

Museums and the Making of Textile Histories: Past, present and future

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Q1 *Do such popular exhibitions represent an innovative approach to textile history, or effectively introduce ideas about the crafting or meanings of textiles, or might recent smaller-scale, lower-budget exhibitions be more indicative of new ideas in this field? Might the content of the latter be explored effectively on a grander scale?*

The rise of the fashion 'block-buster' poses both opportunity and some risk for the scope and ambition of textiles in the museums and related scholarship. On the one hand, the presence of fashion in the museum has probably never been so prominent since the tenure of Diana Vreeland at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in the 1970s. It should be noted that many of her exhibits were considered historically inaccurate at the time, despite their great appeal. The public has come to expect the spectacular, the outré and generally the contemporary in their museum going. All around the world there is a rise of interest in contemporary practice, at the same time as the markets for antiques declines and the teaching of history is threatened. There is an opportunity here to use the lure of the contemporary to explain aspects of the past. This is not to suggest that fashion exhibitions about the historical past have not been substantial and effective (the recent major collaborative exhibition *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity*, 2013, being a fine example).

The most common format preferred by publics and museum-marketing departments alike is the twenty to twenty-first century single author (haute couture), rather than the thematic exhibition; people enjoy exhibitions about a singular named designer as they recognise the brand as a part of everyday life – and the branding is useful for the marketing department. This poses certain problems and challenges, as the model of haute couture tends to be about the finished garment, although the act of making and the heritage of artisanal skill can also be explained to the public through textile samples, toiles, sketches, or even lavish digital recreation of pattern making as seen in the Charles James exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The production of clothing generated from a designer's 'vision' or intention also marks something distinctive that raises issues of the quest for artistic rights and copyright within the appearance industries. There is a great opportunity to link the artisanal — embroidery, embellishment, textile experimentation and technology and so forth — with moral, ethical and social topics of interest to a new generation of viewers and consumers — and the so called contemporary 'craftivism', ethical fashion and 'upcycling'. The rise of vintage clothing, which is now reproduced from new materials to simulate the old, plays a role here in connecting everyday social practices with the role that museums play as a part of leisure and tourism industries, as well as learning for some. As popular culture has shaped contemporary art since the 1960s, making fashion the very centre of its ethos, the 'mechanism' of fashion is ever stronger in contemporary life. However, it is often fashion as 'image' rather than fabricated artefact hand-made, part-crafted or made industrially - from textiles - that is at the forefront.

How have museum publications impacted on the writing of textile history/ies in your disciplinary field? Might their content be enhanced to provide greater theoretical or practical stimulus? Do any museum publications reveal, in a particularly potent way for diverse audiences, current directions in academic history?

Clothing is both a material covering and an enclosure for the body that in the west is generally constructed through draping or cutting cloth, or weaving or knitting it to shape. The structure of European dress is also bound up with abstract forms of conduct and beauty and textiles play a most significant role in promulgating and reformulating aesthetics. The aesthetic and phenomenological dimension of clothing moving in

space is also partly due to the possibilities and or restraints offered by textiles. Cloth and clothing therefore is central to human experience and deserves to be studied in these abstract terms as well as for its technical virtuosity, stylistic advance and influences, etc.

High quality museum catalogues are indispensable for fashion studies. Yet they are under-represented as core reading material for such undergraduates. For 18th century dress, museum catalogues and other publications undoubtedly have helped reshape the field from the 1980s. Facsimile formats – for example, the high quality photography in the V&A ‘Barbara Johnson’ album, published in 1987 (a provincial English woman’s extra-illustrated notebook regarding most of her life’s fashion purchases from 1746-1823, about 120 samples of which 54 are silk, 37 cotton and other linen and other mixes) **IMAGE HERE** <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O140029/album-unknown/> – have been powerful aids in understanding the visual power and materiality of textile culture. The V&A ‘details’ books, although primarily pictorial, opened up a further world of materiality to further explore. The fact that such texts often lack explanatory essays has resulted in them being disregarded by some academics as teaching tools.

Tensions continue to exist between the technical/scientific and social/aesthetic priorities of textile culture. Some dealers, too, are very important – consider the well researched and illustrated annual catalogues of a private dealer such as Titi Halle/Cora Ginsburg, New York (see <http://coraginsburg.com/gallery.htm>). Students require training in how to access such texts as well as long analytical essays. There is something of a schism between theoretical writing on dress (generally not illustrated) and rich illustrated histories – often furnished by the museum sector alongside their exhibition programmes. The nature of contemporary publishing is of relevance here – black and white reproductions in books on dress, where colour is generally so significant - are bizarre in an age of instagram for the young. However, high quality colour printing remains an expense and often it is the museum or a fine research institute such as the Abegg Stiftung that is

expected to undertake such productions. Over the years there have been a number of museum publications that provide an exemplary mixture of contextual analysis as well as the focus required in building an exhibition around artefacts – an exhibition is not a book on a wall. Edgar Munhall’s fine work at the Frick Museum resulted, for example, in the *Butterfly and the Bat*, a brilliant work of historical recovery about the Comte de Montesquiou, and all focussed on one painting by Whistler of a man dressed in black evening wear.¹ **IMAGE HERE FROM FRICK** In the book that accompanied an exhibition, everything from fur to the fine woollen of suits for day and evening was explored, including via contemporary advertising for some of the archaic products such as chinchilla.

¹ Munhall, Edgar, *Whistler and Montesquiou: The Butterfly and the Bat*, New York and Paris, Frick Collection/Flammarion, 1995

In terms of current textile production – art, craft, design, science and technology – what should be the priorities for the current generation of curators, and in what type of museum context? Are any museums demonstrating a particularly innovative approach to collecting for the future?

Museums – their storerooms now full of artefacts – are taking stock and assessing the areas in which they should collect. Museums make their own strategies, working generally from an existing strength or an opportunity. Few now attempt to be encyclopedic and they are aware what the other is doing. New experimental textiles pose all manner of conservation challenges as well as the judgements required in assessing what will be significant in the future for understanding the past. 3 and 4 D printing are current tools of practice that museums have begun to collect. Dr Alexandra Palmer at the Royal Ontario Museum has taken a particular approach to building the collection there. The ROM has a fine collection of printed textiles that was built up from the late 19th century. As well as building up the collection in historical areas where the museum already possesses depth – she has acquired a significant group of men’s banyans that illuminate their connections with the non-western material in the collection, building on previous curators’ interest in design innovation, cut and fit. She also has a collecting policy to acquire men’s and women’s fashion from the wardrobes of contemporary citizens. Some of the men are black, or gay/queer, some of the women are professional and or literary figures etc, and this creates an important opportunity to further consider how dress is a tool in creating a social identity. Known by some as ‘wardrobe studies’, here the focus is on provenance and the ‘object biographies’ (to use Appadurai’s term) that become possible when a great deal is known regarding the identity of a wearer and how they actually wore garments, as opposed to how they looked on a runway or in advertising. In this way Palmer has built up collections of everything from Versace silk shirts – emblematic of 1980s-early 1990s resort wear for the well-to-do – to Japanese high fashion by designers such as Issey Miyake and Comme des garçons, as well as Martin

Margiela. The reticence of certain couture houses in permitting any reproduction of their clothes made in multiples of under 50 poses particular challenges for research publication. Palmer has also engaged with dress and disability in a thoughtful manner, an area in which a doctoral thesis has also been written by Elizabeth Heyman at the University of Technology, Sydney. Palmer's award winning exhibition was called *Fashion Follows Form: designs for sitting*.

Museum curators both influence and are influenced by new developments in the field of dress, textile and fashion studies that take place amidst the humanities, social and technological sciences generally. Economic history from the post-war period argued that fashion, and the textiles that make fashions possible, represent an under-studied aspect of both important cultural endeavour and enormous financial investment from family units and also states in the past. The group around the Pasold Institute, for example, asked, why does fashion not appear within standard histories and social histories as a matter of course? They set out to change this state of affairs and now celebrate an important anniversary of fifty years of research and publishing, see

<http://www.pasold.co.uk/index.php/the-news>

Roland Barthes' influential concept of the 'fashion system' (from 1968) privileged the discursive and representational registers over materiality. The latter tended to be viewed by some as the province of the textile scientist, on the academic end of the spectrum, or the connoisseur on the other. In somewhat of an irony, at precisely the same time as Barthes' study of fashion, there arose a counter-culture of dressing and collecting, conducted largely by self-taught amateurs. The two 'polarities' are not connected at the moment as they are seen as antithetical by most academics.

In North America, continental Europe, the UK and Australia, literary theory, theatre and performance studies have yielded influential models of reading fashion as a cultural practice and as an embodied experience. Significant research about fashion also takes

place around the world within sociology, urban geography, material culture, theories of memory, and labour history. All of these approaches have seen uptake in museums, including the important dimension of textile production, the source of profits for some and misery for others. As more and more strain is placed on our poor planet, more people also ask questions about the ethics of fashion consumption. Fashion is often associated with rampant consumption, but fashion has also been identified as a powerful agent and vector of effecting social change. Ideas about ethical behavior can be integrated in textile design and fashion clothing if the designers of the future have the will. Museums have an important role to play in creatively suggesting such possibilities, as in the Museum of Modern Art's recent exhibition curated by Paola Antonelli, *This is for Everyone – Design for the Common Good* – in which the 4-D design by Jessica Rosenkrantz and Jesse Louis-Rosenberg was included. Being very clear about why 'fashion matters' from a multi-faceted perspective – cultural, social, ethical, practice-based and material – is important for its dignity as a part of any humanist agenda and its socio-cultural development in our own time.

Do the objects in museums actually lend themselves to this kind of physical engagement, and if so, how might museums cater for such engagement without risking the survival of the collections under their stewardship, whilst contributing to current fashions in scholarship around the haptic and emotional qualities of textiles, as well as continuing a long-established tradition in developing connoisseurship?

All exhibitions are ephemeral multi-sensory experiences and without a durable record such as a catalogue or online presence, their effect and impact remains so - ephemeral. This is a particular issue with decorative arts, fashion and textile exhibits as many of the artefacts exhibited do not already exist in other forms of reproduction, to an extent not entertained by painting, sculpture, etc. the forms that are better valorized by both the marketplace and existing museum systems. Digital presentations can play an important role in foregrounding the haptic and emotional qualities of artefacts – whether it be in the ability to look at all the pages of an album, or to expand the details of thread or embroidery – but the downside of a digital presence is that scale is lost, as well as relative hues etc. unless the project is extremely well managed. Digital work in the museum takes many times as long as conventional work and is rarely supported by appropriate staffing levels; many museums are shedding staff and eroding the integrity of curators' voices as principal actors in the museum system (consider also the absurd idea of closing the highly significant *Musée des tissus* in Lyon at the moment). There is great potential for cross-disciplinary possibilities to be explored by many museums at the moment, as well as exploring the affective and socio-cultural nature of textile culture. These include gift exchange, the idea of textile practice as a type of woman's voice, and the relationship of textile to broader print culture and the history of ideas.

Fashion can be conceptualised as a form of knowledge: one requires knowledge of what is in fashion to be a participant. Such knowledge can be derived from a great many sources. The rise of the intensity of

participation in fashion over the course of the eighteenth century is inexorably tied to the world of print. Print is not confined to printed books, engravings and the like, but an 'expanded field' of print, including printed textiles, ceramics and glass painted and modelled after ceramics, and even inlaid furniture. Print was never passive, but was transformed in creative acts of collecting, recombination, being coloured, translated into new formats as 'dressed prints' with the addition of textiles and other media. The translation across media permitted a very wide circulation of fashion meanings, including possible distortions and creative re-combinations. This is not simply a matter of fashion ideas and models in a sense of a Barthesian sign system. Fashion began a process of representation that was more commercialised, marked early in the 18th century by the development of the printed almanac and at mid-century by the everyday pocket-book and a burgeoning range of periodical publications. These were concrete actions in which scale, texture, colour and the variety of the artefacts emphasised the multi-faceted nature of fashion information.

Consider one example. We can extend the relationship of textiles and printed forms more broadly still, even to luxury furniture. A mechanical table by Jean-Fançois Oeben circa 1760 in the collection of the Musée Cognacq-Jay (Paris) was inlaid to directly infer an Indian printed chintz textile. **IMAGE** What a statement of fashionability, a mechanical table that looked like the clothes one was wearing. The woods were once brightly coloured before fading. Eighteenth century chintz has been re-interpreted by Beverly Lemire and Giorgio Riello as a form of information or print culture that could be 'read' and therefore contributed to the burgeoning impacts of fashion.² The very effect of *indienne*, in which dark tones frequently outline petals and stems, was highly valued as a fashion in itself.

² Beverly Lemire and Giorgio Riello, 'East & West: Textiles and Fashion in Early Modern Europe', *Journal of Social History*, 41/4, pp. 887-916.

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<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O141142/cape-unknown/> As the trade in such cottons was banned from 1686-1759 (in England from 1701), such a table was a very modish innovation. Dress is not just a material matter of cutting and forming something derived generally from textiles, but also a cultural idea and a social process. And textiles remain the basis of most clothing.