

Victoria and Albert Museum's (Upper-Class) Fashion Exhibit

Laura Auberry

HIS 301, Making History

Dr. Vivien Dietz and Dr. Michael Guasco

When my family first visited London, my parents let me pick one thing that I wanted to do. As a child that dreamed of being an interior decorator, I obviously had to pick the Victoria and Albert Museum, the most famous museum of decorative design and art. My memories of this first venture into the Victoria and Albert Museum are a bit foggy; I remember snapping pictures of elaborately decorated carpets, fabrics, and furniture on my small digital camera, as my parents begged me to hurry up. I recall feeling a little underwhelmed after leaving and wondering why I had just spent three hours looking at decorative objects. This feeling of disappointment and the foggy memories of my last visit are part of the reason why I chose the Victoria and Albert Museum as my site for this report. Specifically, I decided to focus on the Fashion Exhibit of the Victoria and Albert Museum. However, similar to my first visit, this site also left me underwhelmed.

The Fashion Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum is a permanent exhibit located in Room 40, on floor 0 of the museum, near the main gift shop. The room is somewhat circular, and the objects are housed in glass displays in the perimeter of the circle. The glass displays are reminiscent of storefronts, which is quite apropos for the collection they are displaying. The circular setup of the collection also emphasized how fashion is often cyclical. Instead of being linear, fashion trends have often cycled in and out throughout history. The collection contains five centuries of fashion objects (seventeenth to twenty-first century). Due to the circular nature of the exhibit, museum visitors can choose to start with the seventeenth century and progress onwards or start with the twenty-first century and go backwards in fashion history. I chose to start with the twenty-first century, but I do wonder how my viewing experience would have differed if I had started with the seventeenth century.

The Fashion Exhibit was broken up into specific periods, like “Radical Fashion: 1990-” and “Taking the Air: 1790-1820.” A sign on the display would outline some general trends of the time period, such as the development of blogs or the increasing amount of outdoor leisure, and how these trends coincided with the fashion of the period. In the displays, dresses, shoes, handbags, pants, shirts, and jackets were shown alongside objects that acted as a form of “context” for the period. For example, in the 1970s portion of the exhibit, the display mentioned the rise of alternative culture, and the popularity of the punk rock band the Sex Pistols. In the display, a print for the Sex Pistols song, “Anarchy in the UK” was displayed in the case, along with fashion objects from the period. I enjoyed this aspect, as it emphasized how fashion is influenced by features and movements of its time.

One of my favorite parts of the exhibit was the display for the 1790-1820 time period. This portion was entitled “Taking the Air,” and it emphasized how the British aristocracy spent a large amount of time at their country estates walking outside and doing outdoor activities. This change in leisure activity influenced the fashion of the period, by making clothes more useful for spending time outdoors. This portion of the exhibit was displayed under a decorated archway, painted to look like the outdoors of a country estate. The clothes were set up in a glass case, so the viewer could see through the case to the painted background. I thought this kind of display truly brought the clothes to life, as it felt like I could see the British aristocrats strolling along an outdoor promenade in their waistcoats and dresses. The display served as a way to enliven the objects on display to museum visitors.

As I walked throughout the exhibit, I noticed how the pieces on display came into the possession of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Each object was accompanied by a short description noting the type of object, where it was from, when it was made, what it was made of,

and how the museum acquired it. Some objects were given by people who might have worn it (such as Viscountess Lambton), and some objects were noted as being given by the designer. I found myself reflecting on why someone might donate an object to the Victoria and Albert Museum. Perhaps, for many individuals, donating objects and money to museums is considered fashionable, quite similar to how visiting the London Foundling Hospital was considered a fashionable form of charity. I imagine it might also be quite a compliment to have a piece of clothing that you have worn and owned be displayed in the Fashion Exhibit at the Victoria and Albert Museum. By having a piece in this exhibit, it is a statement to every viewer that the donator of this item has owned an influential piece of fashion history. The same theory could be applied to designers who have donated items to the museum. Designers are probably more inclined to donate items when they realize that their pieces will be displayed as an influential fashion piece. Reflecting on these donations made me question how this exhibit was curated. Does the Victoria and Albert Museum approach the owners of pieces they desire for the Fashion Exhibit, or do people donate items and the curators decide that the pieces are appropriate for the exhibit? This question was something I had never asked myself before yet seems like an essential part of any exhibit. The history presented could differ so much based on what items the museum possessed and who donated them.

Ultimately, I left this Fashion Exhibit at the Victoria and Albert Museum feeling slightly disappointed. I thought the collection was quite small, and it only told one “history.” All of the items displayed were from or were worn by wealthy individuals. Instead of being a Fashion History Exhibit, I thought it was much more history of the fashion of the upper class. While I noticed this one version of “history” at the Victoria and Albert Museum, it can be applied to many museums. Often, preserved historical objects displayed at museums exist only because

they belonged to wealthy individuals. The Victoria and Albert Museum will not be able to display the outfit of a working girl in Victorian England because in reality, this individual would have worn her clothes until they were no longer in a condition to be worn. When reflecting on how museums present history, one should remember how these class divisions influence this story. These same thoughts should also be applied to historical archives. For example, while it might be relatively easy to find letters between two wealthy gentlemen in 1600s London, illiteracy was much higher for the poor population at the time, and their voices are absent from the archives. This is what makes finds like John Styles's discovery of tokens in the archives of the London Foundling Hospital so powerful. Styles was accessing these archives to research textiles and discovered over 5,000 tokens that were left by mothers of children given to the Foundling Hospital. Through these scraps of cloth and objects left by impoverished women in eighteenth-century England, Styles suggests that historians can learn about "manufacturing, fashion, women's skills, childrearing, and maternal emotion."¹ Since so many voices are missing from archives, historians have to be creative in how they learn and present these stories.

While I did enjoy my time exploring the Victoria and Albert Fashion Exhibit, I left feeling unchanged. It failed to make any sort of impact on me. Perhaps, if this exhibit had included more than just wealthy fashion, or a portion on fashion movements today (like sustainable fashion), I would have felt differently.

¹ John Styles, *Threads of Feeling: The London Foundling Hospital's Textile Tokens 1740-1770* (London: The Foundling Museum, 2010), 17.



“Taking the Air: 1790-1820”

Bibliography

Styles, John. *Threads of Feeling: The London Foundling Hospital's Textile Tokens 1740-1770*. London: The Foundling Museum, 2010.