

Le Monde et la Mode: Fashioning Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century France

Chair: Masha Belenky, George Washington University

Lise Schreier
Fordham University

De l'enfant africain comme accessoire de mode

This talk examines the significant body of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French literature featuring exotic children as commodities. These characters first appeared in print in the 1780s, at a time when upper-class French women started casting aside the pet-monkeys of which they had been so fond, and began to take non-European children into their homes. I argue that as these children started appearing, mostly as gifts, in salons and drawing rooms, they also served an important role in the definition of Frenchness. Analyzing memoirs, correspondences, and bestsellers in concert with fashion plates and archival sources from the French Ministry of Education, I show that a number of actual children brought from Senegal and Morocco, as well as fictionalized accounts of their lives, became the centerpieces of both a powerful representational system and a new discourse on education. I explain how non-European children became the ultimate fashion accessory at the end of the eighteenth-century, and why such super-signifying cultural objects came to emblemize elegance, a key component of Frenchness, precisely at the dawn of the colonial era. I also show that in nineteenth-century texts, exotic children appearing as presents offered to French boys and girls became important educational and ideological tools in training youngsters to civilize the “Other.” Indeed, these non-European children were expected to shape French youth’s understanding and eventual practice of morality, charity, and national identity.

Susan Hiner
Vassar College

'Sans dessus dessous': The Social Life of Handbags

This paper explores the genealogy of the handbag, both linking it to the evolving question of bourgeois femininity in 19thC France and considering the definition of women’s roles through their relationships with objects. Through an analysis of several works of literature, anecdotes from the fashion press and iconography from popular culture, the paper demonstrates that *le sac à main* turned the hidden pockets of previous generations inside out, displaying publicly what once had been carefully guarded under the skirts of women. From alms purses to pockets to sewing bags to the handbag, the last of which we recognize today as the key entry point into haute couture, the handbag’s genealogy both refers to the virtue of woman’s work and contains the accoutrements of her fashionability, just as it also signals her commerce with the public world of consumption. The *aumônière* and its close relation, the *bourse de la mariée*, the *sac à ouvrage* and the *réticule* all participated in the engendering of today’s *sac à main*. But by the nineteenth century this purse also initiated the young bride into the two most important vocations (outside of motherhood) of the proper bourgeois married lady—charity work and needlework. The story of the *sac* uncovers the confluence of these two types of women’s work, because needlework and charity intersect in this fashion accessory that ultimately would signal a third and increasingly important type of “work” of 19th-century bourgeois women—the work of consumption. From

Le Monde et la Mode: Fashioning Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century France

sign of moral turpitude to emblem of moral rectitude and beyond, the *sac à main*—a metonym for woman herself—takes its place among the accessories to modernity in nineteenth-century France.

Willa Z. Silverman
Pennsylvania State University

'La Vie mondaine à Paris, 1900-1910': A Monument to Fashion in the Belle Époque

This paper presents and analyzes *Le Monument du costume, 1900-1910: La Vie Mondaine à Paris*, a one-copy *édition de luxe* commissioned in 1913 by the noted *fin-de-siècle* print collector and bibliophile Henri Beraldi. The work features seventy original watercolors by a popular illustrator of Belle Époque high society, Pierre Vidal. In Vidal's detailed illustrations, fashionable Parisians – men, women, and children of *le tout Paris* -- stroll in the Bois de Boulogne and on the boulevards, relax among gentlemen at the *cercle*, watch the steeplechase at Auteuil, take tea at the Ritz, shop in the *grands magasins*, play lawn tennis. Beraldi likely modeled his publication on a work he had in fact written about: the late-eighteenth century commission by the Strasbourg banker Jean-Henri Eberts of the *Monument du costume*, illustrated with prints by Moreau le Jeune. Both Beraldi and Eberts' commissions of these single-copy editions were indeed monuments to antebellum periods soon to be gone with the wind; Beraldi's 'monument,' in fact, was never published due to the outbreak of the war. Nevertheless, Beraldi and Vidal's 'monument' offers a detailed pictorial record of the relationship among fashion, society, and daily life in Belle Époque Paris. At the same time, this work signals the unique role played during this era by *amateurs* such as Beraldi as privileged architects of the illustrated book.