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Spacesuit: Fashioning Apollo



Synopsis

When Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin stepped onto the lunar surface in July of 1969, they wore spacesuits made by Playtex: 21 layers of fabric, each with a distinct yet interrelated function, custom-sewn for them by seamstresses whose usual work was fashioning bras and girdles. This book is the story of that spacesuit. It is a story of the triumph over the military-industrial complex by the International Latex Corporation, best known by its consumer brand of "Playtex" - a victory of elegant softness over engineered hardness, of adaptation over cybernetics. Playtex's spacesuit went up against hard armor-like spacesuits designed by military contractors and favored by NASA's engineers. It was only when those attempts failed - when traditional engineering firms could not integrate the body into mission requirements - that Playtex, with its intimate expertise, got the job. In *Spacesuit*, Nicholas de Monchaux tells the story of the 21-layer spacesuit in 21 chapters addressing 21 topics relevant to the suit, the body, and the technology of the 20th century. He touches, among other things, on 18th-century androids, Christian Dior's New Look, Atlas missiles, cybernetics and cyborgs, latex, JFK's carefully cultivated image, the CBS lunar broadcast soundstage, NASA's Mission Control, and the applications of Apollo-style engineering to city planning. The 21-layer spacesuit, de Monchaux argues, offers an object lesson. It tells us about redundancy and interdependence and about the distinctions between natural and man-made complexity; it teaches us to know the virtues of adaptation and to see the future as a set of possibilities rather than a scripted scenario.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As a certified space cadet I have read dozens of books about the history of space exploration and manned space flight, many more on aviation and astronomy. (I own a book, for example, called "Eject! The Complete History of U.S. Aircraft Escape Systems. Actually, it's pretty interesting.) Virtually all of these books, excepting Mailer's "Of a Fire on the Moon," of course, were written by the anointed for the choir. They focus narrowly, or not too broadly, anyway, on a specific subject and the straightforward tangents of that subject. Michael de Monchaux's "Spacesuit - Fashioning Apollo" was not written for this audience, and the difference is compelling and fascinating. De Monchaux is Assistant Professor of Architecture at the College of Environmental Design at UC Berkeley. Put succinctly, "Spacesuit - Fashioning Apollo" is the history of the spacesuit as a technology, specifically the Apollo spacesuit. To anyone who has explored the history of any technology - the photocopier, cell phone towers, bar codes, VCRs, etc., etc. - the gist that emerges quickly and throughout is how far back in time are the beginnings, and how divergent are the seminal paths that eventually merge to create this new thing. The beginnings of the Apollo spacesuit reach back to a Russian Jewish immigrant born in 1901, Abram Spanel. Spanel started the International Latex Corporation (ILC), better known as Playtex. Yep, the spacesuits that allowed moon-walking astronauts to survive were made by master seamstresses who had once made bras and girdles. Just imagine how this went over with the fighter jock personalities at NASA. But moreover, this book is a cultural treatise about clothing the human body. NASA basically did not want the suit ILC proposed, which was an actual garment.

Spacesuit, Fashioning Apollo explores the archaeology of its namesake, the surprisingly long history of its development rooted back as far as humans began entering altitudinous realms. Romancing new limits in the thinning air, proto-astronauts melded technology with humanity to create a means of entering higher atmospheres...on their way to none at all. The hard-won laurels left many casualties on the way to "higher" understanding. Part of this book, however, is the expression of history not as a single road leading to a distinct end (as so much seems in retrospect), but rather an ongoing act of utilized invention in pursuit of celestial goals. Spacesuit feels more like an archaeological examination of the strata of Apollo as opposed to the dramatized narrative retold so often. This book reveals new layers beneath the iconic appearances of our star-voyagers, and serves as an ode to managed complexity over blind simplification. The literal layering of this history in 21 "layers", instead of chapters--same as the Apollo suit--works as an astute metaphor for the accrued acumen embodied in the technology that makes "great leaps" possible. By appropriating advanced materials and coupling them with an innovated sense of design, the International Latex

Company (Playtex) was able to create a "soft suit" in blatant opposition to the stoic Saturn V rockets. Whereas some insisted the vacuum of space must be met with the solid shell of a "hard suit", Playtex's layered "soft" approach, derived from undergarment design, won out. And it was in the manufacturing of the suits--custom tailored for each astronaut-- that some of the only women involved in the Space-Race took part, a more subtle touch needed to sew the 64 stitches per inch required for the suit's viability.

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