

## **Captured! Knitwear Lost and Found. A Digital Archive of Knitwear at Nottingham Trent University**

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The Fashion Knitwear course at Nottingham Trent University began in 1973 as a response to a recognised need for trained fashion designers in the industry who understood the behaviour of knitted fabric. The course philosophy sees no divide between the technologist and the designer.

As a new researcher I am using the opportunity provided by digital photography and scanning to record obscure, forgotten or lost knitting techniques to further innovation: Special focus on techniques employed to create a close fit to the body in a knitted garment, now increasingly made possible using recent computer automated knitting technology. This recorded material has been compiled into an archive for teaching purposes; to show students examples of good design, though not necessarily the high status design usually celebrated in museums and books on fashion. These types of material are very ephemeral because, unlike other antique heirlooms such as paintings or furniture, when the original owner dies their descendants typically do not perceive that they have any intrinsic value.

For most of its history, knitwear was worn underneath for warmth, never designed to be seen, its journey to the surface a symptom of the democratisation of dress during the 20 century. Machine knitted garments are often left out of histories of dress or mislabelled as woven and have thus become to all intents and purposes invisible. As a by-product I hope this archive will contribute to the identification of a language of knitwear. Knitwear is rarely described in aesthetic terms by historians and fashion journalists.

The archive has been made possible, by the university's location in the East Midlands of the United Kingdom, historically an important innovative hosiery and knitwear centre. An imperative to compiling this archive has been the recognition that the many guardians of this technical knowledge are now very aged.

Material has been collected specifically with the designer in mind, therefore it must be sufficiently inspirational to encourage technical inquiry and be detailed enough to allow this to happen. It is a diverse collection; comprising not only of garments but technical and historical paraphernalia such as old notebooks and the personal notes of technicians. Immediate concerns are that the photographic recording up to now has been quite amateur, although improvements in digital cameras enable better photographs by the amateur.

Digitising has enabled students to enlarge images, making clearer the construction; it has also enabled repeated use of the material without incurring damage from handling.

We have recorded:

- Artefacts in private collections.
- Difficult to access items held in museum stores and collections due to be broken up or auctioned off.
- We have permanently recorded themed items brought together temporarily, for specific exhibitions.

With a view to making the images and supporting background information available online as the majority of these items are rare and often inaccessible even to specialist researchers.

The proposal paper highlights the issues we faced when searching for and recording the material and discusses the creative benefits of having access to a digital archive of this type.