

Fabric Has Life; Beyond the Costumes of the Movies

Howard Besser, Intro to MIAP Final Paper – December 10th, 2014

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Vogue is to fashion as the church is to religion. Fashion exhibitions can now draw the same amount of viewers as religious institutions claimed to have drawn at the height of their popularity. The movies provide a new creative outlet for the fashion industry, whether it is in the form of a Renaissance gown in a period piece or Dorothy's red slippers. The props used in films and attached to actors have now instilled a new religious fervor that was once reserved for making pilgrimages and touching saintly bones. The shell of a costume on display is a relic to the ancient idea that humans can keep a sentimental attachment to an object they have never touched.

When we are young, we form an emotional bond with our toys. We snuggle up to our teddy bears and believe they understand our love for them. But as we grow older and time passes by we have a choice to make. Do we let go of the little piece of our childhood that we would sleep with at night, or do we keep it because it feels wrong to let it go? Even though in our minds we are cognizant of the fact that a stuffed animal is just cloth and fabric with some stitches - it is hard to separate the physical reality from the emotional love and bond we shared when we had not yet formed those connections with people.

Given the bond between childhood and toys as it relates to touch, why is it that today there are so many examples of people forming attachments to objects they have *never* touched, and have only seen them in a movie or on a runway? In the world of movie memorabilia nearly anything a famous actor touches in a movie with a large enough fan following is prized and put on display.

In this same vain, fashion has turned from a high couture French art into a commoditized industry in pop-culture with television shows that use the creative process involved to manipulate drama and ratings. *Project Runway*¹ is a perfect example of fashion in its lowest high art context. The focus is never truly about the clothing and how it hangs on the body. The real meat of the show comes from watching a person have a mental break when they are forced to make an evening gown in two days. The dresses are only there to give the show what a dress always gives to its wearer - a prettier external look to enhance or detract from what is perhaps not so good looking on the inside.

A dress is just that - a simple garment that is (hopefully) both beautiful and enhances the natural beauty of the person wearing it. But all clothing and costumes have taken the structure and fabric necessary to this ideal and had artists construct their own works of art for the body. A designer is an artist with clothes. The history of fashion and how it has evolved can tell more about a culture and gender than 100 history books – and it is probably a lot less dry, too.

To put costumes and historical outfits in a museum seems only natural to study the evolution of a culture. But just how should a museum display these clothes for the general public? In almost every case a mannequin of some sort is used and kept far enough from the viewer to make sure they cannot touch it. But why is there such an emphasis on not being allowed to touch cloth and a tactile object that has been handled for years and years? A dress is not the same as a painting that should not touch human hands because otherwise it will degrade and never be able to be enjoyed by another viewer.

¹ *Project Runway*. Performed by Heidi Klum. (United States: Miramax Home Entertainment, 2006) Film.

A dress or an accessory or a child's plaything - they all exist within the same guidelines that we have put on paintings and sculptures. But a dress deserves a wearer in order to show the world its beauty and structure; a shoe deserves a fabulous outfit to go with it to understand how a designer would compose the 'look.' Toys should be played with and held by children who will love them! The now accepted rule of never allowing visitors to use any other sense besides sight to absorb the meaning of a work is not conducive to the world of textiles and playthings.

There is a defined history behind why museums do not allow visitors to touch their materials. Before museums were a nationalized commodity the only way to view works was at a private home collection. Pre-1900's the way in which art was displayed was much different than today. Paintings used to be paired very closely together with barely any space in between. This was done to encourage quick comparison by way of the viewer and allowed for critical commentary to be the first reaction. The museums of today encourage self-reflection from the viewer in relation to one specific piece at a time. Rooms in museums are arranged now in larger spaces with more space amongst the paintings so that each visitor can enjoy each work piece by piece and move about the room. In this way a curator can drive traffic toward different parts of the museum and ease visitors during a highly popular exhibit.

During the time of popular home collections it was customary that people touch objects. This may sound blasphemous to some, but in reality it is the most natural and compulsive need we have. Before museums were heavily visited and visitors could be properly patrolled they were encouraged to touch what they wanted.² Though one must

² Fiona Candlin, *Art, Museums and Touch*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 60-83.

keep in mind that it was hardly the lowest working classes that visited such places, the idea of the pure and clean upper-class people/families that visited allowed for such lax practices.

As touching became not only a cause for damage, but also an act that could not be contained with larger crowds of people from varying class statuses, the practice fell out of favor. For a good reason this unspoken rule has yet to be reversed. The natural oils from one's hands, the dirt carried in from children, and just the overall sheer volume of people that now go to museums without the amount of security necessary to police each visitor individually make it impossible to continue the practice and preserve the life of a painting or sculpture.

Why are costumes and toys treated in the same manner as other pieces of art when they are not, by function or design, meant to be left alone without human interaction? A toy is simply not the same without a child who is playing with it, and a dress is not the same without a body to fill it. To compare it to a painting – a museum would never display a work by any artist – unless otherwise specified – without a frame. To display a dress in the first place seems a tricky endeavor, and more so when you consider that rarely, if ever, does a model wear it.

It is commonly accepted by conservators that it is against best practices to display any costume on a human body. In the Smithsonian Institute's guidelines for the best methods of costume display it is advised that humans should be avoided at all costs, "this is probably the worst possible treatment that a costume could be subjected to."³ It is proposed that by having a person wear the garment it will aid in its inevitable

³ Karyn Jean Harris, *Costume Display Techniques*. (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1977), 17.

deterioration and the fact that it already has been worn is just cause to make sure no more damage comes to it.

The concept of having a piece that may or may not have been designed to be seen through the lens of artistic innovation to now be treated in such a way is an odd one. Yes, the dress will deteriorate if a person is put inside it and made to wear it for a few hours a day each day, but this is unavoidable and part of the temporary nature of clothing. So why then do we so stringently try to prolong the garment's life to the degree that it no longer serves a function beyond the aesthetic? Is this meant to imply that the value of clothing is directly related to its beauty and not to its ability to define the body and enhance it?

The absence of the human form in display for the sake of prolonging the life of the object is a double-edged sword. When the costume is displayed on a mannequin there is a loss of life to the object - the movement it has and the true shape it can manipulate the body into. But the moment that a body is put into the dress it adds to damage and loss of value. Can there be no middle ground? Sadly, if there is one, it looks as though it will not be developed for a long time.

Why do we settle for the display of a costume without its actor in it? People travel from all over to see Dorothy's ruby slippers at the Smithsonian, yet Judy Garland is dead and *The Wizard of Oz*⁴ does not even play in the background of the display. In the film her shoes represented a magical extension of her physical abilities. Her shoes are not actually magical and serve no functional purpose other than to aid in her dancing and walking, yet we idealize them to an extent that raises them up past the point of the reality

⁴ *The Wizard of Oz*. Performed by Judy Garland. (United States: Warner Bros., 1939), Film.

that they are, in fact, just shoes. Elevation to this degree makes them a totem that symbolizes the hopes and dreams of those who find themselves lost in a new place.

There is a significance to her shoes that cannot be denied, but the external representations just explained are an odd reason to keep her shoes away from the public. Once a material is put behind a glass case with a large ‘Do Not Touch’ sign the object starts to take on an extended life beyond the one that would exist in the world of the movie. By playing such an iconic role in the film, does everything Judy Garland touches now have to be displayed? There are objects and accessories that are an iconic part to many celebrities’ identity that garnered them fame: Marilyn Monroe’s white halter top dress and Marlon Brando’s white stained t-shirt, for example. The movies that incorporated these costumes are simply the backdrop to their celebrity. The garments now serve as a symbol of an ephemeral extension of the actor’s sexuality, or in Garland’s case, her innocence at such a young age.

And yet we think nothing of putting such garments on display. In fact, in *Costume Display Techniques* from the Smithsonian guidelines stated earlier there is no mention of why we display such materials – only that we must and do.⁵ Of course there is the selection process by a curator in terms of whether or not the garment is relevant to the history attempting to be told, but in the larger scope why have we – as the general public – deemed the item to carry some intangible weight is never truly debated?

The Met Costume Institute is probably the most well known exhibitor of costume collections. There is also a cult of celebrity that follows the annual Met Gala ball that draws in the top of the A list to support the institution. The event itself becomes a fashion

⁵ Ibid

show with outrageous dresses and themes. There is nothing inherently wrong in bringing publicity to the institution in this manner – fashion is art and the people who attend the event can in some cases have their careers made for the next year if their dress is a hit. This is the power that a garment has on the wearer; the right dress – or even the wrong one that brings scandal – is so essential to the body of the wearer that image and income can change overnight. In this context, dress is only seen as a pretty piece of fabric, is it not? Physically speaking what is it about the dress and its structure that has created that kind of publicity around this event?

There is no one simple answer as to what makes clothing an artistic piece. A singular t-shirt sold at The Gap is a mass produced item that holds a functional and structural design but lacks the appeal of a Chanel evening gown. It would seem that in order for a garment to be deemed a ‘high art’ the designer should have a distinct style in presentation and the garment should be one of a kind.

In 2011 The Met revealed their Alexander McQueen ‘Savage Beauty’ retrospective, which was visited by nearly 660,000 people over the course of its run.⁶ The exhibit was shown over the summer, the height of New York’s tourist season. The exhibition also very easily coincided with the presentation of Kate Middleton’s now iconic wedding dress that was designed under his couture house after his death. Having these events align themselves in such a manner, one could deem the show an exploitation of his work in order to draw the highest volume of viewers and not necessarily to educate those on the pieces themselves.

⁶ "The Costume Institute." Home. Accessed December 10, 2014. <http://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-museum/museum-departments/curatorial-departments/the-costume-institute>.

On the last day of the exhibit nearly 15,000 visitors showed up in lines that took up to four hours to get through.⁷ The show is the most visited in the institute's history and among the top ten in the history of the museum.⁸ But is there not something about the cult of celebrity that also drew people to see it? McQueen's works are beautiful and structurally a masterpiece, but did the over half a million people that made the pilgrimage worship his genius, or did they come perhaps just to say that they did?

According to *The New York Times*' accounts visitors dressed like they were walking down the runway instead of Museum Mile. In one interaction journalist Diane Cardwell had with a woman named 'Ladyfag,' she recounts if the woman was daunted to wait in line 'in 6.3-inch platform ankle booties of black leather, with curved white heels fashioned like spines that were reminiscent of McQueen but designed by Dsquared. She said she never wore flats, not even "to the bodega."' ⁹ To Ladyfag it seems as though McQueen's death was a symbolic loss to the heart of fashion, not just the loss of life. But perhaps by displaying his works for general public his soul can live on through his works and the happiness the public got by seeing them.

But how can the inhuman display of these objects really do justice to their original presenter to the world - the runway model who wore them? In truth, the designs of any fashion creator are limited in display because of the difficulties of working with a human model. There are normally only two different display techniques when it comes to clothing – either a regular sized mannequin is used or the curator and conservator can create one that best fits the needs of the dress to what the original body type would have

⁷ Diane Cardwell, "Waiting Hours to See the McQueen Exhibit, in a Line Not Unlike a Runway." *The New York Times*, August 7, 2011. Accessed December 10, 2014.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

been.¹⁰ The other lesser-used option is a human, but as stated above this is nearly forbidden. During the ‘Savage Beauty’ exhibit the clothes were displayed on an unspecified mannequin - one that, if it had a head - was only in an oval shape, with the arms and legs posed in such a way that they gave a good representation of movement to a garment as could be done with a stationary object. (See Fig. 1). In certain instances the mannequins have been distressed to accessorize the roughness of an ensemble. These creative liberties enhance the outfit in a way that is of best practice for the garment while also giving it a human touch.

Though these decidedly humanizing traits are great there is nothing that compares to a dress as it hangs on the human body. In the recent ‘Charles James: Beyond Fashion’ exhibition that just ended at the institute, the costumes were shown in a much different perspective in both press and presentation that brings about many differing viewpoints on what display looks better as opposed to what should be done for the sake of the dress’s beauty.

In the *Clover Leaf* gown seen in Fig. 2 the model wears the dress (seen in black and white) in a way that does not do it justice. The drama that the dress creates is lost on her petite frame and she looks more insecure than confident of its beauty. But the same dress can be seen in a completely different context when it is worn on a different model. In Fig. 3 we see a model during a press event of the show nearly 61 years later wearing a replica of the same *Clover Leaf* gown.

The model in the recreation wears the dress with confidence. The drama in the dress does not overwhelm her and she uses the dress’s volume to enhance her beauty by

¹⁰ Ibid

posing just so to the camera. In that instance the dress does what it is functionally supposed to – it gives the wearer the best shape for their body. The striking contrast in both of their bodies is overwhelming in the final ensembles. Each dress and model has a unique identity that extends the fabric of the dress itself. To exhibit the dress on its own without a wearer seems completely counterintuitive to the point of displaying its functional purpose. Not only does using a mannequin or a cast detract from the garment, but the life of the dress, or rather, what the dress signifies and how it can manipulate the body is not even visible in display. But this lends itself to the larger problem that conservators and curators are aware of: “When mounting a display there is always the problem of making clothes come alive in a way that is reminiscent of their original wearers.”¹¹

But why is it against the policy to wear the dress for display? Why is there the push for making a dress that was at one point in the designer’s best interest to sell the garment for limited commercial use, not available to do the same when it is taken off the market and the runway? The preservation of the object - be it a shoe or a book or a dress - is always of the most importance, but when the object is meant to be touched, it is meant to be lived in. Why do we try our hardest to make sure the opposite happens in its lifetime?

Touch is a psychological need for humans in order to feel an attachment to an object. According to the American Journal of Psychology: “Herein lies the pedagogical principle for too infrequently used. In the years of childhood we feel the world of sensitive appearances near to us; we live immediately with and in it; there is an intimate

¹¹ Naomi Tarrant, *Collecting Costume; The Care and Display of Clothes and Accessories*. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), 107.

bond of living dependence which united us to it; and which is only broken when we are removed from contact with things.”¹²

So why do museums put the value of the life of the object over the value of the learning experience that can come from developing a connection with the work and truly understanding it? Children’s toys are the best example of the above as it relates to display. In an interview with Shelly Smith, conservator at New York Public Library, she described the process that goes into the preservation of an object as it is acquired by the library. NYPL has just recently finished a Winnie the Pooh exhibition, complete with the original bear that was given to the book’s publisher. The bear sat on the publisher’s desk facing the sun for nearly 20 years and when it arrived at the library they did a large amount of work on it. Shelly worked closely with the curator to make sure the bear was properly displayed for use.¹³

When an object is deemed to be no longer suitable for display or circulation - take a book for example - there is a copy made, but the original is put away until a new technology or technique can help to restore the object. What is perhaps saddening about this in Winnie the Pooh’s case is that once he is no longer aesthetically pleasing to be on display to the general public he will leave circulation never again to be appreciated or enjoyed - as seen by the original Christopher Robin in Fig. 4.

The display of Winnie the Pooh is a difficult one as there is not much animation that comes from a stationary stuffed animal. In the case of puppets this can be a completely different endeavor that counteracts the problem of the lifelessness that comes with display. In the case of the Jim Henson ‘Fantastic World’ exhibit by the Smithsonian,

¹² F. B. Dresslar, "Studies in the Psychology of Touch." *The American Journal of Psychology* 6 (1894): 317. Accessed December 11, 2014. <https://archive.org/details/jstor-1411644>.

¹³ Interview

The Muppets were arranged in specific poses, not unlike the McQueen mannequins in terms of creating a vivid personality. Each puppet is stationary on the display (behind glass) but posed in a way that mimics singing or moving mid dance (see Fig. 5). Kermit is even posed as though he is talking to the audience. There is a strong energy that comes from their immobility and creates the perception that they are animated, at any moment ready to start singing.

Displays like this are the perfect blend of the entertainment that comes from seeing an exhibition on a popular topic, but also about feeling engaged with the objects in a way that is familiar to the visitor. The glass case becomes almost like the glass of a television screen and we watch from the other side patiently wondering what song will come next.

Puppets as a toy serve an educational purpose. Puppets are an ethnically viable form of communication that have been used for centuries around the world to comment on culture, teach lessons and folk tales, and are even used in dance. At the Ballard Institute and Museum for Puppetry is one of the most comprehensive and unique museums of its kind. The Museum is an ode to puppeteer Frank Ballard and his collection. The museum also houses collections from artists across the globe.

What makes the Ballard Institute so intriguing is that they engage their viewers in active shows with puppeteers. They literally breathe life into these lifeless objects and give them a purpose and platform to perform. In comparison, there was no fashion show down a runway for duplicates of McQueen's gowns during its run at the Met. The inability to wear the *Clover Leaf* dress of James or play with Winnie the Pooh is indicative of the larger school of thought that an object meant to be worn and used

temporarily should, in fact, be able to defy its expected life span and become an object that can stand the test of time because *it* is special.

If Dorothy and her slippers taught us anything it is that it is the person who truly makes himself or herself unique and special. We hold onto our idea that those slippers are Dorothy's and never Judy's because they existed in a performance in time that we can connect with a severe sense of nostalgia. In the same vein McQueen's gowns will probably be able to live a life longer than he did because by extension he was his art. His hands and mind and soul went into each stitch and by prolonging the life of his works we inadvertently prolong his 'life' as well. In every case, the object serves as an extension of the last significant person it came in contact with. Whether it be the cult of celebrity or the nostalgic connection to our own childhood, we form such an attraction to these objects because they become what the actors and artists never could be in our real lives - suddenly so close that we can almost touch them.

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Phone interview with Shelley Smith by Sarah Bellet, December 4th, 2014*
Annotated* Smith asked that our conversation not be recorded and serve more of notes.
This is why no quotations appear.

Appendix:

Fig. 1



McQueen, Ensemble, *Widows of Culloden*, autumn/winter 2006–7. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. From: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org> (accessed December 10th, 2014).

Fig. 2



Austine Hearst in Charles James "Clover Leaf" Gown, ca. 1953 Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Photographer Unknown, © Bettmann/CORBIS (accessed December 10th, 2014).

Fig. 3



Elettra Wiedemann in Charles James “Clover Leaf” Gown. 2014 Courtesy of *Vogue*. Photographed by Hannah Thomson, <http://www.vogue.com/866697/a-first-look-at-the-mets-new-costume-institute-exhibit-charles-james-beyond-fashion/> (accessed December 10th, 2014).

Fig. 4



Winnie the Pooh and Christopher Robin, 1928. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of *The Daily Mail*. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2002613/Winnie-Pooh-The-bear-little-brain-VERY-big-bank-balance.html> (accessed December 10th, 2014).

Fig. 5



The Muppets in 'Jim Henson's Fantastic World' exhibition. The Museum of the Moving Image, New York. 2012. Courtesy of *Gothamist*. Photographed by Katie Sokoler. http://gothamist.com/2011/07/13/in_which_we_enter_jim_hensons_fanta.php#photo-7 (accessed December 10th, 2014)