

Book Review

Marie Riegels Melchior (ed) Birgitta Svensson (ed), *Fashion and Museums: Theory and Practice*, London, Bloomsbury, 2014, paperback, £19.99

Whilst I was studying fashion at college in the 1990s, fashion's place in the museum felt very much to be about conceptual fashion viewed as fine art. Since then, the scope has widened considerably and *Fashion and Museums: Theory and Practice* explores a much wider range of, and approach to, fashion in the museum. Much of this new seriousness appears to follow on from the 2011 Alexander McQueen exhibition, 'Savage Beauty', at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (<http://blog.metmuseum.org/alexandermcqueen/>), which, at the time of writing, was on at the Victoria and Albert Museum (incidentally, this book was prominently featured in the exhibitions shop). *Fashion and Museums*, which came out of a conference on the same theme, explores both sides of the relationship between fashion collections and museum spaces, which is becoming omnipresent. An edited volume, the book is structured into three sections: 'The Power of Fashion: When Museums Enter New Territory', 'Fashion Controversies: When Bodies Become Public' and 'In Practice.' Its central question is, what can museums do that fashion houses, concept stores, magazines, television programmes and books cannot?

The first chapter, Koda and Glasscock's 'The Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art' charts the story of a world famous collection, whose story it turns out mirrors that of collections the world over. From early beginnings, it charts the role of passionate and wealthy collectors, through theatre shows and dress-up boxes to the dizzy heights of blockbuster exhibitions and a more serious, academic, take on costume. The tipping point for most collections was around the 1970s and extensive work has already been done in this area; this book follows in the footsteps of Judith Clark and Amy de la Haye's *Exhibiting fashion before and after 1971* (2014). Up to that point most collections were made up of luxurious, exclusive pieces; however, the change in understanding fashion's place in the museum instigated a change in collecting focus.

Chapter two, 'Understanding Fashion Through the Museum,' continues this theme by exploring the museum as a place in which the public can explore both the current *avant-garde* and fashion as part of our contemporary culture. It explores fashion's relationship with the body and its impact on our identity and self-image, which the author, José Teunissen, states is key in a media driven social culture where clothing continues to gather additional meanings which seem to spiral it further away from its utilitarian roots. In chapter three, Marco Pecorari addresses the challenge of displaying contemporary fashion history in museums, looking at new approaches and new perspectives brought in and made popular by key exhibitions. It covers issues such as the tendency to focus on the production of fashion over its consumption and dissemination, and trends such as 'super brands' which overtake the product itself. It explores the enormous challenges and limitations of makers acting as curators of their own work in the museum, such as the lack of a critical view. It is a fascinating and very relevant topic. The final chapter in this section, 'Appraised, displayed and concealed,' looks at fashion photography in Swedish museums, a detailed view exploring why there is currently a distinct lack of display opportunities for such images.

Section two on 'Fashion Controversies' very much appealed to me, particularly the chapter by Julia Petrov exploring museums, fashion and gender. This chapter discusses traditional roles (women displayed in domestic toil or completing textile crafts) and women leading the way in curating displays of dress as an extension of traditional female textile

crafts. This presents a challenge, that of presenting audiences with diversity in the dressed experience. Petrov makes the point that fashion history should not be seen as frivolous, as this continues the gender stereotype; she suggests that thoughtful practice in the future can help to change this, although it also needs to be made clear to audiences if the balance is to change. Marianne Larsson's well researched and engaging chapter tells the long and winding story of women's emancipation through the struggle to wear practical clothing for skiing. The story is well told, linking together original garments, photos and key figures that led the way, from battling with skirts to items stolen from the male wardrobe. Chapter seven tells the history of the mannequin, from waxworks through to Swedish system developed in 1933 at the Nordiska Museet. Anyone who has dressed mounted costumes for an exhibition will know the challenges well, and this chapter helps the reader to reflect on the mannequin's role in the wider context of displaying fashion in museums. I found some interesting research in this chapter relating to my own work around the imprint the dress makes on the body and bringing this back to life for audiences. Wonderfully written, it makes a dry subject almost magical: 'The previous owners almost come alive, become present and as such the mannequins are filled with character' (121).

Section three, 'In practice', begins with a tour of The Fashion Museum in Bath with its curator, Rosemary Harden. A place I know well, this chapter brought to my attention many more aspects I have missed in my visits. The next chapter, 'Collecting Practice: Designmuseum Danmark' is from another museum I have visited, in which fine art fashion sits alongside period pieces. It is a forward-thinking, fascinating place and this chapter gives lots to think about, including this Dior quote: 'Fashion and dress history is full of examples where fabric and dress melt into each other and become inseparable' (149). I pondered for some time the opening statement to the conclusion of this chapter that 'as a curator one always has to try not to be biased by the *Zeitgeist*.' I agree that normally in life one must try to avoid being biased, but surely the *zeitgeist* is central to creating a collection which reflects fashionable dress? However, this may be down to different interpretations of a much-overused term.

Chapter ten is a refreshingly honest account, chronologically recording the highs and lows of an exhibition on folk dress at Amagermuseet in Denmark, which tried to engage young people. It gives a good account of the challenges faced, although some issues are covered too thoroughly and others hardly addressed, and at times it still feels very much like a conference paper. The next chapter, 'Learning Through Fashion', explores how museum content supports the education programme at the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology using fabric sample books to give a voice to consumers from another time. It is a way of showing teenagers fashion, as they understand it is now a new process. The final chapter explores fashion autography work (which has relevance to my own current MA project) in which an individual relates their life history through clothing. Linking directly to past works such as Beckerman (2005) and Picardie (2006), the author talks us through his PhD project, describing his wardrobe before moving onto designs for an exhibition of his life through his clothes, going into great detail about two proposed exhibition spaces. This chapter made me reflect on the whole book by readdressing the issue of (fashion) makers as curators, and of wearers as curators. Incorporating a personal insight can blur lines of objectivity and addresses the concept of the *zeitgeist* though a whole life view of dress; a fascinating project that has never been realised as an exhibition; if it had, I would have liked to have seen it.

To conclude, *Fashion and Museums* explores the scope of what fashion can tell us, and reminds us of the importance of context. What the different aspects that surround fashion can reveal to us is vast, for example the greater the interest in the body, the greater the interest in fashion. Fashion brings new and larger audiences to museums creating a larger impact and creating new possibilities. It is certainly an exciting time to be working in the field of dress history!

References

Beckerman, I. (2005), *Love Loss and What I Wore*, Algonquin: Chapel Hill

Clark, J. and de la Haye, A. (2014), *Exhibiting Fashion Before and After 1971*, London: Yale University Press

Picardie, J. (2006) *My Mothers Wedding Dress*, London: Picador