

The creatures of Prometheus

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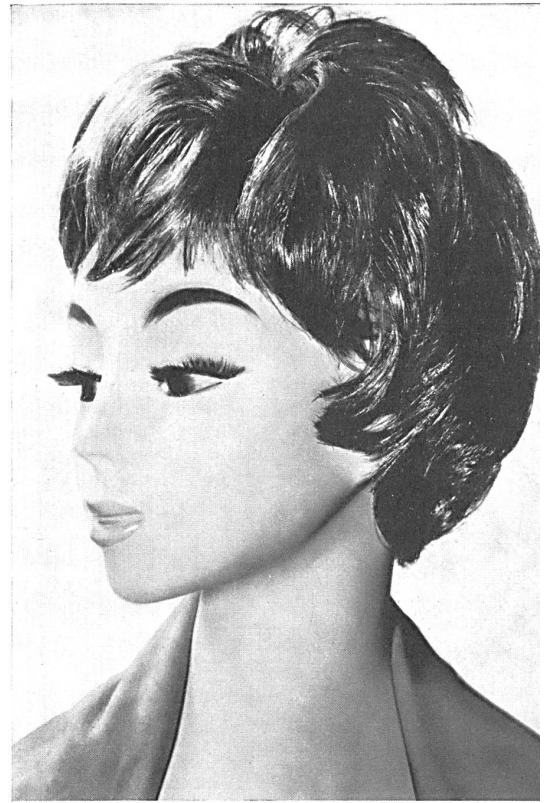
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The Creatures of Prometheus

Imagine the surprise of a visitor on first entering Schlappi Ltd.'s premises at Freienbach and finding himself surrounded by about fifty men and women all in a state of undress, and standing or propped motionless in every possible position, some of them even wrapped in large cellophane bags. He feels he must have wandered by mistake into the workshops of Prometheus, that inspired imitator of the gods. On venturing further into the premises, the impression is confirmed, for he passes between row upon row of shelves piled high with the heads, arms, legs and trunks of men, women and children, then goes through workshops where men and women — real ones of flesh and blood this time — are smoothing down the rough spots, filling in the cracks, painting, polishing, applying make-up, adding hair and assembling these creatures into delightful Eves straight from the garden of Eden or graceful water-sprites with green skin and flaxen hair.

Finally when the visitor is initiated into the manufacture of these creatures, he will find they owe more to polyester than to the sacred fire stolen from Zeus! In theory, the manufacturing process is quite simple. Plaster models are used for casting piece by piece the synthetic resin (polyester) moulds of the different parts of the body. These moulds are coated on the inside with a layer of pigmented polyester which will form the flesh of the finished mannequin; before this first layer has had time to harden, the worker covers it again from the inside with a piece of fibre-glass non-woven material cut to shape beforehand, which he then coats by brush with several layers of liquid polyester, until it has reached the required thickness. The two shell-like halves forming an arm, a leg or a head are put together, and after the join has been sealed with liquid polyester, the two parts are firmly secured together and placed in an oven to dry. Once dry, they are removed from the mould, which is then cleaned and coated with wax ready for use again. The parts removed from the mould have any rough

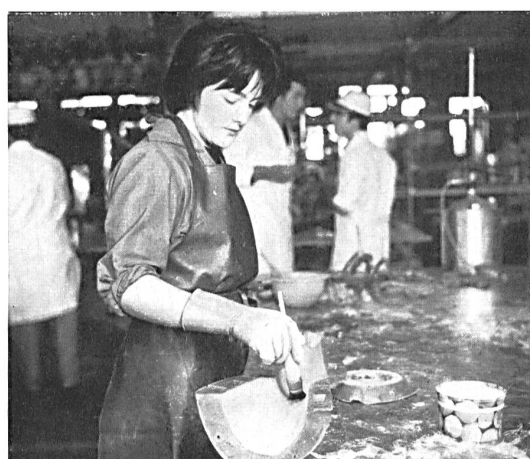


edges smoothed down, and cracks or hollows filled in; they are then polished, painted, made-up, touched up and assembled. Meanwhile, wig-makers have been creating attractive nylon wigs in fashionable hair styles, the whole being lacquered to keep its neat, well-groomed appearance. The wigs are mounted on polyester shells and fitted like a helmet over the mannequin's bald head; being interchangeable, they enable mannequins to keep up with the latest hair styles.

This then is the method of manufacture, and in theory it is fairly simple, provided the worker is skilled with his hands and takes the necessary care.

But the work of Prometheus is after all a work of creation, and in the manufacture of mannequins for window display it is on the ingenuity and artistry of the creator that depends, in the last analysis, not so much the quality of the products but the standing of the creations, the elegance, the chic, the ability of the mannequins to present the loveliest clothes, in a word, the « breeding » of the creatures !

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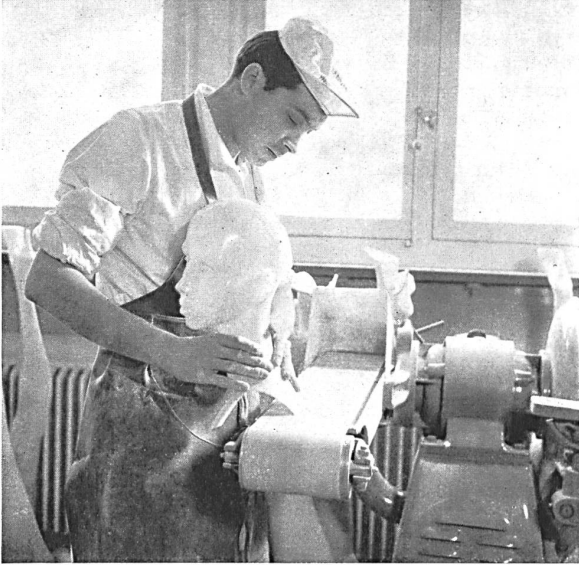


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And it is in this that lies the secret of commercial success. Mr. André Schläppi was not content to be an honest plodding follower. A very high ideal of the commercial role of window display made him feel that it was better to create the fashion than to follow it; even here however this does not mean that anything goes. First of all the fashion set by the couturiers, that is to say the general lines and proportions of the clothes that are to be presented on the mannequins, must be taken into account. The same applies to hairstyles. This being the case, the creator of mannequins for shop-window display who wishes to remain in the forefront of his field has to create each season a new human type incorporating — I almost said incarnating — in a highly idealized and stylized manner, the main features that go to make up the ideal type which fashion-conscious men and women try to imitate. Busts more prominent or less conspicuous, shoulders wider or narrower, greater or less emphasis on hips; the shape of the face and its expression are also important. And this is where the role of the creator, who is a real Prometheus in his way, comes in. He must know how — by combining various natural and purely « zoological » details, as one might say, but also modifying them slightly in one way or another — to « hold the mirror up to nature » and show her an image truer than her own, to create so to speak a breed of beings designed for life in the particular field of fashion. The best example perhaps of what we have been saying are the colour of the skin and the physiognomy. The general colouring of a mannequin does not depend upon an entirely arbitrary decision on the part of the creator. He neither imitates nature nor follows orders received from outside. He selects a dominant shade for the season, best suited to the new type of mannequin and its use, allowing himself to be guided solely by considerations inspired both by his artistic sense and by his commercial flair. As for the expression of the face, it must suggest youth, grace and gaiety without ever falling into vulgarity. I said suggest, for it is obvious that a display mannequin whose face is merely a faithful copy of that of a pretty woman would not look natural, just as a woman who resembled feature for feature the prettiest doll in the world would look artificial.

The creator of the mannequin, and here we mean Mr. Schläppi, must find new inspiration each year. Where does he get it from? It's in the air, all around him! He keeps abreast of the latest trends in fashion, clothing, hairstyles and footwear... He visits exhibitions of paintings, even abstract ones, he looks, listens, keeps informed



copies of the same series, in which there are frequently different poses, different heads, different hairstyles in various shades of hair and different types, fixed or jointed in several ways, depending on the clothes to be displayed.

Speed is necessary here, for all this work takes time and the mannequins have to be in the shop windows for the opening of each season and produced in large quantities only six months after their first conception.

The high artistic value attached by Mr. Schläppi to the role played by mannequins and the originality of his creations, the care taken in manufacture — in which some sixty people are employed — have placed his firm among the leaders in the field. Over 70 % of the firm's output of about 440 models a month is exported. His mannequins are found in places as far apart as Alaska and California, Oslo and London, Madrid and Berlin.

The collection is renewed twice a year, but the polyester mannequins, some with parts in foam rubber, are practically indestructible and can be used time and time again, especially as they can be freshened up and given new hairstyles in the factory as often as required. As a general rule however customers use them for 3 to 5 years. The average weight of a mannequin is 15 lb.

Naturally there are mannequins (men, women and children) of very different types, from the mannequin set rigidly in a given position, for the presentation of fabrics and swimsuits, to the fully articulated dolls for displays that tell a story, as well as various types with movable heads, arms, legs, hands and waists. Particularly luxurious specimens — that might almost be called «high fidelity» — are made with glass eyes which give an attractive look to the impish and graceful faces of the Schläppi mannequins.

René Cadet

of all manifestations of life, and in order to do so thinks nothing of visiting the main European capitals. Obviously, however, all his efforts would be in vain if he did not possess certain gifts: first of all the gift of observation, with delicate antennae for detecting the slightest variations in the human scene, then imagination, in order to be able to combine and dose the various elements of inspiration and recognize the possibilities they afford, artistic sense and moderation too, in order not to fall into excesses of interpretation, and finally commercial flair in order to know the chances of success of a new idea on the practical level.

Once the new type of mannequin has been conceived, the first stage in the production process is handed over to the sculptors, who first of all make small-scale models, then full-size clay models, the whole time under the watchful eye of the creator. Once the prototype in clay has been accepted, it is reproduced in plaster and it is only when the first casting has been made, duly made-up and bewigged that the model is passed for manufacture. This first casting serves as a model for all subsequent



1. The preparation of the moulds
2. Liquid polyester is brushed on to the inside of the mould
3. Oven drying the various parts still in their moulds
4. Partial view of the works
5. Polishing
6. Filling in the cracks and hollows
7. Making a wig
8. Make-up is applied