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Citation: Price, L. ORCID: 0000-0001-7747-4210 (2016). Survey of Historic Costume (6th edition). Reference Reviews, 30(5), pp. 20-21. doi: 10.1108/rr-02-2016-0048

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Link to published version: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/rr-02-2016-0048>

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Survey of Historic Costume

Edited by Phyllis G. Tortora and Sara B. Marcketti

Bloomsbury

New York, NY and London

2015

xviii+702pp.

ISBN 978 1 62892 167 0 (hardback)

Keywords: Fashion; costume; fashion history

The historical costume fashion book has a long history that has tended, during past eras, towards inaccuracy (see, for example, Racinet's and Hottenroth's Victorian images as presented most recently in Leventon 2008). Modern compendiums of historical fashion, thankfully, are much more rigorous in portraying accurately the details of historic dress, focusing less on the fanciful narrative of dress reminiscent of Herbert Norris and more on its social context and the evidence of extant examples and contemporary evidence.

This is the great strength of this book, which focuses on Western costume, but which nevertheless also documents the unavoidably important dress of the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians and Minoans. It is also a weakness, as the impressive scope of this book necessitates a brevity which means that no one subject in it is explored in great depth. This is the catch-22 of most books of this ilk, and whilst there is much to admire in the attention given to historical context, it is sometimes frustratingly shallow in many respects. In short – it is recommended reading for a beginner in fashion history, with more in-depth exploration reserved for other, more topic-specific volumes.

As mentioned, the strength of this book lies in the manner in which it grounds its subject in the social context of the times. It does not merely present examples of dress, but also extensively links it past and present human culture. As far as possible it contains contemporary accounts of fashionable costume; it includes images of extant examples from various museums and private collections around the world; and it also links trends in past fashion to those seen in modern fashion and in folk costume around the world. This attention to historical background gives a unique insight into the cultural milieu that affected developments in fashion, and how these styles are still recycled, appropriated or borrowed by our cultural present. This is an aspect in which other compendiums, such as Yarwood (2011) and Peacock (1991) are lacking.

Apart from the briefness of much of the matter presented in this book, there are other drawbacks of a more practical nature: there are several typos and some inaccuracies that anyone versed in the subject will be able to pick out – no doubt due to a rushed editing process. Nevertheless, as a beginner's sourcebook this is a valuable volume, particularly for first year fashion students, and it would therefore be a fundamental addition to an Arts institution or public library which serves fashion or costume design students.

References

Leventon, M. (ed.) (2008) *Costume worldwide: a historical sourcebook featuring the classic artworks of Friedrich Hottenroth & Auguste Racinet*. Thames & Hudson, London; The Ivy Press, Lewes.

Peacock, J. (1991) *The chronicle of Western costume: from the ancient world to the late twentieth century*. Thames & Hudson, London.

Yarwood, D. (2011) *Illustrated encyclopedia of world costume*. Dover Publications, Inc., Mineola, New York.