Embodying Dress in Context Online

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Abstract

Scholarship on exhibiting dress and fashion includes strategies—from moderate to fantastical—for animating unembodied garments. The same issue can be applied to dress collections in museums, where garments are often almost physically inaccessible and visually unintelligible. My paper will address this issue through a case study of an exhibition on the Canadian Museum of History website, *Canadian Dress: The Confederation Generation, 1840-1890*. Through this project, I was able to digitize many garments, presented as testimonies of people and place.

Note that all images of artifacts are from the collections of the Canadian Museum of History.

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Introduction

As is abundantly clear from this conference, navel-gazing about dress and fashion exhibitions is increasingly on the mind of all those involved in costume, and is the topic of the book *Exhibiting Fashion*, *Before and After 1971*. Perhaps the sudden increase in fashion exhibitions, coupled with a wide range of approaches to what constitutes a fashion exhibition in terms of choice of theme, objects and – especially presentation -- has given rise to a museological retrospective that this conference theme represents – and that is addressed in the recent book, *Fashion and Museums: Theory and Practice* (Melchior and Svensson, 2014)

It is curious to me that in neither of these books I just mentioned nor any recent writing on the topic, is there discussion of <u>digital</u> fashion exhibitions. It was a surprise to me that I was the only presenter to have approached this subject at this conference.

Another aspect of the growing corpus of scholarship on the practice of exhibiting dress and fashion focuses on strategies—from moderate to fantastical—for animating un-embodied garments – through mounting, providing contextual media, and staging *mise en scene* (Hjemdahl, 2014, Mida 2015; Palmer 2008) Clothing is, as we well know, the category of material culture that, unlike furniture or glassware, for example, needs to be mounted to be fully comprehensible. The same problem can be applied to the documentation of dress collections in museums, where garments often lay folded in boxes or drawers, making them both almost physically inaccessible, and visually unintelligible.

It is interesting to ask how different exhibition practices have produced specific bodies.

- Anne-Sophie Hjemdahl

"Exhibiting the Body, Dress, and Time in Museums"
in *Fashion and Museums*

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier, 2011

Ingrid Mida
"Animating the Body in Museum Exhibitions of Fashion and Dress"

DRESS 41:1 (2015)

Figure 1

I hope today to address some of the issues of how to make dress collections accessible to the public through a case study of an exhibition on the Canadian Museum of History website called *Canadian Dress: The Confederation Generation, 1840-1890*. (Canadian Dress 2007)

Canadian Museum of History and its collections

First a bit about the costume collections at the Canadian Museum of History (formerly called The Canadian Museum of Civilization), Canada's national human history museum in Gatineau, Quebec, near our capital city, Ottawa. I was a history curator there for twenty-one years, now retired, but I am lucky to remain as a research associate, with which, to my great joy – I get full library privileges!

Unlike at decorative art museums, the Canadian Museum of History's curators are organized thematically and chronologically, such as, for example, Curator of New France or Communications or Sport. Therefore, unlike the Royal Ontario Museum, for example, there has never been a curator of costume and textiles.

The costume collections reflect the original three disciplinary research wings of the museum: folk culture, ethnology (native peoples of North America) and history. The folk culture collection of about 3000 items includes ethnic clothing brought to Canada by immigrants. Probably the most significant collection is that of aboriginal peoples, about 5000 artifacts. This ethnology collection includes some of the earliest of North American native dress in the world, including, for example, a Naskapi coat, and a Haida button blanket, dating to about 1900.

The History Dress Collections

The history dress collection, about 10,000 garments and accessories, represents western, or conventional wear. In its initial years in the 1970s, the collection was built mainly through hit or miss donation. It was never envisioned as a high fashion collection, but rather the wear of everyday Canadians. Many of the speakers and no doubt attendees at this conference work for national and regional museums like mine where the costume and textile collections are historically based, often concerned with identity, both personal and collective. In these collections the consumer – or wearer – of the clothing – and sometimes the maker – rather than the designer, was the collecting strategy. (Pecorari, 2014) The history collection at my museum then can be placed on the *wearer/dress*, rather than the *designer/fashion* end of the continuum: about 60 percent of the collection is documented as used or worn in Canada, but only 20 percent was made in Canada.

Figure 2

The collection does contain a few eighteenth-century garments, and a few from the early nineteenth century, but very few. There are a few iconic garments representing a meta-narrative of Canada, including an elaborate dress designed by Norman Hartnell and worn by Queen Elizabeth II, but again, few.

The strength of the collection lies in women's wear (of course!) in the period between 1850 and 1930. When I arrived at the museum in 1991, the western dress collection languished from neglect. There was no curator dedicated to the collection, and most of my colleagues were male historians for whom clothing was not an intellectual priority or challenge! So, I took it on. I was tolerated, but not taken too seriously.

Since then, the study of fashion and fashion exhibitions and collections has taken off, lending credibility to fashion in museums. But I argue that those of us involved with an everyday clothing collection, representing ordinary people, still have an upward battle for the same recognition as curators of other categories of material culture.

Figure 3

So, while the entire furniture collection at my museum was digitally photographed in the 1990s, only about fifty quality photos of mounted garments existed when, in 2007, the Canadian government came up with a funding programme for getting Canadian cultural content on the internet, particularly collections in national museums.

An online dress project

The Canadian Museum of History wanted to - indeed was expected to - tap into this resource, and asked for suggestions for topics. I immediately came up with a cunning plan. I suggested a topic that I knew would not be challenged: a web module that would focus on our dress collection dating to 1840–1890 - the generation that brought in and followed shortly after Canadian Confederation in 1867.

Each object was chosen to tell a story about its maker, owner and wearer, and convey the lifestyles of Canadians in the Victorian era. The selection allowed examination of the contrasts of gender and social standing. So, for women's clothing, we have the historical overview of women's roles of the period, and then sections on everyday clothing, outerwear, fancy dress and rites of passage. One of my goals was to try as much as

possible to include only documented Canadian clothing, so we included a section on Notes of Families. I tried to include all photographs and other contextual information that existed.
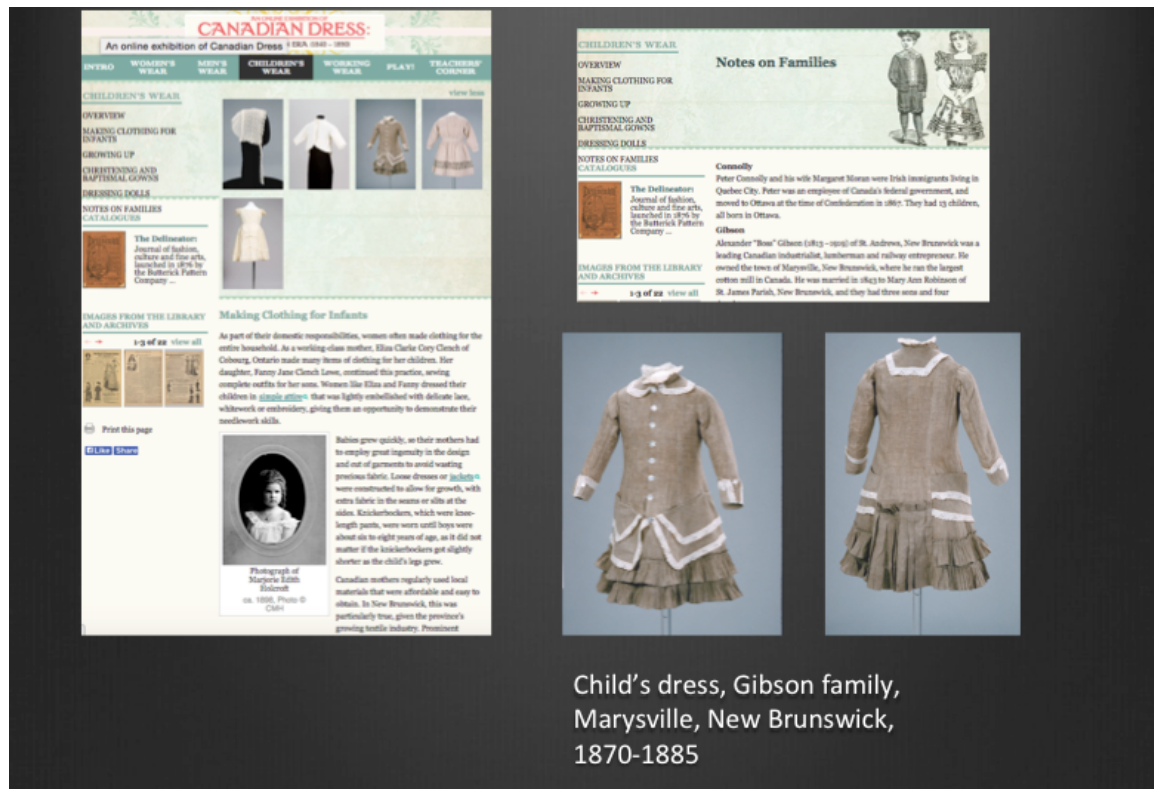

Figure 4

The website was envisioned as a learning experience and online exhibition. Where does this webpage fall in the many types of museum internet-based sites devoted to costume? I cannot pretend that I have any expertise in the digital world, but I am aware that the choice and use of digital technology has an impact on its message and effectiveness, as in the words of the Late Marvin Kranzberg, founding editor of *Technology and Culture*: "Technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral." (quoted in Fickers 2016)

Canadian Dress and other projects

To use the "Levi-Straussian" analogy of historian Daniel Cohen, the presentation of artifact and archive collections online fall between the raw and the cooked. (Cohen 2004) *Canadian Dress* is definitely on the cooked side, perhaps over-cooked; we took the raw ingredients to create a ready-made dish to be served up whole to visitors to the site.
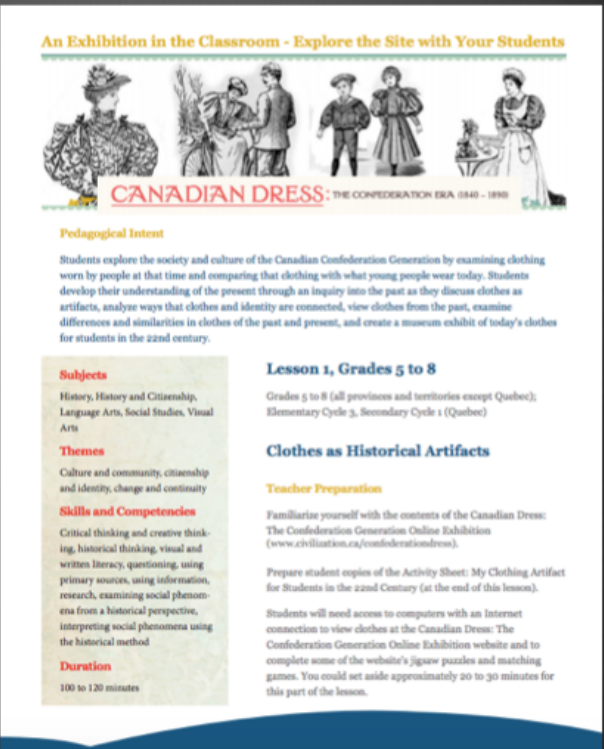
Figure 5

The raw is the old idea of just getting the collections out there by plastering digital images on the web with little context or searchability. Happily, that is not much done anymore, however, this type of inventory still lurks about, including the Canadian Museum of History's Search the catalogue.

But recently excellent websites to do with dress are sprouting up that deliver what you could call parboiled information, which sounds terrible, but actually I think is ideal. In a recent article in *Dress*, the authors promote a flexible, multi-media database, along with custom layouts to allow researchers to use the material in their own way, create their own path, form their own conclusions: "Viewers can consider a digital surrogate of an artifact in multiple contexts and form their own conclusions." (Kirkland, Martin, Schoeny, Smith, Strege 2015)

As Stewart and Marcketti reported in their 2012 survey of dress and fashion website development, one curator they interviewed said: "Museums have this idea that they are holders of authority. Visitors want to trust that the information they're getting is reliable, but there are many ways of learning and content is also about eliciting interaction so that people are engaged with the material" (Stewart, Marcketti 2012) This is certainly more appropriate for this post-modern digital age, compared to the TV dinner of *Canadian Dress*. But, seriously, as online exhibitions go – whether virtualizations of physical exhibitions, or created for the web, *Canadian Dress* is very attractive, and provides a huge amount of information, if well digested.
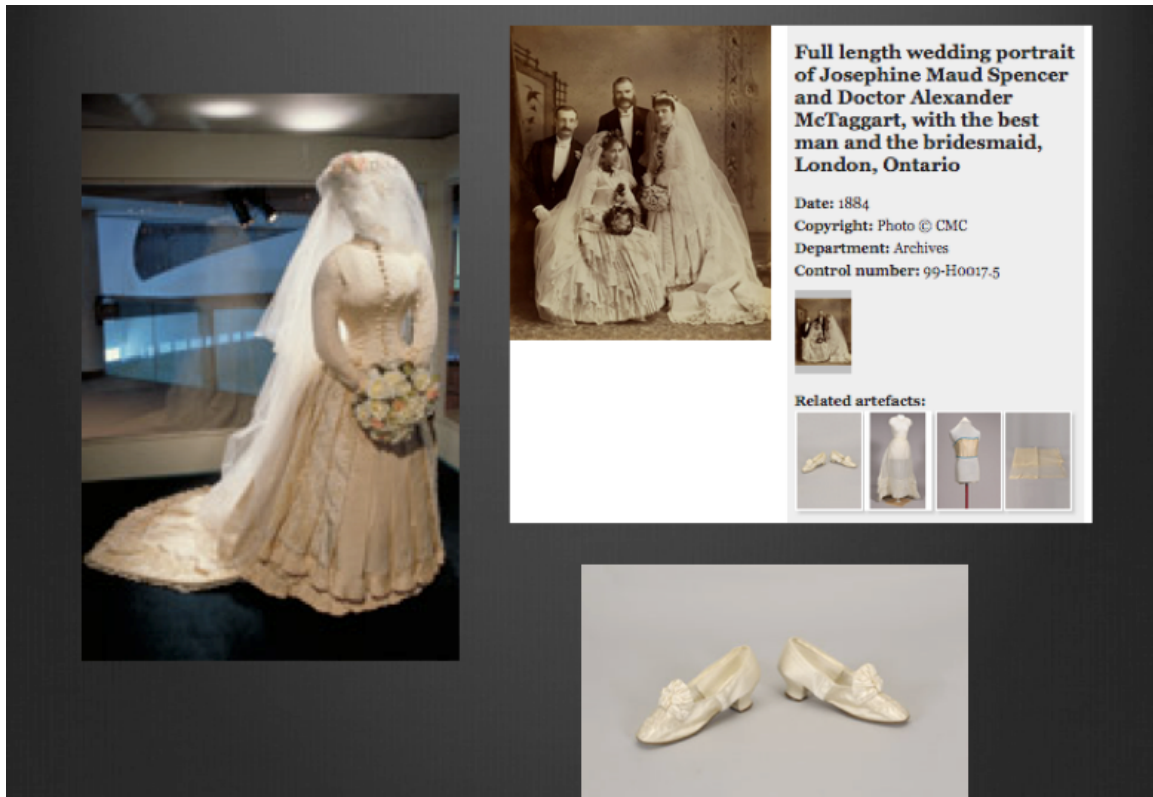
Figure 6

My main complaints are: not nearly enough details. Since part of the reason garments cost so much to photograph - they require conservators or curators to safely mount – it should be an opportunity to provide many details. But generally only two photographs of the front and back of the garment were taken, as in the child's dress in Figure 4. Secondly, the website is not live. It was envisioned from the beginning that viewers of *Canadian Dress* would be able to connect to the museum's database for more information on artifacts, as well as artifacts that were identified for the site, but not featured on the webpage. For some higher-level reason, the powers that be decided that the webpage would be static. I chose 250 costumes but only 53 costumes appear on the webpage. So, visitors do not have access to my total list of documented garments and accessories covering 1840-1890, nor are they able to access any future updates to the information in the database.

One example is the wedding dress in figure 6. The associated artifacts that got online are: the shoes, some undergarments and the photograph. But there are also garters, gloves, corset and box, and two years after the launch of *Canadian Dress*, the family donated a wedding invitation and related newspaper clippings. These could all have been seamlessly added to the online database.
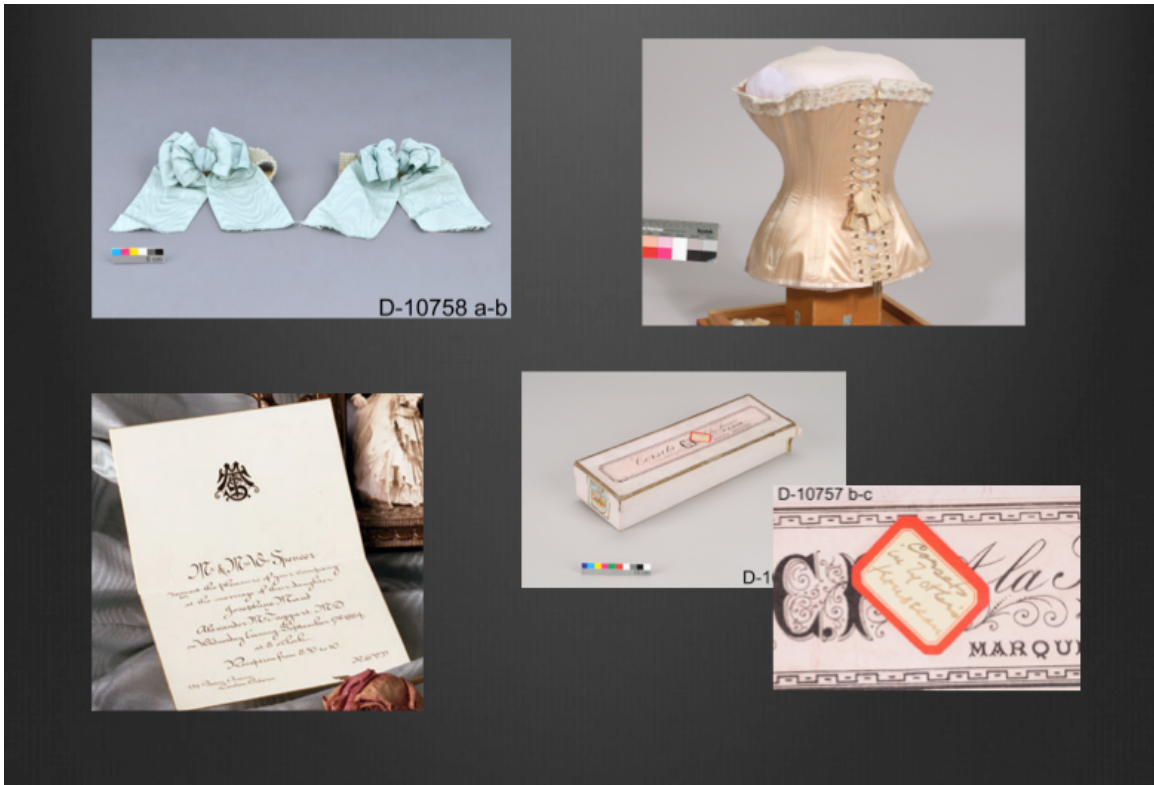
Figure 7

Achievements of *Canadian Dress*

What was achieved with this website was to get a selection of garments mounted and photographed, to attach any related archival material, and to present dress collections in political and social contexts. The garments were mounted for documentary purposes, however, and often do not give a sense of the body form underneath. Note in Figure 8 the difference in mounting for the webpage as opposed to for publication. So, how to embody garments both visually and intellectually in cyberspace? For the *Canadian Dress* project, we did 3-D imaging of a dress that viewers could move in all directions. Ironically, as is often the case with digital maintenance, the image is not longer working and was removed.

Nursing matron's dress, Nova Scotia, ca. 1865

Figure 8

Well, and so it goes, special effects come and go, but collections and good stories live on. Perhaps the awareness of the problem of sustainability and obsoleteness accounts for the lack of writing or presenting on the digital history of dress collections. With technology changing as quickly as fashion, who wants to tackle it?

We are thinking a lot now about the history of dress and fashion exhibitions. I think we would benefit by looking at online exhibitions as well, as there are excellent examples out there (for example ICOM Costume Committee, http://www.clothestellstories.com/) that reflect the values and intellectual approach of their time.

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