

1980-2020

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Abstract

In 1980, Grazietta Butazzi curated the exhibition at the Poldi Pezzoli Museum in Milani *1922-1943: Vent'anni di moda italiana*. This experience enabled us to raise central questions about the cultural status of fashion in relation to the exhibition machine and the museum at the beginning of a decade, the 1980s, that proved fundamental not only in developing the fashion exhibition but above all in defining fashion itself as a discipline, through the focus on themes and issues such as the reconstruction of its history, the conservation of objects and the problem of cultural and museum exhibition practices in relation to commercial forms of display. Retrieving this exhibition means moving between an account of an important exhibition event and the analysis of its role within fashion studies, in years when, especially in Italy, an awareness developed of the need to imagine devices and institutions capable of preserving and studying fashion. Looking at this exhibition today means reflecting primarily on the Italian situation, because even today one of the central issues in Italy is the absence of institutions in the promotion of a national fashion museum capable of dealing fully with the international scope of fashion. The exhibition, curated by Grazietta Butazzi with the coordination of Alessandra Mottola Molfino, was a pioneering project in the Italian panorama of fashion exhibitions. It proved comparable to the work of Diana Vreeland starting from 1972, when she began her career at the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York as Special Consultant and as a first gesture organised the exhibition *The World of Balenciaga*. The exhibition at the Poldi Pezzoli Museum directly addressed the 20th century. Therefore, as it evolved, it began to develop methods of research, conservation and display that were different from those used for garments and objects from the more distant past, which are usually placed in the costume category. It was a fashion exhibition and, over the years (above all through the catalogue), it has become a landmark for those seeking to understand contemporary fashion.

1922-1943: Vent'anni di moda italiana in 1980 enclosed a debate over the organisation of fashion exhibitions that is still relevant today at the Italian and international levels. In fact, this exhibition directly addressed contemporary fashion, with the problems of exhibiting it, making it relevant to

the visitor, and at the same time recognising the status of a cultural object that is collectable. This was a project that not only questioned the exhibition mechanism but also the way of exhibiting in relation to the actions necessary to imagine what a fashion museum should preserve and what professional skills it should develop, in order to contribute to the definition of a discipline profoundly related to the contemporary world and commerce. This is still a relevant exhibition in the Italian panorama, which has to come to terms with the striking absence of a museum project comparable to the finest international institutions, even though in recent years some things have changed. At the same time, it was also a chance to reiterate the need to imagine and design a museum space capable of collecting and exhibiting Italian fashion by working on the questions and narratives necessary to understand and relaunch it. *1922-1943: Vent'anni di moda italiana* reminds us today that the insights of Grazietta Butazzi, in her relationship with the Poldi Pezzoli Museum, represent a wealth of ideas and projects on which to reflect, without nostalgia, so triggering a virtuous process to define a precise cultural policy for fashion in Italy.

In 2020 *Memos. On Fashion in This Millennium*, curated by Maria Luisa Frisa with the exhibition design by Judith Clark at the Poldi Pezzoli Museum reactivates the exhibition by Butazzi, and tries to develop a series of reflections on contemporary fashion, its qualities and its attributes, taking as its starting point Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. The exhibition uses Calvino's words as devices to reflect on what has changed and what has stayed the same in fashion: *Memos* sets out to construct a "discourse on method", or rather a reflection on fashion curating and its ability to deal with the different products of that fashion: not just the objects, but also the images and the words.

In this paper these two exhibitions are connected, compared and considered as critical reflections, capable of moving back and forth between the past and the present of fashion. Through the analysis of both these exhibitions (the Butazzi exhibition has been re-discovered for the first time thorough original archival researches), this paper will address the state of Italian fashion studies, and the cultural status of fashion in its relation to the museum and to the practice of fashion curating.

Keywords: Italian Fashion Studies, Grazietta Butazzi, Memos, Fashion Exhibitions, Fashion Curating

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1. Introduction

The title of this essay makes explicit reference to that of the exhibition curated by Grazietta Butazzi in 1980 at the Museo Poldi Pezzoli in Milan, *1922-1943: Vent'anni di moda italiana*. This was an experience that allows us to raise some crucial questions today about the cultural status of fashion in relation to the machinery of exhibiting and to the museum, at the beginning of a decade, the eighties, that was fundamental not only to the fine tuning of the mechanism for putting fashion on show, but above all to the definition of fashion itself as a discipline, through the attention it focused on themes and problems like the reconstruction of its history, the conservation of objects and the question of the relationship between practices of presentation in museums and forms of commercial display. Looking back at this exhibition means moving between the description of an important event in its own right and the analysis of the role it has played in fashion studies, in years in which, especially in Italy, an awareness had emerged of the need to come up with systems and institutions capable of preserving and studying fashion. Examining this exhibition today signifies reflecting first of all on the Italian situation, for even now one of the central themes in Italy is still the absence of a precise cultural policy aimed at the establishment of a national fashion museum that can bear comparison with the international situation. In 2020, the exhibition *Memos: On Fashion in This Millennium*, curated by Maria Luisa Frisa with a display designed by Judith Clark at the Museo Poldi Pezzoli, reactivated Butazzi's exhibition and set out to present a series of three-dimensional reflections on contemporary fashion and its qualities, taking Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* as its point of departure.

In this essay, an explicit dialogue is established between these two exhibitions and a comparison made of their ability as critical and theoretical reflections to move between the past and the present of fashion. Through analysis of both these shows (the exhibition curated by Butazzi was discovered for the first time as a result of thorough research in the archives), this article looks at the state of Italian fashion studies and the cultural status of fashion as a discipline that is defined in the encounter with the museum and with the practice of fashion curating.

2. 1980: An exhibition to define a museum. *1922-1943: Vent'anni di moda italiana* at the Poldi Pezzoli

In 1980, Grazietta Butazzi curated the exhibition *1922-1943: Vent'anni di moda italiana* at the Museo Poldi Pezzoli: this experience has made it possible to formulate some crucial questions with regard to the cultural status of fashion in its encounter with the machinery of exhibition and

the museum at the beginning of a decade, the 1980s, that was fundamental not only for the definition of the “fashion exhibition” as an entity, but also and above all for the characterization of fashion itself as a discipline. A definition that was achieved through a focus on themes and questions like the reconstruction of its history, the conservation of objects and the problem of the cultural practices of exhibition in museums in comparison with commercial forms of display.

Reexamining this exhibition means moving between telling the story of an important event and the analysis of its role in fashion studies over years in which, especially in Italy, an awareness of the need to come up with systems and institutions capable of preserving and studying fashion was emerging. We should not forget that while the decade opened with *1922-1943: Vent'anni di moda italiana*, it closed in 1989 with another important exhibition, *Gianni Versace: L'abito per pensare*: looking back at these events today signifies reflecting first of all on the Italian situation, for even now one of the central questions in Italy is still the failure of the institutions to promote a national museum of fashion that can fully bear comparison with the international scene.

The exhibition *1922-1943: Vent'anni di moda italiana* was held at the Museo Poldi Pezzoli in Milan from December 5, 1980, to March 25, 1981,¹ with the participation of the Civiche Raccolte d'Arte Applicata at the Castello Sforzesco in Milan. It was promoted by the municipality of Milan (Culture and Entertainment Department) and the Region of Lombardy (Culture and Information Department), with the support of Assomoda (Associazione Nazionale Italiana Rappresentanti Moda), the Associazione Italiana Industriali dell'Abbigliamento and the Associazione Italiana Produttori Maglieria. The organizing committee was made up of: Carlo Bertelli, head of the Artistic and Historical Heritage Service of Milan; Clelia Alberici, director of the Civiche Raccolte d'Arte Applicata at the Castello Sforzesco; Grazietta Butazzi, consultant to the costume section of the Civiche Raccolte; Rosita Levi Pisetzky, fashion historian; Alessandra Mottola Molfino, director of the Museo Poldi Pezzoli; Roberto Manoelli, president of Assomoda and president of the CIMM (Centro Italiano Manifestazioni Moda).

In the introduction to the catalogue,² Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua, president of the Fondazione Artistica Poldi Pezzoli, stressed the major institutional effort that lay behind the project and the cooperation with the fashion system and pointed out the significance of the event, which marked the first collaboration between the Museo Poldi Pezzoli and the Civiche Raccolte d'Arte Applicata not only on the exhibition itself, but on the broader aim of promoting the setting up of a museum

¹ It was then extended until March 31, 1981, in part to catch the public of the ready-to-wear shows in Milan.

² Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua, “Presentazione,” in *1922-1943: Vent'anni di moda italiana*, and Grazietta Butazzi, catalogue of the exhibition at the Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan, December 5, 1980-March 25, 1981 (Florence: Centro Di, 1980), 9.

of fashion in Milan. Not coincidentally, the subtitle of the exhibition on the title page of the catalogue read “Proposal for a Fashion Museum in Milan.”

The exhibition curated by Grazietta Butazzi with the coordination of Alessandra Mottola Molfino was a groundbreaking project in the panorama of Italian fashion exhibitions, able to bear comparison with the actions undertaken by Diana Vreeland since 1972, when she began her spell at the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York in the capacity of special consultant, and as her first act organized the exhibition *The World of Balenciaga*.³ The exhibition at the Museo Poldi Pezzoli tackled the 20th century directly and in order to do so began to define methods of research, conservation and display different from those used for clothing and objects that belonged to a less recent past and that were usually placed in the category of costume: it was an exhibition of fashion, and over the years has become (largely through its catalogue) a point of reference for anyone wishing to take on contemporary fashion.⁴

This does not at all mean that there had been no important and significant examples of fashion exhibitions in Italy in the years prior to the project in question, but there can be no doubt that this exhibition—for the period t examined, the choices made in its presentation and the problems it tackled in a more or less direct manner—clearly introduced not just the question of the way fashion should be put on show, but also that of the role of the act of exhibiting in the broader cultural project of a museum devoted to fashion. It was in fact no accident that the exhibition served as an ideal introduction to the international conference *For a Museum of Fashion*, held at the Milan Trade Fair on March 27 1981, and thus coinciding with the exhibition’s closure: a project dedicated explicitly to reflection on the fashion museum and overseen by a board of advisors that essentially replicated that of the exhibition *1922-1943: Vent’anni di moda italiana*.

The research that preceded the exhibition coincided with the study and reconstruction of a crucial period for contemporary Italian fashion, which came into focus as a system during the twenty years of Fascist rule. Butazzi’s work consisted in putting materials coming from museum collections⁵ with pieces tracked down in private collections as a result of thorough research. At the same time, the scope of the exhibition and thus of the objects on display was not limited to women’s fashion, but reflected the whole of the two decades under examination through all sorts of materials connected with fashion: underwear, children’s clothes, menswear, sportswear,

³ *The World of Balenciaga*, curated by Diana Vreeland, Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, March 23-September 9, 1973.

⁴ See in this connection Marialuisa Rizzini’s detailed essay, “Grazietta Butazzi. Le origini di un metodo,” in *Moda Arte Storia Società. Omaggio a Grazietta Butazzi*, ed. Enrica Morini, Marialuisa Rizzini and Margherita Rosina, proceedings of the conference at the Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Como, June 20, 2014 (Como: Nodo Libri, 2016), 13-32.

⁵ In particular the one on which she was working—overseeing its cataloguing—at the Civiche Raccolte d’Arte Applicata at the Castello Sforzesco in Milan; also on display in the exhibition were materials from the Vittoriale at Gardone Riviera and the Centro Internazionale delle Arti e del Costume in Venice.

shoes, hats and shawls, and even included posters and periodicals able to reflect the discourses on fashion conducted at a commercial level and in the press. More than three hundred pieces in all, with over eighty manikins (between full-length figures and busts).

The elaborate exhibition project⁶ occupied the whole of the Museo Poldi Pezzoli, both the ground and the first floor, thereby colonizing the entire space. On the ground floor the exhibition was laid out in what are now known as the Salone dell’Affresco, the Stanza dei Tessuti and the Sala dei Pizzi, with a complex structure of showcases designed by the architect Takashi Shimura to contain and display the sequence of themes identified [fig. 1]: the project drawings in the museum archives convey the sense of a progressive adjustment of the structure, which eventually developed into a labyrinth of showcases for visitors to pass through, animated by different levels on the inside⁷ and by a number of exhibition modules, tinted in different colors, used to display accessories, fabrics, manikins and busts. A group of manikins “in conversation” at the foot of the grand staircase provided a staged introduction to the section of the exhibition on the first floor, where visitors could move between different rooms [fig. 2]. Amongst the works kept and displayed in the museum were scattered a series of groups of manikins in dialogue with one another: in the Salone Dorato the installation consisted of manikins sitting and standing in front of the large window, in a model that recalled a conversation piece [fig. 3]. The only element that echoed those of the layout on the ground floor was located in the Sala del Settecento Veneto [fig. 4]: a showcase devoted to magazines guided the visitor toward the Saletta dei Trecenteschi where another choreographed group of manikins was on display. Apart from this showcase, the elements on the first floor were not enclosed and these allusions to possible conversations between elegant women brought the form of the house-museum cinematically to life, making the most of a space not originally designed to house the activities of a museum.⁸

Of great interest is the presence among the documents in the archives of the Poldi Pezzoli of a letter sent by Alessandra Mottola Molino to Anna Piaggi.⁹ The initial idea was to bring in the perspective of a fashion editor and her contemporary sensibility to establish a dialogue with the architect responsible for the design of the display, Takashi Shimura. Also among the documents in the museum archives is in fact the hypothesis of a colophon to the exhibition for which Piaggi

⁶ I would like to thank the Museo Poldi Pezzoli and Dr. Martina Franzini of the Ufficio Conservatori for the access they gave me to documentation on the exhibition kept in five files in the museum’s archives.

⁷ On the ground floor, the showcases in the Salone dell’Affresco had a raised level with manikins seated in a theatrical manner, holding a dialogue from above with the standing ones positioned in the foreground.

⁸ The Museo Poldi Pezzoli is a private house that was turned into a museum at the end of the 19th century at the suggestion of its owner Gian Giacomo Poldi Pezzoli, who bequeathed it— together with his collection of artworks—to the Pinacoteca di Brera.

⁹ Letter dated October 14, 1980, kept in the first of the five files deposited in the archives of the Museo Poldi Pezzoli.

would be entrusted the artistic coordination. As Mottola Molfino recalls today,¹⁰ a meeting was held with Piaggi, but the collaboration came to nothing. It was decided not to introduce the contemporary language of fashion through too obvious acts of styling. The white-lacquered manikins, which renounced any kind of anthropomorphizing color, were completed by white paper wigs that merely hinted at their hair [fig. 5]. In this sense the choices made fell within the terms of a debate that took as its reference the experiences of the newly founded Kyoto Costume Institute¹¹ and the exhibition *Curiosità di una reggia: Vicende della guardaroba di Palazzo Pitti* at Palazzo Pitti in 1979, curated by Kirsten Aschengreen Piacenti and Sandra Pinto (which would lead in 1983 to the constitution of the Galleria del Costume in Palazzo Pitti).¹²

The workgroup in charge of the restoration and preparation of the clothes on display at the Poldi Pezzoli was made up of Francesco Pertegato, Gabriella Pelluccani, Laura Marelli, Carlo Barzaghi and Elena Pasti. Francesco Pertegato—at the time a young restorer of textiles just returned from the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, where he had restored some of the clothes and seen the preparation of the ones that were to be put on show in the renovated costume gallery—was responsible for mounting the clothing and the manikins.¹³ Pertegato's account is of great value today because it makes clear that the exhibition served as a testing ground on which to try out and check the effectiveness of techniques of conservation and display specific to 20th-century fashion, moreover in a museum that, as has already been pointed out, did not have spaces designed for preparation and display, nor appropriate equipment. As efficient as possible a working environment was created and fitted with tools for the restoration and care of the clothing: Gabriella Pelluccani, a member of staff at the Castello Sforzesco, had worked for a long time for a couture house and played a fundamental part in the work of sewing needed not only to restore the garments, but also to display them in the most effective way possible. The aim behind establishing suitable working conditions was in part to form a work team that would be able to unite scientific preparation with a series of inventions that could only be tested and adjusted in the process.¹⁴ Pertegato also recalls that it had not been possible to devote to the wigs all the time and materials needed to reproduce the stylized ones of the Kyoto Costume

¹⁰ Conversation by email with Alessandra Mottola Molfino on February 1, 2019.

¹¹ Established in 1978 with funding from the Wacoal Corporation in collaboration with the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The first manikins specifically conceived for the display of historical costumes were also developed in collaboration with the Costume Institute of New York in 1978, <https://www.kci.or.jp/en/profile/#content-history>, last accessed on February 10, 2019.

¹² Kirsten Aschengreen Piacenti and Sandra Pinto, eds, *Curiosità di una reggia: Vicende della guardaroba di Palazzo Pitti*, catalogue of the exhibition at Palazzo Pitti, Florence, January-September 1979 (Florence: Centro Di, 1979).

¹³ Conversation by email with Francesco Pertegato on February 2, 2019.

¹⁴ "I remember that a silk organza dress embroidered with beads (and thus heavy) had its shoulders reinforced with men's socks bought at the UPIM department store, perfect for their softness, strength and color." (Francesco Pertegato, conversation by email on February 2, 2019.)

Institute. Following Butazzi's instructions, shaped and modeled sheets of thin white card were utilized to hint at the hairstyles, without attempting to reconstruct them entirely.

Pertegato's words are crucial, partly because they assign the project a role in shaping the professional figures that turn around an exhibition and a museum that collects and displays fashion. Pertegato speaks in fact of a "paradigmatic trio for every operation carried out on museum collections" that took shape during the work on the exhibition at the Poldi Pezzoli: the planning supervisor, the curator-conservator and the restorer¹⁵ [fig. 6].

So *1922-1943 Vent'anni di moda italiana* at the Museo Poldi Pezzoli can still be regarded today as a pioneering experience for exhibitions and museums devoted to fashion, in the national panorama but also in relation to the international one. It is no coincidence, as was briefly mentioned earlier, that the international conference *For a Museum of Fashion* held at the Milan Trade Fair on March 27, 1981, shortly after the exhibition was supposed to close, had on its board of advisors Alberici, Bertelli, Butazzi, Levi Pisetzky and Mottola Molfino, and on its organizing committee representatives of the same associations involved in the exhibition staged at the Poldi Pezzoli.¹⁶ In the opening words of the then mayor of Milan Carlo Tognoli, the direct relationship between this conference and the exhibition was made abundantly clear. And the event was structured as an important occasion for international comparison, including contributions from the world's most important museums dedicated to costume and fashion. Among the participants: Penelope Byrde of the Museum of Costume in Bath, Madeleine Delpierre of the Musée de la Mode et du Costume in Paris (Palais Galliera), Jun Kanai of the Kyoto Costume Institute, Stella Blum of the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of New York and Valerie Mendes of the Victoria & Albert Museum of London. The papers concentrated not just on stories linked to the assembly of museum collections, but also on the actions required for their implementation, and on the techniques of conservation and display put in place by each museum. It was a genuine moment of reflection that saw museums compare notes in a quest for common standards and practices, in a shared awareness of the need for an active and effective consideration of fashion in the museum.

¹⁵ A collaboration that is "fundamental especially in the case of clothes that, as Grazietta often reminded us, are by their nature dynamic objects that do not take kindly to being embalmed." (Francesco Pertegato, conversation by email on February 22 2019). Pertegato's words allow us to draw attention to a debate that still goes on today over these two terms: conservator and curator. On the one hand a person who studies and restores the article, and who in the process of studying it also identifies the most effective ways of putting it on display and thus bringing it back to life; on the other, a figure who moves with more freedom, using the exhibition project to pursue a line of reasoning, often quite apart from the material nature of the objects that are going to be put on show. Thus the conservator seems to be more closely connected to the dimension of the archive and preservation in a museum, whereas the curator concentrates more on the exhibition project.

¹⁶ See *Atti della conferenza internazionale "Per un Museo della Moda": 27 marzo 1981* (n.p.: n.p., [1981]).

3. 2020: the exhibition *Memos: On Fashion in This Millennium*¹⁷

In 2019 the curator Maria Luisa Frisa started a conversation with the exhibition-maker Judith Clark that turned around two themes: on the one hand the possibility of utilizing Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*¹⁸ to explore the forms of contemporary fashion; on the other the reactivation of a seminal exhibition and space for Italian fashion studies and for the creation of a museum of fashion. As we have seen, in fact, between 1980 and 1981 the Museo Poldi Pezzoli was the host of the exhibition curated by Grazietta Butazzi. Reactivating this space, today, with an exhibition devoted to the forms of contemporary fashion, and simultaneously reflecting on the intentions behind the exhibition in 1980, signified taking stock of the situation of fashion studies in Italy, in their relationship with the museum and with exhibition-making, understood as theoretical reflections in three dimensions.

Clark very often uses words in the titles of her projects that at once express the choices connected with the display and constitute a methodology of inquiry, one that utilizes the exhibition project to frame questions rather than to offer the visitor simple answers or a didactic narrative.¹⁹ Allusions and conversations²⁰ are terms that often crop up in the reflections of the exhibition-maker, but it is above all in her work as a curator that Clark puts these words into effect, three-dimensionally: the display makes metaphorical use of terms that we usually assign to reflections couched in the medium of the written or spoken word.²¹ It suffices to think of the exhibition *Diana Vreeland after Diana Vreeland* staged at Palazzo Fortuny in Venice in 2012, or the one entitled *The Concise Dictionary of Dress* at Blythe House in London in 2010.²² In this last case, the reference

¹⁷ The exhibition opened on February 20, 2020 and, owing to the pandemic, was extended until September 28, 2020 (it was supposed to close on May 4).

¹⁸ Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (Milan: Garzanti, 1988). Although written in Italian, they were published first in English and are now available in a new translation: *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Geoffrey Brock (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2016).

¹⁹ See Peter McNeil, "Why Don't You'—Think for Yourself? Diana Vreeland after Diana Vreeland," *Fashion Theory*, 18, no. 4 (2014), 419-26.

²⁰ See Judith Clark and José Teunissen, eds., *The Art of Fashion: Installing Allusions*, catalogue of the exhibition at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, September 19, 2009-January 10, 2010 (Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2009). Another important reference has been Judith Clark's project *Cristóbal Balenciaga: Fashion and Heritage—Conversations*, staged between 2018 and 2019 at the invitation of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa in Getaria: "Judith Clark was invited to respond to the museum's new curatorial route through the galleries with a new installation. Creating references to recent exhibitions dedicated to Balenciaga's work, the exhibition becomes a repository for museology as well as dress history," <https://judithclarkcostume.com/exhibitions/cristobal-balenciaga-fashion-and-heritage-conversations/>. Accessed August 20, 2020.

²¹ See in this connection Richard Martin, ed., *Wordrobe*, catalogue of the exhibition at the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 9 September-November 23, 1997 (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997).

²² On these see: Adam Phillips and Judith Clark, *The Concise Dictionary of Dress*, published on the occasion of the exhibition at Blythe House, London, April 27- June 27, 2010 (London: Violette Editions, 2010); Judith Clark, "The Dark Room: A Paradigm of Exhibition Space," *Dune*, 1, no. 1

to the literary world was extremely evident: the project turned on the possibility of constructing a three-dimensional dictionary of clothing, in order to explore and at the same time question the very idea of a dictionary. Some of the terms we customarily associate with dress provided the cue for installations conceived by Clark and scattered along a route through the rooms of Blythe House, in an open dialogue between words and objects, between concept and three-dimensional display. The mechanisms that shaped the installations and the exhibition in all its complexity were in turn a question about curatorial practices and the way in which they have changed over time. This sparked off a reflection on the conceptual actions that drive the discipline of fashion curating: defining, archiving, recounting, alluding.

In a way this project has a direct connection with the idea at the base of *Memos*, i.e. using Calvino's lectures as a means of imagining and shaping the structure of an exhibition. If at Blythe House dictionary definitions were at the center of the project, at the Museo Poldi Pezzoli the protagonists were the *Memos*, Calvino's words, treated as aids to reflection on what changes in and fashion and what stays the same. The word *Memos* also evoked the legendary notes typed out by Diana Vreeland at the time when she was editor of the American edition of *Vogue*. Notes that sum up the speed with which Vreeland's imagination operated, that were used to plan the magazine but that also functioned as mood boards made up of words: every page, in its oscillation between editorial intention and curatorial action, could serve as the starting point for a line of reasoning, or an exhibition. Thus *Memos* set out to construct a discourse on method, i.e. a reflection on fashion curating and on its ability to handle the different products of fashion itself: not just the objects, but also the images and the words.

On the ground floor of the Museo Poldi Pezzoli, *Memos* was inserted²³ into the Salone dell'Affresco and the Sala dei Tessuti, where part of the exhibition curated by Butazzi had been housed in 1980. At the center of the Salone dell'Affresco was placed a model that reconstructed the design of the architect Takashi Shimura for the display of the exhibition *1922-1943: Vent'anni di moda italiana*. The model stressed the importance of the 1980 project, which had looked at the historical origins of the production of the Italian fashion in the Fascist period in a groundbreaking way, developing new methods of research, conservation and display of all kinds of materials linked to fashion, presenting around three hundred pieces in the exhibition [fig. 7]. In the Sala dei Tessuti

(2020), 8-17; Judith Clark and Maria Luisa Frisa, *Diana Vreeland after Diana Vreeland*, catalogue of the exhibition at Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, March 10-June 26, 2012 (Venice: Marsilio, 2012). The *Diana Vreeland after Diana Vreeland* project shared with *Memos* the attitude of reclamation and reactivation, since the exhibition in Venice reflected on Vreeland's curatorial work during her time as special consultant to the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of New York, and so there were explicit citations of her modes of exhibiting in the display.

²³ In a highly significant short-circuit, the dialogue between *Memos* and the spaces of the Poldi Pezzoli was further underlined in the book published to coincide with the exhibition, which presented a photographic essay by Coppi Barbieri in which the clothes and objects on display were photographed in the setting of the museum.

a blowup of one of the photos of the display in 1980—uncovered in the archives of the museum—held a dialogue with some of the pieces that were on show at the time and are now in Palazzo Morando in Milan through a structure of pale plywood that “exposed” its temporary dimension²⁴ [fig. 8]. In this way, through this sign that was a mark of the past and at the same time an indication of the contemporary effort of reactivation, the display was able to make the first reflection on the fashion of the new millennium: what is inspiration and what is citation.

The use of the photographic enlargement to establish a dialogue between the past and the present was an expedient that was positioned at the bottom of the staircase leading to the first floor: the photograph was a further account of fashion, one that amplified its meaning in a sort of play of mirrors, evoking too that “multiplicity” of possible interpretations on which Calvino had insisted in his *Memos* [fig. 9]. So it was not just the designed and sewn garment that was presented, but also the one that had been worn, photographed and described. To these levels were added the garment put on show in a museum, which brought the reflection back to the practices of curating, suggesting that this was what was at the heart of the exhibition, rather than the objects on display.

This is what lay behind the “colonization” of the Sala delle Armi, also on the ground floor, which was not one of the rooms utilized by the exhibition in 1980. Here pieces of contemporary fashion began to creep into the exhibition project, displayed amongst the suits of armor and the arms that were one of the focuses of Gian Giacomo Poldi Pezzoli’s collecting: Karl Lagerfeld’s interpretation of a Chanel suit; a Balenciaga outfit in the version of the creative director Demna Gvasalia that layered all the symbols of the uniforms and armor of the contemporary male (work, politics, sport) on a single body;²⁵ a Moncler quilted jacket that turned into a jersey with a flared skirt; a jumpsuit from the Italian knitwear brand Boboutic. These were items of clothing that clearly expressed the way that experimentation on traditional materials and forms has become a characteristic and incessant feature of the creative activity of fashion today.

On the first floor, the continuation of the exhibition was marked by a delicate curatorial gesture, but one that was at the same time very powerful in the way it showed how the exhibition project was inserted into the museum, and above all in making it clear that *Memos* was first of all a museological incursion that aimed to get people to reflect not just on the content of a work, but also on the mode of its presentation: a small frame, made out of the same pale wood as the elements of display designed for the exhibition, placed on a slender pedestal in dialogue with the

²⁴ This kind of wood was utilized for all the display elements that allowed *Memos* to insinuate itself into the rooms of the Poldi Pezzoli.

²⁵ The outfit from the 2017-18 Fall/Winter collection has become celebrated because the formal character of the man’s suit was shattered by the padded shawl with a version of the Balenciaga logo based on the graphics used by Bernie Sanders for the presidential campaign of 2016.

frames in the Poldi Pezzoli's collection, showed that *Memos* was an examination not just of the qualities of contemporary fashion, but also and above all of the relationship between fashion and museum [fig. 10]. Again, in the Sala degli Stucchi, this curatorial attitude was further underlined by a vertical panel in dialogue with the door leading into the first floor of the museum: almost as if it were a second, transparent door, two emblems were intertwined on this panel, that of the Poldi Pezzoli and the one preferred by Italo Calvino, the *Festina lente* (make haste slowly). This was another museological incursion, and one that prompted a reflection on the themes of the signature, logo and symbols in today's fashion and in museums, especially the ones that are born out of a collection with a specific owner. This made clear the character of curation as a site-specific action: making exhibitions does not necessarily coincide with the identification of neutral solutions for display, but may entail an interrogation of the space in which the exhibition is located, and inserted.

In the large Salone Dorato, which houses Pollaiuolo's famous *Portrait of a Young Woman*, a painting that has become the symbol of the museum, the visitor began to encounter some clothes, but used as vehicles to put across concepts. In 1980 this room housed one of the conversations between manikins, without showcases. And in this case too the decision was taken to leave the clothing free from the "constraints" of the museum, on a plinth of pale wood, in dialogue with the tapestry that hangs in the room. Two pieces side by side that represented two languages of construction which pervade contemporary fashion: one, a dress cut and structured to shape the body; the other, a draped dress that took its shape from the body. Giorgio Armani's embroidered garment was a perfect manifestation of the modelling skills that can translate a two-dimensional design into a three-dimensional form, preserving the simplicity of the lines, embellished with delicate embroidery. The dress that Maria Grazia Chiuri made for Dior couture recalled the peplos, a form of attire in ancient Grecia that slid over the body and took on three dimensions only when worn. The choice of this garment was also connected with the words "Are Clothes Modern?" that are embroidered on the front: this was the title of the exhibition curated by Bernard Rudofsky at the MoMA in New York in 1944 that looked at fashion as a discipline of design in its relations with the body. A seminal exhibition that was way ahead of its time, recognizing the central role played by this discipline in the processes of forging an identity and in the interpretation of contemporary life [fig. 11, 12].

Already from the encounter with this installation it seems clear that what the curator was aiming to achieve with *Memos* was to all intents and purposes a reflection on the most appropriate language of display, a language that would be capable of expressing the disciplinary status of fashion. Not coincidentally, near the platform with the two dresses stood a showcase containing

some press kits, the means by which the idea of the designer is translated into words and communicated to the press.

The intertwining of the museum's collection and the objects representing contemporary fashion was further emphasized in the Sala Visconti Venosta, where two pieces designed by Alessandro Michele for Gucci held a dialogue with pieces in the permanent collection: a light and sensual white dress that revealed the body was contrasted with a stiff black dress that covered and concealed. The womb and the rib cage embroidered on the two garments brought the sexual and structural dimension of the human body to the fore. Fashion was presented as a discipline that tended to highlight the questions faced by contemporary existence: identity, gender and sexuality, the limits and possibilities of the body [fig. 13].

In the Galleria dei Ritratti the curator's gaze examined the objects present in the room and then inserted the fashion project, recognizing its extraordinary capacity to probe contemporary life by moving between the two-dimensionality of the image and the three-dimensionality of the object. Thelma Golden, director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, and her husband Duro Olowu, a designer of Nigerian origin and collector, were represented in a formally traditional portrait, made by Catherine Opie, but one that was conceptually subversive: a reflection on the new geography of cultural tendencies and fashion that has broken away from its traditional centers and is drawing new lifeblood from hitherto neglected areas and culture. Alongside the portrait, a showcase with Karl Lagerfeld's drawings for Chloé presented the creative process of the designer who transforms details and elements that strike his or her imagination and adapts them to the identity of the brand. This expressive and linguistic "multiplicity" of fashion—which alluded to one of Calvino's lectures, but again on the basis of the dialogue with the museum and through the logic of the chosen display—was further underlined by the sequences of pieces shown on the manikins: from Prada to Marco De Vincenzo to Francesco Risso's interpretation of Marni and then to Arthur Arbesser and Massimo Giorgetti's interpretation of MSGM, the clothes expressed this multiplicity of language through the use of experimental materials on traditional forms, the novel coupling of fine and humble fabrics, elaborate applications mixed with wire, repetitive palettes of jarring colors on geometric patterns and the refined layering of decorative motifs [fig. 14, 15]. These manikins had an additional significance because they echoed the 1980 exhibition in a—once again—delicate way through headpieces made by the hair stylist Angelo Seminara that evoked the barely hinted at hairstyles of Grazietta Butazzi's show [fig. 16]. A reference that was not explicit, but required visitors to assume a questioning attitude, to take a slightly longer look at these objects in order to examine them carefully, not so much for their extraordinary workmanship and forms, but as an active part of a discourse on display that

suggested possible interpretations of fashion in its encounter with the exhibition and the spaces of the museum.

An enfilade of rooms that was part of the route through the 1980 exhibition was also reactivated by *Memos*. The Sala del Settecento Veneto, the Sala del Perugino and the Saletta dei Trecenteschi were visually associated in a discourse that cited the layout in 1980 and at the same time sparked off a reflection on fashion in its relations between past and present, citation and celebration, mass production and personalized couture, two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality [fig. 17]. In the Sala del Settecento Veneto, two structures that recalled the showcase of magazines presented in 1980 housed some of the fashion magazines that have defined the imagery of the last forty years. Alongside these extremely powerful media that have shaped the visual culture of fashion and the contemporary world through sophisticated inventions and references to the past were displayed two pieces made of metal mesh from the collection that Donatella Versace dedicated to her brother Gianni in the Spring/Summer 2018 collection, an act somewhere between reappraisal and celebration. The paper bodies that people the magazines held a dialogue with Versace's metal ones, absent but evoked by the material and luminous three-dimensionality of these garments, which wavered between the softness of drapery and the sculptural. The Sala del Perugino underlined the role of magazines in shaping our imagination: a showcase at the center of the room presented ten of the twelve issues of *Flair*, a historic magazine that came out in 1950, a masterpiece of fashion publishing in which the reflection on the relationship between content and its formal rendering, through a masterly art direction, reached heights that are still hard to surpass today. From this room visitors entered the Saletta dei Trecenteschi, which in 1980 hosted a conversation between manikins: in this room *Memos* chose to focus on the dialogue between ready-to-wear and haute couture through lace, an important element in the collection of the museum as well. A comparison between Italian artisanship and industry: on the one hand Prada, which used the transparency of lace united with the rigor of the man's blue shirt; on the other Valentino, with a sumptuous high-fashion dress reproducing the forms of a flower that was a triumph of lace and tulle.

The Sala del Collezionista, which was not part of the 1980 exhibition, provided another example of the sophisticated work of display that ran all the way through the *Memos* project and presented a series of reflections on the themes and processes that define contemporary fashion. The logo, the signature that identifies a brand and makes it recognizable, has been reconsidered by designers and proposed as a decorative motif, a heraldic device or emblem: on display here were a tunic of the seventies from the Gucci historical archives, a Fendi fur on which the double "F" was turned into an interlacing of "F" and "L" to celebrate the house's tie-up with Karl Lagerfeld and an interpretation of the Burberry trench coat by its creative director Riccardo Tisci that grafted onto

the brand's iconic garment a shawl with the new monogram "TB." There was also a reflection on Calvino's theme of "rapidity," and on the sense of time and work that leads laboriously to the creation of the object. The new methods of design often have random starting points, quickly mixing them up and layering them in an attempt to get a grip on the mutability of the desires and aspirations that pervade contemporary life, and on the search for a new identity, including that of gender (emblematic in this sense were Gabriele Colangelo and Stefano Pilati's pieces for Random Identities) [fig. 18]. Giambattista Valli's wedding dress for Charlotte Olympia Dellal provided an example of high fashion and the apotheosis of uniqueness: a dress created just once, for a single person, and worn for a single day. Some of the manikins emphasized the curatorial intention behind the project by presenting Seminara's headpieces. And the reflection on emblems was reiterated on the walls: this time that of the Poldi Pezzoli and Italo Calvino's favorite, the *Festina lente* (make haste slowly). They were not intertwined, but enlarged and placed one opposite the other [fig. 19].

4. 1980-2020: Forty years of fashion curating

As we have seen, the *Memos* project was born in and for the spaces of the Museo Poldi Pezzoli in Milan, and was a partial reactivation of the exhibition *1922-1943: Vent'anni di moda italiana*, evoking its modes of display on the ground floor and inserting conversations between the manikins and objects selected for the project and the Poldi Pezzoli's collection into the rooms on the first floor of the museum [fig. 20].

In this way the layout of *Memos* elicited multiple levels of interpretation of the exhibition: it invited a reflection on the objectives of the exhibition in 1980; it drew attention to the Museo Poldi Pezzoli and its collection by exploring it; it analyzed the forms and themes of contemporary fashion through the curatorial action and the results of the display; it took on the character of a sophisticated museological reflection on staging exhibitions of fashion and on the language of display best suited to presenting fashion. And it is probably in this complexity of the design, and the interpretation, of the *Memos* project that we can find a reference to Calvino's work—the *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* evoked by the title—and not so much in the more direct relationship between the titles of Calvino's lectures and their possible analogies with the formal results of the design of contemporary fashion.

Thus *Memos*, in its comparison with the project of 1980, became an opportunity to offer some reflections on staging exhibitions of fashion and, in the way it was conceived as a three-dimensional means of presenting theory, should be placed within the theoretical framework of

curatorial studies.²⁶ To some extent it can be seen as marking the end of a period of forty years in which the themes and problems covered by *Memos* have been tackled on more than one occasion. The exhibition *1922-1943: Vent'anni di moda italiana*, as the accounts of Mottola Molfino and Pertegato have confirmed, opened this period by taking on the display of clothing with an attention to its material character and its needs from the viewpoint of conservation and restoration. At the base of Butazzi's work, and of the collaboration between the Poldi Pezzoli and the Civiche Raccolte, was the strong desire to establish a museum collection, something that was also expressed very clearly in the motives that had led a few years earlier to the founding of the CISST or Italian Center for Study of the History of Textiles, of which Mottola Molfino was not coincidentally the first president (and it was in this capacity that she appeared at the aforementioned conference of 1981).²⁷

The eighties were crucial years for the emergence in Italy of a culture of fashion in relation to the museum. The experience of the Poldi Pezzoli took place exactly a year after the project presented at the 16th Milan Triennale that opened in December of 1979 and had a section specifically devoted to fashion, *Il senso della moda*. A section that saw the involvement of a series of players, including the Dxing research center set up by Elio Fiorucci, who saw fashion as an eminently visual phenomenon, linked indissolubly to spectacularized forms of mass culture.

The project of the *Il senso della moda* section of the 16th Triennale sprang out of a reflection on the importance that fashion had taken on in the preceding years, both for its influence on the economy and production and in a symbolic sense as a manifestation of processes in the imagination and the unconscious connected with the social and political transformations and cultural tendencies of society.²⁸

The exhibition, with a display designed by Eleonore Peduzzi-Riva, was a visual presentation of research (entrusted to Giannino Malossi, Nicoletta Branzi, Veronica Levis and Claudio Possenti) that investigated the connections between fashion and mass communication, the cultural industry and social movements, "in order to throw light on the mechanisms of formation of the language of fashion." The *Mappa della moda* and the *Multivision* project on five screens were the

²⁶ See Luca Marchetti, ed., *La mode exposée: Penser la mode par l'exposition / Fashion Curating: Understanding Fashion Through the Exhibition* (Geneva: HEAD, 2016).

²⁷ The CISST (Centro Italiano per lo Studio della Storia del Tessuto) was established in 1978 at the suggestion of a group of Italian historians with the aim of fostering and coordinating research into the history and conservation of the Italian textile heritage, and consequently into costume, fashion, embroidery, lace and tapestries as well. Mottola Molfino was the first president of the CISST.

²⁸ See *XVI Triennale: Il senso della moda* (n.p.: n.p., [1979]). The 16th Milan Triennale ran from December 1979 to February 1982.

two main elements, and both stressed the visual power of fashion in shaping our imagery and movements in society. The board of advisors included Francesco Alberoni, Anna Piaggi and Umberto Tirelli, as well as the head of the Artistic and Historical Heritage Service Carlo Bertelli, something which attested to the existence of a clear plan: one of the intentions of this section was to contribute to the setting up of a fashion museum in Milan, of which the actions of the 16th Triennale were seen precisely as an experimental anticipation.

In establishing a dialogue between these two experiences, which were also intertwined in their respective institutional ties, the scene was set for a debate between different ways of approaching fashion: on the one hand with a greater attention to the material qualities of fashion in its relations with historical costume and with the museum practices that bind questions of conservation and exhibition inseparably; on the other from a perspective that took account of the relations between fashion and language, in an interdisciplinary framework that brought together mass communications theory, semiology and sociology and that tended to dematerialize fashion into the dimension of the image. On the one hand fashion in its encounter with the museum, on the other fashion in the system of cultural studies: this is a debate that we are probably still trying to resolve today, in part through projects like *Memos*, and that does not merely regard the interpretation we give to fashion in itself, but also the one we give to the exhibition and museum. In addition to the aforementioned experience in Florence, which in 1983 would see the birth of the Costume Gallery in Palazzo Pitti, we should not forget that the eighties were also a central moment in the activity of the CSAC (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione) at the University of Parma, set up by Arturo Carlo Quintavalle at the end of the sixties and which had already turned its attention to fashion at the end of the seventies, but with a particular focus on the process of its design, in the form of drawing, graphic art and photographic image, and at the same time on the creation of an archive, rather than on the question of its exhibition.²⁹ And in 1981 Alessandro Mendini, when he set the official seal on the entry of fashion into the Italian temple of architectural and design culture with the invention of *Domus Moda*, dwelled on just this problem of a museum of fashion in Milan, suggesting that a project of this kind should not be confused “with a few items of clothing placed on manikins like ghosts.”³⁰ So, at the beginning of that decade, people were starting to reflect on questions that linked the definition of the fashion to its relationship with the museum and with exhibition-making, and today *Memos*, by reactivating the

²⁹ For an in-depth analysis of the CSAC and its research into fashion see the recent essay by Elena Fava and Manuela Soldi, “Moda media storia. La ricerca di moda allo Csac,” in *Laboratorio Italia. Canoni e contraddizioni del Made in Italy*, ed. Malvina Borgherini, Sara Marini, Angela Mengoni, Annalisa Sacchi and Alessandra Vaccari (Milan: Mimesis, 2018), 174-89.

³⁰ Alessandro Mendini, “Musei della moda? Considerazioni teoriche a proposito di un museo della moda per Milano,” *Domus Moda*, no. 2, supplement to *Domus*, no. 621 (October 1981), 1.

seminal project of 1980, has brought the debate connected with it back to the fore. In 1981 Grazietta Butazzi wrote:

At a moment in which the “consumption” of the fashion is becoming frantic even on the plane of theorization and interpretation, a new book on fashion might seem superfluous. It is precisely in a key of interpretation—or, much more modestly, as the suggestion of some keys—that, it is hoped, it may not be so. [...] Thus the written texts do not set out to present a history of fashion, but rather to propose some—and only some—ways of tackling this history: the social symbols, the status of groups like women or the young, the conduct of those in power with respect to fashion, the impact of political developments and the profound changes in behavior, cultural movements.³¹

This is an extract from the introduction to the book *Moda. Arte / storia / società*, which is still a pioneering example of a manual that set out to tell the story of fashion over time—without worrying about doing so in chronological order—and recognized its central role in the mechanisms by which society and culture shaped and function. An extraordinary book even in the way it utilized and arranged the images and created short-circuits between them, without following the presumed linearity of time, but seeking explicitly and in an inventive manner unprecedented relations between the formal qualities of the visual materials assembled and the themes tackled in the essays.³² *Memos*, in the intentions of its curator Frisa, which found expression in Clark’s systems of display, appears to us today as a project that shared with Butazzi and her words an Italian understanding of fashion studies, and one that evoked these theoretical movements through a sophisticated curatorial project: the three-dimensional display sought to take stock of contemporary fashion and its forms, but above all it deliberately reasserted the need to define and organize Italian studies of fashion through means and institutions capable of conserving and exhibiting as well as studying fashion.

³¹ Grazietta Butazzi, “Presentazione,” in Grazietta Butazzi, *Moda. Arte / storia / società* (Milan: Gruppo Editoriale Fabbri, 1981), 5.

³² The picture research was by Marilea Somaré, the graphic design by Luciano Marco Boschini.

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