

Giovanna Motta, *La Moda si fa Storia. Borghesi, rivoluzionari, ruoli e identità nazionali*, Edizioni Nuova Cultura, Rome, 2017, pp. 204

This book takes the reader on a stimulating journey through modern history by looking at how and where fashion and different trends affected how people dressed and thought. It concentrates on European society from the 15th century to the 20th century, with references up to the last few decades, and focuses in particular on the role of the bourgeoisie.

Employing a highly interdisciplinary approach, the author considers a host of different factors to describe a continually changing society where fashion was one of the most important ways for people to express their power, their position or simply their originality.

In the first chapter, Giovanna Motta introduces the reader to the complexity of the passage from the medieval to the modern era, in the economy and the sphere of politics as well as in the cultural domain. Investigating how fabrics, clothes and customs circulated, she describes

the success of the individual in satisfying his or her requirements at the dawn of a new cultural era. Cultural not only in an artistic or literary sense, but also as regards commerce and commercial practices: a new era in which voyages, customs and merchandise trade expanded and, with them, new ways of buying and selling; a new era which in some respects can be regarded as global. Against this background of economic considerations, we see that fashion was greatly influenced by contact with places abroad. These contacts with foreign countries (sometimes even unknown) allowed Europeans to import "oriental" traditions, such as donning "exotic" dress or drinking tea, and thus influenced fashion.

The author is highly familiar with the different parts of this patchwork of elements and expertly guides the reader to understanding the importance of these changes in the Western world. The examples she cites are never banal. One of them, in the first part of the book, recalls the story of Francesco Datini, the Tuscan wool clothing merchant masterfully described by the historian Federigo Melis and drawn on by Motta to illustrate the dynamism of trade in the 15th century. Motta returns to Datini and his wife in the second part of her book to underline the role of women in commerce and their role in the evolution of society.

Motta pursues these diverse paths of inquiry using multiple historiographical approaches, from political and trade history to gender history. In fact, what characterizes this work is the range of explanations brought into play, in welcome contrast to the prevailing narrow specialization of historical studies today. Here we have different strands, literally – of silk or wool, of high or low quality, which changes colour according to the type of dyestuff used. The palate of colours used depended on the new substances discovered and imported from far-away countries or on the meaning that people wanted to communicate, as the author reminds us, taking inspiration from Pastoreau's books. No relevant aspect is overlooked. Motta mentions the sumptuary rules that supervised appearance in society and points out the importance

of accessories: wearing shoes or carrying fans showed people's social position, so trade in such accessories became a significant factor for the development of the economy and for the growth of local or foreign markets.

The author wants to show how the bourgeoisie found a way to create their own style. To do so, she considers multiform aspects of life: funeral furnishings, notarial deeds, bequests and marriage contracts. Fashion can be used to describe how society is changing. Accordingly, Motta takes readers on a journey that starts in pre-capitalist society, confined within rigid guild statutes, and brings them to a world of greater liberty, in a freer and more creative market in perfect synchronicity with political and social events. It is a market that freed itself, as it did in Flanders, by shifting manufacturing to the countryside, where the guilds exercised less stringent control.

In the 16th century fashion began to assert itself, with the appearance of the first treatises on the behaviour of the true gentleman. Baldassar Castiglione touched on the topic, but it was Titian's cousin who devoted to it a specific treatise titled *Degli abiti antichi et moderni di diverse parti del mondo. Libri due fatti da Cesare Vecellio e con discorsi da lui dichiarati* (1590). Later, in 1666, came Agostino Lampugnani's *Della carrozza da nolo, ovvero del vestire e usanze della moda*. The society of the *ancien régime* had a deep interest in fashion because of its need to appear, to show off its opulence and wealth, despite requests for moderation from church pulpits. The ideological models of reference natural differ according to the age. For example, the baroque era removed certain rigidities, and the 18th century and Marie Antoinette brought in tall wigs, perfumes, precious stones and many accessories. As the author rightly states, "For those who attended the court, nothing was enough". A simplification of fashion came after the French Revolution, but especially in the early 1800s, when the bourgeoisie sought to firmly establish liberalism. Yet, even then, personalities like C.F. Worth, an Englishman living in Paris who can be considered the creator of *haute couture*, gained prominence. In that period fashion used the first

illustrated magazines to spread and impose models, as in the case of P. Poiret, a real stylist, friend of the illustrator Lapape who was inspired by exotic motifs and Russian ballet.

Among the book's most original facets is its analysis of the clothing of playing card figures to shed light on what types of messages power would like to promote. The use of playing cards in daily life acted as a powerful means of transmission, as a form in which power could impose itself. Nor does the author stop there; her journey through the collective imagination of society also passes through an analysis of the porcelain figures that adorned the rooms of the powerful and affluent classes. This fashion came from the East, from Macau via Lisbon, and conquered Europe to the point of creating an important local industry. These porcelain figures depicted society and how it dressed.

The last part of the book examines the diffusion of fashion publishing. Women started to write about their own situation and to think about how to change society in ways that would give them prominence. These magazine debates were perhaps the forum where bourgeois culture best affirmed itself, drawing its cultural canons. In this period, artistic and cultural movements could express themselves freely, something unthinkable before. The cultural movements went by different names in different places – Art Nouveau, Liberty, Modern Style, etc. – but they all shared the same freedom and originality of expression. A new way of thinking and living gained ground: new materials were being used, new ideas and different suggestions often came from the East, modernity emerged. And all this happened in fashion through the most varied experiences; for example, thanks to the influence of the Ballets Russes, with the sensual language of its choreography and costumes, or by means of the creation of jewels or clothes inspired by animals.

Motta rightly points out that fashion enables men and women to express the look of a changing world: in fashion magazines there is space for affirmation of the role of women, of the women's movement and more generally for the creation of a gender history. In short, "fashion contains history and recounts it to us precisely".

Fashion, then, as this book demonstrates, is an interesting and important vantage point from which to observe and understand not only the customs of a society, but more generally that society's own being and development, the history of the men and women comprising it.

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