THE SPECTACLE OF FASHION

MUSEUM COLLECTION, DISPLAY AND EXHIBITION

Craig Douglas

7.1 Martin Grant Paris installation, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (9 December 2005 – 7 May 2006)
Photo: Helen Oliver-Stowe. Courtesy National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Fashion is designed to be worn on living bodies. In the contemporary museum one of the biggest challenges for the curator of fashion is to somehow recreate some of the life that was originally intended for those garments. (Roger Leong, 2008)

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is clear that large-scale social, political and cultural changes are in progress. Cultural theoreticians have labelled this period, amongst other terms, as ‘Post 9/11’. Even closer to our immediate times, the term ‘global recession’ – as both a name and a condition – is emerging as an economic and, by association, cultural force that will shape the years ahead. No matter what label is applied, the period from the 1990s through to the present has seen paradigmatic change that continues to affect social structures, relationships and value systems. Hooper-Greenhill, writing in 2004, stated:

Museums, expository spaces charged with garnering, caring for and exhibiting those objects that symbolise some of our deepest feelings and hopes, are one of the most vulnerable of institutions at this time of radical change. (Hooper-Greenhill 2004: 557)

Museums: products of the Enlightenment

Museums originated in the Age of Enlightenment. They are an expression of reason and rational thought. They sculpted their position through grand narratives and what Lyotard calls ‘meta-narratives’ (1992: 138), which were understood outside the site (the museum) from which they were spoken. The museum, in developing a reliable picture of the world, has always employed observation, shaped through the processes of classification and presentation to knowledge constructs.
The pre-twentieth-century history of the museum can be divided into two main stages. The first, in broad terms, spans the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – the Age of Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason. The second occurred in the nineteenth century, when the production and dissemination of knowledge were the focus of the Modernist museum. This type of museum was intended to be encyclopedic, drawing together a complete collection to act as a universal archive. The nineteenth-century history of the museum is one of consolidation and extension of the emergent principles of classification, which were often used as a strategy to distance this type of public institution from the contemporary popular museums. However, the most defining feature of the nineteenth-century public museum was that it provided access to public citizenry (Altick 1978). This ideal twenty-first-century museum adopts a more democratic stance towards its visitors. This democratisation has allowed fashion into the art museum as opposed to just the ubiquitous textiles and dress displays synonymous with museums of earlier eras.

7.2 Jean Antoine Watteau, Gersaint’s Sign, 1720
Source: Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin
Fashion commercialism and the museum

In 1720, the French painter Jean Antoine Watteau returned to Paris and stayed with his friend E.F. Gersaint, an art dealer. For him, he completed Enseigne de Gersaint (Gersaint’s Sign), a painting of the interior of Gersaint’s shop intended for use as a signboard (see Figure 7.2). In the painting, Watteau depicts two women visiting a commercial art gallery dressed in robes volantes.

The woman in the foreground of the painting is seen from the back, a view that emphasises the graceful lines of her dress as she peers at an uncrated painting in front of her:

The dresses worn by the women in Gersaint’s Sign are made of simple striped and plain silks . . . this simplicity reflects the importance of the robe volante’s influence on fashion . . . a new style of dress with double box pleats at the centre back that flowed loosely from the neck to the floor. (Parmal 2006: 27)

The woman’s gown depicted in Watteau’s painting developed from the robe de chambre (or, in England, the nightgown), a loosely fitted over-garment that took its inspiration from the Japanese kimono. This evolutionary process, evident during the reign of Louis XIV, sees the nightgown take on increasing informality as it moved from the boudoir to the outdoors (Parmal 2006). French dressmakers of the period often referred to the boxed-pleat style of the robe volante as ‘Watteau’s pleats’.

The Watteau painting provides evidence that the fine arts and fashion have a long and inextricably linked history. Gersaint’s Sign conflates fashion, dress, taste, collecting and commercial enterprise into the broader sensibilities of the Enlightenment. Fashion and painting as commodity and style are at play in this picture. It is interesting to note that the idea of the museum (literally translated as ‘house of the muses’, with a lineage dating back to classical Greece) emerged during this period, when the Louvre became the first public art museum in Paris in 1789–90.

As the Age of Reason gave way to the might of industrialisation, and the city and town emerged as features of a new and growing middle class immersed in trade, the museum had different roles to play. During the nineteenth century it embraced its role as a Cabinet of Curiosities, displaying the wealth of nations and individuals as collectors. However, an equally significant role for the museum, and in particular the art museum at this time, was as a site of civilising rituals. During this century, the serious
museum audience grew enormously. At the end of the century, ‘the idea of art galleries as sites of wondrous and transforming experience became commonplace among those with any pretensions for culture in both Europe and America’ (Duncan 1995: 16). The same can be said about the colonies of New South Wales and Victoria, and their respective public art gallery spaces.

If, as Duncan suggests, art museums are sites of ritual, it is the visitor who enacts the ritual. Many museum professionals have also considered the notion of the art museum as a performance field. Philip Rhys Adams, once the director of the Cincinnati Art Museum, ‘compared art museums to theatre sets’ (Duncan 1995: 12). Maybe that is why the contemporary art museum can, with some imagination and commitment, engage with fashion exhibitions and events. Here I’m thinking of the extravagant fashion shows that have replaced the weekly parades held by the French fashion houses until the early 1980s. In 2006, Chanel chose to show its Spring/Summer collection in the Grand Palais in Paris. But as contemporary art museums curate or host exhibitions on fashion and associated events, it is important to acknowledge the museum’s liminality – a state of withdrawal from the day-to-day world, where time and space in the sense of the normal business of life are suspended. The corporeal experience of being with displayed objects, and the particular space that is the museum, can also be intellectualised. It has been said that:

no country has modernised its economy or polity without concomitant changes in costume or without media to diffuse information and feedback about those changes and their significance. Modernity everywhere was just as much a corporeal experience as an intellectual one. As Gilles Lipovetsky (1991) demonstrates, the rise of a fashion culture is closely linked to deeper changes in society. (Hartley 2009: 170)

The contemporary museum

Today, there are many simplistic assumptions about the nature of fashion and the role and functions of the public art museum. While both engage in the commerce of the sign, their signification has similarities and differences. In both fields of contemporary cultural practice, audiences have come to appreciate the finished product, be it the fashioned garment or the exhibition. Readers of fashion magazines, those who visit the ubiquitous fashion parades
and catwalk spectacles, and those who visit fashion exhibitions in a public
gallery or museum are all unaware of the complex stories, developments
and negotiations that lie behind these events.

The idea of the muse is a daunting proposition for both the fashion
designer and the museum fashion curator. Both creators are tethered to
the related themes of influence, historical connections and the genealogies
of their respective creative and institutional endeavours. However, while
they may be read as separate zones of inquiry – fashion and the museum
– fashion as exhibition in the museum allows for fertile conversations to
occur, aesthetically and intellectually. Here, the essentialism of the fashion
system can also be revealed and considered. Both the fashion industry and
the art museum rely on the centrality of display. Both engage with their
respective modes of production, distribution and consumption.

Between 1997 and 2002, at her own gallery (Judith Clark Costume)
based at London's Notting Hill, the now London School of Fashion academic
and curator Judith Clark ‘consistently questioned the value of established
disciplinary boundaries between the categories of art, history and fashion
and offered visually stunning display solutions’ (Breward 2004: 12). In 2004,
the Fashion Museum (ModeMuseum) in Antwerp commissioned Clark to
produce the exhibition Malign Muses: When Fashion Turns Back. ‘The exhibition
itself stands as a record of the development of a concept. It is very much
an exhibition about the process of research rather than a simple outcome'
(Breward 2004: 14). It pays homage to Anna Piaggi's famous double pages
for Italian Vogue's juxtapositions of contemporary as well as historical
fashion references. This exhibition incorporated a compelling narrative
and a curatorial understanding that fashions emerge out of a continuum of
relationships (Breward 2004: 14).

Today, different concepts of art history can exist in the art museum.
The processes of self-analysis and critique established in the 1960s, and
explored by cultural theorists such as Lyotard (1986), Clifford (1988) and
Jameson (1990), heralded the emergence of Postmodern cultural and
demographic changes. Museums began to view their collections and
temporary exhibitions as vehicles by which the viewer and the curator could
enter into dialogues. The audience and its needs became fundamental to the
new museum.

The museum-building boom of the 1980s and 1990s saw the
introduction of yet another curatorial shift – to a more qualitative
understanding of display. Exhibitions moved from static to more dynamic
models. New meanings were gleaned from art collections and artworks, with interpretation replacing absolute truths. It could be argued that Clark’s 2004 curatorship of Malign Muses: When Fashion Turns Back is an excellent example of interpreting fashion. Her curatorship sees a more radical compression of past and present. As Clark states:

Historical references in dress have never been about evolution continuity. There are others ways of plotting this. In dress, surfaces float free of their histories . . . Curating is like creating a new grammar, new patterns of time and reference . . . Unlike language, but more like the multiple meanings of a pack of tarot cards, objects can be read back to front and side to side. (Breward 2004: 12)

While curatorship within the art museum is in continuous révisionist mode, over the last twenty years two modes of presentation have become dominant: the ahistorical installation and the monographic display (Greenberg et al. 1996).

The ahistorical approach eschews chronology and evolution, taking works of art out of their cultural and historical contexts. Again, Clark’s Malign Muses embraces this form of curatorial inquiry. It has been suggested cynically that this form of curating is elitist by stealth, dealing in obfuscation instead of information. (Szeemann, Fuchs and Hoet in the 1970s and 1980s were ardent exponents of this form of curatorship.) On the contrary, ahistorical curatorship as exemplified by Malign Muses was:

an exhibition project to build ideas in space, sometimes through details of historical dress glimpsed at a distance, sometimes as a massive constructivist set with moving parts that bring past and present fashion together in new, ever-changing constellations. Together, these add up to an exhibition that is a monument to ideas. (Evans 2004: 42)

The idea of the contemporary public museum continues to play a central and important role in the way Western culture is defined and understood. The concept of the museum has been labelled a rational myth – an institution constructed around and driven by a persistent, powerful applied and shared set of beliefs. In general, this museum (and the same could be said about fashion) reflects developments in modernist, post-industrial and postmodern society. A number of theoreticians have commented on a crisis in the contemporary museum. The reality is that, since the eighteenth century when the first public museums appeared in Europe, politics and
social change have made this institution one that, if it were to survive and be relevant, would forever be in change or crisis mode.

After World War II the art museum, in international terms, became eclipsed by the performing arts. Postwar reconstruction and economic recovery led to the emergence of a mass tourism market into the 1970s and 1980s. The interdisciplinary Pompidou Centre in Paris opened in the 1970s with its library, and the gallery coexisted with the other elements. This arts centre allowed for information and entertainment to become connected to a new understanding of culture:

This concept expanded the reach of the art museum towards a whole new audience that had so far taken no interest and dismissed the institution as stuffy and irrelevant to modern life . . . The Pompidou exhibitions [emphasised] a pan-European dialogue and an interdisciplinary cross-fertilisation. (Schubert 2000: 59)

New museology
Over the last twenty years, the concept of the new museology (Vergo 1989) has shaped the way museums have reconsidered the visitor’s experience. Interpretation and visitor-focused engagement has replaced the object as central to a museum visit. In a number of museums, it has become common to readily assess the effectiveness of their exhibitions and displays through visitor evaluation (Pearce 1995). In Australia, the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney was one of the first public museums in this country to develop a dedicated visitor evaluation department.

In the late 1980s, curatorship in the museum realigned itself on the basis of the broad ideals of the new museology – that is, from the object-centred authority of the museum to collections and exhibitions that become more visitor focused. At this time, Australian fashion was also searching for a new design language. It could be argued that certain public art galleries and museums were complicit, along with organisations such as the Fashion Council of Australia, in providing new voices and forums in which local Australian fashion could be considered. Annette Van den Bosch (2005) correctly observes that the boom in the capitalist Western art market from the mid 1960s through to the late 1970s had direct and lasting implications on and for Australian public art museums.

The acquisition of Jackson Pollock’s Blue Poles by the 1972 Whitlam Labor government for the national art collection was a defiant symbol of
the establishment of Australia as a modernist democracy in its own right. The National Gallery of Australia's foundation director, James Mollison, understood that a new era in Australian political history could symbolically be referenced by the acquisition of a Modernist work into the National Collection. Blue Poles fulfilled a number of symbolic functions. It provided the fledgling national collection with an international currency. While there was no National Gallery building at this time, Blue Poles symbolised untold possibilities in terms of alliances and exhibition potential for both the collection and the National Gallery.

At this time, the centre–periphery circumstance of Australia to the world was also being played out in the local fashion industry. Local dress culture was 'burdened with clichés regarding conservative nationalistic referencing and worth' (Healy 2007: 30). Locally produced was seen as inferior. However, the independent creative spirit that gave Pollock licence to paint Blue Poles was also resonant in particular Australian fashion designers' creations. Their work would contribute to a unique, emerging post 1960s Australian fashion industry.

Robyn Healy (2007), in her essay Making Noise: Contemporary Australian Fashion Design, identifies the independent designer as responsible for shaping difference. ‘It's Time’ – the Labor Party campaign slogan and the subsequent election promise of the 1972 Whitlam government – spoke of the potential of the arts to build a very different Australia at that time. Synergies and interdependent relationships shaped early 1970s visual (including design and craft) practices. The National Gallery of Australia (a Whitlam government initiative), established in 1973, reported in its first annual report (for 1976–77) that ‘The Australian National Gallery will acquire objects in the decorative arts. It will be particularly interested in those objects of artists/craftsmen and designers' (Bell 2002: 249). The Gallery's annual report went on to identify, under the broader category of decorative arts, fashion and the theatre arts as two distinct areas of interest. The Gallery would collect 'costume that represents notable, influential and characteristic fashion design of a particular period' (Bell 2002: 249).

**A Postmodern Australia and beyond**

As post-Whitlam Australia was moving economically and artistically into a new era, so too were certain independent fashion designers. The same Anna Piaggi, who had influenced Judith Clark's curatorial framework
that subsequently informed Malighn Muses: When Fashion Turns Back in 2004, announced in Italian Vogue in December 1977:

A fashion arrives from another hemisphere. Over a six-page spread the influential stylist enthuses about the latest Flamingo Park designs, the work of Linda Jackson (b. 1950) and Jenny Kee (b. 1947). She writes that theirs is ‘one of the inventive free collections we’ve seen in recent years’. Animated colour, gigantic pattern and idiosyncratic motifs, combined with the beginnings of unstructured dress forms, make a liberating style. It appears so different from all others. (Healy 2007: 31)

Flamingo Park (1973–82) fashion became known as Australiana – or the first true Australian style. As Robyn Healy aptly states: ‘[It] became an icon of independence in line with the political agenda of the federal Whitlam Government’ (2007: 31). This highly individual fashion design duo was influenced by such luminaries as Sonia Delaunay and her textiles, Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, couturier Madeleine Vionnet, costume from Japan and China, and of course the Australian landscape as championed by Margaret Preston and Indigenous art practitioners. Linda Jackson had been interested in Indigenous art practices since the 1970s, but travelled to the Northern Territory in 1980 for the first time. She worked with various communities, successfully collaborating with Utopia to incorporate batik fabric into fashionable garments (Healy 2007). Kee and Jackson either created their own textiles or commissioned artists to work with them. Kee’s spectacular Black Opal design was contracted by Karl Lagerfeld and incorporated into his inaugural 1983 Chanel ready-to-wear collection (Healy 2007: 31–2).

While the National Gallery of Australia (hereafter referred to in this chapter as the National Gallery) was only established in 1973 and Kee and Jackson’s fashion design had synergistic connections to the spirit of the times, it must be noted that other Australian public art galleries and museums had a history of collecting fashion, costume and textiles that dated back to the late nineteenth century. ‘The first textiles were acquired in 1895 by the National Gallery of Victoria’ (Somerville and Leong 2008). While the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney was established in 1988, its first acquisition was a dozen ‘doilies’ (actually dress trims) embellished with iridescent beetle wings and two cashmere smoking caps from India donated by Professor Liversidge, a founding trustee in 1883 (Jones 2009). The Powerhouse Museum has as its antecedent the Technological, Industrial and Sanitary Museum, established in 1880.
Both the Powerhouse Museum and the National Gallery of Victoria, established as they were in the nineteenth century, emerged in the colonies as civilising influences. The Powerhouse Museum has its origins in the Sydney International Exhibition of 1879, while the National Gallery of Victoria, established in 1861 and significantly enhanced by the Felton Bequest of 1904, became at that time one of the richest art museums in the world. Through stealth and opportunism, this public gallery and its collections have grown to embrace the encyclopedic ideals of the universal art museum.

In 2003, with the opening of the refurbished galleries on St Kilda Road, the National Gallery of Victoria established NGV International on the site. To celebrate the occasion, a series of publications exploring different aspects of this museum's diverse international collections were produced:

The first group of textiles was acquired by the NGV in 1895, and consisted of a small group of Indian block-printed textiles. However, it was not until 1948 that the first major group of fashion-related clothing came into the collection, with the presentation by the Misses Butler of a collection of nineteenth century garments. (Vaughan 2003: 6)

Like the National Gallery of Australia, which established a decorative arts acquisition policy outlined in the gallery's first annual report (1976–77), the National Gallery of Victoria had also established a Decorative Arts Department – only earlier. In 1980, John McPhee was appointed the National Gallery's first Curator of Decorative Arts: 'With his appointment the collection of ceramics, glass, textiles, metalwork and furniture were brought together with the express purpose of showcasing Australian achievements' (Bell 2003: 249). In 1981 the National Gallery of Victoria's costume and textiles collection became a separate collecting area. In 1995 it was renamed 'Fashion and Textiles' to reflect the changing nature of the collection. Throughout the early twentieth century, the National Gallery of Victoria's Fashion and Textiles collection grew through significant acquisitions and gifts.

For example, the Gibson-Carmichael collection of embroidery was gifted in 1911, the Dr G.E. Morrison collection of Chinese costume and textiles was presented in 1920, and a collection of fans was gifted in 1927. With the addition of the Una ‘Teague collection of Eastern European costumes and textiles presented in 1942, the National Gallery of Victoria's fashion and textile collection became truly international in scope. Significant benefaction has supported the gallery's collection, with the 1904 Felton Bequest being one of the richest in the world at that time. In 1974 and again
in 1978, the Schofield gift of nineteenth- and twentieth-century costumes and accessories further strengthened this collection.

In 1973, a group of costumes from the productions of the Ballets Russes established the National Gallery's collection of decorative arts within the gallery's International Art Department. From 1980 to 1986, Diana Woollard was the curatorial assistant responsible for Australian and international arts within the International Art Department. Robyn Healy, who had also been responsible for the fashion collection from 1979 to 1989, took over Woollard's role in 1986. Both John McPhee and particularly Robyn Healy must be acknowledged for their stewardship, insightful curatorship and well-considered fashion and textile acquisitions, displayed and collected throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

From 1983, Robyn Healy at the National Gallery curated a number of exhibitions that drew from and acknowledged the gallery’s growing and important fashion collection. Exhibitions such as Mariano Fortuny (10 October 1983 to 18 March 1984), The Twenties (13 October 1984 to 31 March 1985), Plastic, Rubber and Leather: Alternative Dress and Decoration (22 March to 2 November 1986), Diaghilev’s Designers: The Second Generation (15 November 1986 to 14 June 1987) and New Fashion for the 80s (16 May to 2 August 1987) are examples of insightful exhibition curatorship, informed and supported by savvy acquisitions.

In 1985, some twelve years after Jenny Kee opened the store Flamingo Park and three years after Linda Jackson opened her own shop, Bush Couture, John McPhee (then) Senior Curator in Australian Art and Robyn Healy curated Linda Jackson and Jenny Kee: Flamingo Park and Bush Couture. Writing in the exhibition catalogue, McPhee stated that 'both Linda Jackson and Jenny Kee consciously reject current fashion trends and seek their inspiration in the art of the past' (McPhee 1985: 2). While this was true, the exhibition also acknowledged both Kee’s and Jackson’s spirited collaborations with designers such as Peter Tully, Rolley Clarke and David McDiarmid. The Australian landscape and certain cultural/art practices by Indigenous communities, such as those on the Tiwi Islands and at Utopia, shaped these designers’ practices. Two molork necklaces (c. 1984) and another necklace made of bark and ochre (c. 1984), both from the gallery’s collection, appeared in the exhibition under the names of the little-known Aboriginal artists. A reproduction of Mike Molloy’s Cibachrome photograph dated 1984 and entitled Universal Oz Tribe 1984 fashion illustration for Flamingo Park appears in the catalogue (see Figure 7.3).
7.3 *Universal Oz Tribe*, 1984, fashion illustration for Flamingo Park

Photo: Mike Molloy. Courtesy Jenny Kee
In the same year, Elina Mackay authored a full-colour publication titled *The Great Aussie Fashion: Australian Fashion Designers 1984–85*; the same Molloy photograph is prominently displayed in this book. This publication was part designer profiles, part trade journal. Writing in the foreword, Mackay notes:

**Australian designers have come to terms with their unique environment. Our lifestyle creates a specialised demand for fashion that complements and reflects the easy, relaxed, often sporty activities of Australian people... The real richness in Australian fashion lies in the multi-cultural background of our people... there are no boundaries...** (1984: 1)

The exhibition titled *Plastic, Rubber and Leather: Alternative Dress and Decoration*, which was curated by McPhee and Healy for the National Gallery in 1986, championed in part ‘art-clothes’ – a term coined by Jane de Teliga who, as Assistant Curator of Prints and Drawings, curated an exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in December 1980 titled *Project 33 – Art Clothes*:

This exhibition was a seminal display, positioning local contemporary fashion in line with avant-garde art movements. And [it was] staged in context of a contemporary art project housed in a state gallery that did not represent fashion in its permanent collection. (Healy 2007: 32)

**Project 33 – Art Clothes** embraced designers such as Peter Tully and Katie Pye with their sensationalist design flair. Wearable art objects from this exhibition were purchased by the National Gallery of Australia and the Powerhouse Museum. In 1996, the Powerhouse Museum, under the curatorial directorship of Judith O’Callaghan and Robert Swieca, and supported by Glynis Jones, curated *Absolutely Mardi Gras: Costume and Design of the Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras*. This exhibition explored the phenomenon of Mardi Gras and celebrated the work of designers such as Peter Tully. This designer was ‘inspired by the way tribes created an identity through their ceremonial or party costumes, [and] Tully was determined to create a cultural identity for his own gay tribe... ’ (Jones et al. 1996: 64). Writing in the exhibition catalogue, Glynis Jones stated:

**when people think of Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras, they usually think of costumes for these embody all the reasons for the parade itself: celebration, identity, community, creativity, fantasy, subversion and politics.** (Jones 1996: 35)
The last three decades of the twentieth century saw the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria and the Powerhouse Museum curate a broad range of fashion exhibitions. Collectively, these exhibitions enabled thousands of museum visitors to see dress not only as a form of personal expression, fantasy and creativity, but also as a vehicle that individually or collectively spoke about the particularity of being Australian.

In Melbourne, the Fashion Design Council of Australia (FDC) also championed creative individuality. The Council was established there in 1984 as a peak body representing the interests of individual fashion designers. It encouraged young designers to be provocative and experimental, separating themselves from the conventions of mainstream fashion. While the fashion curator used the exhibition and museum to objectify dress, the FDC exposed fashion through photography, film, performances, catwalks, a retail shop, nightclubs and business seminars. For example, it supported dance performances such as No Fire Escape from Fashion, staged by the provocative artists Leigh Bowery and Michael Clarke & Co, and extraordinary parades starting with Fashion 84 Heroic Fashion. These events and others extended the rather safe parameters of fashion displayed in the museum. As Robyn Healy contends, 'perhaps the real legacy of the FDC is in the ambitious infrastructure it pioneered . . . Essentially [it] targeted the future . . . .' (2007: 34).

The FDC stimulated and supported local highly creative and innovative fashion designers, especially those based in Melbourne. In 1989, curator Jane de Teliga took Australian fashion overseas in the exhibition Australian Fashion: The Contemporary Art. The Powerhouse Museum developed this exhibition in partnership with London's Victoria and Albert Museum. Terence Measham the (then) director of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (which administered the Powerhouse Museum) stated in a foreword to the exhibition catalogue:

[T]he Powerhouse Museum was very pleased to accept the invitation of the Visual Arts/Craft Board of the Australia Council to be the organising museum for Australian Fashion: The Contemporary Art, our first major overseas exhibition . . . The London showing of this exhibition offers the first opportunity for innovative Australian fashion, textiles and jewellery designers to exhibit overseas. The collection reflects our multicultural heritage, the unique Australian environment and our distinctive dry humour and a sophisticated awareness of international trends. (Powerhouse Museum 1989: n.p.)
Australian Fashion: The Contemporary Art was, as de Teliga wrote in the catalogue, 'an extraordinary collection of things to wear by more than 50 Australian designers' (Powerhouse Museum 1989: 5).

Curating fashion and the twenty-first century

The 1990s saw further growth in the fashion and textiles collections of the National Gallery, the National Gallery of Victoria and the Powerhouse Museum. This growth, plus a certain positioning by these public galleries to articulate difference, afforded all museums opportunities to explore the strengths of their collections. Dressed to Kill: 100 Years of Fashion, curated by Roger Leong for the National Gallery in 1994, is one such example. Dressed to Kill was the first major exhibition that focused on the entire history of high fashion drawn principally from an Australian public collection. From the gallery's press release dated 30 November 1993, Leong is quoted as saying:

We have tried to capture and express the excitement, the drama, and the humour with which the very best fashion is associated, in order to communicate the designer's aesthetic and intellectual idea . . . the new concepts and visions of dress which the designers have brought to fashion are the major focus of our interpretation . . . [this] exhibition is a multi-media display.

At the beginning of this decade, the diversity of Australia's unique Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures was showcased at the Powerhouse Museum from April 2000. James Wilson-Miller and Steve Miller, both Indigenous men, curated Bayagul: Speaking Up – Contemporary Indigenous Communications. A music curator, Michael Lea, and decorative arts curator, Lindie Ward, completed the team. A new dedicated Koori Gallery located the exhibition. In the exhibition catalogue, a section titled 'Fashion and design: colours of the land' explained:

Traditional clothing shows ingenuity for making do with available natural materials . . . Contemporary Indigenous fashion shows a similar ingenuity but the materials are more likely to be silks, cotton and wool. The emphasis is on the textiles and the vibrant Aboriginal colours and images created from dyes, batik, screen-printing and even direct application of paint. (2000: 21)

In the emerging twenty-first century, exhibitions have become the medium through which most art becomes known. In the political economy of art
and the museum, exhibitions are the primary sites of exchange where signification is constructed, maintained and occasionally deconstructed:

Part spectacle, part socio-historical event, part structuring device, exhibitions – especially exhibitions of contemporary art – establish and administer the cultural meaning of art. (Greenberg et al. 1996: n.p.)

Realising a set of ideas by incorporating objects, images, text and multimedia in a particular physical structure, the temporary exhibition has become the core business of today’s museum. What to curate is, more than ever before, a question that has currency. The answers lie in a myriad of criteria the museum uses to measure relevance and success, with the most obvious of these being attendance and the least understood or examined being the curatorial premise. While museums have been called ‘safe places for unsafe ideas’, the last nine years in Australia have arguably witnessed some remarkable curatorship of exhibitions about fashion, textiles, dress, creativity and inspiration. In this essay, I have singled out two exhibitions which I believe speak with conviction about the ongoing yet ever-changing role of the contemporary public art museum and fashion design.

As previously stated, the temporary exhibition has currency only if the curatorship has contention. A sound rationale gives an exhibition its legitimacy. Martin Grant Paris, curated by Katie Somerville, opened at the National Gallery of Victoria in December 2005 (see Figure 7.1). This exhibition depended on a trustworthy working relationship between the fashion designer Martin Grant, the curator and the gallery. As Somerville stated in a recent interview about the show, ‘this exhibition was more akin to a contemporary art installation’ (Somerville 2008). The Martin Grant exhibition, like Judith Clark’s Malign Muses, was about ideas, inspiration and associative connections – the conceptual processes with which a fashion designer like Grant constantly engages in order to translate ideas into fashioned garments.

Somerville’s somewhat ahistorical curatorship is further understood when we consider how this exhibition was constructed, both physically and metaphorically. While this exhibition employed a chronology embracing ‘works spanning the years from the early 1990s, designed after [Grant] established his label in Paris, through to the [then] recent collections for spring-summer 2006’ (Somerville 2005: n.p.), it was intersected with the introduction of ‘garments, drawings, paintings, photographs and installations created by Grant and some of his other artistic collaborators’. Included in
this exhibition were additional objects, which offered 'an insight into this fashion designer's influences, and the recurring themes and sculptural forms that characterise his approach to design' (Somerville 2005: n.p).

Like Judith Clark in her 2004 Malign Muses show, Grant regularly employs the history of fashion as a reference tool. This designer also has a fascination with the silhouette. In Grant's National Gallery of Victoria exhibition, the silhouette – translated by the theatrical lighting integral to the exhibition – acts as a shadow or a trace. The shadow can be read as a trace or echo, perhaps homage to past fashion designers. In her introduction to Walter Benjamin's One Way Street and Other Writings, Susan Sontag (quoted in Evans 2004: 43) argues that 'Benjamin, in his writing on the city, spatialises time'. Somerville, in collaboration with Grant, has attempted to spatialise time within the physicality of the exhibition.

Most curators begin with a topic, develop a list of objects that evidence the theme of the exhibition, and then work with an exhibition designer to make it happen. In contrast, Somerville and Grant developed spatial solutions in the exhibition that allowed objects to speak for this fashion designer's abiding interest in fashion history, his collaborations with other artists and designers, his innate understanding of the city that is Paris, and the abiding resonance of the crinoline as both an anchor point for ideas and time, and a theatrical entry point into the exhibition. The crinoline references a past event in Grant's engagement with the sculptural. In 1994, Grant created Habiller Déshabiller, a site-specific sculptural installation in the famous gardens of Château de Courances, south of Paris (Somerville 2005: n.p.). The filmic and totemic references to the crinoline in the exhibition take the museum visitor back in time to another era. The crinoline is also cross-referenced to the ball gown painted by Grant when he was in kindergarten. The designer's childhood painting was also displayed in this exhibition.

The Martin Grant Paris exhibition drew heavily on Grant's private collection, whether it was a framed mirror (displayed in the exhibition) once in situ in one of the shops in Melbourne's famous Block Arcade, or the hand-stitched detailing of his Stitch Coat 2004. This garment was inspired by the collaborative nature of Grant's and Rossllynd Piggott's friendship. This work and others in the exhibition provided a conscious meditation on their mutual interests. Maybe the exhibition Martin Grant Paris could be understood as a group of memory rooms, with each room understood through the objects on show. Or possibly the exhibition could be interpreted as a memory theatre. Frances Yates (quoted in Evans 2004: 45) explains
that ‘memory systems impressed on imaginary or real architectures [were] first used by the ancient Greeks.’

Martin Grant Paris represents a new form of curatorship. The curatorial rationale allows the museum visitor to partially chart the conceptual and creative processes of the fashion designer. Grant’s way of thinking and doing has been exposed. Peter Vergo’s New Museology (1989) (where the museum experience became more visitor focused) has been enhanced by Somerville’s new form of curatorship. Martin Grant Paris became a laboratory of ideas, exposed for all museum visitors to see. Some garments from the Martin Grant Paris exhibition were acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria for its permanent collection.

Another equally innovative exhibition, Sourcing the Muse (12 April to 21 July 2002), was curated by Glynis Jones, Assistant Curator, Decorative Arts and Design at the Powerhouse Museum. Jones employed the museum’s collection as a wunderkammer, or cabinet of curiosities:

The origins of [this exhibition] lie in the Powerhouse Museum’s rich dress and textile collections and the emergence over the last decade of a new generation of Australian fashion designers whose original and distinct signature styles [have drawn] accolades both locally and internationally. (Jones 2002)

Like the National Gallery of Victoria’s Martin Grant Paris exhibition, the curatorial premise for Sourcing the Muse (see Figure 7.4) was built about revealing the fashion designer’s creative processes. Eleven fashion designers – Akira Isogawa, Lydia Pearson, Pamela Easton, Gwendolynne Burkin, Michelle Jank, Nicola Finetti, Peter Boyd and Denise Sprynskyj, Rosemary Armstrong, Georgia Chapman and Maureen Sohn – working as eight Australian fashion labels were invited by the Powerhouse Museum to consider the ‘textile and dress collection and [choose] one or more items to use as a source of inspiration for a new work they would create’ (Jones 2002). It is worth noting that the Powerhouse Museum collection now includes more than ‘30,000 items of men’s, women’s and children’s clothing and accessories from all over the world, as well as fashion plates, drawings, photographs, textiles, swatch books, designer archives and fashion magazines’ (Jones 2009). With such a rich and diverse collection, Sourcing the Muse was a well-considered strategy by the curator to give this museum’s collection a currency and relevance for contemporary fashion designers. Each designer or team of designers was encouraged to investigate the museum’s collection ‘as a source of inspiration and information’ (Jones 2002). While museum collections always remain
7.4 Sourcing the Muse
exhibition installation, 2002
Photo: Jean-Francois Lanzarone.
Courtesy Powerhouse Museum, Sydney

wunderkammern, their curiosity value lies not only in the diversity and sheer number of objects they house, but also in the resonance of each object to its original circumstance, location and culture.

Glynis Jones rightly acknowledges the significance of museum fashion, dress and textile collections when she quotes the late Richard Martin (former curator at the Costume Institute, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Martin once stated that 'one is aware that ours is no mere echelon of objects but a museum's extraordinary capacity to offer history for potential contribution to a creative future' (Jones 2002). A designer's inspiration comes from many sources simultaneously. In the case of the Sourcing the Muse exhibition project, museum object(s) selected by the fashion designers
allowed each person or team to engage in or with the materiality of the chosen objects. For example, Akira Isogawa selected a silk taffeta brilliant blue aniline dyed day dress with bustle c. 1870 for his inspiration, whereas Easton Pearson considered a little Balkan tunic and a fan skirt from the collection. The tunic fitted with a silhouette on which they had been working. They were interested in the inside construction of old garments. Each designer or team created specific garments to be shown as part of the exhibition, inspired by their curious selections. Jones, as curator, had some preconceived ideas of the objects the designers would find of interest. What she found was that they were attracted to 'construction, dress components, decorative techniques and embellishments and, even in one case, the deterioration of historic textiles' (Jones 2002). Designers chose garments from a broad range of cultures, from 'Egypt to Zaire and China and Europe and with dates ranging from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1990s' (Jones 2002).

However, while Sourcing the Muse focused on the breadth and depth of the Powerhouse Museum's extensive collection, this exhibition articulated – albeit within a museum framework – the idea of collaboration. To provide the museum visitor with a better understanding of design processes, a designer's creative process box – containing designs, drawings, production photographs and a mannequin displaying the designer's new outfit – formed part of the exhibition (Jones 2002). In addition, the designers were asked by the museum to employ their own stylists, makeup artists and photographers to achieve an image of the garment they specifically created from their engagement with the museum. The chosen object from the collection was then placed alongside the newly designed garment in the exhibition. While fashioned garments are synonymous (in the main) with living bodies, the fashion image (photograph) incorporated into the exhibition provided an opportunity for the various aspects of the fashion industry to be highlighted.

While the display of dress and textiles in museums follows strict guidelines, the individuality of the fashion designer was championed in this exhibition. Curiosity and wonderment are integral to the museum visitor experience. And while:

we are now experiencing a kind of historical ricorso to curiosity, whose effects are often perceptible just where we might least expect them . . . curiosity has the valuable role of signalling to us that the object[s] on display is invariably a nexus of interrelated meanings. (Bann 2003: 119)
Somehow, Sourcing the Muse was as much about exposure as it was about curiosity. The expository spaces of museums such as the Powerhouse allow for grand narratives to be staged. These 'meta-narratives' were employed in this exhibition to underline the multiple stories and creative processes of fashion designing alive in contemporary Australia. Sourcing the Muse allowed aspects and players relevant to the contemporary Australia fashion industry to form credible engagements with the museum. At the time of the exhibition, there were many closures and failures with offshore manufacturing and increasing imports, which suggested impending doom for the local fashion industry. Yet the industry was 'growing through internationalisation, innovative design and marketing' (Jones 2002). The eight design labels invited to participate in Sourcing the Muse are ahead of the field in innovation and limited high production values. These fashion designers have shown – and continue to show – the way through their individuality, creating about them an aura of uniqueness.

Unquestionably, there is a place for fashion in the museum. While the museum provides a liminal space in which to contemplate objects and collections, it is fashion's intimate association with people's lives, according to curator Glynis Jones (2008), that provides a wonderful base from which to explore the technological, social, economic and political forces that shape the world.

Note

1 Roland Barthes (1915–1980) was a French literary theorist, philosopher, critic and semiotician. Barthes' work extended over many fields and he influenced the development of schools of theory including structuralism, semiotics, existentialism, social theory, Marxism and post-structuralism. In 1983 his original 1967 publication, The Fashion System, was translated into English and published by University of California Press.

References


——— (2008), interview by C. Douglas, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 31 December.


—— (2008), interview by C. Douglas, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 31 December.


