

## „Dress & Gender“ Courtauld History of Dress Association Annual Conference

**Veranstalter:** Courtauld History of Dress Association

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**Bericht von:** Elisabeth Hackspiel-Mikosch, Meerbusch

This year's annual conference of the Courtauld History of Dress Association (CHODA), U.K., had invited scholars from five different countries to discuss the relationship between dress and gender in history. The interdisciplinary symposium, which was organized by Sophie White (University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA), covered a broad range of subjects and offered both theoretical studies and object-based analyses. Documenting the pervasive construction of gender through dress the talks presented historical, religious and political investigations, literary studies, the analysis of actual objects, an enquiry of comics, and a social study of the fashionable behaviour of modern youth.

The first session, headed by Sophie White (University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA) investigated the sartorial performance and display of masculinity and femininity. Looking at comics such as Superman, Spiderman or Batman, Friedrich Weltzien (Freie Universität Berlin, Germany) asked the question if the nerd is a superhero in disguise or if the superhero is actually a dressed up looser. Weltzien did not so much emphasize the obvious masculine symbolism of the superheroes' dress. Instead, he felt that it was the act of dressing up working as a type of metamorphosis that was actually crucial for the performance of masculinity and virility. In order to support his thesis he drew comparisons to other super masculine figures from the history of art and literary. Hercules and Siegfried also owed their extra masculine strength to a metamorphosis of dressing.

Joanna Gardner-Hugget (DePaul University Chicago, USA), who recently curated an exhibition on Julia Thecla, showed how this intriguing but today little known surrealist artist, active during the 1930s and 1960s, concentrated on the image of the „Femme enfant“ in order to assert herself in a male domina-

ted art market. According to Gardner-Hugget, Thecla painted pictures of childlike women in enigmatic surroundings so as to draw attention to feminine issues. Dressing in an eccentric feminine fashion herself Thecla used sartorial performance in order to „circumvent patriarchal opposition to women's presence in the critical and commercial realms of the art market“ and „to lend greater visibility of women in the arts“. Thecla's strategy of sartorial self performance invites comparison to Frida Kahlo, a contemporary Mexican artist who worked with surrealist elements. Kahlo also drew attention to female experiences by her paintings and by staging her female identity with the help of spectacular costumes.

Unfortunately, Hélène de Burgh from the University of Melbourne, who was going to speak about the role of dress and gender in the orientalist writings of Pierre Loti had to cancel her talk at short notice.

Led by Margaret Scott (Courtauld Institute of Art, London U.K.), the second session was dedicated to the policing of the body. The speakers discussed how politics and religion determined dress and the image of politically or morally correct femininity. Graeme Murdock (University of Birmingham, UK) described how the Reformed church tried to control abuses of immoral dressing in sixteenth-century Huguenot France. The Reformed clergymen were particularly concerned with women's dress and with what they believed to be an inappropriate and immodest display of the female body. Worrying about the moral problems of sight, and about the undue arousal of men's sexual desire, Calvinist writings concentrated on the construction of „moral women“ implemented through women's dress. Murdock suggested that despite the clergymen's efforts the strict cover up of the female body actually led to a heightened sexualisation of the female body.

Djurdja Bartlett (London College of Fashion, UK), who until recently lived in Croatia, addressed changes of the socialist concept of dress and gender in the late 1940s and 50s in Central Eastern Europe. Considered as a sign of bourgeois decadence, beauty and elegance were banned from women's magazines during the 40s and early 50s. Instead, the official publications promoted a masculinised

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„New Woman“ dressed most appropriately in workers' overalls and presenting the ideal of a „pure and natural“ woman. When Khrushchev took power in 1956 and opened Russia to the West, women's magazines in socialist countries changed and began to show lady-like clothes again. Bartlett argued that this return to „Western“ aesthetics in women's fashion did not improve or modernize women's social position but in fact documents a conservative return to traditional ideas of womanhood in the socialist countries.

Due to an unfortunate accident Madeleine Hurd (Södertörn College, Sweden) was not able to present her paper about the uniform dress of German storm troopers in the 1920s.

The third session, headed by Christopher Breward (Victoria & Albert Museum, UK), was dedicated to the sartorial construction of masculinity and to the investigation of actual objects. Elisabeth Hackspiel (Niederrhein University, Moenchengladbach, Germany) questioned the frequently mentioned assumption that corsets worn by men during the 19th century were signs of excessive effeminacy. Analysing concepts of physical beauty common during the 19th century Hackspiel pointed out that tight tailoring and tight waists actually reflected generally accepted ideals of masculine beauty and were typical of men's fashion during that time. In the second part of her talk, Hackspiel discussed the uniform of a Prussian chamberlain dated to the 1840s which has an in-built corset. Comparing the tailoring methods and patterns of 19th century men's suits with those of today Hackspiel explained how dress strongly shaped the male body in both cases but followed quite opposing aesthetic concepts of physical beauty.

Daniel Claro (University of Delaware, Newark, DE, USA) examined two silk suits, today preserved at The Wyne, a country house in Hampshire, England, and associated with John Chute, Esq. (1701-1776), a gentlemen architect and art connoisseur. Investigating the sartorial construction of masculine identity during the Georgian period, Claro questioned if the „Frenchified“ or „Italianised“ appearance of Chute, who had been on Grand Tour in Europe, was a sign of effeminacy or even homosexuality, as frequently assumed. Instead,

he argued that gender identity in Georgian times was more fluid and complex and was reflected in particular styles of dressing.

Giorgio Riello (London School of Economics, London, UK) and Peter McNeil (University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia) presented together a paper which showed how the design of men's and women's shoes increasingly diverged during the 18th century reflecting new gender identities. At the end of the century, women wore stylish slippers wholly impractical for outdoor activities, but men preferred sturdy leather boots which became symbolic of democratic ideals and participation in public affairs. While restricted physical movement had been the privilege of aristocracy during the feudal times, at the dawn of the bourgeois period free motion became a question of socially and culturally constructed gender.

The fourth and last session was chaired by Aileen Ribeiro (Courtauld Institute of Art, London, UK). Covering a period from the 15th to 21st century the presentations looked at the provision and consumption of fashion by women. Carole Collier Frick (Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, IL, USA), who had studied Italian municipal archival documents, reported about women's involvement in the production of luxury accessories in Florence during the Renaissance period. Although women were excluded from the guild system, they made considerable contributions to the trades of the headdress-makers, embroiderers, tinsel-makers, purse-makers, belt-makers, hosiers, slipper-makers goldsmiths or shoe-makers. At times costing even more than the entire dresses, such luxury accessories were consumed by all members of society. Since these women artisans sold their products on the open markets they made the women's active participation in the trades quite obvious, and, as Frick suggested, thereby actually undermined the official rigid gender roles pursued by the city's merchant elite.

Studying the novels by Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth, Chloe Wigston Smith (University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, USA) argued that the rise of the luxury market during the 18th century caused fashion to become a site for embarrassment and mortification for women. Both female contemporary no-

velists document how the meaning of fashion went beyond dress and included questions of taste, class and behaviour. Since fashion functioned as an important mode of representation women had to struggle with the constant change of fashion and thereby obviously were forced to neglect their own deeper interests.

Hazel Hahn (Seattle University, USA) investigated the influence of women on the trade and discourse of fashion during the 19th century. She looked in particular at fashion commentaries published in Parisian fashion magazines of the 1830s to 1840s that were written by women, such as Loménie d. V., who wrote for *Les Modes parisiennes*, or Madame de Girardin whose column „Les chroniques parisiennes“ appeared in *La Presse* under the pseudonym of Vicomte Charles de Launay. These articles reflect the new feminization of consumption as a major urban activity during the 19th century. According to Hahn, this led to an increased influence of woman on the retail and production of fashion. The discourse of fashion published by the female writers imparted new public attention to the creativity of dressmakers and other fashion producers. Agnès Rocamora (London College of Fashion, UK) presented the results of sociological research she undertook in the field of contemporary fashion consumption. Having questioned young girls and women who wore cheeky slogan t-shirts featuring inscriptions such as „Porn Star in Training“ or „Hot Property“ Rocamora addressed issues of material culture, gender and fashion consumption. She found out that bonding represented one of the most important motivations for buying and wearing such t-shirts - bonding with girl friends or inviting contact with men. At the same time, the cheeky t-shirts also symbolized the social construction of youthful female identity, which worked independently of the actual age of the t-shirt wearer.

The highly inspiring conference presented a broad range of questions relating to the construction of gender through dress. At the same time, it demonstrated a multitude of methods that can help to answer these questions. This important conference has already drawn the attention of two well respected media and academic outlets. The London Times Higher Education Supplement dedicated a front page

article, titled „Supernerd weaves his way of the closet“ to Weltzien's paper and published a second editorial comment about Rocamora's cheeky t-shirts thereby drawing wider attention to the conference. *Fashion Theory* will publish a selection of the papers next year (June 2005).

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#### CONFERENCE PROGRAMME:

Friday 2 July 2004

10.00 Registration and coffee

10.45 Welcome

#### SESSION 1: PERFORMING GENDER

11.00

Masque-ulinities: Changing Dress as a Display of Masculinity in the Superhero Genre  
Dr. Friedrich Weltzien, Freie Universität Berlin

11.30

Oriental Chic in the Colonial World: the Roles of Dress and Gender in the Orientalist Narratives of Pierre Loti

Dr. Hélène de Burgh, University of Melbourne

12.00

Julia Thecla's Sartorial Masquerade as an Act

of Resistance in the Art World

Dr. Joanna Gardner-Huggett, DePaul University

12.30 Discussion

Chair: Dr. Sophie White, University of Notre Dame, CHODA

12.45 Lunch

#### SESSION 2: POLICING THE BODY

14.15

Sight, Sin and Sexuality in Sixteenth-Century Huguenot France

Dr. Graeme Murdock, University of Birmingham

14.45

Men Challenging Men: Storm Troopers, Uniforms and Bourgeois Taste in the Nazi 'Revolution' of the 1920s

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Dr. Madeleine Hurd, Södertörn College

15.15 Tea

16:00

Dress and Gender in Central East European  
Socialist Countries, 1949-1959

Djurdja Bartlett, London College of Fashion

16.30 Discussion

Chair: Dr. Margaret Scott, Courtauld Institute  
of Art, CHODA

17.15 CHODA AGM - all members welcome

Saturday 3 July 2004

10.00 Registration and coffee

10.30 Welcome

SESSION 3: MASCULINITIES

10.45

Tightly Tied Men: Corset-Constructed Masculinity  
in the Nineteenth Century

Dr. Elizabeth Hackspiel-Mikosch, Niederrhein  
University

11.15

John Chute, Esq. and the Suits at The Vyne:  
An English Gentleman's Dress and Masculinity

Daniel Claro, University of Delaware

11.45

The Art of Walking: Mobility, Gender and  
Footwear in the Long Eighteenth Century

Dr. Giorgio Riello, London School of Economics /  
Victoria & Albert Museum;

Dr. Peter McNeil, University of New South  
Wales

12.15 Discussion

Chair: Professor Christopher Breward, Victoria  
& Albert Museum and London College of  
Fashion

12.30 Lunch

SESSION 4: WOMEN AND CONSUMERISM

14.00

Accessorizing the Renaissance: Female Luxury  
Artisans in the Florentine Marketplace

Dr. Carole Collier Frick, Southern Illinois  
University

14.30

An Embarrassment of Riches: Clothing, Fashion  
Culture and Mortified Women in the  
Later Eighteenth Century

Chloe Wigston Smith, University of Virginia,  
CHODA

15.00 Tea

15:45

Fashion Discourse in 'Les Modes parisiennes'  
and 'Les Chroniques parisiennes' in the July  
Monarchy in France

Dr. Hazel Hahn, Seattle University

16.15

„U R a Naughty Boy Go 2 My Room“: Meaning  
Matters in Girls' and Women's T-shirts

Dr. Agnès Rocamora, London College of  
Fashion

16.45 Discussion

Chair: Professor Aileen Ribeiro, Courtauld  
Institute of Art, CHODA

17.00 Close

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