



# Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century

*Philippe Perrot*

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When department stores like Le Bon Marché first opened their doors in mid-nineteenth-century Paris, shoppers were offered more than racks of ready-made frock coats and crinolines. They were given the chance to acquire a lifestyle as well--that of the bourgeoisie. Wearing proper clothing encouraged proper behavior, went the prevailing belief.

Available now for the first time in English, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie* was one of the first extensive studies to explain a culture's sociology through the seemingly simple issue of the choice of clothing. Philippe Perrot shows, through a delightful tour of the rise of the ready-made fashion industry in France, how clothing can not only reflect but also inculcate beliefs, values, and aspirations. By the middle of the century, men were prompted to disdain the decadent and gaudy colors of the pre-Revolutionary period and wear unrelievedly black frock coats suitable to the manly and serious world of commerce. Their wives and daughters, on the other hand, adorned themselves in bright colors and often uncomfortable and impractical laces and petticoats, to signal the status of their family. The consumer pastime of shopping was born, as women spent their spare hours keeping up their middle-class appearance, or creating one by judicious purchases.

As Paris became the fashion capital and bourgeois modes of dress and their inherent attitudes became the ruling lifestyle of Western Europe and America, clothing and its "civilizing" tendencies were imported to non-Western colonies as well. In the face of what Perrot calls this "leveling process," the upper classes tried to maintain their stature and right to elegance by supporting what became the high fashion industry. Richly detailed, entertaining, and provocative, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie* reveals to us the sources of many of our contemporary rules of fashion and etiquette.

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