*Dress Behind Bars: Prison Clothing as Criminality* - review by Jane Tynan in [*Journal of Design History*](NULL)*,* [Volume24, Issue1](file:///content/24/1.toc), pp. 92-94.

Design and cultural historians searching for academic texts on uniform are likely to encounter a huge literature on the subject. There are many books on uniform, but it is rare to find a focused analysis of uniform clothing from a specific period, or work that theorizes the social role of regulation dress. Even fewer books situate the emergence of uniform clothing within the visual economy and industrialization of nineteenth-century modernity. Not only were uniforms key to the development of mass-produced clothing in Europe, they were also central to the social education and reform projects associated with modernity.

During the past two decades, fashion has gained increased attention within cultural history, cultural studies and sociology, but studies of uniform clothing are less conspicuous. Twentieth-century fashion surveys tend to skip the two world wars, to focus their attention on pre- and post-war styles. War may shrink the fashion market, but military requirements also expanded the production and consumption of military and service uniforms. As regards military uniform, books for hobbyists and enthusiasts dominate the market, such as the illustrated military histories published by Osprey. Few books explore the history and politics of occupational clothing. Uniforms worn by prisoners, nurses, postal workers and police might deserve more considered analysis, but it has fallen to costume historians to trace these histories.1 In the 1980s, Nathan Joseph's sociological analysis of uniform drew attention to the communicative character of uniforms,2 but it was Brian McVeigh's study of regulation dress within the Japanese education system that revealed ‘uniforming’ as a visible marker of social status3 While Jennifer Craik's ambitious survey of uniform explores relationships between their overt and covert meanings,4 stories of subversion tend to dominate the analysis, leaving the original contexts for uniform design under-researched.

Juliet Ash's new book, *Dress Behind Bars: Prison Clothing as Criminality*, is a welcome addition to the literature on uniform clothing. A good-looking book and an engaging read, this volume takes on the subject of prison uniform clothing from the 1800s to consider how and why various designs were developed as solutions to criminality. She addresses popular myths about prison clothing and her book demonstrates how it became, and continues to be, the visible embodiment of punishment in various countries including Britain, North America, Russia and New Zealand. Popular myths about uniform may be hard to avoid, but more work could be done to trace the origins and institutional development of regulation dress. As a system of clothing, it ran alongside the development of mass-fashion, emerged within a burgeoning visual culture and was driven by the interests of the expanding European middle classes.

While much interest has been shown in the cultural practices that fashion and style uniform codes, this tells us more about the role of uniform in popular culture than about its regulatory role in institutions such as the army, police, prisons and schools. Ash looks to the origins of prison clothing to consider how they were originally designed to punish and control inmates. By linking the material culture of clothing with the architecture of control represented by nineteenth-century utilitarianism such as Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon* she anchors the emergence of uniform within a culture of increasing state centralization. Her book explores why this reform, reflected in improved prison hygiene and increased uniformity of clothing, was prompted by middle-class fears that the malign neglect of prisoner welfare might stir revolution. The broad arrows stamped over clothing and the striped fabric served to label and categorize prisoners. Addressing inequality was not so much about social justice but, as Michel Foucault's work suggests, was driven by the desire for the increased surveillance of dangerous groups.

This book illuminates the value of material culture to social history. Ash highlights the significance of clothing to the history of crime and punishment by demonstrating how body uniformity underpinned the operation of new surveillance systems. She uses images, government reports, letters, memoirs and interviews to balance the experience of prisoners against the designs of reformers. Ash pursues her analysis of uniform design through Michel Foucault's influential study *Discipline and Punish*, which explores how a regime of visibility turns the prisoner's body into an object for observation. As she points out, the broad arrow became a ‘visible iconic sign of embodied punishment’, a strategy in evidence today in the use of the orange jumpsuit in American prisons. It is rare to see the work of Foucault used in studies on clothing, whether concerned with the army, the prison or the street. Questions of visibility are explored throughout the book. She argues that ‘the ragged picturesque’, an early nineteenth-century middle-class tendency to view poverty and deprivation through the clothing worn by the poor, ultimately informed uniform design. If the crimes of the poor, such as prostitution, were a matter of moral censure, their ragged clothes were thought to be a visible symptom of criminality. In this context, uniform had a reforming role and was believed to return poor women to the normalizing state of modest femininity. As Ash argues, regulation clothing not only denies prisoners their previous identities but also deprives them of the basic freedoms of sensuality and comfort. Prison uniform, a symbol for the inmate's loss of liberty, is also a material force in the systematic exercise of punishment. However, Ash also considers the efforts of prisoners to resist their sartorial punishment. The experiences of suffragettes and Irish political prisoners demonstrate how resistance to prison clothing was often used to position the incarcerated body at the centre of a political struggle. Ash's examination of prison clothing challenges the assumption that its development represents the modern chronological progression towards more relaxed forms of dress. Its history reveals a range of clothing types used in prisons, amongst them some lenient clothing experiments, and other regimes that left prisoners in their civilian clothes, but as Ash argues, most prison uniforms were designed to shame and discipline the criminal body.

**Footnotes**

1 P. Cunnington & C. Lucas, *Occupational Costume in England*, Adam and Charles Black, London, 1976; D. De Marly, *Working Dress: A History of Occupational Clothing*, Batsford Books, 1986.

2 N. Joseph, *Uniforms and Nonuniforms: Communication through Clothing*, Greenwood Press, 1986.

3 B. J. McVeigh, *Wearing Ideology: State, Schooling and Self-Presentation in Japan*, Berg, 2000.

4 J. Craik, *Uniforms Exposed: From Conformity to Transgression*, Berg, 2005.

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