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Clothing Signifiers - A Visual Narrative of Differences and Commonalities Constructing Identities

Introduction

This paper will review some historical (1890-1910) and contemporary issues relating to the values and meanings of women's clothing and its purchase, care, alteration and reuse. It will report on the initial findings of a project which is examining the design characteristics of women's clothes of that time through a literature review and archive analysis and will compare them with those of today, drawing on the work of Entwistle (2000) and Woodward (2007). As Ewing pointed out (2001:18), the start of the 20th century was a particularly important time of development in women's wear it was: '...the first forward looking fashion, the first symbol of freedom to come...'

The study draws upon one family's archive of letters written between 1904 and 1915. These letters were exchanged between a set of siblings, four of whom were sent as children to Canada for adoption in 1892 by their father, after the death of their mother. Although the four children travelled together they were subsequently separated and sent to different families on their arrival. The surviving correspondence between the siblings in Canada and those remaining in England was exchanged when they were adults in their thirties. The letters illustrate a range of attitudes towards clothing and discuss issues such as the

loan, bequethal and inheritance of clothes, having clothes that fit properly and having clothes that are 'respectable' and appropriate for certain situations. The focus of the archive analysis is concerned with female writer's attitudes to the purchase, care, alteration, repair and longevity of clothes, at that time.

The archive analysis will be complimented by interviews with three sisters who are direct descendents of the correspondents and who live in the same area of Birmingham as the original family. Interviews will also be carried out with descendents living in Canada and the USA, focusing on their attitudes towards clothing today. All of the proposed interviewees will be of a similar age to the original letter writers. Pilot interviews have been carried out and demonstrate the utility of this approach.

A third element of this work is the practical exploration of garment design and construction. This is being carried out at a costume museum collection and with garments sourced from vintage and second hand shops. The technical work of Harris (1999) and Kidwell (1979) will also be referenced here. The documentation of these outfits uses photography and the detailed drawing of garments and their cut and construction details. A similar study will be carried out on a number of contemporary garments when the interview process has been completed and when the type and source of garments worn by today's descendents is established. These will then assist in the development of a model

of the design characteristics, attitudes and meanings that support, choosing, caring and valuing clothes.

This work is being undertaken in the form of a case study. As the research progresses it is anticipated that through the process of interviews, exploration of garments and transcription and collation of letters the study will develop using the concept of grounded theory as described by Glaser and Strauss (1995) and expanded by Charmaz (2006)

The letters

The archive of letters provides a privileged view of the attitudes of this particular family, at that time. They comment on issues as diverse as the sinking of the Titanic to the death of a beloved spouse and amongst the family commentaries and discussions the issues that concern this study can be found. Interwoven with the business of 'keeping in touch' there is the sharing of family stories; the values, opinions and the meanings behind everyday items from clothes to photographs as well as the more serious topics such as money, jobs and housing. Of particular interest here are discussions of the inheritance of clothes among family members, the loaning of clothes between sisters and sister-in-law, clothes to wear for photographs, looking 'respectable', having the correct set of garments in order to make it possible to attend a certain event and having clothes that fit and also 'fit in'. All of the above concerns were serious considerations for the letter writers. For example, on the death of her husband

one of the sisters who had remained in England makes a point of mentioning the passing on of the clothes of her husband:

Father called to see me a fortnight ago and I told him you was sending him some money. I gave him some clothes of poor George and some of mine for his wife he promised to write me but I have not heard anything.

Extract of a letter written by a family member 1912

She gave her husbands clothes to her father. It was he who had sent the siblings for adoption after the death of his first wife. The extract illustrates the practice of passing on clothes after death, particularly within families. A further extract shows how it was felt impossible to attend important events like family funerals if appropriate sets of clothing were not available;

I was so sorry for George I went to see him but I could not go to the funeral as I could not get any black but my love was there with him.

Extract from a letter sent by family member 1912.

The 'black' being referred to here is that of black clothes to wear to a funeral. It is hard to imagine in the 21st century that not having access to the correct outfit could cause someone to miss such a significant event. When one of the sisters who remained in England decides as a young married woman to join her siblings in Canada a similar need to mention clothes arises again. Figure one shows her

wedding photograph. In a letter from Katie to her sister-in-law Laversa, written in 1912, the importance of having the clothes to do the trip is one of the factors stressed.

Just a few lines to tell you what a disappointment we have had. Isaac has been to look and he has tried every office in the town. They have all given us the same answer they say we can't go, every ship is full up until June 23rd except one, that is May 28th, but we can never be more vexed than what we are, because we are prepared to come in every way, I know we have the clothes she gave me and the money you sent we are ready.

Garment analysis

The analysis of the garments from the 1900s demonstrates how well constructed, sturdy clothes with a built in longevity were what women's wardrobes consisted of. This with the archive of letters shows how having the clothes for an important event such as travel was essential. An integral aspect of this study is the exploration of women's garment cut and construction in the 1900s and this is one of the ways in which the necessity of having clothes to rely can be demonstrated. A list of terms to describe garments has been established building on Pedley's (1998) work on museum collections. The list is then used systematically to construct a full description of each garment being examined. Each item of

clothing is then photographed and drawn. The focus of the study has been upon identifying what aspects of clothing of the earlier period might differ from those of today. The key features identified so far include:

- The cut and fit of a garment.
- The repair and alterability of a garment
- The structure of a garment
- The longevity of a garment

The importance of the cut and fit can be demonstrated by the stylised use of gores in skirts and the use of multiple seams and darts for shaping in bodices. The alterability of a garment is also facilitated by the use of large seams from 1.5cm to 4.0cm, large hems of sometimes as much as 7.0cm, and use of pin tucks on the shoulders of a bodice. This latter device allows for the letting out and the leaving in of pieces of bodice fabric after an alteration in case the bodice ever has to be adjusted again. The structure of a garment was of paramount importance at that time as it was seen as essential that a garment fitted. This has been put forward as one of the reasons for the slow uptake of ready-made clothes by women in the period under discussion (1890-1910) - slower than that of men. As pointed out by Tarrant (1994: 140):

Ready-made clothes were seen as cheap, shoddy goods,.....For women's ready-made clothes the sewing machine was not so

revolutionary, as fashion kept changing and styles in the late nineteenth century if anything became more fitted and therefore even more difficult to make.....Nevertheless, some dresses continued to be available ready-made through stores and mail order but compared with the volume of men's garments the quantity was very small.

It is important to bear in mind that the everyday clothes worn by ordinary people would often have been purchased second hand or passed down in families and although often adapted, would not always reflect up to date fashions. The issue of the provenance of women's clothes at that time is relevant to this work. It is important to be aware that women's may have been 'ready-made' in a workshop or factory or they could have been made for a customer by a tailor or dressmaker or even made at home by the wearer herself. This is discussed by Schorman (2003:66) when he states that:

As women's fashion cycled through this myriad of design details, there was no strong aesthetic or economic necessity for styles to evolve in a manner that rejected ready-mades or maintained an extreme polarity with men's clothing, yet both occurred. In an era when factory production and standardisation were increasingly the order of the day, women's clothing styles, in word and practice, venerated custom production and individual fit.

The use of lining that is stitched into the seams in skirts and bodices was indicative of the times and continued to be part of the structured look. When the lining was sewn into the seams of the main fabric it also gave a more structured and sturdy appearance and wear, as pointed out by Bradfield (1968: 263): 'The fact that this dress is so well lined has helped preserve it'. Figure two shows another example of this process. Other methods of enhancing the longevity of garments of that time can also be evidenced in the following practices: added tape or brush braid around the hem of a full length skirt prevented fraying as the skirt brushed the floor; the addition of a piece of tape stitched into the armholes on the inside of a garment and stretched across between the shoulder blades stabilised the back of a garment as can be seen in figure three. The use of manufactured perspiration protectors in the armpits of a garment, removable for laundering; and the addition of a thin piece of string which travels down the back of a button placket and onto which each button is threaded separately and held in place from behind are other examples.

The suitability for collection of garments that show wear and tear and garments that have been repaired has been discussed by Taylor (2002: 15):

The problem of wear and tear is a serious difficulty when collecting dress and condition is always a critical consideration.....Increasingly, however, some types of altered clothes would now be welcome in recognition of the social and cultural insights that alterations can give us.

However, it is not usually possible to know if the garment has been repaired for the use of its original owner or for the use of someone further down the line. The repairs that can be evidenced at the collection being used by this study and those that have been seen in garments purchased from vintage clothing shops are of a wide variety. They include: darning carried out on the sleeves and cuffs of a silk bodice, a process that today would only very rarely be done on a woollen garment if at all; the unpicking of a lining in a sleeve in order to repair what must have been a tear in a highly ornate and structured bodice; the adding in of a dart on each side of the front into a well made black silk bodice whose original shaping was all done very subtly in the seams as can be seen in figure four: and the removal of a petersham waist band so that the pleats of a delicately made light cotton skirt can be crudely doubled over again to make the skirt smaller

The work carried out so far on this aspect of the study suggests that: the importance of cut and fit in the period led to more structured methods of construction and that these also allowed for future alteration. It appears that garments which suggest an investment of time and money in their construction also evidence suitability for repair and alteration. The structure of garments also appears to assist in the longevity of clothing.

Garment reconstruction

The practical aspect of this study currently includes the reconstruction of garments from the 1900's, being undertaken using a process described by

Arnold (1973: 130) as 'the dressmaker's method'. This will assist in the further exploration of past methods of cut and construction. As Arnold explains:

One is to lay white cotton mull (a loosely woven lightweight material) over the garment, matching grain lines with the original fabric and to pin the cotton into shape at each dart and seam gently smoothing the surface until it has taken the same shape as the material beneath. The cotton is then lifted away, marked with a pencil on all darts and seams and then unpinned, providing a full scale pattern.

The whole process means that it is possible to produce a perfect copy of the garment pieces and of how it was cut and constructed, down to the smallest detail, such as the way in which the sleeve of a bodice was cut then or how all of the shaping was put into the seams. This work will be supported by the use of technical publications such as those of Harris (1999) and Kidwell (1979).

Drawbacks of the method are that garments have been worn and may have lost their original shape and may have been cut to fit an asymmetrical figure.

However, the method does give reconstructions that are an exact replica of a particular garment with the same cut and detail. This gives the garment maker a 'hands on' opportunity to discover, explore and understand the methods and cut used at that time.

The interviews

To test whether women today value some of the aspects of clothing cut and construction, evident in the analysis and archive, pilot interviews have been carried out with women of a similar age. A series of interviews are planned with the descendents of the Barnes family. The four key areas for enquiry were identified as;

- Influences on clothing choice
- Where and when clothes are purchased including vintage and second hand
- The care, wear, repair and making of clothes
- How clothes are valued and stories about clothes

The initial results from the pilot study seem to indicate that the values and meanings for women of their clothes are significant. Both pilot respondents stressed that the longevity of the wearability of their clothes were important. Fit and timelessness were also stressed and having the correct garment for a certain situation or social event was seen as important but not essential. Both of the participants in the interviews had at sometime repaired or altered an item of clothing and had kept clothes that had been owned by an older relative. They were aware of issues concerning the bequeathal and inheritance of clothing. The pilot interviews provided a useful test of some emerging ideas about the importance of certain variables and may provide a benchmark for evaluating the responses of the main respondents group of less design aware women.

Conclusion

Current literature indicates a set of ideas about the issues that are significant to today's women that provide a useful context for this study. As Partington points out the values and meanings of clothes have changed (2007:228):

Some designers discouraged identification with and emotional investments in objects, and encouraged 'objective' or 'disinterested' relationships with goods instead of traditionally 'feminine' ways of relating to goods were considered 'vulgar' or 'improper'.

This could be seen as an increasing emphasis on functionality. This reflects the theme that appears to be emerging from the study to date, of the fit of garments and their suitability for wearing to social events and situations. It is the combination of fit and 'fittingness' which appears to be most important when considering the well-being of the wearer. As pointed out by Schorman (2003: 68):

The manner in which women worked out these issues via dress can be seen in the importance, and many meanings, attached to the concept of a good fit.....This concept has psychological as well as physical aspects; clothing must not only fit but must be fitting.

The initial analysis of the attitudes expressed in the letters from the 1900s and the exploration of the cut and construction of period clothing, with the values and

meanings expressed in the interviews, provide some clear models to enable the future designing of garments with the same attributes. The principal of 'alterability' is anticipated to figure significantly, with fashion details valued more for functionality and longevity rather than as social signifiers, although 'fittingness' remains a key concept. It is intended that the project will ultimately enable the construction of future items of clothing, which have qualities that lend them to being treasured in the longer term, enabling them to contribute to the fashionable well-being of the women who might choose to wear them.

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Photographic images – figure 1 – Barnes family photograph

- figures 2, 3 and 4 Leicestershire County Council
Museums Service



Figure 1 – Katie Barnes wedding photograph 1909



Figure 2 – Lining sewn into seams c.1900 (photograph by P. Lockren)



Figure 3 – Tape to stabilize back of garment c. 1900 (Photograph by P. Lockren)



Figure 4 – Addition of a dart .1910 (Photograph by P. Lockren)