

Embellishments: Exploring Dress in Detail

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Abstract:

This exhibit and supporting written materials were created to explore historic costume in detail through a variety of techniques and contexts. Using a methods and materials based framework, this exhibit examines three objects and their construction. The supporting framework and theory behind this exhibit has been established by identifying the ways that fashion exhibits in museums have evolved over the 20th and 21st centuries, featuring case study examples from the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Chicago History Museum. This exhibit serves as an example of how fashion might be displayed in museums in the future to better serve its visitors.

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Deconstructing Fashion in Museums: Theory and Framework

Fashion in museums is more present than ever, drawing crowds and perhaps even reinvigorating institutions in need of visitorship. However, despite the commercial success of fashion exhibits that center designers and aesthetics, fashion in the museum setting has greater potential to educate than the current model of blockbuster fashion exhibits allows. Clothing construction methods and materials have much to teach us about fashion objects beyond aesthetic appreciation. Museums must ask what the public stands to gain from exhibits of dress and fashion. Exhibits rooted in scholarship and research centering around materials, construction, and design approach have the potential for greater education and impact than those that frame fashion as pure artistic expression.

To contextualize contemporary fashion exhibits in museums, it is instructive to trace the history of fashion in museums. The earliest examples of clothing in museums were those collected by decorative arts museums with a textile collection, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. By the 1930s, clothing had been entering museum collections for one of two main purposes, dependent on the museum's focus. For museums focused on history and culture, objects were collected and displayed for their value as a historical tool, providing insight into cultures and eras past. In large part, museums collected pre-industrial dress and focused on displaying objects with correct historical posture and dress. Museum scholars Melchior and Svensson distinguish this approach to conserving and exhibiting fashion as *dress museology*.^[1]

The authors describe this approach as foundational to the acceptance of clothing and dress as a subject worthy of scholarship and conservation.

While dress museology dominated the first era of dress in museums, the second approach to collecting clothing for museums was based largely on aesthetic value and served as a resource for fashion designers and thereby the fashion industry. This approach is termed *fashion museology* by the authors, and eventually would evolve into the more prevalent approach to incorporating fashion in museums.

Melchior and Svensson, as well as fashion scholars Judith Clarke and Amy de la Haye point to the 1970s as a crucial decade for shifting the mainstream approach to fashion in museums.

Clarke and de la Haye point to Cecil Beaton's 1971 exhibit, *Fashion, an Anthology by Cecil Beaton* as a turning point in fashion museology. The authors argue that this exhibit shifted the focus of the museum's fashion exhibits from displaying historical garments in detailed contextual environments to treating fashion as art and "[showing] dress in its own right".^[2]

They note that both Beaton's exhibition and the only other contemporary fashion exhibit to precede it were both initiated and executed by curators from outside the museum field.^[3]

Simultaneously, Diana Vreeland's work in developing what would become the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute constituted another major foray of the fashion industry into major art museums that continues to the present day. Vreeland began the legacy of the fashion industry's involvement with the Met which eventually led to the Met Costume Gala and its spectacle-oriented blockbuster exhibits for which it is now well known. This began a long relationship between the fashion industry and museums that Melchior and Svensson argue is problematic. Fashion museology in its current form is inextricably tied to the fashion industry; at the Met in particular, the fashion industry in large part funds and supports the museum's

Costume Institute, and thus, at least in part, acts as an extension to the industry in its celebration of designers and collaborations with fashion houses. Melchior and Svensson argue, “The representation of fashion designers in museums makes them into artists; the narrative of their exhibitions communicates the gifted talent and creative vision that have shaped the objects displayed. Curators’ critical voices... rarely come forward in this kind of exhibition, and the fashion designer may even be involved in the actual exhibition-making process... The critical curatorial potential thus risks being reduced to extended marketing initiatives.”^[4]

Although many museums rely on corporate partnerships, the fashion industry’s interference with fashion museology, particularly at the Met, goes beyond individual exhibitions—all of their costume-related museum activities are dependent on financial support from the fashion industry. As a result, the exhibits focus on a select celebrated designers, take on an hagiographic tone and thus risk a loss of curatorial autonomy. When designers, magazine editors, and advertisers become so present in museums that they are inextricably linked, what is the museum’s value beyond an extension of the fashion industry?

It is worth acknowledging the positive effects of fashion in museums as it relates to sustaining the future of museums. *Heavenly Bodies*, this year’s fashion exhibit at the Met, for example, garnered a record-breaking one million visitors in the first three months it was open.^[5] Beyond increasing visitorship, incorporating fashion in museums in this manner may also serve the image of a museum, Melchior and Svensson note that “Fashion makes museums appear relevant and appealing to contemporary society.”^[6] At this point fashion museology has done the

legwork of popularizing dress in museums. It has the potential to be so much more than the spectacle-oriented status quo. The following case studies from three different institutions provide leading examples for how fashion in museums may evolve.

Case Study #1: *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* (Museum of Modern Art)

Items: Is Fashion Modern? was a 2017 exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York that chose 111 fashion items and displayed outstanding examples of each, emphasizing cultural context, meaning, and origins. *Items* is an example of a fashion exhibit that considers dress in context. Curator Paola Antonelli describes the exhibits' approach to fashion: "Driven first and foremost by objects, not designers, the exhibition considers the many relationships between fashion and functionality, culture, aesthetics, politics, labor, identity, economy, and technology".^[7] The exhibit is radical in its exhibition of high-brow and commonplace fashion objects without much regard to the artistic aesthetics of fashion. By decentering the designer, the exhibit was able to illuminate the inherently cross-disciplinary subject of fashion in a manner that is urgently relevant.

Case Study #2: *Charles James: Genius Deconstructed* (Chicago History Museum)

As a history museum with an extensive couture collection, The Chicago History Museum is interested both in historical education and showcasing the artistry and biography of the featured designer. It is for this reason that *Charles James: Fashion Deconstructed*, their 2011 fashion

exhibition, deviates less significantly from the typical designer-as-artist model of fashion exhibition. Where it differs from the typical fashion exhibition at CHM is in the attention given to construction and context of the garment. Each object in the catalog features a subheading describing the client for whom the item was made, as well as information about the construction of the garment. In the preface of the catalog, Chief Historian Russell Lewis notes that because for James, “the exterior decorative surface was integral to and at one with the structure” of a garment, museum staff “studied [his works] from all angles and perspectives. Turned them inside out. Sketched, photographed, X-rayed, and recreated replicas of them... the results of this unorthodox but fascinating interrogation of his work are the subject of *Charles James: Genius Deconstructed*”.^[8] This unusual approach to studying fashion is precisely what makes the exhibit so noteworthy. For example, the CHM collaborated with the Field Museum of Natural History to X-ray some of the garments in the exhibit to better understand their construction. By focusing on construction and material, working cross-institutionally, the exhibit was able to make discoveries heretofore unknown about these garments and how they were made. An aesthetic approach to studying these objects simply would not have done them justice--a materials and methods-based approach allowed the exhibit to best serve the goal of using fashion objects to engage and educate.

Case Study #3: *Fashioned From Nature* (Victoria & Albert Museum)

The Victoria and Albert Museum houses the world’s largest collection of dress, consistently mounting new fashion exhibits in addition to their permanent display. *Fashioned From Nature*, their 2018 fashion exhibit, focuses on the natural world as a multifaceted theme. Sections in the

exhibit included natural materials as a starting point for fabric and clothing, natural themes as a motif throughout fashion history, environmental impact of textile and garment manufacturing throughout history, and contemporary sustainability efforts.

This exhibit focused on the raw materials from which clothing is made and its impact through history on the natural world. By exploring nature and fashion as subjects with a multifaceted relationship, the exhibit was able to move past surface-level thematic discussion about nature as a source of inspiration. Rather, the exhibit illustrated both what the natural world provides for clothing design and manufacturing, as well as highlighting the environmental impact of clothing production since before the industrial revolution.

The main focus of the first portion of the exhibit was a historical lense on clothing production and natural materials used in garments. Like the Charles James exhibit at CHM, the V&A collaborated with its neighbor, the Natural History Museum in London, and displayed their artifacts alongside items from the V&A collection. For example, a 19th century dress that used beetle shells as sequins was exhibited alongside a specimen of that same beetle species.^[9] The

second section of the exhibit focused on environmentally and morally sustainable clothing manufacturing, as well as a continued presence of natural motifs that have inspired 20th and 21st century fashion designers. The exhibit explores the potential avenues for a future in sustainable fashion and features designers who are making efforts to work this way. In doing so, the V&A strikes a tone more in line with science and natural history museums, advocating for sustainable practices. Thus even though the exhibit still highlights designers, it does so around a construction-based and advocacy-based theme, rather than a pictorial motif or thematic inspiration.

Although each of these museums varies in its collections and mission, each of these exhibits showcase a unique and forward-thinking approach to fashion in museums. All three, an art museum, a history museum, and a decorative arts museum, found different ways to exhibit fashion that illuminated far beyond the alluring and elusive artistic inspirations of designers and shared insights that only museum-based scholarship could provide. Melchior and Svensson note the “tension between the museum as a center for knowledge and object preservation and the museum as an institution for cultural entertainment and storytelling... What can museums do that [the fashion industry] cannot?”^[10] By remaining rooted in scholarship, taking a construction, materials, or contextual approach, decentering the designer, and collaborating cross-disciplinarily and cross-institutionally, each of these exhibitions provide a new way of approaching fashion in museums that will lead the field for the ever-evolving role that fashion will play in museums.

With this framework in mind, I endeavored to create an exhibition that would use a new and unique approach to studying dress. This exhibition exploring three different objects considers how and why clothing is embellished, providing insight into the time period from which they came, embellishment techniques and craftsmanship, as well as an investigation of each object’s unique trajectory. Each object will be analyzed on the basis of its materials, the method of construction, and consider clothing as design, rather than as art objects. With this exhibit, I hope to highlight some of the items in our collection in such a manner that helps them better serve as an educational resource while also exploring an exhibition style which I believe to be more instructive to the future of fashion in museums.

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- [2] Judith Clarke and Amy de la Haye. *Exhibiting Fashion: Before and After 1971*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014, 74.
- [3] Clarke, *Exhibiting Fashion: Before and After 1971*, 69.
- [4] Melchior and Svensson, *Fashion in Museums*, 10.
- [5] "The Met's 'Heavenly Bodies' Exhibition Attracts One Million Visitors in Just Three Months" *Vogue*, October 21st, 2018, <https://www.vogue.com/article/metropolitan-museum-of-art-heavenly-bodies-fashion-and-the-catholic-imagination-one-million-visitors>
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Exhibition Catalogue



Jacket, c. 1890

Wool flannel, silk lining, embellished with metallic braid

Box 22, DePaul University Costume Collection

This jacket dates to around 1890. It was made by Henry Melhuish ladies tailor to custom measurements, a “perfect fit guaranteed without the necessity of a personal visit”.^[1] As seen below, Melhuish advertised riding habits, traveling gowns, jackets, ulsters, and wedding gowns. Being professionally made, the construction for this jacket is of higher quality than contemporaneous homemade garments. It was typical for ladies jackets to be made by men’s

tailors in this era, however Melhuish produced primarily ladies' garments, specifically advertising jackets, riding habits, and skirts that were appropriate for horse and bicycle riding. The embellishment on this piece is a metallic braid, likely including real silver threads that have tarnished. This type of embellishment falls under the category of passementerie, ornamental edging or trimming (such as tassels) made of braid, cord, gimp, beading, or metallic thread".^[2]

The practice of embellishing jackets with braid trim, and its cousin soutache, originated with military uniforms but becoming popular decorative elements on mens and womens clothing by the end of the 18th century.^[3]

There are 4 pieces on the sleeve embellishment alone. On each side of the front, there are four strands of braid that are continuous from the armhole to the bottom edge of the collar. The strands make curlique and leaf-like patterns, zigzagging back and forth. On the collar a similar two-strand method is used. In the back, the three strands of braid dip down into a deep V shape.

To apply braid trim, the design was often worked out ahead of time on the garment with ink or paint and stitched down in one continuous process.^[4] However, there are not any remaining marks on the jacket where braid has become detached, so the method of transferring the design is unclear. There are small inconsistencies in the design from one side to the other. Because it is difficult to disguise joins in the braid, each section of the trim is in one uninterrupted piece. On this jacket, the braid is couch stitched down, applied before the garment was lined but after the exterior was constructed. Presumably the metallic braid and fine detail of the decoration warranted a hand-done stitch.

Melhuish

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JACKETS,
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1419 MICHIGAN AVENUE, CHICAGO.



Dress, c. 1920s

Silk satin, wool, embellished with metallic thread, purl embroidery floss, glass beads

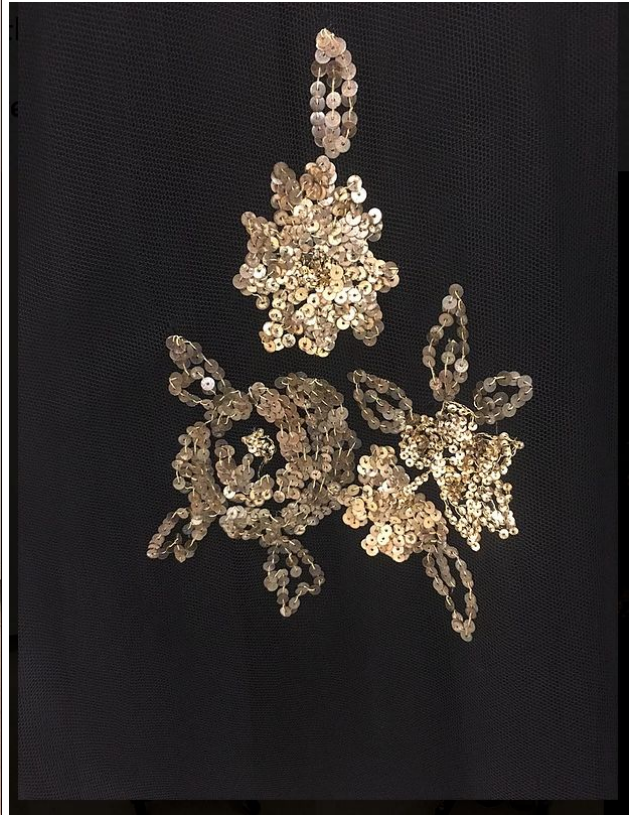
Box 4, DePaul University Costume Collection

This dress, part of an ensemble, is notable for the multiple techniques of embellishment that feature prominently in the bodice of the dress. The base, a smooth silk satin, is oddly attached to a wool skirt piece, which appears to have been added later. The snaps around the neckline and the deep armhole openings indicate that this piece was likely accompanied by a separate slip. Forming a detailed, art deco design on the bodice is a three-component embroidered area: purl embroidery, metal thread embroidery, and beading.

Although this piece has no maker's label--which could be attached to the missing piece of the ensemble--the detailed, time-consuming embroidery and beadwork, indicates that it was likely a custom-made item rather than homemade. Notably, the tucks taken at the shoulder seams fold in a portion of the embroidery, indicating that it was not intentional and had to be altered after the embroidery work was already completed. Similar tucks are found going into the dropped waist of the bodice, however there is not excess embroidery on these pieces.

Three different embellishment techniques comprise this dress's decorative element. The beadwork is applied by "lazy-stitch" technique, in which the thread is not tied off until all the beads in a given section have been stitched on.^[5] The tiny glass seed beads are faceted and remain remarkably shiny. The majority of the embroidery is done in relatively simple stitches but covers a remarkably large area of the garment. The thread used for this embroidery, purl thread, is much more efficient for covering large areas. The portion of the design done in purl thread includes a single chain stitch, a stem stitch, and a seed stitch.^[6] All of these stitches are relatively simple to execute, showing that the design was complex to layout but more efficient to create. The third technique is embroidery with real silver thread, which has tarnished over time.

Catalog Entry 3:



Dress, c. 1930s

Nylon netting, taffeta, sequins

Box 29, DePaul University Costume Collection

This net dress comprises two layers of net and one taffeta lining, embellished with gold plastic sequins. Sequins as we know them today came into fashion in the 1920s after King Tut's tomb was re-discovered in 1922, upon finding sequins on garments there.^[7]

The sequins used on this dress now a glittery sheen, rather than the mylar foil finish that is more typical of contemporary sequins, although the sequins on the dress have deteriorated at different rates. The 1930s was a time of major development for sequins. Gelatin sequins were

produced during this period but melted easily; the solution was acetate sequins, invented in collaboration with Kodak, using the same material as was used on camera film.^[8] It is likely that the sequins on this dress are acetate, as they break easily.

The sequins on this dress were applied by tambour technique. Tambouring is a technique of applying beads, sequins, or can be simply used as an embroidery stitch.^[9] It became popular in the 1920s and 1930s when all-over sequined garments came into fashion, and it is for this purpose that it most often remains in use, although now it is often done by a machine called a Cornely machine.^[10]

The sequins on this dress may have been hand-tamboured, based the inconsistent length of the stitches. However, it is possible that it was done by Cornely machine, especially if the garment was manufactured or custom-made. Because it appears that the lining has been replaced, it is difficult to determine whether or not the garment was produced professionally or homemade. Tambouring by hand requires a tool that looks like a tiny crochet hook, pictured below, which pierces through the fabric, passes through the sequin, and then anchors back down on the reverse side of the fabric with a chain stitch.^[11] Because the large floral motif is repeated four times by hand, it is notable that it appears with such consistency on each panel, if it was indeed done by hand. Because the net is an open fabric, transferring the design would have been a challenge.

^[1] The Chicago Blue Book of Selected Names of Chicago and Suburban Towns: Containing the Names and Addresses of Prominent Residents. Chicago, 1890. Digitized by Google, June 15, 2007.

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Exhibit Introduction

Embellishments: Exploring Dress in Detail

Why do we decorate our clothes? Humans have been interested in embellishing our garments for millenia, with new materials and techniques introduced in every era to make our clothes look shinier, more textural, or just more interesting. This exhibit looks a little more closely at three of the different ways that clothing was embellished through three garments from three different eras, taking us from the end of the 19th century through the 1930s. As new materials became available and different styles came in and out of fashion, so too did the ways we embellish our clothes.

Jacket, c. 1890

Wool flannel, silk lining, embellished with metallic braid

Box 22, DePaul University Costume Collection

The Jacket

This jacket, custom-made by a Chicago ladies tailor in the 1890s, likely would have been worn while traveling or on horseback. As we can see in the advertisement below, Melhuish tailoring services were sent back and forth in the mail.

The Embellishment

The swirly designs on this jacket are done in a metallic trim called braid, which was hand-stitched down. This kind of embellishment, influenced by military wear, was popular all through the 19th century. To transfer the design onto the jacket and stitch down all of the intricacies by hand would have been very time-consuming.



Melhuish

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Dress, c. 1920s

Silk satin, wool, embellished with metallic thread, purl embroidery floss, glass beads

Box 4, DePaul University Costume Collection

The Dress

This dress has lived a storied life, and probably looked really different when it was first made from what we're looking at today. It probably had a slip that was worn underneath it, but we're not sure what it would have looked like exactly. The skirt of the dress has also been replaced, so the wool fabric that we see on the bottom of the dress is in place of something else, possibly fringe, feathers, or more of the same silk that makes up the top of the dress. It's likely that this piece was custom-made, but it's difficult to tell without the other piece in the ensemble.

The Embellishment

This dress has three different elements to its decoration: embroidery, embroidery with metal thread, and beading. You might notice that the glass beads on this dress are shiny and vibrant, while the small metallic threads have tarnished over time. These beads are particularly unique because they are faceted rather than spherical, a distinctly 1920s art deco detail. Although the embroidery stitches on this dress are relatively simple to execute for the skilled embroiderer, the pattern of the design overall is what makes it look complex.



Dress, c. 1930s

Nylon netting, taffeta, sequins

Box 29, DePaul University Costume Collection

The Dress

This dress gets its shape from the flouncy panels of net and taffeta fabric. The dress has four panels, which means that it has a nontraditional shape because there aren't any seams on the sides of the skirt.

The Embellishment

The sequins are the star of this dress, which can be found in circular and floral formations on each of the four panels. In the 1930s, the newest innovation in sequin manufacturing was to make them out of acetate which was developed with the camera company Kodak, since it is the same material used in camera film. The sequins on this dress were attached by a technique called tambouring, which can be done either by a machine that feeds sequins onto the garment as it sews or by hand with a tiny hook, pictured below.

