



Delft Blue to Denim Blue: Contemporary Dutch Fashion

Anneke Smelik (ed.), *I.B. Tauris*, 2017. 400 pp., 86 b&w and col. illus., paper, \$29.99. ISBN: 9781784531973.

While Dutch design has an international reputation, Dutch fashion has not yet established itself as a leader in the global fashion industry. Nevertheless, Dutch designers, brands, and businesses have been increasingly successful in recent years, both creatively and commercially, which raises the need to study this under-researched phenomenon. *Delft Blue to Denim Blue* accomplishes an unparalleled coverage of contemporary Dutch fashion, based on the results and discoveries of an interdisciplinary research conducted by researchers Daniëlle Bruggeman, Maaïke Feitsma, Anja Köppchen, Constantin von Maltzahn, Michiel Scheffer and José Teunissen between 2008 and 2013. *Delft Blue to Denim Blue* is edited by Anneke Smelik, Professor of Visual Culture at the Radboud University Nijmegen and author of publications on visual culture and fashion. In this volume, Smelik co-authored three chapters and also contributed a segment on fashionable technology.

Delft Blue to Denim Blue uncovers the cultural history of the Dutch fashion industry since Second World War.

Through interdisciplinary methodologies such as art history, contemporary cultural theory, sociology and economic viewpoints (p. 5), the book navigates through the contemporary Dutch fashion scene and outlines current developments in the field. It is rich with case studies of Dutch brands, retailers, leading designers, and fashion photographers. It makes a major contribution to fashion research since it develops a discourse for understanding contemporary Dutch fashion in the context of globalization's influence on the local industry. The book's discussion ranges 'from production and consumption, to material culture, and systems of meaning and signification' (p. 5). Additionally, the authors elaborate on narratives such as fashion and national identity, and fashion as a form of co-creation between brands and consumers.

Delft Blue to Denim Blue is based on several theoretical frameworks, which are supported by references to both secondary and primary sources such as in-depth interviews, archival research of fashion publications and the material analysis of garments in archives and museums (p. 6). *Delft Blue to Denim Blue* is generously illustrated with high-resolution photographs and diagrams in colour and black and white, contains a large bibliography, a list of illustrations, and a helpful index. In terms of structure, it includes fourteen chapters divided into three parts. Part I, 'Dutch Fashion Culture', explores emerging connections between Dutch fashion design and cultural heritage. This part focuses on history, narratives, and myths of contemporary Dutch fashion. Part II, 'Dutch Firms and Designers', provides comprehensive case studies of Dutch brands and designers. Part III, 'Novel Perspectives', considers recent developments in Dutch fashion photography, haute couture and fashion projects and collections, which incorporate techniques such as 3D printing and wearable technology.

The book's main argument is that a 'Dutch national style' is purely an assemblage of distinctive cultural influences and origins (p. 20), and that the fashion industry in the Netherlands is rapidly taking advantage of this by creating 'a unique mix of playful individualism, organizational innovation and a creative relation to cultural heritage' (p. 3). Additionally, the book's publication is part of a wider mission to prove that 'the Netherlands today creates genuine fashion, not just "clothing"' (p. 5). Dutch cultural heritage, whether used stereotypically or critically, is an endless source of inspiration for Dutch fashion designers, and in this context, Smelik uses 'cosmopolitan nationalism', taken from Melchior, Skov and Csaba (2011), which

'involves an interpretation and transformation of cultural heritage rather than the use of it in its original form' (p. 16). For example, José Teunissen's 'Clogs on High Heels: Dutch Cultural Heritage and Fashion' demonstrates how contemporary Dutch fashion is strongly connected to Dutch national identity. The author describes how Viktor&Rolf's high-heeled Dutch wooden clogs from their 2007 fall collection were inspired by typical Dutch folkloric costumes, Delftware, and wooden shoes (p. 42).

Smelik's extensive introduction traces the chronicle of Dutch fashion in the past fifty years. She not only proves that the consumption of fashion has a role in constructing personal identity (p. 8) but also that Dutch fashion designers create pieces that 'symbolize Dutch identity and traditions' (p. 14). The introduction also gives a taste of how the authors' study is an epic mission in data collection and evaluation, demonstrated by the highly varied methods of analysis, and synthesis of the vast scholarly sources that these histories and facts have generated. In this overview, Smelik convinces us that it is necessary to strengthen dress scholarship through examining concepts such as nationalism, personal and national identity.

Two chapters noticeably support the book's argument. First, 'Denim Goes Dutch: A Myth-in-the-Making' by Maaïke Feitsma and Anneke Smelik. In their case study of denim, the authors examine how 'Dutch denim' became a national fashion myth (p. 112). They begin by asking 'how an object symbolizing not only America, but also globalisation, can be associated with Dutch culture' (p. 105). They argue that 'Dutch denim is a national fashion myth-in-the-making' (p. 106) and attempt to prove through Roland Barthes' notion of 'myth' that jeans have symbolic meanings in the Netherlands (p. 106). Maaïke and Smelik demonstrate through a systematic discourse analysis that jeans became an 'icon of Dutch culture' (p. 106) and support their argument by referencing recent studies. However, the research does not take into account the significance of new fashion media, blogs in particular and their contribution

to the creation of a 'fashion culture that easily accommodates and embraces denim' (p. 111). Furthermore, social media networks such as Instagram, YouTube and personal fashion blogs are now increasingly part of the fashion media landscape.¹

Second, Constantin von Maltzahn's 'Vanilia: High-Street the Dutch Way' is an analysis of the success story and accomplishments of Dutch brand Vanilia. According to the author, what makes Vanilia 'typically Dutch' is a 'hybrid approach that cleverly manoeuvres between local ingenuity and international appeal' (p. 181). He meticulously demonstrates how this brand successfully goes from design to production to fulfilment. To highlight the causes of Vanilia's continual success, the author offers a detailed analysis of the brand's business model, relationship with its audience and its understanding of 'local consumer needs and market preferences' (p. 179). The chapter's strength is in employing a mixed-method approach of both quantitative and qualitative data, stemming from questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and in-store participant observation (p. 179).

The book does not engage sufficiently with current discourses on the rapid development of eco-fashion in the Netherlands, such as slow fashion and sustainable brands. However, it is a timely contribution to present-day fashion discourse. *Delft Blue to Denim Blue* will be of great value to researchers, students, and industry professionals who wish to immerse themselves in the mosaic of contemporary Dutch fashion.

doi:10.1093/jdh/epy005

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Notes

- 1 D. Bartlett, *Fashion Media: Past and Present*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.