

Vintage Re-Fashioned

Lynne C Webster, Senior Teaching Fellow Fashion

University of Leeds

l.c.webster@leeds.ac.uk

Claire Watson, Senior Teaching Fellow Fashion

University of Leeds

texcw@leeds.ac.uk

David Backhouse (MDes RCA)

University of Leeds

d.backhouse@leeds.ac.uk

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This paper charts a unique collaboration between Students and Staff in the School of Design, University of Leeds (UoL), UK and The Woolmark Company. The basis of this project was to create modern garments using selected pieces from the university's Yorkshire Fashion Archive (YFA) for inspiration and to '*relate dress to its historical, artistic, social and economic context*' (Tozer:1986) using fabric from The Woolmark Company's 'Merino. No Finer Feeling TM' collection.

The methodology involved critically appraising the archive garments before developing the new products. The overall approach was to create modern wearable pieces of clothing taking into consideration the history, shape and fit of the original archive garment. Materials used to complement the wool fabrics included: faux & real leather and neoprene. The techniques engaged to manipulate the pieces included: creative pattern cutting, laser cutting, fabric painting and spraying, sewing, draping and pleating and discussed '*the pattern cutter's ability and talent to interpret a garment*' (Lo: 2011) in relation to its historical context.

Upon completion of the assignment it was found the students had developed an awareness of experience and self-reliance enabling them to '*contextualise artefacts and objects in a multi-layered fashion*' (Palmer: 1997). The finished garments and their narrative were exhibited at Salts Mill, Saltaire UK in September 2012.

Introduction

'Interactions between businesses and universities are a key feature of the higher education landscape of the 21st century' (Solkin: 2010) so when The Woolmark Company approached the School of Design with this exciting project it was an opportunity to shape an exceptional collaboration between two areas of commerce and education.

Based in the School of Design and underpinned by research excellence at the UoL, the YFA is a publically accessible collection of haute couture, fashion garments and everyday clothing. It provides a historical and cultural record of Yorkshire life and documents clothing produced, purchased and worn by Yorkshire folk throughout the 20th Century. The collection reflects changing social attitudes and multi-cultural influences, economic prosperity, global trends and the regional technical excellence in textiles and clothing over a 100 year period. Many of the garments have been donated with accompanying photographic images, information and anecdotes concerning the piece itself, the wearer or the situations in which they were worn. The garments in the archive all have a link to Yorkshire in the 20th century; they could have been purchased in the area, worn at a special occasion or hold a cherished memory.

The craft of cutting and making

Charny (2011) believes the '*distance between the maker and the user is growing and, with it, knowledge, understanding and appreciation are diminishing*'. It is certainly true that engaging students in pattern cutting and manufacturing skills is sometimes an uphill struggle in educational institutions; students studying Fashion Design do not readily value this way of learning or see that the role of 'making' can create new ways of thinking and can help to develop originality. They sometimes question its role in the creative process. However, Lo encourages us to take the examples of;

John Galliano, Alexander McQueen and Yohji Yamamoto; their creations carry a unique signature in terms of cut, silhouette and shape because they were trained as pattern cutters as well as designers. (Lo: 2011)

Lo (2011) goes on to discuss how *'a new trend has surfaced; many designers and design houses are beginning to recruit designers/pattern cutters.'* And goes on to suggest that this has resulted in fashion colleges all over the world starting to offer courses for creative pattern cutters. But feedback from some students about the value of learning the craft of pattern cutting and make can be disheartening; boring, stressful and uninteresting are some of the comments made by students who feel diametrically opposed to this part of the creative process, clearly these barriers need to be addressed. Charny (2011) states that *'almost all of us can make'* arguing that it is *'one of the strongest of human impulses'*. Using the archive garments to persuade the students to *'connect us to our past and to our familial and cultural histories'* (Greenlees: 2011) proved advantageous. By encouraging students to connect to the garments, becoming what Charny (2011) terms *'in the zone'* generated an array of exciting and exceptional patterns, made by students who recognised *'the reward of making'* (Margetts: 2011) and culminating in both modern and wearable pieces of clothing. The techniques engaged in the workmanship of the pieces included: laser cutting, fabric painting and spraying, sewing, pleating and all celebrated *'the pattern cutter's ability and talent to interpret a garment'* (Lo: 2011)

Vintage to modern

The archive garments chosen to be re-worked using the merino wool ranged from the 1940's to 1980's, and featured designer labels such as Issey Miyake, Comme de Garçons and Ossie Clark, through to high street favourites Laura Ashley and Marks & Spencer and also included exquisite home-made wedding dresses. The individual garments were chosen for a range of reasons; to encourage creative pattern cutting, to showcase the versatility of the Merino fabrics, to reflect the contemporary needs of fashion and to demonstrate that wool is not just a traditional fibre of the past but a fibre of the future.

The students started their research by carefully examining the archive garments. They researched their *'historical, artistic, social and economic context'* (Tozer:1986) including donor information and made detailed notes of fit, fabrics, seam details, trims, sizing and any alterations which may have been made to the original garments. The students were aware that

these garments had been treasured by their previous owners and given to the YFA often by family members of the original wearer of the garment. Jenss (2010) discusses how ‘...garments were expensive goods and often a family investment that was passed on to the next generation.’ The students gained an appreciation of the individual wearer and discovered that ‘the [archive] garment is more than just material history; it enables the [student] to get in touch with the past.’ (Jenss: 2010).

The 1946 wedding dress

The 1946 wedding dress had been donated by the bride’s daughter along with an abundance of wedding photographs and detailed information about who had made the dress and how much it had cost. The daughter recalled that her parents had been very young when they married, her father 20 years old and her mother only 19 years old. He had only recently started his National Service with the Royal Signals in 1946 and was granted just one days and one night’s leave to get married (See Fig. 1). The gown had been made by a local dressmaker who was well known to the family. The beautiful silk gown, originally full length but shortened at a later date, had a dainty scalloped edge trim inserted into the princess line bodice, puff sleeves cut tight around the arm and cuff and a bow stitched onto the waist at the back. It had been stitched onto the garment using blue thread to give the bride the ‘something blue’ of the traditional wedding rhyme ‘*something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue*’.



Fig. 1. Full wedding party outside the church.

A decision was made by staff and students to do something radical with the translation of this conventional garment. It was re-fashioned using design elements from both the bride and bridegroom's outfits. The bridegroom wore his army uniform for the ceremony, a common practice just after the Second World War, it consisted of a short fitted battledress tunic and matching trousers. Merging the two contrasting garments together the finished item of clothing consisted of an 'all-in-one' with chunky zip at the centre front, laser cut leather replicating the scalloped edge trim of the bride's dress, bold orange topstitching on the cuffs, hems and collar and clean cut trousers mirroring the bridegroom's (see Fig. 2) . Updated by the use of merino wool and modern technology laser cutting, the amalgamation of the male and female outfits gave a new and unique dimension to the traditional wedding garments.



Fig. 2. 1946 wedding dress with re-made garment.

The 1967 cocktail dress

The 1967 cocktail dress was donated by the original owner's daughter-in-law. Very little is known about the garment as it was found amongst the donor's mother-in-law's possessions when she died. It has a 'v' shaped neckline, elbow length sleeves and is made from 100% wool crepe with bugle bead detailing on the front bodice and skirt section. There is a drape

detail on the sides (see Fig. 3). Along with her other possessions a number of receipts were found, one of which is detailed here (see Fig. 4) for the purchase of a brown coney coat from The Raymond Shop. The coat had been purchased in 1942 for £18.18 and 18 coupons. The back of the receipt (see Fig. 5) gives some indication of how stores marketed themselves at this time.



Fig. 3. 1967 cocktail dress with re-made garment.



Fig. 4. The Raymond Shop receipt

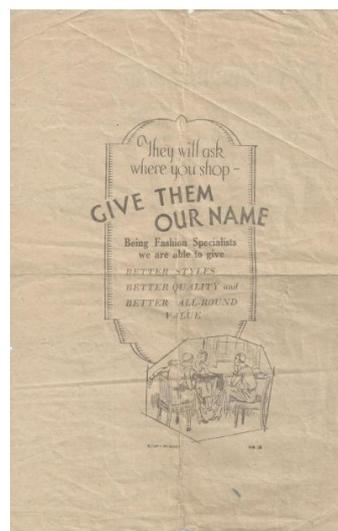


Fig. 5. Reverse of the receipt

The original garment had been made for the ‘larger lady’ but it was decided to keep the ‘over-size’ feel for the new outfit. The cut remained basically the same, wide at the waist and shoulders, but the sleeves were narrowed and the length shortened to give a more modern look. The side drapes were replicated with leather ties added to allow the wearer to personalise the garment. Narrow net inserts were added around the neck, sleeve and drape edges. An innovative spin was given to the bugle beads; they were replaced with a piece of laser cut neoprene. The garment was made using lightweight black merino wool and complemented with a pair of merino wool narrow legged trousers in a contrasting soft cream colour.

The 1980s Japanese designers

The Issey Miyake jacket, Comme des Garçon shirt and Yohji Yamamoto trousers were donated by Maggie Silver, wife of Jonathan Silver (see Fig. 6) who was the entrepreneur behind Salts Mill as it is today. Maggie recalls that Jonathan used to wear the shirt a lot; it was an everyday item for him. He loved the Japanese designers. He bought clothes that were well made and constructed using quality fabrics but most of all he wanted his clothes to be comfortable. Jonathan purchased his garments from the South Kensington store Joseph in London in the 1980s.



Fig. 6. Jonathan Silver in the 1980s

The 1980s jacket was typical of its time; big, baggy and wide at the shoulders. The trousers were also wide and long. After carefully assessing the shape and fit, modern pattern blocks were used to give a leaner silhouette to both the trousers and the jacket (See Fig. 7). The woven stripe on the lower jacket was changed to a painted orange band on the pocket fronts and back and the sleeves were shorted. The trousers were cut using a lean, narrow line and a shorter length to give a contemporary look, the merino wool was hand dyed to give a distressed look. The shirt, the original of which had a patchwork collar, was simply cut in plain cream lightweight merino wool and then stitched randomly in using orange topstitching thread.



Fig. 7. 1980s Japanese outfit with re-made garments.

At the conclusion of the making of the garments the students had learnt what Frayling (2011) terms *'the patient mastery of technique until it [became] second nature'*. Eventually becoming engrossed in the *'practice of thought through action'* (Margetts: 2011) accomplished through the creative activity and craft of pattern cutting; which the students linked to the historical context of the garments, and an appreciation of the merino wool; achieved by manipulating, draping and making the garments.

It was decided that the completed garments would be exhibited at Salts Mill (Fig. 8) which is set in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site, Saltaire situated near Bradford in West Yorkshire.



Fig. 8. Salts Mill, Saltaire.

This Grade II Listed historic mill building was built in 1853 by Sir Titus Salt along with the village to house his workers. The whole area is of architectural and historical interest to the people of Yorkshire but also a wider audience. The project was timed to coincide with the 25th anniversary of Salts Mill, Saltaire UK as an art space and cultural destination. Wool was such an important fibre to Yorkshire and in many ways shaped the lives and fortunes of people living in the region so Salts Mill, built to weave woollen cloth 150 years ago, seemed the ideal venue to showcase this unique range of contemporary woollen garments.



Fig. 9. 1976 lurex garment with re-made garment at the exhibition

Value to fashion education and students

The value of these kinds of projects to fashion design education is immense, not only because it enhances the standing of the UoL as an international university but because it *'translates excellence in research and scholarship into learning opportunities for students'* and *'increases [the university's] impact on a local to global scale'* (University of Leeds: 2012). Ramsden debates that *'a student experience that is fit for the future will develop their qualities of flexibility and their sense of obligation to the wider community.'* (Ramsden: 2009). It is the role of educators to deliver an exceptional student experience centred on inspirational learning and teaching, this project achieved just that.



Fig. 10. Wool Re-Fashioned Exhibition at Salts Mill.

Conclusion

The work undertaken by the staff and students showcased the versatility of Merino and demonstrated that by analysing the original vintage garments, looking into their past and *'being completely engrossed in [the] creative activity'* (Charny: 2011) of re-creating the archive garments, the students had developed an awareness of experience and self-reliance enabling them to *'contextualise artefacts and objects in a multi-layered fashion'* (Palmer: 1997). The finished garments and their narrative were exhibited at Salts Mill, Saltaire UK in September 2012 as *'Wool Re-Fashioned'*.

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Images.

Fig. 1. Full wedding party outside the church.

Fig. 2. 1946 wedding dress with re-made garment.

Fig. 3. 1967 cocktail dress with re-made garment.

Fig. 4. The Raymond Shop receipt.

Fig. 5. Reverse of the receipt.

Fig. 6. Jonathan Silver in Greenhalf, J (1997) Salt and Silver: A Story of Hope. Bradford: Bradford Libraries

Fig. 7. 1980s Japanese outfit with re-made garments.

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