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Motivations for private collecting

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Abstract

Private collectors of dress are motivated by different psychological desires to hunt for, and acquire objects. This article is based on the oral testimonies of four female collectors, revealing interesting, sometimes unconscious, drives for collecting specific dress objects. The research findings show that the collectors are not always aware of their motivations, but when questioned all four women were able to articulate a purpose for collecting the specific category of objects. Emotional value was placed on the collections as well as the process for acquiring them. The women's habits differ in terms of storage and display, and in most cases the objects were preserved with little, if any, wear. The objects were cherished and admired by the collectors, who showed passion when talking about their collections.

The research objectives were designed to help understand why the specific dress objects were collected and what they represented. It was also interesting to note that in some cases the wearing of the clothes created a new persona, a longing for nostalgia for times past. In one case shoes represented a more masculine, sexual identity, for working in a male dominated environment. For one woman collecting Edwardian children's clothes they represented a fantasy of childhood, a romantic image of what might have been.

Three of the women were not consciously aware that they were accumulating collections and the result of being interviewed changed their view of their behaviour. These women are connoisseurs, having accumulated knowledge about the history of their dress objects. Museums acquire and borrow dress objects from known collectors, and without the passion and enthusiasm of private collectors we would not be privileged to see many of the exhibitions available today.

Motivations for private collecting

In his seminal text *Collecting in a Consumer Society* (1995) Russell W. Belk (1995) proposed that modern hedonists live out their desires through the consumption of goods. Other texts contained herein have made explicit that collecting dress is in many respects, unlike collecting other media, not least because the acquisition is not strategic. Clothes are usually bought to be worn and the fact that a group of dress might at some point constitute a collection often 'creeps up' on the wearer. Using oral testimony as the core methodology, this paper explores some individual and intriguing personal motivations for four private collectors of women's dress.

All four women live in the south of England, are in their forties and earn higher than average income. Three of the women, Alex, Sonia and Sarah work in the creative industries, whilst Sandra works in the public sector and they all share an interest in highly crafted dress. Alex collects Victorian and Edwardian children's clothes for display in her home. Sonia buys clothes made in the 1950s and '60s, to wear as well as display. Sarah has a wide range of couture and designer clothes dating from the 1950s to the present day. Sandra collects shoes from well-known top level designers including Salvatore Ferragamo, Manolo Blahnik and Vivienne Westwood. There follows a testimony led narrative, which is juxtaposed with quotations from core critical collections thinkers and dress-specific authorial observations, including material culture evidence.

Although Susan Pearce (1995) does not focus upon dress as a media, she is aware of the potential of dress to convey narrative. A discussion of a military jacket from 1891 includes the observation that,

'...it probably represented a time when life seemed more exciting and more meaningful...' (1994:20). And, this statement is certainly pertinent to the testimony gleaned from the four interviewees.

Alex, who collects young girls Edwardian dresses explains her collecting motivation thus,

'I like to collect items that feel romantic or I can imagine / create the history of that item, a better history, a nicer past and lovely memories. I suppose I'm buying a history that's better than the one I have - I'm collecting other peoples' lives and replacing mine with a fantasy of a romantic past.

Faded and worn with love. That's the fantasy.'

(Alex, 2015)



Fig. 1. Young girl's Edwardian Dress, 1900. Collection Alex. Author's own photograph.

Csikszentmihalyi (1993) discusses how objects define the self and give us the opportunity for self-regulation, helping to stabilise our identity. He believes that objects are external props to support the definition of the self. Sarah collects 'edgy' fashion by designers including Alexander McQueen, Rick Owen, Jean Muir and Rifat Özbek. She reflects that,

'I've realised I put an awful lot of time and energy into my clothes or taking care of them, in a way, and I think that that's... that is a connection, like I say, some part of my psyche to that time. It's almost like nursing a part of myself, if that sounds funny.'

(Sarah, 2015)

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1993) theorizes that collections demonstrate three things. First, objects tell us stories about their owner's power and information about their social status. Second, objects reveal a journey through time, mementos from the past as well as signposts for the future. Third, objects provide concrete evidence of relationships and social networks; as in the case of Sarah who works as a PR in the fashion industry and her collection reflects relationships developed throughout her career.

John Dewy, American Philosopher, writes that, ‘...the “me” cannot exist without the “mine” (1922: 82). This might be especially pertinent to dress as a media and is certainly echoed by Sandra’s attitude towards collecting,

‘For me shoes are not about fantasy they are not about me being someone else they are about me. They are about me. Who I am. My identity and how I represent myself in the world. And what they do is – reinforce to me... if you look at what I have got you can see - its almost like they show me I know who I am. The ones I give away are the ones that I have kind of bought where they are not quite me, so they have gone. The ones I keep are the ones that do represent, and are how I want to show myself in the world.’

(Sandra, 2016)

During early discussions it became apparent that some of the collectors seemed to be collecting dress for a life they only dreamed of, to try to complete something that was missing or might never happen. Sarah reflects,

‘I think I have definitely bought for different aspects of myself. In the past I’ve bought amazing ball gowns [] harking to a glamorous life that I just don’t have. And... costumes - one of the things that I bought once was a ballet tutu - I did actually wear it to a club, which was [laughs] for New Year’s Eve - and it was... it was a costume, it wasn’t an item of... it was pure fantasy and in my mind, when I went to this party - it was for New Year - I dressed as a ballerina and I completely got in character and did the makeup’.

(Sarah, 2015)

Sonia, who collects vintage clothing and accessories, is an Audrey Hepburn fan, considers her to be her ideal woman and collects the style of clothing she wore,

‘Well, I think Audrey Hepburn had an awful lot of class and taste and she had a style, but my body is not Audrey Hepburn, because I’m a little bit voluptuous and little pocket-bean-ness - as in - short. She was very gorgeous... she was gorgeous as in slim, perfectly formed, you know, flat chest, ballerina-like, when I’m not really any of those things but I still like that style.’

(Sonia, 2015)

Sonia's motivation for collecting dress is context specific – she collects the type of dress she imagines wearing for a trip on a luxury liner in the 1920s. Pearce (1994) explains that specific historic events and periods can embody associations, which are conferred onto objects and this is certainly the case for Sonia

'...we often talk about - us going on a cruise - haven't been yet, but, God - I think I can go on a cruise round the world three times and we'd have enough attire to change every day. Also, as well, I've always had this feeling of being, or living, or maybe a previous life, in a castle, and dining and dressing for dinner. So I've purchased enough clothes just in case maybe, one day, that does happen, yes.'

(Sonia, 2015)

Alex is also drawn to the 1920s but this is because she feels that the loose linear silhouette suits her body type.

'Erm... I tend to be drawn to 20's, early 1900s, 20's 'clothes wise'. I think it's probably because it suits my shape and I can sometimes find things that fit me. Erm... I can't put it into any other category. I think its colour, fabric, silk, beading...'

(Alex, 2015)

Alex is a collector-wearer and her choice of purchase is partly determined by what she thinks best suits her. This is an element of collecting that is specific to dress. Sonia, is drawn to this period for other reasons,

'Well, I surround myself with a certain sort of stuff being eclectic to quite tactile, to a [] era, which is quite vast, as in, I would say from the 20's all the way through to about the 70's.'

(Sonia, 2015)

Display is a key component of collecting and the context. Alex does not collect to wear but rather to display, in her current home and different styles, currently stored away, for homes she imagines she might reside in the future.

'I display them when I can because it looks nice, and then I have a fancy house in my head that has other rooms with other colours and other things...'

(Alex, 2015)

Alex mentioned on several occasions that she was collecting to form a legacy for her daughter. Pearce highlights the importance of the object as a sign, and explains that, '...the sign which carries meaning is able to do so because, unlike we ourselves who must die, it bears an 'external' relationship to the receding past, and it is this that we experience as the power of the 'actual object,' (1994: 25). Sandra also sees her collection of shoes as her legacy, one that will be passed on to her friends:

'I have always said that when people leave the church – because when I die I will be cremated, that they should be lined up outside and people can choose a pair to remember me by'.

(Sandra, 2016)

Celebrity status inflates the prices of dress, particularly when they are deceased.

'I did buy an Alexander McQueen black jacket on eBay - pre his death approximately 2008 (as an investment piece, I never wore it...!). Can't remember what I paid, but I would say I got approximately 30% return on it, selling in 2012.'

(Sarah, 2016)

Another important factor adding value to the object can be whom the clothing was designed for and worn by. For example the clothing belonging to Diana, Princess of Wales, has been extensively publicised, sold at auction and exhibited. As Kopytoff (2010) explains it's the life of the object that defines its worth, and continues, 'Biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure,' (2010: 67).

'I worked for a couple of designers... Liza Bruce. And she.. I have... she was known for swimwear. But I have... the only... I've kept two items of hers that I think are really iconic. One of which is the... it's a mesh metallic gauze dress that Kate Moss wore at the height of her career... just as she was coming into the public arena. She wore it with a pair of knickers. Kate Moss wore hers... hers was in silver and the one I've got is in gold and I've kept that.'

(Sarah, 2015)

Pearce explains, 'Powerful emotions are aroused by the objects which the objects seem to return, stimulating a need to gather more and more of the same kind,' (1992: 81). Sandra continually used the word 'beautiful' when describing her shoes. So beautiful that many are unworn and kept as object to be displayed rather than worn,

'There are a pair of Manolo Blahnik's up in cupboard, in the box. They are actually exquisite. They are a kitten heel, not a high heel. I have not worn them yet because they have still got their beautiful pale 'suedy' bottom and they would get mullered'.

(Sandra, 2016)



Fig. Manolo Blahnik shoes, collection Sandra. Photograph author's own.

(Sarah, 2015)

The interview process re-awakened the private collectors excitement about their collections. They valued the opportunity to show and talk about their dress objects. In all four interviews the individuals had not been aware that they would be considered as collectors.

Each woman was articulate when asked about their collection and practices of collecting, yet interestingly none had previously considered themselves to be collectors. There is a theory (discussed in the Introduction) that collectors are born not made. Sarah has always collected,

'Only now, actually, now the fact I'm moving and I'm... I've moved a year ago, and that forced me to look at everything that I own and then I did realise I am a collector. But until that point - no. But as I look back, I've always been interested in vintage and I've always bought things because I've thought there's a value to it, there's something about it that is interesting and that would inform me as a point of research. Whether

that defines me as a collector, I don't know, but I have always - yea - collected things. When I went to school, I collected rubbers - I had a rubber collection, you know?!

(Sarah, 2015)

The act of acquiring collected objects can be as significant as owning them. These oral testimonies show that collecting dress is a personal motivation, bound up in emotional aspects of their lives. Alex collects to make the past meaningful, whilst also acquiring specific items for her daughter. And, distinctively, display and context are critical to her process. Sonia collects clothes to wear, dressing up to escape to a fantasy world. Sarah collects couture fashion, sometimes to wear, but mostly to appreciate the workmanship and luxury materials used. Sandra uses her shoes to play out other personas, and displays those she thinks are too beautiful or precious to wear.

Discussing practices of collecting dress provides a fascinating insight not only into practices of collecting and the type of objects collected but also into the lives and dreams of the women who collect them.

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