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'Double Click' Review: A Shared Eye for Fashion

The fashion world opened up new roles for women in the 1940s. The McLaughlin twins picked up their cameras and got to work.

By *Moira Hodgson*

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Frances and Kathryn McLaughlin. PHOTO: ESTATE OF JAMES ABBE JR.

In March 1940, as growing conflict took hold in Europe, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia announced that he wanted New York to become the fashion capital of the world. American clothes, he told a gathering of the industry's elite, should be the antithesis of extravagant Parisian haute couture. They should be designed for the active lives of American women, those who took buses and subways, who had to "stride out" in communities across the country.

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Double Click: Twin Photographers in the Golden Age of Magazines

By Carol Kino

Scribner

428 pages

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Three months later, the Nazis strode into Paris, and for the duration of the war the great couture houses limped along, their access to international markets curtailed. Back in the U.S., clothing retailers were changing their focus to a hungry youth market that reflected the same energy La Guardia had invoked: the career girl in the cities and the college girl everywhere else. Fashion magazines directed her way included *College Bazaar*, *Charm*, *Glamour* and the best-selling *Mademoiselle*.

The identical twins Frances and Kathryn McLaughlin were fashion photographers whose careers blossomed during this time of unprecedented opportunity for women. In "Double Click," the journalist Carol Kino has interwoven a biography of the McLaughlins with an authoritative, detailed history of fashion, the art world and photography in midcentury New York. Photography replaced "etchings, watercolors, and woodcuts as the snappiest and most up-to-date way to illustrate anything, whether it was a newspaper story, a work of fiction, or a fashion spread." The camera, she writes, was "a magic carpet, out of the Depression into the future." It would be a godsend for the twins.

Known as Franny and Fuffy, nicknames that stuck throughout their lives, the twins were born two months premature in Brooklyn in September 1919. Ms. Kino writes that "when two arrived instead of one, it came as a massive shock." Their father, a fire insurance underwriter, died of the flu five months later, and the girls were raised in Wallingford, Conn., by their mother, Kitty, a staunch Roman Catholic who never remarried. Ms. Kino writes that she was fiercely protective of the girls, fussy about hygiene and neatness, dressing them like dolls in showy, perfectly matched clothes. They grew up to be beautiful, popular and smart, graduating at the top of their class.

An aunt set them on the road to their careers when she gave them a camera, an expensive twin-lens reflex model called a Voigtländer Brillant, as a graduation present. "Without knowing it," Ms. Kino writes, "Aunt Anna had opened the door to their future." (A box brownie, although much in vogue at the time, might not have had the same effect.) In 1938 in their second year at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, which had a fully equipped photo lab, they decided to become professional photographers.

In 1943 Franny was hired as staff photographer for Condé Nast Photo Studios. *Vogue's* art director, Alexander Liberman, had been particularly impressed with the spontaneity of her work. Ms. Kino writes that her "subjects never seemed to pose; instead she seems to happen upon them in passing, as they walk around City Hall or Chinatown or stare down the subway tracks for a train." She was the sole woman alongside such stars as Irving Penn (with whom she went out for a while) and André Kertész, and soon she found herself busy with assignments.

When Franny was hired, Fuffy was at *Vogue*, working for Toni Frissell, who became a celebrated war photographer. Devastated by the idea of her twin advancing while she remained a mere assistant, she decided to quit the job and set up on her own. She moved into the studio of a friend, James Abbe, a well-known photographer mainly of movie stars and celebrities such as Vivien Leigh and Ingrid Bergman. Her work ranged from artful surrealist compositions to shots of models lounging by swimming pools or walking barefoot on the beach. Ms. Kino writes that in her portraits she sometimes adopted the style of Dutch masters, shortening the exposure so that the model's features "seemed to glow in a pool of darkness." Her pictures also often conveyed the idea of twins: similar-looking models posed so that one seemed to imitate the other.

The phenomenon of identical twins has long been a subject of curiosity, but Ms. Kino doesn't delve very deeply into the McLaughlins' psychology. How competitive were they? It's hard to say. They developed an odd friendship with Abbe, who squired them both around town. They went skiing together and spent weekends at his seaside house in Montauk. Since they were still dressing alike, he had shirts and jackets made for himself to match their clothes. "I wanted to be in on the act," he said. The twins vied for Abbe's attention, and when he was away both wrote him letters, addressing him, bizarrely, as "Daddy."

Both twins married photographers. After getting a Nevada divorce in 1946, Abbe married Fuffy. (He did so on the advice of his shrink, who told him he had to make up his mind once and for all which twin he wanted. He was still pondering, years later, when he was in his 60s.) In 1948 Franny married Leslie Gill, also a renowned photographer, one of the first to experiment with color film, who created innovative, surrealist still-life photographs for *Harper's Bazaar*. She continued to work for *Vogue*, where, Ms. Kino writes, she produced a dazzling cover for the launch of Dior-New York that showed a woman turning from a mirror to the camera, "revealing that the underside of her sleek black hat is bursting with red carnations."

These ambitious women picked careers in photography at an auspicious time, when doors for women in the field were open in a way they had never been before. That they were identical twins worked in their favor. Ms. Kino writes: "Fuffy often waxed eloquent about the luck that came with having been born a twin, while Franny typically stayed silent or contradicted her." But one day in a 1976 interview, they changed positions. "It's just hard work," Fuffy said about their joint success, to which Franny responded: "It's sort of magic."

Ms. Hodgson is the author of "It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time: My Adventures in Life and Food."

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