



GLOBAL HISTORY IN THE HISTORY OF FASHION

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TOWARDS A GLOBAL HISTORY OF FASHION

Over the twentieth century, multi-disciplinary academic studies addressed dress practice and bodily adornment from a variety of perspectives, assessing the question of fashion, though few communities outside the West were awarded this term until the past generation. Anthropologists took an ethnographic stance, with works that from the late 1980s became more attentive to the lived significance of clothing that reflected 'agency, practice and performance' with local and global impact.¹ Anthropological studies revealed how clothing resisted and critiqued imperial perspectives, including choices of bodily adornment, integral to community coherence, transforming priorities and social dynamism. These examinations, across world terrains, became richly nuanced with vital studies of evolving clothing systems, including those entangled with decolonization, political changes, and material challenges. The significance of this scholarship affected other disciplinary fields, from history and art history, to cultural and museum studies, with modes of close looking and analysis, as increasing numbers of scholars explored the important matter of 'the social skin'. As Terence Turner observed: 'Decorating, covering, uncovering or otherwise altering the human form in

¹ Karen Tranberg Hansen, 'The World in Dress: Anthropological Perspectives on Clothing, Fashion, and Culture', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33 (2004), 370.

accordance with social notions of everyday propriety or sacred dress, beauty or solemnity, status or changes in status, or on occasion of the violation and inversion of such notions, seems to have been a concern of every human society of which we have knowledge ... the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted.² Studies of clothing revealed its variable efficacy as a tool to discipline colonized peoples, as well as a tool of resistance; while gender practices and the critical resistance of norms were also lively fields of study. Critical analyses of clothing modes opened wide-ranging, cross-cultural studies on the subject of dress and fashion, attentive to the dialogic relationship between colonies and metropolises and other societal forms.³

Within the West, mid-twentieth-century museum and university scholars approached the question of clothing from different perspectives. Among the predominantly male cohort of academics, quantitative analyses of cloth and dress components were prioritized in the 1960s and 1970s, attached to iconic paradigms like the industrial revolution. These scholars rarely (if ever) employed the term 'fashion' in their historical analyses. There was a deep resistance to the serious study of a subject of such seeming frivolity – a woman's question? This blinkered approach was called out in 1973 by a historian of early modern England, Joan Thirsk. She challenged her colleagues to think more broadly about the sources of economic and social change and the rich cultural dimensions animating such processes, writing that:

Fashion is accorded a lowly place by economic historians when they account for the rise of the clothing industries and the changing direction of their trade. They prefer to look for sterner economic explanations, such as the debasement of the coinage, war, new customs tariffs, and occasionally bad (or good) craftsmanship.

² Terence S. Turner, 'The Social Skin', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 2/2 (2012 [1980]), 486–504.

³ Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher (eds.), *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning* (Oxford: Berg, 1992); Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins, Joanne B. Eicher, and Kim K. P. Johnson (eds.), *Dress and Identity* (New York: Fairchild, 1995); John L. and Jean Comaroff, 'Fashioning the Colonial Subject', in *Of Revelations and Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 11, 218–73.

Thus they turn their back on the evidence of contemporaries, and on the evidence of their own eyes in the modern world.⁴

The frustration felt by Thirsk was shared by the predominantly female cohort of curators working in museums with clothing collections (historic and ethnographic). Their work was generally dismissed as lacking ‘seriousness’, as Lou Taylor observes: ‘much of this academic criticism [of fashion studies] came from male staff of “old” universities and was directed at a field still largely in the hands of women or gay men mostly in museum-based jobs or in “new” universities’.⁵ Studies bounded by national borders still predominated in both quarters and efforts to bridge the two solitudes and move beyond national themes only took root from the late 1980s onwards. Links across disciplinary boundaries were ultimately forged between museum and university researchers and with this emerged a range of collaborative projects, including those with global or cross-cultural aims. The global impact of Indian cotton and other Asian trade goods, for example, foregrounded the need for breadth to gauge the impact of pivotal commodities. It is a testament to the collaborative impulses and intellectual innovations that emerged that the ground-breaking initiatives of the 1990s and early 2000s now seem unremarkable.⁶

However, other troubling factors remained to be addressed in the last third of the twentieth century, intellectual hangovers from the West’s colonial past, evident in assumptions about the nature and compass of fashion. There was a widely shared prevailing notion

⁴ Joan Thirsk, ‘The Fantastical Folly of Fashion: The English Stocking Knitting Industry, 1500–1700’, in N. B. Harte and K. G. Ponting (eds.), *Textile History and Economic History: Essays in Honour of Miss Julia de Lacy Mann* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1973), 50.

⁵ Lou Taylor, *The Study of Dress History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 64.

⁶ For example, material culture and apparel research resulted in exhibition and published accounts. Collaboration with Indigenous communities and museum scholars resulted in an exhibition and book – Ruth B. Phillips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700–1900* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998); ‘At Home in Renaissance Italy’ exhibition, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2006 – and an edited volume, Elizabeth Miller, Flora Dennis, and Marta Ajmar (eds.), *At Home in Renaissance Italy* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2006).

that fashion was a Western phenomenon and that the rest of the world did not share this level of aesthetics and economic dynamism, or cultural creativity. Fernand Braudel, an eminent French scholar of the French and Mediterranean world, published his three-volume treatise, *Civilization and Capitalism*, in 1979, translated to English shortly thereafter. Importantly, he argued for the significance of the study of fashion as a key facet of history, but insisted that only elite segments of Europe enjoyed this phenomenon, while the rest of the world ‘stood still’ with no material change.⁷ Gilles Lipovetsky reiterated that Eurocentric treatise, insisting that fashion ‘took hold in the modern West and nowhere else’.⁸ This perspective arose as part of Western imperial thinking, where white Western society was conceived as the apogee of development, a blinkered manner of thought that neglected most of the world’s societies and populations and was only gradually upended.⁹ Eurocentric thinking and subtly racialized analyses seriously impeded this field, with claims about fashion and material culture that persisted into the 2000s. A profound rethinking ensued over several decades. Innovative scholarship presented new conceptual paradigms, such as a late medieval world system conceived ‘before European hegemony’, with expansive material culture defining diverse world regions. The evidence of regional generativity demonstrated the significance of proto-global commercial linkages, a system that flourished until undone by plague and retrenchment after 1350. Janet Abu Lughod laid out the complexities of different cultures and societies, acknowledging as well the absence of comparable evidence in every zone; but sufficient remained to confirm the weight of

⁷ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century, Volume I: The Structure of Everyday Life*, trans. Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 323.

⁸ Gilles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [French ed. 1987], 1994), 15. For a similar viewpoint, see Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits: The Evolution of Modern Dress* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 17–18.

⁹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Books, 1995), 74–83; Antonia Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 6–14.

a multi-centred world system at work.¹⁰ The analysis of great world regions, like the Indian Ocean ‘world’, offered additional evidence of global generativity, where textiles and other material culture forged connections within a far-reaching, dynamic zone.¹¹ New thinking extended further, as critical theorists advocated ‘provincializing Europe’, denounced the effects of ‘orientalism’, and explored the charged materialities of Indigenous-made goods and adaptive modes of dress in colonial contexts, among other interpretive innovations.¹² Gender and race studies produced new assessments of discrete communities, and opened a fuller understanding of ties between colony and metropole; indeed, the making of both emerged through a power relationship, expressed in clothing and fashion systems of profound significance.¹³ Among the new perspectives to shape the study of fashion was recognition of the agency of non-elites and marginalized peoples in generating fads and fashions, shown in global trade commodities, like Indian textiles, while also reflected in the humble by-employments and fashion-focused areas of (gendered) work that ignited interpretive possibilities.¹⁴ The theory of ‘entanglement’,

¹⁰ Janet Abu Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3–32.

¹¹ K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹² Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979); Karen Tranberg Hansen, *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Sherry Farrell Racette, ‘Sewing Ourselves Together: Clothing, Decorative Arts and the Expression of Métis and Half Breed Identity’ (Unpublished PhD Diss., University of Manitoba, 2004); Ruth B. Philips, ‘Dress and Address: First Nations Self-Fashioning and the 1890 Royal Tour of Canada’, in Susanne Küchler and Graeme Were (eds.), *The Art of Clothing: A Pacific Experience* (London: UCL Press, 2005), 135–56.

¹³ Catherine Hall, *White, Male, and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992); Catherine Hall, *Civilizing Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Christopher Breward, *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, Fashion and City Life, 1860–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

¹⁴ Joan Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press,

first proposed by Nicholas Thomas for the Pacific, has been applied with demonstrated utility in other regions and times, validating the power of things, with histories to be imagined and reimagined in new contexts, with equal power in the hands of Indigenous and enslaved peoples as well as colonizers, though differently manifested.¹⁵

Global history provides an invaluable platform from which to address connections, material catalysts, and their impact, while attending to the specificities of place and time, and the myriad actors at work. The correlations observable through a global analysis cannot be limited to one static world region, but necessarily incorporate material and cultural stimuli in cycles of exchange, as presented in these volumes and others.¹⁶ Fashion demonstrates its cultural variability, including the expressiveness of apparent status, equally with gradual and rapid change, even as different technologies shaped material use. Creative preferences in colour, cloth, garment shape and weight, head and footwear and adornments, are all elements that define local and regional fashions, whose significance is amplified from a comparative stance. Assorted disciplinary and interdisciplinary studies now shape our understanding of fashion from global perspectives, with a necessary emphasis on history from below, along with the titivations of elites. Material entanglements are also a feature of these fashion forms, with complexities that illuminate empires and resistances, gender performances and racial standing. A global platform allows richer discursive studies, challenging national boundaries as delimiting

1978); Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, c. 1660–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Ann Smart Martin, '“Fine Feathers Make Fine Birds”: Clothing and Consumerism in Eighteenth-Century Virginia Store Trade', paper presented at the 'Clothing and Consumerism in Early Modern England and America Conference', Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1992.

¹⁵ Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Laura Peers, '“Many Tender Ties”: The Shifting Contexts and Meanings of the S BLACK Bag', *World Archaeology*, 31/2 (1999), 288–302; Marcy Norton, 'Subaltern Technologies and Early Modernity in the Atlantic World', *Colonial Latin American Review*, 26/1 (2017), 18–38.

¹⁶ Prasannan Parthasarathi and Giorgio Riello (eds.), *The Spinning World: A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

of taste, and acknowledging the movement of goods and people in defining and redefining the complex cultural, social, and economic phenomenon called fashion.

WHY A GLOBAL HISTORY OF FASHION?

The historical discipline arrived late in acknowledging that fashion has a history that is not just European. Chapters in this volume refer to several barriers that are methodological and relate to sources. On the one hand, historians of dress and fashion maintained traditional geographic categories of expertise, preferring in-depth studies of individual cities and countries (mostly European) rather than addressing topics and problems or considering manifestations of fashion across space and cultures. On the other hand, historians more broadly dismissed fashion as inconsequential in the great political and social narratives of history, be they local, national, or global. The rise of global history in the 1990s and 2000s did not necessarily help fashion to find a new global historical narrative.¹⁷ Comparative methods of analysis and an emphasis on economic forces affected only marginally the study of fashion, though as already noted it brought renewed attention and new interpretations to the global history of textiles such as cotton and silk. Even the interest in capitalism did not help: the question as to whether fashion was a European invention, posed in one of the first issues of the *Journal of Global History* less than two decades ago, found a negative response. Yet fashion was perceived as having a deep link with capitalist development thus making Europe's a more 'mature'

¹⁷ Exceptions are: Ulinka Rublack, *Dressing Up: Cultural Identity in Renaissance Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil (eds.), *The Fashion History Reader: Global Perspectives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010); Robert Ross, *Clothing: A Global History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013); Beverly Lemire, *Global Trade and the Transformation of Consumer Cultures: The Material World Remade, c.1500–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Linda Welters and Abby Lillethun, *Fashion History: A Global View* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Beverly Lemire and Giorgio Riello (eds.), *Dressing Global Bodies: The Political Power of Dress in World History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

manifestation of fashion compared to Ming China or Mughal India, as some supposed.¹⁸

The Cambridge Global History of Fashion builds on scholarship of the last decade whose cumulative impact is only now being felt. It includes both specific studies on fashion in different world areas as well as wider attempts to conceptualize fashion beyond the confines of Western Europe and to create broader interpretive frameworks.¹⁹ Why should the global scale of fashion and its history be narrated? The simple acknowledgement that fashion, since at least the early modern period (1500–1800) but very likely well before, as argued in several chapters in these two volumes, was present in different areas of the world, is only part of the answer. Since global history has entered the realm of cultural and material study, fashion has found a new meaning and value as a tool for analysis. It is worth highlighting at least four reasons. First, post-colonial critiques of history have questioned classic diffusionist narratives that want fashion to be ‘invented’ in Europe and then be ‘exported’ to other parts of the world. Fashion thus appeared either as a tool of European control and domination (creating power over colonial bodies, reshaping them into European forms and imposing a regimentation of everyday habits) or as the embodiment of ‘civilization’ (the acceptance of European standards of living and their promotion across the world). Today these positions are untenable and take no account of the subtle ways in which resistance to imperialism and colonialism, as well as forms of integration and *métissage*, were materialized in dress and manifested through fashion. A dialogue between Indigenous agency and external forces

¹⁸ Carlo Marco Belfanti, ‘Was Fashion a European Invention?’, *Journal of Global History*, 3/3 (2008), 419–43.

¹⁹ The literature is large and includes Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1991); Eiko Ikegami, *Bonds of Civility: Aesthetic Networks and Political Origins of Japanese Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Suraiya Faruqi and Christoph K. Neumann (eds.), *Ottoman Costumes: From Textile to Identity* (Istanbul: EREN, 2004); Regina A. Root (ed.), *The Latin American Fashion Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2006); Robert Ross, *Clothing: A Global History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007); Antonia Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Rublack, *Dressing Up*; and Lemire, *Global Trade*.

(European but often beyond) provides a wider framework for discussing taste, consumption, and the political meaning of dress.

Second, stories of fashion that stretch backwards into the pre-colonial, and consider colonial as well as post-colonial spaces, are a corrective to Eurocentric assumptions. Eurocentrism is not just the attribution of key (positive) characteristics to Europe or the imbuing of European actors with agency claiming fashion for Europe and Europe alone. It is also manifested in historical narratives that consciously or unconsciously mobilize concepts and actors that place Europe centrally. We have already mentioned the alignment of the history of fashion with the rise of capitalism. Histories of fashion strongly align themselves to industrialization and the economic growth of the West. The very 'origin' of fashion is found in many books either in the period of political and economic revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century (the French and the industrial revolutions) or in the economic flowering of late medieval Europe. These types of narratives exclude instances of fashion born outside these chronologies and geographies. Similarly, the importance attributed to the 'fashion creator' (the couturier, the designer, and the stylist) fits specifically a Western narrative of creativity in the arts that was born out of Renaissance humanism and individualism and developed through modernist and post-modernist discourse. By privileging certain actors and certain regions, the history of fashion has taken the European experience as paradigmatic and has thus often produced Eurocentric narratives.²⁰

This is particularly evident in our third point: the relationship between modernity and fashion. In several Western languages such a relationship is born out of the linguistic similarity between mode (Fr. *Mode*; It. *Moda*) and modern (Fr. *Moderne*; It. *Moderno*).²¹ That fashion and modernity were claimed to develop in Renaissance Europe first and later expand in the nineteenth century, strengthened the double link between fashion and the transformation of

²⁰ Some of these critiques are further developed in Giorgio Riello, *Back in Fashion: A History of Western Fashion since the Middle Ages* (London: Yale University Press, 2020).

²¹ Eugenia Paulicelli, *Writing Fashion in Early Modern Italy: From Sprezzatura to Satire* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014).

time, the attribute of change that still today characterizes the very idea of fashion. Yet in accepting this politically charged historical chronology the concept of fashion is shaped to suit only the historical trajectory of the West. Writers on fashion and modernity have tended to locate its emergence in the context of the development of European industrialization and consumer culture, avant-garde artistic sensibilities, and urbanization from the eighteenth century onwards. However, as Anthony Giddens and others have argued, the subjective experience of life in the present and fashion's role as a mechanism for the fabrication of the self are concepts whose agency has been felt beyond the geographical bounds of capitalist Europe and North America, stretching before and after the neat periodization of European modernization.²²

Nevertheless, there is a risk of presenting fashion as omnipresent in time and space. This is why the work by experts on different world areas, as in these volumes, counterbalances a tendency towards uniform concepts and stories of fashion. In these volumes we present fashion both singular (as a concept and process) and plural (in its varying manifestations). A global history of fashion does not strive to create a comprehensive narrative in the way of works on fashion in Western Europe. It acknowledges instead the wide range of manifestations of fashion in different parts of the world and puts them into dialogue. What lies ahead is not about cancelling the histories of European fashion researched over more than a century, but balancing them with equally researched studies on Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Australasia. Clearly the agendas are not the same; yet even a cursory glance shows how deeply these different areas of the world were connected not only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also well before. Second, studies on Mughal courts or the floating world of Tokugawa Japan allow us to revise established assumptions, for instance concerning the 'centres' of fashion or the dynamics between trade and fashion.

This is an ongoing project and *The Cambridge Global History of Fashion* captures a moment of convergence and dialogue notwithstanding the many physical and institutional barriers brought

²² Christopher Breward and Caroline Evans (eds.), *Fashion and Modernity* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 1–7.