Traditionally, the study of fashion has not been taken seriously as an academic discipline. It has rarely been afforded the serious consideration given to literature, painting, sculpture, music or theatre and, perhaps more surprisingly, it has not, until recently, been subjected to the sort of sophisticated debates which have gone on around other popular cultural forms of the last half century, such as television or popular music. Because fashion has so often been dismissed as at best frivolous and at worst oppressive, anyone studying the subject has had repeatedly to justify their interest (as I intend to do in the first part of this paper) by pointing up the importance of fashion both as cultural barometer and as expressive art form. The point is invariably made that adornment of the body pre-dates all other forms of decoration and that clothes embody the spirit of the age.

However, during the last decade or so the climate of opinion has begun to change. From the middle years of this century costume historians have produced an important body of empirical work on stylistic changes in fashionable dress, and the subject has gradually acquired intellectual respectability. Their research is based on a study of surviving garments and/or on careful analysis of documentary sources in the form of paintings, photographs, fashion plates and contemporary literature. The works of Cecil Willett and Phillis Cunnington and James Laver were pioneers in a genre which includes, for the more recent period, the various visual histories of dress published by B.T. Batsford (e.g. Cumming et al. 1991). Although the first postgraduate course in the history of dress was set up in 1965 (at the Courtauld Institute of Art) the academic study of fashion was, until the late 1970s, largely museum-based. It grew up alongside or in the wake of traditional art history and, as with other fine and decorative art objects, its primary concerns were the accurate dating of surviving specimens and of the dress depicted in painting and sculpture, and the understanding of the actual process of construction. Assignment of authorship has always been less important in the case of costume as so much is anonymous.

However, the methodology of traditional art history, with its tendency to reinforce the elitist distinction between high art and popular art, provides an unsatisfactory theoretical framework for
the study of fashion since it means fashion being viewed primarily from the standpoint of haute couture and high fashion. Yet, fashion was never wholly reserved for the rich and, with the industrial revolution, it became part of popular consciousness. Mass manufacture of clothing enabled it to become part of popular culture. During the last decade cultural critics have begun to explore the meanings of popular culture and their writings have gradually extended to include fashion. Theories of cultural relativity developed out of post-modernist thinking have provided a forum which has been used by feminist writers in particular to explore subjects once considered unworthy of serious attention, including fashion. In ‘Fashion and the Postmodern Body’ the cultural historian Elizabeth Wilson describes how, indirectly, the debates around post-modernism have contributed to ‘rescuing the study of fashion from its lowly status’ and have ‘created – or at least named – a climate in which any cultural or aesthetic object may be taken seriously’ (Ash et al. 1992). Since about 1980 a great deal of critical writing on the cultural significance of fashion has emerged, with much of this research being generated in higher education, particularly in departments of design history and cultural studies.

This new climate should be welcomed by museum curators as helping to create a more prominent space for fashion within their institutions where, all too often, it has tended to be the poor relation in the hierarchy of the fine and decorative arts. As one of the most immediate and important cultural manifestations dress should figure more prominently in collections of material culture. ‘When we dress,’ writes Elizabeth Wilson, ‘we wear inscribed upon our bodies the often obscure relationship of art, personal psychology and the social order’ (Wilson 1985: 247).

Clothes play an indispensable part in the production of the social self and in the creation of identity. Anthropologists have long studied the clothing of small-scale and pre-industrial societies as a facet of material culture and one which has several dimensions, and their work has recently begun to embrace western as well as non-western cultures. Grant McCracken, for example, has used the research tools of the anthropologist to study Elizabethan dress in England (McCracken 1982 and 1985), and in ‘Clothing as Language’ he describes fashion as the study of the expressive properties of material culture, and as being charged with semiotic effect and potential (McCracken 1988: 60). Certainly, we are all able to recognize the rôle which dress plays in the creation of identities, signalling sexual preference, social status or aspiration, occupation, or identification within a group, and the recent past has seen a number of counter-cultural groups – mods, rockers, hippies, punks – self-consciously use dress to create meaning and locate themselves in society. This facet of dress is not a modern phenomenon, but is one of a number of themes which might
provide the curator with the conceptual framework for an alternative presentation of costume to the traditional chronological display of changing styles of fashion.

Let us first consider the manner in which costume is presented in museums in this country. This will often depend upon the reasons the collection was made in the first place and on the rôle which it thus plays in the context of the museum collection in its entirety. We are here to discuss approaches to the decorative arts, but clothing does not fit comfortably within this classification at all. Out of its social or historical context, much fashionable dress, particularly of the postwar period in the twentieth century, hardly resembles any sort of art object in the traditional sense. Traditional aesthetics are hard to apply to street fashion of the recent past or to worn-out work clothing. Perhaps these categories of clothing are more rightly the province of the social history curator, yet in many institutions costume continues to be classified as part of the decorative arts department – as at Manchester City Art Galleries, for example, where the Gallery of English Costume has traditionally concentrated on collecting the ‘everyday’ and occupational clothing.

Not surprisingly, the national collection of dress at the Victoria and Albert Museum probably most closely fits the description ‘decorative art’. There is an emphasis on couture clothes and designer names and in the Dress Collection, as the old costume gallery was so tellingly re-named in the 1980s, one finds a chronological display of the finest examples of what might be called the ‘art of dress’, presented in the manner one would expect of any national collection of fine or applied art. The displays do include some supporting material in the form of paintings and fashion plates but, by and large, the clothes are deliberately presented in glorious isolation so that they should be the sole focus of visitors’ attention. The most recent catalogue (Victoria and Albert Museum 1984) accepts that it is an unashamedly elitist display, showing clothes which are essentially an expression of the fashionable taste of the upper classes. However, one might take issue with the collecting policy of the V.&A. in its claim to be concentrating on styles which set rather than those which take up and disseminate new fashions, for there have been several instances in the recent past of high fashion following the lead of the street. Dick Hebdige, in his seminal study on subcultures, and others have demonstrated how subcultural signs – particularly dress – are incorporated into the cultural mainstream by converting them into mass-produced objects. Thus, the V.&A.’s Bill Gibb dress of 1972 in Liberty cottons is an upmarket adaptation of earlier, ‘hippy’ styles, while Hebdige gives the example of Zandra Rhodes, whose work is well represented at the V.&A., similarly appropriating Punk signs such as safety pins for her couture collection in 1977, a whole year after the sub-culture first began to make an impact (Hebdige 1986: 96).
At the Museum of London, conversely, the dress collection forms part of a collection of material culture relating to the city and its inhabitants and is, therefore, displayed amongst other objects from the various periods in the history of the city. This model is one which is replicated in many smaller museums with social history collections across the country. A third type of display attempts to contextualize clothes by using realistic dummies placed in ‘tableaux’ settings provided by furnishings of approximately the same period. Although this style of display has become very outmoded in museums, it remains popular in country-house settings, such as Killerton near Exeter (see fig. 1).

Whichever approach is adopted clothes remain some of the most difficult objects to display – principally, because in their proper context, they need to move. Clothing ripples, flows and creases with every movement of the body. Separated from their wearers, clothes in museum displays appear curiously disembodied and dead. The V.&A.’s bloodless figures, moulded in uniform grey, solve many of the problems associated with costume dummies but tend to emphasise this more-dead-than-alive feeling in a disturbing way. Elizabeth Wilson describes the Cardin exhibition at the V.&A. in 1991 as like being

‘in an Arabian Nights’ story, or a fairy tale in which some malign being has petrified a whole population. The clothes themselves were brilliantly coloured, clear, incisive of cut, fancifully futurist, yet simple. But without the living body, they could not be said fully to exist. Without movement, they became both oddly abstract and faintly uncanny. Nothing could have more immediately demonstrated the importance of the body in fashion’ (Ash et al. 1992).

There appears to be no really satisfactory solution to the display of costume. Displays of associated material help – prints, paintings and fashion plates for the earlier periods, photography (amateur snapshots as well as professional fashion photography), advertisements and magazines for the modern period. Advertising and fashion photography are surely essential adjuncts to displays of post-industrial fashion, for they provide the sources of those images of desire to which we aspire in purchasing clothing and cosmetics. Increasingly, in the twentieth century, it has been the image as well as the artefact that the individual has purchased in buying clothes and, like advertising, style magazines have moved from being instructional and informational to peddling symbols with which the reader can identify rather than directly imitate.

Photography is, of course, a relatively early industrial art form, and there is no reason why the full panoply of modern reproductive technology cannot be brought into play in elucidating twentieth-century fashion – audio-visual displays, video recordings and, as a way of bringing the consumer into the picture, pre-recorded taped interviews, because recent garments will evoke lively responses from
Figure 1
An example of the traditional, tableau-style display, showing fashions of c. 1830–40
(By permission of the Museum of Costume, Bath)
Figure 2
One of the thematic displays in the Fashion Gallery
(By permission of the Art Gallery and Museum Services, the Royal Pavilion, Brighton)
their wearers. In *Adorned in Dreams* Elizabeth Wilson refers to fashion as a kind of performance art, with clothes acting as a poster announcing our act — whereas, in the pre-industrial world, they were more a badge denoting occupation, marital or social status (Wilson 1985: 242–246). The comparison with performance art is a telling one. Related to both fine art and popular culture, fashion is ephemeral in the way that performance art is, which is yet another reason for the difficulty we experience in attempting to capture its essence and pin it down for posterity.

Let us next consider the story of fashion as it is currently told by those museums with major costume collections. It is fair to say that most describe rather than attempt to explain the phenomenon of fashion. In museum terminology *interpreting* dress does not imply an exercise in semiotics or psychology; for the majority of curators, interpretation is understood as the clear and effective presentation of primary source material. Whilst it is appropriate, within a museum context, to prioritize objects over ideas (we have all experienced the exhibition as book on the wall), the two can be more constructively seen as mutually supportive. This is particularly so with fashion since garments alone tell us no more than a partial story. There are many fashion ‘stories’ which could provide the basis for more challenging displays of historical costume.

For example, fashion and the construction of gender is a theme which would allow the curator to draw on a wide range of historical garments, accessories and other material and even to use a chronologically sequential format, which does appear to be popular with visitors to costume museums. This approach was adopted with great success at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. in 1990 in an exhibition entitled *Men and Women: Dressing the Part*. Covering a period of over 300 years, it explored the relationship between changes in fashion and changing ideas about masculinity and femininity (Kidwell et al. 1989). There now exists a large body of critical writing on this particular aspect of fashion to provide a theoretical framework for such a display. Alternatively, the relationship of fashion to popular culture — through sport, dance, film and television etc. — could provide a broad view of post-industrial fashion history firmly rooted in surviving garments but supported by a wide range of other artefacts and media.

Furthermore, museums with costume collections could mount lively (and undoubtedly popular!) exhibitions focusing on numerous aspects of the vibrant youth culture which this country has fostered in the post-war period and within which dress has played a key rôle. Because of its highly ephemeral nature costume curators need to ensure that such dress does not disappear entirely before it is required in the gallery. Surprisingly few examples of
what has been dubbed 'streetstyle' have found their way into museum permanent collections, partly because many museums still wait for donations rather than systematically collect contemporary fashion, and partly because it is difficult to apply to such fashions the usual aesthetic criteria appropriate to the less problematical decorative arts objects. Perhaps it is indicative of a change in attitude to the display and interpretation of costume in museums that the V.&A.'s major exhibition of late autumn 1994 - Streetstyle - will be examining just this phenomenon. The Museum is having to actively collect for the exhibition and will then consider what to keep for the permanent collection. V&A. News, the Museum's publicity brochure, also noted, when announcing the forthcoming exhibition in a 1993 issue, that the show was obliging curators there to review the idea that fashion ideas are conceived at the top end of the market and then 'trickle down' to the high street.

I am conscious of the fact that visitors to costume museums do appear to value chronological displays, and a compromise policy might involve mounting regular, temporary exhibitions on what might be termed the meaning of fashion, the process of fashion and the politics of fashion alongside more traditional chronological displays of costume from the museum's permanent collection. Something very similar to this was introduced at Brighton Museum as long ago as 1983. In the Fashion Gallery there one half was devoted to a chronological display of fashionable dress from the early Victorian period to the present day, whilst a more radical display in the other was designed to encourage visitors to think about the cultural rôle of clothing by contrasting, for example, a lady in the revolutionary style of c.1810 with a figure in punk dress of 1977, or the occupational dress of a parlourmaid c.1900 with that of a fireman c.1930. Other themes explored 'rank and status' and 'decency in dress'. What is surprising is that, although widely acclaimed - the gallery took the Sotheby Prize in 1984 for 'best museum of fine or applied arts' - the approach has not been much copied (see fig. 2).

Although they tell one story - the way in which the dress of the mainly privileged in western society has changed over the centuries - the majority of costume displays in museums fail to set fashion within any cultural context. New critical writing on the history of dress and theories of fashion could assist the costume curator to develop more thought-provoking exhibitions by adding a critical and theoretical dimension to the important body of empirical research which has been built up by costume historians and curators during the post-War period. Today analyses of clothing increasingly draw on a wide variety of methodologies derived from art and design history, sociology, psychology and anthropology. A museum display can reach out potentially to a far wider audience than even a popular academic book, and it would be a pity if costume curators
were to foster the divide between the academic study of fashion and its public presentation rather than to capitalize on the rich variety of approach to the subject by being eclectic and adventurous in their displays and interpretation of fashion.

**Bibliography**
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