

*The Englishness of English Dress. Edited by Christopher Breward, Beckey Conekin, and Caroline Cox.* Oxford: Berg, 2002. xiv + 219 pp. Appendix, photographs, references. Cloth, \$84.95; paper, \$28.95. ISBN: cloth 1-859-73523-1; paper 1-859-73528-2.

*Fashioning London: Clothing and the Modern Metropolis. By Christopher Breward.* Oxford: Berg, 2004. 223 pp. Illustrations, photographs, notes, index. Cloth, \$74.94; paper, \$24.95. ISBN: cloth 1-859-73787-0; paper 1-859-73792-7.

Reviewed by Regina Lee Blaszczyk

Tourists visiting London's Kensington Palace glimpse vignettes of courtly lives past as they circulate through public and private spaces once inhabited by the British royal family, from William and Mary to Diana. The palace's highlights include the ceremonial dress collection, featuring Andy Aimes's designs for Elizabeth II, Catherine Walker's outfits for Princess Diana, and period settings that contrast the stark workplaces of seamstresses and tailors with the lush dressing rooms of the royal inner circle. Implicitly, the displays convey the idea that ceremonial dress, from the queen's chiffon ensembles in parakeet blue to the princess's smartly tailored suits, embodies a distinctive expression of Englishness. What the glamorous exhibits don't say is that these royal visions of national identity are social constructions, designed to display privilege, assert power, and defuse conflict in a multicultural society, and that the businesses producing these artifacts—the dressmakers and couturiers—are part of a fashion system that has balanced both conformity and diversity for more than two centuries.

If Kensington's exhibits mostly delight the eye, two new books by British historian Christopher Breward interrogate the London fashion scene and help to put the queenly costumes in cultural context. As deputy head of research at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Breward established his reputation as one of Britain's leading fashion historians during the 1990s. Then, as a professor of historical and cultural studies at the London College of Fashion, he published a series of books

foregrounding significant historical topics, such as the relationship between nineteenth-century notions of masculinity and the birth of urban sartorial forms like the business suit. Breward's new work builds on this foundation, linking the worlds of fashion, self-perception, and national identities. Breward offers valuable guidance to historians determined to mesh the study of economy and culture. To be sure, his principal readership consists of British scholars of design and fashion that make up the target audience for Berg, an Oxford publisher in cultural studies. Both books engage debates in those disciplines, but they also open the doors onto cultural analysis for business historians. Breward does this by asking tough questions about social class and English taste, scrutinizing stylistic hierarchies and the businesses sustaining them, and examining London's place in the global fashion system.

An edited volume, *The Englishness of English Dress* consists of twelve papers originally presented at an exhibition and conference at the London College of Fashion. Inspired by the museum's 1999 acquisition of Mrs. Cecile Korner's wardrobe—a collection of dresses from the 1940s through the 1980s worn by an upper-middle-class German immigrant to London—the essays explore the ways in which consumers from a range of classes use clothing to find their places in society. Korner's dresses stand in stark contrast to Kensington's couture, and the volume's contributors would recognize the significance. Their book's title is a play on Nikolaus Pevsner's 1956 volume, *The Englishness of English Art*, which asserted the consensus view that English painting reflected the nation's character. Scrutinizing the realm of costume, the essayists challenge Pevsner's contention that a category of artifacts can embody a single national style. In fact, they show how Brits as different as 1950s Caribbean emigrants and 1990s utopian fashion designer Vivienne Westwood used clothing to critique the idea of a universal Englishness. The West Indians paired English tweed coats and feathered hats with Jamaican circle skirts to create a tropical migrant look, while the young East End designer borrowed motifs, shapes, and fabrics from aristocratic dress to parody English elite traditions. Whether the subject is tennis garb, home dressmaking, rural working-class clothing, royal couturiers, or fashion photographers, the volume's contributors turn the idea of universal Englishness upside down and inside out.

Breward's monograph, *Fashioning London*, elaborates on this complicated picture of English taste. He situates two centuries of fashionable clothing in the context of urban history, examining sartorial preferences among London's inhabitants to trace the city's growth as a hub dedicated to the production, distribution, and consumption of clothing. Using the London sketches of Charles Dickens and Edward Mayhew as models, Breward organizes his book sequentially around chronological vignettes of colorful characters found on London's streets from the 1790s and the 1990s. While rogues and hawkers intrigued Victorian chroniclers, fashion icons fascinate Breward, who gives them pride of place in his analysis. His Londoners include West End dandies, Whitechapel immigrants, The Strand's actresses, high society's Mrs. Dalloway, suburbanite Mrs. Miniver, bohemian teddy boys, free-spirited dolly girls, and Camden Town students. In Breward's account, each of these London types was an arbiter of a particular style that embodied a moment in the city's history. To be sure, each coexisted alongside other types, reflecting the city's diversity.

Breward and his colleagues tell us much about cultural values that underpinned the fashion system and determined the contours of London's rag trade. In their portraits, the acts of producing, selling, and using clothing link royal couturiers, home dressmakers, and Oxford Street shoppers to a multidimensional fashion system that thrived on difference. Breward's descriptions of London as a center for the design and manufacture of clothing suggest that historians on this side of the Atlantic have yet to probe the interstices of New York's fashion trades. Finally, these scholars exhibit a high degree of sensitivity to the varieties of taste, and they effectively engage cultural theory to analyze artifacts as evidence. Their tales of style and identity, diversity and fashion, production and consumption hold important lessons for business historians traveling the cultural path.

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