Up* puts the women of the era—and their dresses—at the center of its narrative. Block’s new book frames the wealthy elites who shaped the Gilded Age economy, culture, and politics as consumers, and focuses on the wives and daughters of elite businessmen and financiers. Such an emphasis allows Block not only to insert women and women’s agency more meaningfully into Gilded Age history, but also to explore the economic consequences of the fashion trade. In Block’s narrative, elite women were more than a passive manifestation of Thorstein Veblen’s “conspicuous consumption.” They were active players in a transatlantic network of commerce, power, and privilege that allowed them a position of influence within U.S. society by turning fashion and the dresses they wore into cultural capital.

Dressing Up is both a study of the French couture industry and an examination of the role American women played in its development. Block rightly moves away from focusing on couture designers as omnipotent geniuses to focus instead on the social life of garments themselves. This method of “follow the dresses” allows her to spotlight the relationships enabled by fashion, bringing labor, gender, space, consumer culture, and performance together into her analysis. Rather than looking at the construction of the garments themselves, Block situates them within a complex web of consumer decisions, spending power, and cultural politics.

Part I provides a background for readers, establishing the argument of the book and outlining the rise of French fashion and its presence in American urban centers from the 1840 to the 1870s. Block details the rise of department stores, retailers, dressmakers, and women’s magazines that made French designs accessible to American women, a process

that, by the last decades of the nineteenth century, turned wealthy U.S. women into informed consumers well-versed in French designs and textile knowledge, or what Block calls “high textile I.Q.” (4).

Part II focuses on the French couture industry in the late nineteenth century and demonstrates how Paris became a center of fashion and style not only for clothes but also for hairdressing, perfumery, and millenary. Historians of fashion will appreciate Block’s discussion of Maison Felix—a competitor to the better-known designer Charles Frederick Worth—who finally gets the scholarly attention he deserves. Block describes how French fashion was very much international, relying not only on American consumers but on foreign labor as well. Indeed, the fashion industry was far more global than the term “French fashion” might suggest. Well before copyright law, French styles were reproduced in the United States or designed by Eastern European immigrants who cultivated a French persona for themselves. French styles did not connote a national origin but a sense of quality and luxury. And as Block shows in chapter 5, it was this international aspect of the industry—which welcomed clients depending on the size of their purse rather than their familial heritage or social status—that enabled American women to use fashion as a form of diplomacy and to become significant agents in international society.

In Part III, Block shifts perspective from Paris to the United States, focusing less on the fashion industry and more on the women who influenced it. Using their power as consumers, U.S. women shaped designers’ showings, prices, and styles. Block moves beyond discussions of the cultural function of fashion in Gilded Age society to demonstrate how purchasing French couture also had economic repercussions that shaped trade and tariff policies. Furthermore, buying a French couture dress was not just a statement of one’s wealth and status, but, as Block demonstrates through the saga of Astor gowns in 1890 and 1891, could also function as an antigovernment political statement.

Throughout the book, Block devotes great attention to the connections between fashion and architectural spaces, not only in designers’ ateliers or department stores but also through exhibitions halls and private mansions. By situating dresses as tangible objects, not just as a conceptual status symbol, she shows how fashion enabled elite women “taking up their space” in society to promote their power in public (165). Block explains how events such as balls, international expositions, and world fairs became spaces where fashion was consumed and displayed, and thus spaces where American elite women could exert influence. Block’s descriptions of the relationships between designers, consumers, architects, and laborers creates an intricate map of the fashion and cultural scenes. (It is perhaps disappointing that an actual map showing these spatial networks, especially one of Paris’s stores, salons, rental apartments, and cultural institutions, is not included.)

The book’s final chapter, “The Underworld and Afterlife of French Couture in the United States,” offers the most interesting and innovative manifestation of Block’s “follow the dresses” method. By showing readers the social life span of a specific dress—buying it, wearing it, repurposing it, passing it on, and perhaps altering it again—Block demonstrates how Gilded Age fashion was about more than the dresses themselves; it was a marker of social networks and power, connecting the past with the present and future. We don’t often think of couture and secondhand as connected, but Block shows how these items carried with them a social capital that was imitated and reproduced across generations and spaces.

The large amount of color images in the book—likely facilitated by Block’s own affiliation with the Metropolitan Museum of Art—can at times give the feeling of reading an exhibition catalog rather than a scholarly book. They make the book an enjoyable read,

especially when Block digs into the analysis of a specific dress. This book can be a great companion to those who enjoy the rich visual world of HBO's *Gilded Age* and want more, but it is also a reminder of the importance of fashion and culture in the history of the Gilded Age.

Hierarchy and Higher Education

Groeger, Christina. *The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. 384 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0674249110.

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Why is the United States a leader in educational excellence and economic inequality? In *The Education Trap*, Cristina Groeger tackles this question and finds the answer in the Progressive Era. Progressives saw schools as a policy solution to inequality and thereby put “the blame, and the burden of reform, on individuals rather than society” (9). Building the myth that schools provided a social panacea to inequality, elites used the broadening of access to education as a tool to maintain power and reinforce socioeconomic inequality while avoiding pressure to create a robust welfare state.

Groeger sets her story in Boston, a city with a well-established public school system, a wealthy tax base, and powerful private universities. The first chapters of her book uncover the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century conditions that led more Americans to pursue degrees as credentials for greater employment opportunities. Before 1880, most workers didn't see schools as an avenue for social mobility. Training came on the job. Then came the economic and social upheaval that expanded both white-collar work and school enrollment. It's a story that readers of this journal will know well, but Groeger takes advantage of newly available Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) historical census data to offer new insights.

One of the most important stories in Groeger's book is a story of failure. Schools became the pathway to white-collar jobs, but not to blue-collar work. That failure came out of a struggle between employers and unions over who would control industrial education. Employers wanted to challenge organized labor's power by creating trade schools outside the purview of labor unions. While unions protected their control over training for certain skilled work, neither group successfully gained power over public industrial education training that might have acted as a gatekeeper for working-class positions. In the end, Groeger argues, this failure helped reinforce existing social inequalities. Without a close relationship with employers, public industrial education failed to