

The Importance of Fashion Symbols and Conservation

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ABSTRACT

The words 'context' and 'conservation' and their inter-relationship are worthy of examination as they relate to the fashion designer's practice. A focus on the linkages between fashion design and conservation is important, as is the relationship between fashion design and textiles in an historic context. Essentially, the path to the future can be explored from our understanding of conservation. Therefore, if we understand the context of a textile, we have a general understanding of a textile's history. And, if we understand a textile's history, we appreciate the importance of conservation.

INTRODUCTION

This presentation will examine how context and conservation affect the function and output of a fashion design house. In the first instance, what does fashion 'design' have to do with material conservation? It is not as simple as saying that design is indulgence. Rather, there is a potency applying to textiles used in fashion design. It follows that textile conservators and designers consider their professional approaches together, as we look to the future of fashion design.

In my final year of fashion design studies in 2014, I had an obsession with 'newness' and set out to create the 'newest' body of work that I could. The quest was to be as innovative as possible? Already I had come to a realisation that everything about fashion design, to me at least, was about indulgence. The designer's role was about perspective; firstly with the purpose and intent of the task at hand, and secondly by imbedded memory of surroundings and past influences. Therefore, what was true innovation became a starting point.

I sensed that, in order to be truly innovative, I would need to produce a body of work where the fabric and its characteristics, its fold, feel and sheen, every quality, would control me and affect me. I found I was asking myself whether I should give into 'chance factors' by partly removing myself from the work in order to express the fabric's personality.

To some extent, these things would **control me** and my design genres; and from that would arise this 'newness' concept I was seeking.

Thus began a thought process about genre, and style genres, then the death of style genre. Everything I thought about now was about this 'newness' and the quest for it; the pathway towards achieving it having been established; even if the goal had not been reached.

PROJECT CONCEPT

I embarked on a project that largely shaped my design perspective, aware of this 'newness' factor. I began a research-based project titled *This Goes With That*. Its focus was the techniques artists use to instigate newness.

After a year of research, I started writing a thesis in support of my theory. I read everything from Walter Benjamin's countless theories of newness, admired Richard Prince's ability to dabble between appropriation and association, studied Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt's theory on chance, *The Oblique Strategies*, and finally The Bernadette Corporation's Reena Spaulings, using large quantities of numbers to stimulate new outcomes.

Margaret Iversen's introductory chapter to *The Aesthetics of Chance* helped highlight the link between the unconscious and innovation within design practices. Art from the Dada and Surrealist movement did stimulate a new train of thought;

one that recognised nothing was completely random. "It created a new awareness that an element of chance and randomness were important to innovation. We are now in a position to formulate the problem of art, more accurately the problem of expression", as it appeared to the writers of the *Literature group* (Aragon, Breton, Soupault). "Only the unconscious does not lie; it alone is worth bringing to the light. All deliberate and conscious efforts, composition, logic are futile." (Marcel Raymond, *From Boudelaire to Surrealism*; quoted in Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1951).

And then the research started leading me into further questioning. What if I was to think in reverse? Instead of considering what makes something new, should I be asking 'what makes something old'? If I'm to make something new, then I must be able to understand what signifies something as being old.

The next stage involved thinking about everything I had ever seen visually and understood to be 'old' within textiles and fashion; and examining my previous experiences with textiles and textile history. Was my experience universally shared; or unique to myself? Also, how important was all of this to creating something 'new'?

In my research, one text stood out most. It was the foreword section of Stephanie Polsky's most recent text *Walter Benjamin's Transit - a Deconstructive Tour of Modernity*. It talks of Walter Benjamin as having described ideas as 'relating to things as a constellation to stars'. "As we grow in experience, our association of things align themselves with a constellation of previously held pleasures". Focusing heavily on *Association and Desire*, Walter Benjamin describes the dependency of 'luminosity' (understanding) to be dependent upon an individual's experiences - meaning that a person can only create new meanings based on their own personal experiences. New meaning and newness could be created only if it connected and disconnected simultaneously according to an individual's previous acquired knowledge.

Therefore, what were the visual cues that represented history to me; lead me to other places? What was that moment visually when something went from new to old?

I also began thinking about how we should make sense of fashion collections. What are those 'aha' moments when we decide a collection is perfect?

Was Walter Benjamin correct, and did it all come down to previous association and meaning? Why was it important, as a viewer, to understand and make sense of a fashion collection? For me, it seemed to revolve around an understanding of material context. It was back to the basics of my ethos.

The starting point became three things I knew about myself as a designer. I was interested in redundancy, frivolity and excess. This is how the *Fashion Baggage* collection was born.

APPLYING INSPIRATION TO FABRIC

In bringing the inspiration to reality, I began with the power of those symbols of frivolity redundancy and excess. Much of this project focuses on the treatments we apply to fabrics: essentially to 'elevate' them (ie. *the frill*). Instead of applying a frill to a garment type, I explored the fundamentals - what sorts of garment types and silhouettes, and materialities, are associated most with those garment types? Furthermore, for instance, why is the frill associated with femininity? In the *Book of Prada* by Muccia Prada and Patrizio Bertelli, 2009, reference is made to the inside working methods of the design house:

"The Prada approach combines concept, structure, image and tactility- thus the material and visual qualities of the fabric are essential. Prada mixes traditional textiles, prints, and wovens of exquisite quality with other unexpected materials more often associated with technical or industrial uses. In this way common materials may be elevated to a new kind of luxury, and luxurious materials may be used in a casual or off-hand way."

Whatever the textiles I was handling, I decided to apply techniques traditionally used on these fabrics throughout history. In turn, this influenced the design process for *Fashion Baggage*, the title of my collection. The decision was whether this or that piece would read as 'historical' or 'contemporary'. Thus, every textile fabric used in this collection had the technique applied that it was most well-known for.

I decided to work with the fabrics I hated the most and to apply techniques that I loathed to those fabrics. So, I would pick up Tuelle, for example, and ask: Must Tuelle always create volume? The answer was 'yes'. Then it became part of the collection.

I was very interested in the language of upholstered fabrics versus the language of fashion fabrics, but how could I work with both at the same time? It was a conscious design choice to confuse and infuse both. For this project, working with upholstery fabric became very important. I decided to treat the upholstery fabric in the exact same way as I was treating the fashion fabrics. The most obvious - red upholstery with a pile - referenced the most classic of couches; blue and white striped outdoor canvases were left flat and had eyelets and press studs applied to them.

APPROPRIATION AND ASSOCIATION

One of the techniques I became very interested in was appropriation and association within design. I applied this to a body of work I set out to make. The emergence of the collective work *Fashion Baggage* marked a turning point in my practice, whereby frivolity redundancy and excess were themes heavily explored.

The size of the garments and the excessiveness of the fabric used were integral to how the fashion models were perceived on the runway. I wanted to offset the world of the collection into a 'contemporary space' (classically contemporary - ie. the runway under lights).

Questions that have driven this project for me are:

Do we experience 'new' each time we shift the context of a materiality out of its original world, even if the garment itself hasn't changed?

What is it about 'incongruous aesthetics' that attracts me? Is it context?

What makes a collection a collection? Do elements within a look become redundant once the viewer establishes a connection and can make meaning from specific moments of the whole piece?

The other aspects of interest were relevance vs. redundancy, good idea vs. bad idea, and Pastiche as a whole. Ultimately, the bottom line inspiration of my collection was to ask the viewer: *What is truly new?*



*These stately, sculptural, immense dresses made of couch fabric are defined by their cut and drape, fitting the body at the shoulder and upper torso, and falling away in heavy folds reminiscent of eighteenth century couture; yet made stranger with unusual padding and bulk.
Image: Elaine Webster*

CONCEPT TO REALITY

Fashion Baggage was a collection built on the foundations of my interest in Walter Benjamin's theory. I wanted to disrupt, using techniques of montage and appropriation, to create a fashion collection that actually screamed 'fashion baggage'.

Fashion Baggage was about the comings and goings of fashion. The collection examined 'the toss' associated with discarding the old to make way for the new, that so often occurs in fashion. A series of six red couch dresses act as real life couches that unwanted garments have been thrown onto.

Each couch dress looked at a different classic garment type seen throughout history. The garment types stemmed from an interest in the language of textiles; and the difference between a fashion fabric and an upholstery fabric.

The process of design worked like mathematics and ran with contrast. The system was designed carefully, using silhouette and fabric treatment to mimic history; and it relied on viewers' previous experiences to draw meaning and trigger moments of history that then faded away into nothing.

While all the garments that were thrown onto the 'couch dresses' in a way that made them look like they were fading away into the couches themselves, the whole can also face into what appears as just piles of fabric. All of the garment types were designed in halves.

This ensures that, at all times, they appear as though they have been only partially placed on-top of a couch.

The project weighs 65 kilograms. It used more than 80 metres of fabric and contained 49 metres of upholstery fabric. This body of work has seen a lot of places.

It travelled from Melbourne to New Zealand to be shown at the 2015 Dunedin *Emerging Designer* Competition. It went to the National Gallery of Victoria (the NGV), showing at the *Jean-Paul Gaultier* exhibition. And it showed at Melbourne spring fashion week in 2014.

LESSONS LEARNED

Paramount in the dissemination of my project is the world in which I placed my work. It is interesting to see who recognises irony in the collection and who does not. However, it has been a fascinating experiment that actually supports and proves what my collection was trying to highlight.

The collection was a study of the context of fabrics and still is. It is a celebration of the garment types that have come and gone in history and the references often associated with them. The collection is made up of six wearable couches with varying silhouettes (designed in half) thrown over the top of them.

Can redundant references to past fashion silhouettes that have come and gone within fashion still bring with them an element of newness? It's interesting to note that, even though the garment silhouettes have all been designed in halves, they still resonate potently and read as though they were from a time before. To me, *Fashion Baggage* is still about redundancy, frivolity and excess.

CONCLUSION

My project, therefore, is a critique of the visual language that is fashion. It endeavours to highlight the lifespan of aesthetic and genre, while making a comment on relevance within design. I believe designing relies upon the elements of chance and randomness as being essential to innovation.

I don't think there is anything to be said for designing, from pen to paper, in order to obtain a complete look before freeing oneself first by gaining a good understanding of the fabric. If this is not done, everything simply arises from one's personal inspiration, without making the most of the fabric itself - its composition, weave, form and function. Of course, some argue that a designer's work essentially should reflect the mind of the designer. Personally, I believe this does not bring anything new to a project.

Page 424 of Bertelli and Prada's text talks of innovation as: "Applying intelligence to an object." Intelligent choices that reflect the values of the designer is the only way to pull ahead of the general onslaught. That intelligence is an altruistic gesture of adding value to an object (perhaps so that followers have something new to copy?) While intelligence often takes the form of innovation, thereby improving things, this does not always need to be the case. It can also mean making good decisions about what should be saved and what should be made obsolete. There is no generosity without intelligence. And luxury is generosity.

In my hunger for newness, and in order to understand it fully, I must understand first what has come before; a respect of history, if you like. This is why a respected understanding for conservation and conservation and its practices is an imperative for me. Essentially, the path to the future can be carved from our understanding of conservation. Therefore, if we understand the context of a textile, we can have a general understanding of a textile's history. And, if we understand a textile's history, we appreciate the importance of conservation.

From the perspective of a designer interested in 'newness', I must understand material context - the wellspring of this 'newness'.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jessie Kiely is a Melbourne-based fashion designer. In 2015 she was named a finalist in the iD International Emerging Designer Competition, held in Dunedin, NZ. Twenty-eight designers took part.