Couture Culture: A Study in Modern Art and Fashion. *By Nancy J. Troy.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003. xi + 438 pp. Illustrations, photographs, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, $62.00; paper, $24.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-262-20140-2; paper, 0-262-7010-0.

Selling Style: Clothing and Social Change at the Turn of the Century. *By Rob Schorman.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. 212 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, $35.00. ISBN: 0-812-23728-5.

Reviewed by Regina Lee Blaszczyk

Scholars know that beauty and business in France and the United States followed dramatically different trajectories. The divergence was manifest in multiple industries and trades. Luxury production on the right bank of the Atlantic Ocean contrasted sharply with quantity production on its left bank. Such was the case in the clothing industry, the subject of these two books by an art historian and a social historian.

In *Couture Culture*, visual-culture specialist Nancy J. Troy, chair of art history at the University of Southern California, examines elite dressmaking in Paris between the 1860s and the 1920s. In four lengthy chapters, Troy traces the evolution of Parisian couture, from its genesis with the English emigrant Charles Frederick Worth to its full-scale institutionalization with practitioners like Madeleine Vionnet in the interwar years. Troy's main focus is the flamboyant Paul Poiret, who led the French fashion industry from the early 1900s through World War II. Poiret not only advanced business practices pioneered by Worth; he also established a permanent place atop the productive hierarchy through his activities as a public-relations virtuoso. Poiret promoted his costumes with a vengeance, lavishly outfitting the Paris villa where he put on theatrical spectacles that associated his dress designs with the exoticism of the Orient. He spared no expense to create the allure, borrowing methods and techniques from professional theater to shape the fashion show into its modern glitzy form. To attract wealthy clients, Poiret also patronized the fine arts, amassing an impressive collection of paintings, sculpture, and decorative objects and describing himself as a fine artist. All this made good business sense, and none of it will surprise business historians who have studied luxury goods.

These ostentatious strategies had historical roots in the state-supported porcelain, textile, and tapestry works of the early modern era, while their legacy is found in the sustained French dominance in contemporary global luxury markets.

In Troy's analysis, Poiret struggled to reconcile his elite status as an artist-craftsman creating one-of-a-kind costumes for wealthy patrons with the lowly economic imperative to generate profits by creating knockoffs for a broader audience. In artistic Parisian circles, Poiret's quandary linked him to modernists like Marcel Duchamp, who dealt with the commercialism he dreaded by making it the subject of his work. Duchamp smashed the emerging cult of mass production over the head, satirizing mass-manufactured objects in a self-referential type of artwork called the "readymade." Poiret, in turn, dealt with the tensions between originality and quantity production by creating "authorized reproductions" of his gowns for a wider audience. To paint this portrait of business success and artistic discontent, Troy draws on fashion magazines, exhibition catalogs, newspapers, and autobiographies, and relies on cultural theories about modernism and artistic identity. Her presentation and analysis of visual materials, including illustrations of Poiret's many spectacles, is especially effective.

Although Troy doesn't consider North America at length, it is useful to know that Poiret's decision to make reproductions for mass merchandisers like the Printemps department store paralleled developments in the United States. American high modernist Georgia O'Keeffe created paintings that were reproduced in a mid-1920s public-relations campaign by the Cheney Brothers Silk Manufacturing Company. For generations, these O'Keeffe commissions remained off the art-historical radar screen, overlooked by the highbrow critics and museum curators who guarded the modernist canon. Yet O'Keeffe and her husband-promoter, Alfred Steiglitz, didn't think twice about this commercial venture when they undertook it. Steiglitz even remarked on the positive outcome of allowing O'Keeffe's images to be circulated among the masses. These American modernists, at least, admitted that commercial commissions were part of the game plan. In this context, it would be useful to know precisely why the French modernists, from Poiret to Duchamp, felt so terrible about the mass reproduction of their work. Did it have more to do with French culture than with modernism? Does the angst over authenticity

tell us something about the differences that national identity can make to artistic cultures, business cultures, and their intersection?

Rob Schorman, assistant professor of history at Miami University of Ohio-Middletown, looks at a very different culture from another angle of vision. His study focuses on the middle-class clothing market in the United States during the 1890s. Through an in-depth study of this ten-year period, Schorman shows how clothing helped to define social status, gender relations, and visions of American citizenship. In the fin-de-siècle decade, middle-class men and women acquired their clothes from different sources. Almost exclusively, men bought readymade garments, while women acquired their clothes in a variety of ways. According to Schorman, women purchased some ready-to-wear clothing, visited dressmakers and milliners who custom-made goods for them, and sewed clothing and trimmed hats at home. During the gay nineties, sex differentiation in Victorian clothing was most exaggerated, due principally to cultural expectations and prescriptions. Men relied on the "sack suit" to project a masculine, muscular presence, while women used ruffles, corsets, feathers, and padding to project an hourglass figure. It was difficult to obtain this shapely look with off-the-rack items. As long as artificial curves were in, Victorian women sought clothing that was cut to fit their individual bodies. New immigrants, anxious to become Americanized, followed suit, discarding Old Country styles for the American look as much as their pocketbooks allowed. Schorman shows that expectations about gender, class, and ethnicity shaped the clothing market, and vice versa.

At first glance, Schorman's analysis seems straightforward, indeed almost simple. Fashion, costume, and labor historians have long known that women's ready-to-wear lagged behind the men's clothing industry, acknowledging that the quantity production of dresses by workshops and factories did not take off until the 1920s. It remained up to Schorman, the social historian and material-culture scholar, to explain why. He does this with clarity and precision, pinpointing the 1890s as the moment that most defined gender differences. Schorman spent many years as a journalist, and his writing is crisp, engaging, and energetic. He draws on a mountain of evidence, using four major sources—mass-circulation magazines, trade and industry journals, mail-order catalogs and brochures, and etiquette manuals—to articulate his thesis.

These two books by Troy and Schorman paint complementary pictures of the transatlantic fashion culture that was emerging at the turn of the century. Troy shows how elite designers manipulated the idea of art, capitalized on the need for distinctive clothing by wealthy French consumers, and built haute couture. Similarly, Schorman articulates how social ideas about what constituted appropriate behavior and body shapes for the American middle class created a mass-market clothing trade that partially remained wedded to handicraft practices. Both authors show that fashion and business, art and enterprise—to the degree that Paul Poiret knew but publicly abhorred—are flip sides of the same coin.

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