
INTRODUCTION

Material Strategies Engendered

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Clothing is one of the most consistently gendered aspects of material and visual culture. It is consumed on a daily basis. Its production is a dominant force in local, national and global economies. Because clothing is highly gendered it is often emotionally charged, and always with us, literally carried about on our backs. Judging from crowds attending dress exhibitions in museums and the popularity of historical sites such as Colonial Williamsburg in the US, re-enactment events, and films and TV dramas highlighting period dress, people are not only interested in their own clothing but are also fascinated by what was worn in the past. Yet even scholars who study people's daily lives worldwide have been slow to systematically analyse dress and visual and material culture. Some anthropologists and historians of non-western cultures have drawn attention to how clothing and textiles reveal characteristics of (and changes within) specific groups and cultures, but they have focused primarily on how material objects are used rather than materiality itself, including visual, tactile and other aspects of the physical world. Historians of western society, including social historians who are committed to interpreting working people's daily lives, have paid little attention to material culture or its visual and tactile dimensions. Historians of women and gender in the West, too, have neglected dress, despite the fact that most garments are designed exclusively for one sex or the other, and that women have been seen as preoccupied with personal appearance and consumption and disproportionately responsible for the production and maintenance of clothing.

From the late nineteenth century until the early 1980s, the study of dress in the West was largely dominated by costume historians, collectors, art historians and museum curators who contributed a rich though limited body of knowledge and detailed visual record of continual changes in

garment styles and textiles. Most defined their subject as fashion, the attire of elites in western society, in contrast to ordinary people's dress or utilitarian work clothes, while others focused on examples of regional or folk dress. They developed a connoisseurial approach to techniques and materials that valorised them as decorative art, and divorced clothing and textiles from the body, from everyday life and from ideological concerns. The few social scientists, including woman's historians, who wrote on dress accepted a dichotomy of fashionable/unfashionable and explained fashion as reflecting social roles or distinctions. Their 'top down' and 'trickle down' emulation model (related to Veblen's 'conspicuous consumption') assumed that fashionable styles continually changed because elites competed with each other to display wealth and status in novel ways and to distinguish themselves from their imitators. In this model, the extent that ordinary women and men were fashionable was due to their imitation of elite styles.

A more analytical approach to dress within visual and material culture began in the early 1980s, chiefly in western Europe, North America and Australia, primarily in response to new studies of consumption. Economic historians took a fresh look at consumerism in western society, replaced the 'trickle-down' model with one recognising the rich material culture of ordinary people, and pushed the birth of consumer society back into the sixteenth century or earlier. Anthropologists like Appadurai began to define consumption broadly, emphasising that it was not only a matter of individuals or markets but also a cultural process.¹ Many turned their attention to how commodification in the West influenced other countries, especially those with a colonial past, revealing the complex, often contentious, process through which cultures and identities are constructed and/or compromised. Cloth and clothing are now more fully represented in studies of consumption and culture, including those concerned with colonial and postcolonial contexts. At the same time, some feminist scholars in Britain and North America began to rethink social and cultural meanings of stylish clothing to women. Elizabeth Wilson laid to rest simplistic social psychological interpretations of fashion, characterising it neither as language nor simple cultural expression of society or individuals, but as a form of visual and tactile communication linked to the body, self and communication. She developed the notion of fashion as paradoxical and double-edged, public and private, individual and social, adorning the surface and at the same time masking and/or revealing (sometimes unwittingly) the inner psyche.² Valerie Steele warned feminist scholars that those who ignore fashion, or dismiss it as oppressive to women, trivial, or the realm of the rich and famous, do so at their own peril: they contradict fundamental goals of the feminist project, revealing women's agency and their own interpretations

of their lives. Thus, feminist scholars who uncritically accepted Victorian medical theories that women's dress was unhealthy neglected to ask how women themselves felt about their clothing, and missed fashion's inseparability from sexuality and the body.³

But let us not single out women, as is too often done by critics. After all, feminist scholars were fundamentally social historians who were slow to use visual or material sources, despite the importance of textile and garment production in the industrialising societies they studied, because their field was rooted in the written and spoken word. In the 1970s and early 1980s, social historians' innovative methods often relied on quantifiable as well as qualitative sources and stemmed from central characteristics of the industrialising West in the nineteenth century. They studied a period during which officials devised new types of written records (such as census records), reformers energetically compiled statistics and reports, public education became more widespread, popular fiction and periodicals aimed at women and working people (including artisans' trade journals) proliferated, and literacy was on the increase. Some social historians (such as industrial archaeologists) considered the significance of material objects but rarely for their visual or tactile meanings. Most who were aware of the growing photographic record of people and events used visual or material sources to illustrate text rather than to drive forward an argument, in the way that quantifiers used calculations presented in tables and graphs. Recognising this gap, Raphael Samuel called for historians to treat visual sources as rigorously and respectfully as they would other forms of evidence, not least in the quest for 'unofficial knowledge'.⁴ But because the written word was so central for social historians, most missed the opportunity to incorporate insights of the 'new' art and design history of the 1980s which directly addressed gender.

The neglect of visual and material sources was remedied in the early 1990s when innovative scholars, primarily in the West, turned to material and popular culture, leisure and consumerism, revealing playful, sensual, tactile, visual, imaginative aspects of daily life. These scholars came from diverse backgrounds in social and woman's history, dress history, art and design history, economic history, anthropology and literature. They built on the work of a few pioneers of the early 1980s, recognising that clothing and textiles almost uniquely combine production and consumption and private, bodily, intimate sensation, sexuality and fantasy with public self-presentation. Fashion history leaped beyond both simplistic universalising or psychological explanations and dress historians' and curators' preoccupations with haute couture and the dress of élites, while building on their valuable detailing and recording of construction and technique. Evans and Thornton first united a study of classic haute couture and contemporary fashion design with feminist cultural discourses.⁵ All these scholars

have in common a focus on the material and cultural characteristics of the object and/or its wearer, either as their central concern or a touchstone for wider inquiry. They define their subject as dress, which incorporates not only fashion but also everyday dress, including specialised garments such as uniforms.⁶ Because, quite simply, scholarly analysis aside, everyone everywhere wears some form of clothing every day of their lives, their inquiries reach around the globe.

Because of its subject matter, the emerging field of dress history is necessarily cross-cultural and interdisciplinary. It is cross-cultural not only because of the ubiquity of clothing but also because the production of textiles and garments is a key industry operating at intersecting local, national and global levels. It is interdisciplinary because meanings of dress and textiles are multiple, many-layered, and overlapping, concerning, for example, individuals, aesthetics, sexuality, cultures, economies, and ideologies.⁷ Interdisciplinary scholarship can be analytically powerful, if it avoids the pitfall of using interpretations, sources or evidence from several disciplines uncritically, without regard for context and underlying implications. It addresses and generates questions crossing disciplines, historical periods, and/or national entities, questions that require a variety of methods and sources.

Interdisciplinary exchanges have been fruitful. Social historians have taken notice of insights about dress, and dress historians have drawn on the material approaches of 'history from below'. Since the 1980s, studies of production and consumption have become considerably more complex. Victoria De Grazia's 1995 collection *Sex of Things* finally took seriously and revised women's identification with decoration, appearance and consumption.⁸ Nancy Green's *Ready-to-Wear, Ready-to-Work* (1997) revised assumptions about ready-made clothing in advanced capitalism and recast the relationship between fashion, national culture and economic change.⁹ Wendy Gamber's *The Female Economy* and Barbara Burman's *The Culture of Sewing* complicated the story by looking at households, the interstices of production, documenting uneven and overlapping changes in patterns of acquiring clothing, and revealing a complex mixture of traditional and new practices.¹⁰ Cultural historians opened up new areas of inquiry, such as textual analysis, consideration of audience, the role of ideology, and the notion of subculture and counter-culture. More recently, Diana Crane draws together visual and documentary material from nineteenth-century France, England and the US to explore dress and social identity including working-class dress.¹¹ Many scholars explore the influence on developing countries of the western production, marketing and consumption of garments – as, for example, in Karen Hansen's study of used clothing in Zambia.¹² Multicultural studies have influenced museum collecting and curating, which now seek to represent a wider

constituency. Although big museums still court blockbuster fashion themes and designers to generate audiences, many exhibitions feature subcultures seen as outside the fashion mainstream. Examples include Barbara A. Schreier's exhibition *Becoming American Women: Clothing and the Jewish Immigrant Experience, 1880–1920*, which toured from Chicago in 1995–6 (published as a book of the same name) and, in London, the Victoria and Albert Museum's popular *Street Style* exhibition (1994–5).

Fashion and textile historians have turned especially to the work of cultural anthropologists for whom, as for historians of pre-literate cultures and periods, material objects are at least as essential as written records. Anthropologists such as Jane Schneider and Annette Wiener contribute a cultural approach to cloth. This approach has been neglected by historians, who have until recently focused mostly on the technical and economic aspects of textile production and labour, including regional or local settings, and the early modern and industrialising world.¹³ Anthropologists, too, have paid more attention to the gendered implications of cloth and clothing.¹⁴ Joanne B. Eicher uses anthropological studies to challenge common assumptions about dress in non-western societies and among minority ethnic groups residing in Britain and the US.¹⁵ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, whose approach has much in common with that of anthropologists, brings 'female-centred production' to the study of colonial America and links it with ways that ordinary people made sense of the world through household goods.¹⁶ As a signal of burgeoning interest in cultural approaches to textiles, *Textiles: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* (Berg) will be launched in 2003.

Historians of dress and textiles have learned to mine the meaning of material objects, visual and tactile culture, not as a substitute for verbal sources when these are unavailable, but in order to reveal dimensions of political and social transformations that cannot be discerned in observed social behaviour or verbal and written articulations. As Daniel Roche has observed, 'clothing helps to constitute the values of sensibility and mobilises the senses'.¹⁷ As palpable material objects that communicate visually (and through tactile stimulation), the meanings of fashion and textiles both span and reflect particular times and places. Christopher Breward has pointed out that because fashion is closer to personal identity than other material objects, it reveals significant social change at several levels, and subtle links between changes in individuals and historical processes, especially with regard to gender ideologies.¹⁸ Like the textiles that were a key means of communication in medieval Europe, the clothed and fashioned body is a visual medium that carries varied messages. For Dorothy Ko, the body itself is a form of attire which can be modified to communicate meaning to observers. Her study of the meaning of footbinding to the people who experienced it in

seventeenth-century China underscores the significance of tactile, visual sources, and in the process can shed new light on contemporary western fashions such as tattooing, crash diets and exercise regimes.¹⁹ Yet, as Wilson observes, fashion also expresses ambiguities specific of fragile modern identities, and is 'essential to the world of modernity, the world of spectacle and mass-communication. It is a kind of connective tissue of our cultural organism.' She defines fashion as 'one of the most flexible means' by which we express the ambiguities of capitalism, selfhood and art.²⁰

Gender issues are interwoven into this emerging field of dress and textile history, but are not at the forefront and do not yet add up to the systematic analysis or synthesis that they deserve, considering the fundamental gendering of attire. In a relatively new interdisciplinary and cross-cultural field, scholars, overwhelmed by literature within their own discipline, are often slow to take note of analytical insights from other disciplines and countries which might enrich their own work. However, Valerie Steele's *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, which gathers a variety of perspectives and approaches into one internationally distributed periodical, has become a major forum for new scholarship, as have interdisciplinary conferences. In the UK, a major international conference, '*Dress in History: Studies and Approaches*' (1997), explored the broadening of the parameters of dress history and key issues, particularly challenges presented by the fact that the 'language and methodologies of fifty years ago are no longer adequate for modern approaches'.

This collection of essays, which we have entitled *Material Strategies*, contributes to this project by bringing together scholarship focused on geographically diverse settings – Britain, the US, Italy, Germany, China and Tanzania – and ranging chronologically from pre-industrial society to the mid-twentieth century. It pushes forward a more comprehensive analysis of clothing and textiles by combining the diverse perspectives of dress, design and textile history, economic and business history, cultural anthropology, social history and cultural and art history. The essays in this volume thus represent a new dress and textile history that incorporates multiple approaches to analysing material objects and visual representations and to exploring human agency and audiences, attempting to avoid the reductive tendencies and pitfalls of a single approach. The result is a powerful analytical perspective that sheds new light on gender history. Each essay in *Material Strategies* assumes that, like verbal and written articulations and observed behaviour, material objects and dress and textiles figure in social configurations and transformations in ideology, ethos, culture and/or institutions, whether for individuals, social entities (classes, races, ethnic groups, genders, communities), industrial sectors, or nations. Above all, because garments

are identified with one sex or the other, the meaning and consequences of these material strategies are inherently gendered.

Essays in Section 1 (see Contents, pp. i–ii) reveal how people and/or institutions in pre-industrial Europe used material objects to manage self-presentation, to convey identity, or to locate themselves at a time when visual communication through garments and textiles was more important in daily life than the written word. Maria Hayward tells us that liturgical textiles in Reformation London contributed to locating individuals in gendered time and life stages, birth, marriage and death. Gabriele Mentges's essay contends that an individual's self-representation through images of himself clothed (and unclothed) represent gendered notions of the relationship of individuals to historical time.

In Section 2, essays centre on specific objects or, in the case of Katrina Honeyman, on a gendered ensemble, the men's suit, that figure in shaping gender ideologies and identities. Honeyman's essay takes analysis of production and consumption beyond the manufacture, retailing and purchasing of textiles and ready-made garments by looking at a complex mix of developments, shifts in fashion, masculine identities and consumerism, and innovations in the organisation of production in the Leeds garment trade. Carole Turbin's essay on the Arrow Man, an image advertising detachable collars in the early twentieth-century US and Cheryl Buckley's contribution in Section 3 analyse a visual dimension of production and consumption in mass-circulation magazines to provide a more complex understanding of shifts in clothing styles. Hayward's essay also looks at the interstices of the economy, production and the church as an unexplored locus of the meaning of textiles.

Two essays in Section 2, along with Breward's in the third section, are about the enthusiastic male consumer, until recently neglected by scholars who accepted the notion that in western society male attire has been austere and unchanging since the late eighteenth century. Honeyman, Turbin and Breward document subtle but complex changes in men's dress and the keen interest of many men in enhancing their personal appearance. Both Honeyman and Turbin address changing ideologies about manliness and consumerism, with Turbin's essay on the twentieth-century US contributing to understanding homoeroticism in some advertising images of men and the eroticism inherent in consumerism. Breward's essay on the Teddy Boy outfit in postwar London underscores that male types identified by dress were not new phenomena but combined British traditions and new trends and, like women's dress, were the result of continuing and uneven fashion changes. Mentges's essay in the first section also underscores a man's consciousness of the consequences of his appearance to others.

The essays by Burman, Turbin and Fields reveal gendered identities shaped by a combination of public and private dimensions: garments such as pockets, underwear and collars are both intimate and a means of managing personal appearance for the purpose of public self-presentation. These essays are about individual garments or components of clothing with a special relationship to the public and private body, showing how, as Joanne Entwistle puts it in *The Fashioned Body*, 'fashion, as discourse and practice, articulates the body, making it social and identifiable', which is 'of considerable importance to the development of modern society'.²¹ Because underwear lies next to the skin, the wearer is aware of the feel of the texture and drape of fabric on and moving with or constricting her/his body, and at the same time conscious of the effect of her/his public presentation. Fields's essay on closed- and open-crotch drawers in the US from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century reveals that women's undergarments are both public and private, and have two sides, eroticism and modesty, dichotomous aspects of sexuality that changed in relationship to gender ideologies over time. Turbin's essay explores the meaning of collars, borders between the private body and public presentation, for changes in ideals of white middle-class manliness. Burman's story of the placement, size and contents of pockets explores a private, hidden segment of clothing that serves to protect and/or transport objects of private or social (public) use, revealing gender ideologies embedded in pockets. Mentges's essay in the first section also touches on this theme, as Matthäus Schwarz depicted himself nude as well as clothed, showing the importance of the private, intimate sense of himself in public.

Section 3 is about varying ways in which material strategies contribute to social transformations that include subtle, or not so subtle, reconfigurations of specific subcultures or entire nations in a short period or over many decades. Both Buckley and Breward explore how dress fashioned specific group identities in twentieth-century Britain, Breward by looking closely at stylish London men, and Buckley by analysing a periodical aimed at lower-middle-class women during the World War I period. Andrew Ivaska's essay on 1960s Tanzania, Eugenia Paulicelli's study of interwar Italy, and Verity Wilson's essay on early to mid-twentieth-century China draw attention to gendered dimensions of national political change. Feminist scholars of the welfare state have revealed gendered dimensions of emerging national social and political policy, especially in western Europe, Australia and North America. Ivaska, Paulicelli and Wilson contribute to linking gender and politics by examining the history and consequences of fashion policies of political leaders seeking to forge, redirect or shore up a tattered or undeveloped national identity. Along with studies like Emma Tarlo's book on how India's political leaders used clothing during the independence movement, these essays reveal that

emerging nations whose identity is shifting and contested are of special interest to historians of dress and textiles.²² The fact that powerful leaders both recognised and used dress as a strategy to further their agendas underscores the political significance of dress on an individual and national level. Problematic situations, with all their tensions and contradictions, often reveal ideological assumptions underlying social patterns. During transformational periods, dress reveals aspects of ideologies linking individuals and societies that may be difficult to discern through other sources because dress is more closely tied to individual identity than most other material objects. This has been demonstrated elsewhere through, for example, studies of veiling in Islamic culture and antebellum African-American clothing.²³ In this section, each essay uses material objects and/or their visual representations to detail how identities of nations in widely different settings are fundamentally gendered, both changing and continuous, and often result from contentious debate and/or cooperation among groups.

Ivaska's and Paulicelli's essays, for different reasons, underscore that dress and textiles provide a window into world-level transformations related to the globalisation of production and consumption. Fashion is central to understanding globalisation, firstly because many workers producing garments for western-owned companies are either immigrants from or live and work in the developing world, and secondly because, as Ivaska shows, western dress brings to developing countries not only new garments but also new ideologies and ways of life. The globalisation of fashion production is construed as both progressive (for example, in Benneton's claims to unite all the world's people) and destructive, in that it exploits and erodes distinctive national and regional cultures. Taken together, these and other studies of non-western settings underscore the inadequacy of Eurocentric scholars' approaches to the task of revealing the significance of what people wear and have worn.

Fashion and textile history is still in transition. Scholars no longer view fashion as primarily the realm of journalists or of costume and art historians, as simply involving a list of detailed characteristics, or as a monolithic look or style which is easily summed up – the Victorian S curve, the flapper, the New Look, or the Nehru suit. Scholars from diverse fields and perspectives have opened up fashion history to consider dress as central to visual and material culture for people worldwide. They seek to understand the complex influences of consumption and production and their interstices, explore the gendered dimensions of national identity and develop new ways of looking at the relationship between public and private life, the body and sexuality. The essays in this volume forge new conceptualisations through particularity: garment manufacture (Leeds), individual garments (undergarments, collars, pockets), specific times and

places (Edwardian London, mid-twentieth-century Tanzania, fascist Italy, pre-industrial London), moments of transformation (World War I Britain, unifying Italy), the emergence of modern notions of time (Renaissance Germany, Revolutionary China). In their different ways, the authors reveal previously neglected nuances and complexities, bring to light new evidence by exploring new sources, put accepted evidence to new use, challenge conventional wisdom, and replace old generalisations with new more complex insights. In short, *Material Strategies* moves scholarship on dress and textiles toward more inclusive, nuanced and multi-layered analyses of the cultural meanings and consequences of the gendered material strategies (knowing, deliberate, unwitting and/or inadvertent) of women, men, social groupings, and nations.

Notes

1. Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).
2. Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (Virago Press, 1985).
3. Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (Oxford University Press, 1985).
4. Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, vol. 1, *Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (Verso, 1996).
5. Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton, *Women and Fashion: A New Look* (Quartet, 1989).
6. Lou Taylor, *The Study of Dress History* (Manchester University Press, 2002).
7. Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson (eds), *Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explorations and Analysis* (Routledge, 2000); Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (1975; repr. University of California Press, 1993); Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (The Women's Press, 1984).
8. Victoria De Grazia (ed.), *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (University of California Press, 1996).
9. Nancy L. Green, *Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Duke University Press, 1997).
10. Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860–1930* (University of Illinois Press, 1997); Barbara Burman, *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Berg, 1999).
11. Diana Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* (University of Chicago Press, 2000).
12. Karen Tranberg Hansen, *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia* (Columbia University Press, 2000).
13. Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider, *Cloth and Human Experience* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989).
14. Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher (eds), *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning* (Berg, 1992).
15. Joanne H. Eicher (ed.), *Dress and Ethnicity: Change Across Space and Time* (Berg, 1995); Joanne H. Eicher, 'The Anthropology of Dress', *Dress*, 27 (2000), pp. 59–70.
16. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Hometown: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (Alfred Knopf, 2001).
17. Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the Ancien Regime* (1989; repr. Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 33.
18. Christopher Breward, *The Culture of Fashion: A New History of Fashionable Dress* (Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 5.

19. Dorothy Ko, 'The Body as Attire: The Shifting Meanings of Footbinding in Seventeenth Century China', *Journal of Women's History*, 8 (1997), pp. 10–26.
20. Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, pp. 12, 15.
21. Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Polity, 2000), p. 238.
22. Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India* (Hurst, 1996).
23. Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* (Berg, 1999); Helen Bradley Foster, *New Raiments of Self: African American Clothing in the Antebellum South* (Berg, 1997).