



The Lost Art of Dress: The Women Who Once Made America Stylish

By Linda Przybyszewski

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As a glance down any street in America quickly reveals, American women have forgotten how to dress. We chase fads, choose inappropriate materials and unattractive cuts, and waste energy tottering in heels when we could be moving gracefully. Quite simply, we lack the fashion know-how we need to dress professionally and flatteringly.

As historian and expert dressmaker Linda Przybyszewski reveals in "The Lost Art of Dress," it wasn't always like this. In the first half of the twentieth century, a remarkable group of women—the so-called Dress Doctors—taught American women how to stretch each yard of fabric and dress well on a budget. Knowledge, not money, they insisted, is the key to timeless fashion. Based in home economics departments across the country, the Dress Doctors offered advice on radio shows, at women's clubs, and in magazines. Millions of young girls read their books in school and at 4-H clothing clubs. As Przybyszewski shows, the Dress Doctors' concerns weren't purely superficial: they prized practicality, and empowered women to design and make clothing for both the workplace and the home. They championed skirts that would allow women to move about freely and campaigned against impractical and painful shoes. Armed with the Dress Doctors' simple design principles—harmony, proportion, balance, rhythm, emphasis—modern American women from all classes could learn to dress for all occasions in a way that made them confident, engaged members of society. A captivating and beautifully-illustrated look at the world of the Dress Doctors, "The Lost Art of Dress" introduces a new audience to their timeless rules of fashion and beauty—rules which, with a little help, we can certainly learn again.

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Editorial Review

Review

"New York Times Book Review"

Like another forgotten artifact, the hope chest, her...book is most delightfully and fragrantly packed.

"Boston Globe"

"A fascinating and valuable book.

"Columbus Dispatch"

A witty look at well-dressed women and a defense of the classic home-economics course.

"Books and Culture"

The writing is sharp; the research thorough; and the book's illustrations alone are worth the price of entry.

"Threads Magazine"

If you re interested in the history of fashion in America, or have just always wondered why Americans don t dress well anymoreand what that meansread The "Lost Art of Dress: The Women Who Once Made America Stylish."... "The Lost Art of Dress" is an engaging and fascinating history of the evolution of fashion and America s approach to clothing itselfIf you love history as much as sewing, or are fascinated by the sewing and style manuals of the past, pick up a copy of "The Lost Art of Dress."

"A Dress A Day"

A fascinating read.... If you love the styles of the first half of the last century and wonder why they were so lovely (and why so many modern clothes are not), you should read this book. If you are interested in the history of popular fashion as worn by ordinary people, you should read this book. And if you re interested in some practical dress advice from the good Doctors, you ll find that here, too. Highly recommended!

"Acculturated"

An important, even revolutionary book.

"Shop the Garment District" blog

[Przybyszewski s] wit and intelligence make this book as entertaining as it is informative.... The information it contains is timeless, so it won't matter how long it takes you to read it, so I suggest you buy it.

"American Age Fashion" blog

This book is a rare birda scholarly book aimed at a broad audience that is a ripping good read.... Whether or not you alter your wardrobe, you ll be fascinated by these admirable women who tried to make America more beautiful, one dress pattern at a time.

"Denver Sewing Collective"

If you love fashion, history, and geek out about sewing you ll love this book. It really is a fascinating read about some amazing women and should serve as inspiration to bring back beauty, thrift and style in to every day fashion.

"Library Journal"

This entertaining read is funny, opinionated, and full of useful wisdommuch like the dress doctors themselves.

"Kirkus"

[An] illuminating commentary.... Przybyszewski s fashion history shines a much-needed spotlight on a contingent of forgotten professionals and the role they played in dressing American women with style.

Sadie Stein, "The Paris Review"

A tribute to a time when styleand maybe even lifefelt more straightforward, and however arbitrary, there were definitive answers.

Karen Karbo, author of "The Gospel According to Coco Chanel"

Linda Przybyszewski s remarkable, enchanting, well-researched history of America at its most stylish

reminds us that once upon a time we were classy and fabulous. After reading "The Lost Art of Dress," you'll think twice before running to the store in sweat pants.

Jennifer L. Scott, author of "Lessons from Madame Chic"

"An invaluable resource of inspiration. "The Lost Art of Dress" calls us to resurrect our stylish roots and bring tasteful beauty back to our everyday routine."

Claire Shaeffer, author of "Couture Sewing Techniques"

"The Lost Art of Dress" by Linda Przybyszewski is a fascinating history about the Dress Doctors teachers, writers, retailers, and designers who advised women how to dress appropriately. Her extensive research in more than 700 books and magazines provides a wide range of information about changing trends throughout the twentieth century. Entertaining and informative, this book is essential reading for all fashion history students as well as everyone interested in fashion."

Lois Banner, Professor Emerita, Dept. of History and Gender Studies Program, University of Southern California, author of "Marilyn: The Passion and the Paradox"

Linda Przybyszewski takes her readers on an imaginative journey through a largely forgotten universe of women writers in the twentieth century who wrote about the art of dressing well. The book is sprightly and well-written, and it suggests new directions for research in the history of fashion and of women.

Przybyszewski offers useful critiques of the restrictive clothing of the nineteenth century, the sloppy clothing of the 1960s, the periodic infantilizing of women through dress design, and the increasing commoditization of products and pleasures. She mourns the loss of the elegance of the 1930s, when women looked both liberated and chic.

Patricia Cunningham, Associate Professor Emerita of Fashion and Retail Studies, Ohio State University

This is an important work. In "The Lost Art of Dress," dressmaker and historian Linda Przybyszewski skillfully delineates the rise of the Dress Doctors in the early twentieth century to their demise in the turbulent sixties. Przybyszewski excavated the lost texts of home economists and others who taught the art and science of dress through the application of five principles of art. Although Przybyszewski laments the decline of the teachings of the Dress Doctors during the 1960s, she sees their legacy in the recent rise of the craft of dressmaking and is encouraged by a renewed interest of Americans in the art of dressing well and with good taste.

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About the Author

Linda Przybyszewski is an associate professor of history at the University of Notre Dame. The author of "The Republic According to John Marshall Harlan," the editor of "Some Memories of a Long Life, 1854-1911," as well as a prize-winning dressmaker, she lives in South Bend, Indiana.

Users Review

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Laura Burke:

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