

The 'Silver Duchess' and her 'Travelling Outfit'

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Abstract:

Sheila Scotter AO MBE (1920-2012) was a former fashion model, department store fashion buyer, former editor-in-chief of *Vogue Australia*, founding editor of *Vogue Living Australia*, broadcaster, columnist and fundraiser. Scotter was nicknamed the 'Silver Duchess' in reference to her signature sweep of grey hair combined with her formidable presence, impeccable manners and high standing within the Australian fashion community. In 2015, the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences acquired a travelling outfit comprising a black and white plaid Gucci jacket, slim black French trousers, classic black Ferragamo pumps and various accessories. The outfit was chosen by her friends and Executors who felt it represented Scotter's trademark black and white mode of dressing. This paper considers how Sheila Scotter enhanced her public and professional identity through the way she dressed and relates these to her career achievements and personal experiences.

Contents:

Introduction / Travelling Outfit c.2000 / Gucci Labels / Sheila Scotter: the later years / Turning to Black and White / Dressing for Travel / *Vogue Australia*: the 1960s / Sheila Scotter and her Editorial Team / *Vogue Australia*: Special Travel Issue, 1964 / High and Low / Sheila Scotter: not so black and white / Conclusion / Acknowledgements / References



Fig. 1:
Diane Masters sketch of Sheila Scotter's 'Travelling outfit' c.2000, Reproduced courtesy of Diane Masters.

Introduction

Sheila Scotter (1920-2012) was a fashion buyer, textile marketing head, broadcaster, newspaper and magazine columnist and a fundraiser. Between 1962 and 1971 she was the third editor-in-chief of *Vogue* Australia and the founding editor-in-chief of *Vogue Living* Australia. Her influence through *Vogue* was likely to have been considerable, particularly, as she herself said, there was little competition in the country at the time. (Scotter 1998, 48) Scotter's services to journalism and commerce earned her a place in the Queen's honour list in the form of an MBE in 1970; and she became a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 1992 for her services to the arts.

Travelling Outfit c.2000

This paper focusses on a 'Travelling outfit' (Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences 2015/64/1) that was assembled from Scotter's wardrobe and given to our museum shortly after she passed away in 2012 (fig. 1). The outfit comprises a twill linen and viscose Gucci jacket and tapered synthetic mix trousers, labelled Fopps, Paris, fig. 2-3). The accessories are a wool and cotton beret, canvas belt with gold buckle, classic Ferragamo patent pumps, kid gloves with black stitching, shoulder bag and a shopping basket (fig. 4). The outfit was put together by two close friends of Scotter's: June McCallum, herself a former editor-in-chief of *Vogue* Australia and Diane Masters, a former model. (MAAS Object file 2015/64/1)



Fig. 2:
Gucci jacket, date unknown (Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences 2015/64/1).



Fig. 3:
Fopps of Paris trousers c.2000
(Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences 2015/64/1).



Fig. 4:
Accessories c.2000 (Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences 2015/64/1).

Several outfits were offered and my colleague and fellow dress curator, Glynis Jones, chose this ensemble which she felt to be the most representative of Sheila Scotter. This begs the question of how accurate is this interpretation of Scotter's style? And does this hypothetical travelling outfit have sufficient power to tell the story of one of Australia's most celebrated fashion identities? Scotter only wore combinations of black and white. It was her trademark. So that is a good start. The outfit was given an overall dating of circa 2007 although some components may be earlier or later. The dating of the Gucci jacket, however, appears to be a bit of a puzzle. The jacket certainly conforms to the more relaxed styles of the mid-2000s. But then, that was not the Gucci way. At least not on the runway. Luxury fashion houses regularly produce generic product independent of the more high-profile runway collections and I wondered whether Scotter's jacket could have been explained within this context?

Gucci Labels

A public relations consultant who handled Gucci's Australian PR in the 2000s did not think this jacket could have been produced during the Tom Ford years as creative director – from 1994 to 2004 when styles were more fitted. (Tracy Baker, Personal communication to the author, 20 February 2017) Ford's two successors Alessandra Facchinetti and then Frida Giannini more or less kept to the same formula.

An early 1990s date also seems unlikely especially as Scotter herself can be seen wearing more square-shouldered jackets at that time. Additionally the jacket shows very little wear and the care labels are closer in character to later in the decade, at the very least. Which did make me wonder if Scotter's jacket could have been a fake? Scotter proudly boasted of bargains like a \$20 Chanel-style handbag so it might not have been beyond her. (Tulloch 2005, 174) This was a difficult question as the jacket is well-designed, cut and finished and certainly does not look and feel like a shoddy counterfeit article.



Fig. 5:
Gucci label (Sheila Scotter's jacket) (Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences 2015/64/1).

There are, however, minor differences between the Gucci label of Scotter's jacket and a Gucci woman's dress and a man's shirt, both 1996, in the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences collection (fig. 5-6). This was the beginning of the Tom Ford era when the fashion house's branding was being consolidated so one would expect consistency in subsequent years. Moreover, the proportions of the two labels are slightly different. Compared with the 1996 Gucci garments, Scotter's jacket has more black ground on either side of the lettering and the individual letters are slightly further apart in Scotter's jacket. The label is also a slightly different weight and texture. The Scotter jacket does not carry the 'MADE IN ITALY' lettering as in the comparison garments but according to certain fake label websites this was not always used. (Fake Hunter) While it is not conclusive that Scotter's jacket may not have been the genuine article, taking all the factors into account, there is more work to be done to establish the attribution of this jacket. Suggestions are most welcome.



Fig. 6:
Gucci label (Dress, 1996, Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences 96/365/1).

Sheila Scotter: the later years

Scotter, well into her seventies and eighties, remained a media favourite and there are numerous images of her to be found online showing her wearing the trademark combinations of black and white, often in plaid, more often than not with a touch of gold. In 2009, during a visit to Australia, photographer and blogger, Scott Schuman of *The Sartorialist*, featured Scotter on his blog wearing a black pantsuit, with touches of accents of black and white. In the photograph, Scotter appears to be wearing shoes identical to the Ferragamo pumps of the museum's travelling outfit. Accompanying the image of Scotter was a note by Schumann:

'I didn't get to spend much time with Ms. Scotter, but she is definitely a person I would love to see again when I go back to Melbourne for the book tour. I will say that in the brief time it took to shoot her she oozed intimidating old world charm.'
(Schuman 2009)

Turning Black and White

It's not one-hundred percent clear when Scotter began dressing exclusively in black and white. She disliked talking about it and makes a scant reference in her autobiography. (Scotter 1998, 126) A short profile around 1987 has Scotter relating to the newspaper that it was when she was twenty-one years old, inspired by her great-aunt Mary who 'was a widow and always wore black'. (*Good Weekend*, c.1987) Photos in Scotter's autobiography suggest it was not until her early thirties, as her hair turned grey that she dressed exclusively in black and white. This would have made aesthetic sense as, by then, her hair whitened completely. In the 1990s, her friend Peter Janson nicknamed her 'The Silver Duchess', which also served as an allusion to her famously imperious manner.

Dressing for Travel

The other question surrounding the museum's travelling outfit is whether Scotter would really have dressed like that when she travelled. Fortunately, we can gain some insight to this because Scotter was a frequent and well-publicised traveller. A photo of Scotter in a white trench coat with black and white bags dates from 1974. (Tulloch, 2005, 174) Scotter was also the subject of a double-page spread in *Country Life* entitled 'Fashionable Traveller'. The topic of black and white isn't raised in the text but the effect is implicit in the monochrome illustrations. (Price 1976, 786)

After her first stint, living and working as a fashion buyer in Melbourne from 1949, Scotter moved to Paris in 1956 where she represented the US manufacturers for *Everglaze and Banlon*. This role gave her valuable industry contacts including a friendship with then little-known designer Andre Courrèges who made her an off-white travel coat and skirt.

Vogue Australia: the 1960s

Whichever year Scotter turned to black and white, it is clear that she had completely adopted the style by her early forties when she was enticed back to Australia in 1962 to become editor-in-chief of *Vogue Australia*. Her first issue of the magazine, in March 1963, reads like a manifesto of her sartorial creed. On page one, an advertisement by the David Jones department store carries the headline 'The drama of black and white'. Other advertisers reinforced the theme throughout the issue. This was all a prelude to the main editorial which headlined as 'Black and White: the colour that's news'. Apart from shaping the magazine in her own image, one could speculate that Scotter was also taking cues from the latest trends, notably Yves Saint Laurent's Winter 1962 collection where the black and white theme pre-

dominated. It is clear that, for Scotter, the personal and professional were completely intertwined. Subsequent issues in 1965 and 1967 show again how Scotter's personal approach to dressing impacted on the pages of the magazine.

Sheila Scotter and her Editorial Team

A photo from the late 1960s shows Scotter with her editorial team at Vogue. The crisp, no fuss contrast of black overdress and white shirt is a prim version of a Mary Quant look but it also harks back to Chanel's designs of the 1950s and 1960s. In some ways Scotter's fiercely independent streak has parallels with Coco Chanel's life. Scotter was born in Calcutta in 1920. At the age of four and half, she was sent to boarding school in England and saw her parents only every four years. Thus from an early age, Scotter was accustomed to frequent travel during her school breaks to visit relatives throughout the UK and occasionally back to India. She was briefly married – first in England and again in Melbourne. Like Chanel, Scotter had a series of lovers well into her mature years. Her autobiography even included a Postscript listing over twenty names and subtitled 'a tribute to some gentleman with whom I have enjoyed breakfast.' (Scotter 1998, 242) Among the list were the names of an Australian Prime Minister and captains of industry in England, France and Australia.

Vogue Australia: Special Travel Issue, 1964

The Chanel comparison seems even more apt when we look at another early issue of Vogue Australia where Scotter's travelling clothes are profiled in the 'Special Travel Issue' of June-July 1964. The cover featured a black and white houndstooth tweed Chanel suit, photographed by Scotter's friend, the former Melbourne resident, Helmut Newton. The copy inside read, 'Here's an all-wool round-the-world wardrobe that really works', 'The basic wardrobe is in black and white; substitute navy or brown if you're so minded'. (*Vogue Australia* June-July 1964, 40-1)

Personally tested and travelling only with cabin bags Scotter 'coped with every situation of her four-week trip: parties in Paris, business meetings in London, theatre in New York, sight-seeing stopovers in Beirut and Tokyo'. Scotter's coat is 'bright white' and the chequered suit: black and white. The copy for the suit adds: 'It looks right in either city or country, worn over a high-necked black overblouse'. (*Vogue Australia* June-July 1964, 41) High necks were another constant aspect of Scotter's clothing choices. It seems that Scotter had absorbed lessons from French designers like Chanel, but also Balenciaga and Saint Laurent, into her own distinctly English style.

High and Low

Another factor of Scotter's dress style was her ability to mix high-end items with inexpensive articles. Further proof of her claim in a national television interview that 'There is something about style and I've definitely got it'. (Michie 2012) For instance, the sunglasses chosen for Scotter's travelling outfit are generic rather than branded. The faux leather suede handbag is by Jendi, an Australian budget-label. Lastly the shopping bag, made in Vietnam from stiff plastic tape, was commonly found in bargain stores in Melbourne's Vietnamese quarter in the early 2000s. In many ways, the narrative of Scotter's personal style does not reside in one single outfit alone. Each item and outfit she wore was part of a larger story and each iteration was validation of her signature style of black and white.

Sheila Scotter: not so black and white

Scotter did wear colour sometimes, particularly early on, and she prided herself on her expertise with fabric and colour; lessons she learned through her textile job in Paris and through mentoring from fellow *Vogue* editor Diana Vreeland. Nor did Scotter impose a regime of only black and white at *Vogue* Australia. Her *Vogue* covers were as bright and colourful as any as in a syndicated cover of Jean Shrimpton in August 1964, photographed by David Bailey.

Late in life, there was only one recorded exception to Scotter's black and white rule: her seventieth birthday party in 1990. Held in Melbourne, the city where she lived out her later years, the party was organised by a committee of friends who persuaded her to agree to an all-red theme. Scotter arrived wearing a red silk dress custom-made by John Cavill. The crowd of 140 friends were all there to welcome her, dressed as they were instructed, that is, not in red but entirely in black and white. She appreciated the joke but, characteristically, never wore the dress again.

Conclusion

Sheila Scotter was a force within the Australian and European fashion scene for many years, through her work as a buyer, textile representative, magazine editor, columnist, broadcaster and energetic fundraiser. Her image as the stylish 'Silver Duchess' has been preserved in countless magazine and newspaper pages over several decades. Despite its slightly speculative origin, I believe that our museum's travelling outfit can stand as a persuasive memento of the intertwined nature of Sheila Scotter's personal and professional life, as expressed through her unrelenting rule of black and white.

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