

FASHION RESEARCH and the PORTUGUESE HERITAGE

Losses of the *Museu Nacional do Traje* infringing restrictions for future narratives and researches.

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ABSTRACT

This paper centers on the importance clothes, as material culture's object, have for fashion research either for its marketing, historical, cultural or technical character. It also discusses the relationship museums have with the global fashion scene, and focuses on a case study about one of the most important Portuguese institutions for the record and preservation of these objects.

The Museu Nacional do Traje (MNT) – Portuguese National Costume Museum – has worked for over three decades to keep the huge and important collection it owns. Since most of the collection (95%) was acquired from the contributions of thousands of donors, it is therefore an important reflex of the material culture and directly linked to the perceptions and values of the Portuguese society. Though many times awarded for its activities, currently the museum's action is increasingly conditioned to narrow limits, which jeopardize the heritage it shelters and the possibilities for exhibitions to the general public, as well as researches in the area.

KEYWORDS

Fashion research, material culture, heritage, cloth, Museu Nacional do Traje

FASHION RESEARCH AND MUSEUMS

Fashion research relies on different sources and disciplines. It consists of preliminary activity for the development of products and fashion collections in order to serve a market, but can also be designed to deepen knowledge in the area, with a broader objective. Under any of these assumptions, the researcher is faced with the need to go beyond the tactile limits of its object of study, requiring diverse information such as social or psychological comprehension about the consumer and the user, in the other words, the universe in which it is (or was) inserted.

This is common sense. Knowing who is the receiver of a fashion production is part of the methodology. Yet, one could say that it is common sense because these objects have a symbolic component and as such lose their meaning if they are not contextualized by their culture. "It is in the interaction between the elements - individual, history and society - that fashion plays its mediator role, coming on stage as material memory of this dialogue" (Azzi 2010:20) and, this done by the "humanity [which is] inseparable from its materiality " (Miller 2007:47).

This article considers the contextualization and intangibility of the object as an indispensable criteria for the study. However it highlights the materiality of fashion and the role of institutions that safeguard this costume material culture.

In some countries, the presence of costume/fashion museums, or even the relevant work of departments from museums of arts and decorative arts specialized in textile, are so active in the fashion scene, that they eventually join or even shape the actions of media, trends, or the market. According to Valerie Steele (2008) director of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York and leading researcher in the field of fashion – museums are, currently, an important piece in the fashion system.

As an example, one may refer some relevant museums regarding the integration of their actions into the fashion system, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, which acts almost as a trends' provider when it launches its thematic exhibitions, that are registered by the British Vogue (Haye 2006). Another example could be the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (CI-MET), with its "entertainment exhibitions", promoting the symbiosis with the "fashion show" – the parade on the catwalk at the launch of fashion collections – it is the "museum show," as stated by the renowned fashion journalist Suzy Menkes (Steele 2008). Or still, one could refer to CI-MET's partnerships with fashion retailers (Wilson 1999, Belk 1995) or with market brands, generating questions and reflections on the role and the ethical responsibility of the institution. We can also cite the *Museo del Costume - Centro de Investigacion del Patrimonio Etnológico* of Madrid or *MoMu*, the Fashion Museum of Belgium, both because of their partnerships with industries, professionals and students, in a performance that aims to conserve, record as well as to promote the incipient fashion culture.

In the cycles of fashion is constant the work to re-create forms and speeches. It is primarily in this process of rereading that knowledge on the history of fashion and the connection to current trends are evident, where the innovation learns with the past. Even so, it is not because of this or of the examples cited that the fashion museums are important.

Through graphic images, mostly paintings, and particularly through preserved clothing, it is possible to measure what the standard body wraps were. Valerie Steele, in her article "Museum of Fashion Is More Than a Clothes-Bag" (1998) discusses the importance of garments as objects of study for the construction of knowledge and reinforces the idea that these are a strong evidence of material culture. As a clear example of this, we can refer to the dummies developed by the Japanese museum Kyoto Costume Institute. The dummies are different from each other, each one has a silhouette: a body shaped by the cloth of each historic period. They were developed in order to more adequately exhibit the clothing of each period. Throughout the history of costume, not only the cloth changed its silhouette, but it shaped the bodies as well. Due to the costumes' materiality, the notion of physical reality and its pattern can be proved. It is only through direct contact with the garments that some questions can be answered, that specific techniques can best be verified and even rescued.



Figure 1: Dummies developed and exported by the Kyoto Costume Institute.
Source: KCI official site (accessed on 25/11/2010).

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The textile pieces are extremely fragile and their conservation or exhibition requires different care and a very specific knowledge gained through practical experience. Some fiends in the process of general maintenance such as insects, humidity, light and micro waste must be controlled and linked to other specific care, such as those presented hereafter.

In the *Museu Nacional do Traje (MNT)*, the final step of the patrimonialization process is done in the conservation studio. This means that the garments already approved and released by the IMC - Institute of Museums and Conservation of the Portuguese Ministry of Culture - are incorporated into the collection. Once integrated into the museum collection they are eligible to receive specific cares for their protection.

As presented by Dina Dimas, head of the MNT Conservation Department, some stages in the process of restoring textiles are: the description of the object, photographic documentation, measurement and analysis of the tissue, ligaments and their fibers, and verifying the colors' resistance to water. These procedures serve to document the state of the object, and to formulate *hypotheses* and a *restoration plan*. In most cases, the textile has to go through the process of consolidation. Such consists of a manual, meticulous and delicate work of stitching and sensitivity, because the aim is that the object should receive as little intervention as possible for it to be preserved. However, according to the situation of the garment, invisible needle points are not sufficient and an intervention with supporting tissues or total exchange of liners might be needed.

In order to carry out all these processes and for the conservation of this type of material culture, professionals with specific knowledge are of utmost necessity, and MNT began its operations in 1976 with a technical team solely dedicated to conservation. This feature was highlighted by the Commission of the Council of Europe when it awarded the museum the "European Museum of the Year/1978 Special Prize" (Rodrigues 1980:19). The team consisted of the following professionals: Alda Leal, Graciete Carvalho, Teresa Borges, Maria Alice Dias, Mariana Coelho, Esmeralda Silva Madeira Cremilde Caçado. However, the "fairy hands," an expression used by many to explain the sensitivity and skills of these professionals, left and the "magic" to turn rags on party dresses was lost, faded away with the apprentices that were not maintained at the museum.

What we want to expose here is the dramatic situation of the *Museu Nacional do Traje* at the moment. Its "engine", the expression used by Elsa Ferraz, the professional responsible for the museum's collection, does not find resources to keep on. The reason is that the considerable team that started in the Conservation Department when the MNT opened is no longer in activity, as it had been for more than 30 years, and those professionals are no longer there. Such is due to retirement and especially to the inexistence of tenders to incorporate technicians and senior technicians into the museum's staff.

Several trainees were at the department, one of the few teaching laboratories in the country to the formation actions on textile and clothing, also provided by the IMC. Although many technicians learned these techniques, they were not kept to perpetuate such knowledge, not even someone to keep the museum's Conservation Department running. Nowadays, only one conservation technician, who had the opportunity to learn the know-how from the professionals who were there for decades remains at the museum. However, she is not employed by the museum.

"Cultural heritage is not limited to monuments and collections of objects. It also includes the traditions and expressions of life inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants" (UNESCO 2003). What is here presented is not, in itself, a traditional knowledge, less so exclusive to this museum institution or even unique to the Portuguese nation. However, this concept is attributed here to draw the attention on the relevance of this knowledge, especially as a safeguard of itself and of the objects that are dependent on it: the conservation of the Heritage Collection of the *Museu Nacional do Traje*.

Furthermore, the exhibition possibilities of the collection are also dependent on the Conservation Department, since when the objects are selected to join an exhibition, they are checked and their conservation status is a determining factor in the decision whether they are to be exposed or not. If the

museum has skilled professionals to restore the garment, or even to perform a minor refit on the selected object, on time for the display, it remains a potential component of the exhibition, otherwise it returns to the wardrobe!

Some projects sponsored by the UNESCO try to avoid this kind of loss, such as one that takes place in France called "*Maîtres d'Art*" - "Living Human Treasures". This project aims to recover and to encourage the sharing of expertise. The "masters of the art of know-how" are selected by different practical application of expertise - ex.: milliners, glaziers and carpenters - and are encouraged (including financial investment) to transmit their knowledge through continuous interaction between teacher and apprentice. Some of these teachers pointed out the importance of values such as friendship and companionship in the work throughout (Abreu 2009:93-94), proving that knowledge and the art of know-how can only be maintained if shared.

In January 2011 the most regretted situation by the staff of MNT was revealed by the sentence repeated throughout the different Departments: *The "Conservation" closed*. Meaning that the possibilities of exhibitions or acquisitions were restricted. It also meant heritage losses for the Portuguese museum context. It was an intangible heritage which needed to be preserved to be transmitted in a practical experience of sharing knowledge, and through this it would have been possible to safeguard the costume culture heritage.

The objects of produced material culture such as clothing products are important in their symbolic interpretation as well as for their plastic analysis. In other words, it is important to say that these objects show the values of a society, record the techniques used in their manufacture and also shows the measure of the bodily changes. They reliably transmit the structures of its conception, its design. Thus, these objects of material culture are important to fashion research and reflections of old narratives and new associations or innovations.

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