

# H-Net Reviews

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**Ulinka Rublack.** *Dressing Up: Cultural Identity in Renaissance Europe.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. xxi + 354 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-929874-7.

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Rublack's work, *Dressing Up: Cultural Identity in Renaissance Europe*, looks at the role of clothing and dress items in the everyday lives of German men and women during the Renaissance. Through an analysis of personal records such as a "book of clothes" and family correspondence, Rublack draws conclusions about the interactions of their authors and their appearances as well as the greater meaning of the outward self in European society as a whole.

In addition to these examples the author uses the experience of religion (and the Reformation specifically) and travel to describe how the representation of selfhood could be, and often was, determined by external sources. The work draws many useful and poignant comparisons between the German and Italian experience of dress during the Renaissance but it would be difficult to call this a comprehensive view of Europe at the time. Nevertheless, Rublack achieves her goal of showing the importance of contemporary individuals' relationship with clothing items as it related to their understanding of self and personhood in the Renaissance and further proves that the study of dress is an important medium by which we can uncover deeper historical truths.

In the introduction, Rublack summarizes the arrival of luxury textiles and fitted clothing to Europe via trade with the East. She offers this information as the basis for Europe's new interest in "dressing up." Furthermore, she states her purpose of showing that dress and visual identity gained importance via the printing press, new forms of painting, and in general, the influx of images into the public sphere. Her first example of this newfound interest in visual representations of the self is the "book of clothes," or *Kleidungsbüchlein*, of Matthäus Schwarz. In this fascinating second chapter, Rublack examines Schwarz's collection of 135 watercolors, most commissioned from miniaturist Narziss Renner, with whom Schwarz worked throughout his youth on this project. These images show Schwarz's progres-

sion from a young man interested in the temporality of clothing and beautiful textiles to an elderly gentleman, ennobled and refined. Especially poignant in this chapter, however, is what such an invaluable resource like this book of clothes can tell readers about the Renaissance experience with clothing, aging, and societal expectations. Throughout Schwarz's youth he is clad in bright colors and fashionable accessories and keeps up this spectacle well into his adult years but once he is married, the images slow and become more banal. The insight this book offers, then, is not only about one man's experience with shaping his identity via the painted image but how anyone in the Renaissance might experience the aging process, both visually and emotionally.

From this example Rublack dives into a discussion of the role of religion in the formulation and appearance of Renaissance dress. The discussion follows Martin Luther and contemporaries through the process of determining a new style of decorous dressing, which was unlike the old style of the Catholic clergy whose splendor was meant to strike awe in the hearts and minds of the congregation. Rather, Luther, as Rublack explains, advocated a style of dress that was based on the academic attire he wore in Wittenberg and saw this as a kind of new luxury based not in the desire for pomp that characterized the old but in virtue, decency, and gentility. Nevertheless, though I found Rublack's treatment of "Looking at the Self" particularly engaging and insightful, her discussion of "The Look of Religion" seemed to follow a different path. The Reformation undoubtedly impacted contemporary Germans' experiences of life, selfhood, and self-perception, but this chapter lacked the firsthand account that made the previous one so convincing. This more general look at the way in which life in Germany was influenced by Luther and Protestant ideals may have been better suited as a second chapter rather than a third.

The theoretical discussion on dress and visual sources of identity continues with a chapter on nationhood and

how clothing might codify the look, culture, and customs of a people. Decorousness is presented again and not only as a religious ideal in dressing but also a German one. This concept is nicely juxtaposed with another chapter on “Looking at Others” and together they highlight a central concern for contemporary Germans (and Luther as well): the impact of foreign goods in Germany. The fear of losing cultural identity as a result of wearing foreign styles is often referenced throughout the book, especially in visual sources. For example, Rublack cites Andrew Boorde’s *Book of Knowledge* and a book that recorded the clothes of Duke Wilhelm IV of Bavaria for both featuring a naked figure contemplating the growing number of options and ever-changing styles in fashion. Therefore, the theme of losing cultural identity as a result of dress is just as valuable to this work as that of creating it. Indeed, for the Germans, and perhaps the English as well, the act of negating foreign influence in itself creates a national image.

In the remaining chapters Rublack uses correspondence from the Behaim family to describe the consumer relationship with clothing in Renaissance Germany. These examples offer a more direct understanding of the individual experience in the same way that the author’s discussion of Matthäus Schwarz’s book of clothes does in the second chapter. Rublack gives a fine summary of the student experience with dress as well as the family matriarch’s role in securing these items and ensuring they were used properly. Rublack’s representation of parental control over their children’s clothing options, even when they were away at school, reinforces one of the book’s tenets, that dress was as much about fitting

into a given cultural identity as it was about creating it. Nevertheless, her discussion of the autonomy that dealings with clothing items offered women was limited; I felt it could have offered an interesting counterpoint to Evelyn Welch’s presentation of Isabella d’Este in *Shopping in the Renaissance* (2009). Furthermore, a comparison with letters from a family of similar stature in Germany or England would have also strengthened the argument.

While the book is clearly organized according to themes, the lack of chronological or geographical progression can make the work difficult to follow at times. Nevertheless, Rublack does an excellent job of providing primary examples to support her claim that clothing can not only inform us about history but is history itself. The work is filled with numerous illustrations, from paintings to manuscript pages and extant clothing, which support her conclusions about the value of images in this time period. Furthermore, her comparisons between the German relationship to dress, which was meant to characterize the average man’s experience, and the Italian nobility’s is insightful, informative, and offers the reader another means by which to contextualize this work. Rublack uses a brief discussion of dress practices in the Far East during the Renaissance period to further root the rise of visual display in a broader context. These passages are brief but are reasonably sufficient to show that the desire to create images, both on paper and with one’s appearance, was a global phenomenon of the 1300s to 1600s. Rublack’s work is a valuable counterpoint to any work on material culture in Renaissance Italy and achieves its goal of proving the importance of analyzing dress, as a medium and as a source, in broader historical discussions.

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