

What's in your Wardrobe?

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Abstract:

This was the title of a project that was intended to be a snapshot at the Millennium of what people wore in south-west Scotland.

In 1998, as part of the then government's very grandiose ideas about celebrating the Millennium, there was a fund for museums to come up with projects to be held in 2000. The director of the National Museums of Scotland asked each of the five museums that made up the National Museums to come up with a project, at very short notice, and one would be chosen to go forward for government funding.

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The remit

The remit was to produce a project with a strong educational and community element to it and it had to be carefully costed.

What project could a costume museum do?

As curator in charge of Shambellie House Museum of Costume, a small Victorian house run as a costume museum in the south-west of Scotland and 80 miles from our home base in Edinburgh, this project posed a challenge. After some thought I decided to work on an idea that took into account something that had been bothering me for a while, what and how can museums continue to collect costume in the 21st century given the pressures of space for storage and display and the costs involved for conservation, storage, curation etc. There were also the difficulties of displaying clothing within contemporary attitudes to museum displays. A further element was the fact that much modern clothing looks horrible on a static figure because there is no underlying structure to it, unlike Victorian dresses for example. To show modern clothes off to advantage they need a body underneath that moves. A further problem is modern fabrics, which can have several different types of synthetic and natural fibres mixed together, as well as synthetic materials themselves. These materials have at present an unknown life expectancy and therefore pose conservation problems.

The Project

The idea for the project was to ask people the question 'What's in your wardrobe?' This would give a review of late 20th century clothing in one area of the country at one significant moment in time. The information would be gathered by using interviews, photographs and videos, rather than actual garments, and covering all ages, incomes, occupations and ethnic groups. Using various local groups, such as schools, scouts and guide troops, church groups, societies, the Women's Rural Institutes, the Townswomen's Guilds, Rotary and other mainly male groups, it was hoped we could manage to contact most communities. The project would create an archive that could be used for exhibitions in any small community hall or school around the region, but it would also be available for future use. Selective collecting of items would perhaps be easier to target, based on the information collected. The costume museum was housed in a beautiful but thinly populated area of Scotland with a good deal of unemployment. At the time, before the devastating foot and mouth outbreak of 2001, employment was mainly in agriculture, sheep and cattle rearing not arable, and in fishing, both areas where labour was being cut. There was some work for women in clothing

factories but this was decreasing because of competition from countries where it could be produced more cheaply. Tourism played a lesser role because the main tourist routes cut straight through to the Highlands, no one turns left at Gretna Green to go to the south-west. There was at the time this project was considered some traveller and New Age communities, but very little in the way of ethnic communities. Towns are small, formerly market towns but again the markets had left and the streets often showed a distressing number of closed shops. At the top end of the social scale is one of the main estates of a ducal family, several smaller estates, some forestry, and of course professionals, such as teachers, lawyers, doctors and church ministers. It was therefore a good mixture reflecting a basically rural society without the distortion of a large city.

The Result

Needless to say this project was not selected for the National Museums of Scotland to put forward as its Millennium project. It was a project that had to be thought out quickly and given some realistic budgeting, but I was relieved it was not chosen because it needed a good deal more thought before it was ready to put into practice. In the years since it was conceived many things have changed but the problems of financing museums with clothing collections have not got better and there may still be some merit in considering the idea when looking at how we can better represent clothing of today for the future.