

Dressing Ghosts: Museum Exhibitions of Historical Fashion in Britain and North America

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Abstract

By critically analyzing trends in museum fashion exhibition practice over the past century, this thesis defines and describes the varied representations of historical fashion within museum exhibitions in Britain and North America. Evidence collected through archival research on past exhibitions at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Bath Fashion Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Brooklyn Museum, the Royal Ontario Museum, and the McCord Museum, and supplemented by media reports, academic reviews, as well as secondary theoretical literature, suggests that the discourses of historical fashion exhibitions have been heavily influenced by the anxieties and values placed upon fashion more generally. The discipline of fashion curation is deeply rooted in and dependent upon much earlier display practices in museums, galleries, and shops. The interplay between personal and world-historical narratives in exhibitions, the celebration of consumerism and corporate brand identity, as well as claims to aesthetic universality and quality, continued to surface across historical fashion exhibitions in all the institutions studied over the period 1913 to the present. Moreover, historical fashion, as it has been displayed in the case study institutions, also reflects the function of the museum institution itself, especially its visual marking of time and social contexts.

This thesis contributes to a growing literature on the history of museums and on fashion curation and provides a historical framework for exhibitions of historical fashion to both disciplines. The worksheet generated during data-gathering provides an objective vocabulary for evaluating the physical and intellectual content of a historical fashion exhibition, and is a potentially useful tool for future researchers. Furthermore, as this dissertation investigates the role of display as a means of communication about material culture, it provides new and original insights into this important aspect of museum practice and therefore, also contributes to theoretical debates within the larger field of cultural heritage.

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Introduction and Methodology

Because museum spectatorship insisted then and continues to insist now on the viewing body's presence at the scene of display, in one sense it tells a truth that recording finds impossible to convey.
(Sandberg 2003: 273)

This thesis defines and describes the varied representations of historical fashion within museum exhibitions in Britain and North America by critically analyzing trends in museum fashion exhibition practice over the past century. The narrative traces the origins of these in the nineteenth century, and follows their manifestations in museum gallery displays from 1913 up to the present day. In so doing, it contributes to a growing body of academic writing on the history of museums and on fashion curation, and provides a historical framework for exhibitions of historical fashion to both disciplines. Moreover, as this thesis more generally investigates the role of display as a means of communication about material culture, it provides new and original insights into this important aspect of museum practice and therefore, also contributes to theoretical debates within the larger field of cultural heritage.

Project Justification and Methodology

The last decade has seen the growing popularity and marketability of fashion as a cultural product and a concurrent rise in its public visibility. Venues for its dissemination have mushroomed (Breward 2003: 12-14) in fashion publications (periodicals, novels, and scholarly texts), television broadcasts, films and documentaries, blogs and websites, higher education degree programs, international fashion weeks, academic and professional interdisciplinary conferences, and also

museum exhibitions. The latter range from amateur involvement to established efforts, as some collections are privately musealised as part of a corporate brand image strategy (Yves St Laurent, Valentino) and even public museums increasingly feature non-professional curators for fashion exhibitions (Diana Vreeland, Hamish Bowles, Christian Lacroix). There is no doubt that even historical fashion in the museum, though withdrawn from the commodity market, nevertheless retains a connection to the broader economic forces of the fashion industry at large (McNeil 2008; see also chapter 4).

Yet fashion in the museum, as such, is a relatively recent newcomer to the exhibition halls of great public museums (Steele 2008). The year 2012 marks the 100th anniversary of the first instance of a major public museum in the English-speaking world putting on a display of historical fashion (explicitly defined as such, not as textile, costume, or dress: see chapter 1 for a discussion of the definition of fashion). It first gained independent recognition of its status as a museum-worthy object in England and America in 1912 (Petrov 2008), and the greatest growth of fashion history collections in museums across Britain and North America occurred between the 1930s and 1960s (Taylor 2004). Along the way, fashion's inherent conventions have come up against better-established museum conventions of display and discussion, not always to fashion's benefit.

The display of historical fashion is not uninformed or insignificant. It does not merely reflect the technical possibilities, museal conventions, and aesthetic preferences of any given period; neither is it only a chance product of the combination of the resources of the museum and the embodiment of the subjective personal visions of the

curatorial and design teams responsible for the exhibit. Far from being passively formed, it is a result of an active series of choices that have at their core particular assumptions about the role of historical dress in culture, then and now; moreover, this has wide-reaching consequences and significance. It is not only the experience and opinion of museum visitors, which are affected. The practice of other museums changes in a cycle of emulation and visual echo; fashion history and theory as they written are also dependent on what the authors have seen. When Elizabeth Wilson, a pioneer of contemporary fashion theory, wrote about museum displays of dress being eerie, uncanny, and dead, she was referring to her experiences at the V&A's costume court (2010: 2); the contention colours her book *Adorned in Dreams*, first published in 1985, and many works on the topic published since. With its evidently fundamental influence on academic literature, therefore, documenting the actual practices, aims and outcomes of fashion curation, and within that more specifically, of historical fashion, is important. The research presented in this thesis is an overview of the possibilities for exhibitions of historical fashion as they have been realized over the last century; furthermore, it highlights the multiple ways in which the representations of fashion within the museum have also engaged with wider discourses within popular culture and academic writing on fashion's role in society and culture more generally.

For the purposes of this thesis, historical fashion is defined as an antonym of contemporary fashion. Because 'contemporary' is a moving target, relative to the age of the subject under discussion¹, 'historical' is here taken to mean: not the work of

¹ Pannabecker (1997) discusses at length the psychological perception of discontinuity between the present and past of fashion.

designers living or working at the time under discussion, nor garments in active circulation in the wardrobes of consumers of fashion in the period being considered. (The latter is a more problematic definition as individuals may consciously choose to wear anachronistic or oppositional styles contrary to dominant trends, and is therefore a secondary characterization.) For example, for 1913, the beginning of the period described in this thesis, ‘historical fashion’ might include dresses produced by couturier Charles Frederick Worth (d. 1895) but not those designed by his son, Jean-Phillippe Worth, who took over the business and ran it until his own death in 1926. However, from the perspective of today, all these as well as the clothes produced under the aegis of the last scion of the Worth clan, Jean-Charles, until his retirement in 1952, would qualify as examples of historical fashion. The brand currently operates under a different designer, producing their signature perfume, as well as lingerie, couture, and prêt-a-porter lines, but these would not fall under the definition used in this thesis and therefore, if included in a museum fashion exhibition, would be categorized as contemporary fashion. (For more on fashion and obsolescence, see Chapters 4 and 7.)

This dissertation seeks to empirically trace the ways in which historical fashion has been represented in British and North American museums over the last century, teasing out the correspondences between varied modes of visual display, didactic textual content, and implicit objectives of past exhibitions. The evidence for these is drawn from exhibitions created by six institutions chosen for their global importance in the field of fashion history collecting, and their representativeness of a type of disciplinary museum (art, social history, etc; see below). It was decided to concentrate research efforts in English-speaking institutions, as historically, the lack of a native

folk costume in England has meant that exhibitions on dress have focused on clothing produced within the fashion system (see Chapter 1); fashion-related discourses within these museums have therefore traditionally related the study of historical dress to sociology, the arts, history, and commerce (see Chapters 1, 3, 4, and 5), rather than being mixed with ethnography or anthropology, as in continental Europe (Taylor 2002; 2004). It was therefore easier to distil the sources for particular curatorial approaches out of the diffuse range of secondary literature.

Each institution has held many exhibitions, and so, rather than being an exhaustive survey, the analysis discusses those exhibitions that could be fruitfully compared with others due to their similarity in scope and content, focusing on similar time periods or aesthetic themes. As these have been discovered not to have been deeply innovative, but instead commonly reproduced across most museum exhibitions of historical fashion (including those produced by institutions not studied in this research), it can be confidently asserted that similar patterns of approach and development will be found in institutions elsewhere, and that the conclusions drawn in this thesis are applicable more widely across exhibitions of historical fashion in the English-speaking world, at least.

In Britain, I focused on the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), a national museum of decorative art, and home of (chronologically) the second major public collection of costume in the country (after the Museum of London, see above), but currently the most important museum collecting and exhibiting fashion in Britain. I have also chosen to examine the history of the Fashion Museum in Bath (known as the Costume Museum prior to 2007), founded by Doris Langley Moore, as one among several

museums devoted solely to fashion and based around the collection of a single individual. Both of these institutions originated various modes of dress display, which were influential on fashion curatorial practice both in Britain as well as in North America. The United States is represented by the history of the Brooklyn Museum's fashion collection, as it was displayed in a municipal museum of art, design, and social history, before it was dispersed, and the bulk acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan. Likewise, I have looked at the practice of fashion curation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (also referred to as the Met) before and after its incorporation of the previously-independent Museum of Costume Art, which is now known as the Costume Institute. The ties between these two institutions, as well as their similarities and differences to British museum practice made them appropriate case study choices. The Canadian examples were the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), a major provincial museum with a long history, and the McCord Museum, a municipal social history museum in Montreal; both collections reflect the economic status of the cities where they are housed; they are also the largest public collections of costume in Canada. Culturally situated between America and Britain, Canadian museums formed an important part of the comparative analytical strategy for this research. Pertinent information on the case study institutions is summarized in a comparative chart (**Appendix 1**). For practical reasons, it was not possible to examine practice in other English-speaking countries, such as Australia.

While the selection of case studies cannot claim to be comprehensive, it is far from arbitrary. The research examines some of the most visible and influential museums in Britain and North America currently collecting and exhibiting historical fashion. The analysis is representative of museum practice at large, as it demonstrates a shared

preoccupation with particular themes in fashion history, likely to also have been shared by other museums not covered by this research. Semiotically-speaking, this is to be expected, as there are particular visual tropes and periods of historical interest that culture selects in its discourse across media (Barthes 1972), the museum being one of the many forums for their discussion and dissemination (Henning 2006). Throughout the dissertation, the inter-relationships between the museal and other incarnations of such tropes are highlighted.

The methodology of data-gathering followed several parameters to ensure consistency. Travel to the case study museum institutions listed above was necessary to examine archival material, such as installation photographs and object lists. This material was combined in analysis with published accounts of exhibitions (exhibition reviews and catalogues, for example) in order to reconstruct the physical arrangement and the intended as well as implied discursive messages of past displays. Anticipating potential gaps in the archival material, it was felt that with such a disparate set of case studies, some rigour in data-gathering could be maintained by asking a set of standard questions of the material to draw out as complete picture of past displays as possible before any further analysis could take place. A form (**Appendix 2**), with relatively objective fields was compiled, drawn heavily from the description of exhibitionary components presented by Belcher (1991), and supplemented by others specific to the field of study (mannequins, for example) and nature of the inquiry (recording the scope of archival material). This worksheet was completed for each exhibition examined and, where possible, photographs and photocopies of relevant material were made for further examination.

The analysis of the data, which makes up the bulk of this thesis, focuses on how the mechanics of display (mannequins, props and settings) influences the informational content of exhibitions by re-presenting historical fashion. These ephemeral traces of assemblages, which are no longer intact, are compared to critical and theoretical literature to provide a new evaluation of the relationship of display to wider cultural narratives. Fashion falls between disciplinary boundaries: sometimes classed as a decorative art, occasionally slotted into social history, or displayed as an anomaly in and of itself, it does not, therefore, draw on any single set of display norms conventional to its subject class. It has been necessary to consider what Styles has called ‘the conceptual diversity of current historical scholarship’ (1998: 388). As this dissertation will show, the affiliation of fashion with any given discipline has had important repercussions for its potential intellectual content, but also for the visual communication of that content. The very act of harnessing fashion to any disciplinary discourse has implications for what it is made to say; equally, the visual means by which it is made to say it. Parallel critical approaches are therefore necessary, and throughout this dissertation, they include: museological theory on exhibition display and history; historiography; body theory; semiology; fashion studies; materiality and phenomenology; and visual representation. I agree with the museum educator Cheryl Meszaros when she says that ‘interpretation is the participation in the occurrence of a tradition where the individual is not in complete control of what strikes it as sense’ (Meszaros 2007: 18); what this thesis essentially attempts to achieve is a hermeneutical analysis of the museum interpretation of historical fashion that addresses some of these traditions.

It became clear at an early stage of the research that the development of historical fashion exhibitions did not follow a neat evolutionary trajectory that showed the development of one form into another. Rather, it was evident that multiple display strategies coexisted simultaneously, sometimes within a single exhibition, and that though preferences for these waxed and waned, their use was not always in keeping with the dictums of exhibition theoreticians. Therefore, the issue of why any given display mode was used became important, and for this reason, the discussion in the thesis is divided into thematic chapters which compare and contrast exhibitions from different museums and decades.

Scope and Content

This thesis is roughly divided into two parts: the first is an extended literature review, while the second addresses the gaps in the literature with results from the research undertaken. Current understandings of disciplinary-specific content that might be implicit in any representation of fashion history in a museum are surveyed in chapters 1 through 3. As this research is at the interface of two academic disciplines – dress history and museum studies – the three chapters that begin the dissertation review the relevant literature of both fields. Chapter 1 seeks to define fashion and reviews critical writing about its functions. The following chapter surveys the literature on museum exhibitions as interpretive media. The third chapter draws the two together in a summary of the debates about fashion exhibitions in museums to the present day, concluding that, while the literature is growing, no previous work has satisfactorily analyzed historical fashion exhibitions in museums in a sustained and evidenced manner.

The second half of the dissertation is divided into thematic chapters (4 through 7), which compare and contrast exhibitions across the case study institutions over the last century. The chapters are divided into themes - commerce, art, embodiment, and history – which can be considered as prisms through which one can view the development and deployment of museum conventions utilized within exhibitions of fashion history. These have arisen out of the archival material studied. Each theme acts as an over-arching concept for the related means by which historical fashion has been contextualized in exhibitions through visual symbolism and metaphor.

Broadly speaking, chapters 4 and 5 describe physical conventions, while chapters 6 and 7 address the wider intellectual concerns that have been materialized within fashion exhibitions. Each chapter begins with a contextualized historical or theoretical survey of the origins for the particular representation of historical fashion under analysis, and utilizes contemporary museological theory to critique its exhibitionary presentation. In each case, the analysis of the exhibitionary metaphor's (e.g.: fashion as art) form and content suggests its precedents, defines its characteristics, and, where possible, infers its effects. In addition to drawing conclusions about how this affects the discourse of fashion, the conventions of the museum institution itself are also highlighted. The text is illustrated throughout with material from museum archives and contemporary periodical sources. The conclusion summarizes these findings, lists the limitations of the thesis, and discusses directions for further research.

Writing Exhibition History: An Overview

The analysis of historical exhibitions presents certain methodological challenges.

There are many theoretical perspectives from which writers have analyzed

contemporary exhibitions (see Chapter 2), and these do provide broad categories of museum functions to look for in historical material: the socio-political role of the museum, its educational and communicative roles, as well as the sensory, material and aesthetic experiences of its visitors are all vital areas for research and evaluation. For example, research advocating for increased visitor meaning-making and participation has usefully defined those aspects of museum exhibitions which have to do with communication and learning, and there is a variety of literature examining the range and depth of visitors' educational and aesthetic experiences within the museum (e.g.: Falk and Dierking 1992). The museum's meeting of its educational and social goals can be evaluated using qualitative and quantitative means: surveys and questionnaires. Aesthetic and emotional engagement, much less easy to quantify, has been analyzed using narrative techniques, and underpinned by theories of phenomenology (e.g.: Csíkszentmihályi and Robinson 1990; Wood and Latham 2009). Yet all these analyses depend on the reactions of present audiences willing to share their experience with researchers. Doing a history of past exhibition displays from this perspective is difficult as it is impossible to observe or interview visitors to gauge the success or failure of the museum's modes of communication – their intellectual and sensory experiences are no longer available for direct analysis².

Moreover, even if it were possible to capture these past experiences, the methodology of analyzing museum exhibitions is overwhelmingly biased towards one type of experience: the visual. While commercial fashion environments are possessed of materiality and facilitate particular sensory responses, exhibition environments are

² However, as museum interpretation specialist Cheryl Meszaros (2007) has pointed out, the hermeneutical study of interpretational strategies can later be used to optimize visitor experience.

highly, even predominantly, visual (Bennett 1998). Fashion within the museum environment in particular takes on a heightened visuality at the expense of hapticity (Petrov 2011), due to the norms and rules surrounding the need for the preservation of objects, the physical arrangement of objects in the space, and the physical and visual relation of visitors to the objects on display. The possibility for the phenomenological analysis of visitor experience and meaning-making in a gallery disappears along with the dismantled display; the analysis is therefore limited to the methodology allowed by the surviving sources: texts and images. (A notable exception is the attempt at a phenomenological reading of texts and images of the experience of gallery space in Rees Leahy 2010.) Although the particular items on display mostly still exist within the museum collection, and even the mannequins or other display supports might survive in store-rooms, they are removed from their display-specific configuration, and therefore lack that particular materiality. A historian has limited access to the curatorial aims of the individuals who put the displays together, and even less insight into the opinions of those who saw the finished gallery displays. Indeed, museum exhibitions, although experienced as material assemblages, in history become visual or textual objects, and, as the review of the literature in Chapter 2 has shown, exhibitions are primarily analyzed as visual media (Hooper-Greenhill 2000, 2001; Bal 2003). While the sensory aspects of exhibitions are only an emerging agenda for museological research, it is nevertheless important to note the possible limits the predominantly visual and textual standard approaches may place on interpreting accurately what was undoubtedly a richer (though lost) visitor experience.

Furthermore, it has been difficult to find examples of authors who have attempted a sustained analysis, or even description, of past exhibitions. While wide-ranging

histories of museal representational systems, exhibitionary typologies, and their hypothetical effect on spectatorship behaviour have been influentially undertaken by Tony Bennett (1995) and others (e.g.: Luckhurst 1951; Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998), specific case studies of long-dismantled displays are much fewer. Some progress has been made in the field of art history, where the dynamics of a display have changed dramatically over the centuries, and important works have been written about the impact of hanging strategies in galleries on the aesthetic perception of fine art (e.g.: Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne 1996; Klonk 2009). Ethnography, too, has seen a re-evaluation of traditional displays following theories of visibility and a growing sensitivity to cross-cultural dialogue in post-colonial society (e.g.: Karp and Lavine 1991). Equally, natural history and science curators have engaged with the didactic impact of their collecting and display conventions on the public understanding of science (e.g.: Macdonald 1998; Yanni 1999). Social history, however, perhaps due to the overwhelming diversity of object classes that make up its potential contents, has not always been subjected to a similar level of intellectually rigorous critique (although anthologies such as Kavanagh's 1996 *Making Histories in Museums* present a range of contemporary approaches). Rather, museum histories tend to focus on the growth of collections, where the resulting mass of objects is seen as being reflective of the interests and biases of the collector and/or museum institution. These biographical approaches tend to describe the display of collections only tangentially, and when they do, betray little reflexivity about their methodology in so doing. Some selected sources have been analyzed below to highlight their approaches to the problem of doing a history of disappeared displays.

Methodological Precedents Reviewed

The private collection of John Fiott Lee, an early nineteenth-century collector of mostly archaeological and geological specimens, has been described by Anastasia Fillippopoliti (2009). Although her primary objective is to assert that Lee was a typical example of a collector of his time by comparing him to the practices of his contemporary individuals and institutions, Fillippopoliti also spends some time in describing and analyzing the displays that Lee created for his collection at his home in Buckinghamshire. Her primary source for this is a description from Lee's biography (Fillippopoliti 2009: 61), although she also uses manuscripts and guestbooks from the time to reconstruct the range of objects and the methods for their display. She does not include any images of the collection in situ, and it is not clear whether the guestbook responses of Lee's visitors to his displays can be visually corroborated with floor plans, drawings, or photographs. As such, it is difficult to agree or disagree with her conclusions about the aesthetic priorities of Lee's museum (Fillippopoliti 2009: 62).

A similar account of a Victorian collector, which only occasionally delves into his methods of display, is Frances Larson's account of Sir Henry Wellcome's collections (2009). Wellcome was a compulsive collector and his ambition for his intended museum grew over the course of his lifetime. His own scattered intellectual energies reflected in his reluctance to display his collection to the public until it was complete, and so his museum, when it opened in 1913 (Larson 2009: 143), showed only a small part of Wellcome's hoarded possessions. Acknowledging Wellcome's already-established interest and expertise in commercial displays for his firm (2009: 22-24; 149; 157), Larson contrasts his stated aims for his museum with the response from the

viewing public, as recorded in periodical articles of the time. Indeed, Larson's narrative analysis extends to the text of the visitor guidebook, and from this, she attempts to draw out the intended meanings, as well as to reconstruct the actual representations of the significance of the material on display (Larson 2009: 151). Where she does include photographs of the exhibits (the archival material is scarce because of Wellcome's aversion to publicity for his museum), she seems to take them at face value; she does not, for example, attempt any formalist analysis of the ways in which particular vignettes or viewing angles were constructed, nor does she question the construction and dissemination of the images themselves. Larson does, however, compare the arrangement and content of the displays to other contemporary precedents. For example, she indicates the similarity of the display's preoccupation with evolutionary linearity and typological organization with that of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum (Larson 2009: 152; 178). While acknowledging the differences between the objectives of Wellcome's museum and those of the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons and the Hunterian in Glasgow (Larson 2009: 150), she suggests that all shared their appeal as sensationalist anatomical collections, and that the Wellcome Museum in particular, had similarities in display techniques with Madame Tussaud's displays (Larson 2009: 174-179) in its use of costumed wax mannequins engaging in gruesome acts. Here, however, Larson slips back into biography, as she reveals that Henry Wellcome had social connections to the Tussaud family, and she concludes that this explains the visual comparability of their two ventures, instead of examining more deeply the broader visual culture that may have brought about this similarity.

Mark Sandberg's volume, *Living Pictures Missing Persons* (2003) discusses the development and deployment of waxworks more thoroughly, and of those reviewed here, his is the book most closely related to this dissertation in its scope and content, and has been inspirational in formulating a critical approach to the material studied in this thesis. Sandberg analyses the discursive meaning of dioramas and tableaux in Scandinavian folk museums at the turn of the twentieth century using an innovative mix of methodologies drawn from visual culture studies. His aim, as he puts it, is to describe 'the conception of a museological project as understood by its historical participants' (Sandberg 2003: 274), and Sandberg's analysis is therefore strongest when he compares dioramas to the conventions of other visual media, such as the ways in which paintings, theatre and film constructed similar reality effects in audiences. However, he is careful not to overstate his conclusions, and points out that 'Our visual access to the experience of museum visitors of one hundred years ago is necessarily virtual; as retrospective photographic viewers of the tangible museum scenes, we are as absent from the scene as the imagined "lost" inhabitants' (Sandberg 2003: 273). He thus shows that he is aware of the failings of the research material:

The visual narration implied in the sequencing of tableaux provides only a partial sense of story; the ubiquitous written guide might not only fill in gaps but also redirect visual impressions in more acceptable directions. The realization that the pictures in the "Fall to Salvation" series, if reshuffled, could easily create the opposite narrative trajectory highlights the arbitrariness of the moralizing narrative effect, or rather, the degree to which the ultimate meaning remained external to the displays themselves. To be sure, the physical layout of the series at the museum itself created a fixed order of interpretation in a way that a pile of unmoored archival photographs does not. Even when arranged properly, however, the sequential images need the prose narrative of the catalogues to close the deal. (Sandberg 2003: 79)

Understanding that a museum display is a visual medium, Sandberg uses relevant concepts of visual analysis by which to examine it, such as iconography and scenography, in addition to the textual evidence employed by other historians discussed above.

Another book that uses concepts from theatre and film studies as a tool to investigate museum history is Julia Noordegraaf's *Strategies of Display* (2004). In the author's view, museums share with and draw on the visual regimes of department stores, other museums, and cinema. Aware that museums are not solely visual, but also material, Noordegraaf analyses 'all the elements that mediate between the museum and its audience, such as the location, architecture and layout of the building, the order and arrangement of the objects in the displays, the various display techniques and different means of communication and visitor guidance' (2004: 13). The interplay between the physicality of the museum, the presence and needs of visitors, and the intellectual preoccupations of the museum administration (directors, designers, and curators) is defined by Noordegraaf within a cinematic metaphor as a "script", something which she argues avoids the Foucauldian unilateralism of the authoritarian power discourse that has hitherto defined museum studies (2004: 15-17).

Appropriately for such a democratic mindset, her heavy use of illustrations throughout the book mean that the reader can compare their own interpretation of the material with that of hers as presented in the text and the summative captions. The author is aware of the possible ambiguities of her source material, and suggests that her analysis can only give 'an idea of the *implied* viewer and the *possible* use of the presentation' [emphasis in the original], as well as to describe the actual use of the museum (which did not always correspond to that which was intended) from the perspective of the viewer where possible through written accounts and guidebooks (Noordegraaf 2004: 19). This approach to the staging of the museum has also been a key element in this thesis. Noordegraaf's central case study is the Boijmans Van Beuningen museum in Rotterdam, and she draws on photographs, guidebooks, floor

plans, media coverage and other archival material to trace its particular visuality over its history, comparing it with other contemporary, mostly European, museum case studies where relevant. Such a sweeping focus comes with the potential pitfall of over-generalization, but Noordegraaf's argument is generally convincing, not least because she draws on the other examples to support her claims for the Boijmans, but not to make the further claim that the Boijmans is representative of all art museums. However, her division of the evolution of the museum's displays into thematic typologies suggests that she believes in the existence of objective overarching stylistic similarities, or 'scripts', to use her term. One weakness of this approach is that it becomes difficult to distinguish whether her source material is documentary or illustrative; it is not always clear that her conclusions arise from the material itself. Her treatment of the art museum as not merely made possible by, but actually 'embedded in contemporary visual culture and society' (Noordegraaf 2004: 250) and therefore subject to the same terms of analysis, is notable and largely unique, however.

It would stand to reason that histories of exhibitionary practices in the visual arts would likewise be literate in the norms of visual practice when analyzing their source material. However, of the accounts dealing with the exhibition history of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Noyes Platt 1988; Staniszewski 1998; Klonk 2009), some of the authors still privilege the textual archival material over the visual, unquestioningly relegating the latter to mere illustration. Susan Noyes Platt's 1988 article discusses Alfred Barr's seminal 1936 exhibition of *Cubism and Abstract Art* at MOMA. She makes the argument that this show introduced new methods of classifying the development of modern (then-contemporary) art, which was reflected

in the display and catalogue. Her aim is to demonstrate how influential this exhibition was in informing all later art historical literature and museum practice. The article begins with a description of the visitor's progression through the show (Noyes Platt 1998: 284-285), drawn from periodical publications, rather than from the visual evidence Platt includes as illustrations in the article. In fact, she prioritizes the written evidence over the visual material throughout; when describing Barr's flowchart model of movements in modern art, which was reproduced on the cover of the exhibition catalogue, she states that: 'The thesis and structure of the chart was reflected in the order and sequence of the installation' (Noyes Platt 1988: 284). This suggests that she gives intellectual precedence to Barr's intellectual propositions as communicated through the exhibition catalogue, rather than as formulated in the exhibition itself, and then documented in the catalogue. Noyes Platt's article therefore focuses on curatorial narrative more than the physical experience of the exhibition.

Writing a decade later, Mary Anne Staniszewski's typological account of exhibitionary practices at the Museum of Modern Art is more concerned with political implications than art historical developments. Staniszewski ultimately makes the point that curatorial conventions for modern art have made aesthetics seem oblique and have so naturalized the constructed nature of display as to make it appear neutral. She suggests that this has naturally led to a rise of a new category of modern art: installations that challenge the museum's intellectual authority and its arbitrary arrangement of objects in space. Radically for a traditional art historian, Staniszewski denies the autonomy of a work of art, and asserts that it depends on its context for its meaning (Staniszewski 1998: xxi). An important contribution of this book is its assertion that exhibitionary forms, far from being so standard as to be almost

invisible, are not natural or self-evident, and that their diversity reflects an equal diversity of curatorial goals. Similarly to the ambition of this dissertation, she seeks to provide ‘an aesthetic, historical, and theoretical framework within which to discuss the exhibition history of the Museum of Modern Art’ (Staniszewski 1998: xxii), something which she believes is relevant to the history of twentieth-century installation design as a whole. Staniszewski heavily captions the images she includes in her book, and sometimes reuses the same image to different effect; her awareness of the malleability of the meaning of such “documentary” images is revealed in the introduction to the book, which reads:

However substantial the Museum of Modern Art’s photograph archives may be, the severe limitations of using one or several black-and-white reproductions representing a complex exhibition to construct a history of installations must always be kept in mind when reading this text. Many of these images are presented as bleeds, not only to make visible the myriad elements of these installations but to prevent the reader from perceiving the photographs as framed pictures and to underscore their status as fragmentary representations. (Staniszewski 1998: xxiii)

Indeed, throughout the text, Staniszewski reminds the reader of the limitations of the greyscale illustrations, drawing on other sources (colour transparencies and descriptions) to describe, at least in words, the nuances of lighting, texture, and colour missing from the images (Staniszewski 1998: 112). It must be admitted that this is still “lost in translation”, however, which underlines the potential weakness of any scholarly work that summarizes, in a limited space, a large amount of primary source material. Furthermore, it also highlights the loss of meaning that occurs in the documentation of the sensory-rich environment of a gallery.

Charlotte Klonk, too, uses MOMA as one of her case studies in her ambitious survey of museum visuality in the period 1800-2000. Like Sandberg, Klonk is interested in the effects of gallery interiors on visitor understanding and experience, and her focus

on subjectivity and perception leads her to a closer investigation of the agency of the gallery; not in the broad socio-political way that preoccupies Staniszewski, but in the individual decision-making of gallery administrators of how they displayed what they displayed. Considering this, she believes, reflects the:

[...] concepts of experience that informed those in charge of the museum displays. Changes in museum interiors – the colour of the background walls, lighting, the height and density of artworks displayed, furnishings (or lack thereof), dimensions and configuration of rooms, flow of visitors – were the product of more or less conscious ideas on the part of curators about what experience people should gain in the galleries. (Klonk 2009: 10)

Thus, Klonk takes Staniszewski's work further to probe not merely the range of exhibitionary possibilities, but also their outcomes and effects. Unfortunately, the significance of this pseudo-phenomenological focus on intended experiences is dramatically limited by a lack of evidence for actual visitor reaction. Klonk's impressive historical research into the reasons (cultural and individual) behind curatorial design choices does, however, highlight further the way in which the display environment is informed by visual assumptions and conventions. It must be noted, however, that the enormity of Klonk's scope – geographic and temporal – means that her case studies seem more like eccentric exceptions than influential paradigms; as in Noordegraaf's work, conclusions do not always seem to arise directly from the material researched.

The examples critiqued above each represent models of methodological approaches to their historical subject matter and source material, aspects of which have been used selectively in this dissertation. What they add to the existing museological literature is a notion that, not only are museums not socio-politically neutral, or that the exhibitionary medium is a form of communication (Hooper-Greenhill 2001), but that the exhibition itself in all its varying forms is itself a type of utterance. While that

formulation generally presupposes notions of authorship and authority, as well as varying levels of audience understanding, I maintain that there is a dynamic between these two and do not posit the exhibition as a straightforward and undemocratic dictum set by curators to passive recipients (Carpentier 2011). Rather, I view the exhibition as an articulation of a more nebulous set of social constructs that results in a shared iconography. The exhibition, while both a product of curatorial authorship and a potential site for independent or collaborative meaning-making, or, in Simon Knell's words, 'an interpretive coupling of speaker and listener where both are manipulating meaning, often unknowingly' (Knell 2007: 7), is here examined for its content, which I assume to be recognized to some extent by both participants in the museum's discourse.

Therefore, in this thesis, I analyze the exhibition as a product, not as a process, and then categorize the variations on that product. While this is, to some extent, reductive, it is necessitated by the lack of archival information on exhibition-building: the partial archive afforded by the case study institutions has resulted in a thematic and comparative analysis. Moreover, it reflects the fact that the behind-the-scenes compromises made by curatorial and design teams are not generally seen by museum visitors and are rarely documented in surviving archival material. This is also a reason not to equate curatorial intent with the resulting content of the exhibition, as this overestimates the extent of curatorial authority over display outcomes. While the curatorial voice has traditionally been privileged in discussions of exhibitions, the reality of museum work diffuses responsibility among many team members involved in creating an exhibition. This dissertation does not intend to privilege the collector, curator, or designer as the sole author of an exhibition; in practice, exhibitions are

composed of a series of decisions made by many actors (not all simultaneously), but it is only the result, visible through its traces in the archival record, which is under consideration here. The exhibitionary assemblage can be analyzed as a whole and as a sum of its parts – artefacts, labels, furniture, colour, lighting, marketing material, scholarly catalogues, and wider cultural discourse such as exhibition reviews. With this in mind, I have chosen not to write a thesis about curatorial practice, but instead attempted a rhetorical discourse analysis of visual and textual exhibition text (where available), comparing specific examples to one another and to wider cultural trends. I have avoided writing a simplistic timeline or biography of fashion history exhibitions, and have attempted to learn from my academic precedents, reviewed above, in producing a review of exhibitionary narrative styles supported by primary source material.

A General Critique of Visual and Textual Archival Analysis Methodologies

Existing exhibition histories rely heavily on archival photographs of exhibitions, yet this is methodologically problematic, as photographs are not a neutral record nor an unbiased medium. As Georgina Born (1998) has eloquently pointed out, photographs of museum installations frequently follow aesthetic conventions common to the period of their making, reflecting perhaps more the medium rather than the message itself. They tend to be black and white and devoid of human subjects (Staniszewski 1998: xxiii-xxiv; Noordegraaf 2004: 19-20). Such choices are made for obvious reasons – to better display the exhibition itself, and also within the confines of the photographic technologies available at the time. Thus, the exhibitions' potential for human interaction can only be speculated about, and the colour schemes guessed at with the help of textual descriptions, if available. Ian Jenkins' book *Archaeologists*

and Aesthetes (1992), which documents the design development of the sculpture galleries of the British Museum, is an example of good practice in that Jenkins draws from an enviable variety and depth of sources to reconstruct the materiality of long-gone gallery spaces. It must be noted, however, that nineteenth-century discourse on displaying antiquities hotly debated aspects of colour and lighting in display, so that Jenkins' analysis benefits from the advantage of such evidence being in the archival record to begin with. For disciplines where gallery wall colour was not contentious, this is less likely to have been included in descriptions, as it was perhaps less notable.

Also generally unconsidered by other authors is the fact that the composition of the images is not always reflective of the gallery spaces as they were actively used. Even the lighting strategies visible on these archival images may be misleading:

photography in low light is notoriously difficult, and the house lights may have been raised or the spotlights turned to their full power for the photographs, something which is unlikely to have been the experience of visitors for conservation reasons. Visitors themselves are a lacuna in installation records: where people do appear in photographs, they tend to be unrepresentative. A notable visitor may be caught in a ritualized pose, for example, or clusters of visitors are made to act out stereotypical attitudes of conventional spectatorship, becoming representative of a museum's ideal audience (Klonk 2009: 15) or didactic purpose (the trope of a mother pointing out some salient feature of a display to her child is particularly common, likewise a child's open-mouthed rapture: Jenkins 1992: Pl VII). Staniszewski suggests that the exceptions 'represent departures from what might have been considered the standard, masculine viewer in a traditional aesthetic exhibition' (1998: xxviii). While I disagree that fashion exhibitions assumed a male gaze, it is widely accepted that the aesthetic

norms of visual composition generally do presuppose such a viewer (Rose 2002). By contrast, this thesis demonstrates that fashion history exhibitions reflect what might be termed a parochial attitude to a predominantly female audience (see Chapter 4 in particular); moreover, I have used photographs of exhibition audiences to reflect on the museum's objectifying of historical fashion (see Chapter 6), rather than as a record of visitor experience.

Photographs and other records of the installation as conceived or as it appeared might be expected to be found in exhibition catalogues, but these books have proven to be only infrequently useful. Although exhibitions are a manifestation of a particular style of knowledge narrative (Hemmings *et al* 1997: 157), this narrative is rarely documented faithfully in an exhibition catalogue. In some ways this makes sense: if a catalogue is produced in advance of the show's opening to sell simultaneously as a guide or souvenir for visitors, there will be limited time to arrange *in situ* photographs of objects. This leads to the catalogue containing pseudo-scientific 'specimen' shots of lone objects, from selected viewpoints, only occasionally contrasted with one another or some related facing image (painting, drawing, print, photograph) for purposes of comparison, and surrounded by antiquarian-style descriptive text, which focuses on material characteristics and linear chronology, such that the result makes it difficult to establish which is meant to be the "historical reality" being corroborated. This re-combination of text and images create new historical narratives that are different than those in the exhibition itself. In addition, rather than including the text as written for and presented on labels in the gallery, museums frequently commission essays from established academics to include in catalogues as a form of intellectual output that is on par with that of a university; exhibitions alone are still felt to be an

insufficiently scholarly form of knowledge-making and communication because of their reliance on visual spectacle and their promotion of informal learning. However, this means that the catalogue, instead of being a faithful record of the exhibition on show, is given over for some further academic purpose, becoming more of an edited anthology. Peter McNeil believes this reflects the museum's hope that viewers will continue to engage with the concepts first introduced by the show (2008: 76-77) when they buy and read the catalogue. However, this may also highlight the museum's lack of faith in an exhibition's unique and lasting power to formulate knowledge and instil learning by its spatial and visual narratives. At the very least, it prevents the researcher and any other geographically- or temporally-distant interested party from experiencing the exhibition in any form but the intellectual premise alone.

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (1991) provides a final caution for those attempting to write about museum communication. While she agrees that museums and galleries undoubtedly have implicit ideological agendas, she warns against a teleological approach wherein 'the researcher has built a theoretical model which he or she then seeks to prove through a personal analysis [...] A hypothesis is proposed and an examination of the visible aspects of a museum or gallery is then carried out to prove the hypothesis' (Hooper-Greenhill 1991: 51). This project seeks to avoid such an accusation by suggesting only that historical fashion has been represented within museum exhibitions in ways that can be read for different meanings, and then defines and investigates these meanings further. Furthermore, Hooper-Greenhill reminds the semiotically-inclined researcher that while the museum's communication may be intended to have a particular meaning, its actual signification will vary based on the receiver. Indeed, this is not unlike the critique of narrative hermeneutics provided by

Bruner (1991: 7); the impossibility of making claims for the audiences of displays from 100 years ago was acknowledged above. Instead, it is hoped that this dissertation achieves what Bruner calls ‘the best hope of hermeneutic analysis’: ‘to provide an intuitively convincing account of the meaning of the text as a whole in the light of the constituent parts that make it up’ (Bruner 1991: 7), where exhibitions are read for the message they put forth about historical fashion.

1. Foundation Garments: Definitions, Functions, and Significance of Fashion

In the sense that our bodies, how they look, what we drape on and attach to them, are palpable, visible, physical and symbolic evidence of our place in society, history and culture, the equation holds true, generally speaking: 'society in dress; dress in society.'
(Keenan 2001: 36)

Fashion has inspired a large body of literature, with documentary, fictional, poetic, biographical, historical and critical works devoted to it, directly or indirectly. It seems to be a slippery, tantalizing, and evocative subject; authors return to it repeatedly because it is both familiar and yet mystifying. To try to make sense of the culture of clothing has been the aim of many individuals over the centuries (see: Keenan 2001; Johnson Torntore and Eicher 2003; Purdy 2004; Welters and Lillethun 2007). In this chapter, some core concepts from academic literature will be considered, as these also arise repeatedly in exhibitions of fashion in museums.

It is the aim of this chapter to review the promise seen in fashion by a selection of its chroniclers, as well as to arrive at a narrowed field focus for the purposes of this thesis. Definitions of dress and its functions can illuminate its significance as an area of study for scholars in various disciplines. Even this brief review, which, of necessity, will limit itself largely to academic literature on costume produced in the twentieth century, reveals the complexity and the contradictory nature of the topic, as well as the incredible variety of what it is expected to reflect about humans and human society. This multiplicity of viewpoints on the relevance of fashion to culture demonstrates the many potential representations of it in a museum setting; it is

therefore vital to briefly note their range. Examined here is the definition of dress (and its synonyms), its role in society (as an aesthetic, embodied, economic, and social phenomenon), and the disciplinary approaches by which it is studied.

Defining Dress

The primary difficulty with a review of the literature on dress is the lack of consistent terminology when defining the field of study. Bodily covering and adornment as well as the practices and socio-economic systems associated with it, have been referred to in a number of different ways, each with its own particular associations (see Barnard 2002: 8-12; Kawamura 2011: 7-9). Whereas ‘dress’ might imply a process (‘to dress’) as well as a fairly sophisticated notion of appropriate social norms in body covering, ‘clothing’ implies the body’s physical need for protection from the elements as well as the very materiality of this covering, made of cloth. The term ‘dress’ may include a wardrobe of possibilities, but the notion of ‘clothing’ is frequently limited to garments, not to accessories or other forms of body decoration. ‘Costume’, now a slightly antiquated term, implies adornment and alteration in appearance, focusing on the aesthetic surface; it is confusingly close to theatrical terminology, although it does not necessarily refer to outfits produced for performance. It can also refer to folk wear, which is now largely anachronistic in the Western world and only worn for special celebrations. The term ‘apparel’ is mainly used in industrial contexts, and implies a focus on functional garments such as uniforms, and their utilitarian aspects. ‘Fashion’, when used in reference to garments, recalls frequent changes of form and stylistic content, and the discussion of fashion tends to take on an aesthetic emphasis rather than a utilitarian one: ‘Fashion is taken to mean clothing designed primarily for its expressive and decorative qualities, related closely to the current short-term

dictates of the market, rather than for work or ceremonial purposes' (Breward 1995: 5). Fashion is also a system of production within contemporary capitalism (this will be further discussed in Chapter 4), as well as an enacted process: 'fashioning' is often used as a synonym for creating, and in contemporary critiques, it is praised as a vehicle of self-expression (Steele 2010). The nuanced differences between these terms are as difficult to discern as they are to define: Costume Institute director Polaire Weissman struggled to do so in 1967:

Let us first consider what we mean by fashion in relation to costume [...] Clothes [...] are merely bodily covering, while costume incorporates adornment, including tattooing, body painting and so forth. Man 'dressed up' before he clothed himself. Costume is a complex of many factors. [...] Fashion in its broad sense is not only a manner of dressing; it is also a social expression of an age, a way of life that reflects man's cultural heritage and current ideals. (Weissman 1967: 151)

Indeed, throughout her essay, she used all these terms as well as others, almost synonymously.

Given all these possible descriptors, careful attention needs to be paid to the context in which any or all of these appear. Many writers use the terms interchangeably, and frequently do not explicitly distinguish whether they are discussing objects and object typologies, or the systems these objects are believed to follow. 'Fashion', for example, is a particularly ambiguous term, which can refer to garments made according to an accepted aesthetic, or to the socio-economic system that produces and consumes this aesthetic. When used as a verb to refer to a creative process, layers of punning and contradictory meanings can appear, as in the following quote: 'Fashion statements appear to mark a moment, but the fashioned body is never secure or fixed. The body is constantly re-clothed and re-fashioned in accordance with changing arrangements of the self' (Craik 1994: 225). Here, 'fashion' is used to mean a medium, a result, and an active process, but not an industry, an object, or a social

pattern. Such a slippage of terminology sometimes also leads to confused analyses, where products and processes are blended into one another. In later chapters in this thesis, I will be using the term ‘fashion’, as the collections and exhibitions I have chosen to study are, for the most part, comprised of garments made according within the fashion system of goods exchange and in accordance with its aesthetic and value system. However, for ease of reading, some synonyms will occasionally be used to avoid unnecessary repetition of the word.

The split in focus between the object and what it is seen to represent, is equally important in producing a viable definition of the subject matter, as it implies a multiplicity of viewpoints. Clothing, as pointed out by Dudley (2011), is both a potent symbol or document within visual media, as well as being a visual medium in itself, relying as it does on accepted sensory and para-linguistic systems for its communicative impact. Likewise, the analysis of dress is at least two-fold:

Dress appears to have two major dimensions: it can be understood as an appearing surface that lends itself to interpretation (a phenomenon) and it can be also be considered as an object in the world to which things may happen (a substance). The first of these relates more to the structural aspect of the social world (e.g., it may signal social class) and the second more to the relational side of individuals and groups. In the second, the adventures of the object turn out to reveal the structuring of the relations in the social domain(s) to which the object belongs. (Corrigan 2008: 155)

Clothing is both indexical and iconic, a distinction ideally (though infrequently) made within any cultural analysis that makes reference to it. Its outward appearance can be examined either superficially, or as a symbol within a larger system of representation. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between the conclusions of those who analyze dress as a material object, and those who use dress as a site of debate about human behaviours, beliefs, looking beyond the object to the socio-cultural concerns by which it is shaped and may be reflected on it.

Disciplinary Differences

The significance of dress, as has been alluded to above, depends on the discipline of the analyst; as Janet Arnold observed, the subject holds promise for many:

The use of costume study extends to many fields. The art historian uses the evidence provided by changing styles of dress to date paintings more closely; archaeologists and textile conservators in museums need a knowledge of cut and construction to piece together tattered fragments and restore them to new life; the history of costume in all its aspects is essential for technical staff, as well as for amateur and professional designers, to produce good period costumes for theatre, film and television; the history of fashion and the crafts of tailoring and dressmaking provide background and inspiration for both the professional dress designer and the art college student. Costume is also an interesting aspect of social history for study in schools. (Arnold 1973: 7)

Indeed, the literature of costume history is filled with elegiac passages extolling the relevance of the subject. Writers seek to prove the necessity of studying the function and history of dress locally and globally:

In all its ramifications it is clear that ‘fashion’ can no longer be dismissed as trivial, unworthy and even – as used to be the case – immoral. Today, fashion in its various guises is widely accessible and relevant to so many aspects of life, yet in many respects it stands alone. For example, it simultaneously engages with the worlds of art, craft and industrial design and yet it belongs to none of them. It is both popular and elite and encompasses different forms of academic study with different purposes. (de la Haye and Wilson 1999: 7)

Dress may have many uses for many different people; it is the purpose of this section to summarize just some of its uses in academic study.

The most eloquent explanations of the importance of clothing come from social science. In the beginning of their classic work on dress, Mary Roach and Joanne Eicher laid out the principles of the study of dress, based heavily on sociological and anthropological assumptions. They wrote:

[...] the portable character of clothing and associated decorative items make these highly visible and flexible in building the setting for behaviour. Visually perceptible, they can, as a rule, be easily understood, more so than abstract, nonmaterial elements, such as beliefs, sentiments, and norms. Even if the

motives behind the use of visible things remain obscure, it is possible to see how these objects may be manipulated and to place some interpretation on this activity. Understandings gained from the study of dress and adornment will cast light on the total picture of human behaviour. (Roach and Eicher 1965: 3)

In this approach, the material culture of dress is seen as a part of a larger system of behaviours, but as a particularly good mirror of those behaviours. Some forty years later, Eicher added to her earlier definition by relying on the communicative function of dress described above:

Our view and definition of dress is one that is a more encompassing concept than focusing on clothing alone. Dressing the body includes many acts and products that serve as a nonverbal communication system. As we dress the body, we manipulate, modify, and supplement it with a wide range of products and artefacts. These acts and products allow us a means to present ourselves to others through the development of personal, social and cultural identities. (Johnson, Torntore and Eicher 2003a: 1)

Social scientists, therefore investigate ‘the meaning of fashion in dress in order to understand behaviour related to dressing the body’ (Johnson, Torntore and Eicher, 2003a: 2).

Although social scientists tend to study contemporary dress (there being sufficient available data to gather from participants for the analysis of behavioural motivation), their basic assumption that clothing is reflective of society has also been accepted by scholars in other fields, such as historians. Dr C. Willett Cunnington, a dress historian, even appropriated and appealed to the social sciences in an essay in which he laid out his methodological suggestions for the analysis of historical clothing:

I wish to draw attention to the scientific approach to period costumes [... which] regards period costumes as fragmentary evidence of human activities in the past... things in themselves unimportant except for such deductions as can be drawn from them about the social life and mental outlook of our ancestors. (1947: 126)

Even in art history, where scholars coming from a long history of connoisseurship might be expected to have some measure of object fetishism (an appreciation of the aesthetic and evocative qualities of the object as such), dress is acknowledged to be

not quite timeless enough to be valued for its own sake: ‘Dress is the most fleeting of the arts, a prey to the arbitrary dictates of novelty and the attacks of critics, subject to endless speculation – and quite meaningless out of historical context’ (Ribeiro 1995: 3). This context is time-dependent, as Ribeiro points out, and fashion is differently judged from contemporary and subsequent positions. To study dress as an art, then, is to derive meaning from, and to add meaning to a historical narrative of taste (see below).

While the visual impact of fashion is widely accepted – ‘fashion as image and as a system conveyed through images’ (Calefato 2004: 3), its materiality remains elusive. Entwistle and Wilson, among others, have criticized the tendency of fashion scholars to overlook the relationship of fashion to the body and to the senses:

For the most part, fashion theorists have failed to give due recognition to the way in which dress is a fleshy practice involving the body. In other words, they disembodied fashion and in doing so fail to consider the way in which fashion and dress are not merely textual or discursive but embodied practices. (Entwistle and Wilson 2001: 4)

The relationship of fashion with the body will be discussed further in Chapter 6. Here, its materiality is highlighted as one amongst a number of its other characteristics.

Museums are perhaps the only public institutions that possess the material objects to marry with all the theoretical significance described above, but can museums make good this promise? Even there, the potential significance of dress is circumscribed by the attitudes of the staff. In 1984, Sir Roy Strong, then director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, wrote of his institution’s growing acceptance that dress is, after all, ‘a valid expression of the decorative arts of any period,’ neither too frivolously ephemeral nor too exuberantly theatrical to be considered of historical value. The study of dress, predictably from his point of view as a museum director, depends on ‘a

scientific study of the surviving examples' (1984: 7), but as has been shown above, 'science', far from being objective, has its own biases (see also Chapter 3).

Thus, the object of clothing, both as medium and message, has inspired a range of approaches and interpretations. The boundaries of academic disciplines have often shaped these differences, and discourses about dress have evolved along related lines (Breward 1998; Lemire 2010). Historians and economists have tracked larger narratives of production and consumption along with their contribution to culture (e.g.: Styles 2008); 'hemline historians' (Breward 1995:1) like collectors and curators, have focused more closely on changes in cut and construction (e.g.: Laver and de la Haye 1996); anthropologists have considered how clothing's materiality facilitated and communicated identity and relationship construction in societies (e.g.: Küchler and Miller 2005); literary scholars, as well as visual, design, and art historians focus on symbolism and representation (e.g.: Lurie 1981); cultural theorists, sociologists, and linguists focus on how communication through clothing affects its development and dissemination (e.g.: Craik 1994). Sociologists in particular study the significance of behaviour, and their view of the role dress plays in culture can be seen from the following quote from a recently-published sociological textbook, in which authors analyze the relationship between dress and social norms and sanctions, concluding, 'The study of dress and society examines the two-way interaction between societal expectations and individual choices about dress' (Workman and Freeburg 2009: 4). The structures of knowledge peculiar to each discipline also structure the analysis of dress: 'The study of fashion [...] is a borderline science, important to the historian in that it exhibits in a pure form the changing impulse of behaviour; to the artist in that

here, if anywhere, we can trace a direct relationship between economics and aesthetics' (Bell 1948: 12).

Each disciplinary approach has particular, though often overlapping approaches toward the study of what dress, as a form of evidence, can express about the structures of society and culture. In addition, each discipline has different standards for the acceptability of the form that evidence takes – whether it is the object, or its representation in visual or verbal form, or some combination of the two – as Entwistle and Wilson point out: 'In Britain, costume history originally emerged as a subset of art history, evolving from the dating of paintings; it was garment based and strongly empirical' (2001:1). Micro and macro approaches also differ; against the backdrop of a long history of civilization, fashion tends to be seen as ephemeral, as its changes contrast with the stability of other social institutions (the only constant in fashion being change itself). In contrast, detailed empirical study makes no such judgments because the changes themselves are seen as significant markers with historical importance. While inter- and multi-disciplinarity have become catchphrases in academic writing (*cf.* Taylor 2004; Breward 1998, 2008), some epistemological divisions continue to exist.

Even the earliest theorists of dress did not always precisely articulate their definition of clothing or its purpose, but more frequently focused their efforts on divining the processes of its initial development and subsequent change. However, these narratives are nevertheless filled with certain assumptions about the function of dress in society, whether modern, prehistoric, Western, or foreign, and can suggest a range of

definitions for dress. Careful analysis of these sources also reveals the origins of modern thought about the significance of dress as a document of culture.

Dress Analysis: An Intellectual Heritage

Bodily adornment, despite being a universal human practice, has not gained moral or intellectual neutrality along with its ubiquity. Writers have found symbolism in both the act and the fact of clothing. The basic assumption, repeated to varying effects throughout the centuries, is that dress is related to and reflective of human needs and societies. Even the most straightforwardly documentary focus on describing the form and material of clothing assumes that it is important because it has been created by humans, and therefore is reflective of their skills and history.

While the majority of writing with any fashion content in the Western world prior to the Early Modern period tended to be proscriptive or poetic, debating the appropriateness of particular forms of clothing to certain classes of people (in religious tracts, manuals for behaviour, sumptuary legislation, heroic poetry, and satire), the growing secularization of society allowed the appearance of more circumspect works by the sixteenth century. Johnson, Torntore and Eicher, in their anthology of fashion writing, claim that French philosopher Michel de Montaigne's 1575 essay, 'Of the Custom of Wearing Clothes' (translated into English in 1603) was one of the first to seriously engage with the purpose of clothing, and not merely to describe or denounce its forms (2003b: 8). Descriptive and philosophical (non-prescriptive) writings on dress begin to proliferate in the Early Modern period, and generalize the dress of other people and epochs into 'representative' examples, in this way building up both analytical shorthand and an appearance of intellectual authority,

which has had surprising longevity. Costume albums consisting of a mix of visual and textual descriptions, such as Cesare Vecellio's famous *Degli habiti antichi et moderni di diverse parti del mondo* (1590), have been tied to a greater movement of categorizing and classifying the world (Ilg 2004) through symbolic means. This was continued in the later literature on the topic, where great albums of the dress of nations were produced by antiquarians with encyclopaedic ambitions (Taylor 2004; Petrov 2008) to develop an evolutionary model of the development of culture. In this semiotic system, where dress was one of the important markers by which human civilization could be visually plotted, particular items of clothing eventually became synonymous with people, places, and times. Even now, the visual iconicity of history in fashion (see Chapter 7) plays an important role in its perception:

Histories of fashion and records of western clothing systems are usually centred around high fashion [...] which become designated retrospectively as the norm of fashions of the moment. Hence, the mini-skirt stands for the swinging 1960s while tight-laced corsets epitomize the Victorian era. (Craik 1994: ix)

This diverse heritage of symbolic thought had in common the goal of understanding human behaviour in dress and through dress. From the sixteenth century until the present day, a variety of hypotheses have been mooted.

The Function of Fashion

As suggested above, definitions of dress usually contain certain assumptions about its function. Indeed, the function of fashion is frequently the primary element of its definition. However, the distinction between the function and the significance of clothing is a somewhat artificial one, since for many theorists, it is precisely in function that significance lies. For example, in her guide to teaching costume history, Valerie Cumming wrote: 'Dress in all its forms is an expression of individual taste

within the limitations imposed by the status, occupation and financial circumstances of its wearers' (1981: 20). Here, ontology is elided with function, and what dress *is* appears to be what it *does* for its wearer: allowing them to communicate their cultural and social capital. Likewise, Janet Arnold, in her classic text, *A Handbook of Costume*, stated: 'Clothes are the outward visible records of man's tribal characteristics, social position, and individual personality. Their changing forms reflect changes of style in art and architecture in a sophisticated society' (1973: 172). In her writing, Arnold allied dress to other arts, perhaps showing more concern than some of her counterparts for the materiality of the objects themselves, but like Cumming, she stressed the evocative, communicative element of costume.

This idea of fashion as an expression or as a record clearly has linguistic overtones.

Entwistle and Wilson explain this attitude:

A number of theorists saw the manner in which dress communicated as a kind of language. This may have been partly because it had become somewhat commonplace to assert the idea that fashion and dress are ubiquitous to culture, a fundamental feature which defines humanity. This apparent universality is one of the reasons why fashion and dress are often compared to language. Moreover it would seem that dress and language are part of the same fundamental human concern, namely, to communicate. It is not surprising therefore to find the idea of language appropriated to explain dress and fashion. (2001: 2)

The communicative function of clothing, therefore, is one that is assumed by its very analysis³, before any further theories of the content of that communication can be proposed. Alison Lurie, one of the most famous theorists of the language of clothes, wrote that if clothing is a language, then 'To choose clothes, either in a store or at

³ It might be argued that largely aesthetic descriptions of fashion do not do so; however, even then, the material properties of the garment are often seen as evocative of the creator's craft and creative genius, which might be defined as a form of communication.

home, is to define and describe ourselves' (1981: 5). Clothing's language (see Barnard 2002) works on both literal and metaphoric levels, and many writers have suggested how and what it may describe about human culture.

It is therefore clear that dress can be interpreted as symbolically or metaphorically displaying social values. Anthropologists, for example, have focused on the social display inherent in clothing, and have analyzed how dress confers and communicates status and identity in various cultures (Tranberg Hansen 2004). They see dress as having a visual shorthand, and being indexical, formally or informally, of social class, nation, gender, occupation, cultural affiliation, like a uniform or livery. However, while dress may be a marker of difference for outsiders and of identity for members of the group, its significance is not static and is subject to change; Craik (1994), among others, has criticized the now-changing anthropological assumption that stylistic clothing change exists only in the Western context, and recently (Dudley 2011) anthropologists have begun to redress this imbalance. It does seem, however, that rapid change is, in the West, due to a highly developed 'consumer society in which a cycle of changing styles is deliberately fostered by the economic system' (Entwistle and Wilson 2001: 1; see also Chapter 4).

As an item among others of material culture, dress is subject to, reflective of, and has implications for socio-economic values. Quentin Bell's assertion that economists 'see in the subject little save a vain peering into bonnet shops and haberdasheries' (1948: 12), was precipitous, as economic historians have noted that many of the innovations in global trade and industrial technology were related to consumer demand for textiles and clothing (Lemire 2010). Furthermore, it has been suggested that technological

possibilities were equally a part of the development of costume: ‘Totally absent from this tradition [of demand-led fashion history] is any consideration of the determining role that might be played by clothing production and its history’ (Leopold 1993: 101).

What most analyses of dress, anthropological and otherwise, agree on is that dress is subject to the social customs of human culture. Janet Arnold pointed out its enjoyable social aspects:

For many people in sophisticated societies, dressing in fashion has been and still is a delightful, if not frivolous, occupation pursued with great enthusiasm in spite of satirical comment on all sides. We should gain some enjoyment from looking at fashionable dress in its own right. (Arnold 1973: 7)

While dress has utilitarian elements (see below), it is also aesthetically appealing and serves a symbolic function. Dr Cunnington, one of the most prolific costume historians of the last century, wrote that:

Costume is an art which unconsciously reflects contemporary ideals, standards of taste, and social urges. It is true, of course, that the costume of the individual reflects his idiosyncrasies, but what is far more important is that fashion reflects the idiosyncrasies of a community, that is to say, its tastes, prejudices, and ideals. Fashion is, in fact, a taste shared by a large number of people for a short space of time. (1947: 126)

Taste, however, is another slippery concept, whose origins are far from clear. When Johnson, Torntore, and Eicher write that dress ‘embodies and reflects unconscious or subconscious ideals and ideas’ (2003b: 9), they may as well be speaking of taste, though it is notoriously challenging to find origins or definitions for any such *zeitgeist*. Fashion in particular is singled out as a system of marking social difference or homogeneity in any given period; the ability to read and participate in its complex codes and rituals is seen by many authors as a marker of social distinction and dominance among the middle-classes where it particularly thrives (Halttunen 1986; Wurst 2005). Entwistle uses the sociological terminology coined by Pierre Bourdieu to describe this process:

The habitus is a performative knowledge, signalling that market actors have the appropriate embodied understanding of fashion. Through enactments of fashion habitus, market actors inside high fashion signal their knowledge and show they belong there, but, more particularly, they perform it. (Entwistle 2009: 42)

Navigating fashion's changing norms signifies a person's participation in or resistance to the dominant culture; this is often encoded in the wearing of specific garments, and studies of subcultures have described the iconic power of particular styles to mark the difference or inclusion of individuals from the group (Crane 2000: 244). As Anne Jerslev notes, fashion can be a 'medium for changing historical embodiments' (2005: 57); in museums, this is frequently reduced further into stereotyped representations of social behaviours across eras where the performativity of fashion becomes a mute mannequin pantomime (see **Figs. 5.3, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5, and 7.7**).

The consequence of the widely-held assumption that fashion can communicate overt and covert messages about the self has been its occasional censure, as Ribeiro describes:

[...] as soon as dress had achieved the basic necessities of warmth and modesty, it began to attract censure precisely because the notion of morality is such a variable. Dress, as an art so closely linked to the body, so revelatory of conscious or unconscious sexuality, is constantly liable to hostile interpretation. The history of dress is often seen as an area impervious to reason and analysis. (1995: 3)

The mysterious, and seemingly slavish compulsion to follow fashion has perplexed, amused, and frustrated writers for centuries. Quentin Bell's summary is typical:

In obeying fashion we undergo discomforts and distresses which are, from a strictly economic point of view, needless and futile. We do so for the sake of something which transcends our own immediate interests. [...] There is indeed a whole system of morality attached to clothes and more especially to fashion, a system different from, and, as we shall see, frequently at variance with that contained in our laws and religion. (1948: 13)

As Bell goes on to describe, fashion's tendency to reveal or conceal the body (as part of its material nature) has moral symbolism, and this element of its communicative

capacity becomes a part of culture's moral economy. The sexual and social messages sent by clothing and its wearers make dress subject to and an agent of social control.

If fashion is a language, then speaking it by wearing fashionable dress, is a behaviour bound by social codes. Craik writes that, 'fashion behaviour invokes rules and codes of dress, adornment and gesture to articulate attributes of the social body. At a collective level, fashion maps social conduct and, in turn, is shaped by it' (1994: 225). This distinction between the individual and the collective experience, the private and the social, is played out on the body, as Entwistle and Wilson describe:

With its changing styles and constant innovation fashion is always reinventing the body, finding new ways of concealing and revealing body parts and thus new ways of making the body visible and interesting to look at. In addition, dress and fashion mark out particular kinds of bodies, drawing distinctions in terms of class and status, gender, age, sub-cultural affiliations that would otherwise not be so visible or significant. In this way, fashion can tell us a lot about the body in culture – throwing light on the ways in which bodies are made meaningful to us, as well as lending insight into the way in which the body enters into the realm of aesthetics. (2001: 4)

Thus, another function of dress is its definition of the individual and the social body.

How this has been expressed in exhibitions of fashion will be described in Chapter 6.

On a practical level, clothing extends or limits the body's capabilities by protecting it from the elements. The textiles and tailoring techniques that allow it to do so may constrict the natural range of movement, however. Insofar as dress is a material object, in constant close contact with the skin, it heightens the sensory knowledge of the self: it appeals to visual, audio and tactile senses, and makes one aware of one's body, covered or uncovered. Getting dressed and being dressed, before being a communicative act, is a very physical one.

Regardless of what is overlaid on top of dress theoretically, the fact remains that it is a set of physical practices and that clothing is a material object. Fashion as a system

reflects human mastery over materials, and many traditional histories of clothing track the adaptations of materials and techniques to preferred forms. James Laver's classic text on the history of costume begins with a discussion of just such differences, assuming that their chronology can be followed and logically divided into stylistic periods by a predominance of form and material: 'It is possible to contrast 'fitted' and 'draped' clothes, most modern clothes falling into the first category and Ancient Greek clothes, for example, into the other. History has shown many variations in this respect, and it is possible to find intermediate types' (1996: 7).

However, certain theorists have worried that a 'positivist' approach to the materiality of clothing is too narrow. For example, Aileen Ribeiro, an art historian who works on costume, wrote:

Clothes, however splendid the craftsmanship and luxury, are basically a commodity and cannot have the emotional impact of art or literature. From a study of surviving dress we can understand cut and construction, we can appreciate qualities of design; but we cannot gain perceptual knowledge. (1995: 4)

Ribeiro might underestimate the individual pull of an item of clothing experienced materially, however. Gale and Kaur write: '...the political and economic contexts surrounding a garment will not prove simple mirrors of its physical history. Each garment, each fabric, each sector and stage seems to have a story in some sense unique or particular to it' (2004: xiii). The idiosyncratic histories of even individual items (such as shoes, or purses, or outfits worn by one person) are also valid and significant, if one defines clothing as part of fluid, lived experience without static meaning.

It must be pointed out as a caution that in the study of behavioural and belief systems, the object sometimes ceases to possess any inherent significance:

Like any material object, clothing can be looked upon in terms of its brute concrete reality or as an element on some greater conceptual scheme transcending its mere materiality. For the social scientists, the relationship between the concrete and conceptual is of central interest because it reveals in practice how we may make sense of the world in which we find ourselves – and even of the worlds that we have imagined. (Corrigan 2008: 1)

Even where the materiality of dress is acknowledged, it is occasionally seen as yet another characteristic by which clothing gains its symbolic power: ‘The sensual and aesthetic – what cloth feels and looks like – is the source of its capacity to objectify myth, cosmology and also morality, power and values’ (Miller 2005: 1). For an anthropologist such as Daniel Miller, the emphasis in ‘material culture’ is still firmly on ‘culture’, dress being seen as a particularly good material for its expression.

Part of the discourse of social history is debate over appropriate patterns of production, consumption, novelty and adaptation, and this can be played out every day in a very mundane way, as Banim, Green, and Guy point out:

Differences of culture, ethnicity and social class jostle with those of sexuality, age and able-bodiedness as both political statements and personal biographies which are central to the construction of multiple selves. Equally visible as a central narrative are reflections upon our bodies with their different shapes, sizes and colours. Women assembling their wardrobes are also constructing identities or selves, packaging some selves for public consumption and reserving other, more personal identities for private spaces. (2001: 257)

Through the interplay between being a personal statement of self and a representation of the social body, fashion becomes part of a pattern of historical change (see Chapter 7). The anthropologists Niessen and Brydon agree, and write: ‘[...] it is the ways in which bodily adornment figures in the relationship between the embodied self and social history which lead us to perceive adornment’s implications’ (1998: xvi).

Indeed, the academic and critical literature on fashion has, on the whole, sought to illuminate the variety of these implications.

Conclusion: The Application of Dress

As the above literature review has shown, writers on costume have attempted to investigate the usefulness of dress. Apart from its practical applications, the greatest significance has been attached to its communicative power; it has been assumed that dress can and does tell us something about ourselves – to study it is to reveal aspects of history, culture, society, power, and human psychology. The particular outcome of this study, along with the emphasis on its significance, however, is dependent on the discipline of the scholar. Elements of the function and significance of fashion as described by the scholars cited in this chapter are also present in exhibitions on the topic, and so a review is necessary. There has been no attempt on my part to confirm or deny any of their hypotheses, as it is the range of these, not their veracity, which is relevant to this discussion. However, the sheer variety of approaches and its consequent conclusions can make the study of fashion as an object and a symbolic system bewildering. As William Keenan insightfully writes:

Yet ‘getting at’ the ‘truth’ of dress is a complex, formidable enterprise in any given case or context. [...] General ‘theories’ of clothing behaviours, decisions, tastes and customs are of heuristic value only and are generally pitched at the level of abstraction that loses sight entirely of the lived reality and experience of dress, its true habitus and context of significance. [...] In this regard, the subject of dress defies efforts to reduce it to cut-and-dried scientific method. There is always a ‘remainder’ after we have tried to provide a full description and explanation of why human beings dress as they do. Consequently, there is always scope for informed guesswork and insightful interpretation if we are ever to arrive at plausible and meaningful accounts of the innumerable dress ways that abound in human history and society.
(2001:37)

Keenan’s quote is a useful reminder of the distinction between the rational and the sensory still present in meaning-making. The following chapter will briefly consider how museums, both as guardians of material heritage, and as its intellectual interpreters, attempt to bridge this gap.

2. Exhibitionary Ideals: Scopic Space and the Functions of Display

Displayed objects of all types are made meaningful according to the interpretive frameworks within which they are placed, and the historical or cultural position from which they are seen.
(Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 8)

Museums, galleries, and the objects within them both shape and represent knowledge. As study collections, they form the basis of research that transforms the material into the intellectual; as spaces of display, they interpret the intellectual through the material: ‘The museum possesses capacities for gathering fragments of knowledge into coherent patterns and for imparting information to great numbers of people’ (Whittlin 1949: 202). They show and tell (Bennett 1995: 349), and both functions are assumed to go hand in hand.

However, despite the importance of exhibitions to any given museum’s mission, they remain an under-theorized area in museological literature. There is an abundance of first-hand recollections of event-specific process, and reviews of particular productions, but very few sustained theoretical engagements with exhibitions as such – their purpose, function, types, and effectiveness. As a result, this chapter draws on the few established authors who have tackled the subject in any depth, as well as a variety of other texts, which, in their assumptions and generalizations, obliquely reveal widely-held attitudes towards display theory and techniques. Their work provides the groundwork for the analysis of exhibitionary structure and function undertaken in this thesis.

This chapter reviews the basic elements of a museum exhibition, and suggests that its primary purpose is to communicate an educational message to the public. It surveys the means by which exhibitions have been designed to do this most effectively by way of visual, spatial, and textual narratives. Educational theories about meaning-making are described, and a short section on visitor-centred studies reviews the literature on audience participation; this is kept brief, however, as the scope of this thesis does not allow for visitor-studies methodologies. It is included mostly to demonstrate the shift from the modernist narrative that positions the museum as singular authority to a more inclusive view of the exhibition as a dialogue between objects and audiences, where visitor agency is considered.

Mechanics of an Exhibition

To define what is meant by ‘exhibition’ is an important step toward deciphering its role in the museum. In this context, it can refer to the design, layout, and furnishings of a space intended for optimizing visual access to and contemplation of the artefacts within the museum’s collection. This encompasses temporary as well as permanent displays, as well as parts of a whole (such as a gallery within a sequence of rooms, or a cabinet within a gallery). Whereas the first displays decorated the interiors of individual collectors, and were designed for private enjoyment and study, modern museum design, underpinned by a growing body of research, is increasingly sophisticated in manipulating space and sightlines to effect visitor behaviour and experience. Some of this is made possible by advances in technology, building materials, and engineering, but developments have also been driven by evolving expectations for public spaces to delight the eye and accommodate leisure as much as

instruction. In all instances, however, a traditional⁴ exhibition requires the *presence* of objects, and their *presentation* in a spatial arrangement wherein the objects become a *representation* of a conceptual subject (Dubé 1995: 4). In a UNESCO journal special issue on museum exhibitions, Raymond Montpetit (1995) points out that while the logic of early collections was evident only to their creators and their colleagues, modern museums now tend to follow a script, which makes the invisible logic of the subject matter coherent through a textual and spatial narrative of introduction, exposition and conclusion.

There are regrettably few museological sources that discuss with any degree of specificity the mechanics of the display environment. While designers and architects have contributed a great deal of literature to the field, their perspective is usually commercial, and books are how-to beginners' manuals for those aspiring to enter the field (e.g.: Locker 2011). Therefore, the vocabulary and expectations in these texts are different than those that might include guidelines for curatorial practice. Michael Belcher's *Exhibitions in Museums* (1991) and Stephanie Moser's essay 'The Devil is in the Detail' (2010) are notable exceptions, which present practical advice for creating effective displays alongside the vocabulary and possibilities for doing so. With the aim of providing a guide for those researching exhibitions, Moser includes the following aspects to consider:

- Architecture, location, and setting
- Space
- Design, colour, and light

⁴ Digital museums as well as interpretive galleries that use only images are growing exceptions.

- Subject, message, and text
- Layout

In addition, she reviews larger categories for exhibitions, which might be deduced from the above categories:

- Display type
- Exhibition style
- Audience and reception

Michael Belcher's book is organized along similar categories, although instead of providing analytical questions for comprehending existing exhibitions, Belcher instead summarizes the possibilities for creating considered exhibition spaces with the above elements. Belcher's book is a more in-depth evaluation of exhibitionary elements, and has been used as a basis for the creation of a descriptive worksheet (**Appendix 2**) for the archival research undertaken as part of this thesis. Both sources, however, insightfully review the instruments by which museums create narratives about the objects they contain.

The urge to create any kind of narrative from objects is a historical result of Western epistemological attitudes. While Arthur MacGregor's work on collectors and collecting (2007) traced this implicitly, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's 1992 volume *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* arguably remains the definitive text which provided a reading of the structures of different types of collections and museums as being organized according to complementary theories of classifying the world. Crucially, she views the museum not just as a cultural form, but also as a constructed object, which has followed an intellectual logic. Hooper-Greenhill applies a formalist analysis to the layout of objects within a museum space, arguing that this not only

represents the world-view of the author of the space, but also shapes the understanding of the on-looker. This understanding of museum exhibitions also underlies the analysis undertaken in later chapters of this thesis.

In a later book, Hooper-Greenhill reiterates her argument that the physical position of an object is deeply related to its conceptual position within a museum, but concedes that the meaning is produced ‘through complex and multi-layered museological processes where museum objectives, collecting policies, classification methods, display styles, artefactual groupings, and textual frameworks come together in articulation’ (2000: 124). This is a useful reminder that not one of the individual details within the mechanism of an exhibition is arbitrary; nor do these represent final and fixed meanings. All are products of a series of contingent choices, and all are subject to the sometimes-unpredictable interpretive process of the audience. As Kevin Hetherington has noted in a review of recent books about gallery display, authors on gallery display all too often describe exhibition space and audiences as static:

What is somehow missing [...] I would argue, is a systematic analysis of the space of the gallery itself. What [the literature has] in common is an historical question about which objects went into which galleries, to what end, and how they were arranged and the practices and debates that surrounded them as those arrangements changed over time. Yet [...] social spaces are not containers in which subjects and objects are simply placed and in which the action then happens, rather they are made as spaces through the changing relations between subjects and objects. The gallery is never empty and waiting to be filled with subjects, objects, discourses (or signs), rather its condition of possibility as a gallery is brought into play through the tensions established around subjects, objects, discourses and signs. (Hetherington 2010: 116)

Thus, Hetherington suggests, meaning is produced discursively from the interactions between the elements of an exhibition, and cannot be considered as springing from one source alone.

As Kathleen McLean (1993) has pointed out, there are many different types of exhibitions. Some are primarily object-based, while others may demonstrate dynamic phenomena; still others may be topical or thematic, dealing in concepts, not things. In addition to content, the form of exhibitions may vary. ‘Permanent’ (in reality, merely long-term) installations in galleries can tend to be summative narratives on ideas or themes well-represented within the collection, while temporary displays can afford museums the opportunity to experiment with new techniques, debate new or topical ideas, or to show objects not already on permanent display. Regardless of their specific content, and across the range of forms, however, exhibitions nevertheless conform to particular conventions, as alluded to above. The definition provided by the *Standard Practices Handbook for Museums* reflects the expectation of a recognizable format:

An exhibit is the medium used by museums for presenting and interpreting objects to the public. Exhibits use some combination of objects, text, graphics, props, furniture or architectural elements to create a physical space dedicated to the exploration of specific themes and messages. (Hayward 2001: 314)

An obligation to the community is emphasized here, and interpretation is highlighted as the purpose of exhibition; indeed, it is this aspect of exhibitions, rather than their visual and material elements, which has garnered the most attention from museological authors.

Public Function and Communicative Purpose

Exhibitions, on the face of it, are put on in order to provide a venue for public access to the collected and preserved objects of cultural value that are at the heart of a museum’s mission. Literature defining the role and purpose of museums includes statements such as: ‘The museum uses its exhibition program to make its collections physically and intellectually accessible to the public’ (Hayward 2001: 319).

Exhibitions thus provide a use value for collected objects, by providing a venue wherein their cultural significance can be displayed and expressed following certain conventions for an audience assumed to have the right to access them: ‘The museum uses exhibition planning to make its collections accessible in ways which meet the needs and expectations of its audiences’ (Hayward 2001: 319). This moral duty to exhibit defines public heritage institutions, although, as will be discussed further in this chapter, this and almost every other assumption about exhibitions can be problematised.

‘The primary function of any museum exhibit’, wrote Lee Parsons in 1965, ‘is to communicate’ (Parsons 1965:167), and nearly forty years later, this is still held to be true: ‘Exhibitions provide a means for the museum to communicate with its audiences by placing objects in meaningful, accessible contexts’ (Hayward 2001: 314). Both these quotes also suggest the linearity – that is, the non-reciprocity – of museum communication, however. The museum’s uni-directional utterance is directed to an audience, and these authors assume it to be eagerly and accurately received. It is only recently that this assumption has been questioned (see below).

The narrative of the traditional museum display is related to methods of classifying knowledge more broadly, as alluded to above. Arising alongside literary forms such as atlases, and later, encyclopaedias, and combined with the accumulation of global souvenirs in collector’s cabinets, by the nineteenth century, the contents of the museum were organized according to intellectual categories superimposed upon objects. Although differences necessarily existed in different geographical contexts and disciplines, the intellectual project of collecting the world remained relatively

stable. Tony Bennett has written convincingly of the connection between the simultaneous evolution of the ordering systems for things and ideas, which he calls ‘the exhibitionary complex’:

For the emergence of the art museum was closely related to that of a wider range of institutions – history and natural science museums, dioramas and panoramas, national, and later, international exhibitions, arcades and department stores – which served as linked sites for the development and circulation of new disciplines (history, biology, art history, anthropology) and their discursive formations (the past, evolution, aesthetics, man) as well as for the development of new technologies of vision. (Bennett 1995: 333)

Furthermore, these varied categories served a communicative purpose and their communications were believed to function in broadly similar ways. Once museums were no longer collection stores to be shared among like-minded scholars, but open to the public at large (conceived as a body of ideal citizens, under-educated, but open to paternalistic persuasion), their communicative function grew in importance, where information could be interpreted as a form of coercion. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill traces the tale from where Bennett leaves off:

The modernist museum collected objects and placed them on display. Visual statements, constructed through objects placed in carefully constructed relationships, presented aspects of a European world-view. The power of display as a method of communication lies in its capacity to produce visual narratives that are apparently harmonious, unified and complete. These holistic and apparently inevitable visual narratives, generally presented with anonymous authority, legitimized specific attitudes and opinions and gave them the status of truth. Display is a one-way method of mass communications – once it is completed and open to the public it is very difficult to modify. In the modernist museum, the voice of the visitor was not heard. (Hooper-Greenhill 2007: 81)

It is clear from both Bennett’s and Hooper-Greenhill’s analyses that this museal form had political implications – an underlying propagandistic agenda communicated through the display of objects visually supporting that message. Texts of the modernist period are overt about the linear narrative and civilizing goals of the museum display:

The very aim of the museum exhibition in our society would seem to be the presentation, and the interpretation, of ‘relation-sets’ re-creating in a variety of

ways man's extended environment as it stretches beyond the reach of our senses, across space and time. Adequately selected and presented, exhibitions of this kind will contribute to the shaping of a common up-to-date imagery and influence the conduct of city dweller bereft of a cultural heritage, which under more primitive conditions of life finds expression in folksong, legend and custom. (Whittlen 1949: 205)

The museum, as understood by Whittlen (an early researcher into museum education), had the authority and the mission for shaping behaviour: simultaneously reflecting and creating a desirable common culture for an urban, industrialized, and secular society. The lasting impacts of this collectivity, especially for those groups and individuals not included in this world-view have only recently been questioned and the univocal nature of the museum problematised (e.g.: Kaplan 2002; Crooke 2007). Donald Ragsdale has even classified museums into typologies 'based on persuasive intent', wherein the museum is variously positioned as:

- cultural icon
- polemic
- collective memory
- partisan advocate
- pure visual persuasion

(Ragsdale 2009: 12)

In Ragsdale's analysis, the entire museum project – the building, collections, exhibitions, and all other functions – are party to the overall persuasive message.

With the expectation of this public role for museums as a civilizing force, mere display – the fetishism of access to a hoard of artefacts, as in early private collections – has long been decried in museological literature. A 1963 newspaper article surveying recent museum redesigns noted 'the growing number of improvements in design and planning which are gradually obliterating the image of the museum as too

often it appeared in the past – a miscellany of objects, meagrely labelled, huddled in somewhat unprepossessing cases and frequently dwarfed by immensities of nineteenth-century architecture’ (Museums Correspondent 1963: 13). Exhibitions, it was said, must serve a higher purpose:

The significant difference, of course, between an attic, or even a dime-store display window, and a visually complex museum exhibit is that the latter is meaningfully organized. The personal associations and discoveries made available in this kind of museum exhibit should make lasting impressions and be inherently educational. (Parsons 1965: 188)

Education is therefore clearly an extension of the public obligation of the museum, and in museological writing is often distilled out of the informational intent of the museum collection. In the instance of an exhibition, rather than a lecture or guided activity, education takes the form of a careful symbolic association between visual elements – the masterful coordination of medium into message. The 1963 article cited above continued:

A general survey of the efforts made of late years reveals a main purpose common to museums otherwise varying in character. Basically, the purpose is to engage the attention and serve the needs of the public as a whole as effectively as possible. It entails giving the objects shown their full measure of interest and importance by more imaginative and informative presentation. A variety of visual means contributes to this end: the logical arrangement and considered placing of the objects themselves; background colour and texture and lighting directed to bring out the value of the exhibit; and the use, where appropriate, of explanatory matter in the shape of photographs, drawings, dioramas, etc., accompanied by clearly legible lettering and printed description. (Museums Correspondent 1963: 13)

The modernist museum was increasingly astute in means by which to manipulate audience experience, but this experience was nevertheless dictated by a paternalistic institution.

Tony Bennett likewise argues that throughout the development of museological theory, the interaction of objects and labels, the words that related to the things on view, were inevitably tied to the greater aim of public education. Their intelligibility:

[...] rested on the confluence of a number of historical processes that, in transforming the museum artefact into a pedagogic object, sought also to cleanse the eyes of the public so that, in absorbing the lessons of those objects, they might be effectively instructed in the meaning of history. (Bennett 1998: 347)

The organization of space in particular, has significant effects on the perception of meaning in a museum. Far from containing commanding slogans, museums also communicate in more subtle and varied ways, from Foucauldian methods of coercive power (see Bal 1996a for examples), to cues or triggers for very personal, esoteric experiences contained within the viewer's own mind (Crane 2000). The curator-educator's job in the modernist museum was to create a semiotic utterance from all the textual, spatial, physical, and sensory means at their disposal.

Means of Museum Communication

As was suggested in the previous section, the communicative content of exhibitions is influenced by what is put on show but also how it is displayed. It is of course important to note that exhibitions of different disciplines have different dominant forms and narratives; in keeping with the larger scope of this thesis, then, this chapter examines mostly literature that relates to art and cultural or social history exhibitions, rather than attempting to also tackle the very different mechanics of science, medicine, ethnographic, and/or natural history exhibitions.

Some generalizations across disciplines can be drawn, however. For example, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, one of the very few authors who have done any significant work on the communicative nature of exhibitions, suggests that they be analyzed as a form of mass media, as: 'Many exhibitions share the major characteristic of most forms of mass communication in that they involve a one-way process, a single message source

with a large group of receivers, and the messages themselves are in the public domain' (Hooper-Greenhill 1999: 6). Hooper-Greenhill herself, along with many others, have proposed that the precise form of this mass communication is primarily visual, although this section will also indicate others.

Theories of communication that might have served to explain the precise nature and effectiveness of the museal utterance tend instead to focus on the verbal – written or spoken (e.g.: Ravelli 2006). However, it is clear that a museum contains many more types of communication, from the verbal (oral and textual), to the physical and visual (see: Silverstone 1994). While the first section of this chapter did provide an overview of vocabulary for the mechanics of an exhibition, the complexity of the display assemblage means it is difficult to determine the communicative power of any given aspect. As Hooper-Greenhill writes:

If individual objects are complex in relation to meaning, exhibitions – groups of objects combined with words and images – are more complex still. Here, meaning lies in the relationships between the objects and other elements; it is combinatorial and relational. The ideas that displays have been mounted to communicate are sometimes (but not always) clearly suggested in the texts of the exhibition, which may offer a preferred interpretation of the various visual elements. However, experience of the visual is not the same as experience of the text; it is more open and at the same time more difficult to talk about. (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 3-4)

Techniques of literary analysis are well-developed, and it has been all too easy for authors to read the museum as a text, focusing only on text (see critique of Noyes Platt 1988 in the Introduction). In reality, however, the written word makes up only a small portion of an exhibition.

The dominant exhibitionary form is the spectacular. Despite potentially being made up of various elements (objects, text, graphics, light, sound, live interpretation, and interactive technologies), exhibitions 'communicate through the senses, the primary

sense being visual, by a process that is both cognitive and cultural. This process encompasses the way people think about what they see and the meanings they attach to it' (Kaplan 2002: 37). Early museological writings even conflated curatorial practice with visual psychology, defining a 'trained museologist' as 'an educationalist familiar with the problems of visual perception' (Whittlin 1949: 194). As stated in the previous section, the primacy of the visual sense in museal experience was a result of the history of the institution:

This flourishing of museums and exhibitions is bound up with the development of distinctive modern ways of seeing the world. For modern cosmopolitan Europeans [...] the world was to be experienced as though it was a picture. [...] This capacity of exhibitionary representation to render the world as visible and ordered was part of the instantiation of wider senses of scientific and political certainty. [...] In this, museums and exhibitions were perhaps particularly effective in that they not only provided a 'picture' but also objects and other tangible 'evidences'. (Macdonald 2007: 184-185)

Authenticity was an illusion, recognizable in a type of museum spectacle (see chapters 6 and 7 for more discussion of this issue); moreover, 'spectacular design causes visitors to suspend disbelief and accept the new reality created for them' (Counts 2009: 374). The visual sense, then, was not one that relied on pure physical perception, but on a disciplined cognition and interpretation of that vision:

In the museum, objects or artefacts are put on display. They are there to be looked at. Museums are sites of spectacle, expository spaces, where exhibitionary complexes are sited. Museums pride themselves on being places where 'real objects' can be seen. This notion of 'the real' is a powerful and enduring one. However, the assumption that vision is autonomous, and that objects are unmediated needs to be examined. Vision should be aligned with interpretation rather than perception. (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 14-15)

The paradox of the exhibition, however, and one that is acknowledged by Hooper-Greenhill (2000: 15), is that this attitude suggests that observers already think know what they are looking at and how to look at it, at the same time as being educated to do so (perhaps in a different way) by the museum. The existence of the cognitive schema and aesthetic fluency, as well as a complicity in the museum's ideological place in society (Baxandall's 'museum set', 1991: 33) are necessary to engage with

museum objects and exhibitions. The longevity of the traditional exhibitionary form in Western culture might be explained by the fact that the configurations between viewers and objects are so flexible and easily changed.

Although it is clearly in line with the traditional philosophical discourses privileging the optical over the material in Western civilization, it remains to examine precisely how the museum minimizes the materiality of its collected objects through the scopic regimes of display. As Sandra Dudley suggests, some of this has to do with intellectual aims:

In particular, the museum's preoccupation with information and the way it is juxtaposed with objects – the biographies of historical objects and the persons associated with them, the classification and scientific significance of natural history specimens, the demonstration by ethnographic artefacts of aspects of particular ways of life – immediately takes the museum visitor one step beyond the material, physical thing they see displayed before them, away from the emotional and other possibilities that may lie in their sensory interaction with it. (Dudley 2010: 4)

Indeed, Tony Bennett provides a useful overview of the changing relationships between things, words, and ideas, maintaining that throughout, the visual sense was privileged above all others (Bennett 1998). Moreover, materiality can also be manipulated to support the museum's intellectual authority through clever staging, as Mieke Bal has noted:

Just as there is a rhetoric that produces an effect of the real, so there is one that produces the effect of materiality. Authenticating an interpretation because it is grounded in acts of seeing or, more strongly, in perceptible material properties, is a rhetorical use of materiality. (Bal 2003: 8)

Intellectualizing objects can heighten the effect of the intellectual distance already physically imposed upon audiences by the museum through glass display cases, stanchions, and other barriers, and muffle engagement with the remembered or imagined materiality of the objects on display (see also Chapter 7). Rationality, and therefore civilization are thus appealed to. Svetlana Alpers argues that the ways in

which a museum compels its audiences to look at objects – ‘the museum effect’ – is a historically-constructed method of endowing objects with an external set of aesthetic and cultural values (1991: 26-27). Thus, vision is used as the channel for educational content, under which the particularity of the material objects is subsumed. In order to enact the classificatory, informational, and educational aims of exhibitions, subtle techniques are used to guide spectator’s responses, restricting physical access to objects at the same time as increasing intellectual dominance over them (see also: Bal 1996a).

Navigating Space

While Tony Bennett used Foucauldian theory to suggest that museums are a disciplinary space, both he and Foucault remained vague about the precise nature of the disciplining environment. The sightlines afforded by traditional museum architecture have been mooted as spaces of observation of both art and artefacts, as well as of other people viewing art and artefacts, but very few authors have discussed the specific ways in which the museal experience is managed at an institutional or an individual level. Jennifer Fisher, although writing about filmic representations of museum space, contends at least that:

[...] aesthetic experience is administrated and contained through the behavioural protocols of the gallery space: speaking in hushed tones, not touching works of art, refraining from running. We are guided to contemplative conduct by the presence of museum personnel: museum guards who police apprehension, volunteer guides who exemplify the ‘ideal viewer’, and from time to time curators who, heir to the class of connoisseurs, perform *savoir faire* through their physical manner and style. (Fisher 2002: 197)

This style of navigation through the museal space, at once physical and intellectual, was produced largely in the nineteenth century, along with other forms of Bennett’s exhibitionary complex. These forms had familiar expectations, as David Dernie

describes in his review of the commonalities and differences of the visual and spatial methodologies of the three early display types:

[...] cabinet rooms, progressive galleries and period rooms. The cabinet is used in part because of the obvious practical need to remove objects from the visitor's reach, but it also reflects a display type well established in the tradition of private curiosity cabinets and, later, in the way in which new products came to be displayed in early department stores. The spatial format of enfilade rooms was of course derived from earlier architectural types (and adopted buildings, such as former palaces). The enfilade enabled clear progress through the exhibition, provided a visual link between related rooms and sufficient spatial coherence in each room to house clusters of objects sensibly. Finally, the period room was an assemblage of various elements [...] from a particular time frame which contextualized a given set of objects. (Dernie 2006: 8)

Dernie observes only one other display style, which developed to better complement abstract art: the white-walled, minimally-decorated gallery, devoid of chronological or taxonomic specificity, which highlights the aesthetic effects of the work itself (Dernie 2006: 9; see also chapter 5). In keeping with the visionary transference of the nineteenth-century proposed by Bennett, Dernie notes the continuing connections between the spaces of cultural and commercial institutions (see chapter 4).

Behavioural codes in these similar architectural spaces varied, however. Early museum space was just as much about socializing and civilizing the bodies as it was the minds and eyes of its visitors, as Helen Rees Leahy writes:

The emergence of art exhibitions and museums in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries constituted a new public arena for looking, walking, standing, talking, reading, writing, sitting and, occasionally, touching. The museum's explicit regulations (rules and bylaws) and implicit codes (spatial and visual) combined to instruct visitors in the acquisition of a repertoire of appropriate 'bodily techniques'. Crucially, the emulation of more practiced spectators has always been an important aspect of art education (and civic instruction) performed within the arena of the exhibition: if visitors could be made to walk properly, they would also learn to look properly. (Rees Leahy 2010: 162)

Rees Leahy and Rosemary Flanders (1999) both emphasize the role of the nineteenth-century popular press in promulgating the codes of physical comportment in museums

alongside as its intellectual goals. Thus, codes of conduct learned in the press could be reinforced through practice in the gallery, and vice versa.

Besides learning how to navigate in the spaces presented to them, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill highlights the importance of museum visitors learning how to navigate and ‘read’ the significances of these spaces as a form of visual language, where the abstract concepts thought to be inherent in the objects on display were communicated through their concomitant symbolic organization in the gallery:

The experience of a visitor to the collections was that of a quantified observation of a rationalized, visual order. Vision is the most distancing of the senses, and in museums, this meant that visitors kept their distance from the displays. In art galleries, paintings were hung at what was considered an optimum height and distance for viewing; in museums, the glass case performed the function of defining the appropriate viewing conditions and distance. The display cases acted as ways of dividing up both the objects and the statements made by the grouped objects – the cases acted as punctuation marks to better articulate the message of the museum. The museum halls were arranged with carefully spaced and ordered identical display cases, each with its own group of objects systematically placed in their proper places, thus (it was thought) enabling the absorption of a large quantity of material. The spatial arrangements were straightforward and easy to see and comprehend and the relationship of the visitor to the knowledge offered was as far as possible direct and unmediated. (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 129-130)

Hooper-Greenhill’s use of the word ‘unmediated’ does not suggest that the selection or arrangement of objects did not presuppose an intended reading; instead, she highlights again the seductive illusion of possession invoked by museal spectatorship. The powerful myth of seeing the ‘real’ and (intellectually) grasping its ontological certainty, discussed above, was further highlighted by the organization of space (*cf.* Whittlin 1949: 188-189).

A specific example can illuminate the general principles suggested by Fisher, Rees Leahy and Hooper-Greenhill, above. Michelle Henning, in her discussion of a particular type of display – the diorama – suggests that this exhibitionary form’s

effectiveness lay in its ability to subjugate the viewer's senses and create awe. The physical space of dioramas, she argues, sought to influence visitor behaviour and response, addressing 'the problem of over-accumulation and the consequent distracted and drifting attention of visitors. The diorama hall, with its darkened centre, illuminated scenes, and overwhelming attention to detail, closes off distractions. [... it] offers an illusion of coherence' (Henning 2006: 44). The result of this illusion, argues Henning, is not that spectators are duped into believing they are actually entering reality, but rather, they are impressed at the museum's ability to masterfully create a sense of authenticity; this is a type of appreciation akin to the awe of technical perfection visible in a film or hyper-realistic painting, for example (Henning 2006: 58-59). Equally, the lack of external or contradictory detail allows visitors to suspend their disbelief and perhaps even their critical faculties and enter fully (albeit knowingly) into the illusion. All this is possible without allowing the visitor to reassure themselves of the reality through their sense of touch. Similar and related 'theatrical' effects are further discussed in Chapter 5.

Narrative Vision

The careful management of the physical space into a series of visual vignettes, then, highlights further the significance and symbolism of the layout of its contents. The intellectual subject matter of the exhibition is therefore supported by its physical layout and visual tropes, creating communicative coherence and a convincing 'reality effect' (Bal 1992). Here, then, discipline-specific epistemological narratives must blend with design in a thoughtful manner in order to effectively influence audiences toward an intended learning outcome. Actual display objectives are described by Giles Velarde, and can be summarized as follows:

- To sell⁵
- To persuade
- To expose
- To parade
- To inform (describe, explain, advise or interest)
- To delight
- To enlighten

(After Velarde 1988: 50-51)

To these, one can also add:

- To entertain
- To titillate
- To shock or provoke

and possibly to evoke other emotional reactions such as pride, belonging, and similar.

One or several of these narrative goals are usually overtly expressed or suggested in an exhibition or display through the arrangement of objects in three-dimensional space.

The traditional attitude toward exhibit design was perfectly expressed by Lee A. Parsons in his 1965 essay comparatively evaluating display techniques. Parsons concludes that:

Museum exhibits that display a wide range of objects do not have to be monotonous, chaotic, or even unattractive. [...] A visually complex exhibit which is well designed can subtly guide the viewer's inevitable associations and conclusions. But it can also allow the viewer to make additional deductions on his own initiative, since a variety of specimens are available for

⁵ Velarde's book includes discussions of commercial displays, but it is important to note that museum displays do occasionally have commercial tie-ins.

his perusal and comparison. The key factor, then, in a successful exhibit (and by successful I mean one that communicates the intended message) is that it does not violate the basic principles of good design. A successful exhibit is so well thought out that its visual organization is clear and unambiguous.

(Parsons 1965: 188)

Parsons (see also Whittlin 1949: 206) clearly takes exhibition narrative space as a manipulation of viewer response, although he does not take this possibility to its logical conclusion and go so far as to suggest any kind of postmodern relativism about the impossibility of truth or the dubious authenticity of objects. The fact of the museum communicating the intended message seems for him to imply that the viewer acts on the communication as directed. His underlying assumptions about the responsibility of the museum more likely echoed another contemporary publication:

The cardinal principles in creating an exhibit are accurate interpretation of the object, clarity, and simplicity in presentation. [...] It begins with thorough research about the material in the exhibit, and hopefully it results in a thought-provoking and informative experience for the visitor. [...] the objects in the story being told are more important than any exhibit techniques; the preparator should remember that his techniques are the means to an end and are not, in themselves, an end. A balance between objects and interpretive aids is of utmost importance. (Bowditch and Sweeney 1969: 1)

The words of this technical pamphlet are very much in the tradition of the modernist museum thinking described by Hooper-Greenhill above: while visitor response can be manipulated through visual means, the purpose is to express a fixed content of historical truth (see also Jones 2010 for a discussion of museums and the construction of authenticity). It is reception, not content which is manipulated in this type of museum communication, and the museum's message is intended to be received like a command or at the very least a convincing suggestion.

Camilla Mordhorst refers to the modernist narrative form as the 'additive narrative', and she defines it as follows:

In the additive narrative, events are *meaningfully* linked by their chronological relationship to each other. The chronological ordering of objects locates them not only in time but also in a *development*. The temporal hierarchy of past

events creates a connection of unarticulated causality, whereby earlier events 'create' later events. (Mordhorst 2002: 2-3)

Mordhorst continues by describing how this narrative is expressed in a museum

setting:

In the additive narrative objects are presented as primary. The selection process necessarily is involved - the absence of certain objects, the premises of interpretation etc. are ignored, as if objects speak for themselves. The 'referential illusion' of this narrative form is underlined by the constant emphasis on the authenticity of the objects. [...] In exhibitions, objects are traditionally placed behind glass, where alarms, dimmed lights, and careful mounting indicate that precisely these objects are particularly valuable because of their authenticity. (Mordhorst 2002: 3)

As the above quote might suggest, this is problematic; curatorial authority in the additive narrative is not only unquestioned but assumed to fully reflect some objective reality. Attentive analysis reveals obvious flaws in this assumption. For one, artefacts in a museum, taken out of their original context, take on other, new meanings, as Crew and Sims suggest: 'With objects transformed from one temporal continuity of use to another, their meanings are entirely reconstituted: the proximity of things to one another perhaps has more authority, more readable meaning than the things themselves' (Crew and Sims 1991: 163). Thus, the narrative created by association between disparate objects gains importance over the objects themselves:

Artefacts do not lose their importance or power when historical interpretation directs an exhibition, although they do lose their primacy. Rather than shaping the exhibition, their use is shaped by the themes of the exhibition. Their provenance becomes less important than their corroborative powers. ... Objects presented within an exhibition in this manner are used generically, offered as representative of the types of objects that could have been used in that setting. (Crew and Sims 1991: 171)

Objects can be interpreted for their formal qualities or in a functional, sociological, cultural, natural, or historical context. Semiotic approaches in museology (using narrative analysis tools imported from literary theory and applied more broadly towards images and objects) seek to analyze the ways in which objects and their arrangements are used symbolically within museum space to produce meaning (see: Ravelli 2006). Contemporary texts about museum exhibitions design (e.g.: Dean

1994; Lord and Lord 2002; Dernie 2006) provide step-by-step instructions for undertaking each aspect of the display process, unabashedly noting the most effective means of manipulating viewer experience through physical and psychological means. In turn, the ideal viewer must be complicit with this arrangement and trust that the exhibition team has put together this semiotic uttering – a historical narrative assembled with techniques of collage – in a literate way.

Crucially, for the traditional educational premise of an exhibition to succeed, the viewer themselves must have sufficient literacy in the museological semiotic style to be able to abstract intellectual content within the displayed assemblage. Furthermore, they must believe that communication is supposed to take place. In his classic text, Eugenio Donato underlines the ultimate museum myth of meaning:

The set of objects the Museum [*sic*] displays is sustained only by the fiction that they somehow constitute a coherent representational universe. The fiction is that a repeated metonymic displacement of fragment for totality, object to label, series of objects to series of labels, can still produce a representation which is somehow adequate to a nonlinguistic universe. Such a fiction is the result of an uncritical belief in the notion that ordering and classifying, that is to say the spatial juxtaposition of fragments, can produce a representational understanding of the world. Should the fiction disappear, there is nothing left of the Museum [*sic*] but ‘bric-a-brac’, a heap of meaningless and valueless fragments of objects which are incapable of substituting themselves either metonymically for the original objects or metaphorically for their representation. (Donato 1979: 223)

To some extent, visitors need to have a grasp of the same kind of historical thinking and skills as do curators, in order to fully engage with visual conventions that extract meaning from the representative ‘bric-a-brac’. If the audience is not a *tabula rasa* after all, then what can the museum teach them?

Education and Effectiveness: Meaning-Making

With the emergence of more sophisticated models of communication and education, the linearity of acculturation and information transmission (from authority to passive audience) is no longer assumed. Not only might the message and its means of transmission not be singular, but the response from the audience/learner might not even be directly related to the intended content of the message. As mentioned in the methodology section of the introduction to this thesis, determining audience reception in a historical context is nearly impossible; an in-depth analysis of methods for audience evaluation would be largely irrelevant to the scope of this research project, and therefore, this section of the literature review, seeks instead to briefly review the ways in which exhibition creators have considered the needs and responses of their museum visitors.

Museums, as argued above, are part of the social complex of cultural communication and education; ever mindful of their educational purpose, they took up the debate and attempted to apply it to the museal environment (*cf.* Whittlin 1949; Durbin 1996).

This was not without its challenges, as Eilean Hooper-Greenhill noted:

Within museums, the phenomenon of display (or of exhibition) remains the major form of pedagogy. It is the experience of the displays that for most visitors defines the museum, and it is through displays that museums produce and communicate knowledge. However, exhibitions, as visual technologies, are problematic forms of pedagogy. Methods of producing exhibitions are well-developed, with museum professionals very clear about how objects should be brought together, considered from the point of view of physical care, and placed on public display; but the interpretation made by visitors of exhibitions are much less well understood, analyzed or researched. (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 4)

Therefore, the crucial end-point of the museum communication formula has been, until recently, rather neglected.

The early days of audience research were still guided by modernist notions of museal authority. Thus, studies tended to examine the extent to which visitors assimilated the intended message of the display, and which techniques might facilitate this communication best:

A great variety of display techniques are available to a designer of exhibits all depending upon his creative skill, intuition and experience. But, do we really know which techniques will achieve the greatest success in communicating a particular topic? Surprisingly little attention has been given to the actual testing of the relative effectiveness of different forms of visual communication in the museum. (Parsons 1969: 167)

With the development of the new theories of acculturation noted above, however, a focus on the visitor emerged:

Research on the interpretive strategies used in exhibitions by visitors with different knowledges, skills, and interests, with different cultural backgrounds and of different genders is urgently needed, but there is little detailed material as yet. However, a range of strategies are now beginning to be used in the development of exhibitions that effectively increase the likelihood that more visitors will find them of relevance and interest. (Hooper-Greenhill 1999: 19)

Now accepting that visitors brought with them their own bundles of knowledge and experience, which they applied to the learning process, studies sought to analyze visitor behaviour, response, and cultural background in order to evaluate exhibitionary effectiveness, rather than only 'testing' the quantity of facts learned against pre-set goals. Still, museums with more easily quantifiable learning objectives and straightforward narratives (such as science and natural history museums, though these are also not as uncomplicated as they may first appear) have tended to lend themselves more easily to survey analysis, and as a result, the literature reflects the behaviours and make-up of the audiences of this type of heritage institution over history or art museums (Caulton 1998: 24-25). Furthermore, even the aim of understanding audiences only serves to further refine learning goals, the achievement of which can then be evaluated, instead of giving them up altogether or making them more flexible.

Because, as Hooper-Greenhill notes, education was seen as the heart of the museum mission, the effectiveness of exhibitions at ‘imparting information to people and influencing their minds’ (Whittlin 1949: 206) was therefore of great concern from the very beginnings of theoretical museology, and as a result, as noted above, some of the work on exhibition design is quite cynical about manipulating viewership to best effect. Some of these concerns stem from the modernist conception of learning, and the fear that if the method of communication was flawed, the message would be garbled, and the chance at comprehension would be lost:

In the absence of goodness of arrangement, spectators will view an exhibition but not perceive it properly or fully; no understanding will result and the process of perception will remain uncompleted. In absence of definite order and coherence, misinterpretation will occur in accordance with the human ‘effort after meaning’ which will have been undertaken on insufficient premises, and the emotional dissatisfaction of the visitor will express itself in for of the well-known ‘museum fatigue’. (Whittlin 1949: 206-207)

Modern museology is less panicked and the tone is less strident, but the concern with comprehension is still evident:

Exhibitions are produced to communicate meaningful visual and textual statements, but there is no guarantee that the intended meaning will be achieved. Visitors to museum exhibitions respond in diverse ways. They may or may not perceive the intended meanings, and, perceiving them, they may or may not agree with them, find them interesting, or pay attention to them. (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 4)

Consequently, instead of ‘knowledge’, or ‘civilization’, the new keyword for the intended outcome of exhibitions has become ‘meaning-making’, a term much more inclusive of the potential contribution of the visitor themselves to the interpretive content of an exhibition.

In a special issue of the *Exhibitionist* journal, Jay Rounds summarized the traditional and emerging theories of education, and their implications for the museum. His

description of the contrasting paradigms for communication is worth quoting at length:

[...] the meaning-making paradigm (“M-M”) differs from the cultural-transmission paradigm (“C-T”) in some critical ways. Where C-T sees a one-way transmission of information from the expert to the novice, M-M sees a two-way interaction through which knowledge and/or meaning is constructed anew in each case. Where C-T understands the learner as a passive receptacle, M-M sees an active agent. Where C-T sees outcomes in terms of the acquisition of the culture, M-M defines outcomes in terms of the construction of meaning. Where C-T aims at a perfect, mistake-free transmission of factual knowledge from teacher to learner, M-M confronts the complex and ambiguous challenge of facilitating a highly-individual process of interpretation that nonetheless is tremendously influenced by culture. Most fundamentally, though, the difference lies in the difficult and elusive distinction between “fact” and “meanings”, and the respective roles they play in the way that individual human beings manage their lives in human societies. If museum exhibits were formerly understood in the relatively simple terms of cultural transmission, adoption of the meaning-making paradigm requires us to produce a far more complex model of what happens when visitors encounter exhibits. (Rounds 1999: 6)

Clearly, this more flexible model requires a greater concern for the spectrum of visitor experience, as well as more careful and circumspect exhibition design. In the same year as Rounds’ article, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill reflected that:

Exhibitions are not always thought of as learning materials, but they are the environment where learning takes place, and they provide the framework for the meaning-making processes of visitors through the way they structure objects and ideas. Just as learning materials are designed according to the needs of who is to learn, so exhibitions must consider who is going to use them, and be designed accordingly. [...] The development of exhibitions needs to take account of both what people want to know, would be interested in, and how they can come to know it – how they learn. The development process needs to be based on the cultural model of communication, with consultation and collaboration with audiences built into it. (Hooper-Greenhill 1999: 19)

The new theory and outcomes were thus established, but the difficult process of applying them to the physical reality of museum space, still so entrenched in traditional modes, is ongoing.

Some of the challenge lies in breaking through staff and visitor conservatism in their expectations of exhibitionary outcome and product. Graham Black, reflecting on the

traditional ‘one-way process of communication from museum to audience rather than a two-way process involving museum and audience as equal partners’ (Black 2005: 183) suggests ‘an approach to presenting the heritage which seeks to engage and involve the audience with “the real thing”, to encourage participation and, through that, to assist visitors to develop the skills to explore for themselves and so enhance their own understanding’ (Black 2005: 185). This is a compromise, rather than a ground-breaking innovation. He admits, furthermore, that:

It is actually quite easy to prepare a brief for a traditional didactically-led glass case and graphic panel exhibition. It is much more difficult to develop an interpretive brief which sets out to engage and involve a diverse audience. However, the end product will go much further toward meeting the needs of museum visitors. (Black 2005: 187)

The objective of display proposed by Black seems to be less a direct message, and more a style of visual symbolism that cues individual visitor response. For this reason, a more thorough understanding of the museum’s audiences has become important in the exhibition development process.

Audience Advocates and Exhibition Experiments

Parallel with and complementary to the development in museum education has been the growing field of museum marketing. Rather than being a cynical exercise in generating revenue at the cost of content, the museum marketing literature (see: McLean 1997; Sandell and Janes 2007) has contributed refreshingly dogma-free perspectives on museum communication, visitors, and cultural value. Responding to the challenge set by policy-makers in government to expand museum offerings, impacts, and audiences (driven by what was seen as the intellectual stagnation of museums in the face of their continued expansion and growing expenditures), museum development officers have, perhaps for the first time, qualitatively and

quantitatively demonstrated who their audiences are; this is a positive development insofar as it adds a quantifiable variable to emerging formulas of exhibition development and educational policy. It has also highlighted the ways in which the museum as an institution has failed to communicate with under-represented groups, and progressive museum administrators have subsequently sought to remedy this lack. The effectiveness analyses, impact strategies, policies of greater social inclusion and community networking, as well as the very notion of museal accountability they have contributed to museum administration and management have slowly but inevitably transformed exhibitionary expectations and products. This has, on one hand, resulted in a widening of the scope of museum exhibitions – no longer strictly elitist and didactic – but on the other, has perhaps made possible a wave of exhibitions with narrow appeal or so-called blockbuster exhibitions with unsophisticated themes with mass appeal that attract hordes of paying customers. The latter is perhaps painfully ironic, as their ‘spectacular’ content encourages passive, awed looking, rather than the interactivity and reciprocity advocated as a goal in museological literature.

Related to the concern for visitor outcomes is the exhibition review, which makes up a considerable proportion of the writing on museums. In the introduction to this chapter, it was noted that exhibition reviews, while constituting a major part of the literature relating to exhibitionary practice, contain little theoretical content; however, allowing for the specificity necessary in this genre, it is nevertheless actually possible to glean some vital clues with wider relevance than to the particular exhibition being discussed. Reviews of various types – from academic peer-reviews in published journals to public evaluations undertaken internally, with measures ranging from practicalities to symbolic meanings – all contain assumptions regarding the nature,

purpose, function, and objectives of exhibitions as a whole, and these can be summarized through oblique analysis.

For example, Kathleen McLean's guidelines for exhibition criticism help to highlight the functions and values inherent in exhibitionism. Following the American Association of Museums, she provides four general guiding criteria or principles:

- organizational clarity of exhibit concepts and elements (how things are organized)
- ability of exhibition environment to welcome and accommodate visitors while reinforcing exhibition themes and goals
- appropriateness of media used to communicate exhibit messages
- overall effectiveness of communication between planners and visitors (providing clear messages)

(McLean 1993: 165)

However, McLean's (and the AAM's) criteria are very authority- and message-centred, reflecting the traditional linear view of museum communication. Audience surveys, imported from market research practice, can now reflect the fluidity of visitor learning, as Lois Silverman suggests:

Evaluation is key to learning what frames of reference visitors bring to bear on the exhibit subject matter you are addressing, what meanings they make and value. The meaning perspective shows why front-end and formative evaluation is essential to solid exhibit design. Only with understanding of visitors' interpretive frames and likely meanings can you effectively address and support multiple meanings. (Silverman 1999: 13)

A new openness to plurality is reflected in this quote, which takes into account visitor feedback and incorporates it into the museum's message. Instead of dictating knowledge and expecting its passive and perfect reception, the museum, armed with

actual facts about the reception of its message, can facilitate the learning process further.

Audience evaluation only appears to be an objective measure, grounded as it is in statistical science. It tends to focus on tangible outcomes, monitoring visitor behaviour as recorded by an observer, as well as being dependent on honest visitor self-reporting. However, as Michael Spock suggests, this may miss the intangible effects, lasting impressions, or connections made long after the fact (Spock 1999: 31). Additionally, summative evaluation frequently incorporates its own biases, evaluating only those aspects of visitor response as they relate to curatorial intent, and does not always leave room for open-ended comments by visitors that reflect their actual (possibly less-structured) reactions. It also does not help to create a professional culture based on more widely-applicable standards across museums; for this, peer review of the sort published in academic and professional journals is necessary.

Kathleen McLean's aim in her 1993 book quoted above was to encourage a vocabulary of criticism – a connoisseurship among professional peers that reflected not just layperson experience, but served as an informed external evaluation of the results of professional practice. As Beverly Serrell (2006) suggests, any reviewing framework can take into consideration the internal concerns and decision-making that were involved in the creation of the exhibition, or they can reflect the experience of the end-user and relate and analyze the formal qualities and content of the presented exhibition itself. As in art criticism, the focus can be on the process or the product, and varying amounts of context can be related to either, although the two are not mutually exclusive. Ideally, both staff goals and visitor experience are integrated into

a rounded critique (Blatti 2003). Marlene Chambers has pointed out that most exhibition reviews, however, nevertheless focus primarily on visitor learning (or meaning-making), and not on other experiential factors:

Most of today's exhibition criticism is grounded in three schools of thought. Yankee Trader criticism, with its authoritarian, didactic emphasis on putting across a message; Houdini criticism, which focuses on escaping the culturally conditioned paradigms that shape our messages and their meanings; and LEGO criticism, which views meaning-making as a shared social process. (Chambers 1999: 391)

Indeed, the literature reviewed in this chapter generally has reflected these same preoccupations; the exhibition is seen as a communicative act fundamental to the museum mission.

What all the means of analysis, criticism and review reflect is the constructed and artificial nature of the exhibitionary medium, which is far from being a straightforward means of communication or a natural arrangement of objects.

Depending on the perspective taken – the layperson, museum authority, process or product – the resulting reading of any given exhibition will be different. Likewise, its impacts will vary and evolve across time as social attitudes and cultural norms change and its audiences continue to incorporate it into their ever-growing cognitive maps of the world. The evolution of subject positions for cultural professionals (Carpentier 2011) as they relate to their audiences has changed the authority of the museum. As a means of communication, the exhibition is not always successful, and curatorial meanings are not always passively accepted; the hegemony of the museum may even elicit deliberate resistance (see: MacDonald 2000; Mason 2005).

The contradictory outcomes of exhibitions, now actively monitored, reflect the paradoxical nature of exhibitionary practice. Multiple, sometimes competing, aims, as

well as growing exhibitionary teams – each member of which has a specialized brief – result in surprises along the way. This much more fluid attitude towards the outcomes of exhibitions is reflected in the recently-published volume *Exhibition Experiments*, the editors of which wrote in their introduction: ‘Arguing that contemporary exhibitionary practice is – or should be – also an experimental practice, the contributors to this volume insist that exhibition, too, is a site for the generation rather than reproduction of knowledge and experience’ (Basu and Macdonald 2007: 2).

Many variables arise out of the complicated exchanges between the various aspects of any exhibition:

All exhibitions entail the bringing together of unlikely assemblages of people, things, ideas, texts, spaces, and different media. Curators, designers, artists, anthropologists, sponsors, visitors, artworks, artefacts, antiquities, machines, installations, display cases, spotlights, photographs, moving images, catalogues, promotional materials, object labels, audio tours, gallery guides – we might say that these constitute the apparatus of the exhibition experiment. (Basu and Macdonald 2007: 9)

Any of these assemblages might generate a new context for the knowledge and experience contained within, thus demonstrating the somewhat spontaneous nature of exhibitions, no matter how well-planned they may be.

Despite using a scientific metaphor for the title of their book and the central lynchpin of their argument, Basu and Macdonald argue that exhibitions are not as precise as science; the results are highly individual and sometimes unexpected. The excitement of the possibilities, however, is shared with science:

Nevertheless, what exhibitions offer is the opportunity to mix media and to draw from different disciplinary traditions, and in the process to explore their differential potentials. Exhibitions also typically reach a wider public than do academic texts and offer different possibilities for engaging them – including physically and within the exhibition space itself. (Basu and Macdonald 2007: 8)

The authors conclude that the value of exhibitions lies in the journey, not the destination: the methods and process rather than the quantifiable results. They argue

that the encounters between objects and ideas, curators and publics, visitors and spaces have intrinsic value.

Basu and Macdonald's work has important implications as a critique for this thesis, in that they highlight the compromise inherent in exhibition design and the multi-vocal nature of its communication. They admit that the process is not entirely esoteric, however:

While [...] there is surely always scope for readings beyond those anticipated, it is also clear that visitor readings are produced in relation to the complexities of the exhibition's affective syntax, assemblages, and spaces. (Basu and Macdonald 2007: 21)

Author Todd Oakley likewise notes the semiotic repetitions that act as mutual reinforcement across exhibitions in different institutions:

The public art museum is a highly structured space which guides individual patrons in the conceptualizations they construct about the objects on display. Even though conceptualizations produce individualistic meanings that change from one visit to another (and even during the course of the same visit) these meanings are not purely subjective. The public nature of art museums ensures that conceptualizations converge enough to make a visit to a museum a kind of experience that is recognizable and replicable among patrons. (Oakley 2001: 86)

Thus, even the most progressive museological writers who focus on less tangible outcomes, or on the process itself, still come up against the limitations and effects of the exhibitionary medium. This highlights once again the difficulty of analyzing something for which the criteria are at once circumscribed and yet little-understood. It also provides an example of the real necessity for a well-researched and bounded project (such as, it is hoped, this thesis) that examines the mutable nature of the exhibitionary form itself.

Conclusion

A museum is not merely a warehouse into which things seen fit to be memorialized are retired; it communicates through these objects by displaying them in interpretive contexts – exhibitions. Tony Bennett’s now-classic term, ‘the exhibitionary complex’, is an apt one. It can be used, as he does, to refer to spaces which encourage similar scopical regimes; however, it also reflects the complicated layers that make up the technology of display: ‘It is the interactions between people, real objects, phenomena, and ideas that make museum exhibitions unique’ (McLean 1993: 15). The exhibitionary process frames its content in particular ways: these frames are both physical and intellectual: a built-up habitus shared and developed by the interactions between objects, authorities, and viewers. The exhibitionary medium may seek to be invisible or unobtrusive, but it is pervasive.

Exhibitions are defined by their conventions, developed in the nineteenth century and earlier. Not only do they often flatten the material into the visual, but they also substitute the textual for the tactile; their narratives are acts of representation, operating on a symbolic level. Their focus on visibility and viewer control has led to display norms that are difficult to alter radically. The display may not guarantee response: that is, the public may intuit their own (perfectly valid) interpretations not consciously facilitated by the intellectual authority of the museum, yet the museum still fundamentally frames the process by providing a time and place for the encounter and knowledge exchange to occur. While the self-reflexiveness of educational and community inclusion goals of museum administration are laudable, there is much work to be done to fully theorize the workings of all aspects of museum exhibition;

such work may help to smooth the process of including new objectives for exhibition outcomes into a medium that is a complicated sum of its historical and physical parts.

This review of the current literature on the nature and function of exhibitions has afforded both methodological and analytical support for this thesis. Writing on the components of a display and on exhibition design permitted the formation of a vocabulary with which to record and discuss the archival material studied as part of this research. The modernist positioning of the museum's moral authority to educate its public is borne out in the strongly didactic tone used within most of the exhibitions studied. Moreover, the perceived primacy of the curatorial message within exhibitionary communication also justifies the analytical framework (with its strong focus on the signification of display concepts and conventions) that structures the latter chapters of this thesis. The following chapter, however, will investigate the move toward the musealisation of historical fashion, and the early history of its appearance in exhibitions.

3. Fashion Show: Precedents for Fashion History

Exhibitions

Amnesia swaggering out in fancy-dress.
(Wright 1985: 78)

The two previous chapters have provided overviews of scholarly literature on fashion and on exhibitionary theory. This chapter attempts to identify the ways in which these two discourses meet in the practice of exhibiting fashion. This is an under-studied topic, demonstrating a gap in the literature, which this dissertation aims to partially fill. Although intended as a literature review, much of this chapter is nevertheless based on original research, especially the first section, which is a summary of the socio-cultural circumstances that surrounded the exhibiting of fashion in museums in Britain (and subsequently North America). What follows is a discussion of different constituencies across museal and academic sectors, which have until very recently been in conflict over appropriate approaches to dress curation. Some of the conclusions drawn may seem sweeping, but this is a reflection of the tone of the literature on the topic. The final section reviews the limited few recent developments in theoretical debates about fashion exhibitions in museums and signposts perspectives that will be discussed further in this dissertation.

Pre-History of Fashion Exhibitions

The earliest documented mention of a fashion museum comes from the eighteenth-century journal *The Spectator*. The 1712 article which first suggests such a notion was written by Sir Richard Steele as an indictment of male and female folly in following fashion. The author proposed ‘to have a Repository built for Fashions, as there are

Chambers for Medals and other Rarities', with the façade of the building in the shape of a Sphinx, and the architectural details imitating lace, fringe, ribbon, and other modish accessories, with a suitable poetic motto in Latin over the door. The space inside would consist of two galleries (divided into male and female categories), with shelves of false books: actually boxes containing dolls dressed in historical fashions. Contemporary designs would also be documented in a like manner, and the author humorously suggests that an old dandy, bankrupted by his interest in fashion, might be appointed Keeper. The author of this parody proposal furthermore insists that the museum will succeed because of the education in appropriate dressing that the visitor will receive; the prestige that will be afforded to England over France (the capital of fashion); the documentary evidence it would afford of the persistently extravagant nature of fashion (shaming young and old alike); and that it would free up historians for more noble pursuits:

Whereas several great Scholars, who might have been otherwise useful to the World, have spent their time in studying to describe the Dresses of the Ancients from dark Hints, which they are fain to interpret and support with much Learning, it will from henceforth happen, that they shall be freed from the Trouble, and the World from useless Volumes. (Steele 1712)

The piece is satirical, but simultaneously visionary, not least because museums devoted to any aspect of everyday life had not yet actually been founded. Its comic effect comes from the risibility of such a notion for an early eighteenth-century audience. Yet it also communicates the main objections to a fashion museum, ones that would continue to be raised for nearly two hundred years until the first fashion exhibition⁶ was staged in a museum; as was suggested in Chapter 1, fashion had long been associated with meaningless frippery, and for this reason, even serious calls for

⁶ A museum of fashion is, of course, not the same thing as a gallery of fashion in an existing museum; the latter had to become possible before the former could be founded: see below.

its close study (Planché 1834) and collection and display (Anonymous 1869), which came in the nineteenth century, were largely ignored until some decades later. The very notion of a fashion museum would continue to inspire only humour until the late nineteenth century.

In her book, *Establishing Dress History* (2004), Lou Taylor has outlined the fitful and often fraught development of collections of textiles and clothing in museums in Britain, France, Eastern Europe, and the USA. Her well-researched narrative need not be repeated at length here, but of her conclusions, it should be highlighted that, unlike other aspects of the fine and applied arts, fashionable costume was not widely seen as a natural museum object, at least in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. In addition, even at in the early stage of its musealisation, varied disciplinary approaches by collectors and curators ensured that the display of antique fashion, infrequent and uncommon as it was, was often as an accessory to narratives about materials, techniques, or political events, and not exhibited on its own merits as it is today (Taylor 1998: 340).

A confluence of factors from outside the museum world finally served to enable the exhibition of historical costume as an artefact of social history and or art in museums in the early twentieth century. As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Petrov 2008), the Museum of London's display of costume at Kensington Palace in 1912 was the first such permanent display in the UK; however, a reviewer at the time seemed unmoved by the aesthetics of the exhibition (**Fig. 3.1**), writing:

In the methods of exhibition employed for the main collection there is nothing startlingly novel. Several Tudor worsted caps, rescued from the London Ditch, and forming part of Mr. Seymour Lucas's large collection, are effectively displayed on roughly carved wooden heads, with the hair represented in the

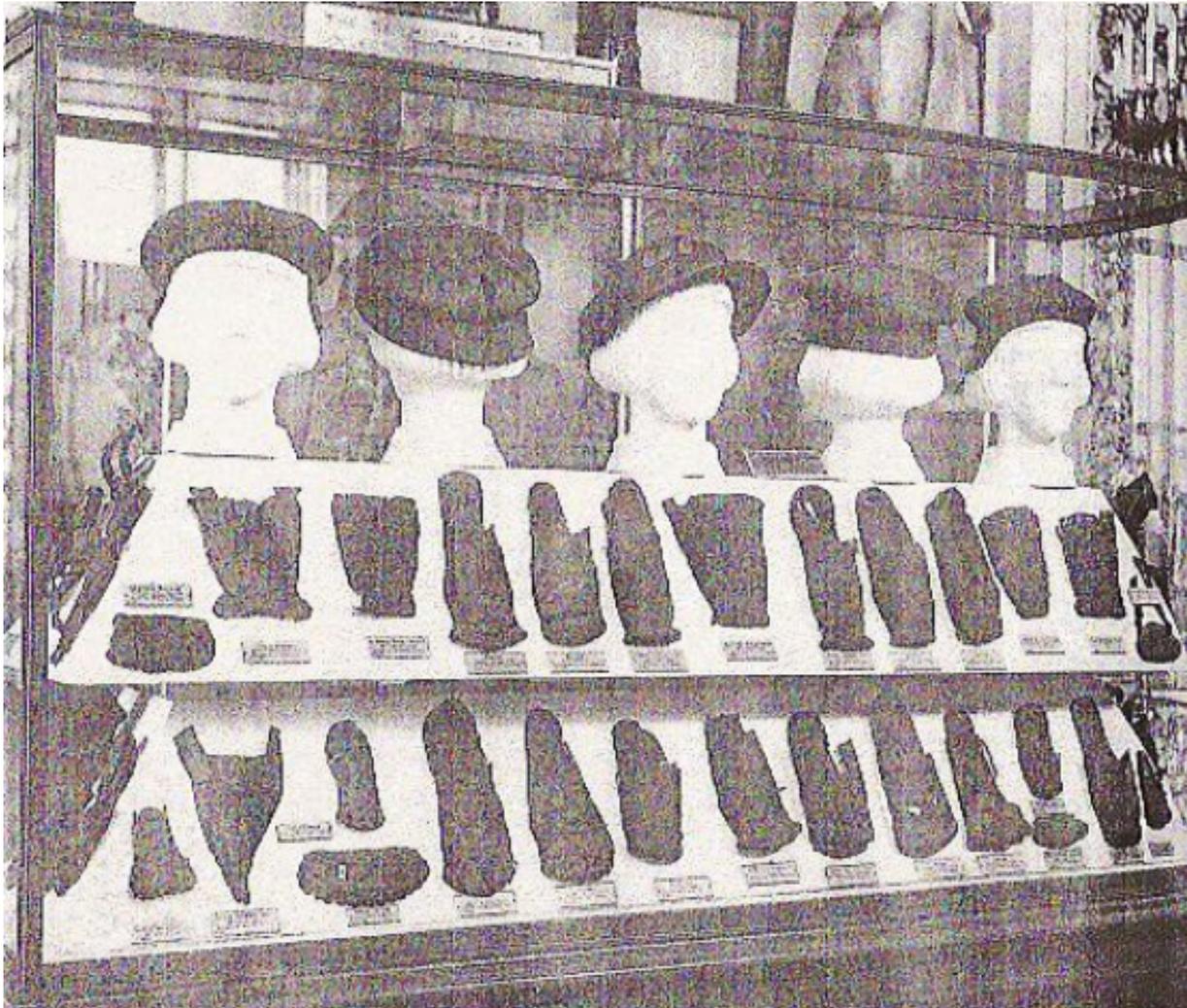


Fig. 3.1: Knitted caps and leather footwear in the costume gallery, London Museum, Kensington Palace, 1912. From: *The Treasury of London's Past* by Francis Sheppard, 1991, p. 82.

style of the period. The costumes generally are mounted on manikins without hands or feet, but provided with appropriate wigs which, to judge from their freshness, are of modern date. (Bather 1912: 295)

Despite the relative novelty of the presence of fashionable dress within a history museum, the critic failed to see any novelty in the method of its display. This suggests that historical fashion had been publicly exhibited prior to 1912, as expectations of display conventions had already been pre-formed.

In fact, as early as the 1830s multiple elements came together to define the public's attitude toward historical costume, as mutually-referential motifs began to circulate in the visual landscape. Pioneering historical genre painter Paul Delaroche exhibited his canvas, *Cromwell Before the Coffin of Charles I*, now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nîmes, France, at the 1831 Salon in Paris; the work, laden with emotional drama, proved popular, and was reproduced in multiple engravings by both French and English artists. Perhaps capitalizing on this revived and reinterpreted sentimental interest in Oliver Cromwell, the heirs of an eccentric recluse named Mrs Luson, descended through marriage from Cromwell himself, permitted her collection of the clothes worn by Cromwell's family to be displayed on realistic wax mannequins in London's Regent Street in 1833 and again on the Strand in 1834 (Anonymous 1834: 3). The costumes were accompanied by accessories as well as relevant biographical details culled from journals in the family's possession. Some time later, in January 1837, Madame Tussaud's announced that a new figure of Oliver Cromwell had been added to their Baker-Street premises, which they had occupied since 1834 (Anonymous 1837). Though no record of the appearance of this figure survives, Madame Tussaud had from the very beginning referenced popular paintings in her installations – Marat and Napoleon (**Fig. 4.1**) having been the most popular – and so it

is not impossible that the Republican wax dummy looked either like Delaroche's painting, or one of Mrs Luson's mannequins.

While it does not feature a museum exhibition in the contemporary sense of the term, the episode described above does illustrate the necessary pre-requisites for the public exhibition of historical fashion. A growing interest in the minutiae of national history, combined with a desire for authenticity in visual detail, allied to the traditional taste for relics of great men was, throughout the nineteenth century, given ever-greater circulation within an expanding number of institutions for public entertainment, recreation, and education. The growth of these institutions also permitted the display of the authentic (or authentic-looking) objects (Sandberg 2003), as opposed to generalized simulacra reproduced in books of engravings or in paintings. (Even so, fashion objects were, and frequently still are, used as illustrations of an implicit timeline or as proof of the veracity of visual representations, not the other way around: see Mackrell 1997.) In addition, as collectible objects moved from being rare and exotic unique treasures to being parts of series in categories of broadly similar mass-produced objects, the quantity of these created the possibility of more and more such institutions – a symbiotic system.

A sympathetic public for a museum of fashion, however, took a long time to develop. In 1864, mirroring the much-earlier disdain of Sir Richard Steele, the *Birmingham Daily Post* sneered at the citizens of Dresden, who 'having nothing better to do just now, are devoting their attention to the all-important question of clothes' by erecting 'a kind of national gallery of the artistic in clothes, to be called "The Museum of Fashion"' (Anonymous 1864: 1). History does not record whether this project ever

came together, but ten years later, the Practical Art Exhibition held at the Palais de l'Industrie in Paris featured eleven galleries devoted to 'a grand exhibition of the garments of the past, the Retrospective Museum of Costume' (Hooper 1874: 624). This was a temporary display (in 1896, a permanent museum of dress for Paris – the Salon National de la Mode – was mooted, though it was not until the 1920s that this was to happen; Anonymous 1896), which included paintings showing fashions over the ages, lay figures dressed speculatively in costumes of periods before any artefacts survived, as well as dresses from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on loan in glass cases. Because it was held in Paris, the capital of fashion, such an endeavour was not seen as strange by contemporary commentators.

Back in Britain, the International Health Exhibition, held in London in 1884, also featured displays of historical dress, but these were costumes made up by the firm Auguste and Co. from the designs of organizer Lewis Wingfield, and were meant to set off the designs of 'rational' dress proposed for contemporary women. The costumes were presented on wax figures by a Mr Edwards of Waterloo Road – 'which if not so finished in their modelling as some of the portrait figures which keep up the fame of Madame Tussaud's collection, are still sufficiently lifelike for the purpose' (Anonymous 1884) – representing wealthy and peasant classes for each period from 1066 to 1820 (Wingfield 1884: vi-vii), with 60 mannequins in total.

Ten years later again, an exhibition similar to the 1874 Paris venture was held in New York's Madison Square Garden for the benefit of charity. The International Costume Exhibition featured modern and historical fashion, and the latter was displayed on lay figures (mannequins) on a stage. The dress on display seems to have been a mixture

of costumes as well as historical artefacts, representing men's and women's wear from the thirteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century; a newspaper description listed a 'Costume of the Time of Henry VIII' and followed it with 'Genuine Spanish costume of the time of 1560' (Anonymous 1895), which aptly illustrates the slippage of terminology that makes research in the field difficult. The early nineteenth century was represented by a display of objects associated with the Napoleonic period; the description of the 'multitude of pictures, costumes, and hangings pertaining to the time of the First Empire' (Anonymous 1895) is ambiguous and does not clearly identify whether these were genuine historical artefacts or representations.

This rising public interest in the history of dress did eventually have an effect on museums: for example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art began actively collecting historical fashion by the beginning of the twentieth century, and listed two purchases of fashion (a French waistcoat, 07.70, and a cotton embroidered Regency dress, 07.146.5) for the first time in 1907 (Anonymous 1907a: 74; Anonymous 1907b: 146).

In 1908, they received a gift of a

blue silk brocade dress, Italian; two embroidered silk coats, one embroidered velvet coat, pair of embroidered knee breeches, pair of Louis XV leather slippers, one Empire dress of embroidered mull, one linen waistcoat, three silk waistcoats, two collars of embroidered mull, and one bone [*sic*] waist of satin brocade with sleeves, French. (Anonymous 1908: 104-105)

from painter William J. Baer and in 1910, acquired a major collection of costumes of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century garments amongst the contents of the houses belonging to the Ludlow family from descendant Maria James. Although the Baer gift and the Ludlow dresses were put on limited display in the recent accessions gallery (**Fig. 3.2**), there would not be a fashion-specific exhibition in the museum until 1929, when a loan collection of eighteenth century French costume and textiles

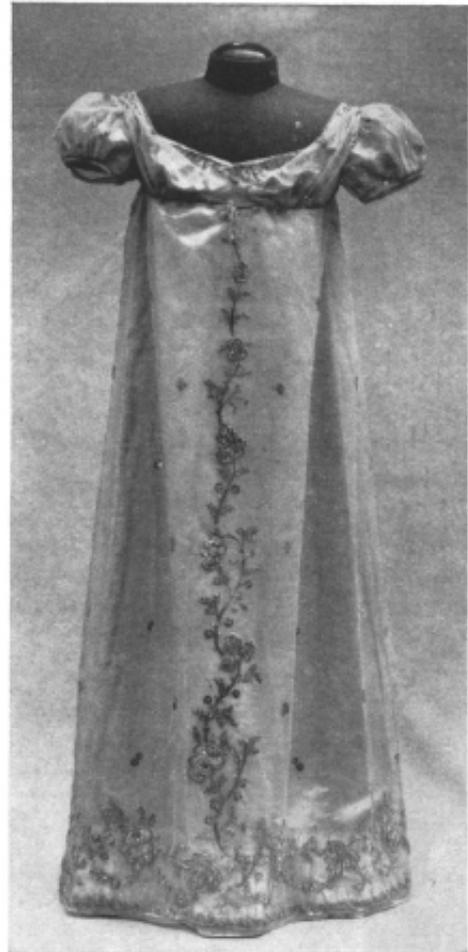


Fig. 3.2: Early fashion mounting at the Met, 1908-1911: Dress, ca. 1810, 08.86.7 (Gift of W.J. Baer, 1908); Dress, 1804-1814, 10.60.213 (Bequest of Maria P. James, 1910). © Metropolitan Museum of Art.

from Mrs Philip Lehman was exhibited (Morris 1929: 78-79). The museum's own collection was only displayed in 1932 (*Costumes 1750-1850*; **Fig. 3.3**), twenty-five years after it seems to have first established, and thirty-seven years after historical fashion had been displayed to public acclaim in Madison Square Garden. While this may seem like the fulfilment of the facetious prophecy made by the *Spectator* over 200 years earlier, it must be noted that a gallery of fashion within a museum is not the same thing as a fashion museum; that was not to happen in the US until the Museum of Costume Art was founded in 1937 in New York, and in Britain with the 1947 establishment of the Gallery of English Costume at Platt Hall in Manchester (as a subsidiary of the Manchester Art Gallery), which was followed by the founding of Doris Langley Moore's independent Museum of Costume in Kent in 1955.

Once within museum galleries, fashion was represented in very particular ways during this early period. The visual classification of fashion as a reflection of socio-cultural development was only one part of a greater drive toward the classification of global knowledge (see Maroevic 1998 for a discussion of the increasingly 'rational' and 'scientific' approach to objects more broadly); the so-called 'scientific approach' to its study (Cunnington 1947) was an aspect of its methodology. The concurrent expansion of the secular political state and its growing tolerance for religious diversity from the Early Modern period through the nineteenth century meant that relics, traditionally an aspect of religious worship, diminished in spiritual significance and grew in historical significance, testifying to the creation of a new faith based on a mythology of social progress and enacted through cultural nostalgia (Sandberg 2003). Such progressivist thinking meant that the passage of time now had a material expression (see Chapter 7), and that the growth in intellect and achievement was



A VIEW OF THE EXHIBITION OF COSTUMES IN THE
GALLERY OF SPECIAL EXHIBITIONS

Fig. 3.3: Installation view of *Costumes 1750-1850* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1932. From: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 27:5 (May 1932), p. 121.

understood as being mirrored physically by the objects of industrial production – to document and demonstrate this, museums had been built. The growing emphasis on rationality and practicality did not defuse the power of the personal; throughout the evolution of the move to considering relics as historical evidence of the lives of ancestors, their remarkable trans-temporal qualities remained appreciable: ‘to touch something that has been in bodily contact with one of our heroes can be a moving experience and an intimate and tangible link with the past’ (Ribeiro 1995: 5).

Costume in particular, due to its being a trace of a body, was particularly effective at enabling viewers to perform mental chrono-spatial displacements, psychologically participating in times and mores past (see Chapter 7): ‘By its means the member of the general public can see a little farther into the past than before’ (Anonymous 1962: 9). This has been most overtly expressed in waxwork exhibitions, from the royal effigies in Westminster Abbey to the historical heroes and anti-heroes of Madame Tussauds – in both cases, the wax ‘body’ was a life-like and accurate support for the clothing actually worn by the personages represented (for a detailed description, see Timbs 1855: 753-754).

Although it was not until the middle of the twentieth century that curators were able to describe the reliquary function of the fashion gallery in technical literature, authors such as Mark Sandberg (2003) have made the compelling case that this was its effect for museum visitors in earlier periods as well. The following quote by Zillah Halls is a particularly well-articulated version of this perspective:

If costume is collected with a definite policy in view, it can tell us more than any other type of museum collection about how people looked and felt and lived at any particular time. A garment can be regarded as the remaining outer shell of a living person and will reflect that person’s taste, position, way of life, or even a transient mood of gaiety or grief, more faithfully and more directly than other arts, which took longer to produce so that spontaneity was

lost, and which, being also more expensive, are characteristic only of a wealthy minority. The trouble and difficulty involved in preparing an informative and attractive display is invariably well worthwhile, and will probably do more to popularize the museum with the public than any other facet of the work of a curator of a general local museum. (Halls 1968: 303)

The personal characteristics of former wearers, in addition, were recognizable through visitors' own personal experience with clothing, and, due to the constant circulation of images of historical fashion in theatre, painting, cinema, and fancy-dress (not to mention family collections of more recent vintage), museum publics had a longer memory for fashion than might be expected. Certainly, this explained fashion's power and appeal in the museum. Yet, although Karyn Jean Harris was able to write that:

After all, costumes like other specimens of museum quality are a part of our culture and heritage, and most people have an inner desire to learn more about their ancestry as well as to relive some of their own personal memories (1977: 1)

it remained unclear precisely how the authentic dress object in a museum could add to the knowledge base established by dress as depicted in other media.

Object-Based History and the 'Great Divide' Between Art and Academia

Thus, despite the entry of fashion, which had previously circulated in the outer orbit of the museum, into its exhibition halls, questions about the wider purpose of this class of object remained unanswered: was fashion able to act as an accurate record of history, to encourage personal reflection, or to inspire similar craftsmanship? Furthermore, should it do any or all of these things, and how might that be coaxed from its material?

The answer depended, of course, on the type of museum that housed items of historical fashion. The questions asked of the material, the narratives imposed upon it, even the display conventions themselves have and continue to vary:

In the search for the representational meanings of dress, it is important that we do not lose sight of the role that dress historians and curators have always given to the garment as an object, to be investigated and displayed – depending on the museum’s emphasis – as an expression of design, social or technological circumstances. (de la Haye and Wilson 1999:6)

Not all museums are explicit in their definition of where fashion fits in their mission, but the Metropolitan Museum of Art, at least in 1987, was an occasional exception. Its then-director, Phillippe de Montebello, stated that, ‘Costume helps to inform us closely of the ethos of a particular generation, and for the Metropolitan Museum costume completes the study of man and what he makes for his aesthetic subsistence’ (1987: 1). How this might be done using the physical material, however, was more difficult to define, as the conventions for the display of art in museums and galleries are reasonably firmly set. In 2006, de Montebello wrote:

More typically, artworks are displayed with the understanding that their aesthetic merit and the virtuosity of their creators are better conveyed when they are separated spatially to underscore their uniqueness. Unlike natural history dioramas or historical-society tableaux, presentation of works in an art museum is generally without recreation of their original social and cultural contexts. (de Montebello 2006: 9)

If context is not physically recreated, it must still be intellectually reconstructed, and here the biases against fashion, and perhaps against material culture more generally, are particularly evident.

An art museum such as the Met, might ‘desire to divorce the subject from its crude economic context’ (Breward 2003: 14) in favour of highlighting supposedly universal aesthetic considerations (frequently accessible to only a small elite). Furthermore, as Breward writes, it might simultaneously seek to popularize itself by holding a fashion exhibition where clothing is defined as art in order to give both art and the museum a human scale:

Moving away from the second-hand investigations of fashion as image or text which mark most book-bound examinations of the medium, the exhibition allows for considerations of form and surface which, though restricted by the

fixed environment and conservation constraints of display, offer a vital platform from which the status and meaning of fashion have been challenged and reconfigured. The most notable curatorial interventions have aimed to establish common ground between the registers of fashion and art, possibly reflecting an attempt by the institutions concerned to reach valuable new constituencies of visitors, supposedly put off by the elitist connotations of painting and sculpture more usually associated with the publicly funded museums sector in Britain and America. (Breward 2003: 13)

However, this superficial focus on the craftsmanship and aesthetic effect of fashion can rely on changing ideas of taste, and thus fashion, in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, is doomed to be seen as frivolous, ephemeral, and irrelevant (Postrel 2007: 133).

History museums, described above as materializing grand narratives of human ingenuity and progress, might be expected to lend gravitas to clothing. However, there, too, fashion has not always been an easy fit. Within the practice of history, the narratives created rely on some kind of record. Traditionally, this has been written language; images, too, have had their place as illustrations. Yet objects appear mute if they are not cloaked in words and illustrated by pictures:

At the core of the conflict is the question the historian persists in asking the curator: “How can these artefacts be made into historical facts?” In my opinion these objects are historical facts. We know for certain from their tangible existence that they existed at an earlier point in history. (Bissonnette 2003: 28)

I would correct Bissonnette’s assertion by stating that objects are documents, not facts, as facts imply a level of rational cognitive interpretation. Words and language systems used to describe objects by historians and theoreticians are just as limited in their representational capacity as images (referred to above as simulacra). In no way do they replace the object of study, and it is the primary assertion of material culture scholars that the object too has a place in defining the histories written about it:

Museums are the best-known cultural repositories of material remnants [...] but it is only recently that curators and academics have begun to acknowledge that many extant textile and dress artefacts, are in fact not iconic examples of a

single period or style, but often complex composites with multiple histories that should in turn be examined from multiple perspectives. (Palmer and Clark 2005: 9)

In their eagerness to provide context, historians have sometimes ignored the complex and unmalleable testimony of artefacts themselves (see: Palmer 1997; Styles 1998).

When placed into a larger narrative, the production, use, and materiality of the artefact itself can become lost, and with them, the possibilities for a nuanced depiction of the interplay between micro and macro forces within history.

The discomfort of historians with material specifics may stem from a fear of being too particular, and thus missing some larger narrative significance. Even the history specifically focused on fashion and clothing frequently denies its materiality: 'Design history describes textiles in a historical, biographical, or technological context, often leaving out, or simply disregarding the visual and tactile qualities of the textiles themselves' (Hansen 2008:5). This anxiety about formalism is somewhat ironic in a museum context, as early museum collections were formed and curated by connoisseurs of the material and aesthetic qualities of clothing, who were interested in these aspects of dress just as much as in the historical and social significances of fashion.

Furthermore, as Taylor insightfully notes, scholarship within the museum institution itself requires meticulous attention to detail and context:

The fact that little of the new fashion theory looks at the actuality of clothing is of concern and has certainly challenged curators to make fusions between artefact research and critical theory approaches on their own terms. Specific problems face them in doing this that critical theorists rarely have to consider. Museum objects placed in glass cases become so completely deracinated from their original cultural and consumption settings that their 'original' cultural meanings become distorted. ... This is further complicated by the fact that when artefacts move from private, personal ownership into the museum environment, they take on a whole new character. They become culturally

empowered and altered by the implied 'approval' of the elite museum institution. (Taylor 2004: 281)

Thus, curators who wish to build narratives about objects face the prejudices of old disciplinary boundaries and the implacable status of the museum institution in society. As Valerie Steele has pointed out, 'On the one hand, museums are accused of over-emphasizing entertainment by putting on popular but mindless fashion shows instead of more socially and artistically significant exhibitions' whereas 'other observers complain that museum fashion exhibitions are not fun enough, what with darkened galleries and the clothes on static mannequins rather than living bodies' (Steele 1998: 333-334). Fashion curators must walk a fine line between the various interests of corporations, cultural critics, audiences, and academics.

These prejudices have led to strong feelings and impassioned debates on all sides (*cf.*: Breward 2008; McNeil 2008). The challenge to accepted intellectual hierarchy that fashion represents has been referred to as a 'great divide' of approaches: 'The division, to identify it at its rawest, lies between the object-centred methods of the curator/collector versus "academic" social/economic history and cultural theory approaches as practiced in the university world' (Taylor 1998: 338). Taylor continues:

Since the interwar period university departments of economic and social history who based their textile history research methodologies on firmly established economic and social history approaches excluded examination of the fabrics they were assessing. Thus very little object-based research was undertaken. When it was, it failed almost totally to address the significance of issues of fashion, style and seasonal change. (1998: 346)

In other words, academic studies of fashion have not only sought to obscure the practicalities of the fashion system, but also its aesthetic (and thus perhaps irrational) appeal. Furthermore, these studies tended to seek generalisable patterns, and were equally uninterested in the specific materials and technique, which might complicate these. Only more recently has a new generation of scholars been able to more

successfully marry cultural theory with object-based analysis using interdisciplinary approaches (e.g.: Granata 2012), following the advice for using multi-disciplinary approaches grounded in object-based study (e.g.: Palmer 1997; Breward 1998; Steele 1998) and cautions against theoretical pitfalls (Tseelon 2001) to academics and curators all too used to the animosity that had represented the status quo hitherto.

Focusing as it does on the detailed analysis of clothing and fabric construction, object-based analysis has been criticized as being too descriptive to be relevant to contextual history and critical theory. Added to this is the association of the technical skills involved in the curation and conservation of clothing with what Taylor calls (and Palmer echoes) ‘feminine domestic occupations’ and ‘a sort of on-going child-care akin to changing diapers’ (Taylor 1998: 348; Palmer 2008a: 47-48, 54) underrated by society at the best of times. It is unfair, however, to refer to the academic prejudice against dress history as being based in misogyny, as Taylor does; the charges she herself quotes as being levelled at costume history for ‘aspiring no higher than antiquarian status’ (Harte 1977 in Taylor 1998: 349) reveal that connoisseurship, as practiced by generations of gentleman dilettantes, was no more welcome in academia than Taylor’s eponymous ‘laundry’: woman’s work. No matter one’s position on the feminist spectrum, however, it is unarguable that fashion curation has been treated less like a profession and more like a set of informal skills to be learned through practice. The sharing of skills and knowledge has been piecemeal and hardly subject to any over-arching methodology. With the advent of specialist programs such as the London College of Fashion’s ‘Fashion Curation’ program, an increase in subject specialist networks, such as the Dress and Textile Specialists (DATS) group, with their conferences and training events, and growing public interest in the

discipline (as evidenced by the German version of *Elle* fashion magazine featuring six fashion curators in their February 2012 issue: Anonymous 2012: 32-38), this may slowly be changing.

Technical Literature and Conservation

Specialist literature about fashion exhibitions, when there is any, is unsatisfactory for anyone seeking a discussion of the discursive meanings of displayed dress. The advice literature tends to about be technical cost-cutting measures and basic conservation (*c.f.*: Buck 1958; Giffen 1970; Briggs 1972; Ginsberg 1973; Keck 1974; Harris 1977; Summerfield 1980; Tarrant 1983; Anonymous 1988; Palmer 1988; Robinson and Pardoe 2000; Brunn and White 2002; Flecker 2007) with anecdotal reports about particular exhibition enterprises. In fairness, most of these manuals were not aimed at specialist fashion history curators; rather, they were aimed at generalist curators dealing with a lack of resources. Sarah Levitt's anecdotal, but entertaining essay in the 1987-88 *Social History Curators Group Journal* is an example of the limited literature available to the curator: Levitt set out to answer the question 'why are so many costume displays so awful?' (1988: 6) and through explaining the varied existing approaches, the technical and cost limitations of good practice, a lack of professional training, pervasive misogyny, and an overall lack of aesthetic taste, concluded that for most museums with costume collections, good displays with adequate interpretation are an impossibility.

Museum-specific periodicals are no more helpful: *Museums Journal* (founded 1901) first included technical discussion in 1932 (Stevens 1932: 226-227), with more theory in 1935 (Thomas 1935: 1-19), whereas the Association of American Museums'

periodicals (launched in 1924) do not include specialist articles about dress exhibitions before 1977 (Frye 1977: 37-42). Both journals took nearly thirty-five years of publication to first include fashion curation in their advice literature, despite the fact that fashion exhibitions were regularly featured in calendar listings and collections of historical costume were consistently acknowledged as being popular (e.g.: Pick 1938).

Few practitioners would argue with Susan North's comments about the technical difficulties inherent in mounting a good display:

Of all artistic media, dress is the most challenging to display. [...] In mounting dress, we are trying to recreate the body for which a garment was originally made, a challenge compounded by the shifting ideals in fashionable silhouette throughout history. This process requires appropriately styled mannequins, carefully shaped underpinnings, a good understanding of fashion history and a degree of skill. The aims in mounting dress are both aesthetic and protective. Not only should the garment be shown accurately and to its best advantage, but it should also be fully supported with no stress on the seams or fabric and protected from any contact with the mechanisms of the mannequin. (North 2001: xi)

The idiosyncrasies of every garment are unique, and require labour-intensive and subtle adjustments with every instance of display. Object-based study, of course, depends on the survival of the object itself, and so the preservation of the artefact is paramount in any exhibit plan, ranking far above aesthetic impact or potential intellectual significance. That may be why discussions of conservation in fashion literature so far outweigh discussions of the hermeneutics of exhibiting fashion. However, with growing technical expertise among curators, conservators and preparators – including more sophisticated understandings of textile decay – that may, and indeed must, change.

The very ubiquity of mass-produced fashion (which makes even museum objects reproducible and replaceable), not only allows for more casual attitudes toward preservation, but also begs a theoretical re-consideration of the principles of museum collecting: if the displayed dresses of the future will no longer be exotic treasures amassed for their uniqueness by connoisseurs, then the underlying reasons for the selection and preservation of those garments that are collected must change. Not specialness, but generalisability marks their significance; yet the story of their reproduced origin lies in their seams, forcing a new balance of object-based research with contextual narratives.

Theory of Exhibitions: New Developments

Dress history as an academic specialization has seen scholarly publications outlining the theory of its study: Janet Arnold's 1977 classic *Handbook of Costume* first detailed the available sources of information about dress and best practice for investigating this, and more recent authors – most notably: Christopher Breward (2003), Valerie Cumming (2004), and Lou Taylor (2002; 2004) – have updated this original account where possible. However, there has been comparatively little academic interest in examining the theory and practice of curating fashion exhibitions, despite the fact that these are acknowledged by all the authors cited above to be an important source of information about historical costume. Sarah Levitt defined good costume interpretation as:

[...] creating a thought provoking display, with a clearly expressed story line capable of raising fresh and stimulating ideas in the mind of the beholder. The museum worker is likely to be conscious of this type of interpretation, but other kinds go on whether we are aware of them or not. Some costume curators do not realize that they 'interpret' every time they fill a case, and many more do not stand back at the end of the process, work out the messages

they have conveyed, and consider whether they wanted to convey them in the first place. (Levitt 1988: 6)

Unfortunately, despite her awareness that these were important issues in fashion curation, Levitt's article was a criticism of existing practice, especially in small museums, and not an engagement with theory and best practice as such.

Recently, Amy de la Haye and Judith Clark, of the London College of Fashion, have announced that they are working on a book about contemporary curatorial practice in dress exhibitions⁷, and the University of Manchester's AHRC fellowship (based around Platt Hall's costume galleries, carried out by Eleanor Thompson under the supervision of Dr Helen Rees Leahy) is geared toward developing new exhibitionary models for historical dress⁸ for a specific institution. Yet neither project is grounded in a historical understanding of the evolution of curatorial practice in the field, nor the visuality and materiality peculiar to the dress object in different exhibitionary contexts.

To be sure, the time is ripe for a scholarly intervention into the practice of fashion curation. After a hundred-year history of being established in museums, during which

⁷ <http://www.fashion.arts.ac.uk/15396.htm>: 'With Judith Clark, I am co-authoring the first book devoted to the discipline of curating fashion. As a trained dress historian and curator I will explore history and current practice and Judith, as a qualified architect and curator, will focus upon design and installation issues. We will ask for statements from international fashion curators, retired and currently working.' (Accessed February 18, 2009.)

⁸ <http://www.arts.manchester.ac.uk/museology/assets/thefile.135638.en.pdf>: 'The overarching aim of the project is to research, test and extend theoretical models for the display and interpretation of historic dress collections, so as to inform and stimulate the development of curatorial practice at the Gallery of Costume and elsewhere.' (Accessed February 18, 2009.)

public interest and exposure have grown exponentially (though resources have not kept up proportionally), audiences and curators alike have raised expectations for gallery content:

Nonetheless, however beautifully lit and staged, far more is expected in dress exhibitions today than the gorgeous spectacle or chronological analysis. Today the most interesting and innovative dress exhibitions tell specific material culture stories through carefully managed use of critical approaches married to the liveliest of display techniques.' (Taylor 2004: 301)

This optimistic statement nevertheless does not give any practical clues for any would-be thoughtful practitioners.

Once again, there are few options, apart perhaps from Taylor's own seminal works; Fiona Anderson's chapter 'Museums as Fashion Media' (2000) had a useful review of perspectives and approaches, but was limited in that it focused on curating contemporary fashion and reviewed practice over the 1990s. In addition, one can cite Judith Clark's (2005; 2010) highly original and thoughtful curatorial interventions as well as their accompanying publications; Clark's work interrogates fashion curation practice by materializing its possibilities, and more often than not serves as a demonstration of the awkward fit between exhibitionary theory and practice in a fashion museum setting (Petrov 2012). The *Fashion Theory* journal's 2008 special issue on fashion curation (based on a 2006 international conference) featured largely anecdotal articles by Breward, McNeil and Palmer (though the authors did attempt to extract theoretical significance from their recollections). Although the journal's editor, Valerie Steele, announced her intention of authoring a book on the history of fashion exhibitions in the foreword to that issue, this has not been forthcoming, and she has not yet followed up her article in that issue, 'Museum Quality: The Rise of the Fashion Exhibition', with anything more detailed. Most recently, part five of the tenth and final volume of the *Berg Encyclopaedia of World Dress and Fashion* (Eicher and

Tortora 2011) which was devoted to ‘Dress and Fashion Resources Worldwide’, largely focused on museums and their collecting and exhibiting practices relating to dress and fashion (the authors and editors distinguish between the more specific concept of fashion within the larger medium of dress). The articles within provide solid overviews, but are not intended to be critical in-depth examinations of the topic. Unfortunately, the growing closeness of the museum and the academy has not yet meant a corresponding rise in the analysis of curatorial practice.

Conclusion

As the above literature review has shown, the standard – suggestive, but largely unsubstantiated – narrative of a progressive rise in the popularity and quality of fashion exhibitions in museums must be more systematically researched. This thesis presents an alternative view, which posits the stylistic differences between exhibitions as sets of competing tropes within a larger discourse of fashion across contexts and media. Fashion, as a flexible signifier, is multivalent; so too, are exhibitions about it.

In 1992, the V&A’s fashion curators described their own obsolescence:

The fact that everyone wears clothes ensures the universal appeal of the subject. Visitors are at ease with the exhibits, quickly relating them to their own bodies and they are uninhibited about expressing opinions about clothes of the past as well as recent times. This instant familiarity generates curiosity and often precludes the need for a specialist interpreter. (Mendes, Hart, and de la Haye 1992: 1)

If this is indeed so, what can a museum bring to such a one-sided conversation? In what ways have curators shaped the representation of fashion history to their audiences? The following chapters will attempt to answer these questions by demonstrating how fashion’s fraught history in the museum has contributed to its

fragmented and often confused presentation in exhibitionary contexts, leading to competing approaches that continue to the present day.

4. Artefacts of Fashion: Museums, Cultural Value and Industrial Inspiration

*The clothes which were yesterday my lord's, to-day are his lackey's;
and to-morrow will be - here.*
(Phillips 1855: 59)

In his oft-cited work on the ‘exhibitionary complex’, Tony Bennett (1996) showed how nineteenth-century museums and galleries were intimately connected in their design and conception to the expanding commercial architecture of the same period (see also Chapter 2). The technical possibilities and visual experiences of industrial exhibitions and shopping arcades found analogous applications in museum spaces. This blurring of commercial and intellectual cultures within the museum continues to create unease and controversy, particularly in the case of fashion exhibitions.

This chapter will investigate how the introduction of fashion – an increasingly important economic and social product in the industrial period (see Breward 1995) – into museums created new connections and tensions between these two worlds. It is the contention of this chapter that it was because of such connections between the worlds of economy and history that historical fashion entered and was interpreted in museums. Museum objects are often said to have ‘historical value’, connoting their perceived importance in documenting or calling to mind some external event popularly held to be of cultural importance. While notions of memory and witness will be discussed in Chapter 7, it is important here to consider the ‘value’ aspect of this somewhat arbitrary notion. Over the last one hundred years, historical fashion in museums has worked with and against more worldly notions of value with

contradictory outcomes. In this chapter, case study material will inform a review of: the early connections between museums and commercial contexts for fashion; the key ontological differences between fashion in commercial and museal spheres (in particular, its move from the ‘now’ to the ‘then’); the partnerships and echoes between museums and the fashion industry; and the promotion of fashion consumerism in museum exhibitions. Some of these themes will also be developed further in subsequent chapters, and the discussions here should be viewed in light of other dimensions discussed later.

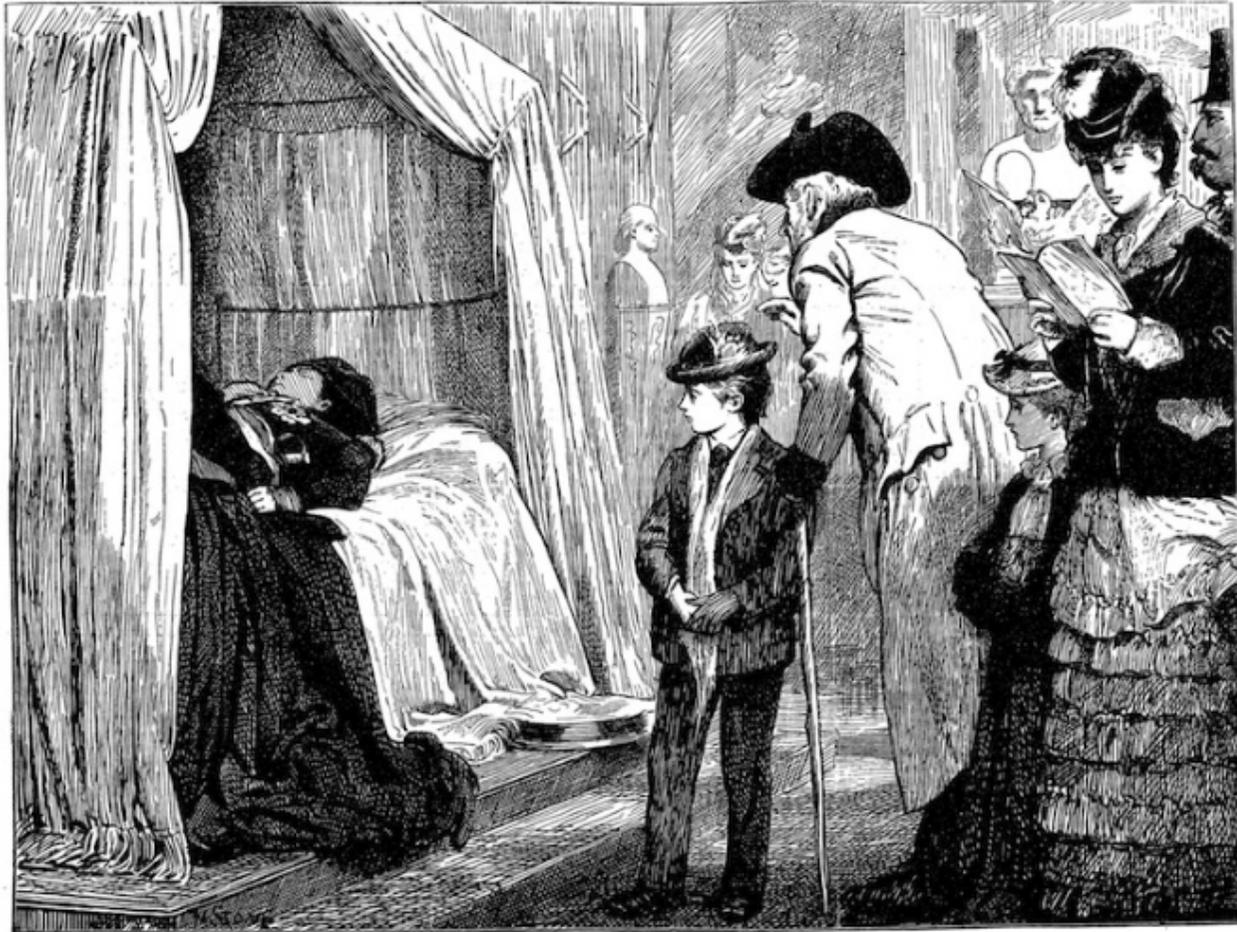
The Gallery of Fashion: Commerce and Culture in the 1840s-50s

Bennett (1995; 1996) has convincingly demonstrated that museums, galleries, and other public collections arose at the same time as what McKendrick (1982) and McCracken (1988) have called the ‘consumer revolution’, which predated, and indeed may have caused the Industrial Revolution. Consequently, they utilized a similar visual vocabulary; however, it must be noted that, at least initially, the objects on display at museums and at shopping centres were different: The British Museum, for example, was largely a museum of ancient archaeological artefacts, and not of the material culture of the everyday. However, by the middle of the nineteenth century, contemporary periodical sources bear out a slippage of terminology and approach between the two. For example, in Albert Smith’s 1842 *Punch* series on ‘The Physiology of the London Idler’, the Pantheon Bazaar was described as combining ‘the attractions of the Zoological Gardens and National Gallery, together with a condensed essence of all the most entertaining shop-windows’, and in particular, ‘the al fresco and gratuitous exhibition of wax-work at the door of the tailor’s opposite’ was highlighted as an attraction of note (1842: n.p.). The following year, *Punch* ran a

series of articles on ‘The Gratuitous Exhibitions of London’, which was a thematic compendium of amusing metropolitan sights for the *flâneur*-about-town. The term ‘exhibition’ was used loosely: the suggestions included some public displays, but the majority was comprised of entertaining street scenes. Shopping arcades were thought to be particularly filled with opportunities for diversion, and at least one instalment was devoted solely to one of these: the Lowther Arcade. Here, the writing style approached that of the growing genre of travel guidebooks (Murray’s *Handbooks for Travellers*, established 1836, for example) rather than that of reporting journalism, and the metaphor of the wax museum was obvious:

The stranger will not fail to be struck by the representation of two headless gentlemen in a hunting-coat and dressing-gown at an adjacent tailor’s. They are placed behind a brass barrier, and have something very awful in their appearance. The legend attached to them is unknown; but they possibly represent the guillotined victims of some revolution - probably the same in which fell the decapitated ladies at the staymaker’s in Berners’-street, whose heads are supposed to have migrated to the hair-dresser’s in the covered passage of Burlington, which is somewhat similar in its features to that of Lowther - *arcades ambo*. (Anonymous 1843: 235)

Even at this early date, the author and the reader clearly shared in a mutual literacy of the waxwork exhibition (see: Timbs 1855: 753-4, who states that the earliest such display was Westminster Abbey’s royal effigies, described first in 1754, but that Tussaud’s, established 1802 in London, was the oldest such contemporary attraction; see also Chapter 3 and Morris and Milner 1992): the deployment of a physical barrier to produce an effect of awe, the macabre combination of prosthetic bodies with the apparent relics of those they represent, and the expectation that the viewer responds to the sight by recalling a historical event and emotionally responding to it (see also Sandberg 2003) (**Fig. 4.1**). Here, and in the previous quotation, clothing displayed for commercial purposes was marked out as a key item of interest. The conventions of display from the commercial sphere were, even at this early stage, connected to those



LONDON SKETCHES—A WAXWORK EXHIBITION

Fig. 4.1: ‘London Sketches – A Waxwork Exhibition’. *The Graphic*, December 14, 1872. The accompanying text reads: ‘The Old Pensioner and the Effigy of Napoleon [...] There are still a few old military veterans left who fought against the great general on the field of Waterloo, and we may imagine the Chelsea Pensioner in our picture to be one of those veterans. It is very unlikely that he saw Napoleon at Waterloo [...] yet, no doubt, the sight of the effigy stirs up in the old man’s mind some dim recollections of the great contest.’

within museums and ‘heritage’ attractions; a continuity of visual strategies common to both spheres is evident across the primary source material.

In fact, the first suggestions for a British museum of fashion came from satire, which used fashion’s commercial status as the basis for its humour. The 1712 *Spectator* spoof was discussed in the previous chapter, and in an 1847 *Punch* article titled ‘Hints for the British Museum Commission’, the anonymous author suggested that rather than natural history specimens, examples of fashion might induce ‘the softer sex to find attractions in the British Museum’ (1847: 59). The article went on:

Fashion and dress always present points of interest to the sex we are desirous of enticing within the walls of the British Museum; and we propose, therefore, to invest the great national depository with attractions for the female visitor, by commencing a collection of the newest patterns in caps, shawls, bonnets, *visites*, and other articles of attire, which come home to us all – in bandboxes, with tolerably long bills tacked on to them. (1847: 59)

Fashion here is portrayed as populist: familiar from its commercial incarnation, and particularly attractive to women⁹, who were throughout the nineteenth century categorized as magpie-like spendthrifts; this was later essentialised as a gender characteristic by psychoanalysts:

Although [psychoanalyst Melanie] Klein related gender narcissism primarily to the bond between the male bodybuilder and his cohorts, the term is well applied to the relationship between the female pedestrian-gazer-buyer and the mannequins designed and staged to attract her. By the late nineteenth century, the shop window was beginning to function, like the mirror, as a tool of gender narcissism and an important site of identity construction, particularly for women, who, parading up and down the streets, examined the goods displayed as well as their own reflections in the plate glass windows and the mirrors cannily placed to pander to their vanity. They stopped to discuss the merchandise and the quality of the display with their friends, their loitering in

⁹ It should be pointed out that this kind of misogyny persisted well into the twentieth century, with the full participation of women: a news item about the 1962 re-opening of the V&A’s costume court was categorized as ‘not for men’ (Haddock 1962: 1287).

the public space legitimized by its association with consumption. (Schneider 1995: 154)

However, from the nineteenth-century sources quoted previously, it is clear that urban middle-class men were also deeply fascinated by fashion and its display (see also Breward 1999), and their informal skills of observation and manoeuvring in public spaces as idlers and loungers would have been equally valuable in a gallery of costume. Parallel behaviours would have been possible and observable in both arenas (see below and **Fig. 6.4**).

Although the British Museum's commissioners did not act on *Punch*'s suggestion of institutionalizing fashion in its galleries¹⁰, Victorian Londoners, male and female, could nevertheless continue to enjoy the spectacle in commercial venues. As an 1874 report from Paris mused: 'What are the long lines of the boulevard windows and those of the Rue de la Paix but an exhibition of clothes? From hat to shoe, from innermost flannel to outermost velvet, every style and article of human costume is exhibited' (Hooper 1874: 624). The museal mindset was applied to fashion in other contexts. Indeed, as Regency women's fashionable magazines used the word 'museum' to mean a collection or compendium even in a literary sense (for example, *The Lady's Monthly Museum; Or, Polite Repository of Amusement and Instruction*, an English monthly women's magazine published between 1798 and 1832, or the *Ladies' Cabinet of Fashion, Music and Romance* published between 1832 and 1870, its title a clear derivation of the notion of a cabinet of curiosities) the materiality of the museum was

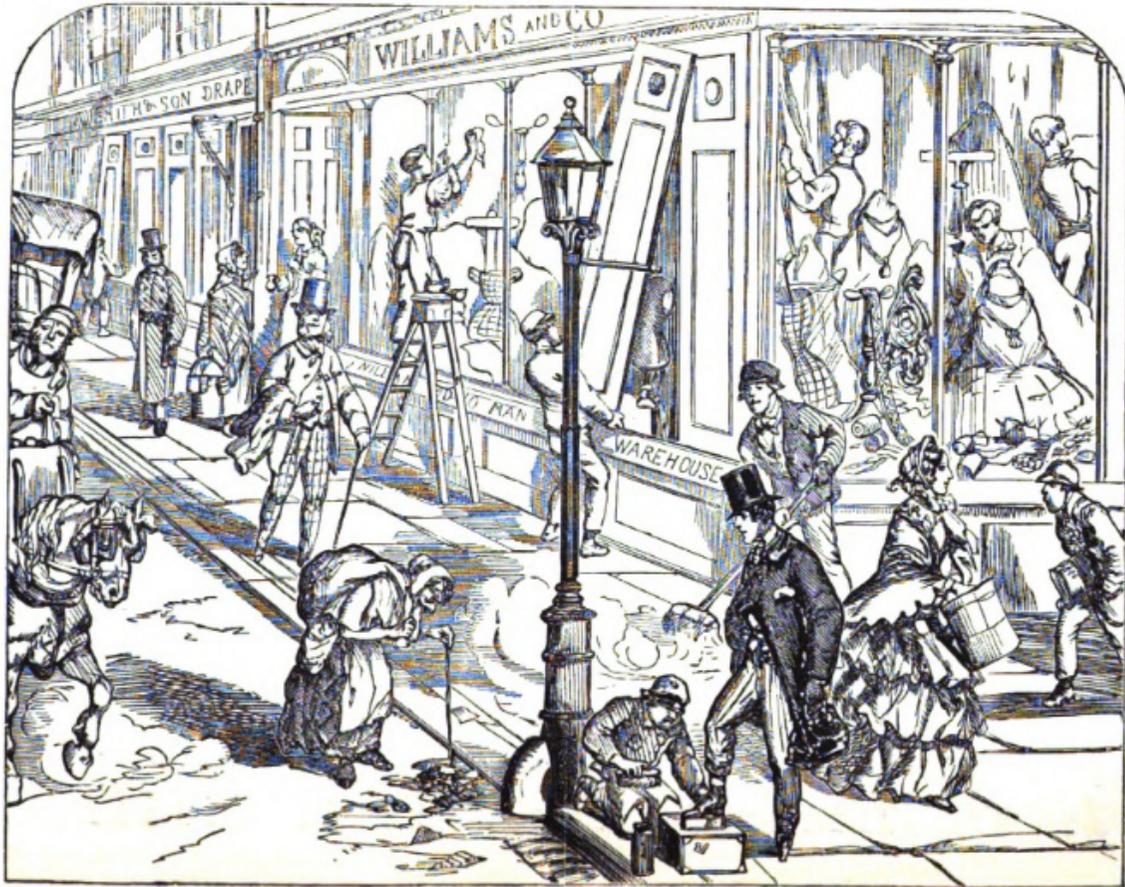
¹⁰ However, the British Museum's library and print rooms did contain fashion-related material that was subsequently used by individuals researching fancy dress: 'The Queen's State Costume Ball is among Town Talk to come; but there is already a rush of ladies to the British Museum for model Restoration costumes' (Anonymous 1851: 483).

not limited to the interiors of public collections. It could, as contemporary journalism demonstrates, also be found along the high street:

In the magnificent linendrapery establishments of Oxford and Regent Streets, the vast shop-fronts, museums of fashion in plate-glass cases, offer a series of animated *tableaux of poses plastiques* in the shape of young ladies in morning costume, and young gentlemen in whiskers and white neckcloths, faultlessly complete as to costume, with the exception that they are yet in their shirt sleeves, who are accomplishing the difficult and mysterious feat known as "dressing" the shop window. By their nimble and practised hands the rich piled velvet mantles are displayed, the *moire* and *glacé* silks arranged in artful folds, the laces and gauzes, the innumerable whim-whams and fribble-frabble of fashion, elaborately shown, and to their best advantage. (Sala 1859: 77)

According to this extract from journalist George Sala, then, a museum of fashion was not necessarily associated with the irrelevant past. The active construction and consumption of acceptable aesthetics was documented in window displays (Fig. 4.2), and could equally be documented in a museum. Furthermore, this extract demonstrates the currency of museum display conventions outside the heritage context, in the commercial world.

While the 1847 *Punch* article cited above reflects the attitude also documented by Klouk (2009) of early museum administrators and commentators that the traditional museum was not of intellectual interest to women, it also suggests that fashion could contribute something new to the museum experience. While the text, taken alone or even alongside Smith's, Hooper's, or Sala's descriptions of shop displays, suggests that the museum would be transformed into an arcade for window-shopping in the process, the accompanying illustration of an Ancient Egyptian woman (recognizable as such from her tawny complexion, angular features and black wig) dressed in a fashionable 1840s evening dress with flounces and holding a nosegay (Fig. 4.3), implies an understanding that fashion might be also a valuable lens through which to view history (see also Chapter 7) and to make it relevant to modern ideas of taste.



EIGHT O'CLOCK: OPENING SHOP.

Fig. 4.2: William McConnell, 'Eight O'Clock: Opening Shop'. From: *Twice Around the Clock* by George Augustus Sala, 1859, p. 77.



HE

Fig. 4.3: Ancient Egyptian woman wearing fashionable Victorian dress. Figurated initial 'T' [possibly by William Newman] accompanying 'Hints to the British Museum Committee', *Punch* 13 (1847), p. 59.

Fashion and Time: Museums and Narratives

As was also discussed in Chapter 1, the key element of the definition of fashion is not essentially material – that is, the term does not refer to particular objects of clothing, textiles, or accessories. Neither is it simply aesthetic; instead, its peculiarity lies in the changeable nature of that aesthetic. To quote Christopher Breward's definition in an introductory volume to the subject:

[...] modern fashionable clothing is a manufactured commodity that has been designed according to predominantly western social, economic, and aesthetic values, and which in its formal and conceptual qualities has aided the shaping of a sense of the present for its various consumers. (Breward 2004: 16)

Thus, it is the periodicity and ephemerality of fashion that distinguishes that term from its erstwhile synonyms. As a commodity shaped by producers' and consumers' changing tastes, fashion is doomed to pass from the now, into the then, and lose its economic value while gaining its very self-definition. If fashion had a scientific formula, it would be change over time, and it is this chronological aspect which makes it such an appropriate museum object.

As Peter Corrigan points out, fashion is subject to multiple divisions of time simultaneously – hours, days, weeks, seasons, years, decades, reigns, and centuries (Corrigan 2008: 71) – but fashion is always doomed to die by virtue of its planned obsolescence. In earlier centuries, this was seen as its moral failing (*cf.*: Johnson, Torntore and Eicher 2003; Ribeiro 2003; Purdy 2004); unable to retain useful features to adapt to changing circumstances, it shed its decorative skins entirely and was constantly being reinvented, making it unreliable and untrustworthy in the eyes of social commentators. More recently, however, it has been seen as emblematic of post-modern society at large, and both Caroline Evans' volume *Fashion at the Edge:*

Spectacle, Modernity, and Deathliness (2003), and Judith Clark's *Malign Muses / Spectres* (2004-5) project celebrated the cannibalistic reincarnations of fashion as being illustrative of the logical conclusion of pervasive mercantile capitalism in all aspects of contemporary life.

It has become the museum's role to preserve these 'fossils of the mode' (Anonymous 1946a: 499). As Susan Crane writes, 'Museums deliberately forge memories in physical form to prevent the natural erosion of memory, both personal and collective' (Crane 2000: 2). These objects, rescued from their certain deaths as commodities, are placed into a narrative within a museum, which produces new, authorized historical meanings for them as embodied memories (Silverstone 1994: 162-3). Therefore, fashion in the museum is an inherently historical object, even when it is displayed as technology, design, or art. Clifford writes that

[...] a commodity or technological artefact is perceived to be a case of special inventive creation. The object is selected out of commercial or mass culture, perhaps to be featured in a museum of technology. Sometimes such objects fully enter the realm of art: 'technological' innovations or commodities may be contextualized as modern 'design' [...] (Clifford 1994: 264)

But even in a context of technology or design, the specialness of the artefact stands for progress – another concept that depends on a stark differentiation between now and then. Even items of clothing exhibited as examples of contemporary design are historicized by the very act of taking them out of a system of commodity exchange, where their economic value is in their being 'of the now' (seasonal, for example), into a symbolic system where they merely *represent* the now in a museal intellectual context which seeks to relate the present to the past in a unified world-view. This is not because museums are only of or about the past, but because they layer a temporal significance onto objects; the clothing object is represented by the museum as being historical insofar as it is documentary. Even a couture gown from the present season,

if it is displayed in a museum, undergoes what Appadurai calls a Commodity Pathway Diversion (1986), as it is not for sale, but iconic of the narrative the museum wishes to tell.

Object narratives are often centred around identity; advanced capitalism promises consumers that they can buy an identity in the shops, and museums show the range of objects that represented and embodied identities bought and sold over time. The creation of a narrative from the past comes to be called history, and as Peter Fowler notes that museums' 'stock-in-trade does rather tend to be of the past and it is certainly what most of them exist to collect, look after and present' (Fowler 1992: 115), it follows that museums make history. Sometimes this historical narrative acts as a way of creating a unified identity, as Susan Crane calls it, 'memory objectified, not belonging to any one individual as to audiences, publics, collectives, and nations, and represented via the museum collections' (Crane 2000: 2); yet Pierre Nora (1989) suspected that this was due to a decline in faith in the art of memory; in the absence of remembering, a culture chooses to memorialize. Museums are thus a prosthetic device, and artefacts external storage for cultural significance.

Given Pierre Nora's assertions about culture's neurotic forgetfulness, then fashion's musealisation follows naturally – it is designed to fade away, and therefore inspires anxious nostalgia, which is combated through the museum process. As Alexandra Palmer, curator of the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada, writes, even the physical decay of artefacts is denied, at least in public representations. She writes: 'While contemporary fashion designers, such as Martin Margiela, fetishize and embrace deconstruction, museums with costumes and textiles deal with this situation on a daily

basis. This story of fashion is completely silenced in costume exhibitions and publications' (Palmer 2008a: 58-9). Indeed, the 1833 exhibition of clothing belonging to the Cromwell family, alluded to in Chapter 3, was lauded at the time for being in such an excellent state of preservation that 'the silk and ornaments possess all the splendour and brilliancy of yesterday's manufacture' (Anonymous 1833: 3). In 1958, reviewing the redisplay of the V&A's costume court, a journalist wondered, 'it is astonishing how fresh many of these 200-year-old gowns still look, and, among minor things, there is one little apron, embroidered with a design of simplified horns of plenty [possibly T.210-1929], which looks as if it had been made yesterday' (Museums Correspondent 1958: 10). For these commentators, it seemed impossible to believe that something so long out of fashion could seem so fresh and desirable.

If, as Richard Martin once wrote, 'Fashion is possessed and haunted by its acute sense of time' (quoted in McNeil 2008: 77), as an object it can evoke the same sense in an individual. Peter Corrigan maintains that '[...] fashion change provides us with more of a sense of the present than most other phenomena, for it shows through our own clothing that we are somewhere other than where we have just been' (Corrigan 2008: 59). This is reminiscent of Foucault's heterochronies (Foucault and Mieskovic 1986: 26) – the slices of neat, ordered time that exist within heterotopias, places like the museum: reflective of reality but so artificial and so different to it as to make viewers more aware of reality.

Placing fashion into a space for intellectual distance and withdrawal from which to contemplate deathliness, its most frightening characteristic (see Chapter 7), neutralizes it, much in the same way that authors (e.g.: Barringer and Flynn 1998)

have argued the colonial museum gaze domesticated the foreign Other. As Kevin Walsh wrote in 1992:

Museums, and the various forms of heritage derivatives have in fact contributed to a form of institutionalized rationalization of the past. The past has been severed from the daily experiences of people, and mediated as a neutered essence which, in its institutionalized form, is often employed to legitimate the ideas of modernity and progress. (Walsh 1992: 176)

Furthermore, as Andreas Huyssen adds, the proliferation of museums may be ‘a sign of the crisis of that structure of temporality that marked the age of modernity with its celebration of the new as utopian, as radically and irreducibly other’ (Huyssen 1995: 6). With this in mind, then, Corrigan’s definition of fashion as the ultimate capitalist commodity insofar as it is synchronous with the pace of economic development, and is valued as such, also makes fashion the ultimate museum artefact, triggering concepts of now versus then most effectively (**Fig. 4.4**¹¹). Feminist historian Ilya Parkins writes: ‘Fashion, as an ephemeral practice that links the self to the social, is a productive ally in linking theoretical frameworks of time to social and cultural histories of the modern’ (Parkins 2010: 115), and indeed, the earliest museum collections of historical dress rarely included any fashions that might have been worn within living memory: Plate 57 of *Old English Costumes* (1913a), which catalogued the collection of painter Talbot Hughes as donated by Harrods to the Victoria and Albert Museum, showed the latest gown in the collection and gave its date as 1868-1878, a fashion over thirty-five years out of date by that point. Iconic of past

¹¹ The model wearing the nineteenth-century gown in Fig. 4.4 is Betty Carol, who was the designer and proprietor of Mam’selle, a New York dress label targeted at the young women’s market. Two of Carol’s colleagues from her salon also served as models. Anne Fogarty, another designer, also appeared as a model in the pageant, as did Eve Orton, editor of *Harper’s Bazaar*, and Catherine di Montezemolo, editor at *Vogue* magazine, as well as other fashion and women’s page editors of the time (Anonymous 1960a).



Fig. 4.4: Professional models Betty Carol and Barry Novak wearing historic evening gowns held by the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's fundraising Fashion Ball, November 1960. This duo, wearing an 1867 coral silk evening dress (C.I.59.35.5) and a 1949 'Junon' evening gown from the House of Dior (C.I.53.40.5a-e), respectively, illustrated the historical reality and fashion legacy of the 'Romantic' period. The pageant, 'Masterpieces of Fashion', provided the entertainment for the evening, and was staged by famed visual merchandiser Lester Gaba, and heavily sponsored by Saks Fifth Avenue, supported by other important New York fashion industry corporations. Photo by Walter Sanders, November 21, 1960. © Time/LIFE.

difference, this made the contrasting present stand out in relief. The past, by its strangeness, evoked the present even more strongly; a canonical past and a progressive future being part of the teleological narrative of Western progress (see Fritzsche 2001 for a discussion of time and discontinuity).

If fashion is of the present, what happens to it when it enters a museum, which is about the past? It gains a different temporality and gains a new significance from that museally-contextualized temporality. Fashion, as such, cannot exist in the museum - in order to be fashion again, it needs to be seen from the present, not within the past. In commodity fashion discourse, 'the dress you wore only a few years ago is only an old dress, and sometimes just a comical old dress at that' (Katharine Brett 1957, quoted in Palmer 2008a: 57), but in the museum, it becomes a costume – a synecdoche (Bal 1996b: 148) made to be representative of a time and place. Museums, by choosing to save some things from annihilation, make a devil's bargain with objects – in order to survive, they are made to stand for something else:

[...] museum objects are literally both 'there' and not-there', present and absent, and in fact in two distinct ways. In the first place, (a) the object is quite obviously materially part of its position (situation in the historiographic theatre of the museum. (It is in fact physically present.) Yet at the same time, (b), it is unnaturally abstracted there from some 'original' situation: its present situation is in one sense fraudulent (this museum is not 'its' place', even where the object's authenticity-value supports its exhibition-value). (Preziosi 2006: 54)

Objects in museums have a symbolic, representational function – in exhibitions, an object never stands for only itself. It is, according to Mieke Bal's theory of narratology (Bal 1996b: 148), infused with extra meaning by its context and interpretation.

In a museum, time is unequal – some years are longer, bigger, more important, while others are forgotten altogether (see also Chapter 7). A museum is an ahistorical place, too, in the sense that events can be re-configured in all sorts of flexible ways within it.

To quote Susan Pearce:

Always, it can be argued, we are looking at artefacts which have been objectified in the bad sense, lifted out of the flow of experience, actual and potential, and packaged in a way which creates a particular relationship with us. The real time from which the objects came no longer exists, and lumps of time have been lifted out to be offered as commodities, as available activities. We are offered not experience of the past, but a sequence of timeless myths abstracted from the past. (Pearce 1992: 208-209)

As Kevin Walsh further explains:

Essentially, the past as occidental rationality has been situated within the contexts of institutional legitimacy, which remove ‘direct access’ to the past from the public. This process began with the museum display and the hermetic sealing of the past within the display case, thus mediating it as something which could have no direct relevance on the daily experience of modern life. (Walsh 1992: 176)

Fashion in the museum becomes an object of cultural critique, and is transformed into something it was not, originally – its economic value as a commodity on the open market is stripped away, and its power for self-expression is absorbed back onto hegemonic narratives consistent with the museum’s social position. Yet, because both fashion and museums are part of the same economic and political processes – Western urban (bourgeois) capitalism – their processes overlap. Fashion in the museum may come to stand for a different time, but the fashion system also changes museum time, as Alexandra Palmer points out:

In North America in particular, many costume and textile collections stem from the founding links between museums and the fashion world. The fashion industry operates on a seasonal Western fashion system, which has been incorporated into museums’ display schedule and is then linked to fundraising openings, the social season, and parties. (Palmer 2008a: 54)

Additionally, fashion's adopted museal aspects are reintegrated into the aesthetic cycle¹² - the British fashion designer Vivienne Westwood is well-known for using the V&A's collections as inspiration for her catwalk designs (Sheridan 2010). Equally, museums knowingly cooperate with the fashion industry to promote their own cultural relevance and authority (Silverman 1986) – the 2006 V&A exhibition *Fashion-ology*, which celebrated the work of *Vogue* editor Anna Piaggi demonstrated this particularly well. Piaggi, whose double-page spreads highlight inspirations from catwalks to museums, was herself musealised. While fashion has been accused of blurring the boundaries further (*cf.*: Silverman 1986; Steele, Palmer, McNeil, and Breward, *passim* 2008; Menkes 2011) in an already confused landscape of museums and the market¹³, there is no doubt that it would not inspire such strong feelings were it not for its sympathetic reciprocity as a commodity of both economic and cultural

¹² The same has been observed for art: 'On one hand, art history supports the commercial status of art by certifying the attribution, age, and medium of a work. On the other hand, art history has developed categories such as "style", or "form" that facilitate aesthetic appreciation but defy commercial quantification. In other words, the discipline's historical enterprise functions contradictorily, both establishing commercial worth and asserting autonomy from market forces'. (Mansfield 2002: 18)

¹³ 'The extraordinary fact is that we live in a world in which virtually anything may be exhibited in a museum, and in which virtually anything can be made to function as a museum, often though little more than verbal designation. At this juncture, it is often difficult to distinguish museum practices from the entertainment, tourist, and heritage industries; department stores and shopping malls; the art market; and even artistic practices. In such a world, the question of 'representation' (adequate or otherwise) is, to say the least, very complex indeed. The distinctiveness of the museum as an institution, and of museology as a practice, has come to be conceived as a mode of representation that deploys and disseminates knowledge. And many museums, aside from their ideological usefulness, are successful because they are good business investments, in every sense of that term' (Preziosi and Farago 2004: 2). Also: Bennett 1996.

value. It is probably no coincidence that nostalgic trends in fashion appeared alongside the founding of museums, which allowed people to adopt a new way of engaging with the past and looking back on it as a distance irrevocably separated from them.

This widespread acceptance of the distancing of historical thought is perhaps why Diana Vreeland's exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art were so shocking to museum colleagues internationally (Menkes 1983: 8) and commentators such as Deborah Silverman (1986). Vreeland curated her shows according to her expertise as editrix of *Vogue*, mixing styles and periods, appealing to the fashion market, and often promulgating myths rather than histories. As Valerie Steele notes, fuelling her desire to be entertaining rather than educational, Vreeland had an 'intuitive awareness that the clothing of the past was never "costume", but rather was the "fashion" of its day' (Steele 2008: 11). Her notorious 1981 exhibition *The Eighteenth Century Woman* was exquisitely styled; mannequins were abstracted, painted in metallic tones, posed and accessorized theatrically (**Fig. 4.5**). The exhibition did not please costume scholars, who found the mannequins with Lurex-covered faces and use of modern accessories 'disturbing': 'not only does this trivialize the clothes to give a *Vogue*'s eye view of fashion, but it serves to distract the mind from the high quality of the textiles, many of which gain their effect from subtlety' (Ribeiro 1983: 156). Interviewed in connection to the exhibition opening, Vreeland justified her design decisions by exclaiming 'Some museums want old clothes to look old; I think they should look starched, fresh and delicious' (Menkes 1981: 9). This attitude was substantially different than the previously-accepted methods of displaying eighteenth-



Fig. 4.5: Installation view of *The Eighteenth-Century Woman*, curated by Diana Vreeland, The Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981-1982. The liveried servants are silvered mannequins, and the female figure's wig and headdress reflect rococo caricatures of fashion's extreme frivolity, not reality. The visual metaphor is of expensive glamour and opulence. Compare this to an earlier installation (*Period Rooms Re-Occupied In Style*, 1963-64) featuring the same gown (C.I. 37.57ab), where the mother figure evokes wholesome relational norms, not the exaggerated role an upper-class consumer. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

century attire at the Costume Institute, appealing more to fashion industry aesthetics than to museum conventions. As Judith Clark has recently written:

As a curator, she was always an editor and reused her magazine tactics. [...] Her exhibitions were haunted by fashion and conjured from its sophisticated language. [...] Her decisions were perceived as quite radical within the museum but were simply common practice in fashion, and had been for decades (with one exception, it was not the presentation of historical dress and therefore of historical fact).’ (Clark 2011: 233)

Vreeland’s application of contemporary taste to previously-distant history broke all the rules of modernism, wherein the decorative and the temporal were associated with mass culture, while high culture preferred the timeless (Purdy 2004: 9-10).

What is interesting, however, is that as fashion is such a familiar presence in people’s lives from their wardrobes and their shopping experiences (see Schneider quote above), its intimate connotations continue to leak into even the most cerebral representations of costume in museums (Petrov 2011). As Joe Moran has written, ‘From the point of view of history and memory, the everyday is therefore significant because it is a sphere in which the modern and the residual can coexist’ (Moran 2004: 56). Fashion historians de la Haye and Wilson gave an excellent example of this in their book *Defining Dress*:

Clothes, all in all, are enormously meaningful and are deeply entwined with our lives. In 1993 the Biba exhibition (shown in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Leicester, but not in London) recreated the ambience of the Biba shops in Kensington in the 1960s and early 1970s. It drew large crowds. A visitors’ book solicited comments and the response was insightful – long entries amounting in some cases to autobiographical extracts as writers recorded in detail where, when and why they wore their first Biba garment and what it had meant to them – showing a whole generation of women whose identities had been formed by a culture in which the dresses of a particular designer had played a crucial role in establishing the ambience of the times. These women, now in their forties and fifties, were to be seen at the exhibition reminiscing with friends and reliving their youth. (de la Haye and Wilson 1999: 6)

People, when they engage with dress in museums by remembering their personal histories as Gaynor Kavanagh (2000) would have them do, are engaging with it as

fashion, not as costume (**Fig. 4.6**)¹⁴. There is a clear reciprocity between consuming fashion in commercial contexts and consuming historical fashion in museums.

Historical Fashion, Contemporary Cultural Capital

While *Punch* had suggested in 1847 that museums partner with the fashion industry, it took over 60 years for this to actually occur. The stereotyping effect of industrialization on the world of material goods meant that museums were increasingly filled with artefacts infused with nostalgia – objects crafted in the past, collected because of a perceived supremacy of skill over that available to the contemporary craftsman. Decorative arts museums and collections in particular were dedicated to the gospel of ‘honest labour,’ produced by hand by naïve craftsmen before the advent of the aesthetically and morally dishonest machine age (see: Eastlake 1868; Morris 1882a; Morris 1882b). The V&A, founded as a result of an exhibition of arts and manufactures, continued to have as its guiding principle the education of generations of craftspeople and the promotion of home-grown industry and talent (Baker and Richardson 1997). Eventually, fashion was also included in this remit. In 1913, the department store Harrods donated the historical dress collection of

¹⁴ This is difficult to demonstrate empirically, as visitor survey studies have demonstrated: ‘The question of the museum as a regime of signification is problematic for social and cultural theory in that it has tended to gloss over audience interpretation, assuming that ideology and content may be ‘read-off’ the social relations of the text’s production. How different social groups and subjects “read” museums, according to the range of cultural experiences, needs, and desires they bring to them is an aspect of cultural representation and reproduction that is underdeveloped in museum visitor research’ (Fyfe and Ross 1996: 131). Anecdotal and circumstantial evidence based on observation such as the quote above continues to provide the majority of the material.



Fig. 4.6: Views of guests attending the November 1960 Fashion Ball held in the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art to benefit the Costume Institute interacting with and admiring the mannequins dressed in nineteenth-century fashion in the exhibition *Charm is Always in Style*. Photos by Walter Sanders, November 21, 1960. © Time/LIFE.

genre painter Talbot Hughes to the museum (Petrov 2008), and the speeches given on this occasion reflect the intentions of the museum administrators for it:

Mr. Pease [President of the Board of Education] said it was no doubt it was a very valuable collection from an educational point of view that was being handed over the Victoria and Albert Museum. Attention to dress was thought by some to be a frivolous occupation, but time worked great changes, and what was once frivolity at another time became an invaluable and concrete reality. ... The collection would stimulate the imagination of the present and the future, and would help in the scheme of colour and design, which was so necessary to the dressmaker. (Anonymous 1913b: n.p.)

Historical fashion, no longer a commodity on the open market, could nevertheless influence manufacture through providing inspiration for designers. In fact, it continued to be seen as ‘a sort of rather unholy by-product of the textile industry’ (Gibbs-Smith 1976: 123) for many years thereafter.

Similar motivations were behind the incorporation of the private Museum of Costume Art, founded in 1937 by Irene Lewisohn, into the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Although then-Met president William Church Osborn privately confessed that he was horrified to think ‘that we will be in the button business’ (Church Osborn 1944), the 1945 notice on the front page of the American Museums Association newsletter was very clear on the subject of connections with the fashion industry:

The Museum of Costume Art has been made a branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art under the name Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. [...] Announcement of this was made by William Church Osborn, president of the Metropolitan Museum, at a December 12 meeting of leaders of the fashion industry. [...] Exhibitions of the new Costume Institute are arranged especially for fabric and clothing designers. The current showing, *Hats and Headdresses*, includes more than a hundred American and European models. (Anonymous 1945a: 1)

Thus, despite the name of the institution suggesting an aesthetic focus, the museum was really geared toward economic productivity. The term ‘art’ might here be more fruitfully interpreted as something approaching Platonic or Aristotelian productive mimesis, the practical application of creativity and skill. This was hardly surprising in

the context, as one of the founders of the Museum of Costume Art was Morris D.C. Crawford, the research editor for the fashion industry publication *Women's Wear Daily*, and the advisor to the Board of Directors in charge of fundraising was Dorothy Shaver, president of the high-end department store, Lord & Taylor (Weissman 1977: n.p.). As early as 1928, the founders of the Museum-cum-Institute had partnered with industry to organize an exhibition at the Stern Brothers department store in Manhattan to raise support for a permanent home for the collection (Anonymous 1928: 35). By 1958, a brochure text emphasized over and over again its primary audiences:

The reason for the Costume Institute [...] to stimulate the creativity of the American fashion industry [...] Located in New York City, focal point of costume design and study in America, the Costume Institute sits at the very heart of those great industries to which its services are vitally essential. It benefits all who work in the various fields of costume – fashion theatre, editorial, promotion, manufacture, merchandising, research. [...] Adjoining the Study Storage is a series of designer's rooms where professionals may work in privacy. Here is where ideas are born. [...] In this creative atmosphere, designers translate the past into tomorrow's fashions. [...] Leading internationally-known designers use the Costume Institute regularly as a stimulus to new fashion inspiration. (Anonymous 1958: n.p.)

An interview with executive director Polaire Weissman in 1961 highlighted the Institute's importance in offering 'a blend of stimulation and information to students, fashion designers, people who promote and sell clothes and those who suddenly need to know some facts about their history' (Bender 1961: 42). Ten years later, a special issue of the Met's *Bulletin* dedicated to the Costume Institute featured interviews with designers who shared how they used the collection to inspire and inform their work (Moore 1971).

Similarly close relationships between costume collections and the fashion industry are widespread throughout the United States. In 1941, the Brooklyn Museum's Industrial Division arranged a display of hats from the museum's collection: 'The main purpose of the exhibition was to bring to the attention of millinery designers the great wealth

of source material in the world-wide range of the Museum's millinery collections'. These were accompanied by contemporary creations forecasting future trends by renowned milliner Sally Victor: 'They were based on the museum's collections, and showed the inspiration which a creative designer may draw from the Museum's material in the production of modern millinery which is neither a replica nor a mere adaptation of an older form' (Anonymous 1941b: 109). Such collaborative relationships were promoted in a speech by the New York textile industrialist Raymond Brush to the annual meeting of the American Associations of Museums in 1948 (Brush 1948: 7-8), and similar sentiments led to the establishment of so-called 'Fashion Groups' of various cities – non-profit professional organizations that promote their industry – which actively participate in the foundation, administration, and fundraising for museums such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art: 'The Philadelphia Museum of Art has received \$15,000 for the installation of a second gallery in its Fashion Wing. [...] The Fashion Wing is an enterprise of the Fashion Group of Philadelphia' (1950: 3). Canada has its own branches of the Fashion Group, and the Royal Ontario Museum's collection was dependent on their efforts: 'The Fashion Group of Toronto, an organization of women working with fashions, "spots" really fine dresses of new styles and asks the owner to give it to the museums when she no longer wants it.' (Usher 1958: 25) It must be noted, however, that even with the help of industry partners, contemporary styles could still be outmoded by the time they reached the museum, as the then-curator, Katherine Brett, noted: 'We try to get a "name" garment typical of the era, though we may have to wait 10 years before it is discarded' (Usher 1958: 25).

Although the time of the founding of the Museum of Costume Art and the Costume Institute were closely linked to government efforts (practical and psychological) to boost industry production in the Depression and wartime period (Weissman 1977: n.p.), as a separately-funded entity within the Metropolitan, the Costume Institute continues to maintain close relationships with the American fashion and textile industries, which still bring important mutual benefits in publicity and financial support. From the very beginning, industry availed itself of the resources of the museum, as a financial statement for the Museum of Costume Art from 1941 stated: ‘Firms and Stores on Fifth Avenue, as well as the Manufacturers of the Seventh Avenue District are constantly coming in to use the source material in the museum, both in study storage and in the library’ (Anonymous 1941a: 3). The Royal Ontario Museum’s Collection enjoyed similar popularity: ‘Designers come from as far as New York to study our collection’ (Usher 1958: 25). Equally, such close relationships between museums and the industry are still maintained by these and other museums: the V&A’s ‘Fashion in Motion’ events promote British high fashion, and the Bath Fashion Museum comes the closest to fulfilling *Punch*’s suggestion by collecting and exhibiting contemporary designs in its ‘Dress of the Year’ series, established by Doris Langley Moore herself in 1963 (Byrde 1984: 150). Under this scheme, contemporary fashion is documented and simultaneously layered with historical significance.

Fashion museum collections, in addition to inspiring and promoting commercial fashion, can provide a valuable aura of history to stores and design brands.

Increasingly, the attractive nostalgia and the perceived authenticity that a (sometimes-fictional) date of establishment can lend to a brand are recognized for their economic power (De Ruyck, Van den Bergh and Van Kemseke 2009). Indeed, savvy marketing

on the part of both stores and museums has led to fruitful collaborations in the past. The Harrods gift of antique dresses was first displayed in the company's own flagship Kensington store during the 1913 Christmas shopping season alongside modern outfits (Mendes 1984: 78), and generated publicity for the store and the V&A through sales of commemorative illustrated books (Anonymous 1913a). In 1945, long before the McCord Museum costume collection had premises of its own or indeed, was even recognized as an entity within the museum, a Montreal department store, Henry Morgan and Company, displayed pieces of historical fashion on loan from the museum to commemorate its centennial (Anonymous 1945b: 5; **Fig. 4.7**). This exhibition no doubt portrayed the store as having native Montreal pedigree, but it may also have been the first time that Montrealers became aware of the McCord museum's fashion treasures, as it was not until 1957 that the Costume and Textiles collection was formally founded.

Deborah Silverman (1986) has written a detailed history of the collaborations between the Bloomingdale's department store and the Costume Institute in New York under the leadership of Diana Vreeland in the 1970s and 1980s. However, even earlier than this, department stores and fashion boutiques were closely involved with the work of the Costume Institute. The fundraising 'Fashion Ball', often referred to as 'the party of the year', an annual event since 1946, is one opportunity for the fashion industry to support the museum financially (see **Figs. 4.4** and **4.6**). In 1960, for example, the department store Saks Fifth Avenue heavily sponsored the Ball (Anonymous 1960a). In 1963, the 'Art in Fashion' publicity campaign featured jewellery, fashion, art, and furniture from the museum's collection in the store windows of luxury shops along fifty blocks of Fifth Avenue leading up to the museum: Tiffany, Bergdorf Goodman,



Fig. 4.7: Henry Morgan and Company 1945 centennial window display, featuring gowns on loan from the McCord Museum. *Montreal Gazette*, June 2, 1945, p.5.

Van Cleef and Arpels, Henry Bendel, Bonwit Teller, Helena Rubinstein, Revlon, Best and Company, De Pinna, Cartier, Saks Fifth Avenue, Lord and Taylor, and B. Altman all featured museum artefacts interspersed with their own products to ‘salute’ the museum and its upcoming benefit gala (Anonymous 1963a).

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to write at length about the problematic ethics of representing contemporary fashion within the museum, especially in the case of financial sponsorship by the firm being represented (see: Leo 2001; Socha 2003; Postrel 2007; Menkes 2011); however, it is one of the aims of this chapter to argue that even outdated fashion, seemingly without market value, can nevertheless be part of the commodity cycle due to the cultural capital endowed upon it by the museum. The evidence suggests that the responses to historical fashion in the museum, from unease at female consumerism to unease about brand domination, suggest an underlying fear about a loss of objectivity and a subsequent descent into irrational commodity fetishism.

Selling Style

The pervasive influence of commercial fashion within the museum is perhaps unsurprising given its history. This chapter has already traced the confused visual landscape of museums and department stores in the nineteenth century, and the presence of museum objects in department store displays in the twentieth. It has also been noted that some of the visual conventions of displaying historical fashion were imported into the museum through the influence of individuals affiliated with both the museum world and the world of the fashion industry. This stands to reason, however, as the genre of the fashion exhibition did not spring fully-formed *ex nihilo*, and its

early years were filled with some debate among practitioners as to how best to develop it.

Indeed, one of the earliest discussions of this problem featured in a 1936 issue of *Museums Journal*. Although it did not describe a collection chosen as one of the case studies for this thesis, the examples given by the Hereford Museum are illustrative of the challenges faced and solutions found by early costume curators:

Stands were necessary to display the costumes, and here a great problem presented itself. Naturally the dresses would look better on figures or stands than on hangers, but modern stands were useless for the majority, owing to the vagaries of ideas of beauty, in addition to the increase in size of the average woman during the past one hundred and fifty years. Repeated requests for gifts brought forth some sixty stands of this century but of old-fashioned shape, from local drapers, and surgical operations were performed upon these as soon as they arrived. The sizes of waists and busts were reduced by many inches. [...] Men have not varied in size so much, and stands were borrowed from the local tailor which exactly fitted uniforms from the early nineteenth century. (Morgan 1936: 170)

The practice, as archival research has shown, was not unusual, but this source is particularly revealing as to the motivations behind the choice of display technique. Indeed, the V&A availed itself of 50 commercial expandable wire mannequins bought at a discount from Harrods after the store's own exhibition of the same costumes had ended (Gaze 1913). Likewise, Doris Langley Moore adapted donated shop mannequins when planning her museum displays: 'Forced to use our ingenuity, we mounted heads and arms on old dressmakers' dummies [...] we also adapted and even reshaped commercial dummies which had grown out of date, and were given to us, very helpfully, by several firms.' (Langley Moore 1961: 280) Langley Moore was reluctant to convey the air of the store fully, however: 'Their heads were a troublesome problem since we had to exclude anything recognizable as a shop-window model [...] repainted and re-wigged, some were by no means unpresentable'. (Langley Moore 1961: 280). Her squeamishness was not shared by other curators, and

many museums use commercial mannequins for their displays, some appropriating their retail 'aura' to great effect.

For example, in 1975, the Brooklyn Museum commissioned Rootstein mannequins of the type used in major department stores, famed for being modelled after celebrities, for their *Of Men Only* exhibition. The exhibition book was in the style of a mail-order catalogue, a form of shopping the curator, Elizabeth Ann Coleman, assumed the audience to be familiar with: 'Practically everyone recognizes a mail order catalogue and receives them [...] the mode of presentation is designed to stimulate the reader's interest in the subject matter whether that interest is based upon fashion history, nostalgia, curiosity or retail clothing economics' (1975: 2). Indeed, some of the mannequins used in the display were actually recognizable from the high street: a 1973 book about window display featured photographs of one of the mannequins used in the exhibition (initially modelled after British actor Jeremy Brett) in the windows of New York department store Bonwit Teller. Of that establishment, Joel wrote: 'The men's store of Bonwit Teller, New York, continues to use natural-looking male mannequins as the prototype of the well-dressed, pace-setting sophisticate they identify as their customer'. (Joel 1973: 121), and perhaps this is also why the same commercial mannequin model was used as a representation of modern man at the Fashion Museum in Bath in the same decade (**Fig 4.8**). Rootstein continue to supply mannequins and display figures to the Fashion Museum, the V&A, and the Costume Institute for their historical fashion exhibitions, though these are not always used in the same explicitly referential manner as in *Of Men Only*.



Fig. 4.8: Rootstein mannequins of Jeremy Brett. L-R from top: *Of Men Only*. [09/18/1975 - 01/18/1976]. Installation view: court suit, silk embroidered velvet and satin. French, circa 1774-1793. Brooklyn Museum Archives. Records of the Department of Costumes and Textiles. (C&T_E_1975_Men); *Of Men Only*. [09/18/1975 - 01/18/1976]. Installation view. Brooklyn Museum Archives. Records of the Department of Photography. (PHO_E_1975_Men); crop from photo of a Bonwit Teller window from: *Fairchild's Book of Window Display* by Shirley Joel, 1973, p. 165 (another features on p. 109); undated postcard (after 1975) from the Museum of Costume [Fashion Museum] Bath.

The exhibition aroused a great deal of interest in the fashion industry. The exhibition's curator and designer were interviewed for *Visual Merchandising* magazine. The article contains much useful information about the technical aspects of staging *Of Men Only*, but also refers to the commercial inspiration used for its design: Daniel Weidmann, the chief designer stated:

These exhibit techniques are adaptive to store windows, as well. As a matter of fact, many of my ideas come from those I have seen utilized in the windows when I stroll downtown. The only difference between my display and that of a store is that I can't drill a hole in a shoe to put a pole through for a mannequin stand. Nor can I nail things or put pins into them to much extent because I'm dealing with museum pieces. (Anonymous 1975b: 37)

There was a further connection to the high street in that the department store Barney's sponsored newspaper ads and radio publicity for the exhibition (Anonymous 1975a).

Thus, the properties and 'furniture' of fashion exhibitions, particularly the mannequins supporting the dress did and do echo the retail environment. Sara Schneider also notes that 'the aesthetics of museum display reflects just how similar these have grown to visual-merchandising strategies in the commercial setting. [...] Many of the audiences or buyers for display are the same as those for museum exhibitions' (Schneider 1995: 36-37). Alongside this perhaps-subliminal similarity are more obvious instances, particularly when exhibitions are designed specifically to emulate the environment of the shop or designer salon. While *Of Men Only* utilized this visual reference most explicitly in the catalogue of the exhibition, it has been a recurring trope used for nostalgic or aspirational reasons in a range of displays. The 1971 V&A *Fashion: An Anthology* exhibition was designed by Michael Haynes, a visual merchandiser for the fashion industry, and although guest curator Cecil Beaton himself was anxious that 'the exhibition should not look like shop windows, and the construction of the display area has made that effect difficult to avoid' (Glynn 1971:

14), the exhibition press release ‘promised that, with Haynes’s involvement, the show would have “all the originality and liveliness of the best shop windows in London”’ (de la Haye 2006: 138). Indeed, the Christian Dior section (the exhibition was divided chronologically as well as by designer or stylistic movement) was specifically styled to look like the brand’s boutique; the corbelled arch which acted as a niche referenced the exterior architecture of the Place Vendôme in Paris, home of many of the great couture salons (**Fig. 4.9**).

Likewise, among the early vignettes featured at the Museum of Costume (Fashion Museum) in Bath was one titled ‘The Draper’s Shop’, set in the 1860s, and another titled ‘A Shawl Shop 1870-80’ (Anonymous 1971; Byrde 1980). On one hand, this was a practical and convenient museal conceit by which to display lengths of textiles and sample books of ribbons and fabrics; on the other, it also called to mind in the visitors a nostalgic era before ready-to-wear fashion, and the appeal of a lost age of personalized service and design: ‘the first of the Victorian scenes represents a busy afternoon at a smart draper’s and haberdasher’s, when shops, however fully stocked, were still relatively small and intimate and not nearly so departmental as now’ (Langley Moore 1969: 21). This sense of mixed awe and nostalgia is also often present in exhibitions on a form of elite fashion: *haute couture*.

Many exhibitions of haute couture contain aspirational branding. The Costume Institute frequently collaborates with fashion houses to obtain funding and object loans: the 1996 Christian Dior retrospective exhibition was sponsored by Christian



Fig. 4.9: Installation view of the Christian Dior section of *Fashion: An Anthology* (1971), designed by Michael Haynes and curated by Cecil Beaton, featuring a corbelled arch that echoes those on the façade of the Christian Dior salon on the Place Vendôme, Paris. © Victoria and Albert Museum.

Dior¹⁵, and the 2005 Chanel show was made possible by Chanel. The logos of both brands appeared prominently in the entry signage for both exhibitions. Equally, the *griffe*, or signature, of Chanel was used for the title signage. This mark of the maker served as a reminder of the production aspects of couture, something highlighted in the Costume Institute's 1995 exhibition *Haute Couture* through the use of dressmaking dummies (recognizable by their wheeled claw feet, stump necks, and articulated arms) in sections that dealt with the materials and making of high fashion. Likewise, the 2007 V&A exhibition *The Golden Age of Couture* also focused on tailoring and the designer's presence, albeit in a different way: Land Design Studio designed the second room with 'an open catwalk display of tailored suits and daywear from 1947-57, a demonstration of highly-skilled cutting and stitching' (Ward 2007: 2). Here, the device of the catwalk, while also a practical means of displaying a large quantity of clothing, was also used to visually refer to the purchasing environment for high fashion.

Indeed, even the architecture of couture is sometimes used as inspiration for the exhibition design. The 2002 show *Elite Elegance: Couture Fashion the 1950s*, curated at the Royal Ontario Museum by Alexandra Palmer was designed by the commercial interior architecture firm YabuPushelberg to evoke the atmosphere of upscale Toronto mansions (Birchall-Spencer 2003: 20), seemingly placing the focus squarely on the consumers of couture. However, the section 'Haute Couture Today' (**Fig. 4.10**) featured a mock winding staircase (Moore 2002: 4), a possible visual

¹⁵ Dior, as the company is now known, no longer have need of an institution like the Costume Institute to promote themselves: the brand was celebrated in an exhibition organized by and drawn from its own archives at the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow in 2011. See also Menkes 2011.



Fig. 4.10: Installation view of couture staircase in *Elite Elegance* (2002). Photo by Brian Boyle. © Royal Ontario Museum.

reference to the famous mirrored staircase at the Chanel salon in the Rue Cambon in Paris, which allowed the couturier to watch the progress of her fashion shows below. In the ROM gallery, the objects and text combined with the design elements to suggest the continuity of a glamorous tradition.

Nostalgia or awe at a lost and/or unattainable world of shopping experiences are economically unproductive, however. Creativity in industrial production and the economic stimulus provided by consumer shopping behaviour, by contrast, are. The exhibitionary focus on the fashion consumer is not merely a reflection of the goods cycle: it also has important implications for the construction of the subject in museums of historical fashion.

The Self-Styled Consumer

An important genre of historical fashion exhibitions has been that of the 'ideal fashion consumer'. Occasionally a generic period clotheshorse, but more frequently a named figure, such persons (most often women) are made iconic. They define style (see Chapter 5) but also are glorified for their acts of self-definition through consumption.

Collecting clothing actually worn is an important part of the acquisition strategy of most fashion collections. The documentation around each dress (oral history about why the item was purchased, how and when it was worn, as well as photographs of it being worn) are vital to creating social history narratives around fashion consumption. This is not as representative a process as it might ideally be; few individuals hoard their entire wardrobe and gift it to a museum, and those who might be approached for donations of their clothing are selected because of personal ideas about taste from

curators and individuals affiliated with museum collections (such as the Fashion Group in Montreal, see above). In preparing his 1971 exhibition *Fashion: An Anthology*, fashion and celebrity photographer Cecil Beaton approached individuals he considered arbiters of high style, many of whom he knew personally through his work in theatre, film, and fashion; these tended to be the upper class purchasers of couture active after 1920, rather than average consumers of high street fashion, and the museum's collection was subsequently skewed toward that demographic (Mendes 1984: 77). Likewise, the wardrobe of Heather Firbank (acquired and exhibited in 1960) did provide a glimpse into the life and priorities of a fashionable and affluent young woman whose couture outfits had been well-preserved; her taste however, was conservative and English, and so the V&A did not gain contemporary outfits by avant-garde French couturiers, for instance (Mendes 1984: 79-80). The documentation around the Firbank collection, however, did allow the curators to reconstruct a picture of the woman through the traces of her consumption (**Fig. 4.11**).

Even if exhibitions of celebrity wardrobes are excluded (because they include or consist of stage and film costumes), one can trace a rising genre of historical fashion exhibitions which feature iconic fashion consumers. These may not be conventional shows of historical fashion inasmuch as they may feature living women; however, these women may be portrayed as historically important due to their patronage of and influence on important designers (Lulu Guinness – Museum at FIT 2011) or use historical garments to effect in their wardrobes (Iris Apfel – *Rara Avis*, Costume Institute 2005; Lulu Guinness, see above; Anna Piaggi, see above). These women are iconic not in an aesthetic sense (see Chapter 5) but in an artful sense: they are known for the image they create for themselves. They are highlighted by museums not just



Fig. 4.11: Images of Heather Firbank as a mannequin in the V&A's 1960 'A Lady of Fashion' exhibition (right) and an archival photograph of her in the same year as her suit (left). From: 'A Fashionable Lady of the Years 1908 to 1921: The Clothes of Miss Heather Firbank'. *Illustrated London News* October 8, 1960; p. 621.

because of the importance of individual pieces within their wardrobes, but because of the way they reflect and navigate the consumption side of the fashion system. The practice of highlighting such women of style is familiar from the publishing industry: from the photographs of fashionable society women in Emily Burbank's 1917 book *Woman as Decoration*, to the spreads of glossy fashion and lifestyle magazines, to 'street style' photo-documentation by Bill Cunningham of *The New York Times* and Scott Schuman's popular 'Sartorialist' blog. Amy de la Haye (2006) has begun to explore this aspect of the relationship between the museum and the high-fashion magazine in her work (see also footnote 7, above). Not unlike the Museum of Modern Art's post-war exhibitions of good design (Staniszewski 1998), where consumers were encouraged under the aegis of 'style', such fashion exhibitions feed directly back into the fashion cycle by being featured in the same media outlets and inspiring the same set of creatives and manufacturers as they promote. Neither is this a phenomenon limited to the English-speaking world: the 1999 exhibition at the Musée de la Mode et du Textile in Paris, *Garde-robres: Intimités Devoilées* featured clothing from such individuals as Belle Époque courtesan Cléo de Mérode, the Duchess of Windsor, Denise Poiret (wife of the couturier) and fashion photographer Norman Parkinson (Golbin 1999).

The rise of this genre is probably traceable back to the 1970s. Cecil Beaton's 1971 *Fashion: An Anthology* exhibition featured clothes which he had collected from the wardrobes of women whose style he esteemed. In his exhibition proposal, he wrote, 'I would hope to flatter the donors by only asking for specific garments that I had seen and admired; and would be very selective in anything that was merely "offered"' (quoted in de la Haye 2006: 130).

Likewise, Diana Vreeland's 1975 exhibition *American Women of Style* highlighted the personalities of specific fashionable women through their clothing, as Vreeland wrote in the catalogue: 'This is not a dress show. This is an exhibition to project, through the beholder's imagination, a vision of ten American women of style.'

(Vreeland 1975: n.p.) Stella Blum, the professional curator of the Costume Institute (Vreeland's title was 'Special Consultant') struggled in her foreword in the catalogue to find the logic behind the selection of such disparate women: Rita de Acosta Lydig, Josephine Baker, Irene Castle, Isadora Duncan, Mrs John W. Garrett, Mrs Charles Dana Gibson, the Duchess of Marlborough, Millicent Rogers, Gertrude Whitney, and Elsie de Wolfe. Indeed, Mrs Vreeland used a liberal dash of artistic license: as no original clothing belonging to Mrs Gibson existed, a pastiche of clothing from the period was put together to represent her (Anonymous 1975c: 1).

A similar exhibition was held in 1999 at the Fashion Museum in Bath. *Women of Style* also featured six women otherwise unconnected apart from their personal style: Mary Curzon, Mary Endicott, Helen Gardner, Martita Hunt, Dame Margot Fonteyn (see **Fig. 6.16**), and Molly Tondalman. Label copy focused on the women's emotional connection to their clothing, and their shopping habits: 'It is obvious that Mary loved fashion when you see how many pairs of shoes she owned [...] Mary frequently bought the same style of shoe in several different colours' (Harden 1999: 4). Both exhibitions featured portraits and images of the women featured, though only the Bath exhibition made any attempt to model the mannequins after them; it seems the women themselves were on display, contrary to the statements of curatorial intention to display personal style.

Rita de Acosta Lydig, Mrs Gibson, and the Duchess of Marlborough were also featured in the Costume Institute's 2010 show, *American Woman: Fashioning a National Identity*. Although this exhibition did not primarily celebrate specific women, and rather was organized around stereotyped female roles – Heiress, Gibson Girl, Bohemian, Suffragist, Patriot, Flapper, and Screen Siren – the mannequins were recognizably humanoid, giving the impression of interacting with each other and their backgrounds (see Schneider 1995). In addition, they were styled to represent particular periods, but in some instances embodied the female inspiration for that period: Mrs Lydig (another woman best-remembered for her shoe shopping habit) served as the Bohemian archetype, and her characteristic poses, features, and coiffure were reproduced in the mannequins, though they were not all clothed in her surviving outfits (**Fig 4.12**). Thus, *American Women of Style*, *Women of Style* and *American Woman* put specific women on display as subjects, notable for their shopping habits.

Even in exhibitions where specific women were not recognizable, they were portrayed through their appetites: sexual and sartorial. The Costume Institute's exhibitions of *The Eighteenth-Century Woman* (1981; see above) and *Dangerous Liaisons* (2004) paired social history with a heavy emphasis on consumerism. The curatorial message for both exhibitions was that by surrounding themselves with particular kinds of material culture, the eighteenth-century elite fashioned themselves and moulded their social interactions accordingly (Bernier 1981; Koda and Bolton 2006). The lively manner in which the latter exhibition, in particular, was staged, served to enable audiences to empathize with the desires and diversions of the people who inhabited such lavish clothing and surroundings, and may have tapped into a cultural stereotype



Fig. 4.12: Installation views of *American Woman* (Met, 2010), 'Bohemian' section. The left-hand image shows one of Mrs Lydig's trunks of shoes and her characteristic pink pantaloons. The mannequins in the section are styled and posed in ways inspired by photographs and paintings of her. © Metropolitan Museum of Art.

of Rococo hedonism. Indeed, the newspaper description of the 1963-64 exhibition *Period Rooms Re-Occupied in Style* focused solely on the consumer culture of the time:

The street is the museum corridor with the wonderfully preserved 18-century [sic] storefront from Paris, behind which passerby may see the remarkable early Porcelains of Sèvres. Two mannequins have been added to the scene, window shoppers of the time of Louis XVI. The fashionable shopping attire that Paris provided one of the shoppers was an open robe worn over a matching petticoat in striped silk with coppery orange iridescence.

(Anonymous 1963b: 171)

The porcelain was to later provide the exact shade of pink for the walls of Vreeland's 1981 show (Menkes 1981: 9). By walking through the interiors of the period rooms, or past animated vignettes as in **Fig. 4.5**, viewers also became part of the value hierarchy on display.

Conclusion: Museums and the Market

As was discussed above, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors who described fashion museums found the notion of an exhibition devoted to such a commercial object laughable, but their fears that fashion could not be sufficiently critiqued in a house of culture and art¹⁶ persist to this day, and reflect a fundamental anxiety about the intellectual authority of a museum in a capitalist society. The case of historical fashion exhibitions highlights that simply removing a commodity from the market by putting it in a museum collection does not remove the museum itself from larger market functions. When collections were established to inspire designers, this simultaneously placed the museum at the service of corporate brands. Equally, while exhibitions of stylish and fashionable individuals may have been intended to

¹⁶ And/or that fashion is not a sufficiently worthy subject for critique in a museum in the first place: see Chapter 3.

highlight the power of individual taste, they can be seen as simultaneously promoting aspirational consumerism. Therefore, the early fear of the influence that giddy consumers or cynical businesses might exert over the museum's mission of cataloguing the products of the past in order to improve those of the future is quite a reasonable one. This is even more so in an age when designers can make their own museums and/or exhibitions, and when both venues use the same designers and properties.

It is not the place of this thesis to comment on ethics of this phenomenon, however. It aims only to catalogue the many contexts of fashion that historical fashion exhibitions reference. Whereas this chapter has discussed the commercial constituencies of fashion, the following chapter will explore the ways in which historical fashion exhibitions interact with the conventions of theatre and the visual arts.

5. Intervisuality: Historical Fashion, Art, and Theatre

There is no historically authentic look that is not the look of an artistic style.
(Hollander 1978: 293)

As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, fashion in a museum was often commodified as a sample to be emulated for industrial manufacture; equally, however, it is just as frequently fetishised for its beauty and perfection of craftsmanship. It is still debated whether fashion is a branch of the fine arts: for example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art devoted an issue of its *Bulletin* in 1967 to debating the connections between fashion, art, and beauty (Laver 1967), with art historians, designers, artists, and curators weighing in on the issue. Melissa Taylor has noted that ‘In the nature of a consistently renewed market, high art finds the transience of fashion in direct contrast to the longevity of art’ (Taylor 2005: 449), and connections between the two are constantly re-evaluated philosophically (see: Bok Kim 1998; Miller 2007). Recently, fashion historian and curator Valerie Steele has contended that although fashion is more commercial and mundane, it is ‘in the process of being re-imagined as art’ (Zarella 2011). Fashion curators, historians and journalists do not hesitate to align the two in titles for exhibitions, books, and articles, for example: *The Fine Art of Costume* (Metropolitan Museum of Art 1954-55), *The Art of Fashion in the Twentieth Century* (Royal Ontario Museum 1957), *The Art of Fashion* (Metropolitan Museum of Art 1967-68), *An Elegant Art* (Maeder 1983), *The Art of Dress* (Ribeiro 1995; Ashelford 1996), ‘The Art of Style and the Style of Art’ (Smith 2010), ‘Gone Global: Fashion as Art?’ (Menkes 2011). Ribeiro writes that ‘clothes, however splendid the craftsmanship and luxury, are basically a commodity and cannot have the emotional impact of art or literature’; she concedes, however, that

‘fashion acts as a link between life and art’ (1995: 5). Indeed, museums have attempted make these links explicit through references to art and artists in exhibitions about fashion: at the Metropolitan Museum of Art alone, these have included *Fashions and Follies: Erté and Some Contemporaries* (1968), *Cubism and Fashion* (1998-99), and *Costume and Character in the Age of Ingres* (1999).

Certainly, fashion and art share a history: until the entry of historical fashion into museums, the only means by which the public could learn about costumes of other countries and times was through its illustration: in books, paintings, and on the stage. As outmoded dress became a visual marker of historical difference (see Chapter 7), practitioners in the fine, decorative, applied and performing arts lobbied for greater and more reliable information through the preservation and presentation of historical fashion. This chapter will examine the influence of artistic conventions and theories, as well as of individual practitioners on the museal representation of historical fashion. It uses Nicholas Mirzoeff’s notion of ‘intervisuality’ (2002) to analyse the connections, references, and interplay between art, theatre, and museum exhibitions of historical fashion.

Visual History: Painting and Antiquarianism

Rapidly improving printing technology as well as increased consumer demand from a more literate populace in the Early Modern period enabled the publication of growing numbers of antiquarian books on a variety of subjects. The quality of scholarship varied widely, and many were derivative instead of empirical, but their wide availability made them extremely influential. Books on dress and costume were particularly popular; beginning from the mid-sixteenth century, illustrated books

appeared throughout continental Europe, which mapped and classified the peoples of the world across time and space using their costumes and adornment as a means of distinction (Ilg 2004). By the eighteenth century, English-language titles were also available in large numbers: these included satirical prints and periodical publications that documented the dress of contemporary people, fashionable or ordinary, to publications about the dress of other countries and the Classical World, as well as antiquarian titles examining historical dress. Dress historian Lou Taylor devoted the first chapter of her book *Establishing Dress History* (2004) to the history and influence of some of these volumes.

Books such as these were published by individuals with claims to expertise, and constructed generalised (often idealised or romanticised) views of the past for the entertainment and edification of the members of the public that could afford to purchase them. They were a part of the greater Enlightenment ambition to order and categorise all that was known about the natural world. Art historian Sam Smiles claims that: 'A large part of the meaning of costume books derives from the growth of a generic class of publications whose physical appearance and modes of presentation of empirical evidence work together to constitute a form of knowledge' (Smiles 1999: 55). Therefore, these books were functionally similar to museums, in collecting and presenting material culture through the conceptual filters recognized by Western culture: time, space, class, nationality, etc. A novelty in these publications was that an increasing number based their visual descriptions on extant material evidence as well as written material.

However, for succeeding generations of scholars who did not have physical access to extant garments, illustrations grew to be an acceptable form of material evidence. An editorial in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of 1869, arguing for a museum of costume, makes this clear when it proposes that 'a museum of costume should be in epochs, illustrated by model and by picture' (Anonymous 1869: 373). This desire was fuelled by an antiquarian nostalgia for an imagined utopian past, as an 1873 article describing historical costumes at an International Exhibition demonstrates:

The art of dress, from the earliest historic times, seems to have been considered an important study among the upper classes of society, and books of ancient costumes show combinations as tasteful, and frequently far more artistic than those of modern times. (Anonymous 1873: 243)

The costumes on display were intellectually assimilated in tandem with the information contained in costume books.

Smiles argues that antiquarian illustrations 'provided iconic illustrations of the past which stood in place of the obscure record with which historians wrestled, that they were constitutive of knowledge rather than representative of it' (Smiles 1999: 56).

Book illustrations, because they were derived from material evidence and observations, held as much credence as the artefacts they represented. Smiles concludes:

This shift from textual to material evidence would necessarily privilege the visual over the verbal, not simply in respect of elaborating visual taxonomies from extant remains, a task which helped to usher in what we might regard as archaeology proper, but also, and perhaps more importantly, by holding out an invitation to imaginative projection that is closely tied to antiquarian elements within Romanticism. (Smiles 1999: 56-57)

This imaginative projection from illustrations was as vital for the purpose of inspiring artists and theatre designers to produce "accurate" representations of historical characters, as it was to inspire the public to emotionally participate in the fiction thus created. The same 1869 *Gentleman's Magazine* article cited above argues that the

beneficiaries of a museum of historical fashion would be stage designers and painters, as well as the audiences thereof, no longer forced to endure anachronistic representations of the past (Anonymous 1869: 373).

The dress and art historian Anne Hollander describes the complementary subject matter of painting, literature, and history in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a mutually-referential process. She writes:

During the nineteenth century historical fiction and historical painting seemed to have identical goals of fidelity to the multiple material details unearthed by historical research. The novels of Walter Scott and the theatrically produced results of J.R. Planché's researches set the nineteenth century on a parallel and reciprocal course of historical visualization. Passages in novels seem to be describing contemporary historical paintings, and many pictures illustrated historical moments as if they were scenes in novels or operas. (Hollander 1993: 431)

J.R. Planché, to whom Anne Hollander refers, has been called by Aileen Ribeiro 'the last great product of a long antiquarian tradition' (Ribeiro 1994: 69) although recent research (Petrov 2008) has shown that there are, in fact, others. Planché, a playwright and theatre designer, was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, and therefore serves as a useful example of the antiquarian attitude toward painting, particularly because his great material interest was in costume.

Planché's heavily-researched 1834 pocket antiquarian volume *History of British Costume* (published with the help of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge as part of publisher Charles Knight's Library of Entertaining Knowledge and reprinted throughout the century) begins with a critical evaluation of his contemporary sources, and reveals early-nineteenth-century attitudes toward the study of dress history. Tellingly, he writes that 'antiquities are now considered valuable only in proportion to their illustration of history or their importance to art' (1834: xi).

After criticizing the liberties taken by artists like Benjamin West (then-president of the Royal Academy) in historical paintings, he exclaims, ‘Does not the historical painter voluntarily offer himself to the public as an illustrator of habits and manners, and is he wantonly to abuse the faith accorded in him?’ (1834: xii) The contents of Planché’s book were used as a model in theatrical and painterly endeavours throughout the nineteenth century, and his call for intellectual rigour and historical accuracy was heeded by many artists and dramatists who followed his example.

Collecting with scholarly purpose was popular for painters throughout the nineteenth century. The mode of relating to the past established by the antiquarians over a century before continued to exert a considerable influence on artists well into the late Victorian period. In August 1882, *The Times* reported:

A society has been formed to publish a quarterly work devoted to the costumes of all nations and peoples. Among the members who have already joined are Mr Alma Tadema, Mr G. Boughton, Mr R. R. Holmes, Mr Louis Fagan, Mr E. W. Godwin, Mr J. D. Linton, Baron de Cosson, and Mr Wills. The curators of the museums and libraries of St Petersburg, Florence, Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Brussels, Naples, and other cities have undertaken to help the “Costume Society” in all possible ways. Each print or chromo-lithograph will be accompanied by explanatory letter-press. (Anonymous 1882: 4)

The Costume Society was thus engaged in creating precisely the same kind of antiquarian illustrated volume that its painter members would themselves have consulted in their professional work when composing a picture set in another place or time. Other members of the Society included Oscar Wilde, J.M. Whistler and Frederick Leighton, and as early as 1862, Leighton had campaigned for the inclusion of costume into the galleries at South Kensington (V&A), but the venture had failed due to internal politics in the Department of Art (Anonymous 1869: 373-374).

Leighton, at least, seems to have been forced to retreat to more conventional methods of representing the art of dress in his paintings.

In his 1999 book, *Vision and Accident*, author Anthony Burton provides a possible reason for the eventual change in the V&A's collecting policy to include fashionable dress. He writes that, 'The main change brought by the early twentieth century was that the museum consolidated its appeal to collectors and connoisseurs, as these two overlapping constituencies grew larger and stronger' (1999: 181). Undoubtedly, the collecting of historical decorative arts like costume by fine artists would have grown into an important enough trend for museums to consider, as curators would undoubtedly have been aware of their antiquarian costume collecting.

The sustained study of specific moments and periods in history for professional reasons likely inspired a further curiosity in the material culture of the past in some painters. As described above, this would have led them to collect artefacts with an increased personal, and not merely professional interest; indeed at some point, the painters no longer merely took advice from other experts, but strove to become experts themselves, and to advocate for further development in their study among their professional peers. For example, Aileen Ribeiro points out that Joseph Strutt and Charles Alfred Stothard began as history painters (1994: 62), and went on to write influential antiquarian works on costume.

By the early twentieth century, artists felt that they could make a unique and valuable contribution to the study of history through material culture. The artist Dion Clayton Calthorp's introduction to his book *English Costume*, published in 1907, is reflective of contemporary attitudes to history. Calthorp wrote: 'I feel that the series of paintings in these volumes are really a valuable addition to English history' (1907: vii),

suggesting that he believed that his art could somehow replace the lost artefact. A few sentences later, he added: ‘Of course, I do not suggest that the ordinary cultured man should acquire the same amount of knowledge as a painter, or writer of historical subjects, or an actor, but he should understand the clothes of his own people, and be able to visualize any date in which he may be interested’ (1907: viii). Calthorp thus was of opinion that knowledge of historical fashion was not only a prerequisite for professional artistic practice, but was also important as acquired intellect for general cultural and social competency. Calthorp’s expertise was sufficiently respected to garner him an invitation to an inaugural luncheon for the Hughes-Harrods collection in 1913 (Anonymous 1913d). Artists could perpetuate knowledge and therefore participate in educating the public by using accurate historical detail in their art, which had been gleaned from their personal research. Their serious attitude towards fashion contributed to the acceptance of fashion as a form of art in and of itself.

Likewise, the preface to G. Woolliscroft Rhead’s 1906 book *Chats on Costume* highlights and confirms the intimate relationship between painting and the study of historical costume. While the historical importance of dress is recognised, Rhead concludes by calling for it to be recognised as an art:

While many works germane to the subject of costume have, of necessity, been here largely drawn upon in the way of quotation, there will, at the same time, be found a certain proportion of what may be described as fresh material, the result of the author’s acquaintance with the subject in his individual practice as an artist. Indeed, the subject of dress is, or should be, an artistic matter; it was so in the past, and it will again, in the very near future come to be recognised as one of the Decorative Arts, requiring artistic knowledge and some perception of the fundamental laws of design. (1906: 5)

Rhead’s aspirations were fulfilled at the V&A, where, by 1913, the chronology of historical fashion was exhibited in order to educate public taste, and to inspire practicing artists and craftspeople. While Rhead’s own contribution to knowledge of

historical costume was still a traditional antiquarian book, in the next decade, painters like Talbot Hughes, Edwin Austin Abbey and Seymour Lucas (Petrov 2008) would complete the circle of the antiquarian tradition, by donating the original artefacts to museums. The V&A is still a centre of visual research for design students, and its collections play a key part in the design process (Kjølberg 2010).

Across the Atlantic, the earliest benefactors of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's fledgling costume collection were also painters: W.J. Baer and Frank D. Millet¹⁷ (Anonymous 1908: 104-105; Morris 1913: 110). The museum further justified its first major bequest of historical fashion (the wardrobes of the Ludlow family, 1750-1860, Anonymous 1911b: 13) in the context of design education: the museum announced its hope 'that these costumes will be the nucleus of a collection for the Department of Decorative Arts, which will be valuable not only for painters and illustrators, but for the playwright and the costumer' (Anonymous 1911a: 11).

Therefore, it was thanks in large part to the advocacy of artists that fashion was included into museum collections. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antiquaries such as Strutt and Stothard (above) had begun a tradition by taking an interest in local history, and by producing texts that illustrated the evolution of costume and other related decorative arts. The practice of history painting, which arose in parallel, benefited from their efforts and many painters became antiquarians themselves, publishing books of their own findings. Taking advantage of the antiquarian role in the development of the museum, they brought the focus from textual and visual

¹⁷ It was actually Millet's widow who donated his former studio properties, but Millet himself had, prior to his tragic death in the Titanic disaster, served as a museum trustee.

representation back to material remains. Their professional status as educated artists and experts ensured that this category of artefact was finally accepted in museums as a legitimate form of high culture, worthy of study and preservation.

Although Valerie Cumming suggests that ‘few art historians would consider dress other than an applied or decorative art’ (2004: 83), in fact, in the early part of the twentieth century, the study of costume in painting became a key aspect of art historical practice. As early as 1962, the Costume Court was praised as a source of primary material for the painting researcher:

The aid given by the expert on fashion to the art historian is considerable. Changes of dress, however capricious in origin, become in the course of time a reliable method of dating. Fashion experts have been able to detect in old master painting anachronisms in the depiction of detail which indicated later addition, or have conclusively settled doubts as to when a picture was painted by the evidence of a mode. (Anonymous 1962a: 9)

Indeed, individuals now known as fashion historians were in fact art historians.

According to his colleague Doris Langley Moore, James Laver became interested in fashion as a method of dating paintings for his work at the V&A’s department of engraving, illustration, design and painting beginning in 1922 (Langley Moore 2004).

The first postgraduate dress history course in Britain was founded by art historian Stella Mary Newton at the Courtauld Institute in 1965 (Taylor 2002: 116); this was poetically appropriate, as the Institute houses the art collection of the textile magnate Samuel Courtauld. Newton’s work was carried on for many years by Aileen Ribeiro, whose research focus on the iconography of painted clothing (1995: 5) is relevant to both art and fashion historians.

In museums, too, the importance of fashion changed from being one of commercial inspiration, to that of a celebration of aesthetic accomplishment. The Metropolitan

Museum of Art sought to highlight this connection to the rest of its holdings in the 1954-55 exhibition *The Fine Art of Costume* (**Fig. 5.1**), which was described as ‘a choice selection of costume and accessories, chosen for their magnificent fabrics and elegance. The exhibition is arranged to provide a delightful visual experience and at the same time show how costume through form, colour, texture, and mobility reflect changing social demands’ (Anonymous 1954). Here, the focus on spectacle and the formal qualities of fashion sought to prove that it could be visually equivalent to the fine arts: paintings were used in the exhibition both as illustrations of and comparisons to the fashions on display, as well as reminders of their aesthetic similarities as *objets d’art* produced in the same period.

Other museums took up this attitude, albeit somewhat later: at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, this change occurred in 1963, with the Adolph Cavallo’s exhibition *She Walks in Splendor: Great Costumes 1550-1950*; in the catalogue, he wrote: ‘Clothes merely cover and protect the body; but when the wearer chooses or makes these clothes to express a specific idea, then the clothes become costume and the whole process, from designing to wearing, becomes art’ (quoted in Parmal 2006: 20). Today, many major art museums collect and/or exhibit fashion: a partial list is provided by Linda Welters (2007: 254), but it should also be noted that an increasing number of artists are using the visual language of fashion to express ideas in their exhibits and installations¹⁸.

¹⁸ For example, the Royal Academy’s 2010-2011 exhibition *Aware: Art Fashion Identity* featured the work of 30 contemporary artists, including such well-known names as Marina Abramovic, Yoko Ono, Grayson Perry, Cindy Sherman, and Yinka Shonibare, who deal with themes of fashion, clothing,



Fig. 5.1: *The Fine Art of Costume* (1954-1955), installation view: dresses of 1858 with portrait of Comtesse Lamsdorf by Winterhalter. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

However, it cannot be said that the framing of fashion as art in a museum exhibition ever really escapes its commercial context. Often, the movements between the commercial and art worlds are very fluid, and even self-referential, as in the case of the work of the Surrealists. The painter Salvador Dali, who, like many of his fellow Surrealists, had a preoccupation with mannequins in his work, was asked by the New York department store Bonwit Teller to create window displays in March 1939 (Anonymous 1939a: 31); sadly, the display was vandalised and quickly dismantled, so no photographs exist. The motifs of decay and misogyny within echoed his earlier artwork displayed at the 1938 Paris Surrealist Exhibition (Kachur 2001: 57-58). In 1971, the 'Schiaparelli and Surrealism' section of Cecil Beaton's *Fashion: An Anthology* exhibition at the V&A visually referenced this and other surrealist installations (**Fig. 5.2**) in the display of Schiaparelli's couture collaborations with Dali. Any curator or museum designer who displays fashion by Elsa Schiaparelli or other Surrealist fashion designers must therefore engage in both the artistic and commercial histories of Surrealism. This was certainly the case in the exhibition *Fashion and Surrealism*, held at V&A in 1988, which was a modified version of the exhibition of the same name curated by Richard Martin and Harold Koda (both of whom later worked as curators at the Costume Institute) at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York in 1987 (see Tregidden 1989). Making reference to such connections between art, historical fashion, and the fashion marketplace within exhibitions can be seen as an honest reflection of the commodity cycle for fashion and art.

costume, and dress in their work. The show also included works by leading avant-garde and conceptual fashion designers such as Hussein Chalayan, Martin Margiela, and Yohji Yamamoto.



Fig. 5.2: Denise Bellon, Salvador Dali with his mannequins at the Surrealist Exhibition in Paris, 1938. From: Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the Marvelous: Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali, and Surrealist Exhibition Installations*, 2001, p. 36. Installation photographs of the Surrealist section of *Fashion: An Anthology* (V&A, 1971), designed by Michael Haynes. © Victoria and Albert Museum.

The Spectacle of Authenticity

As collections and exhibitions of historical fashion have been shown to have emerged out of artistic concerns and were seen to be important for artistic development, they can be expected to demonstrate conventions characteristic of this origin. In particular, the perceived importance of an aura of ‘authenticity’¹⁹ and intellectual authority to the look of a museum artefact in an exhibition was inherited from the writing and work of painters, engravers, and theatre designers who studied costume in earlier periods.

Anne Hollander writes, ‘Any real public knowledge of authentic historical dress has been invaded and corrupted by stage conventions of such long standing that they seem to have the sanction of real history’ (1994: 301-302). Hollander argues that often, the perception of authenticity is triggered by a key conventional prop, such as a wig for the eighteenth-century, or a ruff for the Elizabethan period. Once the key prop is recognized, she writes, the audience slips into comfortably ignoring any possible anachronisms, certain that what they are seeing is ‘accurate’. Indeed, a 1962 *Times* article on the rearranged Costume Court at the V&A described the usefulness of the museum for suggesting details for increased period accuracy in film and performance:

It is not necessary for an historical play or film to be meticulously accurate in every detail of costume down to a button or bow, but some degree of accuracy has its part in recapturing the spirit of an age and here such a mine of reference as the Costume Court is rich in suggestion. (Anonymous 1962a: 9)

The museum’s display of artefacts could define a stereotyped or conventional look for any given period.

¹⁹ See Jones (2010) for a re-evaluation of the materialist approach to authenticity in favour of a relational one.

These conventions first developed for designers out of the visual shorthands and conceptual biases in the illustrated costume history books discussed above and in Chapters 1 and 3. As Ulrike Ilg writes, these relied on numerous assumptions about the material world and its ability to be represented. Her insights are worth quoting at length:

This principle of proceeding by supposedly representative specimens, which includes the promise to render the multifarious world of real dress readable for whoever has studied a costume book, is of course to a large extent a fiction. [...] In the end, standard dress as depicted in a costume book is to a certain extent a creation of the maker of the book because of his choice to represent one costumed figure rather than another, and because of the introduction of categories and distinctions which were never, in reality, so clear. Before entering the book, the 'world out there' has thus passed several conceptual filters. Consequently, what costume books represent is an ideal social reality. They show a world with clear distinctions of gender, class, profession, nationality or ethnic origin and demonstrate the readability of dress as a sign language. This makes them on one hand a valuable tool to handle experience which might in its complexity and quantity overpower the comprehension of a single human. On the other hand, besides being a sort of inventory of the real world, costume books become also a space of thinking. (Ilg 2004: 43)

Thus, the self-positioning of the text as authoritative, as well as its vocabulary of visual symbolism contributed to the creation of a language of costume studies, a language that evolved out of visual media and into the three-dimensional world of museums (see below). It must be noted that the interpretation of the visual material is, in both contexts, heavily affected by the complementary text, so that a semiological function of the resulting collage (where definition precludes ambiguity) is unavoidable.

Historian Stephen Bann describes the evolution of the illustrations included in historical texts in the nineteenth century, and notes that these followed the same pattern of development as the texts, in moving from dry specificity to emotive verisimilitude. As images of past events rely on conventions to be understood, Bann uses Roland Barthes' notion of the *effet de réel*, or 'reality effect' to explain the genre

of the narrative historical painting, commenting that ‘it is precisely the authentic detail which appears almost gratuitous – which passes almost unnoticed – that will confirm and enhance the historical realism of the image’ (1984: 57). Bann notes that this effect relies upon the viewer’s visual literacy and familiarity with other, similar works, requiring ‘the persistence of the effect, or at least its non-contradiction; and that implies the existence of a discourse in which such an effect can echo and reverberate’ (1984: 58). He calls this the ‘historical series,’ and it is a useful concept for considering the museal portrayal of historical fashion in the period under investigation. As Anne Hollander writes:

Historical authenticity in visual terms is a compelling idea; and the public, once convinced that it was possible, never ceased to love thinking it was being given a glimpse of the past brought to life. The public was, however, also being trained simultaneously to think of the whole past as spectacular and of all spectacle as authentic. [...] The public could believe (since they were told so) that the clothes in each were absolutely correct, without ‘seeing’ the current fashion distorting them both. Moreover, they could then turn to works of the past and unconsciously read the details of the costumes in them through the filter of modern taste. (Hollander 1993: 291)

This way of seeing was practiced and promoted by artists, authors, dramatists, and museums alike, creating a visual regime that disciplined the public to react positively to what they were led to believe was authentic. Indeed, the constant repetition of effect would only serve to emphasize its apparent authenticity.

Just as in early-modern costume books, however, the look of the historical fashion on display was an illusion of an objective reality, constructed through a series of stylistic decisions not always based upon historical ‘fact’. For example, the Hughes/Harrods donation of historical fashion to the V&A in 1913, was formed out of the aesthetic preferences of its painter-collector (Petrov 2008), and later presented in theatrical contexts. While initially displayed on the department store premises, the dresses were exhibited in ‘period surroundings’ (Anonymous 1913e: 66). When they were moved

to the V&A, the arrangement in the Central Court was carried out by Harrods' fancy-dress department, as a letter from Richard Burbidge to Sir Cecil Smith testifies:

‘Acting on your suggestion, I shall be pleased to place at your disposal any of the company’s costume experts to render assistance and advice in setting up the exhibits’ (Burbidge 1913). Commercial purveyors of theatrical and fancy-dress costumes were therefore as responsible for the final presentation of the dress collections in the museum as were the curatorial professionals responsible for its intellectual rigour.

The fact that the use of theatre and fancy-dress professionals to style historical fashion exhibitions is widespread does not necessarily devalue its effectiveness: professionals in theatre and the visual arts have an intuitive sense of what ‘looks right’, and indeed, it often does. In 1946, when the Museum of Costume Art merged with the Metropolitan Museum of Art to become the Costume Institute, the theatrical backgrounds of the Institute’s founders (Taylor 2004: 189-190) influenced the choices of display. The opening exhibition, which ran for four months (13/12/1946-10/4/1947), was comprised of tableaux comprised of fashions from the late eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth, arranged around furniture and accessories of the period. The period groups were defined with notes on particular stylistic features peculiar to the period: ‘VII: 1867-1870 – Flamboyant Lines. Long, trailing skirts – bouffant overdrapes – apron effects and sashes – contrasting materials – ruchings and trimmings’ (Anonymous 1946b). Nearly twenty years later, the museum was still displaying tableaux: *Vignettes of Fashion*, like the opening exhibition (**Fig. 5.3**), did not visually emulate any particular period sources, but in its mix of props, lively mannequins, and outfits worn for a staged ‘occasion’, the overall appearance was theatrical. Successive generations of curators followed this established ‘house style’,

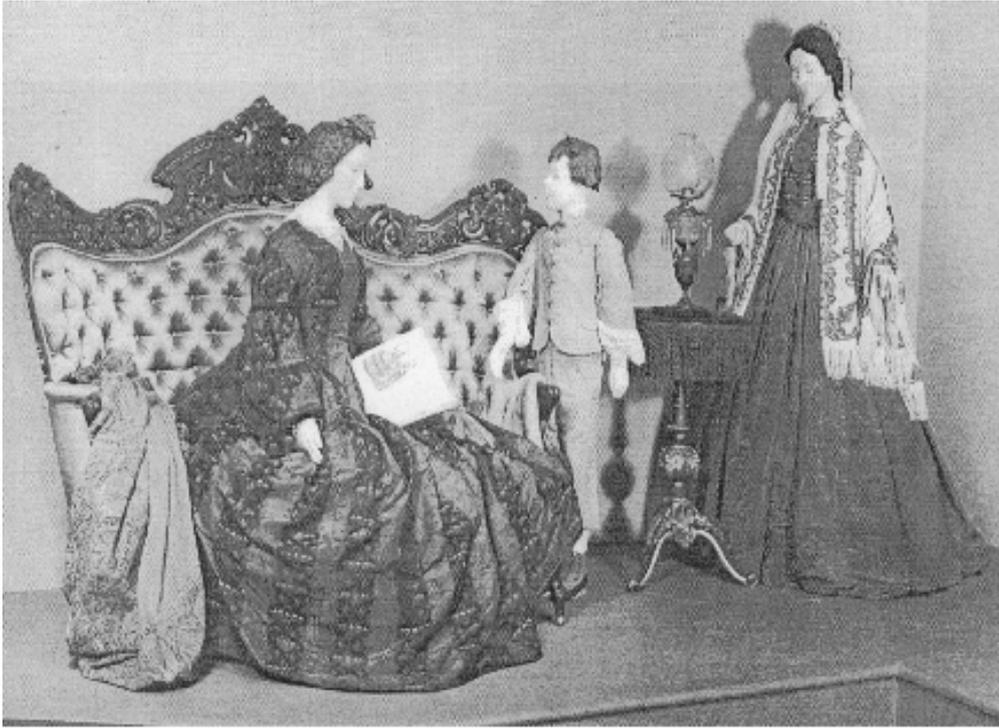


Fig. 5.3: *Opening Exhibition of the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (1946-1947), installation view: 'Caged Ladies'; *Vignettes of Fashion* (1964), installation view: 'A visit to the new baby'. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

in heavily staged exhibitions with props, backdrops, and ‘active’ mannequin groupings such as *From Queen To Empress: Victorian Dress 1837-1877* (1988-89; **Fig. 5.4**) and *Dangerous Liaisons* (2004; see below).

Doris Langley Moore, the founder of the Fashion Museum (Bath), was, among her other interests and activities, a costume designer for stage and film, and her keen sense of artistic fidelity was extended to the look of her collection, when it was exhibited beginning in 1955. Langley Moore and her daughter, Pandora, created a design scheme that featured painted architectural backdrops (Taylor 2004: 142), and mannequin heads whose features were cast from Roman sculptures (**Fig. 5.5**, see also **Fig. 6.1**) at the British Museum (Langley Moore 1961: 280), as their features and hairstyles were similar to those that had seen fashionable revivals over the centuries. Moore’s success was predicated on her having a sufficient level of historical knowledge in realizing her visual goals.

Royal Ontario Museum costume curator Alexandra Palmer writes of the importance of taste and style to the curatorial profession:

Costume and textile exhibitions have, undeniably, attracted some very original, intelligent and artistic women and men to the field who have produced dramatic results. It is indeed a skill and craft to create a dynamic-looking exhibition, particularly with old, stained, and oddly shaped historical dress. When this is well realized it can contend with the latest results in theatrical/film costume and set decoration. (Palmer 2008a: 48)

However, she also points out that combining design and scholarship is challenging even for the largest institutions, as it is difficult to attract and maintain public interest with style without compromising substance. In 1963, the *Times* praised the V&A’s efforts in the new Costume Court despite their having no design staff; ‘[...] the impetus must come from the museum itself. It rests with its responsible officers to



Fig. 5.4: Installation view of *From Queen To Empress: Victorian Dress 1837-1877* (1988-89). © Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 5.5: Mannequin, Museum of Costume (Fashion Museum), Bath and corresponding bust at British Museum. From: Doris Langley Moore, 1961. 'The display of costume', *Museums Journal* 60:11 (February 1961), pp. 275-7.

provide the knowledge and constructive thought which are essential. [...] A keeper details precise requirements as to arrangement, lighting, colour scheme and labelling which are carried into execution by the Ministry of Works' (Museums Correspondent 1963: 13). Yet this new arrangement was praised mostly for its practicality in terms of educational aims and conservation standards, not for its visual effect.

Contemporary fashion theory devotes great attention to the phenomenon of 'spectacle' (cf.: Evans 2003), and this concept offers an explanation for the curious collusion of fantasy and intellectual authority within the display of historical fashion. The 'look' of a display affects the way in which it is looked at, positioning the viewer physically and intellectually in regards to the subject on display. Some authors define museums as a type of theatre: Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, for example, argue that museums 'use theatrical effects to enhance a belief in the historicity of the objects they collect', the fiction being employed to sanction one version of events over another, legitimizing 'both the 'reality' of history and of a single interpretive truth' (Preziosi and Farago 2004: 13). The conventions of theatre, with its 'fourth wall', are an intermediate spatial orientation between the three-dimensional interactivity of objects in their original context, and the flattened visual space of a represented object, whether in a two-dimensional drawing or a museum (Petrov 2011).

This is an easily-understood metaphor: of the 1963 exhibition that placed costumed mannequins into the Met's period rooms, the *New York Times* wrote: 'The occupants are effigies, but their costumes were once part of a living stage and as elegantly contrived as the sets they enhanced' (Anonymous 1963: 171). The Met repeated this conceit some forty year later, in the 2004 *Dangerous Liaisons* exhibition. Michael

Katzberg (2011) has written a thorough examination of it as a staged re-production of the past with inanimate actors, highlighting the theatrical conventions utilized by the curators and designer (Patrick Kinmonth, an opera designer). In this case, the theatrical effects were of the *tableau vivant* type, a form of theatre which emulates the look of famous paintings; the use of this imitative form had special significance for the content of the exhibition, which focused on Rococo visuality. My own critique of the exhibition (Petrov 2004) was that it largely ignored its responsibility to provide social context for the artefacts on display in its intense focus on slavishly (if convincingly) recreating artistic tropes.

The use of tableaux that recreate a source from a two-dimensional medium is an obvious means by which to draw a visual analogy between fashion and art, yet the result devalues both sources. While drawing on images as documents to support the authenticity of the museum presentation is normal, and laudable, the source images are rarely used alongside the re-enacted tableaux, so that the general public does not necessarily recognize any added value to the exhibition (**Fig. 5.6**). The object becomes documentary of the art, as opposed to vice versa. Where the primary source material is used, the painting (or in the case of the Met's 2009 *Model as Muse* exhibition, the photograph) is reduced to an illustration (for the materiality of images, see Edwards 2009), while the dress artefact becomes a prop (**Fig. 5.7**) to support the reality-effect of the assemblage. In addition, the audience cannot engage in the imaginative projection necessary to intellectually participate in the display's content. Rather, it is the display itself that is on display, the content and formal qualities flattened and represented as spectacle. As Handler and Gable warn: 'Mimetic realism thus deadens the historical sensibility of the public. It teaches people not to question

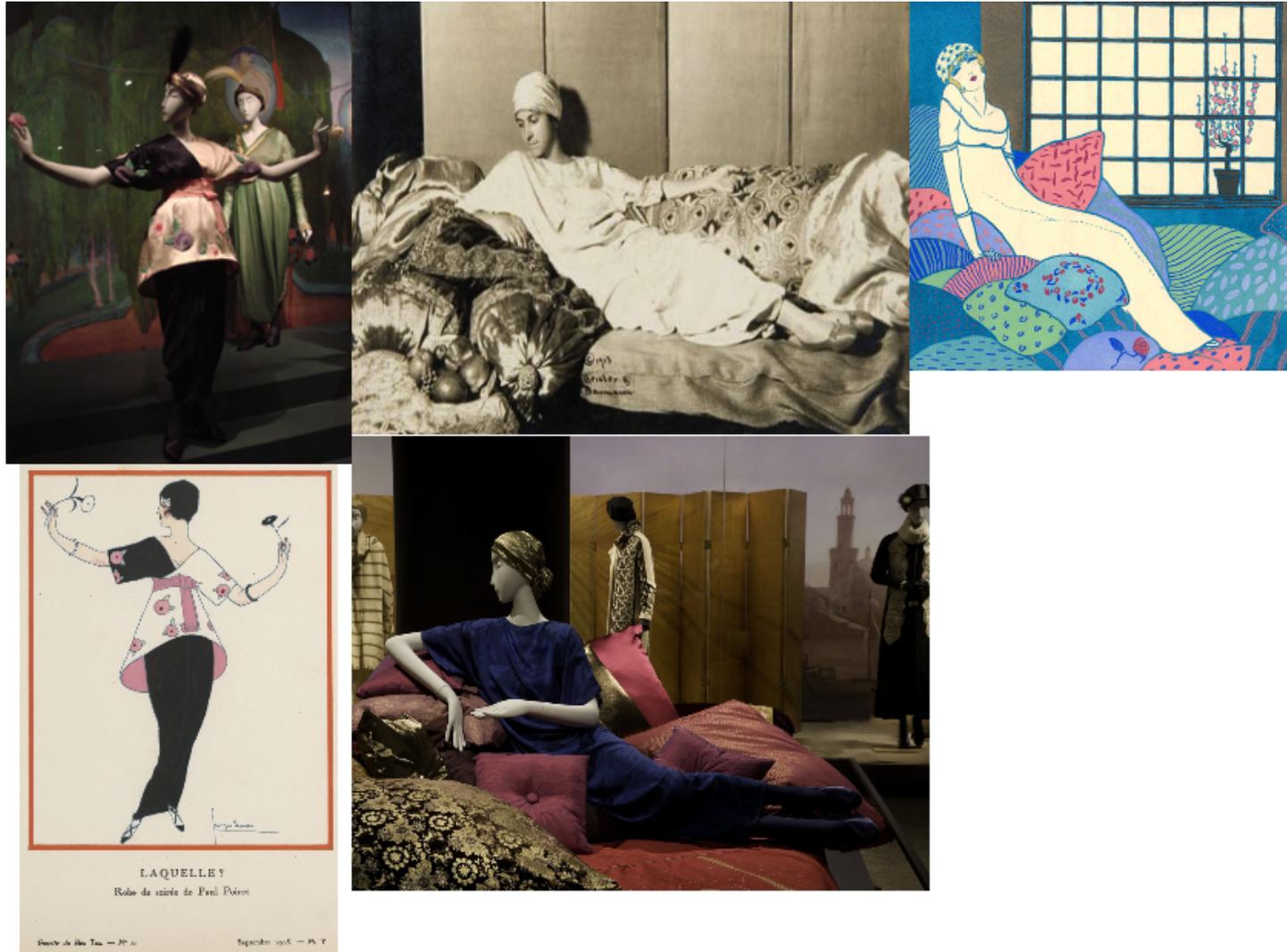


Fig. 5.6: Mimetic realism at the Met: Georges Lepape, plate from *Les Choses de Paul Poiret*, 1911; Geisler & Baumann, 'Denise Poiret at the Plaza Hotel, New York', 1913; installation view of 1912 blue silk damask dress worn by Denise Poiret, in *King of Fashion* (Met, 2007). Georges Lepape, 'Laquelle? Robe de soir de Paul Poiret', *Gazette du Bon Ton*, 1913; installation view of Sorbet dress in *King of Fashion* (Met, 2007). © Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 5.7: Alex Hills, *Model as Muse: Embodying Fashion* (Met, 2009) installation view. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Richard Avedon, *Dovima with Elephants, Evening Dress by Dior, Cirque d'Hiver, Paris*. August 1955. Museum of Modern Art New York, 92.1959. Gift of the photographer. © 2011 The Richard Avedon Foundation.

historians' stories, not to imagine other, alternative histories, but to accept an embodied tableau as the really real' (1997: 224). It is the artful assemblage, not the object that is highlighted in this type of exhibition design. Moreover, the conventions for the assemblage often have their roots in discourses other than fashion itself.

Collusion/Collision: Visual Conventions From Art

While the previous chapter highlighted the means of display inherited from fashion's commercial contexts, this was not the only source for creating the look of exhibitions of historical costume. Display forms for the costume and textile arts were not invented, but appropriated from the context of curatorial developments in art museums. There are some obvious examples: the placing of an artefact on a plinth or pedestal, as though it was a sculpture, and adding a label that focuses on materials and provenance, are practices taken directly from the art gallery. Some exhibitions of historical fashion took the art museum metaphor even further, literally framing mannequins on display to highlight their status as works of art produced by a design genius (*House of Worth*, Brooklyn Museum, 1962; **Fig. 5.8**). Other attempts were made to materialize paintings through the use of models wearing fashion of equivalent periods (**Fig. 5.9**) as in tableaux vivants. However, changing notions in the optimal organization of gallery space were also reflected in each of the case study institutions.

The most frequently-discussed phenomenon in the history of art exhibitions is the move away from decorative surroundings to the stark neutrality of the so-called 'white cube' (O'Doherty 1986; Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne 1996; Klonk 2009; Grasskamp 2011). Whereas the ornate interiors of the first art galleries in Europe and



Fig. 5.8: Framing fashion:
House of Worth. [05/02/1962 -
06/25/1962]. Installation view:
entrance.
(PHO_E_1962_Worth)
Brooklyn Museum Archives.
Records of the Department of
Photography.

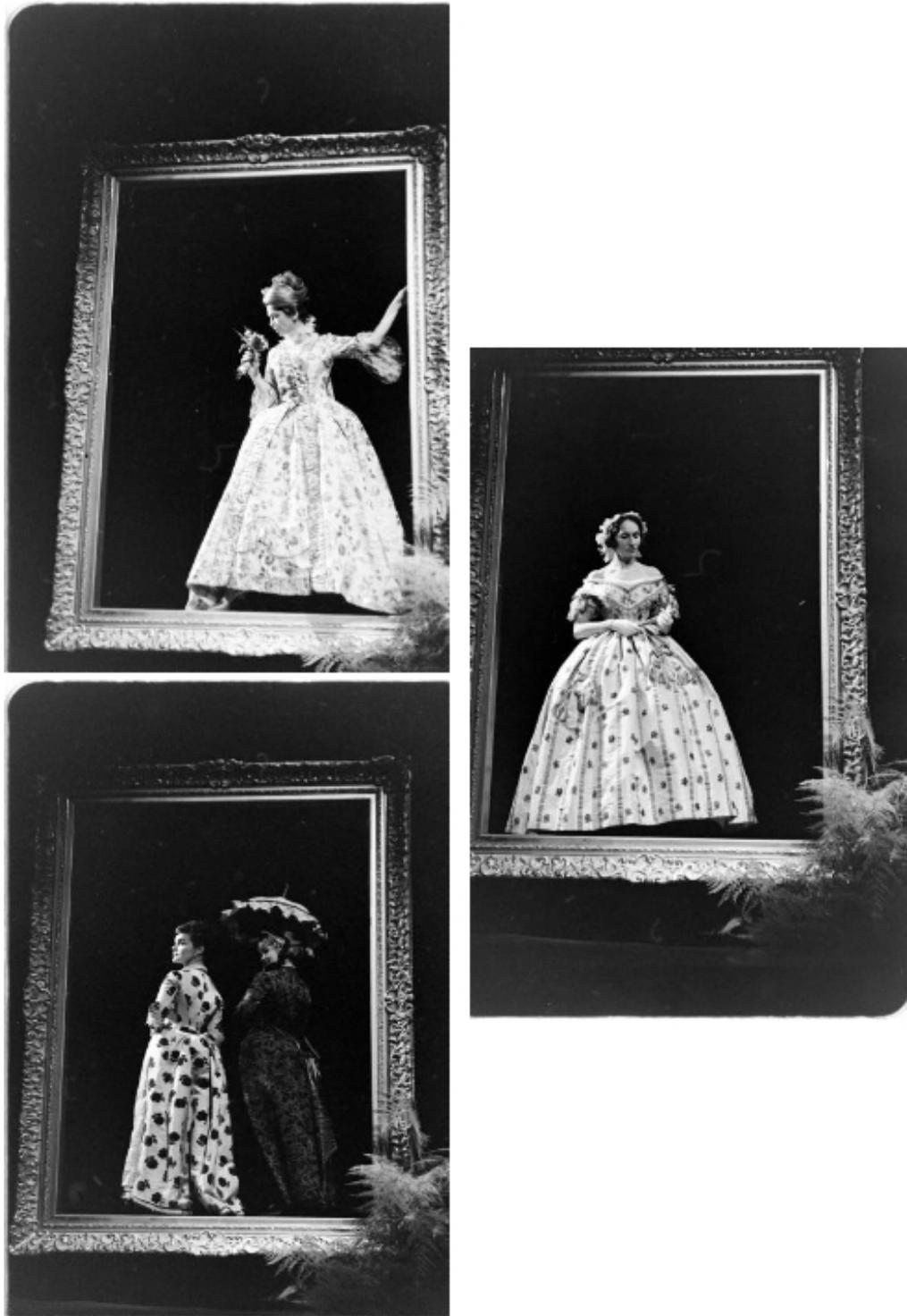


Fig. 5.9: Mrs William Ross of Mam'selle Dress, Inc wears a robe à la française (C.I.60.40.1a, b) to represent François Boucher's *Portrait of Madame Bergeret*; Melanie Miller of *Glamour Magazine* wears an 1861 ball gown (C.I.59.35.4a, b) to represent Franz Xavier Winterhalter's *Ladies of the Court of the Empress Eugenie*; Patricia Ross and Bettye Whiteman of Mam'selle Dress, Inc, re-enact George Seurat's *Afternoon on the Grande Jatte* while wearing bustle dresses c. 1882-1886 (C.I.39.100.4a, b; C.I.58.1.1) at the 'Masterpieces of Fashion' pageant in the Costume Institute's 1960 Fashion Ball. Photos by Walter Sanders, November 21, 1960. © Time/LIFE.

North America preserved or imitated the rich decorative schemes of the aristocratic residences of the original owners of the art on display, the twentieth century saw a gradual rethinking of this format in favour of a stripped-down aesthetic, with a linear arrangement of paintings on pale (often white) walls. Instead of focusing on the art as elements of a whole within a socio-economic context or an artistic 'school', this new approach sought to focus the viewer's attention on individual works and stylistic progression. It must be noted that the newer display style has not completely effaced its predecessor: older display approaches are used consciously by curators and designers to evoke earlier periods and to encourage different perceptions of the artworks on display. However, even the contents of the oldest public galleries have been gradually trimmed back and re-hung, so that more contemporary tastes in art viewership have altered the original displays.

Equally, in exhibitions of historical fashion, the *gesamtkunstwerk* focus on the artistic and socio-economic contexts in which the clothes on display were produced and worn has been affected by the 'white cube' visuality that distils the display to its barest essentials. As was previously noted, the display of historical fashion was a relative newcomer to museums, and historically coincided with the rise of modernist linearity in display; it is therefore not possible to trace the same radical changes in this type of exhibition as for the fine arts. Often, a mixture is used, as in the 1962 redesigned Costume Court at the V&A:

The impression is sometimes given of a room in which the figures stand, but no attempt has been made to provide a complete interior setting which might divert attention from the costume presented. A successful alternative has been to include some token or symbolic feature indicative of the period such as a painting, a vase, a screen, or ornamental piece of woodwork from the museum's other collections. (Anonymous 1962b: 15)

This description demonstrates a slippage between the white cube and *Gesamtkunstwerk* approaches, suggesting even a fine line between the two. However, the fact that curators have periodically chosen to use the more archaic form of display over the conventional contemporary one, or vice versa, suggests that there is, indeed, a difference in the message that can be communicated by the two styles, and this will be discussed in this section.

Of the case study institutions described in this thesis, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum represent the two approaches. While the Met has frequently used a contextual approach to the display of historical dress, the Brooklyn Museum's exhibitions have tended to be visually sparse, focusing instead on the individual pieces as works of art. The spring 1939 exhibition of Victorian and Edwardian dresses at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (comprised of examples from the collections of the Met, the Museum of the City of New York, and the Brooklyn Museum) sought to visually place these costumes in their aesthetic context, albeit without evoking the period with props. The mannequins were sculpted based on physiognomies and physiques represented in portraits by Winterhalter, Carpeaux, Sargent and Boldini (Anonymous 1939b: 72), while the exhibition itself was staged to highlight the costumes:

The exhibition was installed in a gallery divided into three rooms, the walls of which were decorated with mirrors and painted a soft French grey throughout. The figures were grouped on low platforms round the rooms, and no attempt was made to reproduce authentic period settings. The occasional seated figures were placed on inconspicuous stools with the idea of minimizing even the necessary furniture in order to focus complete attention on the models and dresses, and the grey of the background was chosen to bring out the charming colours of the costumes without confusion. (Anonymous 1939b: 73)

The historical fashions, then, were set off according to aesthetic considerations, both of their period of origin, and of the period when the display was staged. Although

different colours were, in different periods, seen as appropriately ‘neutral’ for the display of art (Klonk 2009), this curatorial attempt at inconspicuousness merely draws further attention to itself as a display convention, especially when compared to the means by which fashion was normally displayed at the museum (**Fig. 5.10**).

Another seemingly-neutral, but highly-constructed display convention is that of the period room. Excised from its original architectural context, and reconstructed in a series of such orphaned spaces, the resulting bricolage (often furnished with an array of furniture from the period, but not necessarily from the original room itself) has been seen as a tool for story-telling, but of little historical value (Aynsley 2006; Schwarzer 2008). However, it is a valid attempt at displaying the stylistic connections between the decorative arts, architecture, and the fine arts – an aesthetic synthesis of ‘prevailing artistic impulses’ (Ribeiro 1995: 5) that is visually expressed, as in a *Gesamtkunstwerk* approach. Recreating the ‘primary’ context or function of an object lends it a further credibility as an authentic piece of history (Jones 2010: 184), and for this reason, has continued to be a popular display strategy. The Met has had a long history of utilizing this conceit to display fashion: although the Ludlow costumes were not displayed alongside the other contents of the family mansion that had been acquired by the Museum, nor in a contemporary period room (although this was suggested by a *New York Times* journalist at the time: Anonymous 1911c), in 1963-64, the Costume Institute did populate the Museum’s galleries of architectural settings. *Costumes: Period Rooms Re-Occupied in Style* displayed some of the pieces of historical fashion in period rooms such as those where they might once have been worn (**Fig. 5.11**). This approach set off both the decorative elements of the fashions and of the room settings and decorations to mutual advantage – shared formal



Fig. 5.10: Mannequin face modeled after Winterhalter. Original caption: ‘37.192. Visiting Dress. (English?) About 1837. Red moiré silk. From the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Now in the Exhibition of Victorian and Edwardian Dresses in Gallery D6 from March 14 through April 23, 1939.’ © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Compare to the arrangement of the permanent galleries: cases featuring eighteenth- and nineteenth-century dresses, photos by Alfred Eisenstaedt, 1939. © Time/LIFE.



Fig. 5.11: *Costumes: Period Rooms Re-Occupied in Style* (1963-1964). Installation view. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

elements in historical periods from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries such as scale, colour, and line were more obviously apparent when highlighted by proximity. *Dangerous Liaisons* attempted something similar in 2004, although the installation was now more obviously derived from period images and attempted to recreate a visual source rather than providing an opportunity for the audience to engage in formal analysis. The period rooms became a compositional device to create theatrical interiors, though they shared an integrity of historical authenticity with the costumes on display within.

The theatrical backdrops of the Met used in tableaux and vignettes were discussed above; however, more abstract artistic renderings of interiors were also used throughout the years, as a compromise between an abstracted interior setting and a historic period room. Diana Vreeland's 1982-1983 *La Belle Epoque* exhibition featured murals that evoked the locales of high-society entertainments; the 2010 *American Woman* exhibition (discussed previously in Chapter 4) also featured similar effects – from beaches (**Fig. 5.12**) and ballrooms, to the studio of Louis Comfort Tiffany (**Fig. 4.11**). These installations left no doubt as to the socio-economic, geographical and historical contexts of the pieces on display; the garments fused with the backdrops to become assemblages and representations of style and period. As opposed to the period rooms, which were objects in their own right, sharing intellectual priority with the costumes, in such displays, historical objects, when used, become what Pat Kirkham describes as 'functioning decorations' (Kirkham 1988): their authenticity lends more credence to the primary subject of display, which is historical fashion.



Fig. 5.12: Scenery painter Charles Broderson with Diana Vreeland working on *La Belle Epoque*, 1982 (*W* magazine); Alex Hills, installation view of *American Woman* (2010) © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

It must be noted that the Brooklyn Museum, although often staging exhibitions on similar time periods and topics, has rarely, if ever, used such devices. For example, curator Elizabeth Ann Coleman's *An Opulent Era*, which ran at the museum from 1989-1990 and featured Belle Epoque couture fashions, did not rely on atmospheric backdrops (**Fig. 5.13**). Blue mannequins were placed in enfilade of rooms also painted blue; the dresses were left to float in this cerulean sea, and further content was provided only by text-heavy labels on adjacent walls. It was, in fact, impossible to read the curatorial text at the same time as facing the costumes, so that their visual impact was as a series of objects unaccompanied by any other visual or textual content. Photographs and fashion plates of other fashions from the period were reproduced beside label copy on the walls, but not in a decorative manner; rather, they were clearly meant as encyclopaedia-style illustrations and adjuncts to the text.

Likewise, the *American High Style* installation at the Brooklyn Museum (a companion to the Costume Institute's *American Woman*: the exhibition marked the transfer of Brooklyn's collection to the Met and each institution staged their own display) was a brightly-lit contemporary spectacle without the theatrical effects of the Met's corresponding exhibit (**Fig. 5.14**). Art critic Roberta Smith wrote at the time that the Brooklyn display 'offers its garments – seen against white walls – as art objects. They best assert themselves as examples of an über-art that fuses aspects of painting, sculpture, architecture, body art and theatre with exquisite craft' (Smith 2010). Indeed, the lighting, and placement of mannequins and accessories as pieces of sculpture on plinths, reinforced the impression of the exhibition as a contemporary art installation. The deliberate neutrality of the space and the individual space accorded to each item in the exhibition places Brooklyn's curators and exhibition designers in



Fig. 5.13: *Opulent Era: Fashions of Worth, Doucet and Pingat.* [12/01/1989 - 02/25/1990]. Installation view. (C&T_E_1989_Opulent) Brooklyn Museum Archives. Records of the Department of Costumes and Textiles.



Fig. 5.14: *American High Style: Fashioning a National Collection.* [05/07/2010-08/01/2010]. Installation view. (DIG_E_2010_Style) Brooklyn Museum. Digital Collections and Services.

the 'white cube' school of display, where the focus is on the individual object and the viewer's subjective response to it.

The different approaches of the two institutions also reflect the epistemological rationales for organizing museum material within a display. Iconicity and periodicity are two of the fundamental principles that can be used to guide the look of a display, and both are derived from art history and theory. The organization of knowledge into a chronological order is fundamentally an arbitrary one, and is predicated on notions of difference and progress; as was noted in Chapter 4, the past needs to look sufficiently different from the present in order for this scheme to have effective impact. Historical fashion needs to be set off against contemporary fashion, whether in the viewer's own mind or in physical contrast to contemporary pieces also on display: for this very reason, the V&A later bemoaned the lost opportunity when the 1913 fashions displayed alongside the Hughes collection at Harrods were not acquired by the museum at the same time as the antique examples (Mendes 1984: 78). Equally, the notion of evolution needs to be sufficiently visually recognizable, and the study of the history of artistic style and technology has developed a series of key moments which are thought to be representative of a greater whole; somewhat contradictorily, evolution needs to be punctuated with a series of disparate moments in order to highlight the process of change (see Chapter 7). These moments, when represented through images or objects, become iconic: synecdoches of a greater whole. An example of such historical fashion exhibitions is *The Age Of Napoleon: Costume from*

Revolution to Empire (Met, 1998-1999), which defined the stylistic developments of a historical era around a well-known figurehead²⁰.

Where the consensus on such key moments and objects comes from is a matter of debate: fashion historians have often pointed the finger at film for making some periods more visually iconic than others (Coleman 1993: 4-5). However, as was argued earlier in this chapter, the selection of iconic outfits, styles, and periods actually has a history dating back to at least the Early Modern costume books, and while film and other media may have contributed further icons, the cycle of selection perpetuates itself as opinions and tastes become canonical – history is illustrative of history (see also: Merriman 1999: 5). Museums are themselves also a medium and a source for artistic conventions (*cf.*: Clark and Phillips 2010), although this is expressed differently in different types of display. A *gesamtkunstwerk* exhibition may use vignettes to evoke a stylistic moment iconic of a period such as the Belle Epoque; a white cube-style exhibition is often also organized chronologically, but relies on the power of the individual object (isolated by the means of the display) to recall a period.

While in a *gesamtkunstwerk* installation, the assemblage is more important than the objects that make up the whole, the barer approach for a white cube exhibition by its very layout communicates and demands specialness of the pieces included within. The pieces in the *American High Style* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum were referred to as ‘masterworks’ (Smith 2010), and indeed, the practice of placing artefacts on plinths in spotlights where the shimmer and sheen of the luxurious

²⁰ As examples throughout this thesis have shown, Napoleonic relics and the Napoleonic era more generally have been popular subjects for exhibitions from the nineteenth century on.

materials and fine craftsmanship can be more easily seen, does tend to create masterpieces through display alone. *The Golden Age of Couture*, curated by Claire Wilcox at the V&A in 2007, 'was presented from a historical perspective' but 'made a point of technique' (Menkes 2011), which required a heavy object focus, something that requires isolating each piece visually through a number of means, including the selection of appropriate mannequins. Alexandra Palmer writes: 'Abstract faces and minimal detailing tend to represent the costume as an art object, the mannequin providing the frame' (Palmer 1988: 9) for the dress itself. This fetishistic focus on the formal qualities of a garment is even more apparent in the use of 'hollow' or 'invisible' mannequins, which provide the illusion that the garment is filled out by itself (for a further examination of these, see Chapter 6).

The myth of the masterpiece in art theory is that it is timeless: as Richter and Drabble remind us, 'According to Roland Barthes the mythical charge attributed to images, is created through a process of first de-historicizing them and then intentionally charging them with specific meanings' (2011:7). 'Good art' is considered to be comprised of formal qualities, the aesthetically pleasing nature of which is thought to transcend barriers of time and space (Staniszewski 1998: 159). Adolph Cavallo (mentioned above in connection to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts) wrote of a 1971-72 exhibition at the Costume Institute:

Drawn entirely from the Costume Institute's own collection, the garments and accessories in *Fashion Plate* will represent a succession of fashions in clothing during the past 200 years. The clothes will be shown in conjunction with enlarged reproductions of fashion plates of their time. Both the plates and the clothes exhibit that taste for idealized line, for exaggerated form, for dramatized detail that conditions the visual language of fashion in clothing. To demonstrate fashion's consistency of action through the ages, the staff will arrange the groups of costumes and plates without regard to chronological sequence. In this way, without the distraction of tracing developments from one period to another, the visitor will be free to concentrate on the purely

formal aspects of the images and to identify those elements of line, form, and colour that the designer manipulated to achieve a fashionable look, whether he was working last year or a century ago. (Cavallo 1971: 45)

In this paradigm, the masterpiece is iconic not of a period, as above, but of art itself – the touch of genius²¹ that one can connect with by perceiving its physical manifestation.

Indeed, the aura of artistic genius attached to certain famous fashion designers can defuse accusations of commercialism levelled at art museums that exhibit fashion. N.J. Stevenson (2008) has concisely summarized the evolution and development of designer retrospective exhibitions in an attempt to rehabilitate the reputations of curators who agreed to stage such shows in the face of criticism for such exhibitions as populist exercises in brand-building. This is more true in cases where the designer or brand being celebrated is still in business, even if the exhibition focuses on the history of the house's designs. The Met's 2005 *Chanel* retrospective, sponsored by the House of Chanel and curated with heavy involvement from head designer Karl Lagerfeld was criticized for this reason; however, an object of aesthetic awe is not necessarily always the subject of consumer desire, and these exhibitions often seek to historicize the brand and mythologize the persona of the designer as a genius.

Sometimes this is overtly stated by the curator: for example, *The Genius of Charles James* at the Brooklyn Museum in 1982-83 (**Fig. 5.15**). In the case of the couturiers Charles Frederick Worth (*House of Worth*, Brooklyn Museum 1962), or Paul Poiret (*King of Fashion*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007, **Fig. 5.6**), the appellation of

²¹ I am inspired here by Wölfflin's notion of 'painterliness' (*malerisch*): the notion of the mark of the artist that allows a viewer to connect with them materially. The idea that a designer has a 'signature style' echoes this notion. For a discussion of the painting as autograph, see Guichard 2010.



Fig. 5.15: *Genius of Charles James*. [10/16/1982 - 01/16/1983]. Installation view. (C&T_E_1982_James) Brooklyn Museum Archives. Records of the Department of Costumes and Textiles.

artistic genius was one they assigned to themselves in their own lifetimes, and may in this way be considered historically accurate: Worth, for example, posed for photographs dressed as Rembrandt. Because, as stated above, the values of ‘good art’ are held to be static and unchanging, the histories of these and other couturiers could be relevant not because of the market’s current tastes, but because of what is said to be their timeless aesthetic appeal.

It must be noted, however, that the ‘genius’ celebrated in these exhibitions was usually a male designer producing unique outfits for a leisured class of women in an industrialized, mass-market culture. High fashion was therefore in this formulation a frivolous and unproductive hobby, which had to be rehabilitated as being purposeful in another way. The positioning of a rational male overseeing the self-presentation of a female has been noted by feminist art scholars as having an effect on the visibility of art and of galleries (for a useful summary see Richter 2010); it also had an impact on the ways by which exhibitions of historical fashion were constructed as a means of social improvement.

Tasteful Consumption: The Uses of Fashion in Art Education

Fashion history exhibitions can subvert the commercialism of the fashion system by aestheticising dress; frequently, this is done with a rationale of promoting ‘good buying’ by educating the consumer into a connoisseur. Art education in museums has had a disturbing history of parochial and classist attitudes by experts on the general public’s ability to appreciate the aesthetic (Hill 2005; Whitehead 2005; Klonk 2009); fashion has elicited these as well as misogynistic attitudes toward consumers (widely, though falsely – see Breward 1999 – held to be female). The 1869 article cited above,

which advocated for the establishment of a museum of costume was published with a decorative element (**Fig. 5.16**) featuring a nude woman and her children (also in a state of nature) gazing into a mirror (that serves as the article's opening letter 'O') that shows them reflected, fashionably dressed in a bourgeois interior, with a legend featuring the anti-slavery slogan 'Am I not a woman and a sister?', implying that modern women are slaves to fashion and must be freed through the rationalizing influence of aesthetic education about dress.

An early example of the rationale for educating female consumers about fashion history comes from an 1873 article describing the display of antique dress in the Industrial Department of the Third Annual International Exhibition in London. The author writes:

Ladies, however, are the acknowledged representatives of the art of the toilette. Society would be shorn of more than half its pains and pleasures, if women were to don a universal costume as uninteresting and as unbecoming as that worn by men. Hence the great advantages which a study of the principles of fine art offers to women. And if attention to dress be really one of the penalties they must pay as members of the more angelic half of creation, by all means give them the solace of sound artistic training, with definite aesthetic precepts to go upon, in carrying out the responsibilities and distinctions of their order. (Anonymous 1873: 220)

In a later instalment of the description of these costumes (the space allotted to discussion of this aspect of the Exhibition is unprecedented in nineteenth-century descriptions of historical fashion displays), the author concludes that increased exposure to 'artistic and well-selected' (1873: 303) examples of timeless good taste has made a difference:

We seem gradually progressing to the adoption of a more sensible and tasteful standard than formerly, and the marked improvement in the costume of the middle and lower classes is strikingly apparent; while there is, happily, less display of violent colour and tawdry finery, there is a decided evidence of increased refinement and judgment. (Anonymous 1873: 51)



Fig. 5.16: I.L. [artist's full name unknown], 'Our'; historiated initial in: Anonymous, 1869. 'Notes & Incidents', *The Gentleman's Magazine* 226, pp. 373-374.

It is typical of the cultural commentators of the period that this piece puts the improvement in the material culture of the lower classes down to education, and not to growing economic prosperity. Yet, it also brings up a means by which the exclusive material culture of the upper classes, otherwise unattainable, could be made to have desirable social and cultural value. Disciplining the largely female audience from uneducated consumers into cultured connoisseurs has been one of the social functions of art museums in modernist period (see for example the discussion of MOMA's *Useful Object* exhibitions in Staniszewski 1998). Navigating brand distinctions for socio-economic status requires consumer literacy, not indiscriminate hoarding. In this way, representing historical fashion as art both evades and fuels the market forces that drive the fashion system.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how exhibitions of historical fashion have drawn on the iconography of the fine arts, the showmanship of theatre, and the socio-spatial organization of the gallery. Whether presented as art or alongside art, historical fashion in the museum is, at its core, illustrative. It is collected and displayed as a result of the cumulative effect of other, previous, representations, and is viewed in relation to them. Art gives the study of specimens of historical fashion an integrity and respectability not reserved for fashion in the commercial sphere. However, because of its commercial roots, it is still considered second to examples of fine art. Likewise, art is considered by many to be more fundamental in the truth of its expression of the past than surviving objects; Aileen Ribeiro represents such a view when she writes: 'It is, perhaps, a paradox that dress achieves immortality through the portrait, that the canvas gives it a vitality that cannot be achieved in the half-light of a

museum existence' (Ribeiro 1995: 6). The following chapter will consider how such illusions of vitality have been created in exhibitions over the period under study.

6. The Body in the Gallery: Life, Death, and Historical

Fashion

Material is only meaningful by virtue of the interaction with it by human agents, which is in turn enabled and limited by the capacities of the human body. And in addition, the meaning of many material symbols derives ultimately from their relationship to the human body.
(Boivin 2004: 64)

The previous chapter sought to describe the ways and means by which the fine and theatrical arts, with the aesthetic and exhibitionary conventions peculiar to them, influenced the display of historical fashion in museums over time. It must be noted, however, that this was not always an easy partnership: the application of one discipline to another is not always smoothly possible because of certain key characteristics. For fashion, this is its materiality, something that is less significant for the arts of painting and theatre, which are perceived primarily visually:

‘Contemporary ideas may be stimulated by old fashion plates, prints, and paintings, and not least by the actual substance and texture, faded as it may be of the still-existing historic costume’ (Anonymous 1962: 9). Fashion historian Valerie Cumming explains:

The history of surviving dress really only starts in the seventeenth century, and like all artefacts described as fine or decorative art, is a highly visual subject. However, unlike most of the categories of collection and study that make up those areas, it is fluid rather than static. Garments should be seen in movement on a human body, not frozen on a display figure. This is one of the many difficulties when curating collections of costume and also why some modern writers find costume collections physically and intellectually lifeless. (2004: 83)

This chapter will therefore focus on the ways in which museums have attempted to revivify historical fashion in the gallery by emphasizing its embodied qualities. It is argued that the principal connection of humans to clothing is not intellectual or visual,

but rather sensory, and therefore this chapter will examine the relationship of fashion with the body on (and in) display. It is different from the preceding two chapters in that it does not arise out of a vintage source explicitly linking fashion in museums to a particular theme; the study of the body is a more modern concern. However, even the earliest exhibitions of historical fashion and corresponding curatorial writing reflect an underlying preoccupation with the body, the illusion of life and consequently, evidence of the passage of time (see also Chapter 7).

Because literature on the subject has largely been based on the lived and living body, rather than the displayed representational body, this chapter will attempt to make new links between writing on embodiment from the broadly-defined field of cultural studies and the seemingly disembodied display of dress. It reviews the challenges museums have faced when representing the dressed and fashioned body, and suggests that the desire for lifelike representations can be explained with phenomenological approaches. It proceeds to discuss historical and contemporary body techniques, and how these are different for living bodies and mannequins; this is followed by a discussion of the dilemmas museums have faced in making their mannequins lifelike. However, as museum display figures are only representations of bodies once lived, the final sections also signpost discussions of decay and obsolescence in the following chapter.

An Awkward Fit

In 1932, the Metropolitan Museum of Art faced the challenge of mounting the first display of historical fashion based on its own collections (**Fig. 3.3**). Joseph Breck,

curator of the Department of Decorative Arts, candidly described the technical preparations for this exhibition with details bordering on the grotesque:

If the reader will recall the tiny waists and swelling bosoms of the fashionable figure in the period covered by the exhibition, it will be evident that the modern dress forms supplied by the trade are not an ideal solution of the problem. It would often be necessary to make adaptations – to carve out a waist here or build up shoulders there; and, when such modifications were not enough, to devise entirely new figures. [...] For example, this one in papier-mâché with the large shoulders had a waist inches too big for any dress in the collection. Her diaphragm had to be sawed out and a new waist created in the void. That curious bust with the sloping shoulders and the prominent bosom has been specially modelled to take the high-waisted Empire dresses; it will serve also for the tightly corseted early Victorian figures. Cast in plaster, the bust is mounted on a standard or adjustable height, with a waist segment which slides up and down according to the dictates of fashion. Attached to the waist are flexible iron bands that may be bent as desired to indicate the contours of the figure. And here are our ‘gentlemen’. Originally, these forms were designed for the display of ladies’ bathing suits; hence, provided with legs. But, unfortunately, the pose was peculiarly feminine. To give the figures a more masculine appearance one leg had to be sawed off at the hip and readjusted. This metamorphosis accomplished, the feet were amputated, and buckled shoes, cast in plaster, substituted. (Breck 1932: 124-124)

In performing these radical changes to mannequin bodies – even performing gender re-assignments for some – Breck and his team of technicians were encountering the differences between living and modelled bodies, as well as between contemporary and historical ones. Whereas clothing is created to fit a living, flexible body, in the museum gallery, a mannequin must be made to fit the dress; while fashion dresses the body, the museum must insert a body back into historical fashion. In mounting historical fashion, curators, conservators, technicians and designers encounter all the varieties of fashionable silhouettes across time as well as the individual peculiarities of the bodies that originally inhabited these historic pieces.

Exhibition teams face a difficult struggle to ensure a good fit between the needs of the artefact and the display technology available to them. As fashion journalist Prudence Glynn colourfully put it:

In any *mouseion*, fashion has an obvious place. How it should be displayed is less obvious; indeed it has to my mind defeated most of those who try it. [...] In the wider context there usually seems to me to be something uneasy about a display of clothes, whether on headless stands or on whole figures petrified into attitudes of chic whoopeedoo of Adele Rootstein. How flummoxed the Martians will be when they finally exhume us from our lava of non bio-degradable plastic garbage and find a race stuffed with sawdust whose necks are finished with little wooden knobs, or a nation of six-foot acrobats without benefit of skeleton. (Glynn 1974: 6)

The final product – the dressed mannequin in the gallery – often creates an uncomfortable cognitive dissonance arising from the contrast between the bodily norms of today and times past, as well as the viewer's experience of the lived body versus the simulacra on display (see also Chapter 7).

Beginning With the Body

Before continuing with any analysis of the topic in museums, it is important to briefly review the current understanding of body theory in cultural studies. There has been a recent explosion of interest in issues of the body within cultural theory, characterized by Hamilakis, Pluciennik and Tarlow as the logical result of the cultural change from 'Fordist western bodies, disciplined, rigid, and regimented in time and space, to the bodies of late modernity,' which they characterize as 'perceived as projects and as entities with flexible boundaries and fluid status, changeable to suit specific identities' (2002: 2). This in turn is probably due to the rise of feminist theory and gender studies more broadly, and their 'consequent acknowledgement that the relation between sex and gender (often glossed as the biological and the cultural respectively) is contingent and variable, and understandings of both are culturally and historically specific' (2002: 3). Earlier, sociologist Chris Shilling argued the same when he wrote that 'the body is most profitably conceptualized as an unfinished biological and social

phenomenon which is transformed, within certain limits, as a result of its entry into, and participation in, society' (1993: 12).

Interest in these ideas, however, has led to some confusion over terminology, as Blackman points out:

Thus there are three interchangeable terms that tend to appear in the literature: The first is the term corporeality, [...] which pertains to the body and is a way of referring to the body that does not reduce it to the biological; the second term is materiality, which, again, recognizes the material basis of human subjectivity but does not privilege biology as the unique discipline to provide a purchase into this realm; the third term is somatic, which again refers to the body but within many perspectives also introduces the concept of feeling or vitality into the body. (2008: 20)

Furthermore, all these might fall under the broader concept of embodiment, described by Blackman as a: 'perspective [that] refuses the idea that the biological and the social, the natural and the cultural, exist as separate entities' (Blackman 2008: 37).

Waskul and Vannini take this further by claiming that 'the term "embodiment" refers quite precisely to the process by which the object-body is actively experienced, produced, sustained, and/or transformed as a subject-body' (2006: 3). Thus, cultural theory characterizes the body not as a characterization of a passive ideal, but describes it as the experience of an active, relational system with agency, something that has direct consequences for academic critiques of power and discourse in museology.

Furthermore, embodiment is relevant for the study of fashion because, as Albano writes: 'Clothes, in fact, literalize the notion of embodiment by showing the traces left by the body; they tell us, through their physicality – shape, condition, texture, colour and smell – about another absent physicality, that of the person who wore them' (Albano 2007: 20). This absence is poignant, and indeed, Blackman's survey of the literature suggests that the latest theories on embodiment take agency into a new field of emotion:

Bodies are processes that are articulated and articulate through their connections with others, human and non-human. In this sense, if there is one guiding principle toward which work on the body has moved it is the assumption that what defines bodies is their capacity to affect and be affected. (2008: 133)

Furthermore:

This work suggests that language is not the key mode of communication, and that much of what passes as communication inheres within a realm that is difficult to see, understand, and articulate. This work also suggests that we are far from unitary subjects but are multiple and defined by our capacity to be affected and affect others. It is also often through processes of non-conscious perception rather than through rational and conscious deliberation that the registering of this multiplicity is primarily felt and sensed. This is a form of ‘corporeal thinking’ rather than thinking separated from an inert physiological body (mind-body dualism). (2008: 138)

The attempt to integrate this new multiple, affective subjectivity into traditional epistemology is a still-ongoing process which has evolved out of nineteenth-century Continental phenomenological philosophy and has direct implications for the presence of bodies in museum galleries, both actual and represented.

Phenomenology and the Body

Recent literature notes a persistent bias within Western philosophical thought against materiality and the body (Boivin 2004; Chatterjee 2008; Dudley 2010). Following Platonic and Cartesian philosophy, until the late nineteenth century, cognition was consistently prioritized as a more reliable source of truth and experience in the world, with the consequent relegation of the body and the experiences it affords to human agents to a marginalized and under-theorized position. This had repercussions within museums, too, as objects related to the everyday physical experience of space (architecture, furniture, food and utensils, textiles and clothing, etc.: artefacts frequently classed under the rubrics of social history and decorative arts/design) were under-represented.

Indeed, so isolated from its physiological environment had cognition become that phenomenological thinkers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty devoted significant effort in their writings to rehabilitating the body as the central means of interpreting human existence. In engaging with the precepts of scientific investigation, Merleau-Ponty asserted that all possible conclusions of what is knowable are mediated through the body:

[...] for if it is true that I am conscious of my body via the world, that it is the unperceived term in the centre of the world towards which all objects turn their face, it is true for the same reason that my body is the pivot of the world: I know that objects have several facets because I could make a tour of inspection of them, and in that sense I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body. (2002: 94-95)

Such an assertion is intuitively acceptable even to a layperson, yet presents one obvious epistemological problem: if one is aware of the world through the body, how then is one aware of the body? In response, Merleau-Ponty used a classic phenomenological argument, that of mutuality: both body and world rely on one another and cannot be separated. In a Heideggerian sense (see Chapter 7), being in the world affects both the being and the world:

[...] we grasp the unity of our body only in that of the thing, and it is by taking things as our starting point that our hands, eyes and all our sense-organs appear to us as so many interchangeable instruments. The body by itself, the body at rest is merely an obscure mass, and we perceive it as a precise and identifiable being when it moves towards a thing. (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 375)
Meaning, therefore, lies between world and body, in the interaction between the two.

Yet it also requires an act of cognition, something which Merleau-Ponty did not deny:

[...] my body must be apprehended not only in an experience which is instantaneous, peculiar to itself and complete in itself, but also in some general aspect and in the light of an impersonal being. (2002: 95)

This would seem to have obvious application to museums, which provide a space for intellectual and physical encounters between people, things, and ideas. Merleau-Ponty's ideas were reiterated much later by Bryan Turner in his seminal work *The Body and Society*, who wrote: 'There is an obvious and prominent fact about human

beings: they have bodies and they are bodies' (2008: 1); yet, thinking through these bodies, simultaneously internal and external, has required much scholarly effort and debate.

One significant academic approach, which has arisen out of phenomenological writing, has been the study of embodied experience, which is concerned with how the individual and subjective experience of being a body and of having a body among other bodies, people, places, and things, are culturally-determined and have formative effects on culture as well. Waskul and Vannini describe some aspects of phenomenological methodology:

Phenomenologists firmly establish a focused emphasis on embodied subjects who encounter practical problems in discrete and situated circumstances and thus accentuate an approach akin to the traditions of interactionism: embodied people mindfully resolve pragmatic problems with intention and purpose in social encounters that are situated in broader social, cultural, and institutional milieus. Phenomenological approaches to the body and embodiment concern thick descriptions of lived experience that reveal meaning in the life-worlds of individuals and groups. Meaning is embedded in our experiences within the world; meaning is not apart from either those embodied experiences or that world. (2002: 6)

However, traditionally-bounded bio-medical models of the body are not easy to integrate with wider-ranging concerns about experience and meaning in a socio-cultural context. Even phenomenology struggles with this problem, as Hamilakis, Pluciennik and Tarlow note: 'The difficulties with the best-known phenomenological approaches arise from the conflict between the desire to utilize innate and hence generalisable human characteristics of capacities and perception, and the wish to historicize the experiences and meanings to which they give rise' (2002: 8-9). It is particularly difficult to represent these complex concepts within a gallery space, which has its own experiential conventions.

The objects on display in the galleries of any museum are divorced from their original context. They are no longer in use or in situ, and indeed, their purpose and location within the museum frequently minimizes their materiality (Petrov 2011; Wehner 2011). For example, it is intuitively obvious that the ways in which people relate to clothing in the mundane circumstances of everyday life are not the ways in which they do so in museums, and this has to do with the way in which museums present objects: Amy de la Haye argues that

[...] to represent worn, historical clothing on a modern model is to deny the biography of the consumer who originally chose the garment, and, in the case of haute couture, who commissioned it to fit her body perfectly, and who wore it. Perhaps more than any other medium, worn clothing offers tangible evidence of lives lived, partly because its very materiality is altered by, and bears imprints of, its original owner. [...] When worn clothes enter a museum they embark on a new 'life' and serve new functions. In the process, what was once intimate can become impersonal. (de la Haye 2006: 135-136)

Indeed, one common objection to the display of fashion in museums is how disembodied and lifeless it is. Although some museums, such as Bath, the Met, the ROM, and the V&A, did allow their collections to be worn by live models into the 1960s (**Fig. 6.1**; see also **Figs. 4.4** and **5.9**), the practice had adverse effects on the condition of the garments. While as late as 1972, some museum writers still encouraged dressing up in historical costumes to 'create a social occasion which will draw attention to your society, amuse the membership, intrigue the public, and please the press' (Briggs 1972: 1), the practice increasingly came to be frowned upon, though even critics agreed that 'the incompleteness of costume without the human body will probably always lead to a desire to display it on a human shaped form' (Sykas 1987: 157). The International Council of Museums published guidelines for costume collections, which explicitly forbade the wearing of historical costume for display (ICOM 1990: 127). Fashion journalist Prudence Glynn, on the other hand,



Fig. 6.1: Live models wearing museum artefacts: Embroidered muslin dress, c.1800-1810 (V&A T.673-1913), photograph by Bertram Park, from: *Illustrated London News*, November 22, 1913, p. 843; Linen jacket and skirt (ROM 950.953ab), c. 1867, from Katherine B. Brett, *Modesty to Mod*, 1967, pl. 31; Still from ‘Ancient Models’, 1955, showing a woman a dress from the museum’s collection [accession number unknown] interacting with the mannequin from Fig. 5.5 at Eridge Castle in Kent (the predecessor of the Fashion Museum in Bath). © British Pathé Ltd.

represented the strong feelings of individuals who thought that the aesthetic impact of historical fashion was significantly lessened if it could not be worn by a live model:

You understand, I deplore the death of any magnificently designed object. [...] What I hate is stuffed fashion. [...] So now, at the cost of being banned from visiting major fashion collections all over the world, I pronounce that in my view clothes in museums, with certain obvious provisions, should be allowed to be shown on live models. [...] When you see them on the dummies, mute, pasty-faced, inviolate, you do maybe wonder at the construction, the workmanship, the beading, the social interest. When you see them live, wow! (Glynn 1980: 7)

However, the risks of such practices to museum material ultimately outweighed the benefits; even Doris Langley Moore, who had allowed models to pose in her collection of clothing for film and still photographs throughout the 1950s and 1960s, had eventually come to recognize the damage this wrought on fragile fabrics (Glynn 1980: 7). Compromise was necessary: ‘On the lay-figure on the museum, silk, velvet, cotton, lace retain something of the potentiality of life’ (Anonymous 1962: 9). Life had to be turned into merely life-like.

While it is true to say that the removal of the stuff of everyday life to a museum creates for things a new meaning, their old meaning is not left behind. Rather, it is *represented*; the mimesis of embodiment is a key convention used in museums, and in particular, in displays of historical fashion. In 1972, an American Association for State and Local History leaflet suggested that ‘one can use costumed figures to tell a story [...] or to enliven and humanize a historic house’ (Briggs 1972: 1) and a year later, another leaflet stated that ‘Even when articles of furniture and other period items are displayed in the last exceptional detail, life-size figures give realism to the room when arranged in attitudes of arrested motion’ (Halvarson 1973: 1). For examples of this in practice, one can look to the installation photographs of the 1944 Brooklyn Museum *America 1744-1944* exhibition, which combined American decorative arts

from across the museum's departments, or the 1963 Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition, *Costumes: Period Rooms Re-Occupied in Style* (Fig. 6.1). The Regency Exhibition held at the Royal Pavilion in Bath in 1958 also used mannequins dressed in historical fashion gathered from Doris Langley Moore's collection (later part of the Fashion Museum, Bath) to showcase the newly-renovated rooms of the former royal residence. While it is debatable whether they truly add drama to the scene, the mannequins did give a sense of proportion to the grand interiors in which they are posed, which suggests a similar scale for the human onlookers and visitors to the exhibition.

Thomas Czordas suggested a modified phenomenological methodology for describing bodily experience sensitively:

If embodiment is an existential condition in which the body is the subjective source or intersubjective ground of experience, then studies under the rubric of embodiment are not 'about' the body per se. Instead, they are about culture and experience insofar as these can be understood from the standpoint of bodily being-in-the-world. They require what I would call a cultural phenomenology concerned with synthesizing the immediacy of embodied experience with the multiplicity of cultural meaning in which we are always and inevitably immersed. (Czordas 1999: 143)

This chapter follows Czordas in its approach to the review of the literature on how the study of the body can shed significant light on cultural constructs, and the ways in which this has been achieved within representations of historical fashion in museums. Its contention is that the contexts of the body represented within exhibitions of fashion history reflect wider social attitudes toward body techniques in lived experience.



Fig. 6.2:
Mannequins adding realism in a room:
Installation view of *America: 1744-1944* (Brooklyn, 1944), 'Golden Age, Grand tour, 1880-1890' section. Brooklyn Museum Archives, Records of the Department of Photography (PHO_E_1944_America);
Installation view of *Costume: Period Rooms Re-Occupied in Style* (Met, 1963) © Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Body: Inside and Out

Modern scientific thought would have us believe that the human body is a static given, with norms (health) as well as standard deviations (disease). Likewise, laws and social conventions assume that the interaction of bodies with other bodies can be objectively measured and proscribed through standards of beauty, etiquette, morality, and similar cultural codes. Discourse in these areas, in language as well as deed, with which most people are complicit most of the time, leaves little room for questioning the actually slippery boundaries of bodies. Through careful examination and the suggestion of alternatives, the discourse reveals its arbitrary, constructed nature.

Waskul and Vannini, perhaps following Judith Butler's theories of performativity, suggest the existence of what they call a 'dramaturgical body,' which is 'embedded in social practices [...] people do not merely "have" a body – people actively do a body. The body is fashioned, crafted, negotiated, manipulated and largely in ritualized social and cultural conventions.' (2006: 6) Yet equally, as Nick Crossley points out, society and culture are also sums of their embodied parts:

[...] we must avoid the implication that because society affects the body it is somehow not 'of' the body; that it is disembodied. Societies emerge out of and depend for their continued existence upon the embodied interactions of social agents. Practices are done, roles are played or performed and processes are effected by the embodied work of agents. No aspect of the social world exists independently of such embodied activity. (2006: 4)

This echoes Merleau-Ponty's relational bodily experience, described earlier, and explains the desire of social history curators to 'keep foremost the need to present history to your visitors as the experience of living people' (Briggs 1972: 1). The Fashion Museum in Bath (formerly the Museum of Costume) was lauded for being able to do just this: 'The clothes are mounted on naturalistic figures to give as much impression of life as possible and many are placed in period room settings or against

backdrop views of Bath to give a feeling of period atmosphere' (Byrde 1985: 14).

There, mannequins and backdrops were used to create an impression of the contexts within which the clothes were experienced.

While the extent of the agency of inanimate objects is debated in material culture studies generally, there is little doubt that museum mannequins are imbued with it in writing on museum display. The previous chapter described how visual conventions for dress were crystallized into stereotyped 'looks' and enlivened by the use of theatrical techniques; however, there the analysis focused on how the theatre of the museum echoed the representational content of other art forms. Here, the theatrical metaphor seeks to highlight the representation of life and movement. To a large extent, this relies on the creation of mannequin 'actors', clothing's occupants in effigy, which could be posed alongside other mannequins or objects and props, as though interacting with them. A technical leaflet for history curators suggested that, 'Instead of regarding the room as a place for exhibiting artefacts, the designer might consider it a setting for meaningful activity', where the identifiable action of the figures makes clear the purpose of the artefacts on display, and the presence of the figures 'introduces a dramatic element' (Halvorson 1973: 1). As Sarah Schneider writes:

Mannequin displays link the image of a body to a tacit action: a realistic mannequin, though still, often appears to be about to act or to have just acted. And both realistic and abstract mannequins simultaneously display and are displayed. Appearance is in fact a form of action. (1995: 7)

This is well-illustrated by a photograph from one of the installations from the Met's 1963 *Costumes: Period Rooms Re-Occupied in Style* show, which features three mannequins in an eighteenth-century interior (**Fig. 6.3**). Although all are wearing the historical fashions ostensibly on display, it is their poses which are most striking – it



Fig. 6.3: Dramatic mannequins: Installation view of *Costume: Period Rooms Re-Occupied in Style* (1963) © Metropolitan Museum of Art.

is obvious that the seated mannequin is reading a book, oblivious to the scene of silent courtship taking place behind her. While inanimate mannequins cannot, by definition, engage in either of these activities, their lifelike poses bring a sense of believable action to the installation.

The appeal of the mannequin-in-action is considered by Schneider to be a result of the viewer's expectation of a body in the world:

During the 1970s consciously created 'groupings' animated mannequin showrooms and windows, as mannequins were specifically designed to be sold in sets and to be staged in relation to one another. [...] In promoting their groupings, manufacturers appealed to viewers' desire for realistic representation, not just of the individual in physical movement, but of the emotional exchanges of social life as well. (1995: 98)

However, material studied in this research demonstrates that this trend was seen in museums before the 1970s; archival photographs from the Costume Institute's opening exhibitions in the 1940s (**Fig. 5.3**) show affecting scenes featuring mannequin 'families'. Equally, as was described above, the 1963 Costume Institute exhibition *Costumes: Period Rooms Re-Occupied in Style* saw costumed mannequins in furnished architectural settings, interacting with them and each other (**Figs. 6.2 and 6.3**). The impact of these tableaux relies on the viewer relating their own social behaviour with that of the mannequins via an imaginative projection (Petrov 2011) of their bodily experience onto the visual information before them.

The precise mechanism by which body concepts are constructed is a topic of active debate among scientists, psychologists and social theorists. The development of self-awareness in childhood is pinpointed in psychoanalytical theory as being the root of a desire to know the world in order to possess it. This was described by Jacques Lacan as:

the mirror stage, in which the infant, experiencing its own body as fragmented because of its uneven physical development, perceives and desires the wholeness of the mirrored image. The fascination of the mirrored image coincides with the child's recognition of lack; the visual image, which is initially not understood because it is 'out there', as opposed to the 'in here' of bodily sensation, is gradually comprehended as an image of itself, and the child delights in its visual double for the new sense of power and completeness that it provides. However, because comprehension of 'out there' means a recognition that there is a division between the subject and the world, self and other, it also represents the first attempts to fill the lack: thus simultaneously the triadic relation of desire is constituted, the dynamic of subject, other, and Other. (Cavallaro and Warwick 2001: 24)

This deep-seated desire to create a sense of psychological unity through possession has also been used to explain the power of modern consumer culture and the compelling nature of the images it creates through its merchandising systems:

The body's status as ubiquitous sign in advertising culture, and the proliferation of production oriented toward leisure, helped promote an emphasis on the achievement of an appearance and a degree of physical control commensurate with the display of a hyper-efficient 'performing self'. (Shilling 2004: 2)

Lacan's mirror theory was suggested in Chapter 4 as playing a role in the shopping environment, and also carrying over into the museum environment. Representations of shopping within the museum environment were influenced by the pre-occupations of contemporary curators and projected onto the past, but may have also influenced visitors by showing socially normative shopping behaviour; the eighteenth-century female shopper in **Fig. 6.4** was at once a subject for the female viewer's gaze in 1963 and a stand-in for her, whereby the viewer knew that she was also always the viewed.

The performance of self is both innate and enculturated, where observation and conformity are actually and discursively necessary for social survival. While Shilling pinpoints this as corresponding to a cultural shift that occurred in the late twentieth century, Chapter 4 demonstrated that in fact, the disciplining of bodies through visual encoding was in fact a much earlier phenomenon. Shilling's further assertion that



Fig. 6.4: Object and subject: Installation view of *Costume: Period Rooms Re-Occupied in Style* (1963) © Metropolitan Museum of Art.

the twentieth century was characterized by a continued shift away from negative forms of bodily repression towards positive forms of exhortation in which embodied subjects were encouraged to structure their lives in particular ways. (2004: 3)

is also flawed, in that institutions such as museums from the beginning sought to civilize bodies and subjects into acceptable modes of behaviour (Bennett 1995; Hill 2005; Rees Leahy 2009).

As Waksul and Vannini (among others) have pointed out, observation is an interpretive act, not necessarily grounded in an objective reality, even if it does construct a convincing illusion of such a reality:

When we gaze upon bodies of others we necessarily interpret what we observe. Similarly, others imagine what we may be seeing and feeling, thus completing the reflections of the looking-glass. Obviously, this looking-glass body is not a direct reflection of other's judgments – it is an imagined reflection built of cues gleaned from others. Reflexivity is then to be understood as a necessary condition of embodiment, and embodiment must be understood as a form of reflexivity. (2006: 5)

Nick Crossley echoes this:

The process whereby 'my body', the body that I am, becomes an object of perception, thought and feeling for me, and becomes something that I act upon by way of exercise, diet, adornment and so on, is the phenomenon of reflexive embodiment. (2006: 140)

An example of reflexive embodiment, though not intersubjectivity, on display comes from the 1964 *Vignettes of Fashion* exhibition at the Costume Institute. The exhibition sought to reconnect fashions with the social rituals for which they were originally worn: 'The exhibition consists of 12 vignettes in which the mannequins are "dressed for the occasion." Furnishings and paintings from the museum's collections provide the clothes with authentic settings that illustrate the relationship between dress, interiors, and social manners' (Anonymous 1964: 30). In one vignette, 'Guests for Tea', mannequins in Edwardian tea gowns at a table set with a china tea service almost identically replicated the 1909 William MacGregor Paxton painting *Tea Leaves*, on display above them (**Fig. 6.5**), demonstrating the performativity of social



Fig. 6.5: Reflexive embodiment: Installation view of *Vignettes of Fashion* (1964) © Metropolitan Museum of Art; William McGregor Paxton, *Tea Leaves*, 1909. © Metropolitan Museum of Art.

behaviours. The *New York Times* reviewer noted that ‘viewing the vignettes, one cannot help but compare them to contemporary developments’ (Anonymous 1964: 30), as social norms for social occasions and the etiquette for those which remained had changed. The exhibition served as a visual reminder of this process. Even now, empathic, reflexive embodiment is constantly reinforced through the proliferation of advertising, etiquette advice and ‘makeover’ media, which reinforce insecure messages of potential social disorder if reflexive bodily comportment falls outside normative boundaries. Its power probably lies in the fact that it is internalized, and therefore gives the subject a sense of agency.

However, it must be recalled that even the normative boundaries of the body are essentially arbitrary and changeable. A Brooklyn Museum exhibition from 1957-58, called *The Changing Silhouette of Fashion* (**Fig. 6.6**) made this very point: in the exhibition, ‘ten costumes and the forms they are displayed on show the wide variety of figure mutations the American female put herself through from 1810 to 1928’ (Anonymous 1957: 57). The article’s author felt that the display demonstrated that ‘our women seem to have grown taller, wider and droopier since the old days’ when compared with the early 1800s, when ‘erect posture was the mark of a lady’ or the 1920s when women were ‘flat and rectangular as a playing card’ (Anonymous 1957: 57). An article describing the acquisition of a large family collection of historical fashion by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1911 described the same expansion with some hyperbole:

The costumes present an interesting subject for those interested in the development of the American woman. The average American girl of today could not begin to get into the gowns of the girl of the early part of the nineteenth century or into those of her mother fifty years before. The armholes of the earliest costumes would about fit the wrist of the girl of today. The dresses show that the women of that time were short as well as small, and the



Fig. 6.6: Changing body boundaries: Robert Riley (curator) and Celestina Ucciferri (administrative assistant) installing *The Changing Silhouette of Fashion* at the Brooklyn Museum, 1957; photo by Leroy Jakob, *New York Daily News*.

Museum authorities had infinite trouble in finding manikins [*sic*] over which the gowns could be fitted to show them properly. Figures are not made of that size now, as there are only the exceptional women so small. (Anonymous 1911a: 11)

It does not seem to have occurred to the author of the piece that the Ludlow women could themselves have been exceptional women.

Whether or not bodies have fundamentally changed is a topic of some debate. In her writing on fashion, Doris Langley Moore always vehemently disputed the popular assumption that people's physiques have radically changed over the centuries (Nunn and Langley Moore 1967: 19). Every edition of the guidebook to the Museum of Costume included statements to this effect, and in 1969, she wrote:

To answer a question that is perpetually raised, neither the male nor the female models in the Museum are smaller on average than our visitors themselves. The height of our masculine figures is generally somewhere near 6 ft., our shortest at present on view is 5 ft. 8 in. [...] As for women, we have several dummies of 5 ft. 2 in. (a very ordinary height in the present day); but there are many of 5 ft. 8 in. to 5 ft. 10 in. and a few of 6 ft. The idea that our ancestors were undersized is based on fallacies I have tried to explain elsewhere. The diaphragm of the modern girl is certainly larger than the average in past times, doubtless indicating healthier lungs, and the waist is now free from drastic compression: but when I was a private collector I was able to find living models who could be photographed in our tightest dresses. Our visitors are so often convinced our dummies are 'smaller than life' that there may be some element of optical illusion. (Langley Moore 1969: 1-2).

Royal Ontario Museum curator Alexandra Palmer, side-stepping the argument of whether the body underneath changed, nevertheless acknowledged that the appearance of the body's proportions could be and was modified through clothing in her 1989 exhibition *Measure for Measure* (see: Palmer 1990), which surveyed 'mankind's imagination in creating coverings for the body over the centuries' (quoted in Anonymous 1989: 7). This can be contrasted with the assertion of Sarah Tarlow, who writes that:

the human body exists in complex and multiple forms, both physically and conceptually. There is no universally-conceptualized 'basic' body, onto which are layered social meanings and identities in the form of clothes, jewellery and

other ephemera. Instead, the body itself and what it represents may be very differently conceived, and those different conceptions made manifest in material adornment or modification of the body. (Tarlow 2002: 24)

Tarlow suggests that in different cultures and periods, conceptions of the body's boundaries and meanings change, and this change can be manifested through clothing. Therefore, the measurements of the physical body are, in a manner of speaking, irrelevant: it is the ideal proportions of the body and its normative relationship with its immediate environment, including clothing, which are important. These dimensions are subject to change and social censure.

A review of the Brooklyn Museum exhibition *Of Corsets* (1980-82) provides an example of the cognitive dissonance created by being confronted with such different conceptions of the body; *New York Times* journalist Bernadine Morris wrote:

Tucked away in a [*sic*] obscure corner of the fourth floor of the Brooklyn Museum devoted to decorative art is a compact exhibit of antique objects displayed on wire forms suspended from the ceiling. When viewed as abstract shapes bearing some relationship to the human torso, the exhibit has a certain charm, enhanced by exquisite workmanship: rows of tiny, even stitches made by hand; rims of frothy lace; the most delicate embroideries. But when viewed in terms of use these objects were actually put to, it can be seen as a chamber of self-inflicted horrors as women tortured themselves in subjugation to the whims of fashion. For this is an exhibit of corsets, the earliest dating back to around 1780, the latest around 1950, and it is mute testimony to the distortion of the human body through the ages. (Morris 1980: C18)

Photographs of modern people looking at costumed museum mannequins (even when posed) demonstrate similar ambivalence: onlookers (**Fig. 6.7**²²) seem fascinated, horrified, and perhaps even mildly amused at the evident difference between themselves and their predecessors. Viewing these archival photographs adds another

²² Another important function of photographs such as Figs. 6.7 or 4.6, showing visitors observing displays is to demonstrate the museum's physical positioning of objects in relation to viewers; most archival photographs depict displays straight-on, framed by the dimensions of the case, whereby the proportion and perspective that are so key to museum scenography are lost.



Fig. 6.7: Looking at the past: Man examining a mannequin dressed for the 1947 V&A exhibition *Male Costume 1350-1950*; female visitor looking at an Edwardian dress displayed in *Fashions of the Crowning Years* (1977), © Royal Ontario Museum.

ambivalent reaction to both the body of the mannequin on display and the pictured visitor. Vision and convention are deeply implicated in the embodied experience of self-presentation, so that Nick Crossley's assertion that 'body techniques are culturally embedded and, as such, often have symbolic and normative significance' (2006: 104) deserves further analysis to unpack how specific 'body techniques' gain cultural significance.

The museum can both document and create these body techniques. For example, the Costume Institute's 1988-1989 exhibition, *From Queen To Empress: Victorian Dress 1837-1877*, examined sartorial norms for the first forty years of Queen Victoria's dress. The dresses on show (**Fig. 5.4**) were accompanied by excerpts from contemporary proscriptive literature, such as magazines and etiquette books as the 1879 *Ladies Book of Etiquette*. The introductory label text to the exhibition noted that although the spending power of the English varied widely, fashion:

[...] had some influence on the dress of all but the very poorest. The aspiring middle classes closely copied all aspects of aristocratic behaviour. An increasing number of magazines became available, offering extensive advice on correct etiquette, including the niceties of proper dress for each and every occasion. (Goldthorpe 1988)

The curator's intellectual premise, therefore, was that the increased literacy of the nineteenth-century population in matters of social behaviour and fashion affected the spread of the predominant silhouette throughout different classes. (This was also the premise of the Royal Ontario Museum's *Corsets to Calling Cards* 1995-97 exhibition.) The fashions highlighted in the displays, moreover, highlighted the difference in body norms which had evolved over time, as the curator admitted. Speaking of the cage crinoline, she noted: 'It looks like a rather monstrous contraction to us, but it was a wonderful advance for Victorian women who were freed from their bulky petticoats' (quoted in Gerston 1988). Furthermore, as a review in the *New York*

Times noted, it was anticipated that the exhibition would also affect fashion: the outfits of attendees to the opening reception were enthusiastically reported (the appearance of the innovative evening pantsuit was particularly highlighted: ‘In a crowd of traditionally dressed women, the most advanced looks were tailored, often with trousers, inspired by Saint Laurent’s “le smoking.”’) and the inspired enthusiasm of designer Geoffrey Beene for the sundry styles of sleeves on show was the final note with which the article ended (Morris 1988). Despite the historical distance of the fashions on display, then, fashion’s changeable nature lends a fluidity to body boundaries that allows them to shift in response to visual suggestion.

The Dressed and Undressed Body

The body exists within various boundaries, both literal and metaphorical. One such boundary, which arguably affects and mediates any and all interactions with the external world is clothing. As Joanne Entwistle put it, ‘Conventions of dress transform flesh into something recognizable and meaningful to a culture and are also the means by which bodies are made “decent”, appropriate and acceptable within certain contexts’ (2001: 33). Itself subject to historical codes of social order, the shorthand which dress provides for gender, social status, occupation and occasion, has a significant impact on embodied experience by introducing and defining the body within itself. It precedes and presages the communication of the body with the outside world, while at the same time limiting or expanding the opportunities for such communication:

In framing the body, however precariously, dress contributes to the symbolic translation of materiality into cultural images or signifiers. As a mediator between the carnal dimension of existence and the abstract laws of the symbolic order of language and institutions, dress aids the construction of subjectivity as representation. (Cavallaro and Warwick 2001: 3)

However, the term *embodiment* suggests not an objectified body, seen in perspective from some imagined outside rational viewpoint, but participation in the world through an active, lived body that evolves in the process of being and becoming: ‘Seen as contingent formations of space, time and materiality, lived bodies have begun to be comprehended as assemblages of practices, discourses, images, institutional arrangements, and specific places and projects’ (Farquhar and Lock 2007: 1).

Similarly, fashion is also contingent, an assemblage of accepted norms and esoteric touches, whose understood superficiality merely disguises more layers underneath (Esposito 2007). In his chapter on “The Fabricated Body,” Peter Corrigan (2008) reviews some of the relationships between body ideals and body appearances as explicitly stated by reformers and advertisements. However, the relationship between the personal and ideal body, especially in dress, is not usually so overtly expressed, and so studies of this topic have tended to focus on proscriptive literature (as above) and dysfunctional attitudes and/or behaviours (for example, the huge feminist literature on beauty culture and its concomitant disease, the eating disorder). In the Costume Institute’s 2010 exhibition *American Woman: Fashioning a National Identity*, curators Andrew Bolton and Harold Koda focused on the changes in the ‘physical and fashionable appearance’ of the ‘mass-media representations of American women from the 1890s to the 1940s’, whereby the American female body became ‘a spirited symbol of progress, modernity, and ultimately, Americanness’ (Bolton and Koda 2010: n.p.). The curators argued that the fantasy bodies created in these depictions both created and reflected the aspirational reality for historical and contemporary women; the show ended by asserting that the series of archetypal ideals featured within it were styles still embodied by the current American woman.

While clothes may mimic, draw attention to, define and outline the body, allowing and enhancing its ability to participate in the world in an embodied way, they can also be seen as another aspect of the environment within which a constructed body circulates: ‘Clothes as conveyors of meaning and value, that give shape to a system of objects in which the body finds the space for innumerable and complex sensorial identities’ (Calefato 2004: 3). According to Calefato, the clothed body is object and subject: ‘The garment as a vessel of otherness, a place where the identity of one’s body is confused, an indistinct zone between covering and image’ (2004: 60). While this is true of the clothed body in lived experience, within the museum, the quote takes on even more meaning. For example, the redesign of the V&A’s Costume Court in 1983 was meant to be body conscious. The museum’s director, Sir Roy Strong, was adamant that nothing interfered with the interplay between clothing and the body: ‘Dress is the sculpture of fabric on the human body. It has an aesthetic form. We are not trying to present it as part of an illustrated book or as the social history of Jane Austen’s world. [...] This display is anti-camp, anti-dramatic, anti-theatre’ (quoted in Menkes 1983: 8). According to the director, ‘the real innovation of this exhibition [was the] human element. Each of the 200 figures has been exactly proportioned to fit the garment on display, instead of pinning and folding the clothes to the dummies’; head textile conservator Sheila Landi was described ‘re-moulding the bosoms of a dummy with polyfilla to get the correct 1920s silhouette’ (Menkes 1983: 8). In describing her preview of the new exhibition galleries, fashion journalist Suzy Menkes spoke of ‘the ghostly effect of no make-up and the wigs, all authentic in style but a uniform shade of pallid grey’; deathly mannequins (see Chapter 7) notwithstanding, Menkes conceded that ‘the idea of emphasizing the natural body

shapes of the wearer is illuminating when it comes to twentieth century fashion, for you can then see how great design can restructure our proportions' (Menkes 1983: 8). Erasing the facial personality of a mannequin could instead redirect focus onto the changing body norms that fashion reflects or dictates.

More radically, the once-popular practice of using silhouette heads or bodies for the display of historical fashion erases the specificity of the body inside (even its dimensionality is minimized), thus muting the importance of the body within and re-focusing attention on the covering. The support for the item is not completely invisible, though, and becomes an image of a body rather than a body itself. Examples of this technique date to the 1950s and 1960s: the Costume Institute used figures with painted silhouette heads to display male dress in *Adam in the Looking Glass* (1950). The 1962 re-opening of the V&A's Costume Court saw the introduction of similar 'bas-relief' figures with silhouette heads and sometimes arms, while the costume was padded out underneath (Laver 1962); this was praised for the

[...] tact evident in the absence of heads on the dummies which display clothes in the round, which would have introduced an element of personality of dubious value. The lack is made up for by a small silhouette on white card beneath each dummy, showing the figure complete with hairdress, headgear, hands, and feet. Life-size silhouettes give a sufficiency of animation to a number of costumes shown, so to speak, in 'high relief'. (Anonymous 1962: 15)

From 1963, Doris Langley Moore mounted clothing on enlarged photographs and drawings, as well as on a mural painted by Max and Daphne Brooker at the Costume Museum at the Assembly Rooms in Bath. The Royal Ontario Museum used a similar convention for displaying twentieth-century dresses in the 1967 *Modesty to Mod* exhibition (Fig. 6.8).



Fig. 6.8.1: Silhouettes as images of a body: Installation view of the V&A Costume Court, 1962 © Victoria and Albert Museum; Installation view of *Modesty to Mod* (1967), © Royal Ontario Museum.



Fig. 6.8.2: Silhouettes as images of a body: Installation views of *Adam in the Looking Glass*, 1950. From: Hyatt A. Mayor, 1950. 'Change and Permanence in Men's Clothes'. *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 8:9 (May 1950), pp. 262-269; Installation view of the V&A Costume Court, 1962 © Victoria and Albert Museum; Installation view of dresses of 1802 and 1804 (accession numbers unknown) mounted on mural titled 'The Painting Lesson' by Max and Daphne Brooker, at the Costume Museum, Bath © Fashion Museum, Bath & North East Somerset Council; Installation view of *Modesty to Mod*, 1967 © Royal Ontario Museum.

Clearly, clothing and the body are inter-related and so Eicher, Evenson and Lutz expand and define the zones suggested by Calefato above:

The art of dress involves several possibilities for the relationship between dress and the body. By definition, no item of dress can be completely independent of the human form; yet a continuum exists between those that most nearly merge with body form and those that greatly diverge from body form. One option merges the body and dress, with the dress emphasizing the shape of the body. This is called body dominant dress. [...] By contrast, the form of dress may diverge from the form of the body, essentially covering the body and becoming an independent for with the body subordinate to the dress placed on it. (2000: 323)

Clothing's proximity to the body suggests an elision between the two: 'Clothing, then, signals a human wearer, and in doing so is tied into our conceptions of dignity, personhood and bodily integrity' (Soper 2001: 18).

Curators at the institutions examined in this research seem to have been very aware of the ambiguous relationship between the body and fashion, and exhibitions featuring undergarments or revealing clothing demonstrate this particularly well. The Brooklyn Museum 1980 exhibition *Of Corsets* has already been discussed above, but it was preceded in 1939 by an exhibition entitled *Style Foundations*, which also displayed the material means by which women's bodies were changed for similar ends in different ways:

You breathe freely in modern corsets for modern corsets are not the old fashioned torture chamber affairs that caused ladies to faint and long treatises to be written about health. The rigid, unyielding corsets of our grandmothers and great-grandmothers have been replaced by soft garments with skilfully placed gores of elastic that give with every breath and motion of the body. [...] The cycle of fashion is back to wasp waists, hips and high rounded bosoms; but the superb health of the modern woman will not be touched at all. Women's waists will be two inches smaller and look as if they could be spanned with two hands; but they'll breathe as freely as ever. (Anonymous 1939d)

Here, historical fashion was placed in contrast to modern technology. Although the conception of the ideal body had not changed between Victorian times and the 1930s, the text tells us, the acceptable means by which this was achieved had.

At the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Richard Martin and Harold Koda collaborated on two exhibitions in 1994 and 1996, both of which traced the variations in the relationship between the body and clothing over time. *Waist Not* (1994), described

the physical and representational ideals of the human body through history. [...] But fashion's inconstant waist is not a sign for body subjugation. Rather, its changes and options suggest that fashion assumes a task of rendering more similar, at least in ideal form, the range of human bodies. (Martin and Koda 1994: n.p.)

Here, as at Brooklyn, the differences and similarities between the shaping of the body (and its ideal silhouette) were highlighted. Two years later, in the 1996 exhibition *Bare Witness*, Martin and Koda reiterated their position that fashion ultimately describes the body, even as it seeks to stifle it: 'In fact, *Bare Witness* is not about burlesque stripping. Rather, it is about demarcating the body and making discriminating choices about the body. It is about the power of the body, concealed under the civilized apparatus of clothing, to materialize' (Martin and Koda 1996: n.p.). Their argument is actively anti-Foucauldian, asserting the subversive power of corporeality in social discourse.

Similarly, the 2008 McCord exhibition *Reveal or Conceal?/Dévoiler ou dissimuler?*, curated by Cynthia Cooper, asked its audience 'to consider what this constant modification of the female body looks and feels like materially' (Matthews David 2010: 250). Unlike the Costume Institute exhibitions, however, which had a range of fully-articulated or abstracted mannequins as well as dressmaker dummies and torso forms, the curator and conservators at the McCord utilized 'invisible' forms to support the garments on display, taking the body out of the dresses entirely (**Fig. 6.9**). In her review of the exhibition, Alison Matthews David was positive about the



Fig. 6.9: Internal mannequins: Installation view of *Reveal or Conceal?* (2008). © McCord Museum.

decision to custom-make mannequins that stopped the interpretation of the body at the boundaries of the garment, emphasizing their emptiness:

The headless dummies are hollow and almost sculpted in black burlap. Their non-representational forms did not aim at any kind of false historicism. It seems appropriate for an exhibition on bodies and their social and physical malleability to craft forms individually rather than displaying the garments on 'one size fits all' mannequins. The result is an elegant presentation that allows the viewer to focus his full attention on the cut, construction, colour, and fabric of the garments on display, while keeping in mind that they were worn by flesh and blood people with very different body shapes and sizes.

(Matthews David 2010: 250)

However, given the exhibition's explicit focus on the body, an emphasis on the materiality of clothing was perhaps less successful than Matthews David suggests. A view of one section, 'Hemline History' (a clever allusion to the description of classical fashion history in Breward 1995: 1) demonstrates this. High hemlines expose the female leg, but in an exhibition where mannequins are not possessed of limbs, all that is exposed are awkwardly empty shoes, placed under an improbable floating dress (**Fig. 6.10**). The body was dematerialized: neither revealed nor concealed in this representation, and this arguably led to a loss of meaning. As Doris Langley Moore had written nearly fifty years earlier:

The relationship between a hat and a head, décolletage and a bosom, a ruffle and a wrist is so inalienable that it is a loss to be obliged to leave it to the imagination; for the fact is that it takes knowledge and training to be alert to mere suggestions. (Langley Moore 1961: 277)

This is just as true for male fashion as for female fashion; the McCord had previously featured male torsos (**Fig. 6.11**) to demonstrate the varied degrees of exposure in historical swimwear in *Clothes Make the Man/Lui: la mode au masculin* (2002-2003).

Meaning in fashion is derived from the proportion for clothing to body, and this is also true in the gallery space. To once again quote Doris Langley Moore:

After experimenting over many years with display techniques, I have found that dummies which look human, with just the degree of idealization that has always been a feature of successful fashion plates, serve our purpose much better than headless and armless or highly stylized models, and there are good reasons why they are more in favour with the public. Realism certainly ought



Fig. 6.10: Invisible bodies: Installation view of *Reveal or Conceal?* (2008), 'Hemline History' section. ©McCord Museum.



Fig. 6.11: Installation view of *Clothes Make the Man/Lui: la mode au masculine* (2003-2003), 'Exposure: On the Beach' section. © McCord Museum.

not to be as obtrusive as in waxwork portraiture, but those to whom costume is an unfamiliar subject will find little interest in a sleeve with deep ruffles unless it is set off by an arm, or in a man's starched neckcloth and collar without the semblance of a neck. (Langley Moore 1969: 1)

Picturing a person is equivalent to picturing their clothing and vice versa, but problematically, the corporeal, imaginary, and pictorial coincide, as Cavallaro and Warwick pointed out:

No representation is natural, and representations of the body, whether clothed or unclothed, are no exception. However, exposing the artificial quality of the representation becomes especially problematic when it comes to dealing with the body, owing to a tendency to take corporeal existence somewhat for granted, as a natural attribute or possession. It could be argued that this difficulty is further exacerbated by the ambivalence of the subject's relation to its body, simply on account of the fact that it both is and has a body. When the body in question is clothed, and hence defined by a symbolic intersubjective casing, denaturalization turns into a harder task still, as it is arduous to determine to what extent dress contributes to, or indeed confirms, the body's status as a disembodied representation, and to what extent dress, as a material phenomenon in its own right, reinforces a view of the body as an irreducibly corporeal dimension. (2001: 4)

Because clothing is so critical to the experience of the body, even clothing without a body is not always lifeless: the 1967 Royal Ontario Museum exhibition *Modesty to Mod* featured very animated uninhabited clothing (**Fig. 6.12**), articulated not according to the construction of the clothing (by following seams and fabric shapes, for example), but according to human anatomy (knees and elbows). On the other hand, even in the absence of clothing, cultural norms maintain an expectation of dress, so that, as Anne Hollander says, a nude in art – a two-dimensional representation of a naked body – is judged against a standard, dressed fleshy body.

It can be shown that the rendering of the nude in art usually derives from the current form in which the clothed figure is conceived. This correlation in turn demonstrates that both the perception and the self-perception of nudity are dependent on a sense of clothing – and of clothing understood through the medium of a visual convention. (1993: xiii)

The extent to which visuality informs the material experience or expectation of the dressed body must therefore be investigated.



Fig. 6.12: Clothing comes alive:
Installation view of *Modesty to
Mod* (1967) © Royal Ontario
Museum.

Materializing the Body

Neither naked nor dressed bodies are present in museum galleries of fashion history; instead, they are replaced with simulacra, which are a third category of body. Whether invisible, abstracted, or fully articulated and accessorized, the substituted bodies of mannequins in galleries frame the fashion on display in different ways. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to discuss the conservational merits of different types of mannequin construction, the literature of textile conservation does provide rich source material on the addition of corporeality to clothes with the use of mannequins.

By far the greatest proportion of mannequin-related literature for museums is of the how-to genre. Recognizing that most museums have very limited budgets and resources, the authors present options for mannequin construction or adaptation that maximally prevent damage to the objects on display and provide flexibility of interpretation (*cf.*: Clearwater 1980). However, even conservators admit that a purely practical approach does not necessarily result in a satisfactory display: ‘As we continue to examine social issues using costume collections we need to consider if we want to use mannequins not only as a form to place garments on [*sic*] but also a figure that supports the interpretation of the exhibition’ (Kruckeberg 1990: 93). These two priorities can conflict, and Costume Institute conservator Christine Paulocik felt it necessary to highlight the importance of good communication between the staff members who represent these different interest groups: ‘Ideally the mounting of costume should be a collaborative effort between the curator, dresser and conservator’ (Paulocik 1997: 26). Ultimately, the interpretive concerns must take priority to fulfil

the educational role of the museum (see Chapter 2), and mannequins can provide context as well as support. This can be a truly daunting task, and the choices available to the curator and conservator are often unsatisfactory: ‘Creating an illusion of body and context is a task which may face many museum workers in the course of their professional career’ (Ginsburg 1973: 50).

The following quote from a very early article on the display of clothing in museums is written in a florid style, but accurately reflects the enormity of the design challenges facing museum workers:

Clothes are loveliest when worn [...] Bereft of movement the loveliness vanishes and left is the depressing inertness of vacated clothes. To these the museum curator is heir; all his showmanship must be summoned to animate the empty costumes and enhance their embroidered beauties. Is there nothing to do but use those dreadful lay figures of wood and cloth and waxen face and arm? [...] But we who have seen them row on row in glass cases blush for shame at the showmanship that devised them. Our sensitive beings shudder at their too, too solid shape and everlasting smile. [...] There seemed to be no alternative to the hasty purchase of many lay figures, such as confound the windows of the large stores. It was appalling to think of so many disgustingly pink figures, with long-lashed eyes and coy expressions. Should they be half-busts or full figures, with heads or gruesome decapitated trunks ending in unnaturally turned wood? The lower extremities offered a nauseating choice between intricate wire cages and tri-footed wooden pedestals, too elegant in their turning and abominably comic in their splay-footed hat-stand posture. I sickened at the sight of them. (Thomas²³ 1935: 1-3)

Examples of such mis-matched ‘decapitated trunks’ and splay-footed hat-stands’ can be seen throughout the archival photographs of past exhibitions at the institutions under consideration here (**Fig. 6.13**).

²³ Trevor Thomas went on to work at Leicester Museum (now New Walk Museum) and was responsible for acquiring the outstanding collection of German Expressionist art that is one of the present-day highlights of the gallery.



Fig. 6.13: Decapitated hat stands: Installation view of a special exhibition of textiles, 1915-16, from: *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 11:1 (January 1916), p. 23; Installation view of *Soierie Française* (1972) © Royal Ontario Museum.

It was due to the dissatisfaction with such display alternatives that museum curators and conservators began to collaborate with mannequin firms to develop dummies that would better reflect museally-desirable bodies. In 1980, Stella Blum, curator at the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, provided technical assistance to Wacoal Corporation for their historical fashion mannequins, and Brooklyn Museum costume curator Elizabeth Ann Coleman worked with Goldsmiths to develop special mannequins for the 1989-1990 exhibition *Opulent Era*; both (Fig. 6.14) were later marketed to other museums and collections (Wacoal n.d.; Goldsmiths n.d.). Mannequins with corseted torso shapes developed by Derek Ryman for the V&A's 1983 redisplayed Costume Court were likewise used in other museums (Goldthorpe 1985: 189). While the curatorial aim as set out in the literature was to reflect the silhouettes of the garments' original wearers, the reality shows that the resulting mannequin's body is a chimera of conservational and curatorial priorities, a hybrid of human, dress, and history, very distant from the disappeared human body that once inhabited the clothes on display.

This may be the most effective means of display, however. In philosophy, the ephemerality of the body causes anxiety and distaste, as sociologist Chris Shilling argues:

[...] value is attached to the living, acting body, and old age brings with it for most classes a decline in the symbolic value of the body. Consequently, it should not be surprising if the prospect of dying makes modern individuals particularly anxious. For the individual whose self-identity has become closely connected to their body, death is disturbing partly because it represents an end to value in a world geared towards the accumulation of value. (1993: 186)

This is probably why most museum exhibits tend to generalize human value through the synecdoche of culture at large – too much personal information tends to be morbid, as the value of the body remains only in what amounts to relics (see Chapter

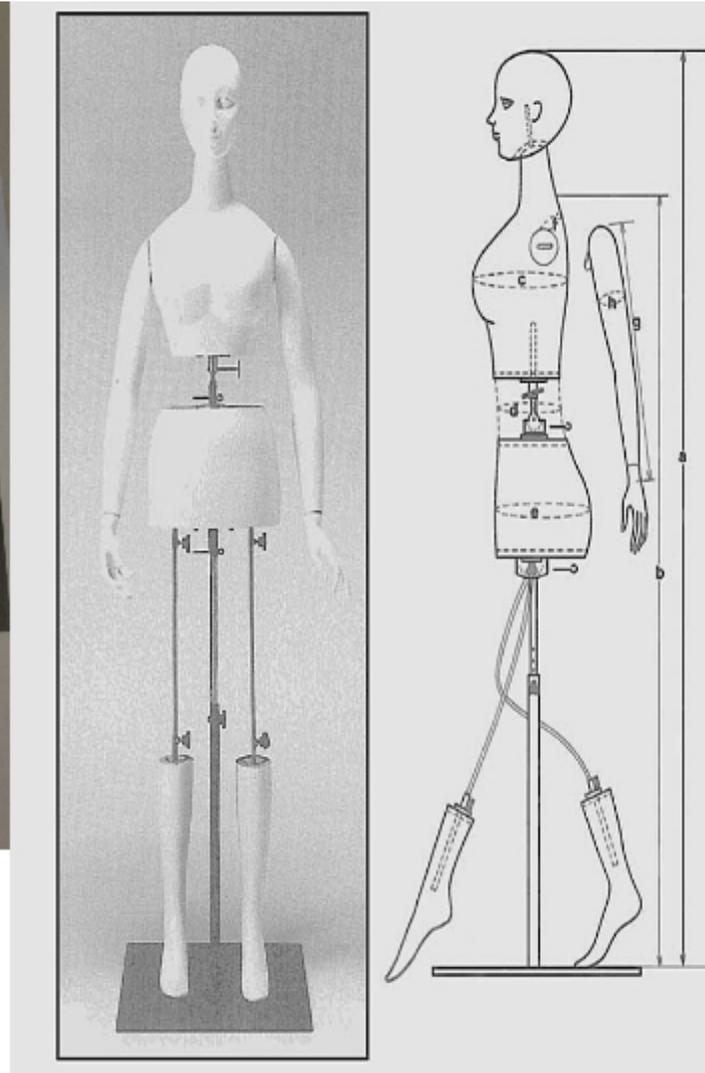
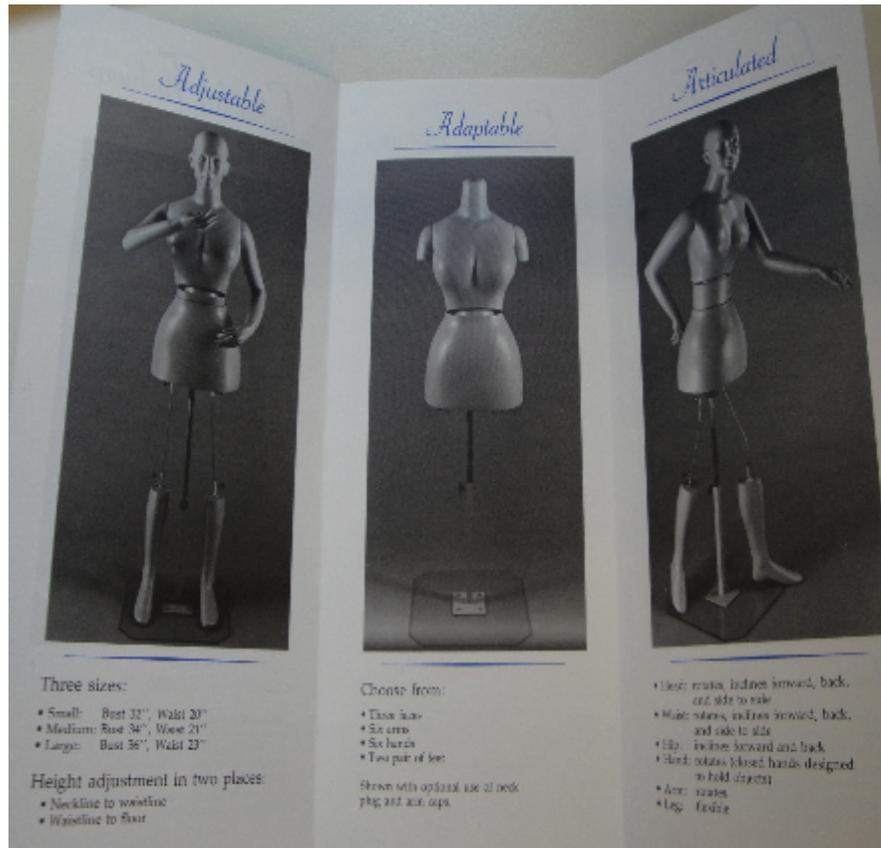


Fig. 6.14: Museum-commissioned mannequins: © Goldsmiths Ltd. (no longer in production); © Wacoal Corporation (still in production).

7). Interestingly, writers on fashion history have identified this as popular with museum audiences:

When mounting a costume display there is always the problem of making the clothes come alive in a way that is reminiscent of their wearers. Although certain types of garment are seen as decorative objects in their own right most of the clothes are viewed by the public as having been worn by their ancestors, and they like to see them shown in a way that suggests there is a body underneath rather than a headless stand. (Tarrant 1983: 107)

However emotionally effective, realism in a mannequin can go too far to become prescriptive, especially if the face is recognizable. Male mannequins used for nearly thirty years at the V&A (documented in photographs and on film from 1934 to 1962) were modelled on historical personages such as the monarchs Charles I and George VI (**Fig. 6.15**); doubtless, they were meant to easily recall an era to the minds of audiences, in a period when national history was divided into reigns. However, such a display technique risks the audiences assuming that the garments worn by these lifelike dummies were also worn by their historical counterparts. When this is actually the case, as in the Fashion Museum's *Women of Style* (2000) exhibition, where the wardrobe of Dame Margot Fonteyn was displayed on mannequins modelled after the famed ballerina, the effect is unnervingly surreal – a crowd of surrogate Margot Fonteyns represented different periods of a single woman's real life (**Fig. 6.16**). The garments on display became relics in a very direct sense when the mannequins used seemed to be effigies. This approach is rather too obvious and might even be ineffective for evoking a sense of the original wearer: 'Presence is *not* the result of metaphorically stuffing up absences with everything you can lay your hands on. It can at best be *kindled* by metonymically *presenting* absences' (Runia 2006b: 309).

A headless or featureless mannequin is therefore representative of a cerebral, or at least subtle, approach to fashion history, and this is probably another reason why



FROM THE V. AND A. EXHIBITION OF MALE DRESS : ENGLISH, SECOND QUARTER OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.

AN ENGLISH SUIT, 1765-70 ; OF WOOLLEN CLOTH, TRIMMED WITH GILT BRAID, PRESENTED BY LADY SPICKERNELL.

THE UNIFORM OF A COLONIAL GOVERNOR : ENGLISH, c. 1816, WOOL EMBROIDERED, WITH A SILK EMBROIDERED WAISTCOAT.

Fig. 6.15: Heroes of history: mannequins, built in 1934 or earlier, made to resemble James I and George IV, contrasted with more modern headless mannequin. From: *Illustrated London News*, October 11, 1947, p. 404.



Fig. 6.16: Multiple Margot Fonteyns: installation view and detail from *Women of Style* (2000), Fashion Museum, Bath. © Fashion Museum, Bath & North East Somerset Council.

dress has been devalued in museums – fashion’s close links with the body, when displayed, evoke embodied personal memories that are nostalgic, not the rational critical distance of historical discipline (Shaw and Chase 1989). As Cavallaro and Warwick point out, this also undermines the possibility of a single narrative:

No garment incarnates unproblematically a specific symbolic content, instantly recognizable and decodable. Individual and collective responses to clothes, therefore, cannot be woven on one single narrative, but rather result from the coalescence of fragmentary and frequently conflicting elements, deriving from many disparate mental images and corresponding fictive permutations. (2001: 47)

The widely varied interpretations that result from incorporated memories threaten the intellectual authority of the museum. Yet the very relatability of fashion, because of its universal presence in society, can make the work of the museum to interpret it easier.

Envisioning the Body

The discourse of embodiment is a selfish one; each bodily experience is subjective and non-generalisable (Schilder 1935). The experience of other bodies must therefore be only partial, constructed through fragmentary sensory input. It is vision which provides subjects with the experience of subjectivity: the appropriate distance necessary for the self-awareness of both body and world which was described above by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Marjorie O’Loughlin, for example, argues that ‘for Merleau-Ponty vision encompasses tactility – it merely reveals what touch already knows’ (2006: 37). Thus, vision is the primary supplementary or prosthetic sense with which bodies can know the experience of other bodies. Yet the limitations of this single sense reveal the distance between subjects, and O’Loughlin writes about how ocularcentric discourse results in a strange and unusual self-subjective distancing: ‘a kind of body-objectification, which is perhaps rather odd since in everyday life people

do not normally experience their bodies as objects' (2006: 57). That is, if another can be an object of scrutiny, so can the one doing the scrutinizing. As soon as bodies are externalized, their essential corporeality removed, the relational gap between body and world widens, and bodies can become commodities (see above and **Figs. 6.4 and 6.7**).

Mark Pluciennik explains how this separation of the body from its senses persists even in contexts where materiality might be expected to rule:

The oft-noted privileging of the visual above other senses would seem to be an outcome of the nature of the modern archaeological or museum encounter (the smell, sound and the touch of the decayed or preserved are clearly ephemerally 'of the present', out of context or unavailable; taste is often unadvisable!) coupled with a long-lasting western philosophical and scientific tradition of visual metaphor. (2002: 174)

Artefacts and bodies deprived of their vitality seem like soulless rationalizations.

Elizabeth Wilson writes of 'the uncanniness of the museum display, with clothes suspended in a kind of rigor mortis, offered a seductive example of "hallucinatory euphoria," a glimpse into a dystopia of depthless colours and inhuman brightness, a veritable imitation of life' (1993: 15). In the museum, cultural discourse and norms of embodiment, which would have limited power if they relied on language alone, are distilled and exuded into external, non-living models of bodies. As Patrizia Calefato notes, 'The fashion system [...] constructs stereotypes of female beauty through the symbolic economy of the model' (2004: 58). Eerie and distant though they may be, these plaster mannequins and painted anatomies are visual evidence for the constructed cultural expectations of fleshy life: 'The life-size mannequin constitutes a composite portrait that is representative of the majority' (Parrot 1982: 53). Vision, one of the body's senses (see above), can aid in the understanding of these surrogates

deprived of their senses – the mute, bounded representations of bodies in art, wardrobes, stores and museums (Petrov 2011).

Conclusion: The Body and Time

Bodies, unless they are the ghostly or surrogate metaphorical bodies discussed in the previous section, are temporal. They age, die, and disappear, and with them, so do their embodied experiences. To quote Kate Soper:

Much of our clothing and bodily adornment will outlast us, sometimes by many years, thus escaping the relatively speedy post mortem decomposition of our fleshly selves; and it is arguably this combination of proximity with the organic body and alterity from it that is responsible for the poignancy of lost or no longer needed clothing. (Soper 2001: 22)

How, then, can a museum measure, define, explain, or even approach the traces of bodies no longer present, no longer able to enact their will upon the cultural world?

The historian's usual tools apply here, and the materiality of the museum experience complements these so that an exhibition sensitive to empathic embodiment can be created. As mentioned above, attention to context is critical:

The body pervades cultural representations throughout history. Yet its endurance should not be conducive to facile assumptions about the body's timeless or transhistorical status. In fact, bodies are always historically situated, and hence sites of ideological contestation. For one thing, the production and preservation of cultures rest largely on the socio-political definition of proper and improper bodies. (Cavallaro and Warwick 2001: 6)

This chapter has presented numerous examples of fashion history exhibitions that have documented and defined physical and social bodies. The history of the body and bodily techniques, both prescriptive and descriptive, illuminates the actions of cultural discourse: the convention of displaying historical fashion in chronological order visually demonstrates the effects of social structures across time on the body underneath.

The instability of body knowledge may be the reason why Western epistemology has had a negative bias against embodiment. Soper writes of

[...] the relative philosophical neglect of clothing. Or perhaps repression is the apter term: for I think we have to relate this neglect ultimately to the Platonist emphasis in the Western philosophical tradition – that is, to its abstraction and prioritization of the mental, the rational and the spiritual over the corporeal, the material, and the sensual, and the related tendency to define what is distinctive to human being in terms of the possession of mind or soul rather than by reference to embodied existence. (2001: 15)

Clothing, as has been argued, is an essential element of the body, and attitude towards it is reflective also of attitude toward corporeal existence. Examining the museum as a discursive institution that constructs concepts of valued bodily techniques can thus shed light not on the apparent meaning of the objects held within for their original owners, but on the deeper and more fundamental attitudes toward the body held by contemporary society.

The fashion and textile historian Joanne Entwistle has criticized Foucauldian notions of discourse for what she perceives as Foucault's insufficient attention to corporeality, writing:

Further problems arise from Foucault's rather ambivalent notion of the body: on the one hand, his bio-politics would appear to construct the body as a concrete, material entity, manipulated by institutions and practices; on the other hand, his focus on discourse seems to produce a notion of the body which has no materiality outside of the representation. [...] The body cannot be at one and the same time both a material object outside of language and a solely linguistic construction. (2001: 42)

However, Entwistle misses the value in Foucault's historical focus, almost unique among theorists of the body in culture. A living embodied body is certainly material; yet, as experienced through the lens of history, it has limited materiality, and has only representational symbolism in the present. As Albano writes:

This tension between presence and absence allows clothes to occupy the subliminal mythological place described by Baudrillard for antiques, of being

both real and a phantom of reality. Such traces, memories of use and belonging, are what arguably authenticate biographical relics, rendering them 'true' to the biographical subject, or rather to the cultural relationship that is recognized between the subject and the object. (Albano 2007: 20-21)

Representations can stand for a variety of different concerns, and the museum can choose to represent various relationships between the subject and the object. Indeed, this is reflected in the array of approaches to the body and to dress across exhibitions of fashion history.

The preoccupation with creating an illusion of life in exhibitions of historical fashion, discussed throughout this chapter, suggests an accompanying anxiety about death and decay. And as historical fashion makes the passage of time evident through its obvious obsolescence, curators have the difficult task to make it appear relevant and vital. The following chapter will discuss the historicity of historical fashion, and the tensions between past and present in the curation of historical fashion.

7. The Way of All Flesh: Representing the Pastness of

Historical Fashion

What is the source of this uneasiness and ambiguity, this sense that clothes have a life of their own? Clothes without a wearer, whether on a secondhand stall, in a glass case, or merely a lover's garments strewn on the floor, can affect us unpleasantly, as if a snake had shed its skin.
Elizabeth Wilson (2010: 2)

Whereas the previous chapter suggested that introducing 'liveliness' to gallery spaces was part of a strategy to suggest the embodied practices of wearing fashion, this chapter analyses the terms of this discourse from a different perspective. The curatorial preoccupation with endowing a sense of life, it is argued, also reveals that fashion in a museum has the capacity to mark of the passage of time through its innate processes of obsolescence and decay. This chapter therefore elaborates on the material discussed in the previous chapter, as well as referring back to the discussion of fashionable time in museum displays in Chapter 4. As that chapter argued, fashion, when displayed in a museum, is no longer an active part of the commodity time stream. In terms of its existence on the open market as a commodity, once it is no longer for sale or in use, it becomes obsolete. However, its presence in a museum suggests that apart from economic value, the fashion object has gathered nostalgic value: it was collected by the museum and now stands as a monument of times and people past. Its value is now rather as a witness to history and these are the terms in which it is discussed. Therefore, inspired by the philosophical discussions about the nature of museums by French literature critic Didier Maleuvre (1999) and the pioneering work of Scandinavian media historian Mark Sandberg (2003) in the museal staging of historical subjectivity, this chapter also investigates what is

historical about historical fashion, and how this is materially and visually expressed in exhibitions.

It is important to point out that this chapter does not make claims about the nature of history itself; rather, it seeks to describe how different concepts of history and the past have been articulated in museum exhibitions of historical fashion. Because historical fashion is defined oppositionally as not modern (see Introduction), it belongs to the historical tradition of dividing time into ‘here and now’ and ‘then and elsewhere’ (Ricoeur 2004: 308); this distinction means that historical fashion’s quality of being of the past is an important part of its ontology. The analysis in this chapter takes for granted the existence of historical consciousness – ‘a sense of belonging to a succession of past and future generations as well as to a present community and society’ (Glassberg 1987: 958) – and seeks a pattern amongst various imaginings of the past and of history in the use of historical fashion. The museum insists on its authority to tell stories about the past because of the fact that it has historical collections (**Fig. 7.1**): its artefacts are presented as documentary. The ways in which these objects are combined and interpreted in display, however, reflects very different historical narratives and very different relationships between the past and the present. In this chapter, it is argued that positioning fashion as a historical object that can represent the passage of time simultaneously highlights the impermanence of the cultural processes that produced it and of the human subjects that wore it; the discomfort with decay and disrepair occasioned by viewing historical fashion is here theorized as being the result of an encounter with the ‘uncanny’.



Fig. 7.1: Installation photographs of 'Behind the Scenes', visible storage at the Fashion Museum, Bath. © Fashion Museum, Bath & North East Somerset Council.

Deathliness and Display

The previous chapter suggested that a common critique of fashion in museums is that the costumes on display are not sufficiently lively. Indeed, the feminist fashion scholar Elizabeth Wilson wrote in the first lines of her classic book *Adorned in Dreams*:

There is something eerie about a museum of costume. A dusty silence holds still the old gowns in glass cabinets. In the aquatic half light (to preserve the fragile stuffs) the deserted gallery seems haunted. The living observer moves, with a sense of mounting panic, through a world of the dead. (Wilson 2010: 1)

In this quotation, as well as the one presented at the beginning of this chapter, Wilson contends that it is the deathliness suggested by unoccupied clothing that makes it uncanny; no longer true to the way in which it is corporeally experienced in everyday life, fashion as displayed in a museum is inauthentic to its fashionable life. Metaphors used by other commentators on the topic of fashion museums echo the sense that fashion is meant to be part of everyday life – worn by a living body, for example – and that to display it on a mannequin in a glass case is akin to the practice of taxidermy (Glynn 1980: 7) or to confining fish to an aquarium (Museums Correspondent 1963: 13). Clothing in a wardrobe may be worn again, but never once it is in a museum collection²⁴. Of the 1983 V&A Costume Court re-display discussed in some detail in the previous chapter, Stella Mary Newton wrote:

What used to be glaring (and injurious) daylight has been replaced by a delicate twilight, immensely more becoming to our foremothers and fathers who are now gathered in an atmosphere of pensive suspension. Waiting, one can now almost imagine, in a silent assembly, not in Dante's Purgatory but in the antechambers of some assuredly blessed abode. (Newton *et al* 1984: 98)

While not dead as such, the resulting limbo state is only a shadowy reflection of the full potential of fashion outside the museum context. Alienated from its most familiar

²⁴ Not since the ICOM guidelines expressly forbade the wearing of historical costume for display, see previous chapter.

state, fashion as framed in a museum case seems uncanny (for a discussion of the uncanny, see Royle 2003).

Indeed, this sense of uncanniness is related to the dissatisfaction with the nature of museum display generally present ever since the very inception of the museum as such, as Didier Maleuvre writes:

The criticism levelled at the museum centred on the question of authenticity: the museum endangers artistic and cultural authenticity by removing artworks and artefacts from their original locations and placing them in galleries where they can only be gawked at, and never, so to speak, lived with. (Maleuvre 1999: 1)

Museums were, according to Maleuvre, blamed for ‘loss of context, loss of cultural meaning, destruction of a direct connection with life, promotion of an aesthetically alienated mode of observation, instigation of a passive attitude toward the past and of a debilitating mood of nostalgia’ (1999: 1). It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to debate in depth the ethical consequences of this, assuming that it is indeed true.

However, Maleuvre undoubtedly makes a compelling point about the museum’s invention of new mental and bodily techniques for encountering time: setting objects in a new representational context and positioning the audience as viewers of a distant past (see below), not as participants in a continuous present. He does not, however, explain why such encounters might have had such a viscerally unsettling effect on observers such as Elizabeth Wilson.

One can begin to seek a possible answer as to why this may be so in phenomenology, and in particular in the philosophical writing of Martin Heidegger. In division II of his seminal work, *Being and Time*, he discusses the nature of history, and more importantly, the relationship of history to mortality. Heidegger actually tackles the paradox of museums containing objects of the past, but also of the present:

Howsoever the historical, as that which is past, is understood to be related to the 'present' in the sense of what is actual 'now' and 'today', and to be related to it, either positively or privatively, in such a way as to have effects upon it. Thus 'the past' has a remarkable double meaning; the past belongs ir retrievably to an earlier time; it belonged to the events of that time; and in spite of that, it can still be present-at-hand 'now' – for instance, the remains of a Greek temple. With the temple, a 'bit of the past' is still 'in the present'. (1967: 430)

In the pages that follow, Heidegger expounds further on the ways in which antiquities demonstrate that things from the past but still present (as in a museum collection) are so because of their belonging to the world, which is temporal, and their connection to the world and the existence of a past Dasein (a Being-in-the-world), no longer present. An old object, such as one in a museum, is historical insofar as it relates to a past Dasein's experiences. He concludes that 'indeed history is neither the connectedness of motions in the alterations of Objects, nor a free-floating sequence of Experiences which 'subjects' have had' (1969: 440). Instead, the historical object within a historical narrative documents the Dasein's existence: 'Remains, monuments and records that are still present-at-hand, are possible 'material' for the concrete disclosure of the Dasein which has-been-there' (1969: 446).

Within a museum, the object can also be seen as memorializing the Dasein's passing. In this way, museum objects, particularly fashion, which are so intimately linked to the corporeality of a past Dasein, have the potential to make current viewers feel uncomfortable because they recognize the evidence of mortality (deathliness) – the possibility that their presence, too, will only be evident through the things they interacted with. In such a reading of Heidegger, then, historicity and pastness (the qualities of being historical and of the past) are related to deathliness. The sudden consciousness of being in history, as any Dasein is, leads to the uncanny effect of the presentiment of death (Royle 2003: 86) described by Wilson, above.

Although the innovation of the fashion system depends on what Ingrid Loschek calls ‘creative destruction’ (2009: 1), the annihilation of the old is not acceptable in a museum context. While an antique object is recognizable as such by signs of wear (Rosenstein 1987: 399), the wear also signifies decay, something the museum strives to impede. Conservation practice regularly erases or masks the signs of deterioration (Paulocik 1997), signs which outside the museum gallery might be prized as the patina of age. This is not only the case for items that will truly suffer material damage from the strain of handling, gravity, and light as a result of going on display; there are, sadly, whole classes of fashionable wear which, due to their physical composition of unstable materials, are decomposing rapidly even in storage (Palmer 2008a: 58; see also Chapter 4). Rather, this is a sign of a greater discomfort with the ultimate implication of the passage of time: death.

Such an understanding of museum objects suggests that galleries and stores of fashion in museums contain and preserve the relics of people who once lived; furthermore, the clothes themselves are reliquaries for the traces of the bodies that once inhabited them. Indeed, this seems to be borne out in some of the writing on fashion: in a 1947 essay, for example, noted fashion historian Dr C. Willett Cunnington suggested that the predominant means by which fashion was studied and described were the aesthetic and the historical, ‘preoccupied with the exact dates of specimens and what notable people wore them’ (Cunnington 1947: 125). In a 1977 article titled ‘Costume as History’, Melinda Young Frye corroborated this view, noting that clothing ‘entered the collections of American museums during the last half of the 19th [sic] century, when it was accepted primarily for its historical association with famous persons – its

“relic” value, as it was then termed’ (1977: 38). Indeed, writing on the relevance of the study of fashion to history reveals this obsession with the aura of the person who wore the clothing originally:

A historian who is trying to form in his mind a clear picture of people in the period he has chosen for study may usefully supplement contemporary descriptions of what men and women said and did and looked like by seeking out their painted or sculptured [*sic*] portraits. But while portraits – and even photographs too - will show how people wished to appear, only a costume collection carefully displayed can demonstrate three-dimensionally the actual appearance of historical characters. (Nevinson 1971: 38)

The author of this piece, writing for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, seems to believe that clothing tells a truth unmediated by forms of historical recording; that because it was worn next to the actual physical body of a long-dead historical person, it can transmit that corporeality even to the present day. This sort of fetishism is frequently seen as embarrassingly specific by scholars who, throughout the twentieth century, called for more objective contextualization for fashion. Dr Cunnington himself spoke archly of the implications of this approach:

It is, no doubt, of some sentimental interest to know that a particular pair of stays was once worn by Queen Anne, but unless we know that she was a typical woman of her epoch and not exceptional, her stays will tell us very little about the general run of stays and even less about the general run of women of that time. In fact, the specimen only tells us one thing, the approximate size of Queen Anne’s waist, and –really – does that matter very much? Moreover there is the horrid possibility that they were not Queen Anne’s stays at all. (Cunnington 1947: 125)

Even in his disapproval, however, Dr Cunnington also acknowledged that the identity of the original wearer was critically important for the ontic authenticity of the garment under study.

Although displays of fashion do often take the form of anonymised parades of generalized ‘styles’, purporting to objectively illustrate cultural and social developments (see below), often the most prized items on display are those where one can not only see the item of clothing, but also other “evidence” of the individual

wearing the self-same clothing. The well-illustrated provenance of the item serves as proof of its historicity. One example of this is the V&A's British Galleries display of the embroidered seventeenth-century jacket belonging to Margaret Layton alongside a portrait of her wearing it (**Fig. 7.2**). Unlike the displays discussed in Chapter 6, which were created to enact the accompanying visual media, the portrait of Margaret Layton is indexical of the historical truth of the jacket on display. Whereas in **Fig. 6.5** the museal display imitates the reality portrayed in the painting displayed above it, the British Galleries display demonstrates rather the veracity of the portrait as a historical document, which accurately captured the material reality of the jacket. Margaret Layton, who died in 1641, is not revived in this display: rather, her jacket is shown as being convincingly and irrevocably of the past, and having belonged to a specific individual who once lived.

Historical Distance

Museums have developed techniques for creating relationships between themselves, their visitors, and their collections, which rely on hierarchies of authority, but also on the intellectual and physical perception of historical distance. Mark Salber Phillips writes:

Often called objectivity, distance is assumed to be a function of temporality, a clarity of vision that comes with the passage of time. This view of historical distance, however, is only a starting point, since it must be evident that every history faces the task of positioning its audience in relation to a past. (Salber Phillips 2003: 438)

In the case of museums, the past is portrayed as embodied within the artefacts on display. The fascinating paradox is that the artefacts ontologically remain of the past, though they are optically contained in a modern setting; although encountered with present-day sensibility, the garments are nevertheless positioned as being essentially



Fig. 7.2: Early 17th-century woman's jacket (T.228-1994), shown being worn in the *Portrait of Margaret Layton* (E.214-1994), attributed to Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger and displayed alongside it in the British Galleries at the V&A. © Victoria and Albert Museum.

historical. Assuming that visitors view the displays with a certain amount of historical awareness, the challenge, then, is to develop means by which this gap in temporalities can be traversed.

An excellent example of this comes from a 1952 Pathé newsreel about an exhibition of historic menswear in the V&A. The clip opens with a pan of the façade of the building, and the narration begins:

If you've the vision, you'll look on the Victoria and Albert Museum as something more than a treasure house of the past; certainly as more than just a doorway to outworn ideas, for it enables you to match your own streamlined century to what has gone before – to see progress against a background of romance. (Pathé 1952)

The observer, it is suggested, requires a certain level of knowledge and imagination to bridge the distance between present and the past and insight to recognize the valuable information held within. The clip proceeds to show historian and curator James Laver examining a series of male mannequins that have been taken out of their glass cases (these stand empty in the background). Laver touches and adjusts the clothing on nearly every model before walking out of the frame (**Fig. 7.3**) as the narration highlights the difference between the time of the models on display and the current moment; unlike in **Fig. 6.7**, where the image is staged to show a moment of physical comparison between the observer's self and the dressed mannequin, Laver's behaviour and the narration demonstrate a detached aesthetic expertise, coolly evaluating the relics of bygone times from a position in the present. The historical positioning of the observer in this instance is that of distinction and difference; as Lehmann points out, to focus on the object as a garment of historical interest is to highlight its strangeness and peculiarity, to define it as 'unconnected to our own experience and inaccessible to our sensibility' (1999: 300). Indeed, Mark Salber Phillips reviews the long tradition in the arts where distance has been seen as



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Fig. 7.3: Three stills from 'Pathé Pictorial Technicolor Supplement - Men about Town', 1952, showing James Laver examining mannequins at the V&A. © British Pathé Ltd.

particularly critical for aesthetic experience (Phillips 2003: 439). The filmed museum encounter serves to further highlight the difference between here-and-now and there-and-then.

Laver's movement, and the immobility of the mannequins also highlights their uncanny pastness: present to be seen, but unmovingly distant. A quotation from Elizabeth Edwards about photographs may be usefully applied here:

Stillness invites evocation, contemplation and a certain formation of affective memory in a way that film and video, with their temporal naturalism and realistic narrative sequence, cannot. As both Christian Metz and Barthes argue in their different ways, film suggests 'being there' in its temporal immersion, whereas photographs speak to 'having been there': they are fragmentary and irreducibly of the past or of death itself. (Edwards 199: 226)

It is the lifeless motionlessness of the dressed mannequins, as contrasted with the animation of the onlooker that endows them with their status as historical objects.

Likewise, this is also shown in another Pathé newsreel from 1955, set in the first incarnation of Doris Langley Moore's Costume Museum at Eridge Castle, Kent. Here, too, costumes on realistic mannequins were displayed openly (not behind glass) so that the physical encounter between model and observer was unmediated. The clip humorously plays with this notion by setting up a scenario wherein a live model dressed in a historical costume stands still alongside the mannequins. When two women visitors to the museum approach her, she moves and surprises them (**Fig. 7.4**). The humour in this scenario arises from the disruption to the distance expected of museum objects and the past they represent. The situation is comic because it is absurd: the people of the past are not available to the present, and the breaking of this convention is not only exceptional, but even unbelievable.



Fig. 7.4: Still from 'Ancient Models', 1955, showing two women surprised by a live model among mannequins at Eridge Castle in Kent (the predecessor of the Fashion Museum in Bath). © British Pathé Ltd.

The following quotation from Frank Ankersmit encapsulates the belief system that positions subjects and objects in this way:

Historical experience involves, in the first place, a Gestalt-switch from a timeless present into a world consisting of things past and present. This gives us the discovery of the past as a reality that has somehow ‘broken off’ from a timeless present. This is ‘the moment of loss’. But at the same time historical experience aims at a recovery of the past by transcending again the barriers between past and present. [...] The sublimity of historical experience originates from this paradoxical union of the feelings of loss and love, that is, of the combination of pain and pleasure in how we relate to the past.

(Ankersmit 2005: 9)

In this way, the museum becomes a place of wish-fulfilment, where the fact of absence is made present only insofar as to make it more poignant; to go any further, as in the Eridge Castle pantomime of bringing the past to life, breaks down the willing suspension of disbelief into comic absurdity.

However, the desire to make the historically-distant past present remains, and here, the artefact in the gallery can play an important role. Rather than crude pantomimes, museums have traditionally used poetic techniques to evoke a connection with the past. In a case study of the early arrangement of the Cluny Museum in Paris, historian Stephen Bann characterizes two of these: metonymy and synecdoche (1978). While both divide the historical past into chronological periods, the objects serve rather different purposes. In the metonymical approach, Bann argues, ‘Within each “century” set, the “specimen” fragment would represent metonymically the greater whole from which it had been detached [...] without implying reference to any organic totality’ (Bann 1978: 257-258). In the other approach, by contrast, ‘each object held a synecdochic charge: each object gave access to the milieu and the living historical characters with whom it had once been identified, through a process that was ultimately grounded in the myth of the resurrection of the past’ (Bann 1978: 259). In the former system, the object is a specimen of or a monument to the past (in

Runia's view, it also highlights the loss, absence, and fragmentation of the past: 2006a); in the latter, the object serves as a relic of lived history. The arrangement of artefacts in a gallery and their relationship to each other also reflects the subjective positioning of the past. As Eelco Runia suggests, 'the past does not exist independently of the historian' (2006b: 306); it is written by historians, imagined and/or remembered by people, and built by museums. In his view, the translation of time into space allows the absence to become, if not present, then at least continuous with presence, without a dramatic rift between past and present (Runia 2006a: 14-15).

Timeframes and Time Machines

The physical arrangement of historical fashion within museum galleries suggested the possibility of time travel. The 1952 Pathé newsreel cited earlier had a narration that suggested this: 'To stroll with James Laver, the author, down centuries of men's fashions, is to quicken your understanding of the past' (Pathé 1952). While Laver was able to touch the items on display, something that would certainly not have been possible for the average museum visitor, his journey through museum space and, simultaneously, chronological time, was typical. Moreover, certain authors have suggested such a notion creates a powerful psychological effect:

'Presence', in my view, is 'being in touch' – either literally or figuratively – with people, things, events, and feelings that made you into the person you are. It is a desire to share in the awesome reality of people, things, events, and feelings, coupled to a vertiginous urge to taste the fact that awesomely real people, things, events, and feelings can awesomely suddenly cease to exist. (Runia 2006a: 5)

While the importance of mortality to the notion of historical and museal presence was discussed above, in this section I wish to additionally highlight the evolutionary aspect of presence that Runia's quotation suggests. In his view, which seems to be phenomenological insofar as it is centred on individual sensory experience, history

must culminate in the personal and present-day. This section, therefore, will discuss how the museums researched as part of this thesis have deployed visual conventions to position their audiences in relation to the past in this way.

While the success of individual museums at communicating this notion effectively to their audiences is debated (Penny 2002; Noordegraaf 2004), few writers on museology argue with Tony Bennett's assertion that museum space²⁵ was fundamentally conceived of as a means of intellectual time travel: 'the museum visit thus functioned and was experienced as a form of organized walking through evolutionary time' (Bennett 1995: 186). Mark Sandberg, in his study of Scandinavian folk museums, concurs:

[...] the very idea of a museum carries with it a long-standing institutional commitment to unique objects and authenticated traces. The motion and physical relocation – an elaborate choreography of bodies and objects that necessarily plays itself out in real space and time. (Sandberg 2003: 7)

While Bennett and Sandburg believe that this was a development of the nineteenth century, the institutions studied as part of this research each had some element of this in their galleries in the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries.

The earliest displays of historical fashion at the V&A were cases arranged in a line to represent the chronological development of dress throughout modern history (**Fig. 7.5**). This arrangement was established in 1913 and continued, relatively unchanged until the gallery was redisplayed dramatically in 1962; the new 'costume court' was

²⁵ Museums offer a space-time hybrid, which may be divided or constructed differently depending on what concept is under discussion (see: Wallerstein 1998). The Bakhtinian notion of chronotopes is also relevant here, as galleries are also 'places of intersection of temporal and spatial sequences' (Folch-Serra 1990: 261). For a discussion of sequence and chronology in narrative, see Ricoeur 1980.



Fig. 7.5: ‘A gallery in the Victoria and Albert Museum devoted to old English costumes’, 1913. From: *Old English Costumes: A Sequence of Fashions through the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*. London: Harrods Ltd. (The St Catherine’s Press), 1913, p. 2.

A GALLERY IN THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM DEVOTED TO OLD ENGLISH COSTUMES.

octagonal in shape and the physical sequence of cases could no longer be totally linear (Fig. 7.6), but the display was still fundamentally evolutionary, ‘showing the development of fashionable dress in Europe between about 1580 and 1948’ (Thornton 1962: 332). It was before this latter renovation that the Pathé News corporation filmed in the museum (see above), when the space was arranged in a way that easily communicated the notion of the linear passage of time. This is a conceit whose tradition lives on: the majority of the galleries in the Fashion Museum (Bath) are arranged chronologically, so that visitors can metaphorically walk through time, where history is represented by historically-dressed and accessorized mannequins in glass showcases on either side.

Likewise, the Costume Institute’s collection was always intended to be encyclopaedic, and although displays have varied in the logic of their organization, the desire to be comprehensive has always underpinned both collecting and display activities. In a 2001 exhibition, the Costume Institute documented its own history; the section for fashion (the collection also includes ethnic dress) was titled ‘Costume History Timeline’, and was organized chronologically. White mannequins with relatively detailed features were styled with white paper wigs (by contrast, the folk and ethnographic costumes were mounted on headless jointed tailor’s dummies, thus highlighting their technical aspects rather than their being worn by human actors in social and cultural contexts) in a ‘continuous parade of fashion’ (Koda 2001).

Although the text noted the disparate collections and conflicting curatorial interests across the Institute’s development, the display was cohesive, reflecting what curator Harold Koda suggested was the original ‘simple formalist criterion’ for the collection: ‘to clearly represent the style of their day [...] intended to form a timeline of Western

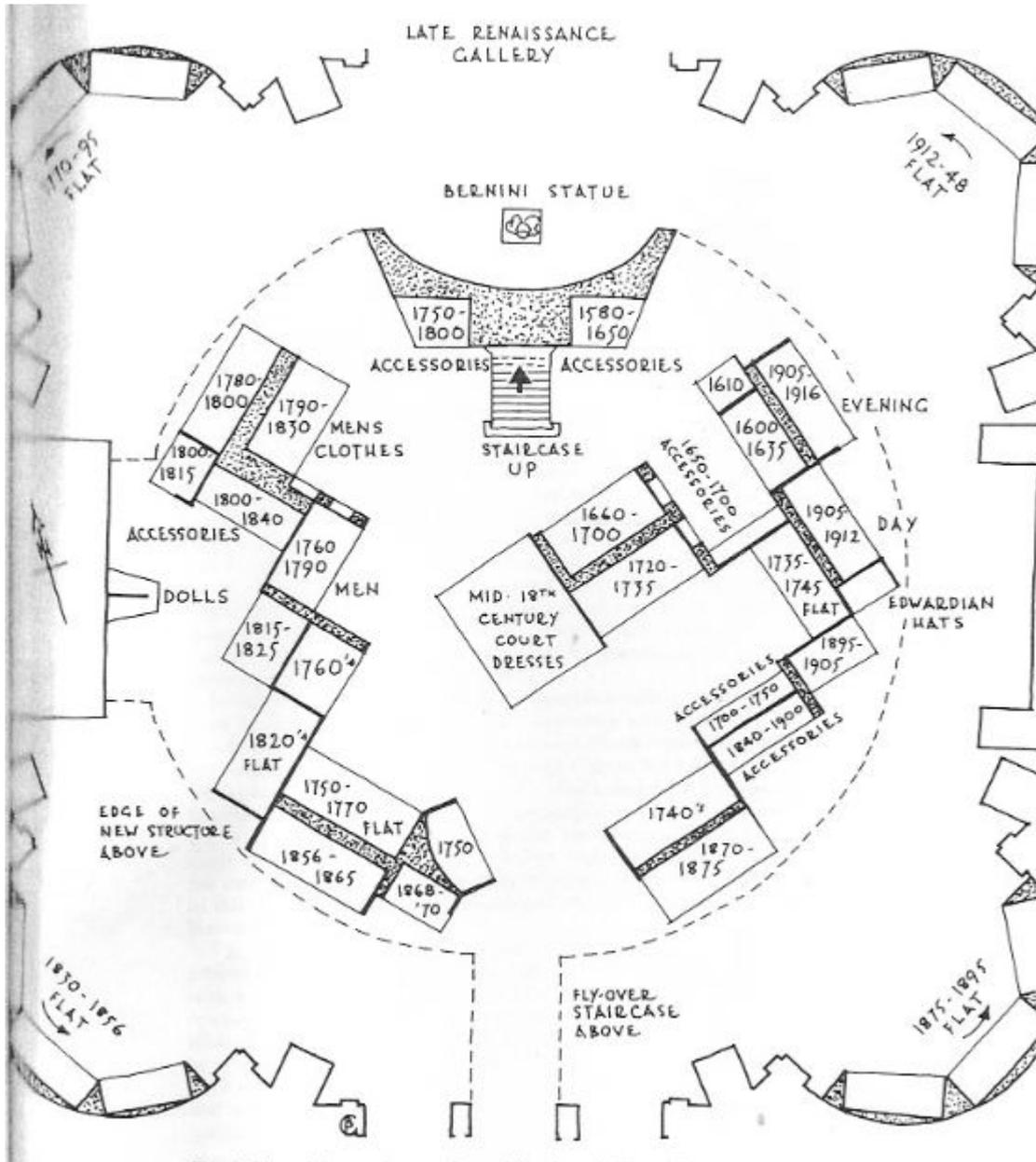


Fig. 7.6: Floor plan of the redeveloped (1962) costume galleries at the V&A. From: Peter Thornton, 'The New Arrangement of the Costume Court in the Victoria & Albert Museum', *Museums Journal* 62:1 (June 1962), p. 327.

fashion' (Koda 2011). This is very similar to how Sandberg describes the organization of early Scandinavian museum displays:

Erasing the traces of the collection process, these various kinds of curators increasingly presented objects in use and bodies in context, allowing spectators an impression of direct physical access to previously distant times and spaces. (Sandberg 2003: 8)

Thus, in this exhibition, it was once again the continuous evolution of historical silhouettes rather than the piecemeal development of the collection that was on display.

At the Brooklyn Museum, the 1970s permanent costume gallery took the form of a theatre, where a series of 45 mannequins (**Fig. 7.7**), primarily female, 'paraded' on a conveyor belt past a background of slides, and accompanied by music to provide more context (Roberts 1976: 6; Coleman 1978: 135). Visitors remained seated in the Costume Theatre for this twenty-minute presentation, and although here they did not walk through history, history 'walked' before them. Indeed, permanent or long-term exhibitions, even if they do not attempt to reflect all eras from which fashion survives in the museum's collection, do nevertheless tend to present an evolution of stylistic and social change. The McCord Museum's *Form and Fashion* exhibition (1992-1993), for example, documented only the fashionable clothing worn in nineteenth-century Montreal, but nevertheless attempted to make larger claims about the history of fashion change more generally: 'The women's attire held in the McCord Museum collection provides an apt illustration of the stylistic changes of this period through the evolving shapes of skirts, sleeves and bodices' (Beaudoin-Ross and Cooper 1992).



Fig. 7.7: Selected mannequins from the *Costume Theatre*, Brooklyn Museum, installation views c. 1970: CTX_E197-i022, sporting outfit, American, 1895; CTX_E197-i038, evening coat, Reverdot label, French, 1915; CTX_E197-i023, day dress, American, 1918; CTX_E197-i039, evening dress, French, 1926; CTX_E197-i036, day dress, American, 1928; CTX_E197-i040, day dress, Gwinn label, American, 1947. Brooklyn Museum Archives. Records of the Department of Costumes and Textiles. (C&T_E_197-_Costume).



Within and Without History

The preceding quote suggests a slightly different relationship between the object and history than the reliquary function described above. An analysis of the text in many exhibitions also reveals a notion of history as an objective entity that stands apart from the object, or indeed from fashion. The 1992 Costume Institute exhibition *Fashion and History: A Dialogue* is a particularly good example of this. The introductory text stated:

Like other art forms, it [fashion] is both an immediate expression of contemporary culture and the genesis of a continuous history. Fashion is a dialogue between the ideas of the moment and those of the past; it is a discourse between the values and creativity of present-day society and those of history. (le Bourhis 1992)

In this formulation, history is not a narrative that arose from a series of documents, or even a social phenomenon, but instead an independent force of pastness. However, despite the curator's assertion that 'the thematic organization of the diverse costumes challenges studies of clothing as simply social or historical documents' (le Bourhis 1992), the items on display were indeed documents of how ideas were (re)interpreted in different eras and places.

An illustrative approach like this runs the risk of being teleological (Hall 2000: 332).

When an existing, external narrative takes precedence over the particularity of the individual object, as Mary-Ann Hansen writes, 'an artefact can easily be replaced by another representing the same immaterial qualities' (Hansen 2008: 6). She elaborates: 'Reducing objects to representations of function or ideas leads us to a platonic relationship with matter and objects [...] objects can then be easily replaced by other objects representing the idea' (2006: 6). This approach erases the differences and adaptations between objects, and flattens them into a homogenous mass; it also suggests that rather than arising from a mysterious consensus reached by individuals

with agency, the events of history are an inevitable fate. As opposed to presenting the historical fashions on display as contingent on ideas of taste even within a particular period, they are frozen into an illusion of stability. Admittedly, the use of umbrella terms for historical periods is difficult to avoid: objects that do come from a particular time frame must be described as such to do justice to their provenance and context. However, in exhibitions organized around ‘eras’ or ‘ages’, objects are transformed to props in a play or actors in a pageant, representing and recreating an external idea of a period such as ‘The Age of Napoleon’ (Metropolitan Museum of Art 1989-1990) or ‘the confined world of a Victorian lady’ (*Corsets to Calling Cards*, Royal Ontario Museum, 1995-1998). This type of approach demonstrates a perceived discontinuity between the past and the present.

However, as Pannebecker suggests, this is merely one temporal lens through which to view the history of fashion, and she believes what is needed is ‘a rethinking of assumptions of univocality and discontinuity in the history of fashion. To question these often unspoken assumptions inevitably leads to a more analytical level of discussion’ (Pannabecker 1997: 180). A creative example of an exhibition that dealt with the nature of history in fashion and the connections between past and present was Judith Clark’s *Spectres: When Fashion Turns Back*, staged at the V&A in 2005 (originally staged as *Malign Muses* at the ModeMuseum, Antwerp in 2004). By using highly original installation and spectatorship techniques, such as revolving cogwheels (**Fig. 7.8**) which demonstrated the self-referentiality of fashion history, Clark’s exhibition manipulated space to make manifest ‘the illogical nature of fashion in its referencing of history, the means to distort the histories represented, and the way to experience the haunting of contemporary fashion by its past’ (O’Neill 2008: 254).



Fig. 7.8: Installation view of *Spectres: When Fashion Turns Back* (V&A, 2005) 'Locking In and Out' section, featuring moving cogwheels juxtaposing dressed mannequins to one another in order to illustrate the repetitious nature of the fashion system. Photo by Ronald Stoops. © Victoria and Albert Museum.

Furthermore, it demonstrated the duality of fashion's own cannibalistic relationship to its own obsolescence, as Lehmann describes it:

[...] by postulating stylistic dicta that provide a dialectical environment in which any past object, i.e. a garment or accessory, is potentially seen as historic (where it is rooted in the past and identifiable as such), but at the same time serves as a basis for a contemporary rendition, a novel version of an old form, revived for the latest trend, which in turn signposts the fashion to come. (Lehmann 1999: 301)

Rather than offering up history as a commodity for the benefit of designers, as in Chapter 4, however, here Clark made manifest fashion's inherent historicity, and opened up a critique of the museum itself. As a reviewer of the exhibition wrote: 'she claims the exhibition not as an exploration of the relationship between fashion and history evidence in the exhibits themselves, but as an exploration initiated by the display structures and viewing mechanisms that support and surround the exhibits' (O'Neill 2008: 258-259). Therefore, the exhibition illuminated what Preziosi has characterized as the historicizing work of the museum:

Museums do not simply or passively reveal or 'refer' to the past; rather they perform the basic historical gesture of separating out of the present a certain specific 'past' so as to collect and re-compose (to re-member) its displaced and dismembered relics as elements in a genealogy of and for the present. [...] This museological 'past' is thus an instrument for the imaginative production and sustenance of the present; of modernity as such. (Preziosi 2007: 112)

The historical fashion on display in *Spectres* was documentary of an objective past, but more importantly for the meaning of the exhibition as conceived by Clark, also demonstrated the alterity of concepts of 'now' and 'then' within the museum space.

Constructing History with Historical Fashion

The fashion object in a gallery, therefore, is a tool with which to think historically, shrouded as it is in an aura of pastness. Pioneering fashion historian J. R. Planché, mentioned previously in Chapter 5, suggested that its vividness made 'costume' an ideal tool for communicating history:

The spirit of critical inquiry has separated the gold from the dross and antiquities are now considered valuable only in proportion to their illustration of history or their importance to art. [...] The historian, the poet, the novelist, the painter, and the actor, have discovered in attention to costume a new spring of information and a new source of effect. Its study, embellished by picture and enlivened by anecdote, soon becomes interesting even to the young and careless reader; and at the same time that it sheds light upon manners and rectifies dates, stamps the various events and eras in the most natural and vivid colours indelibly on the memory. (Planché 1834: xi-xii)

According to Planché, then, fashion's appeal to the senses, is precisely what makes it also appeal to the intellect.

The importance of this appeal of the historical past to contemporary emotion in the Romantic period (to which Planché belonged) for historical understanding (discussed in detail by Phillips 2003) is further elucidated by historian Stephen Bann (1984). Bann suggests that it was the Romantic historical novelist Sir Walter Scott who perfected 'a technique of transference and assemblage which will finally transcend the heterogeneity of its origins' (1984: 108). Although Bann makes claims that are true for the nineteenth-century reception of historically-inspired literary and visual material, his argument is also valid when examining the representation of fashion history in museums, where exhibitions are created through a process of artful assemblage, creating an enhanced impression of authenticity. The museum, as was also noted above, is concerned with creating coherent representations of periods out of the sparse documentation of individually-surviving pieces of antique fashion.

It is not just objects, but their contexts and combinations which create implicit and explicit canons of meanings; meanings which are expressed through the spectacle of museum display. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago suggest the mechanics of this process of history-making in museums:

Are the histories staged by museums facts or fictions? Museum institutions exist above all for the collection, preservation, and conservation of the fragments and relics of the past, and it is commonly assumed that they are dedicated above all to documenting the facts of history. Yet, by and large, all museums stage their collected and preserved relics in such a way as to enhance the facticity of these surviving objects, documents and monuments. Indeed, what constitutes ‘facticity’ is clearly a matter of a certain style of presenting things in what in a given time and place may be legible as factual. Facts may be apprehended as such under certain specific conditions of presentation and reception. (Preziosi and Farago 2004: 13)

Indeed, Chapter 5 documented some of the more overtly theatrical effects used in displays by the case study institutions. Here, however, the emphasis is on how methods of presentation might be deployed to create an impression of time and to communicate its pastness.

The past as embodied in an object is not an objective reality: it is envisioned and represented according to a series of choices made by museum staff: conservators, curators, designers, and directors. If museums believed in the authenticity of the object and its ability to communicate a stable past, representation would remain static; however, this is not the case. Objects are displayed and redisplayed, affected by ‘an ever-changing historical sensibility that is a product of the present, not of the past’ (Handler and Gable 1997: 223). While this is likely to be the case for all the institutions studied in this dissertation, only one has the depth of documentation to demonstrate this on the example of a particular object: the many display permutations of the 1832-33 dress acquired by the Costume Institute in 1950 (**Fig. 7.9**) show how the different mannequin, accessories, and silhouette support (padding) added to this light brown silk dress (C.I.50.15a, b) at various times change its look and therefore its message. The installation views are undated, but the mannequins suggest approximate decades: the c.1960s variant strips the ensemble of its pelerine (shoulder cape) and transforms the dress into an elegant evening gown complete with closely-curved hair



Fig. 7.9: Object documentation photograph and three installation views (c. 1960s, c. 1980s, c. 1990s) of a brown silk dress and pelerine, American, 1832-1833, C.I.50.15a, b (Gift of Randolph Gunter 1950). © Metropolitan Museum of Art.

and an ornament. A later view adds more padding so that the shoulders move up, adds an apron (44.34), not associated with the original item by provenance, and a paper wig styled into ringlets, transforming the dress into an example of domestic femininity. Another view sees the dress reunited with its original pelerine, over the top of which is added a muslin kerchief, a belt, fingerless gloves (all unidentified) and an 1824 feathered bonnet (C.I.39.13.118); the mannequin, whose shoulders now sag, is now posed alongside a fully-dressed male, and the dress is an example of early nineteenth-century urban gentility. The dress itself, in all these representations, cannot even be considered a singular object: its objecthood comes from its combination with other artefacts and accessories (mannequin, wig, pelerine, mitts, belt), which unite into what might be called an 1830s dress in a museum setting.

The styling of this and other objects to create 'complete' outfits helps to create a sense of material and temporal integrity. The work of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein is often cited to provide an explanation for the perceived necessity of maintaining the illusion of wholeness. In her work on depression, Klein uses the term 'sublimation' to describe the panicked efforts of the mind to reduce anxiety caused by separation. Although Klein uses the word 'object' in the psychoanalytical sense, it can also be usefully read to mean 'artefact', and therefore becomes a useful critique of museum practice as it struggles to make sense of the past out of material remains:

There is anxiety how to put the bits together in the right way and at the right time; how to pick out the good bits and do away with the bad ones; how to bring the object to life when it has been put together [...] The attempts to save the loved object, to repair and restore it, [...] are determining factors for all sublimations and the whole of the ego-development. In this connection I shall only mention the specific importance for sublimation of the bits to which the loved object has been reduced and the effort to put them together. It is a 'perfect' object which is in pieces; thus the effort to undo the state of disintegration to which it has been reduced presupposes the necessity to make

it beautiful and 'perfect'. The idea of perfection is, moreover, so compelling because it disproves the idea of disintegration. (Klein 1935: 152-153)
A museum object – conserved, accessorized, and posed in a manner that evokes its 'lived reality' (as imagined by the museum staff) – may be called sublime insofar as it overcomes the disparateness of its own origins in different material and temporal contexts. The continuity staged in this way creates what Runia (2006a) might term metonymic presence (see also Pearce 1998b: 168).

Conclusion

The presentation of historical fashion in museums strives to control and overcome, by the use of visual and intellectual conventions, the cultural anxiety caused by the decay and death so problematically present within itself. Ewa Domanska claims: 'the ambivalent, "uncanny" status of the disappeared person (dead or alive) resists the dichotomous classification of present versus absent' (Domanska 2006: 345). She contends that the dead are the universal social 'Other', and as such, are used as an intellectual foil:

Like every "Other," the dead can be approached in two ways: we can either see their otherness as pathological and try to normalize them by making them similar to the living, or we can treat them as members of a certain "culture" (or cultures). (Domanska 2006: 347)

As the last two chapters have argued, this is precisely how historical fashion has been positioned in the museums under study: recovering presence by emulating 'lifelike' situations and contemporary values, or distancing them for 'objective' contemplation.

This chapter has discussed the various contingent ways in which fashion has been represented as a historical object. It has speculated on the reasons behind the pervasive characterization of historical fashion as 'deathly' and the persistent denial of its physical decay. The use of historical fashion to mark the passage of time by

means of spatial arrangements has been discussed, and the ways in which these mark the divisions between the contemporary and historical have been highlighted. Even more than revealing the historical nature of historical fashion exhibitions, this chapter has demonstrated the way in which the mechanisms of the museum exhibition are made visible when historical fashion is displayed as a time-dependent force.

The museal mindset is one of self-conscious temporality – an awareness that the present is different from the past, but that the past is not unrecognizable for this distance. Equally, it is often infused with a moral purpose – to learn the lessons of the past by applying them to the present. In this way, the past is always seen through a filtered lens of today's needs (Preziosi 2007). As Susan Pearce points out, 'the past is essentially unknowable, forever lost to us, and in museum displays its material traces are reconstructed into images of time past which have meaning only for the present, in which their genuinely intrinsic relationships to the past are used to authenticate a present purpose' (Pearce 1992: 209). However, for a knowing viewer, it is this referentiality that makes the history of exhibitions (the ways in which museums contextualize objects on the past-present continuum) so fascinating. The space-time of the museum is the three-dimensional expression of the space-time of historical thought (Wallerstein 1998) – the medium is the message. The exhibitionary medium seeks to be invisible, unobtrusive, immersive, but smoothly conducive to shaping the viewer's understanding. The object on display anchors the relevant corresponding moment of history to the present.

However, it is important to recall that the museum is still a place of intellectual encounter and dialogue. As O'Neill writes, 'the cloak of authority that pervades the

lifeless quality of museum dress displays is not a neutral foil of clarity and comprehension at all; for there are many who have caught its flicker in the subdued light as a phantasmagoria thick with discontent' (2008: 259). Visitors can choose to suspend their intellectual disbelief, and to interpret the dresses they see on display in the way the museum intends. Alternatively, they can respond to the dissonance and reflect on their individual experience to make meaning. As Susan Crane points out:

Preservation also occurs in the minds of the visitors who remember the objects, the collectors, the museums – and these same minds may also contest the meanings of the objects, histories and memories provided by the museums. Prior memories and their meanings may resist the museal collection. (Crane 2000: 9)

It would be incorrect to suggest that the ontological status of an object within or without a museum is more authentic than the other, or that these are interchangeable – they are different, but that difference is of critical importance. Valerie Casey suggests that:

Society will always need places to mark time, to contain aesthetic icons, to enable memory to be experienced by proxy. [...] The myth of object autonomy and authenticity upon which the museum's cultural authority is founded begins to dissipate as museum visitors recognize the degree to which design and display embeds museal objects with value. (Casey n.d.: n.p.)

Historical fashion, a constructed medium to begin with, is perhaps the ideal museum object with which to explore and express the complexity of cultural meaning. In addition to its many other functions and definitions, it is a useful critique of the museum institution and the construction of history.

Conclusion

A dress on a hanger means little: We need to understand its context, its implications, the influences that went to shape it, its effects.
Christina Walkley (1985: 9)

In this thesis, I have examined the discursive function of historical fashion in museum exhibitions, through the visual and intellectual themes prevalent in fashion exhibitions in Britain and North America over the last 100 years. Although the limited length of this thesis has precluded the undertaking of a comprehensive history of fashion history exhibitions, the breadth of the case study institutions has permitted a review of the exhibitionary models for fashion history in England, America, and Canada over the last century, with conclusions plausibly generalisable from these. Evidence for this research has been drawn from two sources: existing secondary literature, as well as primary source information from museum archives and contemporary journalistic and academic reviews. This evidence suggests that the discourses of historical fashion exhibitions have been heavily influenced by the anxieties and values placed upon fashion more generally in the commercial and aesthetic spheres. The look and content of exhibitions of historical fashion has been derived from other museum models and from commercial fields, echoing commerce, the arts, and the human body in visual and textual ways. Moreover, historical fashion as it has been displayed in the case study institutions reflects the function of the museum institution itself – its marking of time and social contexts, and its use of visual practices to do so. The discipline of fashion curation, therefore, is deeply rooted in and dependent upon much earlier conventional display practices in museums, galleries, and shops. Although the links between these arenas for the dissemination of fashion history have been broadly acknowledged (Taylor 2002: 24-50; Breward 2003: 11, 215; Cumming 2004: 72), no

other researcher has, to date, produced an evidenced account of the specific links between historical fashion in the gallery and in its other contexts as an explanation for its appearance across exhibitions. 2012, a landmark year for fashion exhibition in the English-speaking world, is an appropriate time to contribute a more comprehensive analysis of museum practice in representing fashion history to an increasingly active professional and academic discourse.

Overview

The first section of the thesis sought to define the terms of investigation. In the first chapter, the literature of the field was reviewed to derive an appropriate terminology for fashion in general, and historical fashion in particular. In addition, the varied meanings and significances of fashion for society mooted in literature on the subject were surveyed, so as to better compare these with their museal equivalents. The second chapter analyzed exhibitions, and the literature on their communicative strategies and intellectual function within museums. A vocabulary for the components of an exhibition was derived, and its function as a means of knowledge transfer between museum experts and audiences was considered. In the final chapter of the first section, writing on fashion exhibitions was reviewed, and the early history of fashion display was described. It was concluded that while important scholarly works on the subject do exist, no comprehensive history or analysis of the subject had hitherto been undertaken. The research and analysis undertaken as part of this thesis therefore represent important contributions to the theoretical discussions of curatorial strategies for historical fashion and museology more generally.

Chapters 4 through 7 moved on to a thematic analysis of archival material. Although the thesis is not structured chronologically, it is evident from the earliest material on the subject that a continuity exists in the discourses around exhibitions of historical fashion: for example, the 1837 exhibition of Cromwellian relics on waxwork mannequins (see Chapter 3), the 1847 satirical suggestion of a museum of fashion trends (see Chapter 4), as well as the 1869 editorial advocating for a costume reference collection for artists (see Chapter 5) are all direct antecedents of contemporary display culture. The interplay between personal and world-historical narratives in exhibitions, the celebration of consumerism and corporate brand identity, and claims to aesthetic universality and quality, continued to surface across historical fashion exhibitions in all the institutions studied over the period 1913 to the present. In each exhibition studied, display techniques were used to highlight some particular feature of the objects on display, usually connecting them to a larger narrative. This ‘selective valuing of one feature over another’ (Kneill 2012: 323) demonstrates the contingent nature of the museum exhibition.

In Chapter 4, it was demonstrated that historical fashion, though economically and aesthetically obsolete once its ‘season’ as a desirable commodity had passed, continued to retain associations with its commercial origins. Complicity with market forces can be traced throughout the history of fashion exhibitions. Most obviously, the display furniture of the exhibition was often derived from stores, with ensuing visual similarity between the two forms of display. Moreover, exhibitions on designers and consumers celebrated the commodified life of the artefacts on show, often promoting luxury brands and lifestyles in overt or suggested ways. The partnerships and resources provided by the fashion industry to museums created reciprocal value in

exhibitions, and the fashion industry – both producers and consumers – have traditionally been seen as the primary audience and the main supporters of fashion exhibitions.

The following chapter, by contrast, suggested more exalted origins for exhibitions of historical fashion from the fields of the fine, decorative, and performing arts.

Acknowledging the contributions of artists, theatre designers, and art historians to the collecting and study of historical fashion, links between such individuals and the institutions studied were highlighted to explain the particular visual style of display in exhibitions. It was argued that not only did exhibitions of historical fashion follow similar trends as did exhibitions of fine art, but they utilized artistic techniques such as spectacle and staging to further highlight the suggested authenticity of the objects on display. Framing fashion as art within the museum made it subject to aesthetic priorities, and allied fashion history to art historical practice.

Chapters 6 and 7 analyzed the materiality and ephemerality of historical dress in two contrasting ways. Both responded to the paradox of historical fashion in the museum: the near-impossibility of satisfactorily conveying the embodied experience of fashion in its routine manifestation. Chapter 6 analyzed approaches to displaying and signifying fashion's relationship to the human body. Approaches from cultural studies as well as phenomenological theories on embodiment were applied to exhibitions of historical fashion – disembodied by conservational necessity – to elucidate the processes of the production and representation of fashioned bodies in the museum. The dissonance between historical and contemporary body norms was highlighted, as was the uncomfortable and uncanny difference between lived experience and the

appearance of museum simulacra. This chapter went some way towards answering how and why the presentation of fashion in the museum differs from the ways in which it can be encountered in day-to-day life. The agency, subjectivity, and materiality of the lived body, it was argued, could only be represented by visual means, depriving objects of vitality. Chapter 7, for its part, took the absence of the human body from historical fashion displays as a starting point to evaluate the representation of the passage of time in exhibitions. In this way, it drew back on the discussion of the relationship between fashion and time in Chapter 4, at the beginning of the second section of the thesis. Fashion history in the museum was presented as a tool with which to think historically. Techniques of display design that drew attention to historical fashion's quality of being of the past were recounted, and it was suggested that this type of museum object demonstrates particularly well the museum's construction of temporality more broadly. Theorizing the decontextualisation of historical fashion in the museum in this way is one of the original interpretive contributions of this thesis.

Thesis Insights

The focus on the devices – literary and visual – that the museums studied have brought to bear on historical fashion of necessity highlights the constructed nature of the exhibitionary medium, much as Georgina Born's critique of the conventions of museum documentary photography (1998) did in its way:

The overriding theme is the construction of the museum's heroic realism [...] The building of lifelike models and their setting in dioramas as a scenario/environment come into view as the focus of an intensified artistic intervention in the production of realism. This is the construction of mere display as spectacle, and with this we enter the era of illusionism, of the full staging of the contents of the museum. (Born 1998: 228)

The constructed nature of the exhibitionary assemblage (see **Fig. 7.1**) was made evident repeatedly during the archival research process undertaken for this thesis. Files for past exhibitions sometimes contained only unlabelled installation photographs, making it difficult or impossible to determine the theme of the exhibition without reference to a corresponding text that would eliminate the need for such speculation. Furthermore, close study of some photographs revealed that they had been misfiled, and were assumed to document some other exhibition; this became obvious when the same objects were featured in very different combinations. It became clear that examining exhibitions using only visual methodology would not reveal sufficient information, and all the elements – text, images, object – would need to be considered together. A focus on the syntax of an exhibition reveals the grammar by which it constructs meaning. What is simultaneously evident is the subjectivity of knowledge generally, but also the shared means by which it can be attained. These have been remarkably consistent for historical fashion exhibitions over time.

Indeed, claims for innovation in display practices are often discovered to be unfounded when compared to archival evidence. For example, critiques of the commercial aesthetic in museum fashion exhibitions today often lay blame at the feet of *Vogue* editor-cum-curator Diana Vreeland (*cf.* Cumming 2004: 72), omitting other precedents of spectacular and populist displays, such as the revolutionary visual contributions of fashion photographer Cecil Beaton and exhibition designer (former window-dresser) Michael Haynes in the 1971 V&A *Fashion: An Anthology* exhibition (Robertshaw 1971: 66), or even more fundamentally, the ongoing relationships with industry that all museum fashion collections have (see Chapter 4). The lack of true originality in both the intellectual premise and the design expression

of most fashion history exhibitions studied in this research suggests that there is a vocabulary of shared notions of the relative importance of particular periods, themes, and aesthetics in the history of fashion across countries, decades, museum institutions and the professionals working within them. Evidence of the connections between the different contexts for fashion (in shopping, art, theatre, and even the personal wardrobe) is presented here as being key to the understanding of fashion in the museum context. This thesis has codified and defined some of the terms under which these can be understood, although more research is necessary to investigate its sources, particularly in academic literature, and the precise systems of its circulation among professionals in the field.

In general, historical fashion in a museum can be made to fulfil a number of purposes. Historical fashion, just like the period room (Aynsley 2006: 11), can also demonstrate histories of style, document the disappeared past, communicate national histories (as in the clothing worn by famous national heroes and heroines or produced within the country), and exemplify techniques of construction and surface decoration. Moreover, as this thesis has shown, it can satisfy the human voyeuristic urge by its spectacular and wondrous appearance, provoke nostalgia and facilitate memory work, tell personal stories or enable their communication, and to foster a sense of time-space displacement. None of these are mutually exclusive, but some are privileged over others in different display styles. As Simon Knell has recently written:

The material object, from which our conceptual or intangible object is negotiated into existence, remains simply that: material and mute but implicitly, we must believe, bearing authentic witness to its origins and original context. We can take the intangible, immaterial or conceptual object wherever we like and deploy it in our imaginings and communications in a wide variety of ways. The silent, material, object – the real museum object – however, remains in a drawer or case. (Knell 2012: 325)

Likewise, historical fashion has been used as a tool with which to imagine and represent histories and contexts.

Certainly, the preoccupations of curators studied as part of this research and evident in their exhibitionary output are closely correlated with the epistemological aims described in academic guides to the study of fashion history (Arnold 1973; Taylor 2002, 2004; Cumming 2004). Whether knowledge in exhibitions of historical fashion is constructed and derived in similar ways as in theoretical writing on the subject – if it parallels or contradicts academic writing on the history of fashion – is an area for future in-depth research; however, there are undoubted similarities. There is, for example, an enduring belief in the authenticity of the objects on display, which can be expressed visually and its content understood by a knowing expert. Valerie Cumming, for example, writes that ‘Without the information contained in art in all of its forms, from drawing to sculpture, it is likely that displays of historic dress would be awkward pastiches of the intentions of their original makers and owners’ (2004: 83); the quotation not only reflects an uncritical attitude to the conventions of art, but also the idea that displays of historical fashion can re-create some lost original aesthetic. While both assertions are somewhat naïve, they can be demonstrated time and again in exhibitionary efforts to evoke period atmosphere (as, for example in *Dangerous Liaisons*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004; see Chapter 5). The ‘museum set’ (Baxandall 1991: 33) of the curator, as much as of the visitor, acts as a paratext that guides the interpretation of fashion history; because of it, objects cannot escape the context of the museum but actually gain a new meaning from that context. As the gallery architect Thierry Despont noted, ‘decorative art is about placing objects in environments’ (Farrell 1996: 5) and indeed, any re-creation of a context, whether it is

a period room, or even just a mannequin, is also an opportunity for the willing suspension of disbelief in the sublimating artistry of the museum.

The prevalence and relative value of certain periods in fashion history over others is also noteworthy. The persistent reappearance of Victoriana in fashion galleries, for example, is not only a function of the high survival rate of garments from the nineteenth century; it is also a reflection of the fact how that particular historical period is thought (by collectors and curators alike, for garments must first be preserved in order to eventually be displayed) to be particularly important. It is probable that certain historical periods evoke easier contrasts or comparisons with contemporary developments in society or aesthetics: for example, the Brooklyn Museum's 1939 corsetry exhibition was intended 'to show the origins of today's wasp waists and bustles,' (Anonymous 1939c: 1) by displaying underwear and outerwear of the nineteenth century alongside that season's latest styles in the same.

This display strategy has a secondary effect: to increase the relatability of the distant past to viewers in the present. Neither is it necessary to overtly mirror historical objects with contemporary ones to produce recognition. In positioning mannequins to enact 'universal' human experiences such as maternal affection (**Fig. 5.3**) or flirtation (**Fig. 6.3**), for example, museum curators and designers transpose contemporary social values onto objects from a different era. The object, after all, has no innate need for any particular style of display: the choices made in exhibition result from a belief that one aesthetic will be more suitable than another for the intended narrative. The result, however historically inaccurate or implausible it may be (we will never know if the christening robe in **Fig. 5.3** ever clothed such an adored infant, or if the *robe á*

la française in **Fig. 6.3** was ever privy to furtive expressions of romance), may trigger a moment of personal empathy. This is the powerful emotional effect of the underlying desire to be reconnected with the past described by Ankersmit (2005: 9, see Chapter 7) and is difficult to resist.

This is a provisional interpretation, of course, and one limitation of the methodology used in this thesis has been that it cannot consider in any detail (due to a lack of records) the audience response to the exhibitions studied. More research needs to be done to evaluate visitor response to such constructions of the past, and whether they are indeed effective in inspiring learning about fashion's place in social and artistic history. Furthermore, the study of visitor behaviour in a fashion gallery may elicit new insights into the nature of the gallery as a performative space, and how this is related to the performative aspects of fashion.

Contributions to Research

Beyond the new observations and insights described above, this thesis contributes more broadly to the communities of knowledge and practice around fashion history and museology. One of the main contributions of this thesis to museology has been to theorize the museum as a unique form of space-time, as well as pointing out the varied and yet immutable aspects of an exhibition. In terms of museum practice, this may help to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the museum as a medium for fashion exhibitions, and provide an opportunity for innovation in the future. The documentation of the representation of fashion history to the museum-going public also has relevance to the field of fashion studies, as it demonstrates the connections

between academic, museum, and wider cultural discourses around fashion, and theorizes fashion history in the museum as a specific object type with unique needs.

In examining aspects of the representation of fashion history in museums, it has been necessary to invent lenses by which to do so, drawing on a wide variety of discourses, such as the production of historiography in gallery spaces, the relationship between the arts and the production of history, the conception of the public and private body, as well as the vocabulary with which fashion is discussed. The methodology worksheet (**Appendix 2**) generated from existing sources and discipline-specific concepts provides an objective set of tools for evaluating the physical and intellectual content of a historical fashion exhibition, as well as being a potentially useful tool for future researchers in the field at other institutions. While the data gathering stage of the project involved the close study of archival sources and a comparative approach, the thesis is not limited to the simple documentation of museum material. The analysis is cross-referenced to periodical sources and academic texts in fashion, museology, art criticism, and historiography to produce a nuanced account of the symbolic function of historical fashion in museum display. All the trends and themes in display mentioned throughout the thesis can be supported by evidence from more than one institution and no overarching grand narrative has been placed upon the data. The sheer number of correlations across institutions and decades suggests that these may be generalisable, and indeed, the small number of professionals in the field and their mobility across museum collections, makes it even more likely that similar examples may be found in exhibitions of other museums not studied in this research, and the methodologies for research and analysis may be easily applied to them. Some selected examples have been mentioned throughout this thesis, and as one of the main postulations of this thesis has been the existence of and museum complicity with a

wider visual culture of historical fashion, further research will undoubtedly reveal many more.

A secondary, if unexpected, outcome of this research has been to generate interest among museum curators in the case study institutions for better preserving their archival records of past exhibitions, both as a reflection of labour carried out and knowledge gathered (e.g.: Bell Price, pers. comm., 2010²⁶). As suggested above, there has been precious little innovation in the field over the century of historical fashion exhibitions studied in this thesis, and this may be because of a lack of knowledge about precedents. Projects that seek to experiment with and develop future directions for curatorial practice in the field (such as Thompson, forthcoming) must be informed in the practice of the past. Exhibitions are ephemeral – time-bounded, and often unaccompanied by published output such as a catalogue – and if the research gathered is not fed back into the collection records and/or preserved for posterity, it is lost forever²⁷. In a world of increasing demand for academic rigour in curatorial practice, exhibitions are evaluated as scholarly output and Alexandra Palmer correctly suggests that documentation and debate around the content of fashion exhibitions will only serve to improve them in the future (2008b: 124-126).

²⁶ See also Tran Le 2011, which compares a historic installation photograph of the Costume Institute's opening exhibition with current documentation images of the same garments as those on display in 1946: a similar methodology to that used in this thesis.

²⁷ Madeleine Ginsburg experienced similar frustration at the indiscriminate culling of files and lost expertise when attempting to document the early history of the Costume Society (Ginsburg 2005).

In addition, the preservation of exhibitionary material can dent the monolithic anonymous intellectual authority of the museum (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 151) by attributing authorship to the curatorial and design teams responsible, and thereby revealing their individual biases, strengths and weaknesses. As few institutions maintain thorough records of past exhibitions as a matter of course (archives of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum are notable exceptions for the scope of the preserved material and its accessibility), it will take a critical mass of researchers making inquiries for this material to convince administrators of the usefulness and value of maintaining an archive of label copy, installation photographs, object lists, publicity and promotional material, catalogues and press clippings for every exhibition. Labour-intensive and cumbersome though they may be, these records are necessary to introduce and maintain intellectual rigour into the discipline of fashion curation and to free it from accusations of frivolity (see Chapter 3). This thesis champions that aim.

Future Directions

To define the schema of a historical fashion exhibition is to recognize its many forms and its connectedness to other media. For many, museum exhibitions are one source of information about historical fashion, alongside books, films, photographs, extant objects in personal collections, etc.; the intellectual authority of the museum and the expertise of its design, conservation, and curatorial staff provide a unique synthesis of the knowledge available about the topic. Certain constant elements can be expected: there will be a historical theme (usually based on a period or aesthetic, though sometimes biographical by producer or consumer), objects, mannequins, text labels; there may be an accompanying catalogue or at the very least an illustrated brochure;

there will be media publicity. While one can envision a historical fashion exhibition as being staged with mannequins in a gallery setting, this would underestimate the importance of the wider context within which the exhibition is set: its boundaries are not delimited by the museum space, but bleed into academic discourse, popular visual and print cultures, and the visitor's own imagination.

However, there is currently no methodology by which to qualitatively or quantitatively evaluate this broader communication of a museum exhibition – the contribution that it makes to the popular psyche and to a larger visual context – and therefore many questions remain about the significance of fashion history exhibitions for culture more widely. While this thesis has noted the more overtly-expressed connections, others doubtless remain. After all, audiences see museum displays within a range of other fashion images, often quite different in purpose. Does their visual literacy translate to this context, making them 'consume' in the same way, the museum whetting their desire (see Silverman 1986)? To what extent is the fashion museum also an organ of social control and normalization, inspiring and enforcing social norms about dress – context, quality, gender roles, etc.? Within such an interconnected visual culture, does the museum contribute a new type of semiotic visual discourse in fashion (new signifiers for new signifieds), or are its images understood within an existing semiology? Put another way: do museum displays of historical fashion contribute anything original to an already crowded visual landscape? Is there a stereotyped visual experience of fashion that is identifiable as uniquely museal? Judging by the references to mannequins and museums made in runway shows (Evans 2003: 89-105), as well as investment made by couture corporations in archives and the spate of brand exhibitions in major markets (Socha 2011a, b), there may well be;

however, given the high degree of reciprocity between commercial contexts and the non-profit public domain of heritage, the specificities of each are increasingly difficult to define.

One other important theme it has not been possible to discuss in any depth in this thesis has been gender. Although touched upon throughout (for example, in the discussion of the perceived ideal audience for a fashion museum in Chapter 4), no sustained critical engagement has been undertaken here with this complex issue. This has been a conscious omission, as I felt that other, more general and fundamental concepts relevant to the display of historical fashion ought to be defined before a more nuanced discussion of the representation of gendered dress and labour could take place. However, I will be interrogating historical fashion in museums from a feminist perspective in future work (Petrov, forthcoming).

Relevance

This thesis cannot conclude with a general statement about the optimal methods of representing historical fashion in an exhibition. Its aim was not to produce an extended exhibition review, and there is no Platonic ideal of a fashion history exhibition, so none can be proposed. I have not attempted to dictate appropriate means of selecting mannequins or of interpreting historic fashion – such a project would unnecessarily repeat existing work and would either be too narrowly-focused or too broadly-conceived to be a truly helpful guide to curators and designers. Rather, I have, through the investigation of historical methods, tried to define the various iterations of historical fashion in a gallery setting, so that the aforementioned techniques and practices are informed ones and not chosen arbitrarily or intuitively.

Some exhibitionary idioms work better than others for particular theoretical premises, and I encourage curatorial self-reflexivity about that. If practitioners can look back upon the choices made by their predecessors, critically evaluating the results and responding to them in their own work, they would be participating in a productive dialogue of fashion curation. After a century of practice, curatorial and design choices must now be conscious, not trial and error, and this thesis has gone back to the beginning, providing a meta-analysis of the possibilities and a critical discussion of the consequences thereof. In the future, these can be tested using more quantitative methods, including gauging actual audience response, and further refined as conservation, exhibit development, and curation evolve as disciplines. To do so, however, it is necessary to begin with the basics.

In other words, discussions and analysis of fashion museology cannot be generalisable or more than situationally-specific until such a concept is defined, and its conventions, genres, and socio-cultural contexts are described. To claim that a fashion exhibition consists of some mannequins accompanied by explanatory labels is a little like saying that a painting is some daubs of pigment on a canvas with a title. Both claims are, strictly speaking, true, but infinitely more complex in practice; this thesis has described some of the complexities of that practice. Following Michel Foucault (1977), I believe that visibility is as important and pervasive a socio-economic force as are patriarchy and capitalism; I also believe, as Guy Debord described, that the tropes and conventions of visibility are self-referential and self-replicating, and that is why its causes and effects need to be defined and contextualized before any truly productive discussion of change can begin. There is power in naming a thing.

Along with many other museologists (including MacGregor 2007), I believe that collections are not merely neutral repositories of the past. Like Pierre Nora (1989), I do not consider museums (as just one of the *lieux de memoire* he describes) as neutral records of history. While this point of view has been expressed in too many publications to list (in fact, perhaps the whole field of the so-called New Museology and the studies that have followed it are founded on the premise that none of the practices of record-keeping are unbiased or unpurposed), museums are still endowed with an unquestioned authority (for discussion of visitor attitudes to museum authority see Crane 1997; Cameron 2007). Perhaps, if for this particular discipline, the vocabulary, syntax, and grammar of exhibitionary communication are disclosed, its messages will become clearer, and the ‘staging of the museum’ that Born discusses (above) will be revealed. Furthermore, it is hoped that this will lead to what Meszaros called ‘critically engaged interpretation’, with ‘an awareness of the kinds of interpretive authorities or traditions of meaning-making that are called upon in an act of interpretation’ (Meszaros 2007: 17).

Although my project is not avowedly pedagogical in purpose (nor, as mentioned above, didactic in intent, as I see myself as first and foremost an historian), it is effectively pedagogical in outcome, as it can influence both practitioners and students. Not only do I hope that with my having defined and analyzed the schema of fashion exhibitions, curators will begin to deploy the tropes discussed in this thesis more consciously and effectively, but also that students of dress history will begin to see more clearly the biases and contexts of one of the major sources of information for the

history of fashion. The documentation of past practice in fashion curation can inspire future developments.

Appendix 1: Summary Chart of Case Study Institutions

| Museum | Collection Type | Date Established | Department Name | First Appearance of Fashion in Galleries | Significant Events |
|---------------------------------------|---|------------------|---|--|--|
| Victoria and Albert Museum (London) | Arts and manufactures; decorative arts and design | 1852 | (From 2001) Furniture, Textiles, and Fashion (from 1978: Textiles and Dress; previously, only Textiles) | 1913 | 1913: Harrods gift of historic fashion collection prompts specialized costume gallery, called the Costume Court 1971: Cecil Beaton exhibition dramatically widens scope of collection to include contemporary dress 2012: Fashion Gallery (40) to reopen following renovation |
| Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) | Fine and decorative arts | 1870 | Pre-1946, Decorative Arts; thereafter, Costume Institute | 1929 | 1907: First purchase of fashionable dress. 1929: Loan exhibition of eighteenth-century fashion. 1932: First exhibition of museum's own fashion collection. 1946: Incorporates Costume Institute (previously Museum of Costume Art) 2009: Acquisition of Brooklyn Museum costume collection |

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------|-------------------------------------|------|--|
| Brooklyn Museum (New York) | Fine and decorative arts | 1897 | (Before 2009) Costumes and Textiles | 1925 | 1925: major architectural expansion made room for costume galleries 2009: costume collection transferred to Metropolitan Museum of Art |
| Royal Ontario Museum (Toronto) | World culture and natural history | 1912 | Textiles and Costumes* | 1933 | 1989: New Costume and Textile Gallery 2008: Opening of Patricia Harris Gallery of Textiles and Costume in new wing |
| McCord Museum (Montreal) | Canadian social history | 1921 | Costume and Textiles | 1957 | 1972: Begins to collaborate with Montreal Fashion Group to collect examples of contemporary Canadian design. |
| Fashion Museum (Bath)** | Contemporary and historical fashion | 1963 | n/a | 1963 | 1963: Doris Langley Moore gifts her collection to the city of Bath; originally opens as Museum of Costume. 2007: Name changed to Fashion Museum |

*The department was established in 1939 as a textiles department, but its galleries included a costume gallery, and in 1996, a dedicated ‘fashion costume’ curator was added to the staff.

** The Fashion Museum was based on the personal collection of Doris Langley Moore, which was previously displayed partially in various locations including Eridge Castle in Kent and the Brighton Royal Pavilion from 1955.

Appendix 2: Exhibition Comparative Criteria

Title
Concept/Tagline
Theme
Institution
 Room
Dates
Curator
Permanent or Temporary
Sponsor
Type:
 Emotive
 Aesthetic
 Evocative
 Didactic
 Interactive
 Responsive
 Dynamic
 Object-Oriented
 Systematic
 Thematic
 Participatory
Orientation Aids:
 Geographical
 Intellectual
 Conceptual
 Psychological
Entrance Focus
Circulation Pattern:
 Arterial
 Comb
 Chain
 Star/Fan
 Block
Arrangement of Space:
 Linear
 Free
 Corridor
 Alcove
 Composite
Showcases:
 Free-standing
 Vitrine
 Open platforms
Mannequins:
 Heads
 Faces

- Hair
- Hands
- Legs
- Poses
- Surreal
- Internal support
- Lighting
- Colour
- Labels:
 - Literal
 - Descriptive
 - Emotive
 - Conceptual
 - Technical
 - Relation to object
 - Readability
- Graphics
- Models/maquettes
- Props
- Other media
 - Film
 - Interactive computer display
 - Projection
 - Audio
- Pacing:
 - Light
 - Colour
 - Texture
 - Scale
 - Space
 - Shape
 - Intensity
 - Arrangement
 - Movement
 - Temperature
- Marketing Material
- Press Coverage
- Publication
- Archival Material

(Adapted from Michael Belcher, 1991. *Exhibitions in Museums*, Leicester: Leicester University Press)

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