Dress History: New Directions in Theory and Practice

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In recent years dress historians have ruminated on the nature of their discipline at regular intervals. In 1997 the conference “Dress History: Studies and Approaches” took place in Manchester and examined the gulf between object-based and theoretical approaches and many of the same themes presented there were revisited at the “Developments in Dress History” conference at the University of Brighton at the end of 2011. This event celebrated the pivotal role played by Professor
Lou Taylor in the development of dress history. Dress History: New Directions in Theory and Practice is an edited collection of essays drawn from the conference, which provided a comprehensive examination of the latest research exploring the meaning of dress in its widest cultural context. To distil over 60 papers into a volume of 12 essays is no mean feat, but the editors have chosen carefully and each contribution helps to illuminate the healthy state of dress history today.

In their introduction Nicklas and Pollen (both academics from the University of Brighton) explain that “Through original research and innovative case studies, we argue that dress is a fundamental means, indeed sometimes one of the only available ways, by which groups and individuals express and negotiate their identities” (p. 1). They explain that contributors to the book are united by “their close focus on objects and images of dress“ providing a “showcase of the latest research from around the world” (p. 1). They grapple with terminology and methodology, choosing the term “dress” over “fashion,” “clothing” and “costume” for its inclusivity, which is illustrated in the broad range of case studies included. The editors outline the importance of Lou Taylor’s contributions to the dress history project, through her writing, teaching and curating. In particular they single out her two publications, The Study of Dress History (2002) and Establishing Dress History (2004). Taylor’s work and these two publications in particular form a thread that runs through the whole volume.

Jonathan Faiers begins the volume with “Dress thinking: disciplines and interdisciplinarity,” arguing that dress history needs to be at the center of critical enquiry rather than fighting on the side-lines. Like the editors, Faiers stresses the importance of explaining the scope of dress history. He provides the reader with a summary of pioneering publications on the subject, including discussions of the work of Laver and Bell, who “saw the edges of their disciplines not as limits, but as bridges” (p. 31). He also draws our attention to prophetic literary works that pre-date a recognized subject of dress history: James Fenimore Cooper’s 1843 Autobiography of a Pocket Handkerchief, Zola’s The Dream (1888) and Carlyle’s Sartor resartus (1833–1834), as well as more contemporary writing outside the confines of dress history such as architectural historian Mark Wigley’s White Walls, Designer Dresses (1994) and Nicholas de Monchaux’s Spacesuit: Fashioning Apollo. Faiers encourages the dress historian to explore new ways of thinking about interdisciplinarity, in order to counter the danger of the subject becoming fixed within specific disciplinary boundaries as it becomes more institutionalized.

The remaining 11 essays are arranged chronologically and include contributions from established writers as well as those at the beginning of their careers. Each essay has its own specific subject (often an under-researched area of dress history), but studies of the object or image predominate and many also illuminate some of the broader issues and
problems facing the researcher. Liza Foley is a doctoral student at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin. Her essay “Gloves ‘of the very thin sort’: gifting Limerick gloves in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” is drawn from her PhD research. Such gloves were highly prized and expensive. Made from the aborted skins of unborn calves, their fineness allowed them to be packed within the two halves of a walnut shell. Foley is interested in the materiality of such objects and acknowledges her debt to Taylor’s emphasis on objects as a means of examining society and culture. Foley discusses the gifting of such objects drawing on Mauss’ theory of gift-giving. She assesses the Limerick glove as a material manifestation of social connections.

Clynk and Peoples’ essay “All out in the wash: convict stain removal in the Narryna Heritage Museum’s dress collection” highlights the problem facing the researcher when surviving objects are elusive. Between 1803 and 1853 72,000 convicts were sent to Van Dieman’s Land (now Tasmania), but the silence which had surrounded this part of Australia’s history until recently meant that much material evidence of their existence has disappeared. The authors have been forced to utilize alternative primary sources including museum documentation, digitized records, newspapers and photographs of ex-convict women, illuminating the ways in which women had access to fashion and why this was not acknowledged in the Narryna collection (the largest private collection of nineteenth century dress in Australia). It became clear to Clynk and Peoples that the convict stain had influenced the lack of acquisition of particular items for the collection.

The global reach of the book is notable. Damgaard’s research on Afro-Brazilian dress known as traje de crioula (creole clothing) highlights the issues surrounding the production of images created of African and Afro-Brazilian women in the nineteenth century by, or for, foreign visitors. Styliano looks at a small collection of Ethiopian clothing that belonged to Queen Woyzaro Terunesh which found its way to the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1869. She examines the cultural biography of these objects (drawing on the work of Kopytoff) and as a consequence is able to enhance the understanding of the V&A’s attitude to African dress.

The relationship between the museum and its owner is examined in Guth’s essay “Dress, self-fashioning and display at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.” Guth asserts that for Gardner “dressing was inseparable from collecting” (p. 124). Her collections of paintings, sculpture, decorative art and, significantly, portraits of herself displayed around the museum create “a kind of social performance” (p. 123). Museum collections are also central to Alexandra Palmer’s essay “‘At once classical and modern’: Raymond Duncan dress and textiles in the Royal Ontario Museum,” where she outlines the complex questions a curator must ask when acquiring new items for the collection. In charting the process of the acquisition of pieces designed by Raymond Duncan
(designer, philosopher and dancer), she charts the research she undertook in order to apply for funding to acquire a number of pieces designed by him, and in so doing she also reveals his taste for wearing Greek togas made from cloth that he wove himself.

The focus on individual dress practices is also addressed in Jane Hattrick’s essay on the British couturier Norman Hartnell. Drawing on the privately owned Hartnell archive, Hattrick concentrates on his public and private identities as revealed through his clothing preferences. This fascinating essay argues that Hartnell’s personal taste in dressing himself had an impact on his designs for his women customers. He performed a series of identities in public and private. He had feminine outfits made up for him at the House of Hartnell, such as an embroidered crinoline gown. His public persona saw him dressed as a metropolitan dandy in London and an English rural landowner at his house in the country.

Rachel Ritchie’s research is presented in “From Kays of Worcester to Vogue, Paris: the Women’s Institute magazine, rural life and fashionable dress in post-war Britain.” She argues that the contributors to Home and Country (the magazine of the National Federation of Women’s Institutes) positioned the countryside and rural dwellers as part of fashionable modernity and this was largely achieved through the presence of clothing on its pages, including reports of the Paris fashion shows. Through examination of the magazine, Ritchie analyzes the ways in which consumers were able to overcome the difficulties of limited access to shops. During the 1960s the magazine saw increasing numbers of advertisements promoting mail-order and home dressmaking and knitting that helped provide rural women with an economical means of keeping up with fashion.

The ability of dress to signal rebellion, political associations and social conscience is explored in Annabella Pollen’s “Radical shoemaking and dress reform from Fabians to feminists.” Pollen begins with a discussion of the bohemian libertarian Edward Carpenter in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whose philosophy around the simplification of life included the rejection of fashionable dress. He maintained “the liberation of the feet to be of principal importance” (p. 181). To that end he adopted sandals, which he made himself, as well as to order. Pollen continues her discussion of radical shoemaking in her case study of Green Shoes, a women’s shoemaking collective established in Devon in 1981. The group prioritized “foot-health, comfort and durability.” Pollen concludes that such comfortable shoes should be seen as both sensible and radical.

Dress History concludes with a discussion of contemporary makers and consumers in India. In “Dress and textiles in transition: the sungudi sari revival of Tamil Nadu, India,” Kala Shreen examines the disappearing craft of sungudi. In this process knots are tied into fabric which is then dyed and the knots removed leaving a pattern; the resulting fabric is
used for saris. A project to revive this intricate, time-consuming process was launched in 2011. But rather than focusing on the material object and its production, Shreen concentrates on the craft organizations, retailers and consumers using the concepts of “transit,” “transition” and “transformation” to aid an understanding of the sungudi sari and how the values imposed on it by the various organizations attempting to revive the process resulted in it becoming “an exotic object” (p. 205).

The editors’ statement that “dress can variously conceal, embellish, envelop and shape ideas as well as bodies” (p. 12) is aptly demonstrated in the content chosen for this publication. The increasing numbers of conferences, publications and social media content devoted to the serious study of dress history is testament to the healthy state of the subject, and the publication of Dress History: New Directions in Theory and Practice is timely. The varied scope of the essays included provides the reader with a snapshot of the richness of the field. However, if an emerging researcher picks up this book thinking they will learn “how to do cutting-edge research” (p. 1), as the editors claim in the Introduction, they might be a little disappointed. This is not a “how to” book; its value lies in the fact that the individual contributors approach their subjects from a multiplicity of angles and engage with a variety of sources, methods and ideas.