

OTHER REVIEW

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Dressing up: cultural identity in Renaissance Europe. By Ulinka Rublack. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xxi + 354. ISBN 978-0-19-929874-7. £30.00.

The publication of this volume marks a milestone in the historiography of European dress. This work assesses the shifting politics, practice, and materiality of clothing to understand better two of the most seminal events of early modern European history: the Renaissance and the Reformation. Ulinka Rublack considers the significance of an enhanced visual engagement in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in high art, popular prints, and dress. The result is a highly original and important reinterpretation of this era. At the outset, Rublack positions her study within the wider remit of dynamic commercial societies, acknowledging the global context of European events. For example, in both the opening and closing chapters comparisons are made addressing fashion in vibrant societies such as Tokugawa Japan and late Ming and early Qing China. In this, Rublack joins a growing number of historians who reject claims for European exceptionalism in fashion. Her stance on this question marks the end of a time (one can only hope) when historians make claims for European uniqueness without recourse to evidence from comparative societies. Indeed, the noted cultural historian, Peter Burke, long ago insisted that: ‘Historians of Europe will never be able to say what is specifically western unless they look outside the west.’¹ This is a history of Europe. But it is presented with an awareness of the wider connections within Europe and between Europe and the wider world. This subtle text traces the multiple affects of geography, time, and social context, whether exploring patterns of consumption among adventurous Nuremberg adolescents travelling in Italy or heated debates on nationalism and the threat of ‘foreign’ clothes that agitated German commentators. They feared that ‘foreign clothes will take your heart’ (p. 138), eviscerating the power of German manhood.

The power of fashion was a serious matter. The eminent Fernand Braudel acknowledged fashion as a reflection of social, cultural, and economic change. But, as Rublack observes, Braudel insisted that this phenomenon was exclusively European in origin and that, in contrast, other great empires of the early modern era (Ottoman, Mughal, Chinese, Japanese) shared a material world ‘that stood still’. Braudel also made the same claim of material stasis for non-elite Europeans before the 1700s. Braudel cast a long shadow, shaping the boundaries of historical inquiries for generations. Daniel Roche’s claim for an *ancien régime* culture of clothing before 1700 is put to the test in this volume. Rublack paints a richly detailed world mediated through apparel and the critical choices made by city burghers and craftsmen, by students and clerics, by German goodwives and Italian courtesans, real and imaged. The colour, cloth, and construction of clothing preoccupied every level of society. These subjects were debated with fervour equal to debates on theology and little wonder, as the internal state was assumed to be reflected externally. Thus, striped garments were a source of growing tension by 1500, particularly

¹ Peter Burke, ‘Res et verba: conspicuous consumption in the early modern world’, in John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the world of goods* (London, 1993), p. 148.

when these 'over wild' colours were worn within the lower classes. Ultimately, striped clothes assumed a symbolic importance and the term 'striped laymen' was applied to reform-minded autodidacts who challenged the religious status quo (p. 103). Nations, peoples, and institutions were defined by their dress.

Rublack presents a richly conceived analysis of the changing visuality within European society, including a more intensive focus on all manner of dress, evident in published costume books and private visual records of a life of clothing, such as that created by the sixteenth-century Augsburg merchant Matthäus Schwarz. The geographic focus of this volume is central Europe and in particular the free imperial cities, like Augsburg and Nuremberg. The men and women in these cities were closely involved in the materials of life, crafting their appearances to suit religious and civic sensibilities. Rublack's 'urban ethnography' of clothing in Nuremberg, for example, challenges the proposed '*ancien régime*' of dress, showing the vibrant complexity to be found even among city artisans and the myriad colours and textiles of this sixteenth-century world. She challenges a 'Whiggish' history of dress that proposed a drab, bland environment before eighteenth-century innovations, noting for example the prominence of mercenary soldiers as agents of anarchic plebeian styles. Rublack likewise points to the need for more careful examination of sumptuary legislation and its connections to local dress cultures, for these edicts could include permissive ordinances as well as restrictive.

This volume is gloriously illustrated with 156 images, many of which will be entirely new even to readers experienced in this field. The objects she presents are integral to her analysis, evidence of the flow of ideas and materials through early modern Europe. Rublack shows great dexterity as she engages with a variety of historical traditions from Renaissance and Reformation studies, to Art History: as she notes, 'art applies to any humanly crafted assemblage of forms' (p. 259). Rublack is equally adept in her subtle theoretical interpretations. In sum, this volume delights the eye and the mind. It is an important contribution at every level.

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

BEVERLY LEMIRE