

Book Review

Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim, *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object-Based Research in Fashion*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015, paperback £24.99, pp. 224.

With fashion exhibitions becoming increasingly popular in museums worldwide, the discipline of fashion curating has also become more recognized. However, many museums with collections of costume do not have specialist curators, and even students on specialist courses may not have easy access to collection artefacts. Therefore, important information that can only be gleaned from the close examination of an object may be missed when exhibitions are prepared. Against this background, the authors have created a practical guidebook to researching fashion objects using a material culture framework.

The book is organized as a capsule course to gathering information on dress. It begins with a brief overview of object-based approaches in fashion, noting the names of collectors, curators, and academics in this field who advocated for systematic object study beyond mere connoisseurship. The following chapters outline Mida and Kim's method, which they dub 'the slow approach to seeing' (p. 13): a methodical process from observation to reflection to interpretation. The authors also discuss the importance of documentation, particularly through drawing and detailed photography, as a means by which to engage with objects. Targeted looking can, in this way, reveal hidden components and significances.

In the first stage of analysis, details of material, construction, and use are noted. It is assumed that the reader comes to object analysis with a basic knowledge of textile and costume. While the authors guide the user to notice pertinent details, they do not explain what a selvedge is, or how to determine woven designs from embroidery or hand- versus machine-sewn seams. Readers are referred to dictionaries and encyclopedias for information on the difference between various textiles and weaves. The authors do provide detailed guidance on what to look for, and include some helpful hints on the development of textile technologies (such as synthetic fabrics) and labels, which would assist in grounding any conclusions drawn at this stage in historical fact.

The reflection stage then prompts the reader to think about the significance of the object. Importantly, Mida and Kim emphasize the sensual properties of dress, recognizing the embodied nature of this type of object; 'dress detectives' are encouraged to consider the sounds, smells, and textures of the garments under analysis, and to imagine its worn experience. This is a unique contribution to non-journalistic writing on fashion, and is certainly worth highlighting, as garments hanging limply on hangers in wardrobes or laid out in collection storage lose many of the key qualities that make them appealing in life. Contextual information by way of similar garments (extant or represented in images) is then solicited to fill out a picture of the life cycle of the object. Mida and Kim address the issue of survival bias, and sensibly caution that conclusions on the representativeness of any garment must be made after extensive study of comparable examples and evidence from multiple sources.

The final stage – interpretation – prompts the use of theory to understand the significance of the garment in economic, social, cultural, historical, and philosophical terms. This chapter emphasizes the importance of research questions for guiding investigation, but also explains the disciplinary biases that might arise when interrogating fashion objects. Unfortunately, this section is rather short, although it does summarize how some of the particular garments studied in detail later in the book reflect important theories commonly used in fashion studies. One of the things many students of fashion struggle with is the 'so what?' of object-based research,

and a more detailed explanation of why it is important to go beyond the garment, and how to begin doing so, would have greatly strengthened the chapter. A longer bibliography would have been useful here, as well; Barnard's *Fashion Theory* reader (Routledge 2007), Kawamura's *Doing Research in Fashion and Dress* (Bloomsbury 2011), or Kaiser's *Fashion and Cultural Studies* (Bloomsbury 2013) would all be useful additions.

Seven detailed case studies follow, and serve as demonstrations of Mida and Kim's methodology. These feature museum objects as well as ones from private collections, and cover a range from historic (1820s) to contemporary (2004) dress, making this book useful for a variety of contexts where costume may be analyzed. Mida is a teaching curator in the Ryerson University Fashion Research Collection, while Kim was a fashion curator at Kensington Palace; their expertise in teaching and collection research is evident in how carefully case studies are described, the conclusions drawn, and the references used in describing the significance of their conclusions. Some useful contextual information for each garment is provided after detailed analysis, leading the reader to targeted theories around topics such as gender, class, and commodification. Adequate bibliographical references are provided at the end of each section which, although not exhaustive, point the reader towards key texts from which to begin their own, related, work. Each chapter is lavishly illustrated in colour, with object photography by Mida and a range of documentary images from archival sources. These are largely excellent, although unfortunately, some photographs of the dress details discussed are slightly out of focus (pp. 87, 110, 145, 169, 207).

This book is not a guide to be referenced once in a while; it is intended to be used by the researcher before, during, and after encounters with fashion objects. Nevertheless, there are two appendices, featuring checklists for observation and reflection, which summarize the approaches demonstrated in the body of the book, and these can be used independently. In preparing this review, I experimented with using the checklists in my undergraduate dress history class, which features object handling. It was evident that some of the strategies of 'slow seeing' need to initially be practiced with an experienced individual, who can demonstrate the techniques. As might be expected of a system which somewhat artificially separates three inter-related aspects of analysis, the construction observation checklist was somewhat limited; prompts for reflection would have been useful to guide the process of examining the design decisions and wear patterns which may be noted. The reflection checklist, however, would be extremely useful as a means of encouraging students to choose relevant areas for critical analysis, as preparation for essays or exhibition projects.

For post-secondary students on fashion courses with access to study garments, or for the novice researcher investigating in a museum or private collection, this book would be an invaluable resource. Even individuals with experience in handling fashion objects may glean new tips, or be reminded of best practice when closely examining dress objects, or in relating these findings to broader socio-economic, historical, or theoretical contexts. This book would also be a useful addition to the shelf of fashion collections in museums, to assist when training staff and volunteers in collection inventory or exhibit preparation. *The Dress Detective* gives clear clues to becoming a sartorial sleuth.