Dressed to Impress

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The Anonymous Project

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Not Another Fashion Book !

By Lee Shulman

I have vivid memories of my parents getting ready for a special night out—a well-deserved escape from the everyday worries of middle-class suburban life: mortgage payments, extortionate school fees, and, let's face it, just a break from me and my brother. As a father, I get it. The meticulous care and selection process of an evening out was, in itself, a fabulous event. Especially for my mother, whose wardrobe was a color-coded rainbow of flowing gowns and stylish 1970s looks. Color was even bigger and bolder then. Clothes were thrown onto the bed and paired with shoes and accessories, but the selection was refined down to the perfect combination for the evening's theme. I remember observing my father slipping on his cufflinks and asking me to help thread them through—like a surgical operation. It was a spectacle to behold, watching my parents transform into elegant superheroes, ready to head out into the night for an adventure I could only imagine, likely more glamorous than the reality, only to find them again the next morning around the breakfast table—slightly disheveled in pajamas and nightgowns, unkempt hair, leaving no trace of an evening well spent—or maybe not.

Through the framework of *The Anonymous Project*, I am often asked about the main differences between these images and modern-day family photography. I don't think much has changed. We still celebrate and immortalize family moments in exactly the same way as we always have—family celebrations, holidays, and leisure time. This still remains the main preoccupation of most photography... except for one simple reflection: "Well, I guess people dressed better." I guess this is a subjective viewpoint, and maybe a little simplistic as an answer, but it remains true. Fashion is not just a marker of a period of time; it also says a lot about the social and economic values of that society. It is often dissociated from real life in magazines and books, but here we get to see the two together, and these family photos are very telling. They show a postwar society that wanted to celebrate life in all its facets. I am always amazed by the incredible colors and use of patterns and fabrics in what we mistakenly think of as a very monochrome period. Here the clothes shout: "Look at me!" and "Life is fabulous." I agree.

The 1950s and 1960s were periods of seismic change, not just in the world of politics or technology, but in the way people dressed, presented themselves, and viewed their roles in society. For many, the family photo album became a personal archive of social and economic standing, capturing moments that spoke volumes about aspirations, identity, and the influence of the larger cultural landscape—most notably, the world of fashion. Amateur family photography, taken in the comfort of home or during family outings, often acted as a mirror reflecting the postwar shifts in American society.

When you look through those photo albums, you see men in sharply cut suits and women in neatly pressed dresses, with children often decked out in the latest trends. But beyond the fabric and style choices, these images represent so much more—they reveal the ways in which fashion played a role in navigating a newly prosperous, yet rigidly structured, world. The 1950s, in particular, were a time of stability following the tumult of World War II. Families were eager to restore a sense of normality, and fashion became a tool for signaling this newfound order.

Family photography has always been a fascination—if not an obsession—of mine. It seems to present a truth in a medium that has often been manipulated and twisted to create false representations of our history and culture. The privileged relationship between the photographer and subject, whether it be a family member or friend, is often comforting and devoid of any real political intentions, yet it was, without a doubt, a middle-class white privilege to those who could afford it.

One stark and often uncomfortable truth about family photography in the 1950s and 1960s is the glaring absence of African Americans in these portrayals of middle-class life. The rise of consumer culture, coupled with the dominance of white-centric fashion and media, meant that African Americans were largely excluded from the aspirational narratives presented in family photography and advertising. This exclusion reflected broader societal inequalities, with African Americans facing systemic barriers not only in fashion but in every aspect of life—from segregation to limited access to the job market.

In mainstream fashion advertisements and cinema of the time, African Americans were largely invisible. When they were represented, it was often in stereotypical or marginalized roles. This exclusion was particularly painful, given the economic and social strides African American families were beginning to make in the postwar years. In the context of family photography, African Americans often had to create their own visual narratives—sometimes taking pride in their clothing choices and fashion sense in ways that allowed them to assert their identity despite the lack of mainstream representation. Their fashion, though often overlooked by popular culture, was no less significant, blending creativity with resilience. It is, however, cruelly missing from this narrative, highlighting this historical and political void that cannot be ignored.

I by no means pretend to be a fashion historian, and my interest is purely that of an admirer of the extraordinary fashions, creativity, and design of the clothes represented here. The more I leaf through these images, the more I notice the incredible detail and workmanship in the fashions worn. These are not just simple garments; they are genuine works of art. They seem more fantastic and extravagant than most clothes we see today on the streets of many fashion capitals of the world—expressions of carefree freedom and individuality that now seem almost lost in time.

This newfound freedom coincided with the rise of advertising and mass consumerism, especially in the American way of life, where clothes, cars, and even architecture were all about the future and reaching for the stars. They represented a promise of a brave new world, which we now know to be an illusion in the political landscape that followed. But maybe, for a moment, we were living our best lives. These fashions seem to be a celebration of the extraordinary advances in technology, new materials, and techniques that could bring what was once inaccessible into the home. I find the advertising of the time fascinating—not only for its aesthetics and my subjective love for 1950s and 1960s graphic design, but also because it marked the start of what would become an insatiable push to sell an aspirational lifestyle. Though problematic on many social and ethical levels, it also created its own language, with taglines that seem almost more fantastic than the clothes they were trying to sell: “You look better in LEE” and “Hello, Good Looking!”

When editing these images together, I have always made a conscious choice to leave them as they were taken—full framed, uncropped, warts and all—a real testament to the incredible talent of some of these anonymous family photographers. Some of the images, in my eyes, are works of art and surpass the often contrived ideas we have about amateur photography. Today, in this accessible world of smartphone photography and technological advances that make photography child’s play and disposable, it’s easy to undervalue these images. Yet these photos were taken with enormous care and love.