



Nylon: The Story of a Fashion Revolution

Susannah Handley

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"At a New York fashion show, we saw a girl clad from head to foot in artificial materials. Everything she wore was made from synthetic stuffs created by chemists. Her hat was Cellophane, her frock was Rayon. She wore 'Nylon' stockings and carried a patent-leather handbag and stood in imitation alligator shoes. Even the faint hint of musk on her imitation silk handkerchief came from a synthetic perfume."— *National Geographic Magazine*, November, 1939

Nylon, the wonder fabric, debuted at the 1939 New York World's Fair and created quite a sensation. Later, following the deprivations of World War II, Europeans and Americans greeted synthetic fabrics so warmly and quickly that they helped to bring about what Susannah Handley describes as a "fashion revolution." The story of synthetics in fashion, she notes, is one of chemical innovation, national pride, couture brilliance, and street style—and it reflects the social trends and desires of every generation in the twentieth century.

Nylon: The Story of a Fashion Revolution folds together an array of topics: the role of technology in modern life, the changing nature of popular taste, the fortunes of the late twentieth-century garment industry, and the design innovations and artistry that synthetics permit, even encourage. Handley tells behind-the-scenes stories about companies like DuPont (inventors of Nylon, the first pure synthetic fabric) and its competitors and imitators. She introduces readers to the world of clothing design and manufacture, tracing the development of fabrics from the semisynthetic "Art Silk" early in the century to polyester, Lycra, and the newest technological fibers and desirable weaves. She examines the advertising strategies that played on and built up consumer expectations. And she describes a not-too-distant future of interactive textiles, solar suits, intelligent jackets, and the "wearable office."

Lavishly illustrated, with many images in full color, *Nylon: The Story of a Fashion Revolution* is a fascinating combination of social history, history of technology, and the story of fashion.

"So rapid has been the technological progress that we can no longer be sure that the 'natural' material we see and handle is not in fact artificial, and even in the eco-fiber war it is practically impossible to establish whether or not nature's fibers hold the ethical high ground. The story of synthetics is the story of the eternal competition between nature and artifice."—from the Introduction

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