

Conservation and the Narrative Power of Exhibited Garments

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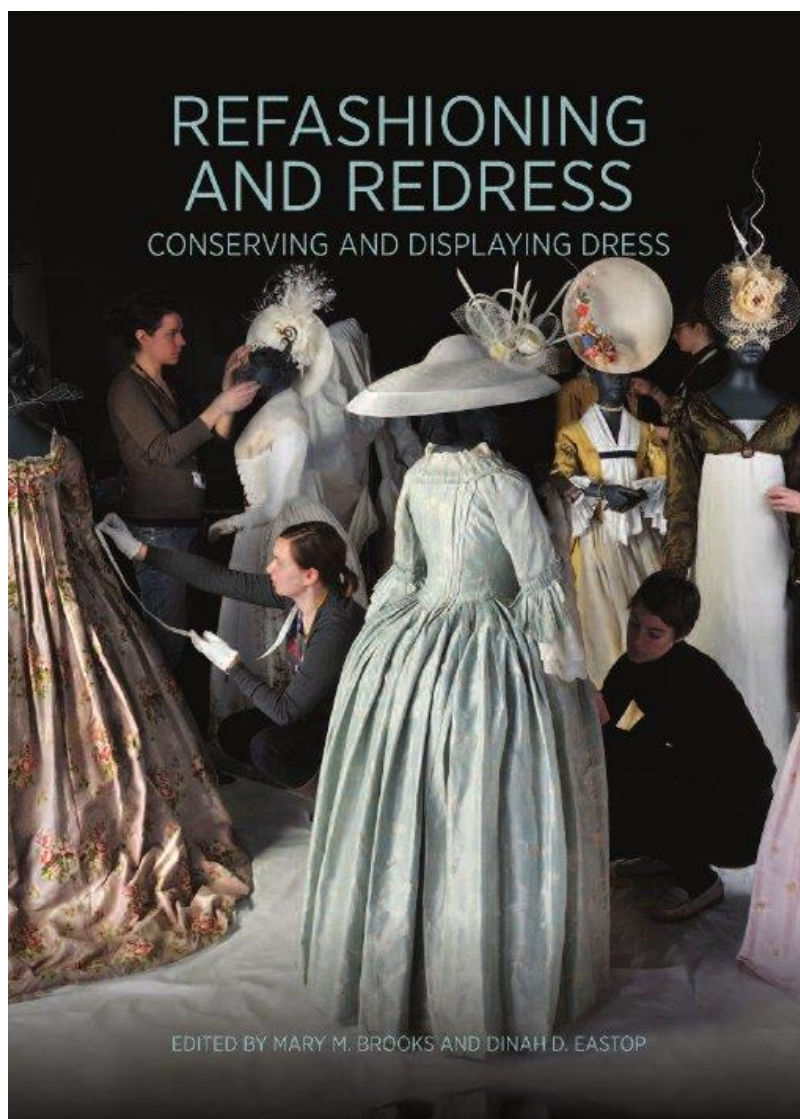
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Abstract:

This paper explores the work of representation and processes of 'making meaning' through consideration of the intellectual and practical dynamics of conserving and displaying dress as a collaborative process involving curators, conservators and designers. Selected papers from a new book *Refashioning and Redress: Conserving and Displaying Dress* (Brooks and Eastop 2016), which discusses the role of conservation in creating narratives of dress, are introduced.

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Introduction

Exhibited garments provide a means to examine how narratives are sustained. The physical realization of such narratives often arises from 'behind-the-scenes' processes, thus the role of conservation in narrative-construction is seldom recognized. This paper explores the contribution of conservation by considering exhibited garments as agents of redress, as manifestations of refashioning and as evidence of altered states using a range of papers included in our recent edited volume *Refashioning and Redress: Conserving and Displaying Dress* (Brooks & Eastop, eds, 2016). These papers were commissioned by us from curators, conservators, designers and museum specialists from around the world, and so we can hear multiple voices and present multi-disciplinary perspectives. This presentation builds on the authors' presentation at the 2015 ICOM Costume Committee Toronto meeting.

Agents of Redress

Mie Ishii's paper (2016, 33-48) explores how the preservation, conservation and display of an Ainu robe, worn by a leader of this indigenous minority in Japan and now in the Tokyo National Museum, makes a strong statement regarding changed political, cultural and social attitudes towards the Ainu peoples. Previously considered ineligible for state funding for conservation, this robe was the first to receive state-funded 'full-scale repair'. The complexity of the ethical and decision-making framework is discussed and English translations of key Japanese sources are provided.

The 2013 *First Peoples* exhibition at Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Melbourne Museum, Australia, was a shared endeavor of Museum Victoria and the Aboriginal community of Victoria. Possum-skin cloaks were displayed in the exhibition as significant and living aspects of southeast Aboriginal culture. This is reflected in the collaborative authorship of the paper "Wrapped in Country". Conserving and representing possum-skin cloaks as in/tangible heritage' in which Elders, artists, curators, conservators and collection managers discuss the conservation and preservation of these cloaks as an act of cultural redress (Atkinson et al, 2016, 49-64).

Manifestations of Refashioning

Presenting once-fashionable garments as high fashion can be challenging as tastes change and materials deteriorate. Two papers discuss alternative approaches to achieving the desired spectacular effects. Ford and Leong (2016, 173-186) discuss, amongst other techniques, the use of substitution in the 1993-4 exhibition *Fashion as Art. Dressed to Kill* at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Scaturro and Fung (2016, 159-72) explore the thinking behind the decision to use replication in presenting the desired iconic impact of a Charles James gown selected for display at The Costume Institute, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Evidence of Altered States

Material changes, whether from use, repair and alteration, or conservation or display interventions, are well known but may not always form part of an exhibition's chosen narrative. Lady Curzon's 1902 Delhi Durbar 'peacock dress' is associated with narratives of imperial power and not with the more mundane but personal stories of wearing and alteration. The former narrative is made evident in its exhibition at Kedleston Hall, the Curzon family house, alongside William Logsdail's posthumous portrait of Lady Curzon (Brooks, 2016, 19-32). Garments worn by Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv, both Prime Ministers of India, and damaged during their assassinations, act as powerful metonyms for

the wearers. Preserving the evidence of these violent deaths, especially the bullet holes in Indira's sari, was crucial. The garments worn on those two fateful days now form part of the exhibition at the Indira Gandhi Memorial Museum, New Delhi and act as powerful relics. The often-dramatic reactions of visitors, many of whom come almost as pilgrims paying homage, clearly indicate the ongoing importance of these damaged garments.

Conclusion

We have two core conclusions. First, that it is important to recognize that the processes of conserving and displaying dress often arise from complex, collaborative and dynamic interactions of investigation, interpretation, intervention, re-creation and display. Second, that it is critical to understand how seemingly static exhibitions are active agents in cultural production by creating narratives from and through dress.

References

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Scaturro, Sarah and Joyce Fung. 2016. "A delicate balance. Ethics and aesthetics at The Costume Institute, Metropolitan Museum, New York." In *Refashioning and Redress: Conserving and Displaying Dress*, edited by Mary M. Brooks and Dinah D. Eastop. Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 159-72.

For a full listing of all the papers in the volume, see *Worn Dress: Display as Meaning-Making*, Mary M. Brooks and Dinah D. Eastop, in: A. Kim, *Exhibitions and Interpretation: Proceedings of the ICOM Costume Committee annual meeting, Toronto 2015*:

http://network.icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/minisites/costume/pdf/Mary_Brooks_and_Dinah_Eastop_Toronto_article_PDF.pdf