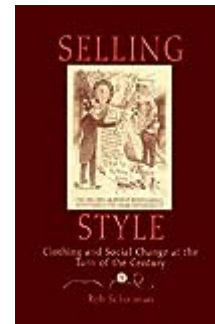


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Rob Schorman. *Selling Style: Clothing and Social Changes at the Turn of the Century.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. 212 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3728-3.



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Clothes Define the Woman and the Man

Rob Schorman uses the emerging business of producing and marketing clothing at the turn of the century to illuminate conflicts and changes in the American middle class's understanding and expression of gender differences, and similarities. He identifies the 1890s as the decade when men's and women's clothing styles and habits differed most markedly and tries to tease out the reasons behind those differences. In doing so, he provides a fascinating history of the transition from home-made to ready-made clothing and the advertising strategies employed to convince both male and female Americans to embrace changes in fashion and production methods. He also attempts to analyze the continuing discourse about fashion and gender that is present in contemporary popular magazines, trade publications for advertising and clothing, mail-order catalogs, and etiquette manuals.

The most important gender difference in the 1890s clothing business was the acceptance of ready-made clothing for men, and the continued emphasis on custom-made clothing for women. The male shift to ready-made clothing was not an automatic one and the ready-made

clothiers were careful to express respect for the older, artisanal values of the tailor including "individuality, respectability, command and craftsmanship" (p. 42) while pointing out the attractions of the ready-made clothing which was associated with "hustle, progressiveness, science, and expertise" (p. 42). Women, on the other hand, as befitted their place as upholders of tradition in a rapidly changing society, were still encouraged to take up sewing, and the transmission of the skills involved were seen as important activities for mothers and daughters. Aspects of ready-made clothing were more slowly incorporated into the feminine sphere with the providing of patterns to the readers of women's magazines, the selling of trademarked brands of hooks and eyes, and the promotion of manufactured dyes to transform old garments into new.

Having established the different ways in which male and female clothing were produced and characterized, Schorman explores the writings of contemporary social commentators Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Henry Finck on the subject. Finck, who was strongly influenced by Darwin and also a firm believer in sex role differen-

tiation, saw clothing differences as part of the natural order and attempts to erase them as potentially upsetting laws of social evolution. Gilman, a feminist, believed 'the wide unnatural gulf between men and women ... is nowhere better shown than in dress' (p. 83). To bridge that gulf, Gilman urged women to switch to ready-made clothing and also advocated cheaper, less restrictive fashions. Schorman sees these views as exemplifying his claim that clothing was one of the important signifiers of gender differences in the late nineteenth century.

In another chapter, Schorman describes the relationship between clothing and citizenship. This relationship intensified in the 1890s with the patriotism associated with the Spanish-American War and in the continuing efforts by newly arrived immigrants to Americanize themselves through dress. Clothing advertisers exploited the patriotic fervor surrounding the war in ways that sometimes further differentiated the genders, and also in ways that were merely silly. Women were encouraged to wear army grey, blue, and red while yellow became unfashionable due to its association with the Spanish flag. But they were also admonished to eschew military-style capes that were too mannish or masculine. Men's clothing advertisements sold clothing by showing men charging with bayonets or firing cannons. Schorman discusses the role clothing played in immigrant lives as the adaptation of American fashion became an easy way to announce the shedding of Old World ways and the embrace of the New.

Schorman concludes his study by explicitly showing the relationship between the development of the advertising and fashion industries. Both industries became much more sophisticated and aggressive in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Using myriad examples of clothing advertisements, Schorman demonstrates a symbiotic relationship between the two which persists until the present day.

As a history, *Selling Style* is meticulously researched, providing much information on changes in both the manufacture and selling of clothing. The book also furnishes more than enough evidence of the relationship between clothing and ideas about gender, identity, and the rightful order of things in a middle-class universe. While I doubt that anyone needs this book to prove that gender definition was a source of anxiety in late nineteenth-century America and that clothing and advertising often reflected gender-related concerns, the immense amount of detailed information makes this volume a worthwhile contribution to both material culture studies and the history of gender. The author does an incredibly good job of tracking down the artifacts and literature of the period and explains their multiple meanings with intelligence and rigor. My only minor criticism is that like most historians, he becomes so fascinated with his material and approaches that he loses sight of the fact that his chosen subject—clothing—is only one of many ways to talk about gender and identity at the turn of the century.

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