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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

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 10 hours 18 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Audible Studios

Audible.com Release Date: May 13, 2014

Language: English

ASIN: B00K7E1DCI

Best Sellers Rank: #72 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Arts & Entertainment > Design

#417 in Books > Arts & Photography > Decorative Arts & Design > Design History & Criticism

#655 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Science > Technology & Engineering

Customer Reviews

Physically, "Fashioning Apollo" is quite an elegant book (even though it is soft-bound with a "rubberized" dust cover). Text and photos are all of superb quality, glossy throughout; and it has a nice smell to it (something you'll never get from a Kindle). If you're looking for a nuts and bolts technical book, this isn't the book for you. There are several other excellent texts that fit that bill. This is more of a series of essays on a variety of subjects, not always directly related to the spacesuit, but somehow always returning. In some ways, it reminds me of "Of a Fire on the Moon" by Normal Mailer - more of a "feeling" than simply straight reportage. I wasn't quite sure what to expect, but overall, I think it's a great book. It takes a variety of historical viewpoints, ranging from Dior fashions, to the detonation of the first hydrogen bomb, to the shocking state of JFK's health, to the fact that Wylie Post's eyepatch helped warm the icy oxygen that was pumped into his first altitude suit, and manages to pull them all together into a very well-written book. Any shortcomings would be related to its intended audience: it doesn't seem "technical" enough to satisfy the space-geek-types, but there is not a huge pool of 'non-geeks' who are likely to be interested in this sort of thing. Having said that, "Fashioning Apollo" appears to have been well-researched, Mr. de Manchaux is obviously an accomplished writer, and I highly recommend this book.

A beautiful bountiful book. This is a high quality look at the design (and what that design means to us in other contexts) of the Apollo spacesuit. It covers a lot of ground, engineered as the suits were, with handcrafted layers that perform many different yet interrelated functions. So we have chapters on the actual construction of the suit, and chapters on cities and simulation and JFK. It's sometimes wordy, is not afraid of big concepts, but it is always lively. A flexible mix of human and technical interactions. The point is that unlike most of the other systems that got us to the moon, a space suit is best fashioned to the evolved biological complexity of the human body, a second skin, rather than an engineered off-the-shelf hard shell. We are treated to a smart romp that deftly combines fashion, politics, ergonomics, space travel, architecture, history, corporate culture and an iconic journey to the brave new frontier. There are lots of books on the Apollo moon missions, but however many you have this will be a unique addition to the understanding of how we got to make that first step on another world. Wonderfully illustrated, fully referenced. I hope you find this review helpful.

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. Most in NASA and the aerospace industry wanted to contain astronauts in hard, rigid suits (cans, really), not dress them in fabric. And yet, once all requirements were considered, ILC's concepts were chosen. Rather than simply dissect how the Apollo spacesuit came to be, de Monchaux explores a spectrum of cultural powers and movements that made such a device possible, but not necessarily inevitable. The narrative explains that the only way to develop a spacesuit that worked fully was to maintain the round peg of the human body as the square-hole concepts of engineering and bureaucracy evolved to accommodate that concept. The concepts for rigid suits came up short. Regarding Apollo, they came up short rather completely. This book is also an expose of the Cold War. Informed and inquisitive people have always known there were activities our democracy pursued that were far removed from our consuming, post-war suburban lives of ease and abundance. Even for the well educated, though, that knowledge tended to be cursory without the specific pursuit of a particular interest. Presented here both explicitly and implicitly is a window into the myriad of secret (or at least never publicized) programs, as well as the almost open-ended funding that paid for them. Further, this book is about The Sixties, perhaps the most American decade in a century that was already America's. As de Monchaux tells the story, the Apollo suit is really emblematic of a counterculture. ILC's informal engineers were self taught, with little if any college experience, details that rankled the quantitative, degree-strewn POV of NASA and aerospace bureaucracies. Although from a generation well before Woodstock, ILC engineers found implicitness out of explicitness, while also finding ways to satisfy

the calculations and methodologies the bureaucracies needed as much as demanded. There is no doubt the initial purpose of Apollo, in 1961, was political, both domestically and internationally. As de Monchaux writes, "From the perspective of Kennedy's knowledge of the media's power in the cold war, the entire effort to go to the moon should be rightly understood as an elaborate apparatus for the production of a single television image. Kennedy approved plans to go to the moon because he - and perhaps particularly and peculiarly he - knew that the single image, however arduously achieved, could be magnified and extended globally, and, in an instant, change the world." There is also little doubt that for many, many space enthusiasts within NASA, the aerospace industry and the general world populace, by July 20, 1969 Apollo had evolved into an almost Renaissance-like quest in American culture that was at least transcendent. After all, fighter jocks don't become artists (Alan Bean) or poet/philosophers (Edgar Mitchell) without a life-altering experience. Of all the pieces of equipment an astronaut needs, his or her spacesuit is in many ways the most important, considering the failure of a suit's most basic concept will lead to an agonizing and quick death. De Monchaux has structured his book to reflect the 21 layers that were sewn and bonded together to make the Apollo suit. In a very real sense, the suit was not only composed of 21 layers of nylon and mylar and teflon, but also layers of imagination, determination and temerity - the same sort of audacity that pushed our ancestors out of the liquid realm of the sea into the much thinner fluid of our atmosphere, that propelled us into that sky, and then beyond. More than any system-within-the-system that emerged from this project, the Apollo spacesuit was likely the most incongruous - intuitive, not easily quantifiable, perhaps a genuine synthesis of art and science. How fitting that this piece of equipment preserved nakedness as much as could be (skinny dipping in the universe, if you will), and that it was the result not so much of if-then thinking as in asking "what if?"

The Apollo space suit met many demanding requirements, the subtlest of them arising from the basic difference between the squishy stuff of human flesh and the hard, metallic structures of rocketry. Even more than that, the suit makers had to negotiate the vast cultural differences between the space program and the ladies' underwear market - hard vs. soft all over again, in social structure this time. Although fascinating as a piece of technology and crucial to lifting people up out of the warm, comfortable environment in which we evolved, the suit is at least as interesting in the ways it points out how traditional command-and-control structures fail utterly in dealing with the basic facts of organic existence. (Not surprisingly, they had to learn this all over again when they tried to apply military C&C to the social problems plaguing American cities.) This wide-ranging narrative covers personal details of JFK's presidency, the incredible difficulty of getting the suit

approved, even though all of its competition failed miserably, and other vignettes for the space program's origins. It makes a fascinating read, and explores yet another way that women have made fundamental, irreplaceable contributions in the most male-dominated fields.-- wiredweird

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