

Men in Skirts

BY PIPPIN

Bravehearts is, first and foremost, a history of men's fashion as it relates to sexism. While writer and curator Andrew Bolton would be unlikely to characterize the work this way, a constant thread in the essays accompanying the hundreds of truly beautiful photographs is that men in skirts are still men and still masculine. According to Bolton, they should not be penalized by accusations of femininity for the sartorial choice of wearing a non-bifurcated article of clothing to cover their legs.

As Bolton notes in the introduction, "We are not concerned with drag, transvestism or cross-dressing. This is because these are strategies primarily used for the exploration of camp and feminine identities ... this book is primarily concerned with the construction of masculine identities." It is unfortunate that Bolton's work insists on emphasizing (over and over again) that men in skirts are still masculine, strong, and by implication, heterosexual. The text clearly is reinforcing a solidly entrenched gender binary. Bolton negates the power of the images to challenge traditional gender roles and identities, and does not attempt to break down barriers between men and women that throw fashion roadblocks into the path of queer liberation.

That said, the book is a fascinating history of men's fashion as long as one reads carefully for the sub-text and draws one's own conclusions. The images, from a concurrent exhibit at London's Victoria and Albert Museum and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, are startling and beautiful.

The book is divided into five sections – Men and Trouser Tyranny, Skirts in History, Exoticism, The Kilt, and Subcultural Style. Each section of the book, with the exception of the first (which focuses on the politi-

**Bravehearts:
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By Andrew Bolton
V&A Publications 2003**

cal and health movements to free up the space between men's legs), takes the reader on an evolutionary journey through history from the Egyptian high kingdoms up to the couture designers of today, including Versace, Gaultier, and Westwood.

The book is clearly written for a largely white, western audience, as shown by the odd breakdown of chapters. Skirts in History focuses exclusively on western European fashion; Exoticism focuses on the history of fashion in Africa and Asia.

Bolton does note that the revival of the kilt by George IV in the early nineteenth century was a form of self-exoticisation, but even in this chapter it is made clear that the nineteenth-century popularity of the kilt was largely about the very rich and very powerful taking on the attributes of those whom they had subdued in war and politics – in this case the Highland clans of Scotland.

It is not until the very final pages that Bolton acknowledges the important role that queer men have played in the history of men's fashion and in particular, the role of the skirt. In his essay on Subcultural Style Bolton discusses the impact of glam rockers like David Bowie and the consequent development of the punk scene, the New Romantics, and later, grunge. But even in noting the impact of such figures as the bisexual Bowie and Culture Club leader Boy George, Bolton retains the need to reassure his readers that these seminal figures were masculine men and not trying to be seen as women or using fashion to transgress gender roles.

Bolton quotes Bowie on the controversy surrounding his appearance in a pre-Raphaelite-style dress on the cover of his

1971 album, *The Man Who Sold The World*. "You must understand," Bowie is reported as saying, "that it's not a woman's dress. It's a man's dress. The important fact is that I don't have to drag up ... I don't wear dresses all the time, either. I change every day. I'm not outrageous. I'm David Bowie."

Even Boy George, one of the heroes of 1980s popular queer liberation, has his political impact somewhat lessened when Bolton says of him, "For all his sartorial dilettantism, Boy George, as his name suggests, was usually quick to distance himself from the act of drag or transvestism." He goes on to quote the pop star, "I dress in a similar way to a priest or an archbishop. I wear robes, not dresses, and to be a transvestite, you must wear women's clothes. I don't." He added, "I'm not fighting an oppressed need to be a woman. I'm proud to be a man."

While one must certainly take Boy George at his word, it is distressing that so much stunning creativity need be limited by his political (and one might think, economic) need to ensure that his sartorial transgression is limited to appearances and does not challenge the inherent sexism that goes along with our modern culture's need to keep genders strictly regulated, whether you are wearing a skirt or not. ▼

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