

Fashion & History. How Fashion has Written History

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The relationship between fashion studies and history has a long and complex genesis. In general, these are sectors that have not always communicated easily, due to methodological and content differences, despite the many points in common. Yet history is an important element for understanding, even today, the development and meaning of fashion phenomena, which are rich in long-term political, social, economic and cultural implications. For its part, history can also benefit from specialized studies such as those on fashion, which focus on aspects of daily and social life capable of shedding light on broad cultural constructions of a given historical period.

But let's proceed in an orderly manner. We could say that the relationship between fashion and history has witnessed three phases in recent times. In the first, which goes back at least until the 1980s, there was a great interest above all in aspects linked to the history of art, and therefore to the aesthetics and appreciation of fashion products, be they clothes, fabrics, tapestries, carpets or other things. A strong push in this sense was given by specialists in medieval and modern history, who interpreted these artefacts as an integral part of the culture of the time. The analysis started from a detailed examination of the garment and led, with an inductive method, to construct a historical interpretation of the period. The result of this happy union has generated both an excellent line of historical works and close contact with museum institutions for the enhancement of the clothes and textiles on display. There are in fact numerous studies in this regard, in Italy and abroad, and this approach has proved to be resilient and capable of continuing to produce excellent results.¹

The second phase opens around the 1980s, with the renewal of historical studies following the Cultural Turn, which opens up new perspectives. Interests deriving from anthropology, sociology and linguistics are grafted onto it. On this basis, sometimes highly theoretical, a new field of study has developed which

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1. There are very many studies in this regard and I will limit myself to offering the following as an introduction: *Enciclopedia della moda*, directed by Tullio Gregory, Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2005, 3 voll. (voll. 1-2, Rosita Levi Pisetzky, *Storia del costume in Italia*; vol. 3, *Universo moda*). Concerning the relationship with museums: Anna Somers Cocks, *The Victoria and Albert Museum: The Making of the Collection* (Leicester: Windward, 1980); Musée de la mode, *L'album du Musée de la mode et du textile* (Paris: Réunion des Musées nationaux, 1997); Caterina Chiarelli, Carlo Sisi e Giovanna Tennirelli, *Galleria del Costume. Le collezioni. L'abito e il volto. Storie del costume dal XVII al XX secolo* (Livorno: Sillabe, 2003).

we know as Fashion Studies. It is not a strictly historical sector, therefore, but a sometimes heterogeneous complex of studies that aim to analyse the symbolic and cultural meaning of fashion, often linked to Cultural Studies. From this point of view, we are also witnessing an expansion of studies towards the contemporary situation and, more recently, also an expansion in geographical terms towards non-Western areas. In fact, if the meaning of Fashion Studies is that fashion is a socio-cultural phenomenon, then it cannot be restricted to the Western, and in particular European, tradition, but must necessarily also include regions such as the American, Asian and African ones. First developed in English-speaking areas, this approach has long since spread to Italy too.²

The third phase is more recent and is linked to a new turning point in historiography, partly dissatisfied with some overly theoretical approaches of historical works. This is the Material Turn, that is, a renewed attention to the materiality of objects, which aims to combine attention to cultural history with that paid to material culture. The meaning of this new approach is to react, as Giorgio Riello explains,³ to a method that had become very theoretical and exclusively deductive, and which therefore started from theorizations to descend to the objects, considered the necessary result of socio-cultural conditions and essentially devoid of meaning in themselves. Instead, the synthesis now attempted also seeks to validate the materiality of objects which, as Arjun Appadurai had already recalled in a pioneering essay, have their own social life, their own biography.⁴

These few lines already introduce the great wealth and variety of studies that link fashion and history today, in an increasingly fruitful relationship, both from a methodological and a content point of view. The issue of this magazine aims to contribute to this dialogue, showing the variety and creativity of the intersecting themes.

The first section of this monographic issue concerns places, to underline how history is inextricably intertwined with the memory of places. Outlining the historical geographies of fashion, the first essay by Daniela Cacia takes us to seventeenth-century Piedmont, to the Savoy court, to analyse some central events in the life of the court such as dances. Of great interest is the material on which the essay is built, namely the codices preserved at the Biblioteca nazionale universitaria (National University Library) and the Biblioteca reale di Torino (Royal Library of Turin), as well as the atlases of Giovanni Tomaso Borghio, which give us the forms of representation of power, embodied, in an exemplary way, by Duke Carlo Emanuele II. Other documents, this time from the CSAC archive (Centro Studi e Archivio Comunicazione, the Study and Archive Communication Centre) in Parma, transport us to Milan in the 1970s/1980s, presenting us with unpublished aspects of the person considered the first modern fashion designer, Walter Albini. Valentina Rossi reconstructs various aspects of the figure of this great innovator, who pioneered the potential of the Lombard capital as the driving centre of the new form of fashion, the ready-to-wear industrial one. The essay by Elena Fava then takes us to contemporary Florence, that is, to another capital of Italian fashion. However, the authors do not investigate the well-known events linked to the Sala Bianca and Giovanni Battista Giorgini's first fashion shows, but rather an event of the 1980s which linked fashion and art with a "post-modern" spirit, namely the Pitti trend, an original stage for young creative artists, characterized by typical atmospheres of the new millennium.

2. As a confirmation of the interest aroused over time by Fashion Studies, suffice it to recall the creation of various specialized fashion magazines (including the present one), as well as entire editorial series such as those of Bloomsbury on Fashion (in particular *Fashion and Culture*). Also in Italy there are series dealing with fashion, among which, see *Culture, moda e società* (<https://zonemoda.unibo.it/culture-moda-e-societa/>).

For an introduction to the problems of the fashion-history relationship: Lou Taylor, *The Study of Dress History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); *The History of Fashion Reader: Global Perspectives*, edited by Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil (Basingstoke: Routledge, 2010); Christopher Breward, *Fashion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); *Fashion Theory*, edited by Malcolm Barnard (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); *Moda. Storia e storia*, edited by Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, Giorgio Riello, Elisa Tosi Brandi (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2010).

3. *Writing Material Culture History*, edited by Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (London: Bloomsbury, 2021); *The Cambridge Global History of Fashion*, Volume 1: *From Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Christopher Breward, Beverly Lemire and Giorgio Riello (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

4. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

If the first section grafts the historical experiences of fashion on the area, the second section concerns the use of clothing for the construction of a personal and social identity. It begins with the investigation into masculinity, referring to a thriving sector of studies that has long since overturned old stereotypes, making use of the theoretical work of various interpretative lines (such as *Men's Fashion Studies*, *Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities* and others). The authors Nicholas Bortolotti and Carolina Davalli project their theoretical analysis on to a concrete plane, studying the representation of clothing and the male body in a museum context. In turn, the T-shirt also represented an iconic garment capable of a complex historical evolution, capable of giving rise to multiple forms of identity appropriation, as Eleonora Chiaia shows, retracing its genesis and analyzing some representative case studies. Below, we can observe an interesting parallel. If the male posture is an integral part of the variations of the gender identity image, in the same way, Silvia Vacirca suggests, hair and hairstyle are historically an important part of defining the female look. Starting from this assumption, the author carries out an analysis on a unique case of its kind, namely that of a Hollywood star, like Barbara Stanwyck, who presented herself to the public with grey hair from a relatively young age - as part of her own style, at variance with the stereotype of actresses who are perpetually young (under penalty of exclusion).

Finally, the last section collects essays that address three great challenges affecting the world of fashion. The first questions the very status of fashion in relation to the world of art, considering for example the fluctuating border between creative freedom and productive needs, the role of the artist and the meaning of his productions: retracing a rich theoretical debate, Giuppy D'Aura suggests a reading full of contrasts but also of encroachments and intersections between the two fields. The second challenge refers to a central theme in contemporary fashion proposals, namely the role of heritage and the use of revival, as proposed by Sofia Gnoli, in a historical excursus that illuminates the central weight of these revivals up to today's concept of brand heritage, which is nourished by images but also more concretely by increasingly appreciated archival materials. The last is the challenge of sustainability. Clizia Moradei and Alessandra Vaccari present the state of the art through the choice of key words, starting from the well-known 3 Ps of sustainability (profit, planet, people), with the addition of other words, necessary to reach a better definition and a concrete approach to the circular economy.

Thus, with a gaze that continually moves between past and present, between changing social and cultural codes, between elements of exclusivity and inclusiveness, the fashion-history relationship fully reveals its heuristic strength.