

theme 2

memory

strand 3

design museums

author(s)



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abstract

Based on a research on museum exhibitions this paper discusses a study case for: The Victoria and Albert Museum. Review of literature, ethnographic fieldwork, qualitative analyses and interviews, were instrumental for tracing the resources and connections adopted to communicate fashion design, as clothing material culture, and the possibilities of those practices for the promotion and integration of clothing material culture within the contemporary context.

keywords

Material culture, heritage narratives, museum exhibition, fashion design collection.

Fashion Design at V&A. Museum Studies, Case IV.

The narrative of the museum fashion collection at the reopened permanent exhibition.



Introduction

This paper incorporates Ph.D. in design material in progress, with advisors Prof. João Mota (University of Aveiro) and Prof. Nuno Porto (Anthropology Museum - British Columbia University). The object of the aforementioned Ph.D. focus on costume/fashion museum exhibition, including museums websites, in order to identify the most relevant narrative models. Four institutions serve as central case studies: two from Portugal, one from Spain and Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) from UK.

Approach to research

- 2011 June: recognition, material collection, website access.
- During 2012: website access, museum member experience, field notes, images collection, participation on events/activities, and interviews – Oriole Cullen, Jenny Lister (Fashion Department) and Filipa Alves (Learning Department).
- June–July 2013 and January 2014: website access.
- Theoretical references focus on: curating, exhibition narratives and case studies.

The approach followed the objective to understand how the museum communicates the clothing material culture. The *Clothworkers' Centre for the Study and Conservation of Textiles and Fashion*, opened on 8 October 2013 was not considered.

Study case: V&A

The institutional position is:

“To be the world's leading museum of art and design. To enrich people's lives and inspire individuals and everyone in the creative industries, through the promotion of knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of the designed world.” (website, 01/19/2012).

Central values: generosity, imagination, coherence and rigour (V&AM 2011/12: 4)

In the early 2014 we pin point on the website an interesting change of the first strategic objective: “To provide diverse audiences with the best *quality experience* and optimum access to our collections, *physically and digitally.*”

Fashion Collection

The V&A collection has the most relevant icons (authors/objects) of the fashion history. Moreover, designers of London and other emerging fashion centres are valued.

Recently “in recognition of the pluralistic nature of fashion” (Rothstein 2010:5) V&A began a collection of mass fashion, including acquisitions by eBay (V&AM 2010:5). Contemporary materials, especially fabrics with advanced technology and its uses in the fashion industry are also collecting.

The most direct and comprehensive digital access to the collection is from “Search the Collections”. MW awarded this catalogue in 2012.

Fashion Exhibition

Room 40 (Fashion Gallery) – reopened on May 2012, after a renovation – presents two distinct areas: the outer circle with the permanent exhibition - free access -, and the inner circle that is connected to the mezzanine for temporary exhibition.

The permanent exhibition was produced in a classical, didactic and chronological narrative. V&A named 18 thematic periods based on the use of the clothes, socio-cultural context, or for an interpretative view.

Comparing the room 40 today and before its renovation we can highlight 5 differences: it seems wider, the exhibition way is more oriented, there are more objects on display; clothes and accessories are together – contextual group of objects; and there is more brightness.

Considerations

The V&A is not just a museum, it is also a recognise brand. Museum sacralizes objects by extracting them of the commercial circuit. Costume/fashion museums – as previously investigation (Norogrande 2011) – adopt the same symbolisms used by fashion market as patrimonialization criteria, which Bourdieu (1974) would call a consecration cycle.

According to this and partner actions (Haye 2006), the V&A is a benchmark its own for this consecration, it is a museum and it is fashionable.

According to Sherman and Rogoff (1994: ix), by comparing the policies adopted by museums over time,

it is possible to appraise the “cultural construction”.

Clothes, as other manufacture/industrial goods, are produced with a lot of processes and the final products do not show all the knowledge and technics involved. There is also the relationship with the body, the sensory dimension, intrinsic to fashion (Frisa 2008; Palmer 2008).

How and what to communicate about the possible narratives around an object is a curatorial decision, in concordance with the institutional position. The interaction between multiple agents and interfaces in the production of a heritage narrative make possible an expansion of the perceptions and views about an object or context.

The V&A perspective for the fashion permanent exhibition is rigorous and traditional. There are no interactivity spaces and neither the exhibition design invites for permanence. The objects are presented by its aesthetical characteristics without thought or questions to reflect about this material culture. For example, at *Museu Tèxtil i d'Indumentària* (Barcelona) is permanent the invitation to reflect about the body transformed for clothes. Or the *Museo del Traje* (Madrid) that shows radiographic image to communicate an object to other perspective. The use, or even the developing process of design objects, are relegated to the visual aspect, because objects are also images. More than material culture, the permanent exhibition presents “design” as a visual culture.

On the other hand, at the temporary exhibitions the V&A makes emphasis on experience, e.g., at the Yohji Yamamoto exhibition (2010–2011) the public could touch the clothes, at the Hollywood Costume exhibition (2012–2013) the public was immerse on the cinema experience, and at the exhibition British Design 1948–2012 (2012) various collections dialog in the same context promoting a global view of the design history.

Finally, on the website appears an parallel V&A, a museum that extends the physical built space of this institution adding new layers of interaction with public.

Conclusion

The V&A is one of the most important cultural centres for the study/knowledge of fashion design heritage, by its didactic permanent exhibition, various narratives

of temporary exhibitions, information disseminated on the website and the new study centre. Nevertheless, the narratives of fashion design at V&A, mainly if consider the permanent exhibition, are mainly produced by an aesthetic appeal of the objects.

Museums as a mediator of cultural construction can providing narratives for a wider awareness about the fashion universe, presenting the science over beauty clothes and the challenges for an ethical fashion. Expanding the cognitive references, the contact possibilities with the objects, science of the dressing material culture and the conscious about fashion industry is profitable to the scientific and professional communities, and also to a cultural construction.

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