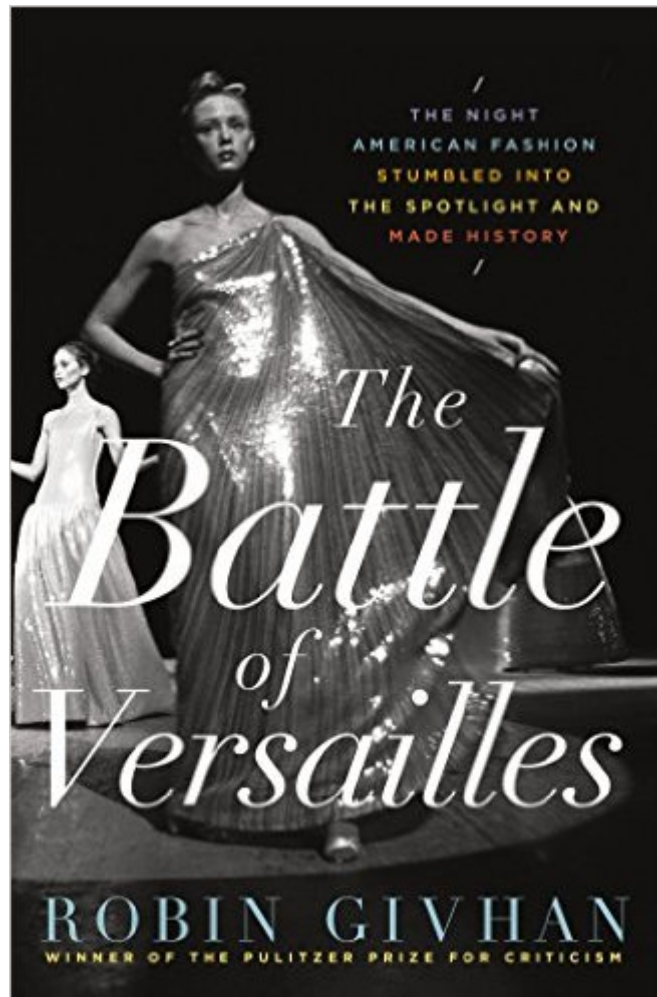


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The Battle Of Versailles: The Night American Fashion Stumbled Into The Spotlight And Made History



Synopsis

A Washington Post Notable Book of 2015 "It was a big deal when American fashion went to Versailles. Who better than Robin Givhan to tell this captivating story?" - Diane von Furstenberg

On November 28, 1973, the world's social elite gathered at the Palace of Versailles for an international fashion show. By the time the curtain came down on the evening's spectacle, history had been made and the industry had been forever transformed. This is that story. Conceived as a fund-raiser for the restoration of King Louis XIV's palace, in the late fall of 1973, five top American designers faced off against five top French designers in an over-the-top runway extravaganza. An audience filled with celebrities and international jet-setters, including Princess Grace of Monaco, the Duchess of Windsor, Paloma Picasso, and Andy Warhol, were treated to an opulent performance featuring Liza Minnelli, Josephine Baker, and Rudolph Nureyev. What they saw would forever alter the history of fashion. The Americans at the Battle of Versailles- Oscar de la Renta, Bill Blass, Anne Klein, Halston, and Stephen Burrows - showed their work against the five French designers considered the best in the world - Yves Saint Laurent, Hubert de Givenchy, Pierre Cardin, Emanuel Ungaro, and Marc Bohan of Christian Dior. Plagued by in-fighting, outsized egos, shoestring budgets, and innumerable technical difficulties, the American contingent had little chance of meeting the European's exquisite and refined standards. But against all odds, the American energy and the domination by the fearless models (ten of whom, in a groundbreaking move, were African American) sent the audience reeling. By the end of the evening, the Americans had officially taken their place on the world's stage, prompting a major shift in the way race, gender, sexuality, and economics would be treated in fashion for decades to come. As the curtain came down on The Battle of Versailles, American fashion was born; no longer would the world look to Europe to determine the stylistic trends of the day, from here forward, American sensibility and taste would command the world's attention. Pulitzer-Prize winning fashion journalist Robin Givhan offers a lively and meticulously well-researched account of this unique event. The Battle of Versailles is a sharp, engaging cultural history; this intimate examination of a single moment shows us how the world of fashion as we know it came to be.

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Customer Reviews

Robin Givhan, the fashion reporter for the Washington Post, writes an interesting book, "The Battle of Versailles: The Night American Fashion Stumbled into the Spotlight and Made History". It's the story of a sort "Battle of the Bands", but this was a "Battle of the Designers"; French vs American. The French went into the November 1973 evening as the winners, but as the long evening ended, the Americans emerged victorious. The competition, set up by American fashion publicist Eleanor Lambert with the assistance of French aristocrat Marie-Helene de Rothschild, was held in the Theatre Gabriel in the Chateau de Versailles. It was ostensibly a benefit for charity; the evening would be dinner and a fashion show. But what a fashion show; five designated French designers vs five designated American designers. Both would present a show to the 800 or so guests, combining fashion with a bit of showmanship. The guests would declare a winner. The early 1970's, when the competition occurred was a changing time in the fashion world. Many of the old-world designers like Chanel and Dior had died - Dior in 1957 and Chanel in 1971 - and the lives of many of the wealthy women who had been devoted customers of haute couture had changed; no longer were they changing their clothes three and four times a day. Life was simplified and ready-to-wear was coming into it's own. The American designers were moving into these designs perhaps a bit more rapidly than their French counterparts. Now was the time to see who had the vision of the future. While most of Givhan's book is about the ten fashion designers chosen to compete, she gives a lot of space to the models, particularly those used by the American designers.

Robin Givhan's Battle of Versaille is a serious and simultaneously entertaining look at the growth of American fashion and its "breakout" in the 1970s. The premise of her book (a rather sketchy one I thought) was that a fundraiser to refurbish Versailles, developed into a "throw down" between French and American designers and....USA! USA! ! The world is forever changed!! appreciate every book of this type needs a premise or central idea. However, the author's emphasis on this show

seems overblown. Fashion was not the sole domain of French designers. Mary Quant had turned the industry upside down with the mini-skirt; Halston had been dressing Jackie Kennedy for a dozen years before this event; Oscar de la Renta was thriving. Diana Vreeland had been setting trends at Harper's and Vogue with the frequency of any Parisienne. Yes, France was clearly dominant, but America was hardly a backwater of Yankee Doodle Dreary. I think too there is some overemphasis on the distinct world of couture and its iron clad hold on American style. Saks, Bergdorf's and Bonwit Teller made a ton of money off of the well-to-do. What DID happen in the 70s is that fashion became accessible to a mass market. People like Balenciaga would have died before he dressed a suburban housewife. Bill Blass was happy to do so. Re: Bill Blass I think Givhans overstates his impact. Arbiters like John Fairchild of WWD had him banned from his publications as a derivative hack. Even when Nancy Regan became a client he never was quite first rank. What Givhans seems to under appreciate is that publicity, licensing and celebrity were now driving the industry. Art was now lithographs of soup cans; Calvin Klein jeans and the model who wore them, Bianca hooked up with Mick at Studio 54 to get high.

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