The boy knocked at a door, and the door promptly opened with a spring and a click. A parlour door within a small entry stood open, and disclosed a child - a dwarf - a girl - a something - sitting on a little low old-fashioned armchair, which had a little kind of working bench before it.

'I can't get up,' said the child, 'because my back's bad, and my legs are queer. But I'm the person of the house... I'm a Doll's Dressmaker.'

'I hope it's a good business?'

The person of the house shrugged and shook her head. 'No. Poorly paid. And I'm often so pressed for time! I had a doll married, last week, and was obliged to work all night. And it's not good for me, on account of my back being so bad and my legs so queer.'

They looked at the little creature with a wonder that did not diminish, and the schoolmaster said: 'I am sorry your fine ladies are so inconsiderate.'

'Verly the way with them,' said the person of the house, shrugging her shoulders again. 'And they take no care of their clothes, and they never keep to the same fashions a month. I work for a doll with three daughters. Bless you, she's enough to ruin her husband!' The person of the house gave a weird little laugh here, and gave them another look out of the corners of her eyes. She had an elfin chin that was capable of great expression; and whenever she gave this look, she hitched this chin up. As if her eyes and her chin worked together on the same wires.

'Are you always as busy as you are now?'

Busier. I'm slack just now. I finished a large mourning-order the day before yesterday. Doll I work for, lost a canary-bird.'
The Ontology of the Fashion Model

Caroline Evans

Jean-Léon Gérôme, Working in Marble, or The Artist Sculpting Tanagra, 1890
© Dahesh Museum of Art, New York / Bridgeman Art Library
The idea of a model is many centuries old; derived from *modulus*, the Latin word for measure or standard – the diminutive of which was *modellus*, from which came the old Italian *modello*, meaning the mould for producing things – the word drifted into French, *modele*, in the sixteenth century, and then into English shortly afterwards, in the sense of a small representation of an object, like a sculpture’s maquette for example or an architectural model. Its usage to conote a mathematical model only developed in the twentieth century, as did the term fashion model.

The concept of ‘the model’ differs between fine art, design, architecture, fashion, photography and new media, and offers an intriguing mix of things: it can be a rudimentary sketch, an ideal, a miniature, a set of instructions, a maquette or a prototype. It can suggest both the early stages of a project and its final realisation, ranging from an idea that is barely formed to an ideal which reality can never match. But only in fashion is the model a living, breathing human being; and only in fashion does this creature have an inert counterpart, in the form of the dress she wears, also known as the model. Their alliance can be disturbing, and plays itself out largely in the form of inherent contradictions between the model dress and the model woman. With all models, though, from architecture to fashion and beyond, the model’s relationship to reality is always questionable, which poses philosophical problems about the ensuing association between a copy and an original. When the original is a human being, this relationship has the potential to touch us profoundly; and when the copy is a human being, it has the potential to disturb us profoundly.

In ‘Dolls: On the Wax Dolls of Lotte Pritzel’, 1913, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke describes how dolls ‘make us aware of that silence larger than life’ which is ‘at the border of our existence’, so that, he writes, we experience ‘that hollowness in our feelings, that heart pause which could spell death’.¹ In many ways, the fashion model has much more to do with the doll than with the artist’s model who most people assume to be her immediate predecessor. Indeed, the first fashion models were dolls: they were the models for models.
if you like. And, like her predecessor, the fashion model exists on the cusp of the organic and the inorganic, between the animate and the inanimate, bridging the worlds of the living and the dead.

In the eighteenth century, before fashion models existed, French dressmakers commonly promoted their work internationally by sending dolls around Europe, fashionably dressed in the latest modes; most likely because fashionable women themselves couldn’t travel as freely. The dolls, few of which survive today, made regular trips to foreign capitals. They were about 75cm high and had adult figures, rather than the child-like bodies of nineteenth-century toy dolls. Literary scholar Julie Park identifies the eighteenth-century fascination with dolls as part of that century’s burgeoning culture of consumption, in which the use of fashionable commodities cemented the construction of fashionable identities. ‘Being a woman in the eighteenth century’, she writes, ‘was an intensely mimetic and modern project, capturing not what women are, but what women are like’. This mimetic relationship was later to underwrite the connection between the first fashion models and their audiences. In the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fashion model, contemporary observers, both writers and illustrators, saw the same ‘charged encounters between the natural and the artificial, the original and the copy, and the human and the inhuman’ that Park finds in the eighteenth-century fashion doll.3

As fashion historian Alison Matthews David has shown, however, the first living fashion models in Paris were not, in fact, women but men. Anticipating by a good 80 years a number of early twentieth-century stage plays depicting fashion modelling in couture houses, David describes in particular an 1826 vaudeville performance that featured a former artist’s model, Hector, named after a Greek hero, who had become a ‘mannequin, model for fashions’, and who entered the stage singing – ‘Brilliant model, faithful mirror, I sparkle with light and fire! I wander everywhere, setting the vogue for the new looks in the catalogue.’4 According to David, ‘beginning in the 1820s, certain tailors hired handsome men known as “mannequins”, the ancestors of the fashion model, to display their latest creations in modish spots around Paris. The practice seems to have been current until the late 1840s. This live version of the mannequin appears repeatedly in written sources, suggesting it was an important trope in the period imagination.’5 One such source is Étienne-François Bazot’s Les Nouvelles Parisiennes from 1814, which investigated early-nineteenth-century Parisian society through various demographic groups:

Every three months the tailors renew the shape of their suits; so they send for one of these gentlemen, dress him, and send him on the town. The young man, called a mannequin, shows himself in the spaces consecrated by the incroyables; he listens to and welcomes their advice, and according to the majority, the clothing is rejected if it is abominable, but if it is judged divine, then it is unanimously adopted.6

Far from being glamorous figures, these early male models were described by their contemporaries as pitiful young men who were obliged to display modish clothing at the races and other fashionable venues which they then had to return at the end of the day. David also goes on to note the ambiguous class status of the male mannequin, ‘a man whose profession was to rent out his body... he had to be elegant enough to appeal to dandies and poor enough to require a wage’.7

But according to contemporary accounts, those professional actors who did work as unpaid mannequins were admired more than they were pitied. For example, in 1841 the journalist and dandy Roger de Beauvoir observed that young actors were employed as...
mannequins to parade ‘a risky suit, a dangerous waistcoat or a contentious pair of trousers’ in the fashionable public spaces of Paris, and David argues that when, many decades later, Charles Frederick Worth (1826-1895) and other couturiers sent their female mannequins to the races ‘Worth may simply have been feminising an advertising practice long familiar to tailors’. And perhaps men’s greater freedom to parade unaccompanied in the early nineteenth-century city also goes some way to explaining why it was they, rather than women, who were the first to model fashions in this way.

Worth himself is normally credited as being the first couturier to use living women as fashion models. He did not, however, invent the concept of fashion modelling so much as professionalise the practice. Worth’s own wife, Marie Vernet, had been a model, and they met when she was employed to model ready-to-wear clothing at the Parisian silk mercer, Gagelin et Opige. The couple married and set up their own firm in the 1850s with a colleague; there Marie continued to model, working a 12-hour day, including throughout both her pregnancies. After she personally retired from modelling in the late 1860s, she remained in charge of the models at Worth.

The Worth salons of the 1860s are described by Emile Zola in his novel The Kill, which portrays the febrile and sexualised atmosphere of the Second Empire under the corrupt political system of Napoleon III, in which the Haussmannisation of Paris is funded by frenetic speculation in real estate and stocks. In the novel, Renée, the beautiful young wife of a ruthless profiteer, visits the salons of ‘the illustrious Worms, the couturier of genius to whom the great ladies of the Second Empire bowed down’, accompanied by Maxime, her adolescent nephew and soon to be lover. Inside these salons, the perfume of the dresses combines with that of the hair and amber-scented shoulders to produce ‘sweet-smelling warmth, the fragrance of flesh and luxury’, and the boy glides across the sofas like an adder, losing himself under skirts, behind bodices and between dresses. Zola does not say if Maxime is really losing himself in the bodies of the women at Worms, or if he is roaming decadently through the clothes on display. ‘That child pokes his nose everywhere’, declares a baroness, patting his cheek.

It was in this louche atmosphere that the Worth mannequins modelled, showing the evening clothes in a brilliantly lit salon so that ball gowns might be fitted under conditions closest to reality. They modelled to a social mix spanning old aristocracy and new freedom to parade unaccompanied in the early nineteenth-century city also goes some way to explaining why it was they, rather than women, who were the first to model fashions in this way.

For other elite dressmakers in this period, however, it was still very much part of their routine to attend to their clients at their homes and apartments, with aristocratic women waited on by their dressmakers in the mornings. It was only once these same women started going out to visit couturiers in the 1870s and 1880s that fashion modelling became widespread. By the 1890s, fashionable society women would spend their afternoons looking in on the mannequins who modelled in the couture houses of Redfern, Laffériere, Rouff, Fred, Callot Soeurs, Worth and Doucet. As a consequence, modelling became the exclusive preserve of these high-class dressmakers, while the...
drapery establishments had by now ceased to use living mannequins as they had in the 1850s when Marie Worth modelled at Gagelin.15

By the end of the nineteenth century most fashion models were female, not male: the profession had become feminised, if you like. But fashion models were still yet to be actually called models. That term was reserved for artist’s models.16 The French singer Yvette Guilbert worked as a fashion model from 1883 and said ‘I became a mannequin, not a “model” in your sense of the word. We look upon mannequins and models as different things. The first means to try on dresses before customers, but a model in France is a girl who shows her figure before everybody, especially sculptors and painters.’17 Instead, by the 1880s, female models were beginning, like male ones, to be called mannequins, as they continue to be called in French today.18

The term mannequin (for fashion model) comes from the Dutch mainikin, and was used in the eighteenth century to describe an articulated doll used by artists, known in English as a lay-figure. In the nineteenth century it became the term for the French dressmaker’s and tailor’s dummies, life-size and made of wicker or wood, that came into production from the 1830s and 1840s. These mannequins were the living fashion model’s immediate predecessors, from which she was to acquire her name, although not immediately.

Unlike male models, who had been called ‘mannequins’ since the 1820s, the first female models at Gagelin in the 1840s and at Worth from the 1850s were not called mannequins but demoiselles de magasin. They were sometimes also called essayeuses (also the word for a fitter) because the very first gowns they modelled were prêtés à essayer: ready to try on, unlike a couture model. In his memoir, Marie Worth’s son Jean-Philippe wrote that when his mother was first modelling for Worth in the 1850s ‘the word mannequin had not been coined... and, had it been, would have been considered an insult’.19 He claimed that the use of the word ‘mannequin’ to describe the female fashion model was launched by a journalist from La Vie Parisienne in 1870 who, having witnessed a vendeuse modelling a dress for a client at Worth, wrote an article about ‘the Entrée de Mlle Mannequin. It was the first time that anyone had ever dared to call a demoiselle de magasin a mannequin. What would have happened had my mother been the saleswoman can well be imagined.’20

17 Yvette Guilbert Comes, Chicago Daily, 8 December 1895.
18 Paul Robert cites the Goncourt diaries’ reference to a ‘demi-soif mannequin’ in the late nineteenth-century and defines a mannequin as a young woman on whom couturiers fit their model dresses and who, in the twentieth century, presented them to the public, op cit, p 134.
20 La Vie parisienne from 26 February 1870 described a mannequin parade at Worth in thinly veiled terms; see Tétart-Vittu, op cit, p 37.

Above: Mannequin at Rochas, Paris, 1928
Left: John Redfern designing and fitting a dress on a mannequin, from J. Roger-Miles, Les Créateurs de la Mode, Paris, 1910
Courtesy Musée Galliera
But why did the word mannequin have such bad connotations? Since the late eighteenth century it had been used to mean an empty-headed, fashionable, man of straw21 and up to the late nineteenth century its slang meaning remained ‘an insignificant or contemptible person’.22 As soon as it also came to be used to describe the tailor’s dummy, in the 1840s, that image too was used pejoratively. Similarly, in 1844 Grandville (the pseudonym for the French caricaturist Jean Ignace Isidore Gérard) satirised the fashionable crowd at the Longchamp racecourse by representing them as no more than an assemblage of objects, using fashionable accessories and dress to represent their bodies. Sneering at the vacuity of these people, and of the fashion to have oneself replaced by a dummy, he argued that what one lost was the individual – ‘mannequin of mannequins, and all is but mannequin!’23

The word mannequin was still not respectable by 1879 when Edmond de Goncourt referred contemptuously to les demoiselles-mannequins, ‘the young-girl mannequins’ who paraded in Worth’s salon. The term was always used disparagingly, and evoked both scorn and prurient disapproval. Applied to the female mannequins in the couture houses in the 1870s, its connotations shift again to a darker register as it comes to suggest the theme of femininity as a kind of mechanical performance. The Goncourt journal entry for Friday 9 May 1879 describes a ‘young girl, or rather a lady-mannequin’ in Worth’s salon, ‘whose specialty is to represent pregnancy in high society. Seated alone at a distance, in the half-light of a boudoir, in an interesting condition, she exhibits before the visitor’s eyes a gown adapted with the utmost genius to the deformity of child-bearing.’24 Goncourt’s disgust and misogyny at Pinguat, ‘the famous couturier to the prostitutes’, is even more striking: his mannequins are described as robotic, unnaturally aged and simian, evincing ‘the grimacing corruption of monkeys’.25

The theme of woman as lifeless dolls, and hence pattern-cards of idealised femininity, was also one evident in much nineteenth-century literature, such as E T A Hoffman’s 1817 short story ‘The Sandman’, with its protagonist, Olympia, the perfect fiancée who turns out to be an automaton, and who would later be used by Freud in 1919 to introduce his discussion of ‘The Uncanny’. The literature on doubles and dolls is extensive, particularly, as the literary critic Karl Miller has shown, in the romantic period when the doppelgänger theme emerges.26 It is above all in their resemblance to living dolls that nineteenth-century fashion models are linked to the themes of...
doubling, life and death that preoccupied so many nineteenth-century
writers. In this respect, one novel stands out above all others for
its suggestive links with the fashion model. Published in 1886, at
exactly the time when living mannequins began to be illustrated in
fashion magazines, Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s extraordinary novel,
L’Eve Future, is predicated on the opposition between doll and
human, perfection and imperfection, the ideal and the real.27

The novel describes the creation of a female android, Hadaly, by a
fictional Thomas Edison, built for an English aristocrat who has fall-
en in love with a woman who is beautiful but worthless; the android
is designed to correct her defects and become his ideal companion.
It is a Stepford Wives story with a Bladerunner twist: the beautiful
android gradually, and poignantly, acquires some human character-
istics (and so, of course, she must die – which she duly does). Hadaly
is made of silver-coloured metal. She has silver feet clad in ‘a snowy
skin’ and though they seem light their hollow interior is filled with
quicksilver. Her legs are made of platinum, and her limbs are con-
ected by a series of delicate steel wires. She runs on electricity and is
operated by her maker at a touch of ‘the rings on her silver gauntlet’,
just as the couture house mannequin only moves on the instruction
of the couturier.28

Written at a time when the first mannequins were walking in the
couture houses, the novel features one whole chapter devoted to
describing the android’s walk. Powerful electromagnets inside her
create ‘human movement itself’, which is calibrated ‘according to
the undulations of the living torso’. Delicate steel wires give her ‘that
gracious bend of the knee, that constant undulation, that roll in the
walk that are so seductive in a mere woman’.29 Throughout the book,
Villiers expressly uses the term ‘model’ to mean the prototype rather
than the copy: Hadaly is dressed ‘like her model’30 – that is, like the
woman she was based on, Miss Alicia Clary. And the confusion
between the animate and the inanimate woman is further evoked
when the convincing and satiny quality of Hadaly’s skin is described:
‘The result is to confuse completely the sense of human beings, to
render the copy and the original [in the French, le modèle, ie, the
model] indistinguishable’.31 So in this usage, the term ‘model’
means the original flesh and blood woman who is a prototype for the
android, rather than the android being a prototype human being –
the relationship is unstable between copy and original. Chillingly,
the chapter closes with Edison showing his patron a sample of the
synthetic skin as if it were a fabric swatch. ‘And now my Lord, would
you like me to show you this ideal textile skin?’32

Villier’s fictional account of the female android chimes with
descriptions by journalists and diarists of the living mannequins of

29. ‘c’est le mouvement humain lui même’, calibrated ‘selon les ondulations du torse vu’. The steel wires produce ‘ce plié
gracieux, cette ondulation ferme, ce vague dans la démarche, qui son si séduisants chez une simple femme’. Villiers
de l’Isle-Adam, ibid, pp 233, 229.
32. ‘Maintenant, milord, ajouta Edison en regardant Lord Ewald, tenez-vous à ce que je vous montre ce textile derme idéal?’
Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, ibid, p 265.
the couture houses. They too evoke the figures of the doppelgänger and the automaton who so fascinated writers of fiction: in fashion journalism the living mannequin has long appeared to inhabit the interstices between life and death, organic and mechanical movement and object- and subject-hood. While inside the salon the attention of many writers was also typically drawn to the mirroring of the space as much as to the mannequins themselves. Their reflections created a parallel to the repetitive nature of their task, indifferently modelling the same garment ten times a day to ten different clients, each time as if it were the first. All these features combine to make the fashion model something a little less than human: mechanical or doll-like in her smooth performance, her body is always svelte, her step rhythmic and her movement gliding, qualities that, again, contribute to her slightly unnatural, even uncanny appearance.

This unnaturalness was augmented by what was worn beneath a mannequin’s gown. In Villier’s novel, Hadaly’s legs are ‘a hermetic sheath of platinum’ 13 – Villiers used the word maillot for sheath, recalling the black satin undergarment worn by fashion mannequins, known as a maillot, or more commonly, a fourreau. 34 The effect is reinforced by his description of the first sight of Hadaly walking upright, ‘enveloped in long, full pleats of black satin’. 15 The fourreau was a tight, enveloping undergarment that covered the mannequin from chin to wrist. The writer Morgan Jay points out that while the practical function of the fourreau was to preserve the mannequin’s modesty and to protect the gown from being soiled, ‘this denial of the body is also a way of reifying the mannequin – long despised, living off her body, like a prostitute’. 36

The dehumanising effect of the fourreau was reinforced by the way both couturiers and clients treated the mannequins. A model might be passively pushed and pulled in all directions in posing for the client and made to stand for hours while the couturier designed on her passive body. Writing in 1900, Kathleen Schlesinger describes the courtier Walles’s ‘sketching in charcoal on white muslin an idea for the embroidered vest of his newest model’, 37 with the torso of the mannequin used as a form of drawing board. In these circumstances the fashion model’s resemblance to the inanimate dummy is all too literal; and in fashion discourse, too, she was frankly described as more a walking object than a living subject, with her ‘industrial smile’ and her mechanical walk, performed with ‘indifferent docility, without nerves and without thoughts’. 41 She retains both her name and her curiously neutral gender le mannequin from the artist’s dolls and dressmaker’s dummies of the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries; Didier Grumbach, in his Histoires de la mode,
recounts that these first, living mannequins were known as sosies or doubles.42 Perhaps this was because they were the double of the inanimate mannequin from which they took their name; or perhaps they were the double of the client, though never her equal.

So if the living woman is the mannequin then what or who was the model? The fourth edition of the Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française (1762) defines a 'model' as three things: 1. an exemplar, something to aspire to – ie, a model of behaviour; 2. an architectural model or sculptor's maquette, a small three-dimensional trial object; 3. an artist's model, either male or female. And it continues to define the word in essentially the same way in later editions, right up to the nineteenth century. So the third definition of an artist's model was current at the same time as the artist's articulated doll, le mannequin. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries artists used both dolls (mannequins) and human models interchangeably. Why, then, did the nineteenth-century fashion model, or living mannequin, initially take her name from the mannequin rather than from the model or living woman? Literally, it was because she replaced the dressmaker's dummy or mannequin: she is a living mannequin. But also because in the dressmaking trade the word model had another meaning, closer to the first and second definitions, as a first-stage dress that was used to work out the design as a canvas toile and then made up as a model to show to buyers – a prototype. The word model, therefore, always referred to the dress, not the living woman who wore it, and survived as such well into the second half of the twentieth century.

An extremely rare surviving model gown in mauve silk taffeta by Poiret from 1909 illustrates this etymology. Sewn into its hem a swatch identifies the other eight colours the dress could be made in. Next to it, also in the hem, is a coarse canvas label printed with the model name, Maintenon, its copyright registration number, 5272, and either its price or the collection model number, 800. The label proves that the design had been registered at the Paris Industrial Relations Board, the conseil des prud'hommes. The dress would have been worn by a mannequin in the fashion show. If ordered by a private client it would be re-made to her measurements; if bought by a trade buyer, the buyer acquired the right to reproduce the dress commercially, and an inferior version of the dress itself.43 Much modified this would then be mass produced in American garment factories, while the model dress itself was never sold. It was a prototype whose sole purpose was to be copied and adapted for sale. Models were all numbered for internal records and the couture houses kept careful track of them in their fight against copyright infringement.
One of the most enduring residues of this fight are the photographs designers arranged to be taken from the 1880s onwards to document their ownership of various dress designs with the Paris Industrial Relations Board. Mannequins in these photographs were either live or inanimate and brightly lit to show as much detail as possible. By and large most of the dresses themselves have disappeared, but thousands of the resulting copyright photographs have survived, especially from the 1920s, and are housed in various Paris archives. In addition to recording the design details of the garments, these photographs also provide the only trace of the many anonymous mannequins who wore them. But which model is the real subject of these pictures – the woman or the dress? In their entirety the pictures constitute an archive of the working body, rationalised, multiplied and subject equally to clock time and fashion time. An index of monotonous seasonality, they offer both a ‘haunting certificate’ of the mannequins’ presence, to borrow a term from Roland Barthes, and a testament to the more repetitive and unglamorous aspects of their daily work.

Although very few identifiable model dresses survive, there are ghostly duplicates of all of them in the form of haute couture dresses located in the collections of costume museums all across the world. The model number and client’s name were usually inserted behind the dress label as a form of both identification and authentication. (In the case of a model dress, by contrast, the dress’s name and number were written on a white band stitched into the hem.) Each of these couture gowns is, then, a copy of the original modèle from which the customer would have made her choice by watching it being modelled in the salon by a mannequin. All couture gowns are thus something of a simulacrum, each one a copy of an original which has perished or disappeared. In this the model gown resembles the photographic negative that Walter Benjamin describes as the non-existent original engendering a multiplicity of copies in the form of the photographic print. And this is the clue to the industrial nature of the fashion model.

With the nineteenth-century expansion of the French export trade in fashion, the model dress became a design prototype for which overseas buyers bought the reproduction rights. This development can be traced in the changing definitions of the word ‘model’ in the second half of the nineteenth-century. Whereas the Académie Française dictionary continued to define the model as a pattern for artistic or moral values up to 1835, by the 1870s the Émile Littré Dictionnaire de la langue française adds industrial values to these moral and artistic ones, suggesting the model as a pattern for artisanal or industrial manufacture – ‘Manufacturing model, a system of factory production for soap, mirrors; in industrial textile dying, skeins of yarn used for trialling dyes’. And it gives the word’s etymology: from Italian modello, derived from Latin modellus, a diminutive of modus from where it refers us to the entry on ‘mode’, fashion; so there’s a linguistic connection from mode to modèle. By 1932 the eighth edition of the Académie Française dictionary had absorbed these new definitions, but mysteriously, despite the widespread usage of the term model to mean the dress, well evidenced in newsprint and magazines, no dictionary lists it, not even a dictionary of technical fashion terms.

The model is thus ambiguous, and the potential for confusion between the model dress and the living mannequin is rich: the fashion modèle, unlike the artist’s model, was merely an inanimate garment, whereas the mannequin, who took her name from an inanimate

dressmaker’s dummy, was a living, breathing woman. And the masculine gender of the French noun for the female model, *le mannequin*, and the use of the male noun for female actors, appropriately designates the estrangement which was so often attributed to them by early commentators.

What all this evidence about the slippage between mannequins, model women and model dresses suggests is not only that the idea of a woman as object is related to the commodity form (which in an advanced consumer society is troubling in itself); but also, another form of anxiety, that unease over the double, as Freud observed, issues a challenge to the idea of the individual self as sovereign.48 Far from being simply a literary device linked to the nineteenth-century taste for ghost stories, doubling was in fact intrinsic to haute couture – a complex commercial reality that in effect structured its business organisation. It is at the moment of being modelled that the dress has the potential to multiply, to give birth to the copy. Until Worth’s innovations in the 1850s, a dress would be individually made for each client, in consultation with her. Worth instituted the idea of the pre-designed collection, for which a number of models would be made before the season when they were shown to the client: this was the purpose of the living mannequin. This emerging fashion system in the second half of the nineteenth century was predicated on a pattern of doubling which replicated itself in every part of the trade, not simply in terms of constructing a fashionable appearance in public, but also backstage in the couture house, in terms of manufacture, starting with the ‘model dress’ as the prototype from which all copies, whether doubles or multiples, were reproduced for clients or buyers. In this way, the fashionable woman and mannequin each personified a facet of the doubling that is as the heart of the European haute couture fashion system. The presentation of the mannequin was an analogue of the mechanism of doubling that underpinned fashion production and sales in the couture houses, and of the hidden spectre of American mechanical reproduction that was due to replace French craft skills once the couture dress was sold on the open market. A single dress model could become an army of ready-to-wear dresses ready to march out of American factories and onto store rails.

This structure of doubling was replicated at many levels throughout the business. Even the client had her inanimate body-double lodged in the couture house, in the form of a lay-figure custom-made to replicate her own proportions and on which her dresses would be cut and fitted. In every house, usually near the workrooms, there would be a room full of these ghostly body doubles – an army of headless clients of widely differing physiques and heights in unbleached canvas. The dramatic potential of these spaces saw them become the focus for a number of literary accounts. Lucy Clairin’s novel of 1937, *The Diary of a Mannequin*, for example, is a first-person narrative set in a fictional Paris couture house called Boris.49 One day the narrator, Alice, who is about to be sent to model in the Cannes branch, is taken upstairs to the ateliers by the *première*, Mané, to be fitted for the clothes she will take with her. Standing patiently for an hour while the dresses are fitted, she notices a door labelled ‘Musée Grévin’, the name of the Paris waxworks museum. She asks the *première* about it, and is invited to go and explore. Inside, a staircase leads up to a long room filled with dressmakers’ dummies in all sizes and shapes ranged along its four walls. ‘There are big ones, little ones, fat ones, thin ones, grotesque ones and hideous ones. From all the bodies, the head is missing’ writes Alice. ‘Here is my Musée Grevin’, Mané said to me with a big gesture. Do you realise? Each of them has her name on

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a label. These are the mannequins of our clients... No more measurements to take from them... can you believe I collect them, what horrors!'50 Both women enact a kind of class revenge on the clients in a pantomime of abuse, insulting and mocking the dummies.

Louis Roubaud’s account of the couture business from 1928 describes a similar room full of clients’ dummies. Taken by the couturier to a basement room lined by fitted cupboards, he sees the mannequins, each one a precise replica of the client’s body, hanging in a line in the basement cupboards like Bluebeard’s wives, their names written on the doors – ‘Mme A..., Mlle B..., Mme de M...’. Roubaud describes them as ‘dead women in cotton canvas’ – a description made literal when the men come upon the mannequin of a young actress, an ex-client who had recently died, and unceremoniously throw it out.51

Freud described the double as ‘the uncanny harbinger of death’.52 His essay on the uncanny dealt with dolls and doubling, looking back at the nineteenth-century literature of his youth from the far side of the Great War, in 1919, at a moment when to look forward was to confront a different set of anxieties about women. In this sense, ambivalent responses to the emerging category of the fashion mannequin were underwritten by fears of mechanisation and modernity in a period of increasing automation in industry. The encroaching emancipation of women in both society and the workplace played a part in these anxieties too. Journalistic unease about the living mannequin’s nomenclature and her relation to the inanimate mannequin was linked not only to contemporary anxieties about her objectification, but also to her troubling status as a new kind of working girl – a woman who wore fashion for money, rather than for the love of it.

The philosophical and fantastical resonances of this opposition – in addition to other antimonies like alive-dead, animate–inanimate, object–subject, original–copy – underpin both the ontological status of the fashion mannequin and the commercial structures of haute couture as it developed in the second half of the nineteenth century. But what is interesting about these oppositions today is just how enduring they have become, with contemporary designers picking up traces of these same old anxieties (as Walter Benjamin once noted, the woman of fashion is a figure ‘who mimics the mannequin and enters history as a dead object’).53. For example, in their autumn 2006 collection, the designers Viktor & Rolf adapted the Dutch convention of silver-plating babies’ shoes, to plate a range of clothing details and an entire wedding dress, even including the bride’s floral bouquet. Consisting of neat 1950s day dresses, formal grey suits and flared trench coats, the whole collection was prim and conservative:

Silver-plated dress, Viktor & Rolf, ‘Silver’, Autumn/Winter 2006-07
Photo Peter Stigter
Courtesy Viktor & Rolf

The robot Maria in Fritz Lang’s Metropolis, 1927

50. Il y en a de grands, de petits, de gros, de maigres, de grotesques, de hideux. A tous ces corps, la tête manque. Voilà mon Musée Grévin, me dit Mané, avec un grand geste. Tu te rends compte?... Chacun d’eux, sur une étiquette, porte son nom. Ce sont les mannequins de nos clientes... Avec eux, plus de mesures à prendre... crois-tu que j’en collectionne, des horreurs!’, Lucy Clairin, op cit, p 57.
52. Sigmund Freud, op cit, p 235.
it had what the journalist Sarah Mower called ‘that slightly queasy, mummified touch’. This iteration of woman-as-object recalls not only Hadaly, the Villiers android, but another modernist representation of a metal woman, the robot Maria in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927). Like Hadaly, Maria begins as flesh and fabric and is remade as metal: unlike Hadaly, however, Maria is a silver Jezebel, sexuality unleashed. These images combine metal and flesh, flesh and fabric, to evoke a demonic sexuality – the bad Maria’s white chiffon floats free as she dances, while Viktor & Rolf’s is embalmed in a silver carapace. In her brilliant analysis of Maria’s dance in the film’s nightclub scene, Mila Ganeva points out the close links between fashion modelling and Maria’s poses, gestures and attitudes – as it turns out, Maria the robot is also, in her fleshly incarnation, a fashion model.54

Another Viktor & Rolf show from two years earlier replayed a different nineteenth-century anxiety. The ‘One Woman’ show of autumn 2004 opened with actress Tilda Swinton modelling to a voiceover of her own voice reading a tone poem that ended, ‘There is only one of you, only one.’ Gradually, as the show proceeded, it became apparent that all the models were styled to look exactly like the actress, with Swinton leading an army of fashion androids behind her. The conceit both raises the spectre of woman as multiple and usurps the clear distinction between original and copy – a presentation in which the original (*le modèle*) is an actress, and the copy is a model, or in fact a run of identical models.

The confusion between model and original is described by Leon Riotor in his 1900 book *Le Mannequin*, in which he argues that by the turn of the twentieth century living mannequins, with their uniform proportions, were increasingly being used as models – ie, moulds – for shop dummies. Riotor’s text suggests an uncanny reversal, in which the dummies that served as the prototypes for the first living models had been superseded by the living women who had become the pattern-cards for the dummies. As an allegory for the relationship of the model dress to the mass-produced garment being that of the original to the copy, Riotor’s doubling runs through fashion as both an industry and as a cultural form. The relationship is based on mimicry and distinction (the very inaccuracy of the copy testifies to the latter) and it is a relationship that is often haunted by an invisible anxiety – the anxiety of both matching up to the veracity of the original and differentiating oneself from it. At the centre of this turning commercial world stands the fashion model – be it a dress or a woman – a touchstone for fashion itself, with its dance of mimicry and multiplication, that puts into question the difference, if any, between copy and original in the world of goods.