

When Clothes Don't Make the Man: Sartorial Style, Conspicuous Consumption, and Class Passing in Lothar Meggendorfer's Scenes in the Life of a Masher.

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Abstract

This essay examines Lothar Meggendorfer's once well-known pull-the-tab book *Scenes in the Life of a Masher* as a revealing example of the tremendous social anxiety surrounding the interplay of conspicuous consumption, sartorial style, and the social construction of masculinity as the nineteenth century drew to a

close. The 1894 text provides a rare glimpse in a book for young readers of the impact that consumer capitalism had not simply on the expected issues of social standing and class mobility but on the less expected one of male gender roles. In so doing, the moveable toy book records an important paradigm shift in the history of white Western masculinity, its relationship to retail commercialism, and its production of men's sartorial style

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Clothes are social phenomena. Changes in dress are social changes.

—Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits*, 4

Although few child or even adult readers today might recognize the name of Lothar Meggendorfer, he was a groundbreaking figure in the development of pop-up and movable books. Born in 1847 in Munich, the author-illustrator began his career in the late 1870s. In dozens of published texts that appeared over the course of nearly five decades, Meggendorfer's work astounded children and adults alike. As Ann Montanaro observed, Meggendorfer's "inventive use of paper and rivets for maximum real-life action brought special amusement to viewers who were captivated by the fact such an effect could be produced by printed paper" ("Lothar Meggendorfer, 1847–1925," par. 2). Meggendorfer coupled such paper kinesis with colorful, lively, and often intricate illustrations, earning "him recognition as a master of the art of movable books and was considered a high point of creative inventiveness in nineteenth-century book publishing" (Montanaro, "Lothar Meggendorfer, 1847–1925," par. 2).

Meggendorfer was as productive as he was pioneering. The Munich-based author-illustrator "went on to become one of the most prolific children's movable book authors of the nineteenth century, making more than 100 books" (Knipschild 8). His texts boasted equally strong commercial sales, especially from the 1880s to the 1900s ("Originality," par. 3). As Kristen Knipschild explains, "by 1902 publishers had produced and sold more than one million copies of Meggendorfer's books." Many of his titles went through multiple printings and were translated into a variety of languages, from French, Italian, and Swedish to Bohemian, Hungarian, and Russian (8).

For these reasons, Meggendorfer's importance is widely recognized by book historians today. In 1975, marking the rough centennial of his first text, *The*

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