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Linda Welters and Abby Lillethun, *Fashion History: A Global View* (2018)

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Markets, Globalization & Development Review

Book Review**Linda Welters and Abby Lillethun, Fashion History: A Global View (2018)****Introduction**

In their recent book titled “Fashion History: A Global View,” Linda Welters and Abby Lillethun provide a new and holistic perspective on fashion history by arguing that fashion has occurred in cultures beyond the West and throughout history. They focus on two main issues to expand the history of fashion. The first one is the conceptualization of fashion history as Eurocentric and as the product of Western capitalism. Even though some of the recent fashion scholars have a more pluralistic view, dress historians paid little attention to fashion outside the West. Most of the prior studies on costume, dress or fashion acknowledge fashion as a Western phenomenon ignoring fashion in non-Western cultures. Building on the earlier works of Eicher (2000, 2001, 2010, 2014) and Niessen (2003, 2016), in this inspirational book, Welters and Lillethun explore a definition of fashion beyond the modern West. The second issue the authors emphasize is the fallacy to define fashion as exclusive to post-1350 Europe. The general assumption has been that fashion did not exist before the fourteenth century and it developed in the European courts with the rise of market economies and spread to the rest of the world through the expansion of Euro-American power. In this book, Welters and Lillethun argue that fashion existed in Europe before the mid-fourteenth century and in cultures outside the West.

Apart from these two main problems, the authors also bring to light two other assumptions. Focusing only on elite dress and excluding everyday dress of common people from fashion history is one of these assumptions that prevents global understanding of fashion history. The authors argue that European folk dress should also be included in the history of fashion. Finally, Welters and Lillethun, also suggest that fashion is beyond changes in forms of dress and tailoring. Changing dress practices and changes in body modifications, hairstyling, fabrics and textiles should be interpreted as fashion as well.

Consequently, in *Fashion History: A Global View*, Linda Welters and Abby Lillethun address this problem of exclusion and suggest to resolve it by reconceptualizing fashion history as a global phenomenon. In this regard, they provide examples from the geographic and historic places that have been neglected in fashion studies, such as the Ancient World, and East, South and South-East Asia, to show that fashion changes across the

globe. They highlight several ancient civilizations, such as China, India, Meso- and South America, which are ignored in the costume history textbooks. The book further explores key issues affecting the fashion system such as innovation, production, consumption, identity formation and the effects of colonization. These examples, cases and archaeological findings help to disprove the prior claims and show that fashion history should be understood as a global cultural phenomenon, originating before and beyond the 14th century Europe. The following sections summarize how the authors address these problems and provide an overview of the contents of the book.

Problems that Prevent Global Understanding of Fashion History

The authors present why the history of fashion should be understood as a global cultural phenomenon and discuss the developments that led to the main issues the book addresses. The first one is the belief that fashion is exclusive to the West. They review major developments, including the rise of cultural studies, to explain the reasons behind their argument that fashion existed in cultures outside the West. Wolf (1982), for instance, was one of the first scholars who addressed consequences of studying only the West. With globalization advancing in the 1990s and with rise of China and India, the attention started to shift beyond Euro-America. By the end of the twentieth century, more scholars started to question the hegemony of Western Europe in the history of dress and endorsed a more holistic approach (e.g. Baizerman, Eicher, and Cerny 1993; Craik 2009; Goody 2006; Hansen 2004; Schneider 2006). Craik (2009), who coined the term “the fashion impulse,” addressed that fashion systems operate globally and non-Western dress has its own fashion system. She argued that fashion impulse is a human impulse, which occurred in non-Western and preindustrial societies and cultures as well.

Niessen (2003), in *Re-Orienting Fashion*, was one of the first scholars to address the boundaries set by fashion theory and reimagine fashion history as global. She discussed the problem of Eurocentrism in reference to dress history and argued that if the others are seen as outside the fashion system, then they are viewed as people without change, progress, taste, style and preferences. Even though fashion studies started to embrace the global Niessen (2016) believed that the Western bias is still dominant in fashion studies. In this book, Welters and Lillethun address that the same is true for fashion history, which mostly followed a Eurocentric approach and neglected the fashion systems that operate historically in regions beyond Euro-America, apart from few authors who explored the

history of dress in Asian cultures (e.g. Niessen, Leshkowich, and Jones 2003; Slade 2009).

In addition, Welters and Lillethun also provide an overview of the historical developments to explain the reasons behind their second claim that fashion existed in Europe prior to the medieval period. Except few scholars (e.g. Finnane 2008; Lemire 2010), dress historians accepted the mid-fourteenth century as the birth of fashion, as it appears in many texts since the 1980s. The conceptualization of fashion's birth in fourteenth-century Europe gained importance in the cultural studies, when a French historian, Braudel (1981) published *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, which included a section on "costume and fashion." Braudel (1981) claimed that fashion began in Europe as a way for the elite to distinguish themselves from the ones that belong to lower social scale. The change occurred around 1350, when men's tunics became shorter. Similarly, Lipovetsky (1994) placed the origin of fashion in the West's Industrial Revolution. Hence, Braudel's and Lipovetsky's perspectives possess the two problems that the authors mention: fashion did not exist before 1350 and fashion did not exist outside Euro-American zone.

The authors also explain the assumptions that created problems related to focusing only on elite dress and the scope of fashion change. Braudel (1981), for instance, distinguished costume and fashion based on the pace of change in dress. According to him, costume referred to the clothing of Europe's peasants, Peruvian Indians and sub-Saharan Africans, whereas fashion applied only to Europe's elite. He focused on changes in forms of dress and tailoring, ignoring the changes in body modifications and hairstyling and changes in fabrics and textiles, which have been the elements of fashion change in Eastern cultures, such as India, Japan and China. Even though some of the recent studies extend dress history beyond Europe and America (Hill 2011; Ross 2008), they do not contextualize changing dress practices as fashion. Welters and Lillethun, on the other hand, argue that changing dress practices and folk dress should also be included in the history of fashion.

Overview of the Contents of the Book

Part one of the book, *Understanding Fashion and its History*, is about how we dress our bodies and assessment of key fashion theories and scholarship in the field of fashion history. The authors first discuss interpretations of terminology used in the study of fashion, including the definitions and terms used by fashion/dress historians and cultural historians. In Chapter 2, they propose a broad and inclusive definition for fashion and state that they prefer to use the term fashion for changing styles

of dress, whether that change is slow or fast, in the shapes of clothing or the fabric patterns, in hairstyles and colors, in cosmetic and body decorations or in permanent body modifications (p. 29). This broad definition forms the basis of this book that if fashion is defined as changing styles of dress adopted by people at any given time and place, then the West cannot be the focus of fashion history. Furthermore, it helps to understand that the desire to embellish the human body – the fashion impulse – is the main reason for dress and people seek novelty or change. Therefore, fashion is common to human nature.

In the following chapters of part one, Welters and Lillethun examine key theories that explain how fashion systems operate. The three concepts that have continued to be discussed in fashion theory are change, imitation of elites and pursuit of novelty, which was first proposed by Spencer in 1854. Veblen's theory of the leisure class (1899), Simmel's trickle-down theory of fashion change ([1904] 1957), King's trickle-across theory of fashion change (1963), Field's trickle-up theory (1970), Polhemus's bubble-up theory (1994), and Blumer's theory of collective selection (1969) are some of the key theories that the authors refer to.

In Part One, the authors also present the historiography of fashion history literature, which helps to reveal the rise of Eurocentrism, which is the practice of viewing the world from a European perspective (p. 51), in the study of dress history and recognizing it as a problem in the 1980s. Reviewing literature from the earliest sixteenth-century costume books to studies on fashion history today, the authors examine how the old costume history became the new fashion history and how cultural and critical studies are affecting the study of fashion. They also discuss the current state of fashion history and scholars who are influential in the development of the new fashion history in the 1980s. The new fashion history has taken into consideration the developments in other disciplines and started including those who had been ignored by the old costume history. Some of the examples of important thinkers and scholars who influenced this cultural turn are: philosopher and semiotician Barthes ([1967] 1983) who initiated a new interpretation of dress as a form of silent communication; Hebdige (1979) who conducted an ethnographic study on youth subculture; anthropologist Geertz (1973) who developed the ethnographic technique called the *thick description*; Bourdieu (1977, 1990) who introduced the concept of *habitus*; Butler (1988, 1990) who theorized gender, identity and performativity.

The rise of such cultural and critical studies has helped to show the need for a global and inclusive view of fashion history. They start discussions on fashion among non-elites, non-Western cultures and in

varied power or economic structures (e.g. Bourdieu 1984; Craik 1994; Hebdige 1979; O'Neal 1998). They also suggest that it is critical to understand the power relations related to fashion and its production, consumption, and practice. This book is an answer to these calls. It critically analyzes the historic formation of the meaning of fashion, investigates the problem of Eurocentrism and calls for attention to a global, more inclusive fashion history. Part one is an overview of these major developments in dress and fashion history that led to the main issues the book addresses.

In Part Two, *Outside the Cannon: Alternative Fashion Histories*, Welters and Lillethun present examples to support their arguments. They share case studies from India and China to show that cultures existed centuries before the rise of the West. Furthermore, they write about fashion change in precolonial and colonial societies in America, Africa and Southeast Asia, including illustrations from their own research on New England natives and case studies in Greece, Latvia, Indonesia and the Bronze Age. Cannon (1998) was among the first to suggest that fashion exists in all cultures across time and space. He argued that the frequent changes in native tastes and the existence of style leaders showed the criteria for fashion in indigenous (small-scale, nonindustrial) societies. Craik supports Cannon that "fashion is not exclusively the domain of modern culture" (2009, p. 19). Using Craik's (2009) concept of "fashion impulse," which supports the argument that creativity exists from prehistory to the present, Welters and Lillethun talk about dress practices of native cultures. Similar to Cannon (1998), they argue that change in dress and appearance is a universal behavior, and impulse to decorate the body is evident among prehistoric people and indigenous societies in the West.

The following chapters of part two consist of examples to reinforce the argument to include local cultures in fashion studies. The authors use beads and tattoos as the earliest evidence related to dress and adornment and link archeological findings to fashion process to show that fashion change along with the tools used. They give examples of humans utilizing beads as body embellishments in prehistoric times and present prehistoric body markings as early known tattoos. The authors further give examples of fashion systems among native people in the Americas before and after European colonization. In part two, Welters and Lillethun also talk about early trade networks in the Eastern Hemisphere, which began at the Bronze Age between Mediterranean cultures, and their contributions to changing styles of dress. Bronze Age luxury trade in the Ancient Near East, Silk Road commodities, textiles and dress of selected Eurasian courts are some examples of trade and fashion in selected regions in Eurasia. The authors provide evidence from such contexts that changing tastes took place in

jewelry, cosmetics and grooming and that fashion impulse existed long before previously stated. Through trade and exchange, new ideas about dress and appearance spread across the Eastern Hemisphere.

Part two further includes examples from dress histories of China, Korea, Japan, India and Indonesia. Unlike the ethnocentric perceptions of previous scholars (e.g. Braudel 1981; Lipovetsky 1994), who saw Asian dress as unchanging, Welters and Lillethun illustrate with examples from various Asian societies that fashion has been a vital part of life in Asia. Even though dress forms did not change for long periods in many Asian societies, change occurred in the fabrics, embellishments, trims, accessories, cosmetics and hairstyles, showing that dress incorporates all aspects of appearance. Consequently, the authors argue that change in fashion is not only restricted to tailored clothing.

Chapter 8 of part two addresses the other two problems in the history of fashion: the problem of the “birth of fashion,” excluding pre-1340 from the fashion discourse and the problem of excluding the non-elite from fashion. The chapter analyzes alternative fashion histories in Europe and America, prior to mid-fourteenth century Europe. The authors claim that the date of the origin of fashion is not fixed to one time and region and that excluding the centuries preceding the 1340s from the fashion discourse misses the fashionable behavior in earlier cultures in Europe. They support their argument by sharing examples from the early medieval period in Western Europe and the ancient world. These examples help to show that fashion existed before the Middle Ages and in non-capitalistic societies. In chapter 8, the authors also criticize the exclusion of folk dress from costume and fashion histories. They refute another mistaken assumption that peasants or country folk did not participate in a fashion system and that fashion practice only occurred among the elite. They present examples of everyday fashion and dress practices of common people in England (folk dress) and fashion in the dress of slaves from Africa and the Caribbean, to prove their participation in the fashion system. These examples support the authors’ argument that the study of fashion history is not limited to Western dress worn in urban environments beginning with the middle of the fourteenth century. Therefore, the study of ancient dress, folk dress and non-elite dress cannot be excluded from fashion studies.

In the last chapter of part two, titled *Global Fashion*, Welters and Lillethun extend their discussion into modern times by examining the spread of European styles (Western dress) to societies around the world through globalization. Examples are given from the Pacific region and sub-Saharan Africa to show how locales responded to the introduction of European fashions in fabrics and garment styles, and modified them according to their

own tastes. The chapter also discusses the inverse spread: the adoption of non-Western styles by Westerners and the non-Western influences on Western dress, such as the Asian influences from India, Japan and China. In Chapter 9, the authors also talk about post-modern global fashion, where they discuss the hippie movement and state that in the later twentieth century, youth everywhere created their own fashion microsystems. They describe interactions of non-Western and Western cultures in the era of globalization and state that it is no longer correct to separate the West from the rest. Local fashion contexts connect to the global world through trade networks, travel, tourism and internet. Therefore, the influence of the local on fashion systems cannot be ignored.

Conclusion

With this book, Linda Welters and Abby Lillethun propose a new perspective on fashion history and invite more scholars around the globe to enhance the depth and scope of fashion history by collaborating and writing inclusive fashion histories. They argue that fashion history should be understood as a global phenomenon and focus on four issues to expand the history of fashion. The examples and cases shared in the book show that the desire for novelty and change is universal and existed across time and space, even if the pace of change in style may be slower in pre-medieval and non-Western contexts. Therefore, the authors argue that fashion history should not be limited to the West and to post mid-fourteenth century and it is time to reconceptualize the history of fashion to include dress systems outside Western fashion, along with preindustrial and tribal dress across the world.

The authors also suggest that fashion is beyond changes in forms of dress and tailoring. The examples covered in the book help to reveal the changing tastes in fabrics, hairstyles and cosmetics, which are elements often neglected in fashion history. Changes in body decorations and embellishments are also characterized as fashion and reflect changing taste, and therefore should be included in fashion history. Finally, the authors demonstrate how fashion innovation and diffusion appear in multiple ways, not only by emulation of elites but also through cross-cultural exchange and trade, and subcultural rejection of mainstream styles. The case studies presented in the book reveal that emulation of elites is common across fashion history and is not only restricted to the West. However, the authors support Sproles' (1974) argument that, fashion diffusion is no longer only related to emulation of the elite. New styles can be introduced at all levels of the society, enabling fashion leadership to become more inclusive. Therefore, they underline the potential for further study of everyday dress of common people as part of a fashion system.

Especially at a time when the fashion industry is blamed for concerns about diversity, becoming more inclusive and addressing the problem of exclusion in fashion history is both important and relevant (*also see, Cavusoglu 2019, in this issue*). In this regard, *Fashion History: A Global View* is inspirational for new studies on fashion history by showing how new styles were initiated at times, in places and in ways that ordinarily are not included in fashion history. The book can further extend the way fashion history is taught at the colleges and the universities.

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