

Jews in Suits: Men’s Dress in Vienna, 1890-1938.

By Jonathan C. Kaplan-Wajselbaum.

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Surviving photographs of Jewish Viennese men during the *fin-de-siècle* and interwar periods—both the renowned cultural luminaries and their many anonymous coreligionists—all share a striking sartorial detail: the tailored suit. Yet, until now, the adoption of the tailored suit and its function in the formation of modern Jewish identities remained under-researched.

Jonathan Kaplan-Wajselbaum’s *Jews in Suits* is an erudite, handsomely printed, and substantial 278-page book by an emerging voice in Jewish and Fashion Studies. The book is published within the prestigious Dress Cultures series of Bloomsbury Academic. It is the first volume to examine the dress politics of the Jewish men who adopted the modern suit in modernist Vienna, complementing but also expanding the existing knowledge of the city’s complex culture and history in the period 1890-1938. Kaplan-Wajselbaum’s work crosses the diverse fields of Jewish studies, design history, fashion studies, and central European history. This is no mean achievement, and included the learning of academic German and some Yiddish during the writing of the book. It includes vibrant case studies on the leaders of the famous Jewish intellectual group Sigmund Freud, Arthur Schnitzler, Stefan Zweig, Peter Altenberg, and Karl Kraus. The author’s inter-disciplinary project relates the material culture and representations of dress fashions to Jewish acculturation and the historical rise of antisemitism in Vienna.

Kaplan-Wajselbaum graduated from University of Technology Sydney in 2019 with a dissertation titled “*Kleider machen Leute: Jewish Men and Dress Politics in Vienna, 1890–1938*”. This complex thesis explored the role dress played in the construction of masculine Jewish identity in Vienna during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the related working of antisemitism. The study was in part a springboard from his fashion design collection and his earlier animation degree in which he had explored his fascination with Old Vienna. As the grandson of the well-known Sydney Holocaust survivor, Mimi Wise, herself once in the clothing industry, Kaplan-Wajselbaum showed an early fascination with the social function of clothes, their power of representation and the insights they can reveal into lost worlds. Working from the southern hemisphere so distant from European libraries and

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resources can be difficult and challenging. Yet, the author ventured into libraries and met with scholars in cognate fields far and wide. Archives consulted include those in Vienna, New York, Jerusalem, and Sydney. He used data and skillsets ranging from analysis of gender and class, cultural and religious systems, urbanism, demography, theories of representation, discourse, and object analysis.

Jews in Suits uses a rich range of written and visual sources, including literary fiction and satire, ‘ego-documents’, photography, trade catalogues, invoices, and department store culture, to propose a new narrative of men, fashion, and their Jewish identities. The results reveal that dressing in a modern manner was not simply a matter of assimilation, but rather a way of developing new models of Jewish subjectivity beyond the externally prescribed notion of ‘the Jew’. Drawing upon fashionable dress, folk costume, religious dress, avant-garde, oppositional dress, typologies which are often considered separate from one another, this work concludes by proposing a new way of reading men and clothing cultures within an iconic cultural milieu, and offers insights into relationships involving clothing, grooming, and understandings of the self. The prose is lively, easy to read, and packed with thoughtful analysis. It uses the well-known frame of self-fashioning, a concept which first emerged in Shakespeare and Renaissance Studies in the 1980s, to consider topics as chapters including Fashioning the Self, Dressing Society: Dress and Identity in Europe’s Third Jewish Capital; Refashioning the Self: Acculturation, Assimilation, and Clothing; Strangers in the City: “Rootless” Jews and Urbanity in Vienna; *Der kleine Cohn*: Dress and the Function of Mocking through Caricature; and The Man in the Suit: Jewish writers and their Clothing. There is a strong focus on close reading of photographs in the tradition of the French theorist Roland Barthes’s semiology, as well as use of printed caricatures and other scurrilous images that reveal much about social thinking and prejudices.

As a design historian who researches fashion, I am concerned with how there are fashions in all things. This was the contention of the great structural or comparative Annales School historian, Fernand Braudel, who argued that clothing fashions were not ancillary to history, but might tell us something important about it. In *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century* Braudel studied ‘those strange collections of commodities, symbols, illusions, fantasms and intellectual schemas that we call civilisations.’ Of this he argued that ‘The history of costume is less anecdotal than would appear’. (published in French 1979; Harper and Row edition, 1983: 333). In this statement, Braudel shifts the study of dress, from a series of micro-analyses to something that might embody important cultural shifts. Braudel refuted the notion that fashion is trifling, posing the rhetorical question: is it ‘an indication of deeper phenomena – of the energies, possibilities, demands and *joie de vivre* of a

given society, economy and civilization?’. At times reading Kaplan-Wajselbaum’s study, I might have wished for more consideration of how sartorial fashions interacted with other facets of material culture. He covers the coffeehouse and the modern menswear shop well, but to what extent was there more expenditure of fashionable clothing than on, say, household furnishings, transportation, or tableware?

Nonetheless, this innovative study of Viennese Jewish men re-creates their culture of clothing with clarity and imagination. Kaplan-Wajselbaum examines the varied dress of workers, the rising middle class, plutocrats, intellectuals and trekkers. Essential reading for those interested in men’s dress and modernism, the book contains insights into the insidious workings of antisemitism as it pertains to the everyday act of choosing and selecting men’s clothes. As Kaplan-Wajselbaum poignantly concludes, the clothes these men had carefully selected were in the end no protection at all against the modern machine of Nazism.