

## **Worn Dress: Display as Meaning-Making**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper explores the work of representation and processes of 'making meaning' through the consideration of the intellectual and practical dynamics of conserving and displaying dress as a collaborative process involving curators, conservators and designers. The themes of a new book *Refashioning and Redress: Conserving and Displaying Dress* (Brooks and Eastop, 2016) which discuss issues in exhibiting 'worn dress' are introduced.

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### **Introduction**

The work of representation and processes of meaning-making are explored in this paper, considering both the conceptual and the practical dynamics of conserving and displaying dress. Themes considered in a new book, *Refashioning and Redress: Conserving and Displaying Dress* (Brooks and Eastop 2016), are briefly introduced. Exhibiting 'worn dress' (that is, garments as worn, and also garments that have been worn or used in other ways) whether on a replica body, or on a stylised, headless mannequin or on a stylised form, is usually a collaborative process involving curators, conservators and designers.

Processes of interpretation are inevitable in conserving and presenting garments for public display; Knutson introduced a notable example in 1991 which was further discussed by McLean et al (2014). Exploring such interpretation as a process of representation leads to questions about the outcomes of such interaction and the effects of principles on practice and vice-versa. Recognizing the process of exhibiting dress as an interactive process of presentation and conservation, and the responses of 'visitors' to a display as a dynamic interaction, allows seemingly static exhibitions of 'costume' or 'fashion' to be seen as active in the production of cultural meaning. The focus becomes the dynamic between the applied and the conceptual in an active process of representation.

### **Decision-making**

Display involves specialist expertise, including curatorial, conservation and design decisions and is often dependent on many factors, including available expertise and resources. Decisions also reflect the cultural value placed on different exhibits at different times and places. Each influences decisions about what it is that is being represented in a specific display context. Multiple roles and expectations are projected onto an inanimate garment, one that may once have been closely associated with a known wearer, an animate body. Approaches may include showing a garment as worn; highlighting alterations, wear and use; presenting it as design, for example, as a representation of a maker's vision, whether an unknown dressmaker or a couturier's technological wonder; or shown as a representation of the wearer, that is as an evocation of a specific individual. Attention can be focussed on what the museum visitor understands about the maker or wearer of the garments, the nature of the interpretation and the authenticity of what is presented.

## **Origins and Aims**

*Refashioning and Redress* explores questions about the process of representing dress in museums and the role of conservation in this 'meaning making' process. Papers were commissioned from around the world to explore conservation/display interventions as processes of investigation, preservation and presentation. Here is an extract of our invitation: 'We [Brooks and Eastop] want to focus on museum display which, as you know, involves complex collaborations between different specialists and engagement with the values attributed to various material and social/political/cultural properties of exhibits and their settings. We are interested in fostering debate about: decision-making; the effects of these decisions on the material evidence of dress; and how this evidence is presented. The core issue we are seeking to address is how the physical informs the intellectual, and vice-versa, in conserving and displaying dress in museums'. We particularly welcomed collaborative papers from curators, designers and conservators, and are delighted that the resulting papers reveal a broad range of practice as well as demonstrating changing approaches and actions at different times and in different places.

## **Contents**

The book's introductory paper focuses on the interactions of meaning and matter. It considers key concepts and key terms, such as representation, parataxis, abstraction and materialization. The opening essay highlights absence and presence in considering the challenges of displaying the dress of known individuals. The following papers are grouped around the themes of: redress; refashioning and reassembly; re-presentation; fashioning; and the performative. Different approaches to displaying dress are presented throughout the book including the use of 'invisible mannequins' in the Fashion & Textile Gallery at the Bowes Museum, England. The final paper provides a historiography of dress display at the Rijksmuseum, The Netherlands.

The book's contributors and contents reflect the geographical and cultural diversity characteristic of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), with papers reflecting work in the following regions and countries: Australia, Brasil/Brazil, Europe, Hong Kong, India, Japan and New Zealand/Te Papa.

The case studies include garments of notable wearers and by notable designers. The former includes the reliquary garments of St Godehard, garments worn in India by Lady Curzon, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, and less well known, a robe worn by the Ainu chief Akashi Wakanosuke, and the mourning ensemble worn in Brazil by the coffee plantation owner Countess of Pinhal. Theatrical dress is also included, notably the beetle-wing costume worn by the actress Ellen Terry when playing Lady Macbeth, and costumes worn in Hong Kong by famous performers of Cantonese opera. Anonymous dress, i.e. garments worn by unrecorded wearers, is also considered. Examples include the Tahitian Mourner's Costume collected in 1774 during Cook's second voyage and a fragmentary coat found concealed within a building. The work of many notable designers is also included, e.g. that of Charles James, Alexander McQueen, Zandra Rhodes, Philip Treacy and Vivienne Westwood. The innovative work of contemporary makers of possum-skin cloaks is also represented as is the empowering approach taken to the exhibition of Māori kākahu (cloaks).

## **Conclusion**

Ranging from the practical to the theoretical, these papers examine the material, social, and philosophical interactions inherent in the conservation and display of dress, drawing upon diverse disciplines - from dress history to social history, material culture studies to fashion

studies, and conservation to museology. This exploration of the process of representation, ranging from the local to the national, from the neglected and the everyday to the heroic and the mythic, from spectacular fashion to theatrical dress, from the personal to the political, and the fragmentary to the virtual, is designed to encourage reflection and debate about the implications of conserving and displaying dress.

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