

Materials of Fashion

From
Analogue
Principles
to
Hybrid
Practices

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INTER/ SECTIONS – Creating and Investigating Sartorial Culture

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
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Short Bio of the author: *Julia Catrin Eberhardt is a fashion designer, trained at the University of the Arts Bremen, and a dress- and art historian based in London and Jena. She worked for the British brand Vivienne Westwood, developing runway collections and special client orders for thirteen seasons. She is a visiting tutor for fashion design and fashion theory at the Arts University Bournemouth (UK). Since 2023, she has taught dress history and fashion theory at the University of the Arts Bremen (DE). Julia Eberhardt graduated from Birkbeck College, University of London, as an art historian specializing in the Early Modern Period's material- and sartorial culture. She is currently working on her Ph.D. at the Friedrich-Schiller-University Jena, investigating the material and visual culture of Thuringia's sixteenth- and seventeenth-century dress, and is funded by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung.*


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Introduction

As designers, can we benefit from dress-historical observations? As historians of material culture and fashion theorists, can we benefit from expertise in design and craftsmanship? Understanding the human body, mastering textile materiality, and extending ideas through garments are leading us to the core of cultural progression – then and now. This paper, providing an abstract of a talk given in November 2022 at the HfK Bremen, aims to introduce personal observations and experiences on the multidisciplinary approach of looking scientifically at aspects of sartorial culture and, simultaneously, being a creator of its objects. I would like to give insights into my work as a designer and historian and discuss how both professions, which may seem worlds apart at a first glance, are tightly interlocked in the multifaceted matters and meanings of fashion. With the following reflections and thoughts on interdisciplinary research, I wish to strongly encourage design students to analytically follow the questions on sociocultural and historical relevance that arise when creating objects and products.  ILL-1




Creating Sartorial Culture



As designers, we are responsible for knowing and investigating our reference sources: how we choose the topics we want to address, the visual material we want to use for the collection development and print, and how to consider the people and cultures we cite carefully and respectfully. In developing a knowledge of the historical dynamics of dress customs and -innovations, you learn to evaluate and analyse the current demands of your own work as a creative professional. Furthermore, when fashion design graduates start their careers working for an established brand, they are required to understand and adapt its aesthetic, values, and corporate identity.

While working on 13 seasons for Vivienne Westwood, mainly on runway collections and special projects for private clients, I had a profound amount of time to engage with the house's history. When creating new designs for a fashion brand with a history of almost 50 years, the legacy of Vivienne's and Andreas Kronthaler's⁰¹ work provided a rich source of thoughts, material references, and archive objects that I was allowed to work with – a house DNA to follow, to break or to comment on.  ILL-2

It was an amalgam of my own wishes in the creation processes and staying within a complex brand narrative. Developing new collections was therefore a constant balance between looking back into the brand's history and simultaneously looking forward to creating its new chapters.  ILL-3
For instance, one of my favourite developments for the Fall 2018 runway

01 Vivienne's husband since 1992 and Creative Director of the brand

collection was a new take on an iconic wool suit from the Harris Tweed collection from 1987 and incorporated street style elements, as we engaged with possibilities of developing contemporary concepts for Westwood heritage pieces, thus adding to their historical relevance.  ILL-4  ILL-5  ILL-6

The collection ideas even developed further in the process of styling during the show conceptualisation in the final days before the défilé.  ILL-7  ILL-8 The close-to-the-body creation of looks that is very particular to Vivienne's and Andreas' way of working (the collection development mainly took on from brand-specific pattern cutting systems and modifying toiles in the fittings) always extended onto the skin and hair where aesthetic and citation could be ironically broken or emphasised – observations and practices that are also deeply rooted within dress historical dynamics of the early modern period, especially in the highly intricate fashions of the Rococo that emphasised the decoration and stylisation of the total body.⁰²

Since the brand's inception, Vivienne's work had been strongly influenced by the aesthetics and cultural discourses of the early modern period in Europe. For the collection research and style development, we therefore repeatedly examined preserved clothing and other objects of European material culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in museum collections, academic journals, and books, as well as engaging in relevant craftsmanship of the period. Besides her infamous parody of British heritage culture through ironic design concepts, and her profound engagement with tailoring practices, Vivienne's creations often played with strategies of Historicism that were both criticised and celebrated by fashion theorists and -historians. For instance, for the development of unisex pieces for the Pirate collection of 1980, Vivienne looked attentively at loose-fitting early-modern men's shirt- and breeches patterns documented in Norah Waugh's book *The Cut of Men's Clothes*.⁰³ She stated: "I wanted that rakish look of clothes which didn't fit [...] I really got a breakthrough, because their priorities were totally different from our priorities: they didn't want to cut a trouser that neatly defined the two cheeks of your bum. They weren't interested in that. They were interested in sexuality in a totally different way. And I only found it out by research really."⁰⁴

Historicism as a design approach is considered in place when reference visuals or objects are in use, no matter the period they are taken from – if they are 300 years or 30 years old – they are a cultural and material input to the creative practices that has to be evaluated and respected, even if historical material is intended to be intentionally negated. To work on a

02 For further insights into Vivienne's reception and investigation of historical dress and art history, see the 3 short films of the *Painted Ladies* series by Gordon Swire, Channel 4, 1996

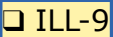
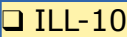
03 Waugh, Norah: *The Cut of Men's Clothes, 1600 – 1900*, Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1964

04 Cited in Wilcox, Claire: *Vivienne Westwood*, V & A Publications, London, 2004, p.16

personal ‘reference archive’ by thorough dress historical research, to build a vocabulary of styles and meanings, and to be conscious of how to use these is, therefore, a necessary qualification of a designer. Refining my fashion design skills through research in visiting archives and collections, looking at extant garments and accessories, rather than mainly pictures, equipped me with reference knowledge (from which I am able to draw or that I can intentionally avoid) and the capability of visualising/materialising my ideas in a conceptual narrative.

That building on historical references can initiate a new stream of stylistic development was a central work experience while working for the house. Vivienne explained this phenomenon in 1987: “I take something from the past which has a sort of vitality that has never been exploited – like the crinoline – and get very intense [...] you get so involved with it that in the end you do something original because you overlay your own ideas. So, there’s your own individuality, your own particular way of looking, and what you see cements it all together. Things are never quite as they were, so even if you tried to copy a traditional garment exactly you couldn’t because you’d have to use a modern way of making it. The idea is something that comes with the form, and it grows as you do.”⁰⁵

While experiencing this way of working for almost seven years, I started to distinguish three ‘concepts’ of incorporating dress-historical research into new design developments that I call ‘Translation’, ‘Citation’, and ‘Formation’.⁰⁶ They can be applied separately or combined in an outfit idea or collection concept and give a stylistic latitude that can extend beyond historicism but also generate an intended visible reference to style and poise of a place, time or (sub-)culture.



‘Translation’ denominates the analysis of a specific historical silhouette, and/or combination of garments on the body, that is construed into a new garment- or outfit. For Look No. 46 of the Fall 2016 collection, a Dutch women’s ensemble from the first quarter of the seventeenth century, that was discussed in a dress-historical publication by the Abegg-Stiftung in Switzerland⁰⁷, was a source of stylistic reference. Here, the shape characteristics of the pink bodice and black jacket were fused together into a couture zip jacket.  ILL-9  ILL-10




‘Citation’ considers incorporating aesthetic and material aspects, like significant details of a historical object or era, into a new design concept. Often, artworks and fashions of the French Rococo were cited in Westwood collections, as it was a preferred art historical period of Vivienne’s since

05 Cited in Wilcox, Claire: *Vivienne Westwood*, p.32

06 These concepts will be further explored and duly appropriated in a design-theoretical paper I am in the process of developing and that will examine fashion design practices that build on historical references

07 Jolly, Anna & Pietsch, Johannes (eds.): *Netherlandish Fashion in the Seventeenth Century*, Riggisberger Berichte 19, Abegg- Stiftung, Riggisberg, 2012

the late 1980s. Accordingly, for the Spring 2019 collection, the impression of swirling Rococo trimmings was applied to gathered T-Shirt surfaces through print- and cutting experiments.  ILL-11  ILL-12

The concept of 'Formation' encompasses the analysis of the construction, finishing, and/or applied craftsmanship to be found in historical garments, which is then to be applied to new design developments. In Look No.36 of the Spring 2018 show, we examined the effects of stylised feminine dress in Dutch genre painting of the seventeenth century. Then, the basic construction of the tight fitting and heavily boned historical bodice shape was adapted for a corset top, while the original material severity was broken by styling elements of loungewear and the use of shirting cotton.  ILL-13  ILL-14  ILL-15

Understanding and blurring such possible boundaries and intersections between art history, fashion history, and design helped me further to establish an awareness of the cultural impact of dress objects. Especially the investigation of extant historical garments (as in the collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum) became an independent research project, which I pursued over the years working for Vivienne and Andreas, that ultimately led me to the decision to start a master's programme in art history at Birkbeck College, University of London. Although I did not initially set out to become a historian when I graduated as a fashion designer from the HfK Bremen, the experienced design research and creative encounters with art- and dress-historical discourses in my work experience at Westwood lead me toward my own research questions.

Investigating Sartorial Culture



In working with the cut and materiality of clothing, we, as creative professionals, carry a set of investigative and tactile tools that can also profit scientific research in the history of dress.⁰⁸ The advantages of knowing how sartorial objects develop and how the body underneath determines their rendering provides invaluable insights into the historical progress of craftsmanship and cultural relevance of historical garments. A historian of material culture or dress history who is only trained by text- and visual sources will therefore never be able to come as close to the semiotic and material dimensions of these objects. Naomi Tarrant, a former curator of costume and textiles at the National Museum of Scotland, already pointed out in her 1994 book *The Development of Costume*, that every so often “clothing studies are contorted to fit some theory without a basic understanding of the properties of cloth and the structure of clothes” and that

08 For further insight into the discourse on experiential dress knowledge in academic research through making clothes, see Davidson, Hillary: *The Embodied Turn: Making and Remaking Dress as an Academic Practice*, in *Fashion Theory* (Journal), Vol.23, Issue 3: The Making Turn, 2019, p.329-362

“a little knowledge of weaving and dressmaking might have made some works [academic publications] more relevant to clothing studies.”⁰⁹

With successful scholars frequently coming from creative backgrounds, such as costume design for theatre/film or tailoring, it can be observed that dress history requires, as Lou Taylor summarised 2002 in her book *The study of dress history*, “innovative cross-disciplinary academic approaches.”¹⁰ Through their material-specific training, creators and makers of fashion or costume can offer unique analytical equipment that enables them to also become collectors, researchers, lecturers, textile conservators or curators, even though further studies and/or apprenticeships in the humanities are required to build a professional academic practice. Students, who would like to take the path of working in these scientific disciplines will have to develop academic skills in research methodologies, critical thinking, methods of source analysis, as well as professional writing and publishing.

The field of dress history is still young and partly undefined in its discipline-specific canon and methodologies. Valerie Cumming aptly noted in her publication *Understanding fashion history* 2004 that “there is no agreed method for studying the subject at the beginning of the 21st century, just a great many writers, from a variety of disciplines, who are interested in carefully selected aspects of it.”¹¹ Especially in German academic culture, where dress history is still not represented by a professorial chair in the humanities by 2023, it will have to be shaped further through innovative cross-disciplinary methodologies, thorough research, and extensive publication projects. Hence, the study of dress will continue to offer specialisation possibilities for scientific professions that engage with the body and the myriad semantic levels of fashion, gender, culture, and patterns of consumption. Although its diverse and relevant discourses – that inevitably touched the subjects of social history, art history, cultural history, semiotics, anthropology, and archaeology – the study of dress was mainly overlooked and underestimated in the humanities during the twentieth century. But dedicated transdisciplinary scholarship of the past 25 years demonstrated that “the complex history and diversity of the discipline are worthy of respect and that understanding its many strengths, as well as weaknesses, is a skill acquired incrementally by looking at, reading, and thinking about evidence with an open mind.”¹²

In creating sartorial objects, we engage with the human body and its differing physical, social, and cultural peculiarities. For me, fitting sessions during my studies at the HfK, and later at the Westwood Studio, in which

09 Tarrant, Naomi: *The Development of Costume*, Routledge, London, 1994, p.12

10 Taylor, Lou: *The Study of dress history*, Manchester University Press, 2002, p.1

11 Cumming, Valerie: *Understanding Fashion History*, Batsford, London, 2004, p.7

12 Cumming, Valerie: *Understanding Fashion History*, p.8

we developed new silhouettes on the moving body, were vital to understand the technical and material aspects of different garment styles that helped me profoundly in my investigations of historical dress. Understanding the construction and statics of historical attire, and how it supported or distorted the body it was made for, can supplement observations to anthropological and, sometimes even forensic (if the dress objects to be analysed are part of a burial) results. Here, the physical characteristics of an individual, such as age, body height, sex determination, and anatomical peculiarities, can become comprehensible by understanding the cut, the making, and the characteristic combination of the clothing on the body.

In analysing historical dress patterns, -materiality, and -styles, researchers of sartorial culture have to rely extensively on artefact-based approaches that require a practice of attentive 'looking' and a profound spatial imagination – proficiencies that are also trained in the processes of creating and optimising a design product. Lou Taylor further annotates that such "object-based research does indeed centre on examination of minute detail channelled through a series of patiently acquired skills and interpretative methods."¹³


With my professional expertise lying in the process of 'making' and 'creating' garments, the projects I worked on during my master's programme at Birkbeck College (University of London), followed the discourses of the so-called 'Material Turn' in the humanities. This extensive stream of theory that evolved over the past 30 years regards material culture and object biographies as central primary sources where usually rather text-based sources are employed, asking what artefacts say about an individual, a society and its history, or what meanings they transmit.¹⁴ Especially the analysis of extant garments in museum collections is thereby a necessary task for dress historians that takes an ongoing scientific curiosity and has to be patiently trained. Valery Cumming argues: "Collections of dress and textiles offer more than attractive public displays; they are under-used sources that offer many entry points into the artistic, cultural, economic, political, social, and technological trends of which they are part [...] intelligent use of collections can offer insights into many aspects of the subject that theories alone cannot answer."¹⁵

As an art- and dress historian, I developed my research focus in the field of early modern portrait culture (mainly from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century), specifically considering strategies of material and sartorial self-staging of the urban elites in Western Europe. More specifically, when investigating the rendered elements of contemporary dress within various

13 Taylor, Lou: The study of dress history, p.3


14 For the epistemological discourse on object-based methodologies in art history see, for instance, Yonan, Michael: *Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies*, in *Journal West* 86th, Vol.18, No.2, Fall 2011 (University of Chicago Press, 2011)

15 Cumming, Valery: *Understanding fashion history*, p.12

portrait media of the period, I discussed them as non-textual biographical testimonies of the sitters. Especially in the eighteenth century, due to the decline of sumptuary laws and the liberalisation of the fashion industry and luxury consumption, the semiotics of clothes and accessories in life and paint often took on personal meaning. Elements of a person's wardrobe could thereby commemorate individual interests besides visually chronicling stages of life such as matrimony or mourning. In my master's thesis *Treasured Trimmings- Ephemeral Ribbons and the Curation of Sartorial Likeness in Feminine Portraiture, 1750-1790*, I engaged with characteristic fashionable ribbon trimmings in women's clothing of the second half of the eighteenth century. These ribbon embellishments could embody sentimental, cultural, and even political significance for the wearer beyond their decorative materiality and were also attentively documented within the portrait medium.  ILL-16 Women of the early modern period even occasionally used such textile details in their clothing to encode cultural comments that were often denied to them in public. However, the necessity of the meticulous analysis of such sartorial semiotics in portrait media of the period is often ignored by modern viewers and scholars that are not trained in the making and structural analysis of clothing. In such circumstances, valuable information about the wearer, but also about the compositional conception by the artist supporting the semiotic importance of clothing, is lost. In my experience as a 'maker' and researcher, the socio-cultural readability of historical dress and its depiction (be it documentary or allegorical) can be profoundly relearned through the knowledge of its manufacturing and its material- and cultural worth. The 'making skills' of a creative professional can support the historical reconstruction of the cognitive and social imprinting of contemporaries, wearing and encountering sartorial objects in the past, profoundly.

Conclusion



Intersections between the theoretical and applied disciplines of dress and fashion inspire new research, generate debates and create sources of friction that enrich the discourses and experiences of working with the cloth and body. Hopefully, this transdisciplinary concept of creating and investigating sartorial culture initiates questions on the history of the dressed body that we continuously shape as fashion designers. The interest in the culture-historical dimension of fashion that many students develop during their design studies is often worth maintaining and I hope that my career path encourages interested makers to become investigators. There are no limitations in inquisitively thinking about the meaning and making of clothes.  ILL-17

ILL-1



Backstage at the 'Andreas Kronthaler for Vivienne Westwood' Spring 2020 show in Paris

ILL-2



Westwood Archive at Elcho Street

ILL-3



Running order for the 'Andreas Kronthaler for Vivienne Westwood' Fall 2017 show

□ ILL-4



Wool suit from
the Vivienne
Westwood Harris
Tweed collection
Fall 1987

□ ILL-5



Fitting for
Look No.7 for
the 'Andreas
Kronthaler
for Vivienne
Westwood' Fall
2018 show in the
Paris showroom

□ ILL-6



Look No.51
backstage at
the 'Andreas
Kronthaler
for Vivienne
Westwood' Fall
2018 show

ILL-7



ILL-8



Close-up of
Yuniya wearing
Look No.45
backstage at
the 'Andreas
Kronthaler
for Vivienne
Westwood' Fall
2019 show

ILL-9

19
RIGGISBERGER BERICHTE
NETHERLANDISH FASHION
IN THE SEVENTEENTH
CENTURY



ABEGG-STIFTUNG
2012

ILL-11



ILL-10



Look No.46 of
the 'Andreas
Kronthaler
for Vivienne
Westwood' Fall
2016 show

ILL-12



Look No.1 of
the 'Andreas
Kronthaler
for Vivienne
Westwood'
Spring 2019

ILL-13



□ ILL-14



□ IMAGE-15



Look No.36 of
the 'Andreas
Kronthaler
for Vivienne
Westwood'
Spring 2018
show

□ ILL-16



□ ILL-17



Look No.41
backstage at
the 'Andreas
Kronthaler
for Vivienne
Westwood' Fall
2017 show

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Studio intern Jordan in the Westwood Archive at Elcho Street, London 2017 ©Julia Catrin Eberhardt

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Running order for the 'Andreas Kronthaler for Vivienne Westwood' Fall 2017 show at the showroom in Paris ©Julia Catrin Eberhardt

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Wool suit from the Vivienne Westwood Harris Tweed collection Fall 1987 © Victoria & Albert Museum London

ILL-5, -6

Fitting for Look No.7 for the 'Andreas Kronthaler for Vivienne Westwood' Fall 2018 show in the Paris showroom ©Julia Catrin Eberhardt

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Look No.51 backstage at the 'Andreas Kronthaler for Vivienne Westwood' Fall 2018 show ©Julia Catrin Eberhardt

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Close-up of Yuniya wearing Look No.45 backstage at the 'Andreas Kronthaler for Vivienne Westwood' Fall 2019 show ©Julia Catrin Eberhardt

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Cover of the publication Riggisberger Berichte 19 – Netherlandish Fashion in the Seventeenth Century, 2012 ©Abegg-Stiftung Riggisberg

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Look No.46 of the 'Andreas Kronthaler for Vivienne Westwood' Fall 2016 show ©Vivienne Westwood Ltd.

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Madame de Pompadour, François Boucher, 1756, oil on canvas, Alte Pinakothek München ©Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen

ILL-12

Look No.1 of the 'Andreas Kronthaler for Vivienne Westwood' Spring 2019 show ©Vivienne Westwood Ltd.

ILL-13

The Letter, Gerard ter Borch, c.1660-1662, oil on canvas
©Royal Collection London

ILL-14

Woman's Bodice, England, c. 1660-1669, Silk, linen, whalebone,
bobbin lace, parchment, linen thread, silk thread, metal strip
©Victoria & Albert Museum London

ILL-15

Look No.36 of the 'Andreas Kronthaler for Vivienne Westwood'
Spring 2018 show ©Vivienne Westwood Ltd.

ILL-16

Louise d'Épinay, Jean-Étienne Liotard, 1759, pastel on paper
©Musée d'Art et d'Histoire Geneva

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Look No.41 backstage at the 'Andreas Kronthaler for Vivienne Westwood'
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