

DRESSING THE NEW WORLD. A Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research Fellowship (2015-17)

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Abstract

“Dressing the New World” aims to understand in detail the trade mechanism of European products and fashion overseas. It will evaluate the impact of European commodities and fashionable goods in everyday life in the colonial system. In particular it will study textiles and fashionable items in the Spanish New World, governed by the Spanish from Mexico City since the conquest of the Aztec Empire in 1521.

Two specific questions led me to this research proposal:

- What effect did the successful marketing of European products have on the Spanish New World at the turn of the eighteenth century?
- How and why should one go about studying the European textiles that transformed the way people dressed in these territories, which stretched from Mexico City in New Spain, to the Spanish West Indies in the Caribbean, and all the way to the Spanish East Indies in the Asia Pacific?

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Introduction

The “Dressing the New World” research project is framed by a unique document, which describes Mexico in 1700s.¹ This document is a rare source for the knowledge of Spanish America at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and a unique source to understand how and why Europe aimed to disseminate its textiles, commodities and fashionable goods overseas. This research project seeks to consider early modern fashion in detail through this historical document and other resources from literature, iconography and material culture, merging into different disciplines: modern history, art history and dress history. Finally the research project aims to integrate the impact of politics and global connections in fashion studies for the early modern period.

Official reports, political correspondence and accounts written by travellers are rich sources of information that allow us to write the history of fabrics and fashions and to study their impact, consumption and distribution in early modern times. Taken together these sources will offer a unique view through which to envisage and articulate textiles and dress in the mix of cultures of the New World from the Spanish conquest in 1521 up to the nineteenth century, and map out how the global market connected different parts of the world in early modern period. Matched with a unique source of iconography (the “Casta paintings”), the achieved research will produce the first illustrated glossary on textiles and garments which were consumed on a global scale in the preindustrial time.

The Culture of Clothing: A system?

Very little information has reached us about fashion and dress in the New World, and the only research that has been carried out has been limited to its social and economic aspects. In 1979 Fernand Braudel produced a three-volume publication of the first broad-scale history

of the preindustrial modern world, which is considered one of the precursors of world-systems theory: 1. The structures of everyday Life. 2. The wheels of commerce. 3. The perspective of the world.ⁱⁱ More recently, new approaches have come from North America, addressing the question of visual and material culture and design studies. In 2010 David Jaffee published a study of the material culture of Early America – *A New Nation of Goods* - analysing domestic consumption in the North Eastern territory in the mid-nineteenth century.ⁱⁱⁱ In my research I will investigate the global market, focusing on the impact of the European clothing culture in eighteenth-century Spanish colonies. To this end, the project will use different source types and documentation and will cross multiple disciplines:

1. Travel literature
2. Paintings of different racial identities in colonial Spanish American society, called “Casta Paintings”
3. Museum artefacts.

This research proposal intends to open a new and exciting window in fashion studies with the study of the circuits of fashion and clothing culture, merging into colonial studies (Zaval, 1967; Earle, 2012) and global history (Grusinski, 2002; Leibsohn, 2012).^{iv} The uniqueness of this research project is its interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary ambition. This proposal seeks to connect and inter-relate a wide range of different disciplines within the human and social sciences. It will also aim to develop the study of a fashion system for an earlier period as stated by Roland Barthes in his 1967 *The Fashion System*, and will drive analysis beyond the social-cultural approach of the Ancien Régime clothing culture in France described by Daniel Roche in 1997.^v My sources and method will contribute to bring fashion studies into global and political history, which is completely genuine. The originality of this research is to write a new chapter on the global history of people’s dress, combining it with travel literature, paintings and museum artefacts.

A World of Commerce

In his dictionary of commerce, Savary des Bruslons writes that: “The West Indies, a Spanish colony, cannot do without merchandise and products manufactured in Europe” (Savary des Bruslons, I, *État général du commerce*, 1723).^{vi} The *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d’Alembert describes Mexico City, capital of New Spain and the largest city in the New World, as being extremely rich in commerce as it was supplied in the north by approximately twenty large ships filled with merchandise from Christendom that landed each year at Vera Cruz (*Encyclopédie*, vol. 10).^{vii} In spite of strict regulations trade with Spanish America, theoretically reserved exclusively for the Spanish, was nonetheless supplied by other European countries, especially by the French, English and Dutch. This commerce was, in fact, one of the richest and most profitable of European businesses. All the merchandise for Spain and for Spanish America was transported by French, English and Dutch vessels, as well as those of a few other Northern European countries (Savary, I: 237).

Texts (written descriptions, travel literature), images (paintings, maps, drawings) and object studies (dress, garments, fashion accessories) are the three axes I chose as methods of investigation and analysis. Therefore, the research will be articulated through three bodies of documentation:

- The fascinating description of the trade in Mexico by the French agent Jean de Monségur in 1707-1714, a French archive kept in Paris.
- The phenomenal “Casta paintings” series from 1711 to 1770s conserved in Spain and other places in Europe and in Mexico.
- The rare textile samples (from books of textiles samples, or pieces of clothing), costumes (dress or piece of clothing) and accessories (fan, shoes...) from museum collections around the world.

New words for the Culture of Clothing and the trade of textile in the New World

WORDS and concepts. Textile vocabulary

Jean de Monséгур, in his report, listed textile terms, garment terms (such as lace), fashionable goods terms, and all kinds of luxury goods (such as wigs, fans, patch boxes) exported from Europe and traded and consumed in Mexico in the early eighteenth century. This relationship offers a vivid context for these global commodities, for example who is demanding, who is selling, who is buying and consuming, who is wearing what, how, and for what occasion, at what age and gender, etc. It offers also a unique, primary and early commentary about textiles coming from the South East, China and East Indies. Therefore this manuscript qualifies the textile terminology in a unique way, which cannot be found in documents such as wardrobe inventories and shopkeepers' account books. This will be the base to build up this research proposal. Thus, the project aims to correlate the merchants' language of fashion and textile consumption. It will raise a number of relevant questions: How a trade vocabulary of fashion translated into the wardrobe, use and fashion in a colonial context. How it impacted the way people dressed. What it tells about sex, gender and social hierarchy. What and who moved the trade circuits. And, finally, did European fashionable goods and textiles operate a cultural transfer in Mexico and if so, on a broader scale?

IMAGES of the people. The Casta Paintings

Written descriptions and words can be envisaged in colours and context, thanks to the contemporary iconography especially the "Casta paintings" (pinturas de castas), which showed possible mixtures down to several generations (Katzev, 2004).^{viii} The interest of the Spanish enlightenment in organizing knowledge and scientific description resulted in the commission of many series of pictures that documented the different racial mixes (*metisage*) of population: the "casta paintings". These paintings illustrated the rank of each person in the colonial system. The Iberian word *casta* means lineage, or race. This term was used in seventeenth-eighteenth centuries in Spanish America to describe as a whole the mixed race people; this system of *casta* impacted every aspect of life (Cummings, 2006).^{ix} These paintings were very popular in Spain and other parts in Europe. A hundred paintings are known to have survived among private and public collections (Mexico City, Madrid, and UK). Most of them are by a prominent Mexican artist, Miguel Cabrera (1695-1768). These paintings depict the New World's human bodies in colours and in material contexts (a shop interior, a market place, a landscape, a domestic interior etc.). They also offer a catalogue of textiles traded and consumed by the colonials at the time. It further offers a reflection of European fashion and its eventual combination with and assimilation into local products, textiles and garments. This body of iconography, already presented and studied for their colonial context and quality by American scholars (M. Garcia Saiz, 1989; M. Carrera, 2003; I. Katzev, 2004),^x will frame the pictorial context of this very innovative research in textile and dress history. The research aims to present a complete set of pictures in relation to Monséгур's description of the Mexico trading post, which has never been done before.

ARTEFACTS. Objects in focus

This project aims to connect museum objects to textual description and representation in paintings. Material culture studies aim to analyze how objects impact our lives. Surviving objects allow us to understand the material qualities that made textiles desirable and to consider the accuracy of textual descriptions. The surviving "artefacts" (**Figure 1 and Figure 2**) represent an important element of the research project as they come to interact and question the written documents. It challenges the research and will allow object based case studies ready for the final Glossary, the object in focus section in the project website, and the set up of the virtual exhibition accessible on line for a large public. Twenty-four objects in focus, built up as an "abecedario", will cover the duration of the fellowship, and therefore will provide a set of contexts, texts and images, with the contribution of colleagues from museum

and dress collections around the world.^{xi}



Figure 1: 2002.19.39 RĂ©ticule or purse (beaded rĂ©ticule), Mexico, 1800 - 1830 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. W. Kent Newcomb. Certified by the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board under the terms of the Cultural Property Export and Import Act. ©Royal Ontario Museum



Figure 2 : 979.141.1 full overview Rebozo, shawl, (silk, cotton), Mexico, 1775 - 1800 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. W.K. Newcomb ©Royal Ontario Museum

Global perspective, Politics and Fashion studies

“Dressing the New World” will aim to reveal the importance of the knowledge about how Europe produced luxury and semi-luxury goods, where these commodities were traded and by whom, and in which ways new places of marketing reflected European fashions. The innovative nature of this research project is based on the use of unexpected material produced by the French intelligence services of the time in order to understand the making of luxury and fashions’ distribution and circulation. It will also highlight the importance of the products coming at the same time from Asia in order to compete with the European market. The research project seeks to consider and to integrate the impact of politics and global connections in fashion studies and visual culture. It further intends to consider the role of fashion in colonial studies.

Yet there is much to investigate in other mechanisms by which innovations were introduced, marketed, adopted or rejected in parts of Europe and outside Europe. This research focuses on bringing together text, images and objects in order to interrogate the ways in which they were used to translate knowledge of innovation from one location to another. It will also address the role of some of the intermediaries in this process, many whom travelled extensively (designers, merchants, their agents/commissionaires).

Official reports, political correspondence and accounts written by travellers are a rich source of information that allows us to write the history of fabrics and fashions and to study their impact, consumption and distribution in early modern times. Taken together, these sources will offer a unique manner in which to visual and articulate textiles and dress in the mix of cultures of the New World in the early eighteenth century, and map how the global market connected different parts of the world in early modern time. My new research will present an ongoing challenge addressing the literature of fashion and textile in a very new aspect of material and clothing culture in the New World in the early eighteenth century. This project deepens my research questioning the impact and dissemination of European fashion, and how creativity and innovation impacted the trade of European textiles and fashionable goods in the late seventeenth-early eighteenth century in the New World. This project aims to study the phenomenon of spreading fashion overseas in the early modern times, with a focus on the European vocabulary of fashion and textile terms as a language of innovation in New Spain (Mexico) in early eighteenth century^{xii}.

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- ⁱ Duviols, Jean-Paul, (ed.), 2002, *Mémoires du Mexique. Le manuscrit de Jean de Monséгур (1707-1709)*, Paris, Chandeigne.
- ⁱⁱ Braudel, Fernand, 1979, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th century: The perspective of the World*, vol. 3.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Jaffee, David, 2010, *The New Nation of Goods: Artisans, Consumers and Commodities in Early America 1790-1860*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania.
- ^{iv} Zaval, Silvio, 1967, *El mundo americano en la época colonial*, México, Porrúa. Earle, Rebecca, 2012, *The Body of the Conquistador: Food, Race and the Colonial Experience in Spanish America*, Cambridge University Press. Gruzinski, Serge, 2002, *The Intellectual Dynamics of Colonization and Globalization*, NY, Routledge. Leibsohn, Dana, and Favrot Peterson, Jeanette, (ed.), 2012, *Seeing Across Cultures in the Early Modern World*, Ashgate.
- ^v Roche, Daniel, 1997, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the Ancien Régime*, Cambridge, Past and Present Publications, C.U.P.
- ^{vi} Savary des Bruslons, Jacques, 1723, *État général du commerce, Dictionnaire universel de commerce*.
- ^{vii} Diderot, Denis, 1751-1772, *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*.
- ^{viii} Katzew, Ilona, 2004, *Casta Paintings: Image of Race in Eighteenth-century Mexico*, New Haven, Yale University Press.
- ^{ix} Cummings, Thomas B. F., 2006, "Casta Painting: Image of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico", *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 88.
- ^x García Sáiz, Maria Concepción, 1989, *Las castas mexicanas. Un genero pictorico americano*, México, Olivetti. Carrera, Magali M., 2003, *Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage, and the colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings*, Austin, University of Texas Press. *Painting a New World: Mexican Art & Life, 1521-1821*, 2004, Denver Art Museum.
- ^{xi} <https://dressworld.hypotheses.org>
- ^{xii} Maria Joao Ferreira, Liza Oliver, Corinne Thépaut-Cabasset, Maria Ludovica Rosati, 2016, "Les textiles à la période moderne : circulation, échanges et mondialisation", *Textiles*, Revue Perspective, 1, pp. 27-38.