Letter from the Editor

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The diversity of fashion scholarship today is inspiring. Consider this issue of Fashion Theory, which encompasses subjects ranging from evangelical t-shirts to Qing women’s fashion, and from the Australian influence on Anna Piaggi to Victorian fancy-dress balls.

“OMG: Authenticity, Parody, and Evangelical Christian Fashion” by Lynn S. Neal is a fascinating examination of evangelical t-shirts, which will be of interest, not only to scholars investigating the relationship between religion and fashion, but to anyone interested in the concepts of authenticity and parody. T-shirts with messages often seem to tell us something about the wearer, and Christian evangelicals are among those who use fashion to communicate their beliefs. Neal analyzes “how Christian
companies construct ‘evangelical authenticity’ through their origin stories, the text and graphics of their tees, and their styling of the models wearing the apparel.” But what happens if the appearance of the wearer is ambiguous, or we can’t tell if the message is sincere or a parody? Neal argues convincing that “While Baudrillard sees a world of simulation, which dissolves any distinction between ‘original’ and ‘parody,’ evangelical t-shirts and parodies of them operate in a world of representation, which preserves it…. The subculture’s tees and parodies of them materially stabilize or fix the meaning of evangelicalism, even as these parodies problematize expectations and definitions of religious authenticity.”

“Cloud Collars and Sleeve Bands: Commercial Embroidery and the Fashionable Accessory in Mid-to-Late Qing China” by Rachel Silberstein takes a new and theoretically sophisticated approach to the study of fashion in Imperial China. Focusing on the embroidery industry in Suzhou, she explores how “the growth of commercialized textile production entwined with fashionable consumption to stimulate new styles in Chinese women’s dress.” Put this way, it seems obvious, but Silberstein is among the first scholars to investigate in detail the relationship between commercial production and fashionable consumption in Qing dynasty China. As she points out, the mid to late Qing was a period of social mobility, urbanization, and the growth of a mercantile class. Contrary to stereotypes, Qing China turns out to have been a highly commercialized country, albeit not a capitalist one, with its own developing fashion system. Utilizing a range of sources, Silberstein describes and analyzes the “real transformations” that took place in Chinese women’s dress between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries.

“Anna Piaggi and Australia: the eye has to travel” by Paola Di Trocchio looks at the Vogue Italia writer Anna Piaggi (1931-2012), one of fashion’s great “eccentric” dressers, whose unique personal style incorporated both historic (“vintage”) clothing and contemporary high fashion by friends such as Karl Lagerfeld. The late Vogue Italia editor Franca Sozzani valued Piaggi’s “vreelandesque” sensibility and invited her to create her famous and influential Double Pages for the magazine. A recent book and documentary on Diana Vreeland were titled “The Eye has to Travel” and Paola Di Trocchio also uses the phrase to describe Piaggi’s approach to fashion. In particular, she traces Piaggi’s connections to Australia and her close relationship with Australians, such as Vern Lambert, “an amateur fashion historian” who sold museum-quality vintage clothing at the Chelsea Antiques Market. Figures as diverse as Jimi Hendrix and Jean Paul Gaultier purchased garments from Lambert, but according to Di Trocchio, it was his influence on Piaggi that would have “an enduring presence.”

“The Victorian Fancy Dress Ball, 1870-1900” by Rebecca M. Mitchell takes as its starting point that observation that Victorian fancy dress balls differed from the masquerades of the previous century. But until now few studies have explored “the nature of these differences.” According to Mitchell, a central difference was “the Victorian embrace of self-revelation in fancy
dress, as opposed to disguise or antithesis.” Whereas the eighteenth-century masquerade ball utilized “carnivalesque inversion,” late-nineteenth-century fancy dress balls allowed participants to reveal “aspects of their character… by choosing costumes from a prescribed set of identifiable roles and tropes,” as well as by choosing “often abstract costumes that directly engaged with issues of the day.” Examples of abstract costumes include “Photography,” “Suez Canal,” and “Money.” One of the many wonderful illustrations shows a costume called “The New Woman,” which features props and images including the bicycle, golf club, and hunting rifle. If only someone could do an exhibition on this!

In addition, Danielle Bruggeman reviews *Fashioning Memory: Vintage Style and Youth Culture* (Bloomsbury) by Heike Jenss. While there have been many publications on retro style and vintage clothing, Bruggeman argues that “Jenss’ contribution lies in her in-depth theoretical exploration of how cultural memories can be ‘fashioned,’ i.e. given shape and meaning.” She focuses, in particular, on the cultural construction of “the sixties,” showing how “fashion plays a pivotal role in the constant process of remaking cultural memories of the past.” Her work utilizes ethnography, memory studies, and material studies approaches, while also drawing on work about modernity, such as Ulrich Lehmann’s *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity* (2000), in which he argues that, “In order to become the new, fashion always cites the old.”

Sanda Miller reviews *Fashion and the Art of Pochoir* (Thames and Hudson) by April Callahan and Cassidy Zachary. This “lavishly illustrated” work focuses on “the pioneering collaboration between couturier Paul Poiret and two illustrators, Paul Iribe and Georges Lepape.” Unfortunately, there are no illustrations included with this review, or, for that matter, with Bruggeman’s review of *Fashioning Memory* – a terrible lacuna, as the publishers would surely have provided them.

Lastly, this issue contains a conference report by Peter McNeil describing the second “Dressing the Early Modern Network Conference,” which took place in September 2016 at the University of Bologna. About 20 papers were presented on topics ranging from economic history to sumptuary laws and cochineal dyes.

Sincerely,
Valerie Steele