

REVIEW

Sonia-Doris Andraş, *The Women of „Little Paris”: Fashion in Interwar Bucharest*, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2024, 256 pp.

This book is grounded in the doctoral research conducted and defended by the author at the London College of Fashion, University of London. The story centers on fashion-conscious women in interwar Bucharest, particularly within spaces frequented by foreign visitors and characterized by Western influence and admiration of Paris (and later Hollywood), embodying modern, Western-friendly ideals and serving as focal points for capitalist-driven consumption practices.

While the investigation is rooted in methodological approaches from fashion studies, its scope has been effectively broadened to produce robust and comprehensive insights. This expansion involved an interdisciplinary approach, drawing particularly on cultural studies – especially gender and urban studies – as well as diverse historiographical perspectives, including political, cultural, literary, and art history, which constitute the book’s most significant strengths. Thus, the analysis extends beyond fashion studies by illustrating how Bucharest women embodied and actively participated in broader processes of modernization and cultural borrowing during the interwar period.

Andraş’s volume is carefully crafted, drawing on an extensive array of archival materials, including fashion and style advice literature, tailoring guides, phone books, periodicals, and a variety of related advertisements. It also incorporates invitations to store openings, fashion parades, beauty pageants, and social gatherings, alongside postcards of Parisian and Hollywood film stars, illustrated movie posters, and a rich personal collection of photographs of the author’s great-great-grandmother and grandmother. These primary sources are complemented by an extensive body of secondary literature, which Andraş skillfully integrates to support her arguments. Additionally, the appendix offers valuable statistical data, providing intriguing insights into Bucharest’s entire fashion universe—from the types of fabrics available in pre-war and interwar Romania to various beauty products, their importation, luxury taxation categories, and prices.

The volume comprises eight parts: an introductory section followed by six substantive parts and a concluding chapter. The second chapter surveys debates portraying interwar Romania as an intermediary realm between tradition and modernity, East and West, the familiar and the othered. Interwar Romania modernized, and Bucharest and its women embraced Western trends economically and affectively, yet escalating extremism would increasingly overshadow them. In the third chapter the analysis narrows to Bucharest, interrogating processes of urban modernisation, the reciprocal dynamics between

the city and its women inhabitants and workers, and the capital's contribution to postwar national reconstruction. The capital was ambivalent: to outsiders it often appeared as a modern Western city, yet modern neighborhoods sat alongside poor, almost-feudal quarters that could confound even insiders. Life seemed to revolve around Calea Victoriei — the main ceremonial avenue where different “Bucharests” converged. At the same time, modernization proceeded alongside a drive to “Romanianize” society: preserve and remake traditions, reduce dependence on imports, and broaden the participation of ethnic Romanians in production and trade. The fourth chapter positions the “modern girl” and the “new woman” as key concepts and investigates how emancipation and nascent fashion and beauty advertising jointly shaped new forms of feminine identity. It is interesting to see how ambivalent was the public discourse towards the ideal of the “new Romanian woman”: it encouraged women's participation in public and professional life yet demanded they preserve their ‘feminine charm’. This signalled a demand for a feminine archetype capable of satisfying traditionalist and progressive expectations alike. Thus, in the *années folles à la roumaine*, modeled on Parisian and Hollywood trends, the fashionable woman of Bucharest occupied an ambiguous role: hailed by some as progress and denounced by others as decadence. Men and women alike inscribed this feminine role with personal prejudices and objectives and interpreted through partisan lenses. Explored in chapters five to seven, all these tensions inform analyses of women's representation in literature (diaries and memoirs), the fine arts (particularly portraiture and performance), and emergent visual media such as film and photography.

Throughout the book, the author persuasively argues that public life — above all the street (namely Calea Victoriei and Lipscani) and its attendant fashion, entertainment and commercial spaces — emerges as the principal site where women negotiated new visibility and agency. What is more, it argues that this happened even in traumatic times as Bucharesters' “fashion choices reflected the complex structure of Romanian society, striving for beauty and optimism in the stark, pessimistic post-war and post-Depression period.” (p. 38). The book's universe is richly populated with a constellation of Romanian and Romania-born women — from Miss Romania titleholders to female writers, artists, actresses, dancers, fashion designers and models, spanning feminists, fascist sympathizers and avant-garde figures. It introduces readers to Lucreția Kar, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Henriette Yvonne Stahl, Cella Delavrancea, Princess Marthe Bibesco, Anna de Noailles, Elvire Popesco, Alice Voinescu, Sonia Delaunay, Lizica Codreanu, Renée Perle and many others.

It may be striking, though equally arguable that it is not, the book demonstrates that, as in interwar Romanian politics and diplomacy, fashion likewise relied on Paris to link the country with the wider world. As the author aptly notes, “Bucharest echoed interwar Romania,” and her research effectively portrays “the interactions between interwar Bucharesters and the world of

fashion as a conversation.” (p. 198). Deference to Paris was evident across all aspects of fashion and femininity: the Romanian public—particularly women in Bucharest—were presented with Paris-trained dressmakers, furriers, perfumers, designers, cosmetic specialists and physicians, alongside premier Parisian products, whether imported, endorsed by Parisian experts, or worn by film and theatre style icons. Yet paradoxically, contemporary advice literature urged women to act as ambassadors of Romanian beauty and guardians of the nation’s racial identity, even as, by the late 1930s, the ideal of the “new woman” was increasingly co-opted and reshaped by far-right currents.

In conclusion, the book’s principal strength is its synthesis of a kaleidoscope of data and interdisciplinary interpretations, demonstrating how fashion’s commercial and symbolic capital rendered it effective conduit for promoting Western imitation as a means of identifying with the West, women’s emancipation, but also political and ideological projects.

Georgiana Țăranu*

* Ovidius University of Constanța, Romania, georgianataranu87@gmail.com