



Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing

Diana Crane

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It has long been said that clothes make the man (or woman), but is it still true today? If so, how has the information clothes convey changed over the years? Using a wide range of historical and contemporary materials, Diana Crane demonstrates how the social significance of clothing has been transformed.

Crane compares nineteenth-century societies—France and the United States—where social class was the most salient aspect of social identity signified in clothing with late twentieth-century America, where lifestyle, gender, sexual orientation, age, and ethnicity are more meaningful to individuals in constructing their wardrobes. Today, clothes worn at work signify social class, but leisure clothes convey meanings ranging from trite to political. In today's multicode societies, clothes inhibit as well as facilitate communication between highly fragmented social groups.

Crane extends her comparison by showing how nineteenth-century French designers created fashions that suited lifestyles of Paris elites but that were also widely adopted outside France. By contrast, today's designers operate in a global marketplace, shaped by television, film, and popular music. No longer confined to elites, trendsetters are drawn from many social groups, and most trends have short trajectories. To assess the impact of fashion on women, Crane uses voices of college-aged and middle-aged women who took part in focus groups. These discussions yield fascinating information about women's perceptions of female identity and sexuality in the fashion industry.

An absorbing work, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas* stands out as a critical study of gender, fashion, and consumer culture.

"Why do people dress the way they do? How does clothing contribute to a person's identity as a man or woman, as a white-collar professional or blue-collar worker, as a preppie, yuppie, or nerd? How is it that dress no longer denotes social class so much as lifestyle? . . . Intelligent and informative, [this] book proposes thoughtful answers to some of these questions."-*Library Journal*

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