

Fashion history

The Mechanical Smile: Modernism and the First Fashion Shows in France and America, 1900–1929

Caroline Evans
(Yale University Press, £30 *£27)

IN PARIS, in 1920, at lunch with a journalist, the dress designer Paul Poiret, who was attended by four of his mannequins all wearing green-and-gold uniforms, said: 'No... do not speak to the girls, they are not there.' Disregarding Poiret's disdain, Caroline Evans's wonderfully illustrated book offers a vivid historical analysis of the mannequin's role in French and American couture from 1880 to 1929.

In the 18th century, 'mannequin' meant 'an empty-headed, fashionable man of straw'. By 1870, as Parisian dressmakers increased (from 158 in 1850 to 1,700 in 1900), the term shifted to the women who modelled the clothes. Those silent, gliding, smiling women were different from today's models. Miss Evans traces their changing size, age, weight, height, walk and demeanour meticulously through the



Above: Patou with his American mannequins, 1925. Right: This 1915 *Harper's Bazaar* contained the latest French fashions

decades, also emphasising physical differences between French and American mannequins. Fascinating details abound, such as the tight, black, long-sleeved garment (a *fourreau*) worn under even low-cut gowns by 19th-century mannequins—a practice dropped in the early 1900s.

The book focuses on the commercial inter-reliance between

France and America. Paris couture needed its export market—even in 1902, 63% of sales went abroad. The author conjures up astonishing parties and fashion shows on both sides of the Atlantic, with mannequins riding horses, and Champagne and *foie gras* refreshments. Her account of the relationship between mannequins, triple mirrors, chorus lines

and Modernist painters such as Marcel Duchamp is compelling.

At the outbreak of the First World War, designers such as Jean Patou and Poiret joined up, but their houses stayed open; and although French women dressed more soberly in wartime, the export market was invaluable to the French economy. Consequently, designers aimed to please American taste, to the disgust of some of the mannequins.

The book looks closely at the businesses of two great innovators: Lucile (Lady Duff Gordon), the first international designer, with showrooms in Paris, London, New York and Chicago; and Poiret, whose novelties included perfume, mass production and the hobble skirt.

Although modern theory, on topics such as 'the gaze', is offered, the wealth and breadth of contemporary material here almost speaks for, and certainly illustrates, itself. *Philippa Stockley*



Cultural history

Tangier

Josh Shoemaker
(I. B. Tauris, £16.99 *£15.40)

TANGIER IS, perhaps, the most exotic city in the world. Great travellers and travel writers have passed through over the centuries and written vivid descriptions of it, which have only added to the mystery.

This book is a fantasia of stories and quotes by and about the quite astonishing number and variety of writers who have made their homes there for a time. It's a heady mix of tolerance and vice, and is often very funny, too.

The *Times* correspondent Walter Harris—who made his home in Tangier in about 1900, built a villa, planted an exquisite forest and lived there for the rest of his adventurous life—tells the story of coming across

an English preacher shouting a fervent Christian sermon to an intent crowd of Muslims. Fearing for his safety, he drew close, only to discover that the translator was telling a fantastic fairytale, which bore no relation to the Englishman's rantings on salvation.

Reading *Tangier* is a bit like sitting at a cafe table on the Grand Socco with an old Tangier hand, which is, indeed, what the author is. He knows all about all the characters that have passed through this city where many of their writings were spawned, and, in fact, quite a few of the more recent ones he knew personally.

At the centre was Paul Bowles, who wrote *The Sheltering Sky* there and who, with his equally talented wife, Jane, was the magnet that drew so many writers to the place: Truman Capote, in search of dancing



The Kasbah in Tangier, a city that has inspired writers for centuries

boys; William Burroughs, who wrote *Naked Lunch* there and kept off drugs for a time while doing so; Jack Kerouac, who didn't; Allen Ginsberg, guru of the Beat Generation; Tennessee Williams, who was invited to Tangier by the Bowleses, as were Patricia Highsmith and Gore Vidal.

From Ibn Battuta, who was born there in 1304, to Tim Mackintosh-Smith, who entertainingly followed in his footsteps recently to write *Travels with a Tangerine*, we are regaled with literary legends of this multi-layered city, which is brought alive in a marvellously odd, gossipy romp of a book. *Robin Hanbury-Tenison*