

# Spacesuit: Fashioning Apollo

*Nicholas de Monchaux*

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**Spacesuit: Fashioning Apollo** Nicholas de Monchaux

How the twenty-one-layer Apollo spacesuit, made by Playtex, was a triumph of intimacy over engineering.

## Spacesuit: Fashioning Apollo Details

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# From Reader Review Spacesuit: Fashioning Apollo for online ebook

## Michael says

A record of the victory by redundancy and adaptation over systems engineering to produce the A7L spacesuit, De Monchaux's book adopts the structure of said spacesuit, resulting in 21 overlapping but essential chapters; each deals with a different aspect of the A7L story, from its competition with "harder" alternatives to its production by Playtex. Notable among these are a chapter on JFK's image consciousness, and an extensive history of early flight suits from Wiley Post to the U2.

This is an ambitious attempt at rethinking the way we write histories of technology, raising a number of intriguing questions about the future of both design and applied science. It's definitely a worthwhile read, and I'd recommend it for designers, engineers and history buffs alike.

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## Brian Borst says

This is an excellent book. Not does it give the reader a great look into the space suits used for apollo missions, it also talks of U.S. politics, and the influence of advertising and the fashion industry. It's broad and interdisciplinary, but very much recommended.

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## Chuck says

Strange book. The author makes many tangential detours, some are interesting and some are not. The parts about the suit, it's history, development and construction are very good and the sections on systems engineering as it relates to urban planning (still don't see the connection to the main subject) were not, at least to me.

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## Ian says

"In its visual vocabulary of checks and crosses, the black-and-white cathode of the GE [simulated lunar approach and landing] system is remarkable for its reduction of the lunar goal to its essence--a mastery not so much of earthly space or outer space, but of information space" (de Monchaux, pg. 175).

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## Milele says

This is a fantastic book and in the last few days I have been unable to help telling everybody about it. It's a beautiful exploration of culture and industry around the Apollo missions and the challenges involved in building a spacesuit that would allow an astronaut to walk on the moon. It weaves in science, art, feminism,

business management and media studies to the topic. I was particularly excited by the information about how expert seamstresses and clothing designers integrated, with plenty of challenges, into the NASA managed engineering culture.

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### **Lara says**

Parts of this book were super interesting--I loved the beginning, how de Monchaux connects the early balloon flights and learning that the human body does *not* do well in the upper atmosphere, and the "New Look" of Dior and changes in the fashion world to why and how the space suit was eventually constructed. The parts about Mission Control and NORAD were kind of interesting as well. However, towards the end, he goes on this city planning tangent that barely feels connected to the space suit at all and is...well, kind of boring.

In addition, I was listening to the audio version with Bronson Pinchot narrating and his pronunciations really bugged me. And I'm not sure if there are pictures in the book version (I'm assuming there are), but it would have been really helpful to see some, especially when de Monchaux is describing the differences in various versions of the space suit. Oh, the perils of audiobooks!

Anyway, worth a read if you're super interested in the subject, but I feel like it could have been structured a little better.

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### **Juan Martinez says**

From page 20: "Against this background, Hawthorne Gray set out in November 1927 for the last of three high-altitude flights. His craft would soar above 44,000 feet, but an accurate estimate of his breathing supply's longevity would leave Gray dead long before the balloon's landing at 5:20 p.m. 'Undoubtedly,' a posthumous award of the Distinguished Flying Cross concluded, 'his courage was greater than his supply of oxygen.'"

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### **Kkopp says**

A special book with a special perspective. An architect (and professor of architecture) looks at the fascinating story of how the people who made Playtex bras and girdles ended up beating out military-industrial giants to fabricate the clothing that humans wore in space and on the moon. Taking the suits' multi-layered structure as his reference point de Monchaux explores, in 21 short, extremely readable chapters, the encounter between the fragile and unique individual human (astronaut) body and the mammoth systems engineering behemoth that was being created to fulfill Kennedy's order to put a man on the moon in less than a decade.

De Monchaux weaves his story out of both astute and often entertaining appraisals of the various design strategies used and the very human stories behind the master seamstresses, test pilots, businessmen, and bureaucrats that managed to find a way to work together in the service of a truly monumental goal. Along the way he exposes many fascinating offshoots and extensions of the project, including the attempt to take a systems approach to urban redevelopment as the space program wound down in the face of the need to tackle

pressing terrestrial problems.

The physical book itself is a pleasure to behold, with its soft "hard" cover and excellent photos and layout, although a bit heavy to easily read in bed....

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### **Ian says**

This cultural history of the development of the Apollo space suits is a fantastic book. It's written as a collection of essays, ranging from the early history of ballooning and high-altitude travel, to early 20th century daredevil pilot Wiley Post, to Christian Dior's "New Look," all the way through the birth of cybernetics, the roles of women in the US space program, and late 20th century urban planning.

I can't recommend it highly enough. Easily ranks up with (and would definitely appeal to readers of) both Lipstick Traces and The Making of the Atomic Bomb.

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### **Chebe says**

The first, 'Spacesuit: Fashioning Apollo' is about the early USA space program, and how seamstresses of the Playtex underwear company came to make the spacesuits worn by the Apollo astronauts. It's a very interesting read, and talks about the subject in circles covering different aspects of different events that would all have a bearing on how an inexperienced (underdog) firm got the job, using their more traditional skillsets and hacking around the many problems they encountered to provide the only viable option; a soft suit. It's a beautiful big book with wonderfully detailed images and photos.

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### **Unit of Raine says**

I enjoyed the space/NASA history, the connections to fashion, victorian ballooning (and mechanical ducks), the lovely photos and gorgeous texture (I do like good paper and softcovers). I quite enjoyed the discussion of the development of systems engineering & the ongoing successes & failures. Unfortunately, that part is a little close to home.

It was interesting to focus on the soft spacesuits and the various systems implications. I'm not sure I'm a huge fan of his drawn out conclusion, but I strongly agree that organic systems have a complexity, flexibility and robustness that synthetic systems will never achieve (mainly because it isn't logical...).

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### **Kendra says**

I went in with high expectations, and I was still blown away.

Although the beginning is a little slow and seemingly disjointed, Nicholas De Moncahux is really laying the groundwork for a symbiotic set of vignettes (layers) on the spacesuit. This book is the perfect confluence of theory, structure and practice - each meditation on Rauschenberg or Chanel feels like it adds to the overall

story of Playtex and the construction (fashioning) of the Apollo suits, rather than being extraneous. It's really beautiful. Buy this book. Spend an afternoon exploring. Take its conclusions with you into your life.

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### **Stephen Shapiro says**

An excellent, wide-ranging look at the technology, institutions, and cultural expectations surrounding the Apollo Project's A7L spacesuit. Written from a cultural studies perspective, which expands its scope to include not just spacesuits, NASA, the International Latex Company, and systems design, but also Dior's New Look and the public imagination about space flight.

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### **Dane says**

I was a little disappointed by this book. I was expecting it to be about the technical design of the suits, a literal examination of the 21 layers that it talks so much about. Instead, it tries to make a (somewhat painfully forced) point about space adapting to humans rather than humans adapting to space via a series of essays, many of which are only tangentially related to the space program. It reads more like a humanities textbook than the technical account that I was expecting.

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### **Darshan Elena says**

A fun book for nerds and geeks, *Spacesuit: Fashioning Apollo* provides an overview of the history and science of the spacesuit. Clever in organization and broad in scope, this book was a blast to read.

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