

Fashion and Museums: Theory and Practice.* Marie Riegels Melchior and Birgitta Svensson, eds. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. 210 pages.

Reviewed by Kelly Gallett Richardson

A glance at museum schedules will reveal that fashion is, well, in fashion. Blockbuster exhibitions promising glamour draw standing room-only crowds and valuable revenue in the form of ticket and gift shop sales, as exemplified by the Costume Institute at the Met's recent record-breaking *China: Through the Looking Glass* exhibition. The museum's influence on fashion is apparent as well, as online shopping sites promise "curated" collections of goods for sale and exhibit-like retail displays blur the boundaries between the two. *Fashion and Museums: Theory and Practice* seeks to reveal the reasons behind the new love affair between fashion and museums and fashion's influence on museum practice. Comprised of papers presented at the 2011 conference, "Public Wardrobe: Rethinking Dress and Fashion in Museums" at the Nordiska Museet in Stockholm, Sweden, *Fashion and Museums* is organized into three sections: History, Theory, and Practice; featuring contributors from both the academic and museum worlds.

In the introduction, editor Marie Riegels Melchior introduces the concepts of dress museology and fashion museology as keys to understanding the history of dress and the contemporary popularity of fashion in museums. Early costume and fashion exhibitions in the dress museology model focused on the aesthetics of historic objects dressed on realistic forms or the work of a singular designer. Fashion museology, by contrast, is experience-based, and is designed to encourage and engage new visitors, build the museum's prestige, and attract media attention.

The first section, "The Power of Fashion, When Museums Enter New Territory," is an overview of fashion's history and its transformative effect on museums, from the Costume Institute's origins as a collection of community theater costume, to the innovative curatorial practices of Antwerp's Mode Museum. The second chapter, "Understanding Fashion through the Museum," discusses the influence and importance of fashion studies, which has situated fashion within a broader social and historical context, enabling curators to address the meaning of fashion objects and their role in identity construction. The final chapter in this section uses the example of fashion photography in Swedish museums to demonstrate that the perceived commercial or pedestrian nature of fashion can result in significant artifacts and information being lost or undiscoverable because of institutional bias.

Section two, "Fashion Controversies: When Bodies Become Public" deals with the special issues of gender and body ideals inherent in exhibiting fashion, including the overrepresentation of wealthy upper class women in museum collections, the lack of diverse bodies on view, and the difficulty in attempting to craft a general narrative using such privileged objects and sources. The final chapter in this section is an exploration of a Swedish museum display system developed in the 1930s that reveals the divide between folk costume and fashion.

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The final section, “In Practice,” probably the area of most interest to those working in museums, presents five innovative exhibition approaches that facilitate audience connection to objects on display. Specific case studies include the Fashion Museum’s “Dress of the Year” and their efforts to make those annual choices meaningful to viewers by mixing the old and the new, highlighting the cyclical, self-referential, and relatable nature of fashion. Spurred by the popularity of dress and fashion in museums, a reexamination of textile collections in Denmark’s Designmuseum led to awareness of the impact of fashion on art and design, resulting in modification of the museum’s collecting policy. In Denmark, a small cultural heritage museum connected younger visitors to traditional dress artifacts by using contemporary dress codes and fashion to reveal similarities between the clothing on display and their own wardrobes. The staff of a Norwegian textile mill museum used fashion as lens to facilitate high school students’ understanding of the relationship between industrialization and modernization. In the final case study, exhibition designer Jeff Horsley walks the reader through the possibilities of an autobiographical approach to exhibiting fashion through the process of creating his own fashion autobiography.

Fashion and Museums: Theory and Practice demonstrates that “fashion,” once a dirty word in academia and the museum, has an inclusive appeal that can draw in and engage a broader audience, as well as lead to new approaches to existing collections. It also calls for museums to see curatorial possibilities beyond the object and its creator—to bring the entirety of the fashion industry under consideration, including systems of production, consumption, promotion, and distribution.

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