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Snapshot: Display Mannequins

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Although the dress mannequin is usually considered marginal within the marketing and displaying of fashionable clothing, it can be analyzed as a key cultural artifact in the fashion system. The display mannequin is part of an archaic imagery of humankind, similar to automatons, robots, and dolls. At a metaphoric level, it has an importance in Western culture, because on a symbolic plane the mannequin replaces the human being. In fashion, the mannequin engages in the dialogue between the container (the clothes) and the contained (the body). Global examples in department store and boutique windows in Milan, New York, and Beijing, along with online images and online catalogs of firms selling mannequins, illustrate this point.

One sees the use of these artificial substitutes for the human body in many places. Albert Schütz, a sociologist working in Germany in the first half of twentieth century, argued that in order to reconstruct the meaning of the actions of subjects, researchers create some ideal types, like mannequins. The mannequin is, in this case, easily manageable; it is abstract and functions to aid the comprehension of reality. In fashion, a dress mannequin is used to present clothes, because they cannot present themselves. Clothes, carried on the surface of the body, are denied a life of their own, submerged in the powerful aura surrounding the body. Clothes are the typical case of a container that needs to contain something in order to exist. In this case, reproducing the body or one of its parts provides a means for clothes to be displayed.

Examples of mannequins appear in mythology, as, for example, when the Greek widow Laodamia constructed a wax mannequin of her husband, and in history, for example, when Julius Caesar reported on funeral rites among Celtic tribes in which wicker mannequins symbolized a being without life. The mannequin is also one of the modalities in which the human being has been depicted. As far as technology is concerned, the mannequin is a poor relative. While over time technological products have developed the capacity of moving, the mannequin did not. Even the doll has been able to do better than the mannequin, acquiring in its modernization process a bit of voice and movement.

Mannequins in Advertising and Art

The history of the mannequin relates first to clothing production and merchandising. At the end of the nineteenth century, it was used to hang fashionable clothes. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was used for commercial purposes of display. Its history also relates to clothing consumption through the invention of clothes hangers, which are essentially minimal mannequins. Maintenance of many garments such as dresses, jackets, blouses, and shirts would be difficult if an army of clothes hangers did not inhabit closets.

In the 1920s, French advertising discovered the mannequin, and abstract body forms were developed instead of naturalistic ones, calling attention to the garments and not the mannequins. At that time, the mannequin was rethought as an artistic object and a vital component of urban decor, with shop windows as a part. The window is a place where passersby generally cannot enter; it is part public (offering itself to their glances)

and part private (accessible only to shopkeepers and clerks). The window can be classified as "no-place" and the mannequin as a silent inhabitant. This no-place is one realm of the mannequin, the "not alive." For commercial strategies, the window is a screen behind which mannequins wear dresses to attract the attention of passersby. The dialectic established between the mannequin, clothes, and human body is complicated, because the mannequin is doubly deceptive, being both an anorexic and an immobile body. When customers decide to try on a garment in the fitting room, they discover a lack of correspondence between how the dress fits the mannequin and how it fits them. They realize that the body of the mannequin differs from their body, partly because the mannequin is immobile. When human beings try on clothes, it not only means adapting the garments to their body but also verifying suitability to body movement. Perhaps to avoid such disillusionment, several U.S. department stores use live models to display their wares.

In the history of the fashion system, the mannequin has remained anonymous for a long time. In contrast, fashion has recently had an increasing tendency to identify the source of a product by adding a signature. This tendency has also involved the *mobile body* of fashion: the living model. Top models in recent years have become increasingly famous, to the extent that they also "sign" the dresses they wear. With the mannequin, the labeling process has been more gradual. The first step has been the mannequin's acquisition of a certain cultural depth and a stronger identity. Only secondarily has it also acquired a label, as when well-known designers add their signatures to the mannequins that they use to display their designs. The development of cultural depth in the mannequin has been produced by the confluence of art, theatrical show, technology, and fashion.

In the world of art, the mannequin and painting are closely related. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, articulated wooden mannequins with oviform heads were often found in painters' studios to aid artists in studying anatomic postures and the drapery of clothing. From an instrument of artistic production, the mannequin became an object of artistic inspiration within the school of Italian metaphysical painting. It then became a creeping leitmotif or theme in the history of twentieth-century surrealist painting, passing from the Italian artist Georgio de Chirico to the Belgian Jules Breton and German Hans Bellmer, as well as to contemporary artistic vanguards, such as the Italian-born Vanessa Beecroft.

In addition to painting, the mannequin has been closely related to sculpture since the development of ancient Greek statuary, recently acquiring an even closer relationship to sculpture thanks to the 1970s hyper realistic genre. For artists such as Jeff Koons, as well as the Chapman brothers, Ron Mueck, Cattelan, Charles Ray, and so on, the mannequin (in the form of humans) has become a central expressive element in their art. Through new colors and synthetic materials, artists were able to perfect the reproduction of the human body, making the mannequin look lifelike.

Mannequins in a storefront window on Fifth Avenue, New York, 1942. In New York and London, display mannequins tend to have more realistic features than the shop dummies in other cities such as Milan.

Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.

Painting and sculpture have, however, created two different visions of mannequins, both of which influence their reality in regard to displaying fashion. One corresponds to a mannequin without face and movement, which interprets spiritual works of art. This type is without ego but also alienated and alien. The second corresponds to a mannequin that represents a human being with a face but without life. The fact that the mannequin is not endowed with movement places it in the realm of shadows. These two types still influence current mannequins. In addition, the worlds of theater, cinema, and television have entertained episodic but significant relationships with the mannequin. Just to offer three examples, recall Dario Fo's theatrical piece Thieves, Mannequins, and *Naked Women: Four Parodies* in *Two Acts* (1958), in which the use of mannequins plays on the fact that although they seem human, they are not. Stanley Kubrick's film Killer's Kiss (1955) has a much-cited duel in a mannequin storage room, and the recent television series *OH! Mickey* broadcast by MTV represents a convergence between animated cartoon, sitcom, and installation, proposing episodes of three minutes each in which the protagonists are mannequins.

Contemporary Mannequins

As for technology, robotics has limited its contribution to modest innovations, although it did create a mannequin with movement: a mannequin-robot set to imitate the movements of a customer's arm, so that customers can understand better how a certain item of clothing would fit. The robot is also programmed to judge the age and sex of shoppers as well as identify bags they are carrying, and to pass along the information to stores for marketing purposes. Robotics has also produced mannequins that iron shirts, jackets, and trousers and are used at some laundries and dry cleaners or in domestic settings.

The mannequin is an object historically assuming various shapes, depending on the current social construction of the body, the negotiation of masculine and feminine images, sociocultural values, and the tastes of an epoch. The development of a stronger identity on the part of the mannequin is recent and invests it with one of the two visions expressed by art, which recur in the fashion system. On one hand, the mannequin exhibits artificiality; on the other, it reproduces the human being in an increasingly plausible way. The reinforcement of human identity is supported through the acquisition of details and characteristics, such as hair and makeup or poses and postures: a hand on a hip, a gesture toward the audience. Mannequins thereby assume more defined characteristics of personality. One might expect that mannequins are chosen to resemble the local population so that potential customers readily see themselves in the garments exhibited. In Beijing, however, mannequins do not have Asian features.

Fashion in China is almost completely Westernized, and industrialization has encouraged workers to buy and wear Western-style dress: simple, practical, and cheap. It is not surprising that the display mannequin presents a model of beauty based on the features of affluent Western women, implying that contemporary Chinese culture accepts the Western model of feminine beauty, elegance, and style. In Milan, the mannequin is still largely depersonalized and abstract. Apparently, the goal is to avoid drawing attention away from the garment. In New York and also in London, mannequins, in contrast, have more concrete and realistic features. Thus, Asian, South American, and black mannequins are seen that reflect a multiethnic metropolis. Age is also visible. Mannequins resembling children have been available for some time, but, until recently, those resembling older women were not. For example, mannequins with white hair are no longer rare. Apparently, fashion merchandisers have begun to recognize this market group as an important one that has resources to spend on clothing. Nevertheless, these older-appearing mannequins may both attract and put off potential customers: Although an older consumer may identify with age, the fantasy of identifying as being younger is dissipated. The diffusion of aged and ethnic mannequins means that the subjects portrayed show an increased social, economic, and political power and are able to influence their depiction.

Once the mannequin has acquired an identity, has been in a sense labeled, the second step is acquisition of a true distinctiveness, which takes place in the process of altering its structure. This structure has always been modified, depending on the item being displayed or the space available in the window or shop. Here as well the debt to sculpture is great. Sculpture has always carried out the representation of the whole figure and also of body parts—heads, torso, and so on. Partial mannequins may be hands for wearing rings, necks for displaying necklaces, feet for shoes, legs for stockings, or heads for wigs. The adaptability of the mannequin body, allowing it to be destructured, might be retrieved in the clothes hanger, the minimal unit to which the mannequin can be reduced. Clothes hangers too have begun recently to be objects of a certain experimentation, like Marjet Wessels Boer's dancer-shaped clothes hangers. More important, clothes hangers often become the prosthesis of the clothes that are bought; they are signed like the clothes that they support. Similarly, mannequins are also signed. This labeling process occurs in different ways: Window Mannequins labels them on the head, Bonaveri on the side of the trunk, others on the pedestal; yet others sign the code of the model on the mannequin body, while others, in the end, supply mannequins with a proper noun and a card reporting their main characteristics. Arte Vetrina proposes a large selection of models, from the very new "manga for fashion trends" to the "urban & ethnic" series of mannequins. Some fashion firms, like Gucci, produce their own mannequins without signing them. Other fashion firms, like Emporio Armani, put the accent on the meta brand "Made in Italy" and use only mannequins made there (and make them transparent, to allow the support system to seem more invisible).

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