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# TURNING FASHION HISTORY INTO FASHION PRESENT



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## **Turning Fashion History into Fashion Present**

### **Synopsis:**

How using a multidisciplinary approach and access to the Seneca Fashion Resource Centre inspires and excites today's students of fashion history.



## **Turning Fashion History into Fashion Present**

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Perhaps it is because they live so much in the moment, (as evident through their posting on social media of selfies, tweets and snaps) that the prospect of studying the history of fashion seems at best boring and at worst irrelevant to many 1<sup>st</sup> year students of fashion programs. After all, are they not involved in the creation of the new, the modern, the future? Why would they need to consider the past?

Just one of the challenges for educators is how to help students appreciate the work of their predecessors and avoid the pitfalls of fashion failures. To do that we need to find ways to transform their opinion of the past, in effect to turn fashion history into fashion present. This is particularly important in the business of fashion since attempting to sell something that did not work in the past seems a good way to fail in the present.

Fashion has been described as cyclical and eclectic. It is true that fashion designers have taken the best from the past, filtered it through the zeitgeist and created the future. This process provides a source of inspiration and one used not only by new designers but by many established design houses.

At Seneca College one of our strategies for this educational challenge was the establishment of a Fashion Resource Centre. The centre was formally established in 1989 but several years before this, faculty saw the value of bringing fashion products into the classroom. Slowly but surely the collection was built until we now have over 15,000 garments ranging in age from 1840 to the present day.

Our mandate has been to collect what Canadians have worn. This is a concise statement that allows for great leeway in collecting. Our donors have worn Canadian designed and manufactured fashions as well as influential International designers. We have collected women's, men's and children's wear. The collection includes everything one might wear from the inside out: underwear, outerwear, day and evening attire, ceremonial/bridal wear, hats, shoes, jewellery and handbags.

The centre is housed within the School of Fashion and is used by different professors within the school. But, it has also been accessed by programs that might not immediately come to mind as users of such an historical resource.

The evolution of fashion is a course of study for students of fashion design as well as fashion business, visual merchandising and floral design programs. The fact that fashion is eclectic means that these students must be able to identify fashion styles particularly when they observe a current trend that has been seen before. They must also understand and speak the language of appearance, fashion and clothes as members of their industry.

Having the ability to recognize a style that is being revived means they can also associate other elements of that past period and predict whether these may also make an appearance in the current fashion scene. This ability to predict and recognize trends is critical to the role of buyers,

merchandisers and retailers of contemporary fashion products and one of the reasons why students can take the fashion history they study and put it to practical application in their careers.

For fashion design students learning to draft their own patterns for the first time, seeing construction methods used to create a variety of styles of skirts helps them to draft the 2-dimensional pattern they will need in order to construct their final design. An examination of the placement of darts and seams on an existing skirt often provides the key to their own pattern. This is especially helpful to the student who does not own a variety of skirt styles or who has never worn a skirt.

The fashion industry also requires that students become proficient at creating accurate technical drawings using CAD programs like Adobe Illustrator. To do this the professor may photograph a variety of skirt or dress styles which are given to the students who must then render these in technical drawings. This is what the manufacturer will require in order to put the garment into production. The specific style lines and details must be accurately depicted and failure to do so can cost the factory and the retailer money if errors are made. Using actual garments for this exercise is a practical way of having students perform the skills required of them in the industry.

Floral Design students examine the history of botanical styles, and their professor comes to the Resource Centre to borrow garments that provide inspiration in their bouquet designs. For a Victorian nosegay - a Victorian lady's dress; for an Art Deco themed event centrepiece - a flapper dress, shoes and a handbag from the 1920s; for a class on Asian floral techniques - a Cheongsam or kimono.

Another group of students interested in appearance were those studying Game Art and Animation at our college. In the course of their study they learn how to design avatars or characters for video games. They were interested in how they could create garments that would help them to reveal the character and personalities of their avatars to their players. They often used what they described as "spandex suits" for their characters because it was easy to follow the basic body shapes and to simply colour the skin to resemble something approximating a close fitting suit. These would cover the body but did not necessarily move in a natural way nor reflect garments that might be appropriate for settings other than the future. They wanted to learn how to draw clothing that could immediately place the game player in the correct century or era.

During a visit to the Resource Centre, we showed them a number of garments from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries so they could experiment with different silhouettes, colours and patterns in the creation of characters. A discussion of some of the inferences drawn by viewers of appearance through the use of particular colours, patterns and clothing styles was made more relevant by showing them items that might be used to enhance a perception of youth vs. maturity, scholarliness vs physical strength, humor vs seriousness in a character. The students learned that more than gender is determined by what someone wears.

How else can we bring the past to the present? Discussing some of the contemporary issues facing the fashion industry, such as fashion sustainability, or the pros and cons of fast vs slow fashion can become an examination that connects the dots between the past and the present.

For example: the concept of fashion sustainability which includes the repurposing of garments and fabrics is a hot topic and yet, one that the world of fashion has engaged in throughout many centuries and decades. Rationing during the second World War meant women re-made many of the items in their wardrobe using suits from brothers, fathers or husbands serving in the war with the resulting silhouette for women having shoulder pads that mimic the wartime uniforms' of both service men and women. The concept of "Make do and Mend" meant taking an old coat and re-working it into a jacket for a daughter, creating hats using leftover fabric salvaged from a dress or unraveling a sweater to crochet into a handbag or gloves.

A discussion of the pros and cons of fast vs slow fashion reveals that Fashion design and business students can attest to the draw of fast fashion since it feeds their addiction for new styles at prices within their budgets. But when we begin to examine the garments made 100 years ago they begin to appreciate the thought that has gone into the construction of a garment. We look at 30 intricate and beautiful buttons on a Victorian bodice – certainly more than is required as a simple fastening. The interior of the bodice reveals boning as well as a belt and weights sewn in the hem. All of these elements combine to create a fit to the wearer's body that surpasses anything we would find in garments made today. The individual elements that may have been added by the designer or dress maker created individuality for the wearer. The examination of these stimulates discussion about the methods used or *not* used in the garments we find in stores today. The concept of slow fashion and the thought as well as time that went into these garments can add value beyond fit.

Another element of the slow fashion concept that we examine is the source of garments that make up the Fashion Resource Centre. One of the first questions that visitors to the centre often ask is where did we get all of these garments? Why were they kept? The answer is that people have saved some of these pieces for decades because the garments have become more than clothing, they represent the people who wore the item and commemorate them. Some pieces, like ceremonial garments (wedding gowns, christening gowns) seem to make sense to save but others like sportswear (a bathing costume) or day dresses seem to be an odd item to hold on to.

Quite often the pieces come to us with stories attached – "this was worn to my grandniece's bat mitzvah" or "I wore this to a charity ball" or "I always loved the work of that designer". Some belonged to a deceased relative who liked to collect beaded garments while others were kept in a trunk in the attic and were forgotten until someone passed away. A discussion about items that are in students' closet ensues. What have they kept and why?

In May 2013 we began another project that allowed us to turn fashion history into fashion present with a cross disciplinary project involving students from the Digital Photography program, Fashion Design and Fashion Business Management students. A "digital sandbox" had been created and with the help of a part time member of the college library as well as the Information Technology department the students and I began the process of photographing the collection in a 360 degree format.

Each garment was mounted on the appropriate dress form which was also mounted on a turntable. The turntable would move incrementally and was linked to a digital camera which shot 45 images as the garment rotated. A program allowed these images to be "stitched" together and the result was the ability of the viewer to move the garment around, and, using a "magnifying glass" examine details at any point or position on the garment. The intention is to

add this repository of 1200 garments to the Fashion Resource Centre's website as well as the college library site where virtual visitors will have access at any time and wherever they happen to be. They will have the convenience of being able to see the garments and details of particular interest while the possibility of damage to a garment that can result each time it is taken out of storage is decreased.

Social media was incorporated into the project by one of the students who created Pinterest boards and an Instagram account. As the project progressed she posted some still images of the garments as well as the process.

A more recent project that came to fruition this spring was the publishing of what we called a "Look Book" of the Fashion Resource Centre and which again involved students from three different programs at the college. Firstly, a student from the Digital Photography program worked with me and students from the Fashion Design and Fashion Business Management programs styling and then photographing several hundred items from the collection. A group of students from the Corporate Communications program were involved as interviewers of donors, designers, graduates and students who commented on the significance of particular items or the centre in general. And, a Graphic Design student worked with me on the layout of the book. The result: a 100+ page book of garments from the collection.

We continue to look for ways to bring this collection of historic garments into the present. Over the years we have invited members of the general public to view our collection. Curated shows have been held on the campus for the past 6 years. One exhibit focused on the popular Downtown Abbey television program and incorporated photographs of the Downtown characters juxtaposed with garments of the same eras and styles from our collection.

We have always been happy to prepare exhibitions off campus as well to reach more people. In celebration of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Toronto's Eaton Centre we exhibited examples throughout the mall of the types of clothing shoppers would have seen, purchased and worn since it opened in the late 1970s. Casa Loma is a landmark in the city of Toronto and for a two week period we displayed garments that might have been seen in the home during its occupation by the builder/owner Sir Henry Pelham (1911 to 1933). Collaborations with the Fashion History Museum and the Bata Shoe Museum also allow for more people to experience the collection.

How can you do this if you don't have such a resource? Assignments or projects that draw relationships between past and present can be created using any item. Students may investigate their own closets or those of a relative, or a grandparent to find an item to research.

The Dress Detective: A practical guide to object-based research in fashion by Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim is an excellent resource to use to encourage a student to pose those questions that will give them a different and perhaps more personal understanding of an article of clothing. The authors write that the book can be used "by anyone with a family heirloom or dress artifact to help discover the biography of the object."

The book includes checklists and case studies as well as the systematic framework for an object-based study of dress. Their "Slow Approach to Seeing" involves three steps: Observation, Reflection and Interpretation. In the observation stage a checklist with forty questions including: general elements or identifying features of the garments, construction techniques, textiles used,

labels etc. assists in really seeing the item. The stage of reflection requires the researcher to look at the garment from a subjective angle. What do they observe about the touch, sound, and smell of the garment? What might it have felt like if they were to wear it? Do they have any emotional reactions to the garment? And finally in the interpretation stage conclusions regarding a variety of topics which may be drawn on the basis of what has been discovered about the object. This form of study draws the relationship between past and present.

Another assignment that helps the student apply the past to the present requires them to research the background, philosophy and signature style of a couture house such as Balenciaga, Yves St Laurent, Gianni Versace, and to then imagine they have been hired to take over the house and create a modern collection that incorporates the signature styles of the house. The student must not only create a modern collection but must identify the demographics of their target customer and why this new collection would appeal to this customer. Students come to the centre to do research using examples from the collection as well as print material.

In their future careers fashion business students will likely be required to create trend forecasting documents or mood boards. An assignment requiring them to assemble mood boards which demonstrate how current fashion has been influenced or shows styles details from different historical periods creates preparation for a future task. A variation on this assignment is to have them write a series of style blogs illustrating the relationship between present trends and past designers.

If you are from an educational institution that does not have such a resource, I would suggest that finding some way to encourage an exchange or develop a relationship with an institution that has a collection of fashion can benefit your students. Most educational institutions will find that they have some access to a local museum. Whether it is a small, private museum focusing on the history of your community or a large, government funded one they are more than likely looking to increase and enhance access to their collections.

Educators agree that experiential learning and finding ways to appeal to a variety of learning styles makes for an enriched classroom. I encourage our students to be “in the moment” in the classroom as a way of making a personalized learning experience. Our Resource Centre is not a museum. Not everything is handled with white cotton gloves. I encourage students to touch some of the items and to guess what they might be made of, to what event someone might have worn the item, or how they (the student) would have felt appearing in such a garment. Their reaction is wonderful! If that means they turn the cameras from themselves and post Instagrams of our displays I think this is a good way to make the most of the moment.

We are particularly fortunate at Seneca College to have had faculty with the foresight to create experiential learning through the establishment of our extensive Resource Centre. I fully acknowledge that the scope of the centre as we have it now would have been impossible without the college’s support in terms of space, human and financial resources. We have found ways to ensure that our collection of historical garments has a contemporary presence in our post-secondary educational institution and many of these could be used in helping any student turn fashion history into fashion present.

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