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On Fashion and Form



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FOR ANYONE WHO has worked with mannequins, you know it's a bit of a love/hate affair. Effective styling and posing requires a unique industry talent—and extreme patience. With their cumbersome weight, protruding limbs, and delicate fingers and toes, simply changing a mannequin's outfit can be quite a feat—especially if pantyhose are involved(!). Yet despite their challenges, mannequins continue to provide an essential service in today's retail environments.

A mannequin (derived from the Flemish word *manneken*, meaning “little man figurine”) essentially is a human figure used for displaying or making clothes. Evolving from dressmaker forms and dummies, the history of the modern retail mannequin is far reaching, with a wooden torso discovered in King Tut's tomb (made to the exact measurements of the king in 1350 B.C.) often cited as the “first dress form.” In 756 A.D. China, full-scale human figures were used in the Battle of Yongqui, during which a besieged Tang army lowered dressed dummies down castle walls, thereby drawing fire from the enemy and allowing the Tang army to retrieve the forms and salvage the arrows as needed ammunition.

For more fashionable pursuits, in 1391, Charles IV of Spain gave a gift of miniature doll-sized mannequins dressed in the latest court fashions to Queen Anne of England. This practice continued through various European courts, including Henry VIII's gift of a set of fashionably dressed English Court miniatures to the De Medici ladies of Italy. Even Marie Antoinette in the mid-1700s kept her sister and mother apprised of the latest Versailles fashions using miniature dolls.

With the growth of cities and retail markets in the early 1800s, full-sized wicker forms came into use, as well as wire mannequins from Paris. But, with the dawn of the industrial revolution in the mid-1800s, the demand and manufacturing



of mannequins went through significant growth and change.

Papier-mâché mannequins made a big impact with their lighter weight, as did the popular wax forms with their striking life-like appearance with embedded real hair, false teeth and glass eyes. Wax mannequins soon gave way to plaster composite introduced in the 1920s, followed by plastic, fiberglass and fiberglass-reinforced plastic.

Mannequin design evolved along with the changing times and fashion ideals. Modest Victorian mannequins shifted after WWI to a more daring exposure of legs, arms and busts that was reflective of the emerging flapper era. In the 1920s and '30s, Art Deco inspired the use of abstract heads. The introduction of the boutique store concept in 1960s London launched a new era of experimentation in finishes, poses and features that were used in ever more provocative displays.

Soon to follow came the casual fashions and natural poses of the 1970s, followed by the fitness and gym-toned, active poses of the 1980s.

The recession in the early 1990s had a significant effect on experimentation and creativity. Budgets for visual display teams were cut, and minimalism was in. Realistic mannequins gave way to headless mannequins or more neutral and abstract “universal” sculpted heads that did not require make-up artists and wig stylists. And with less visual merchandising leaders and skilled stylists employed, the purchasing of mannequins also shifted somewhat, as more store design teams took over the role on specifying mannequins, versus visual teams.

And yet, despite the current challenging global economics and the dominant use of neutral mannequins, there are hundreds of mannequin companies working every year to impress buyers with new collections that feature the latest in design and production values. The options today are as creative as ever, and experimentation is evident with articulated limbs, changeable faces, novelty finishes, and even beacons and animatronics.

With all these great resources at your fingertips, ask yourself: have you fallen into a trap of sameness with the mannequins you are using in your store? How can you use what's available without waiting until a renovation or a new store opening allows for full replacement? With today's range of mannequin options, it's easier than ever to add valuable visual impact to your own presentations by incorporating new mannequins into the mix. Keep an eye on it.

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BASED IN NEW YORK, PETER-TOLIN BAKER IS ACTIVELY INVOLVED WITH RETAIL DESIGN AND VISUAL MERCHANDISING VIA P-T B DESIGN SERVICES (OWNER), THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (ADJUNCT PROFESSOR), RETAIL DESIGN INSTITUTE NY CHAPTER (BOARD PRESIDENT) AND AS A REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR TO DESIGN+RETAIL.