

Re-thinking Gender and Fashion Exhibitions in Contemporary Museums

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Abstract: *This article explores gender in contemporary museum exhibitions, with a focus on fashion exhibitions. It reveals how the concepts of gender and fashion are embodied through an analysis of museum fashion exhibitions, aiming to discuss issues pertinent to fashion and gender in contemporary museum exhibitions and explore the implications for museum development. To achieve the study purpose, it begins with an introduction to the relationship between fashion and gender and further discusses its representation in museums. The role that museums play in interpreting fashion, feminism and gender is therefore exemplified by exploring the functions and meanings of museums. Furthermore, using the V&A Museum as a case study, the paper examines how fashion and gender are interpreted through museum exhibitions and applied to exhibiting practices. Finally, by analyzing the impact of fashion and gender on museums, insights are gained into the role of museums in performing educational functions and developing collaborations on cross-border and innovative performance forms, which have implications for the development of museums.*

Keywords: *fashion; gender; museums; feminism; V&A*

1. Introduction

Gender has always been a topic closely associated with fashion.^[1] The rapid versatility of fashion has led it to be seen as a source of ideas for contemporary visual culture, using clothing and its expression as an exhibition. The rise of feminism has been a catalyst for women to re-examine women's clothing and, in particular, the rise of feminism and the development of the LGBTQ+ community over the last century has led to a more diverse public perception of fashion exhibitions and an increasingly broad target audience. Art and fashion should be brought together in a closer, more open way and should break down restrictions and organizational rules, not in juxtaposition, but as a whole, engaging and influencing each other.

Pulitzer Prize winner Jeffrey Eugenides has argued that sex is biological.^[2] From a semiotic perspective, if gender is seen as a symbol, then clothing as a vehicle for fashion tends to concretize gender and gender roles because of social norms and the images that people expect to 'dress' for gender. Stereotypes of what men and women are supposed to look like are already in place. A fashion exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, entitled 'Gender Bending Fashion', shows how fashion designers over the past century have subverted gender stereotypes and told the history of fashion around the relationship between gender and clothing. Fashion is a form of artistic expression, and moving away from the binary of 'gender' is one of the means of liberating it. In her book *Vision and Difference*, Griselda Pollock devotes an entire chapter to reading women as symbols and analysing the mutual positioning of the male creator and the passive female object. However, in the world of fashion, gender is visualized. Both men and women can express themselves in different forms through fashion. The fluidity of fashion allows it to change according to a variety of capable and objective factors, such as the public's understanding of fashion, trends, seasons and locations.

The temporary and provisional nature of the displays in the fashion exhibition is consistent with both. The presentation of fashion through museums is therefore a process based on the visitor's experience. Fashion exhibitions are more capable of signifying this transience than other aspects of museum exhibitions.^[3] For example, how the fashion of the past marks the historical era more accurately than other fashions. The products produced at a particular time. Its absolute state marks the 'present', yet as fashion theorist Heike Jansons points out, it 'has the potential to survive in objects and images that have the potential to spread'. Fashion is thus a sign of attitudes and emotions towards a particular moment in time. In their time, there are often things which are most transparent or elusive, sometimes only scratching the surface of properties over time. Reconsidering fashion through the museum's exhibition space is therefore an effort which is beneficial to think comprehensively about the history of fashion.

2. Museums, Fashion and Gender

Today's museum exhibitions also reflect the notion of fashion and gender. When fashion is viewed from a museum perspective, fashion items such as clothing and jewellery are not only an interpretation of fashion in terms of gender, but also a further emancipation of the notion of identity construction and gender identity through changes in clothing.^[4] In the museum, fashion was a step in the history of human dress, closely linked to the development of the people's era, and the bold innovation and experimentation of women in fashion in the 1960s reflected the awakening of female consciousness. In the past, a woman's choice of clothing had to be feminine, and in the late 1960s, as feminist consciousness began to awaken in the West and the feminist movement grew stronger, women realized that the liberation of women's clothing was also part of their liberation.^[6]

2.1 *The relationship between fashion and museum*

Not only feminism but fashion's articulation of group genders, such as queer culture, is reflected in gender identity and identity construction, and clothing inevitably becomes an essential part of the formation of cool culture and self-identity. In an interview with the co-curator of the queer style magazine *Attitude Streetstyle*, Amy de la Haye stated that "queer style is crucial to the study of subcultures". This interpretation of this one idea by the museum is built into a public sphere. If we take the queer's self-gender identity as a minority one, then it may move into social prejudice and stereotyping. In 1995, Cole published a paper entitled 'What a Queer Collection', discussing the collection of materials related to lesbian, gay and bisexual life, art and design in the V&A and other museums and galleries. Nineteen years later, the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) in New York hosted *Queer Style (2013)*, the first major exhibition dedicated to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender fashion and dress. In the meantime, more and more has been written about LGBT fashion and clothing, but still, very little has been written about its presence in museums and archives.^[7] Therefore, it is worth thinking about how museums as a public cultural space can allow feminism and the culture of queer to better embrace the public and be more comprehensively interpreted.

Fashion's interpretation of gender is also reflected in how the museum engages with the audience. If the museum's audience stands at a point in time to view a historical memory of a time in the past, then the narrative function of the museum is key to unlocking the audience's understanding of history.^[8] In the connection between museums and exhibits, fashion and gender, exhibitions and visitors, interpretation and engagement, the theme of fashion is expressed through fashion items taking clothes as a medium, and fashion, in turn, expresses the understanding of feminism and gender in fashion through the interpretation of museums. In the field of fashion, museums, through their narrative function, act as a medium to bring fashion and feminism closer together. For example, the Tsinghua Museum of History in Beijing hosted an exhibition of brooches and jewellery entitled 'The Mind'. This exhibition presented the 'feminine voice of silver' in fashion jewellery through the interpretations of collectors. Due to the growing popularity of vintage culture in China, there is a growing number of vintage enthusiasts. The audience for this brooch jewellery exhibition is mainly female, but the collector herself is a woman. "I hope that the male audience of this exhibition will pay more attention to women's voices while understanding the beauty of jewellery fashion and the historical stories behind it," says curator Zheng Yingyan. As a female curator, the brooch jewellery is told through a woman's perspective of the changes in social history. In curating the exhibition, the museum also follows the collector's idea of presenting various brands of jewellery, such as costume jewellery, to explain the stories behind brooches through the development of costume jewellery over time.

2.2 *The Influence through Fashion Exhibition*

As a platform for showcasing fashion, it is worthwhile to deeply interpret the relationship between fashion and gender. When feminist theory enters the museum, it raises questions about the provenance of the collection and the need for visible access to artefact. Feminist theory applied to collections will also lead curators to reveal the role of women and the cultural 'other' in the creation of objects and to question the objects in the portraits or sculptures of these people. Feminist theory is a dynamic process that should be realized in practice and can improve the museum's function as a public cultural space. Similarly, when the concept of feminism and gender in fashion is interpreted by museums, It is significant to consider that how the authority of museum narratives will be taken into account as well as whether museums should take on social responsibility in a more creative way of the engagement with audiences. Theories of gender relations in feminism, and in the exploration of identity and identification offer ways of thinking that can be implemented in museum practice. What most of the authors gathered in the 2006 anthology *Friction in Museums* have in common, for example, is their opposition to accepted universal notions. Feminist efforts to overcome the limitations of masculinist

theory are consistent with the various theoretical rejections of universalism and with the vision put forward by some innovative practitioners, and the combination of fashionable expression with the interpretive function of museums gives a vehicle for feminist as well as gender interpretation. The analysis and interpretation of fashion, feminism and gender through museum practice is, therefore, a topic worthy of consideration.

3. V&A Museum as Case Study

We take the V&A museum as a case study. The V&A's fashion collection, designated as a national collection, consists mainly of European fashion clothing and accessories from the last 500 years and is one of the largest in the world, rivalled only by the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Museum of Fashion and Textiles in Paris, the MOMU in Antwerp and the Kyoto Costume Institute in Japan, is comparable to it.^[9]

3.1 *The Fashion gallery in The V&A*

Since 1970, the Fashion Gallery has grown considerably in importance at the V&A, attracting both academic interest and being one of the V&A's most famous museums. In addition to being a representative fashion museum, the V&A has made many efforts to combine fashion and museums across borders and to innovate. For example, the catwalk in fashion was incorporated into the fashion exhibition as a special event, offering a free catwalk show to everyone entering the museum, allowing anyone to sit in the front row. As the only fashion collection of its kind, it allows people to experience professional fashion events in a truly unique setting, the museum. In addition, the fashion section with the V&A is committed to strengthening the collaboration with designers and brands, thus enhancing the effect of the V&A's fashion brands, for example, the latest exhibition with Gucci, *Fashioning Masculinities: The Art of Menswear*, which was a huge success.

The collaboration between the museum and queer designers bridges the gap between the liberation of gender in fashion. In preparation for the exhibition, the designers pass on their design ideas and styles through their clothes to the museum, which is constantly refining itself as it embraces the designers' ideas. In addition to presenting fashion exhibitions with themes such as Queer and feminism, the V&A Museum has also strengthened its collaboration with designers, including the famous Alexander McQueen. As a gay designer, Alexander McQueen, who studied for his MA in Fashion Design at Central Saint Martins, visited the museum at least once a week to review the archives. He used the museum's various collections as a direct source of inspiration. At the launch of the V&A's fashion exhibition 'Savage Beauty', Tee England, as McQueen's stylist and stylist and aesthetic consultant, advised the 'London' gallery, a new addition to the 'Savage Beauty' at the V&A. At the Victoria and Albert Museum, the 'London' gallery is a new addition dedicated to 'Savage Beauty'. The gallery is filled with her own clothes, as are many of the works in the exhibition. Notably, Alexander McQueen's work was the subject of one of the first "V&A Fashion Movement" events - a live fashion show in the beautiful surroundings of the museum.^[10]

3.2 *"Fashion in Motion" of the V&A*

In addition, the V&A Museum's exploration of the link between fashion and gender is new and evolving with the times. After the famous Claire Wilcox joined the V&A, she launched the 'Fashion in Motion', bringing catwalk shows to the museum. She not only realized the possibilities of popularizing high fashion, but also changed the function and image of the museum. Featuring both established and emerging designers, she made the unique spectacle of fashion shows and presentations more accessible to a wider audience and aimed to inspire the next generation of designers.

The V&A Museum not only breaks away from the traditional thinking of fashion exhibitions, but also builds a bridge for the interpretation of gender in fashion. At the same time, it has strengthened its collaboration with Queer designers, making more outstanding fashion pieces familiar to the public. In particular, the V&A's 'fashion in motion' series brings high fashion closer to the average museum visitor, allowing designers' fashion ideas and interpretations of gender to be engaged with the audiences in a more artistic way. This cross-border alliance between fashion and museums breaks the isolation of the traditional fashion show as a form of fashion performance, and breaks through the traditional concept of the museum as an objective, beloved and static space, seeking innovation in the display of fashion-themed exhibitions, providing a more direct and immersive experience for the audience, which has implications for the development of museums.

4. Implications for Museum Curation

Museums have a strong knowledge production and public education function, and gender sensitivity can only be enhanced in museum practice. Fashion exhibitions disseminate the notion of the gender ambiguity of fashion to audiences through museums, while the emergence of new fashion concepts and audience groups opens up new possibilities for museum development.

4.1 Breaking the social stereotypes

First of all, breaking through inherent gender stereotypes is also a problem for museums in the future. Museums have never been the judges of society's culture that the right is in the hands of the audience, in the hands of the public. When new social cultures emerge, museums should also think about whether they should take the initiative to embrace new cultures. Utilising the museum's educational function as a public cultural space and breaking down inherent prejudices about gender, a museum environment dedicated to serving the whole of humanity and diversity should be created.^[11] Fashion is seen as a 'comprehensive social fact' in a postmodern society that has a profound impact on individuals and collectives, reflecting the facts of life in society as a whole. Whether it is a feminist-influenced fashion revolution or breaking down the prejudices of men's dress codes, it reflects how fashion designers introduce and conceptualise social issues into fashion, and when this phenomenon is disseminated through the medium of museums, it will be in dialogue with the public, showing more social impact and enriching the designers' ideas through public participation and interaction. Not only feminism but as groups such as LGBTQ are becoming more influential in society, museums need to consider the needs of groups such as LGBTQ and create a positive environment that is more accessible and respectful to the queer culture.^[12] This mediated vision makes us realise that gender issues have the potential to become a serious and egalitarian social dialogue in fashion museums and exert more influence on fashion as a 'primary social fact' and offer the possibility of fashion breaking down gender boundaries and stereotypes.

4.2 Improving the social influence of the museum

Secondly, the cross-border association of museums is strengthened to create a museum brand effect. The emancipation of gender to fashion makes fashion more inclusive, and the diversity of fashion expressions enhances the possibility of cross-border collaboration for museums. For example, Alessandro Michele for Gucci, dress worn by Harry Styles, styled by Camilla Nickerson, 2020 on display in *Fashioning Masculinities: The Art of Gucci's brand redefines fashion in an out-of-the-box way, celebrating creativity, innovation and self-expression, and this crossover collaboration is a reinterpretation of the male expression of fashion.* In this cross-border collaboration between museums and fashion, not only does it enhance the promotion of fashion to the general public but also contributes to the establishment of the museum's own brand. For example, the collaboration between TikTok and the museum has helped to produce engaging and educational content. This covered funding from the #LearnOnTikTok bursary to bespoke advice and platform support from TikTok to promote the V&A's content and further expand its reach. To launch the *Fashioning Masculinities: The Art of Menswear* in the V&A exhibition, the V&A partnered with TikTok to host an evening co-curated with TikTok, which saw 90 of its high-end art and fashion content creators take part in the event.

4.3 The engagement with audiences

Furthermore, the way in which engaging with the audience in museums is crucial as it is directly related to the user experience and it also makes museums a key place to recreate the everyday experience of fashion, allowing the general public to participate in fashion and experience the charm of fashion without style conveyed in exhibitions, serving as a great place where fashion is integrated into daily life. If museums were to treat clothing as mere artefact for display, it would be a mere object for fashion and would not maximize its artistic value.^[13] Fashion can only be fashion if it is integrated with the body, and gender differences make the relationship between fashion and the body flexible and fluid, making it difficult to convey design concepts and effects to the viewer if the exhibition is viewed only as an object. It is a clever way of breaking away from the museum's traditional static approach to display by combining fashion with catwalk events to attract a wider audience to a free catwalk show and to create an intertextual dialogue with the museum's collection. In this way, the study of fashion expands from purely material objects to cultural practices and conceptual presentations, constructing a historically inherited system of fashion culture.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, museums enable visitors to engage in dialogue with fashion and deepen the public's thinking on issues related to fashion and gender. However, the interpretation of fashion and gender opens up new possibilities for museums to play an educational function, strengthen brand partnerships and innovate forms of presentation. In this context, museums should play an integral role in telling the stories behind fashion exhibitions and communicating with the public. Fashion exhibitions are based on an underlying narrative that can make a critical statement about fashion. Museums should reflect on their function in the field of fashion and seek to diversify the themes of their exhibitions, the forms of collaboration and the forms of presentation. This is exemplified in the case of the V&A Museum, where the exploration explains how gender is reflected in fashion and museums. Finally, the new collaborations and new forms of engagements that have emerged from the museum's interpretation of fashion and gender are explored, with implications for the development and management of museums.

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