

Pushing design boundaries – Australian extremes, mainstream fashion limits

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Abstract

The Australian cultural and historical context provides a fashion evolution influenced by extremes. Fashion transportation, commencing with the eighteenth century convicts and colonists, took little note of the new environment and its clothing requirements. Originally, occasion designated, complex outfits were imported and characterised early Australian fashion as copying the United Kingdom styles. Over the years fashion has been adjusted by Australians in response to the new continent's extremes of climate and lifestyle. Initially Australians suffered daily discomfort when wearing imported fashions because the detailed, tailored styling and heavy fabrications restricted the colonists. As Australian society established, specific requirements for every day garments and special dress were identified and creative, practical, local adjustments to clothing were made. Nevertheless, the fashion transplantation movement remained and was welcomed nostalgically by the settlers. Fashion imports continued to be promoted until the mid-twentieth century. The opening of debate about the creation of a national identity, together with Australian design ingenuity and the maturing of design confidence, have allowed for the gradual emergence of a lifestyle-specific Australian fashion. This paper considers design boundaries and fashion extremes using examples from the Dorothy Nicol Historical Fashion Collection, Lismore, Victoria, Australia. Examples from Dorothy's collection provide an insight into the development Australian fashion from cultural, historical perspectives.

Themes and overview

The themes of the 2007 International Foundation of Fashion Technology Institute conference include the proposition that the impact of fashion has moved beyond our established and accepted horizons to the widest vistas of our creative imagination. Instead of presenting fashions

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themselves as extreme entities, this paper will consider the development of a fashion identity in relation to the extremes of the Australian climatic, cultural and historic contexts.

In this paper my suggestion is that there is an Australian fashion identity and that this identity initially developed in response to the extreme environmental influences that challenged the first settlers. Migrating willingly or being transported to Australia as punishment, were both extreme situations that settlers faced and to which they reacted.

After more than two hundred years of European settlement, the established, western, fashion identity has influenced fashion developments and been adapted and integrated into the Australian fashion identity. Currently the Australian fashion identity relates strongly to comfort, style and functionality, matched to lifestyle and specific activity demands on the performance of the end product. The contemporary responses to extremes are evident in the creative, innovative commercial developments such as high performance fabrics.

Concepts from some leading, Australian fashion writers will be presented and I will show the Dorothy Nicol Historic Fashion Collection as a microcosm of fashion solutions to the extremes of Australian rural, bush life. Over time Australian fashion emerged and this process is considered theoretically and with practical examples of past Australian fashion from the Dorothy Nicol Historic Fashion Collection particularly the selected Eldridge Aunts' dresses and their story.

My personal focus for several years while working on my Masters Research project has been the Dorothy Nicol Historic Fashion Collection, one small community resource.

From this collection, I am able to bring notice to some specific items of historic significance within a cultural and historic context in relation to a harsh, unsympathetic and often extreme environment. In my presentation at the conference, I will be providing a range of images demonstrating the concepts outlined in this paper.

Convicts and social mobility

The convicts and free settlers were counselled to take advantage of the opportunity of forging rich and exciting futures for themselves and their descendants in this new Southern hemisphere continent – Australia.

From 1788 until 1868 British felons were transported to Australia as punishment. It is now with pride that some families trace their origins back to those early, convict ancestors. In a *National Geographic* magazine issue dedicated to commemorating the Australian bicentenary, the story of one such First Fleet convict was told as part of the a full family history (Everingham, 1998). This 19 year old convict, Mathew Everingham, having suffered brutal hardships including near starvation, completed his sentence with great remorse, encouraged by a patron who he corresponded with during his imprisonment. Being healthy and literate Mathew and his new wife like others of his generation, embarked on their future fuelled with hope. By 1800 he was free, had accepted an award of a land grant instead of returning to England and expressed excitement about his new life. The article shows a portrait of this couple looking handsome and prosperous. History has often proved that clothes make the man and from these early times onwards fashion in Australia became a symbol of status, and acquired wealth.

Most people seek to look their best to impress and to improve their image by using dress and decoration. This human need is apparent even in the less than favourable climatic conditions, primitive living situations and hardships in the virgin bush of the early colony of Australia. The classic Australian anthem by Dorothea Mackellar (Mackellar, 1907) passionately describes the image of the Australian environment that the settlers needed to dress for, came to love and following generations were loyal and sentimental about as – a sunburnt country; wide brown land; ragged mountain ranges; drought and flooding plains.

At first, the early settlers, convicts and then pastoralists, gold miners and townspeople dressed in the similar style of dress as their contemporaries in the United Kingdom. News of fashion trends traveled slowly by sea so, the style in Australia lagged behind old world fashion directions. Resources for clothing repairs and new creations were not readily available or plentiful so adaptations to dress appeared. There was a rebellious streak in the new national personality and even the convicts customized and accessorized their meager uniforms (Maynard, 1994). At the same time, however, the well-to-do and those striving to be upwardly mobile continued to copy fashion styling from the Northern Hemisphere.

Imported fashionable dress formed a uniform of respectability for the Australian colonists even though the materials' weight, garments' fit and styles restricted movement and were uncomfortable in the

prevailing climate. In 2006 Australians were offered a television documentary-drama series entitled, the *Outback House* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2005) which reminded viewers of the mismatch between historic clothing styling and lifestyle requirements. This program was an historic themed drama based on a concept, shared by similar series developed around the world, where today's participants undertake to live a recreation of the life of their ancestors. In the Australian program, the recreated lifestyle was that of rural settlers forging a farming property from the hostile ground upwards. Among the very many trials that the show's participants had to endure was the challenge of constantly wearing historic, clothing styles that they found to be more restrictive than the 2005 clothing that they were used to wearing before being involved in the film. The younger women particularly found the rigid and multiple-layered, underclothing frustrating and the effort of laundering huge. Participants also found that adaptations to dress were necessary to provide ease of movement. Like the early settlers, the residents of the *Outback House* were limited in their knowledge and selection of fashion and used their ingenuity to suitably clothe themselves.

Emergence of Australian Fashion

Settlers to Federation 1799 -1901

Researchers of fashion history find that the majority of fashion textbooks available in Australia chronicle European and particularly British costume development. Popular Australian publications such as magazines and newspapers for many decades, took their fashion leadership from overseas. From the mid-twentieth century, with the advent of easier, quicker and more economical global travel, Australia, like other western countries, looked to Paris for fashion direction. Major Australian department stores of the time brought exclusive, Parisian fashions and French fashion mannequins to model these styles which inspired great excitement and publicity thus launching the whole world of haute couture on the other side of the world.

Costume historian and curator Marion Fletcher (Fletcher, 1984) writes from an Australian perspective from early settlement of to the period up to Federation, in 1901. Fletcher notes that although Australia has, by world standards, a short history, its development from a small convict settlement to a thriving industrialised nation has been dramatic. In any civilization, she asserts, clothes form an important aspect of social life, and in the distant society of Australia, where it was important to

cultivate an image of respectability and substance, and where other amenities of life were less transportable, clothes offered a visible measure of the owner's prosperity.

Fletcher further discusses how from around 1884, fashion information came from British publications like Weigel's *Journal of Fashion* and these styles were eagerly copied by local dress makers, a practice that endured for many decades. Otherwise, garments were imported and Fletcher reports that there is evidence of a dress by Worth, who is known as the first couturier, being sent to Melbourne for a special occasion and no doubt being treasured, enjoyed, made-over and perhaps copied. This way of accessing fashion via mail, sea and then air and interpreting the contents of magazines has lasted through the decades until the present time.

In conclusion Fletcher states that Australia was essentially British and remained so, without its own identity in spite of Federation, well into the Twentieth century and in fact, this was the case until the mass European immigration following the Second World War from the late 1940s, in her opinion.

Maturing of Australian Fashion

Bicentenary 1988

Australian's celebrated the anniversary of two hundred years of European settlement with gusto. Symbols of Australian geography and culture, that had previously suffered from a cultural cringe (or an embarrassment because of their over use or immaturity of design and presentation) gained status as acceptable fashionable art. National icons and artefacts had a fresh treatment and new, more international audience thanks to the publicity that the Bicentenary celebration brought.

In one of many commemorative publications, fashion editor, Elina MacKay (Mackay, 1987) explains how the Australian fashion designers of 1988 embraced images of Australian flora, fauna, landscapes and colour schemes. A group of Australian fashion designers who integrated national motifs into their work featured in the publication. Some of these designers and their designs were promoted widely. The art of Ken Done and his textile printing studio, for example, transformed contemporary Australian art images into fashions that captivated many visitors to Australia and promoted a specific fashion style. Also at this

time, indigenous motifs and painting were integrated into fashion, textiles, corporate and domestic décor and attracted interest overseas.

Australian fashion of 1988, as well as the range of cultural writing and activities of the time, celebrated a multi-faceted, new maturity. In Mackay's book, the forward by R J K Hawke, the then Prime Minister enthusiastically presented his opinion that Australia's greatest asset is its people. Mr. Hawke also identified the trend towards a global outlook, innovative design of fibres and clothing and advanced manufacturing strategies as key commercial, survival skills for Australia. He added that development of imaginative design and innovative processes would widen horizons for fashion within Australia and spearhead a new competitive assault internationally.

Mackay herself writes that in 1988, Australians looked to iconic Australian natural and manmade images combined with technology to demonstrate originality through fashion. She commented that Australia is a nation marked by its cultural conglomerations, where the underlying fashion message uses fabric as a canvas to portray graphic messages of the life and times extending images that first surfaced as "Australiana" then grew into "Australian."

For every day fashion since 1988, strong, iconic images have been toned down, made more subtle to integrate into the overall fabric of Australian fashion and have enjoyed general acceptance.

Fashion reflection - identity 1998

In 1998, a leading Australian fashion writer Alexandra Joel (Joel, 1998) set out her chronicle of Australian fashion history. This work looked at Australian fashion history in a cultural context from Federation onwards. Joel tells the story of finding and developing fashion identity by asking what is Australian fashion? How good is it? Does it exist at all? Joel wonders if it is about the sensation caused when the then Prime Minister's wife Sonia McMahon wore a dress split to the thigh to the Nixon White House or when Maggie Tabberer (leading Australian fashion model, designer and media personality) was refused entry to a Rugby League club for wearing a pant suit. Joel also considers if it is the koala-emblazoned, Jenny Kee-designed sweater photographed on a pregnant Princess of Wales; or a surf-inspired Mambo T-shirt, worn by the New York 'urban cool' set especially after the Sydney Olympic Games' publicity; or an exquisite lace creation by Collette Dinnigan, shown in Paris is the

Australian fashion identity. Essentially Joel concludes that the answer is all of these things and a great deal more.

Because Joel's book follows the history of high fashion, she chronicles the overseas influences first British, then the impact of European haute couture on the development of Australian fashion. The role of the department store in bringing fashion trends and the growth of the fashion media and its place in disseminating fashion information is evaluated as key influences.

The final section of the book looks toward 2000, considers domestic lifestyle design demands and the influence of increased international recognition on Australian fashion. The closing photograph in this book features an iconic Australian fashion model, now television presenter and celebrity wife, clad in Australian fashion swimwear. This sporty, beach culture image appears to be a perfect vehicle to demonstrate fashion styling blended with lifestyle and garment performance demands. Joel says in conclusion, Australians dress in a way that reflects their country – a bright, beautiful land with a relaxed lifestyle – Sarah O'Hare (now Murdoch) wears a minimal two-piece by Zimmermann.

Dorothy Nicol Historic Fashion Collection microsim

Mainstream fashion textbooks and journals tend to present high fashion, prestige items of dress that are valuable, show status and are protected to survive time. Museum collections and costume and fashion publications tend to represent this type of fashion primarily because it is more carefully preserved being better looked-after than every day garments that may have perished over time.

As the voice-over identified in a fashion industry documentary, *The Look – The Big Picture* (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1991):

"All styles are historical styles with social, cultural, moral, economic and technological conditions stitched, sewn or printed into minutely detailed documents of a specific moment in time".

The Dorothy Nicol Historic Fashion Collection is not prestigious in the accepted sense. It fits into a category of collection that is privately funded and follows the collecting interests and bias of the owner. In its regional context it also represents a specific perspective – that none the less can help us in understanding more about our position in history, the meaning of our past and the legacy of the future. Referring again to the

words of Alexandra Joel (Joel, 1998) which are that, Australia's quest to define its identity is still in progress, the study and preservation of Dorothy's collection has historic and cultural importance. Joel further says that the examination of fashion is part of the process of piecing together our too long neglected past and, in so doing, arriving at a richer understanding of who we are.

The Dorothy Nicol Historic Fashion Collection represents a Regional Victorian fashion perspective, with a particularly Western District emphasis. The extensive range of garments have been worn, loved and now loved again in this region. Garments have been enthusiastically revived in parades and through visits for the public's entertainment and education. This is not an academically precise collection but one with the charm and fascination of local history. Special warmth and personality permeates the collection through Dorothy Nicol and her local supporters.

The geographical context of the Dorothy Nicol Historic Fashion Collection is the town of Lismore and the Western District of the state of Victoria in South Eastern Australia. Lismore is approximately 200 kilometres to the northwest of Melbourne the capital city of Victoria. Largely by-passed by the traffic of the Twenty-first century, Lismore was a centre of culture activity and lively, well-heeled society as was the case in the whole region. Economic comfort in the region was supported by a productive rural lifestyle focussed on wool, dairy, meat and crop production and the processing of these in bustling local industries. The region features rich volcanic soils, good rainfalls and hence rich farmlands. Lismore and similar towns were first populated by a squattocracy of free settlers who had taken up large tracts of farming land. Obtaining large areas of land greatly improved the output of the squatters' farms where, as opposed to Britain, few animals could be sustained on one acre. Wealth was also created by the discovery of gold nearby with Lismore being on a pathway to westerly expansion, linking the state of Victoria to its neighbouring state of South Australia.

The Dorothy Nicol Historic Fashion Collection had its origins in Dorothy Nicol's strong interest in both fashion and history. Over time she accumulated an eclectic range of clothing, accessories, dolls and lifestyle memorabilia. As an awareness of her collection grew, in the Western District of Victoria and beyond, so did her collection, as it was and is augmented by gifts and bequests. A study of examples from Dorothy

Nicol's collection reveals more about creative solutions to dressing for the extremes of Australian rural life gone by.

As stated in this paper's abstract – initially Australians suffered daily discomfort when wearing imported fashions because the detailed, tailored styling and heavy fabrications restricted the colonists. As Australian society established, the specific requirements for every day garments and special dress were identified and creative, practical, local adjustments to clothing were made.

Part of the author's Masters Research project was the production of two catalogues of fashion items from the Dorothy Nicol Historic Fashion Collection and the story below is from one of these. (Walsh, 2007) Textiles and fashions are, without specialist care, not very durable over time and those which remain tend to be those representing dress for special, formal occasions. The examples outlined below are from this dressy part of the original owners' wardrobes. The Eldridge Aunts' fashion selection demonstrates independence and style. The range of formal day dresses were selected from the Dorothy Nicol Historic Fashion Collection to show how lifestyle activities, restrictions and extremes as well as positive factors can be seen in the physical composition of these fashions along with their history and that of their owners'.

The Eldridge family were early settlers in the Terang area of the Western District of Victoria in the South East of Australia. The Aunt's lived a quiet, hard-working life, hosting Sunday visitors and making visits as a main social activity. Picnics at the bush block were a favourite outing and social sports, spectator activities were occasionally scheduled. The Eldridge Aunts, three maiden ladies, Florence, Anne Mariah and Ethel have been remembered by their family who still farm their property, Noogee. The dresses were made and worn by the Eldridge sisters and they joined Dorothy's collection via the owners' niece-in-law, Barbara Eldridge. The family has always been enthusiastic about preserving local history particularly in recent generations. Barbara reports that the family seemed very clannish and very content with what they had, but very productive and happy with their own entertainment and company. They maintained the traditional lifestyle and values of using and re-using everything and using an innovative approach to problems and challenges. Each of the sisters was good at particular aspects of work and they stuck to those roles. For example, one did the outside work, another liked gardening and another was good at cooking and sewing.

Each of these four example dresses was made from the same paper dressmaking pattern and this was used to make the dress style over and over during the three decades 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Little changes were made to each new garment over the years. Changes in choice of fabric and trimming were made to the individual taste of each of the sisters and the season and occasion were considered. The size and lengths were adapted to suit each of these sisters. When the current descendants inherited the property and moved into the farm homestead, there were some fabric lengths still with paper patterns pinned to them ready to be constructed again. A legacy of ingenuity was part of the inheritance. There were carefully sewn flour, bag aprons and delicately embroidered sugar bag, knickers.

The dresses' fabric is high quality and durable construction and the trimmings are simple and conservative. Version 1 is of heavy weight, silk crepe. It has a green background under a multi-coloured paisley motif, all-over print and the minimum of functional trims. Version 2 is in a similar heavy crepe, woven fabric but in black and features a self fabric belt and matching bolero jacket that is edged around the neckline with narrow white, cotton lace. Version 3 is black, silk crepe featuring tucks and gores to provide bust, waist, hip fit and hemline fullness. It has white, cotton lace edging the neckline and two coloured, black and white, decorative buttons trimming the bodice front. Version 4 is black and white striped, silk crepe, lace trimmed at the neckline edge white decorative rather than functional buttons down the centre front bodice

These self-sufficient women are great examples of a generation of strong, capable unmarried women on the land. Many rural men worked away from home on occasions and two world wars took men off the land to support Britain and fight and often die for England – the old country, the mother land. The Aunts' dresses tell the story of rural women making their mark on the land and nurturing their property for subsequent generations to enjoy and grow. They contributed a continuity and stability in country regional life. (Walsh, Sylvia, 2007) The strength and resilience of rural women has had much written about in Australian history. These qualities are often romanticised in Australian literature and the media such as *We of the Never, Never* (Gunn, Aeneas, 1907, novel and motion picture, 1982, Director Igor Auzins) and the *The Drover's Wife*, Lawson, Henry, 1883, from *While the Billy Boils*) that describe the hardships of women alone eeking out a rural livelihood in tough, primitive conditions.

Growth of Australian fashion identity

For a long period, life in the bush was held in high regard in the fabric of Australian folklore. Many Australian's forefathers were brought up on the rollicking adventures and yarns telling of the settler's life in the bush. Rural locations and the bush were imagined, portrayed and experienced as dangerous, mysterious and even romantic places for those fresh from England. The freedom to settle, carve out a new life and re-invent one's life was an opportunity for those ready to have a go at working hard to make their fame and fortune.

The writing of Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson for example, were once a part of strong popular culture. These works were made accessible by being published in daily newspapers and forming part of the Australian schools' reading curriculum up until the mid-twentieth century. In more recent times, the exciting story of the heroic character Clancy of the overflow was featured in a movie *The Man from Snowy River* (Paterson based, motion Picture, 1982). Other historic Australian classic stories, poems and ballads have been the basis for film, radio and television dramas and this trend peaked in the late 1980s. Costume dramas bring back romantic images of the settlers' lifestyle and dress. Dressed in garments, styles and fabrics which made little allowance for the needs of the harsh climate and demanding activities of life in the bush and on the land. Dress for a life on the land, on farms and in rural townships gradually adapted in response to extremes different to the needs of the British lifestyle.

The rural decline has influenced what the well-dressed country population are wearing and how they and Australians as a whole see their fashion identity today. Lismore in western Victoria is a microcosm of this change in lifestyle and identity. The history of Lismore shows a repositioning of wealth, large demographic shift and population reduction parallel to the drop in wool, meat and dairy foods supply and demand. Even without the negative effects of drought, generally speaking, popular tastes have moved away from wearing wool fashions and eating large quantities of meat and butter. The demand for these products from rural regions such as Lismore has diminished the economic viability and tested the creativity of the remaining population.

The world as a global village, in terms of ready and fast access of information, means that large numbers of Australians now know more

about life in American television's *Sesame Street* (Public Broadcasting Service, 1969) and other fictional and real locations in Europe and the United States than life in their own countryside and bush. Many Australians know more about life in the various cloned, homogenized reality television's *Big Brother* houses (de Mol, 1999) than real life in their land. Australians' connections with a rural life and nature is often limited and gained from the comfortable position front of their televisions viewing popular, romanticised, fictional series such as *McLeod's Daughters* (Nine Network 2001) which features the farming adventures of a family group of women.

Dr. Margaret Maynard (Maynard, 1994 and 2001) writes incisively from a cultural practice viewpoint and social behavioural context of the development of dress in Australia. Maynard confirms earlier writers' opinions that clothing has always been central to Australian identity. However, she sees contradictions between traditional dress as a class symbol, egalitarian fashion styling roots, and historic and cultural myths contrasted with urban realities.

The fact is that today's population of Australia is predominately urban based located in key coastal cities.

Conclusion future extremes pushing design boundaries

A fashion identity transported from overseas has developed into an Australian style, inspired from within, while taking into account the unique Australian history and culture. Design boundaries are being pushed, developing fashion identity by responding to extremes. Science and technology are major fashion-change agents.

Australians traditionally see themselves as good at sports, either as active participants or as spectators. They have become well-respected as designers of fashions based on performance sports wear. There is a significant trend towards textile-inspired outdoor, lifestyle specific clothing. The beach and sporting consciousness together with applied design focus herald a brave new world of high-tech fabrics, treatments and accelerated processing techniques. This was essentially the message presented in an address to the Australian TCF Technology Network by Dr. Nigel Johnston (Johnston, 2007).

With the same adaptive enthusiasms as their forefathers, Australians continue the drive to master the continent's extremes of climate by

designing fashions beyond mainstream limits and in a global scenario rather than in geographic isolation.

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