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Fashioning the Curator: The Chinese at the Lambing Flat Folk Museum

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Introduction

In March 2015, I visited the Lambing Flat Folk Museum (established 1967) in the "cherry capital of Australia", the town of Young, New South Wales, in preparation for a student excursion. Like other Australian folk museums, this museum focuses on the ordinary and the everyday of rural life, and is heavily reliant on local history, local historians, volunteers, and donated objects for the collection.

It may not sound as though the Lambing Flat Folk Museum (LFFM) holds much potential for a fashion curator, as fashion exhibitions have become high points of innovation in exhibition design. It is quite a jolt to return to old style folk museums, when travelling shows such as *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* (Metropolitan Museum of Art 2011 – V&A Museum 2015) or *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier* (V&A Museum 2011 – NGV 2014) are popping up around the globe. The contrast stimulated this author to think on the role and the power of curators. This paper will show that the potential for fashion as a vehicle for demonstrating ideas other than through rubrics of design or history has been growing. We all wear dress. We express identity, politics, status, age, gender, social values, and mental state through the way we dress each and every day. These key issues are also explored in many museum exhibitions.

Small museums often have an abundance of clothing. For them, it is a case of not only managing and caring for growing collections but also curating objects in a way that communicates regional and often national identity, as well as narrating stories in meaningful ways to audiences. This paper argues that the way in which dress is curated can greatly enhance temporary and permanent exhibitions. Fashion curation is on the rise (Riegels Melchior). This paper looks at why this is so, the potential for this specialisation in curation, the research required, and the sensitivity needed in communicating ideas in exhibitions. It also suggests how fashion curation skills may facilitate an increasing demand.

Caring for the Audience

The paper draws on a case study of how Chinese people at the LFFM are portrayed. The Chinese came to the Young district during the 1860s gold rush. While many people often think the Chinese were sojourners (Rolls), that is, they found gold and returned to China, many actually settled in regional Australia (McGowan; Couchman; Frost). At Young there were riots against the Chinese miners, and this narrative is illustrated at the museum.

In examining the LFFM, this paper points to the importance of caring for the audience as well as objects, knowing and acknowledging the current and potential audiences. Caring for how the objects are received and perceived is vital to the work of curators. At this museum, the stereotypic portrayal of Chinese people, through a "coolie" hat, a fan, and two dolls dressed in costume, reminds us of the increased professionalisation of the museum sector in the last 20 years. It also reminds us of the need for good communication through both the objects and texts. Audiences have become more sophisticated, and their expectations have increased. Displays and accompanying texts that do not reflect in depth research, knowledge, and sensitivities can result in viewers losing interest quickly.

Not long into my visit I began thinking of the potential reaction by the Chinese graduate students. In a tripartite model called the "museum experience", Falk and Dierking argue that the social context, personal context, and physical context affect the visitor's experience (5). The social context of who we visit with influences enjoyment. Placing myself in the students' shoes sharpened reactions to some of the displays. Curators need to be mindful of a wide range of audiences.

The excursion was to be not so much a history learning activity, but a way for students to develop a personal interest in museology and to learn the role museums can play in society in general, as well as in small communities. In this case the personal context was also a professional context. What message would they get?

Communication in Museums

Studies by Falk et al. indicate that museum visitors only view an exhibition for 30 minutes before "museum fatigue" sets in (249–257). The physicality of being in a museum can affect the museum experience. Hence, many institutions responded to these studies by placing the key information and objects in the introductory areas of an exhibition, before the visitor gets bored. As Stephen Bitgood argues, this can become self-fulfilling, as the reaction by the exhibition designers can then be to place all the most interesting material early in the path of the audience, leaving the remainder as mundane displays (196).

Bitgood argues there is no museum fatigue. He suggests that there are other things at play which curators need to heed, such as giving visitors choice and opportunities for interaction, and avoiding overloading the audience with information and designing poorly laid-out exhibitions that have no breaks or resting points. All these factors contribute to viewers becoming both mentally and physically tired. Rather than placing the onus on the visitor, he contends there are controllable factors the museum can attend to. One of his recommendations is to be provocative in communication. Stimulating exhibitions are more likely to engage the visitor, minimising boredom and tiredness (197). Xerxes Mazda recommends treating an exhibition like a good story, with a beginning, a dark moment, a climax, and an ending. The LFFM certainly has those elements, but they are not translated into curation that gives a compelling narration that holds the visitors' attention. Object labels give only rudimentary information, such as: "Wooden Horse collar/very rare/donated by Mr Allan Gordon." Without accompanying context and engaging language, many visitors could find it difficult to relate to, and actively reflect on, the social narrative that the museum's objects could reflect.

Text plays an important role in museums, particularly this museum. Communication skills of the label writers are vital to enhancing the museum visit. Louise Ravelli, in writing on museum texts, states that "communication needs to be more explicit and more reflexive—to bring implicit assumptions to the surface" (3). This is particularly so for the LFFM. Posing questions and using an active voice can provoke the viewer.

The power of text can be seen in one particular museum object. In the first gallery is a banner that contains blatant racist text. Bringing racism to the surface through reflexive labelling can be powerful. So for this museum communication needs to be sensitive and informative, as well as pragmatic. It is not just a case of being reminded that Australia has a long history of racism towards non-Anglo Saxon migrants. A sensitive approach in label-writing could ask visitors to reflect on Australia's long and continued history of racism and relate it to the contemporary migration debate, thereby connecting the present day to dark historical events. A question such as, "How does Australia deal with racism towards migrants today?" brings issues to the surface. Or, more provocatively, "How would I deal with such racism?" takes the issue to a personal level, rather than using language to distance the issue of racism to a national issue. Museums are more than repositories of objects. Even a small underfunded museum can have great impact on the viewer through the language they use to make meaning of their display.

The Lambing Flat Roll-up Banner at the LFFM

The "destination" object of the museum in Young is the Lambing Flat Roll-up Banner. Those with a keen interest in Australian history and politics come to view this large sheet of canvas that elicits part of the narrative of the Lambing Flat Riots, which are claimed to be germane to the White Australia Policy (one of the very first pieces of legislation after the Federation of Australia was *The Immigration Restriction Act 1901*).

On 30 June 1861 a violent anti-Chinese riot occurred on the goldfields of Lambing Flat (now known as Young). It was the culmination of eight months of growing conflict between European and Chinese miners. Between 1,500 and 2,000 Europeans lived and worked in these goldfields, with little government authority overseeing the mining regulations. Earlier, in November 1860, a group of disgruntled European miners marched behind a German brass band, chasing off 500 Chinese from the field and destroying their tents. Tensions rose and fell until the following June, when the large banner was painted and paraded to gather up supporters: "...two of their leaders carrying in advance a magnificent flag, on which was written in gold letters – NO CHINESE! ROLL UP! ROLL UP! ..." (qtd. in Coates 40). Terrified, over 1,270 Chinese took refuge 20 kilometres away on James Roberts's property, "Currawong".

The National Museum of Australia commissioned an animation of the event, *The Harvest of Endurance*. It may seem obvious, but the animators indicated the difference between the Chinese and the Europeans through dress, regardless that the Chinese wore western dress on the goldfields once the clothing they brought with them wore out (McGregor and McGregor 32). Nonetheless, Chinese expressions of masculinity differed. Their pigtails, their shoes, and their hats were used as shorthand in cartoons of the day to express the anxiety felt by many European settlers. A more active demonstration was reported in *The Argus*: "... one man ... returned with eight pigtails attached to a flag, glorifying in the work that had been done" (6). We can only imagine this trophy and the de-masculinisation it caused.

The 1,200 x 1,200 mm banner now lays flat in a purpose-built display unit. Viewers can see that it was not a hastily constructed work. The careful drafting of original pencil marks can be seen around the circus styled font: red and blue, with the now yellow shadowing. The banner was tied with red and green ribbon of which small remnants remain attached.

The McCarthy family had held the banner for 100 years, from the riots until it was loaned to the Royal Australian Historical Society in November 1961. It was given to the LFFM when it opened six years later. The banner is given key positioning in the museum, indicating its importance to the community and its place in the region's memory. Just whose memory is narrated becomes apparent in the displays. The voice of the Chinese is missing.

Memory and Museums

Museums are interested in memory. When visitors come to museums, the work they do is to claim, discover, and sometimes rekindle memory (Smith; Crane; Williams)—and even to reshape memory (Davidson). Fashion constantly plays with memory: styles, themes, textiles, and colours are repeated and recycled. "Cutting and pasting" presents a new context from one season to the next. What better avenue to arouse memory in museums than fashion curation? This paper argues that fashion exhibitions fit within the museum as a "theatre of memory", where social memory, commemoration, heritage, myth, fantasy, and desire are played out (Samuels).

In the past, institutions and fashion curators often had to construct academic frameworks of "history" or "design" in order to legitimise fashion exhibitions as a serious pursuit. Exhibitions such as *Fashion and Politics* (New York 2009), *Fashion India: Spectacular Capitalism* (Oslo 2014) and *Fashion as Social Energy* (Milan 2015) show that fashion can explore deeper social concerns and political issues.

The Rise of Fashion Curators

The fashion curator is a relative newcomer. What would become the modern fashion curator made inroads into museums through ethnographic and anthropological collections early in the 20th century. Fashion as "history" soon followed into history and social museums. Until the 1990s, the fashion curator in a museum was seen as, and closely associated with, the fashion historian or craft curator. It could be said that James Laver (1899–1975) or Stella Mary Newton (1901–2001) were the earliest modern fashion curators in museums. They were also fashion historians.

However, the role of fashion curator as we now know it came into its own right in the 1970s. Nadia Buick asserts that the first fashion exhibition, *Fashion: An Anthology by Cecil Beaton*, was held at the Victoria and Albert Museum, curated by the famous fashion photographer Cecil Beaton. He was not a museum employee, a trained curator, or even a historian (15). The museum did not even collect contemporary fashion—it was a new idea put forward by Beaton. He amassed hundreds of pieces of fashion items from his friends of elite society to complement his work.

Radical changes in museums since the 1970s have been driven by social change, new expectations and new technologies. Political and economic pressures have forced museum professionals to shift their attention from their collections towards their visitors. There has been not only a growing number of diverse museums but also a wider range of exhibitions, fashion exhibitions included. However, as museums and the exhibitions they mount have become more socially inclusive, this has been somewhat slow to filter through to the fashion exhibitions.

I assert that the shift in fashion exhibitions came as an outcome of new writing on fashion as a social and political entity through Jennifer Craik's *The Face of Fashion*. This book has had an influence, beyond academic fashion theorists, on the way in which fashion exhibitions are curated. Since 1997, Judith Clark has curated landmark exhibitions, such as *Malign Muses: When Fashion Turns Back* (Antwerp 2004), which examine the idea of what fashion is rather than documenting fashion's historical evolution. Dress is recognised as a vehicle for complex issues. It is even used to communicate a city's cultural capital and its metropolitan modernity as "fashion capitals" (Breward and Gilbert). Hence the reluctant but growing willingness for dress to be used in museums to critically interrogate, beyond the celebratory designer retrospectives.

Fashion Curation

Fashion curators need to be "brilliant scavengers" (Peoples). Curators such as Clark pick over what others consider as remains—the neglected, the dissonant—bringing to the fore what is forgotten, where items retrieved from all kinds of spheres are used to fashion exhibitions that reflect the complex mix of the tangible and intangible that is present in fashion. Allowing the brilliant scavengers to pick over the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life can make for exciting exhibitions. Clothing of the everyday can be used to narrate complex stories. We only need think of the black layette worn by Baby Azaria Chamberlain—or the shoe left on the tarmac at Darwin Airport, having fallen off the foot of Mrs Petrov, wife of the Russian diplomat, as she was forced onto a plane. The ordinary remnants of the Chinese miners do not appear to have been kept. Often, objects can be transformed by subsequent significant events.

Museums can be sites of transformation for its audiences. Since the late 1980s, through the concept of the New Museum (Vergo), fashion as an exhibition theme has been used to draw in wider museum audiences and to increase visitor numbers. The clothing of Vivienne Westwood, (*34 Years in Fashion* 2005, NGA) Kylie Minogue (*Kylie: An Exhibition* 2004–2005, Powerhouse Museum), or Princess Grace (*Princess Grace: Style Icon* 2012, Bendigo Art Gallery) drew in the crowds, quantifying the relevance of museums to funding bodies. As Marie Riegels Melchior notes, fashion is fashionable in museums. What is interesting is that the New Museum's refrain of social inclusion (Sandell) has yet to be wholly embraced by art museums. There is tension between the fashion and museum worlds: a "collision of the fashion and art worlds" (Battersby). Exhibitions of elite designer clothing worn by celebrities have been seen as very commercial operations, tainting the intellectual and academic reputations of cultural institutions.

What does fashion curation have to do with the banner mentioned previously? It would be miraculous for authentic clothing worn by Chinese miners to surface now. In revising the history of Lambing Flat, fashion curators need to employ methodologies of absence. As Clynk and Peoples have shown, by examining archives, newspaper advertisements, merchants' account books, and other material that incidentally describes the business of clothing, absence can become present. While the later technology of photography often shows "Sunday best" fashions, it also illustrates the ordinary and everyday dress of Chinese men carrying out business transactions (MacGowan; Couchman). The images of these men bring to mind the question: were these the children of men, or indeed the men themselves, who had their pigtailed violently cut off years earlier?

The banner was also used to show that there are quite detailed accounts of events from local and national newspapers of the day. These are accessible online. Accounts of the Chinese experience may have been written up in Chinese newspapers of the day. Access to these would be limited, if they still exist. Historian Karen Schamberger reminds us of the truism: "history is written by the victors" in her observations of a re-enactment of the riots at the Lambing Flat Festival in 2014. The Chinese actors did not have speaking parts. She notes:

The brutal actions of the European miners were not explained which made it easier for audience members to distance themselves from [the Chinese] and be comforted by the actions of a 'white hero' James Roberts who... sheltered the Chinese miners at the end of the re-enactment. (9)

Elsewhere, just out of town at the Chinese Tribute Garden (created in 1996), there is evidence of presence. Plaques indicating donors to the garden carry names such as Judy Chan, Mrs King Chou, and Mr and Mrs King Lam. The musically illustrious five siblings of the Wong family, who live near Young, were photographed in the Discover Central NSW tourist newspaper in 2015 as a drawcard for the Lambing Flat Festival. There is "endurance", as the title of NMA animation scroll highlights.

Conclusion

Absence can be turned around to indicate presence. The "presence of absence" (Meyer and Woodthorpe) can be a powerful tool. Seeing is the pre-eminent sense used in museums, and objects are given priority; there are ways of representing evidence and narratives, and describing relationships, other than fashion presence. This is why I argue that dress has an important role to play in museums. Dress is so specific to time and location. It marks specific occasions, particularly at times of social transitions: christening gowns, bar mitzvah shawls, graduation gowns, wedding dresses, funerary shrouds. Dress can also demonstrate the physicality of a specific body: in the extreme, jeans show the physicality of presence when the body is removed. The fashion displays in the museum tell part of the region's history, but the distraction of the poor display of the dressed mannequins in the LFFM gets in the way of a "good story".

While rioting against the Chinese miners may cause shame and embarrassment, in Australia we need to accept that this was not an isolated event. More formal, less violent, and regulated mechanisms of entry to Australia were put in place, and continue to this day. It may be that a fashion curator, a brilliant scavenger, may unpick the prey for viewers, placing and spacing objects and the visitor, designing in a way to enchant or horrify the audience, and keeping interest alive throughout the exhibition, allowing spaces for thinking and memories. Drawing in those who have not been the audience, working on the absence through participatory modes of activities, can be powerful for a community. Fashion curators—working with the body, stimulating ethical and conscious behaviours, and constructing dialogues—can

undoubtedly act as a vehicle for dynamism, for both the museum and its audiences. As the number of museums grow, so should the number of fashion curators.

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