

TEXTILES AND DRESS FROM BELOW: ORDINARY AND EVERYDAY TEXTILES AND DRESS IN MUSEUMS AND HISTORIC HOUSES

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[SLIDE 1] Introduction:

Twenty thousand garments are stored at Killerton House National Trust in Devon, under the supervision of dress curator Shelley Tobin and her team. It is the National Trusts biggest dress collection, and was primarily collected by Paulise de Bush, a dress enthusiast in the 1940s and 50s. Later, her friend and a fellow dress fanatic Atherton Harrison ensured de Bush's collection found an appropriate home, by negotiating for Killerton to take the collection in its entirety. Here, in 1977, the garments were catalogued for the first time.

This paper will consider my experiences of handling items from this collection during my PhD research in 2015; how historic curatorial treatments on these garments influenced my reading of them and how these influences may be mitigated.

[SLIDE 2] The vast collection of garments now at Killerton House only survived due to the work of Atherton Harrison in finding them a permanent home. Harrison kept the Killerton House Dress Collection relevant and desirable by producing displays of the garments in the house every year, until her retirement in 1994. Without Harrison, Killerton House dress collection wouldn't be what it is today. As Shelley Tobin has noted, "it is as much Atherton's legacy as Paulise's."¹

The mid-twentieth century was a period when numerous dress collections were being established.

[SLIDE 3] Maidstone Museum's Costume & Textiles department was founded in the 1950s; Springhill National Trust's in the 1960s; while the first official fashion curator at the V&A was employed in 1957. Dress collections set up during this mid-twentieth century period, employed what we would now recognise as unorthodox methods, to display and animate their garments. Doris Langley Moore, who founded the Fashion Museum in Bath in 1963, for example, is famous for believing that seeing historic garments on living models helped the viewer to fully appreciate the relationship between garment, undergarment and body. To this end, she produced two books which featured famous faces, such as Vanessa Redgrave and Vivien Leigh, wearing the nineteenth century garments from her collection.² Many of these garments now reside in internationally important museum dress collections. During this period therefore, the professions of dress curation and mounting were in their youth, with these practitioners experimenting with their methods.

I consulted Killerton House collection for my research into the garments worn by British Quaker women during the late nineteenth century. After 1860, these religious women had begun to incorporate fashionable dress into their wardrobes, after centuries of strict religious prescriptions regarding dress were relaxed. [*I'm happy to discuss my research into Quaker dress with anyone interested*].

[SLIDE 4] Killerton holds many everyday accessories belonging to the lifelong Quaker, Elizabeth Pettipher Cash, who became one case study for my doctorate. Cash wore, what is commonly known as 'Plain' dress, which was a strikingly austere, fossilised style of clothing, recommended by the Religious Society of Friends until the mid-nineteenth century. However, some Quaker women

¹ Email Correspondence with Shelley Tobin. 13th April 2015. See Appendix 1.2 Interviews.

² *The Woman in Fashion* (1949) and *The Child in Fashion* (1953)

continued to wear the style of clothing into the twentieth century. Cash wore it on a daily basis until her death in 1894. Few examples of Plain dress from the latter half of the nineteenth century have survived – probably due to their Plain and therefore unexceptional appearance - so the Killerton collection is of note. Plain dress was composed of full-length high-necked gowns with gathered skirts and modest petticoats; large shawls, in un-patterned fabric and muted shades, and tall, silk poke or bibi bonnets with wide ribbons tied under the chin. Cotton and linen accessories, including kerchiefs, caps and fichus were also important.

[SLIDE 5] Killerton House holds two of Cash's Quaker bonnets dated to the mid-nineteenth century, alongside her other everyday linen and knitted accessories. Due to Cash wearing the style of dress until 1894 however, these garments could well be decades older. Quaker Plain garments are particularly difficult to date due to their simple cuts, lack of fashionable embellishment, colour or pattern, and their fixed stylistic appearance across many decades. It is during a day of active research viewing Cash's items in the Killerton collection, a day which left me deeply puzzled, that my story really begins.

This paper is a reflection on my own experiences that day, and how they altered the manner in which my research progressed. It is a reflection on how I came to realise that keeping everyday garments safe and unaltered in dress collections has historically been a fragile thing; especially when those garments are strikingly plain in their appearance.

This paper is born from discussions with the current dress curator of Killerton House, Shelley Tobin. It is by no means a character or professional assassination of the self-styled Costume Consultant, Atherton Harrison; nor the curatorial practices which she undertook. It is simply an open consideration of how these historic practices, today alter our handling and readings of garments, when approaching them for research purposes.

Bonnets:

[SLIDE 6] The most visually outstanding among Cash's surviving garments in Killerton House dress collection were her two bonnets, strikingly and incongruously decorated with large coloured ostrich feathers. These appeared very far removed from Cash's lifelong commitment to moderation in her dress. Both bonnets are dated by Killerton records to around 1850 - though, as already noted, could easily be decades older.

Produced in lustrous black satin, the first bonnet features a twenty-three centimetre deep brim and is lined with cream silk. The tall pleated crown, typical of the Quaker bonnet style, is made of buckram. The twenty inch long black ribbon ties are not original - being made of a raw black silk of a slightly different shade to the main bonnet.

The second bonnet, identical in size and shape, is made of a dark blue ribbed silk. The original ribbons survive, pinned to the brim. The main body of the bonnets are in excellent condition, testifying to the high-quality fabric and production employed in the bonnets' construction nearly one-hundred and seventy years ago.

As these images show however, it is evident that both bonnets have undergone radical decorative alterations. Most notably, on the brim of the black satin bonnet, sit three obtrusive dyed ostrich feathers; two small in bright orange and one large in peach and brown shades. The blue bonnet meanwhile sports one large un-dyed ostrich feather. **[SLIDE 7]** Laid across the brim, the feathers are crudely attached, using a rough loop stitch in black cotton thread and cream cotton thread, net and a modern safety pin.

We might surmise these alterations are the result of a local amateur dramatic society in the early twentieth century, when the use of altered historic garments was common; or that they were adapted for fancy dress before being donated. But no.

The origins of their incompatible adornments became clear through examination of Killerton House curatorial numbering practices and through the testimony of their current custodian, Shelley Tobin.

[SLIDE 8] The accession number etched into the calamus of the un-dyed feather, differed from those sewn into the bonnets. Consultation of the collections' records, revealed that the feathers were dated to the early 1900s and were acquired by the dress collection in 1981, whereas the bonnets were dated to the 1850s and had been donated in 1982. Therefore, both items were donated once it was already a formally held and catalogued collection under the supervision of the National Trust. These records illustrated that the feathers and bonnets were given to the museum by unrelated donors, in different years, from distant geographical locations. There was no correlation between the bonnets and the feathers before they entered the collection; and they were certainly not physically joined.

The current curator Shelley Tobin revealed in our discussions about this anomaly, how the then 'costume consultant' Atherton Harrison, did some rather unorthodox things with the collection.³ Whilst Tobin acknowledges that Harrison played a vital role in the creation and management of the dress collection during her career, she also confessed that Harrison carried out alterations and made additions to garments when they did not meet her display requirements. According to Tobin, Harrison employed a group of 'Thursday ladies' who would 'meet to do repairs and probably sewed feathers on bonnets too.'⁴ Harrison however had ceased to employ these women by the time Tobin joined in 1992, as the first official curator of the dress collection.

So, the feathers were attached to the bonnets sometime between their donation in 1982 and Tobin's arrival in 1992. They therefore, would have been attached to the bonnets under the curatorial oversight of Atherton Harrison, for aesthetic display purposes. **[SLIDE 9]** As Tobin commented, "It makes us cringe these days, but [...] in spite of what we think of Atherton [Harrison]'s displays, the collection would not have been around without her efforts."⁵

However, their continued preservation in the manner in which Harrison adapted them, is problematic from a researchers perspective. Without my scrupulous examination of the items, my finding of the differing accession numbers, and my determination to get to the bottom of the reasons behind their frankly bizarre appearance, I may have simply read them at face value. Initially I wondered:

- Was this the work of Cash herself?
- If so, why had she done this?

The specialist knowledge of Quaker dress I had acquired by this point of my studies enabled me to identify that their appearance was deeply un-Quakerly. These two questions were quickly discounted by applying a scrupulous methodology to analyse the garments, drawing on my familiarity with Quaker aesthetics, as well as me sitting on the floor of Killerton House dress collection, leafing through their hand-written records from the 1980s. Researchers are well-placed to help dress

³ Email Correspondence with Shelley Tobin. 13th April 2015. See Appendix 1.2 Interviews. According to Tobin, Atherton Harrison was not a professional dress Curator, but was a self-styled 'consultant'.

⁴ Email Correspondence with Shelley Tobin. 13th April 2015. See Appendix 1.2 Interviews.

⁵ Email Correspondence with Shelley Tobin. 13th April 2015. See Appendix 1.2 Interviews.

collections unearth and clarify exactly this type of detail, illustrating one of the mutual benefits of allowing researchers access.

It's easy to imagine the misrepresentation these items could suffer, however, if a researcher were less willing to scrutinise the authenticity of their appearance. Since my research took place, Cash's items have been professionally photographed and are now viewable on the National Trust collections website. Only one of her bonnets, the one of black satin, has been included. It has been photographed with the feathers in situ and there is no mention of their later addition in the item summary.

For my research, the knowledge that the feathers were attached sometime in the 1980s by museum staff, allowed for the bonnets to regain their Quaker origins and to be appreciated for their typically unadorned Quaker Plain aesthetic. This eliminated their incompatibility in the Cash collection, but it also revealed that these garments were, at one point, not valued at Killerton House as examples of Plain Quaker attire.

So, the question is, should artefacts which were adapted through historical curatorial practices be conserved to reinstate them to their original appearance? My initial reaction upon viewing the bonnets, was 'the feathers must be detached'. The curatorial decisions taken by Harrison may well have seemed appropriate to her vision at the time, but it may now be appropriate to employ conservation strategies to remove the evidence of her questionable practices. In using the latest conservation techniques on these items, it would be possible to totally transform the interpretation of them for researchers and viewers – to restore them to examples of the simple religious garments they once were.

But research illustrates that a more considered and nuanced reaction may be more appropriate, and is often taken, when collections are faced with anomalous items of dress.

Susan Pearce in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, has said that **[SLIDE 10]** "It is therefore incumbent upon the investigator to try to find ways in which [...] the processes through which objects become components parts of collections, and collections themselves acquire collective significance, can be appreciated."⁶ Tobin has asserted that the Killerton House dress collection acquired 'collective significance' due to the work of Harrison and is a part her legacy. Should the garments which she adapted therefore, be preserved in their altered states as artefacts of her vision? Do we perceive this object in its current form as a tragedy? Or could we celebrate its deviation from the original, as evidence of an archaic attitude to curation?

Expert eyes can help dress collections to unravel and to tell a wider audience the complex histories of adapted dress, like these Quaker bonnets. Such collaboration to unpick the stories of a garment can make further drastic conservation interventions unnecessary. Indeed, as Katy Lithgow **[SLIDE 11]** wrote in her article, *Sustainable Decision Making*, "[...] the National Trust has, in line with other conservation bodies, moved away from considering conservation to be 'stopping the clock', defining conservation since 2003 as, '...the careful management of change.'"⁷ While the changes Harrison made to these Quaker bonnets were perhaps not what Lithgow has in mind, it is interesting to note that the National Trusts' current conservation practices carefully question the value of intervention.

⁶ Susan Pearce, *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (London: Routledge, 1994) 1

⁷ Katy Lithgow, "Sustainable Decision Making – change in National Trust collections conservation" *Journal of the Institute of Conservation*. 34. 1 (2011: 128 – 142) 128.

[SLIDE 12] Recently, new value has also been attached to displaying damaged or anomalous items. The *Present Imperfect* exhibition at London College of Fashion in 2017, exhibited garments which were, “badly damaged, utterly worn-out or made from textiles that have perished over time” as well as items that had become deformed, shattered, or even been written on.⁸ While *Fashion Unraveled* currently on at FIT is exhibiting contemporary garments which were unfinished, altered, deconstructed or damaged, alongside stories from their donors.⁹ These exhibitions seek to celebrate garments which have historically been overlooked or suppressed from display.

Far less attention has been paid however, to the effect of how badly dated curatorial techniques or conservation may have rendered a garment fundamentally altered. There are obvious reasons for a lack of scholarship on this subject; the most obvious being that criticising the practise of a conservator or curator may be seen as deeply unprofessional, or even personally damning. Strong, trusting relationships between those in the heritage and arts sectors are key to their ongoing progress and success. However, two articles have sought to investigate solutions to the conundrum of interpreting items exposed to now questionable past museum practices.

Geoffrey Hancock and Georgina Brown have written on their examination of a mounted specimen of a tropical spider, which underwent an “unusual preparation” in the eighteenth century. The spider had been dried, and then mounted using a haphazard arrangement of wires pushed through the length of the body, “analogous to stringing beads.”¹⁰ Their article is a detailed celebration of a display technique long since rendered unsuitable. [SLIDE 13] They note how, “the apparent rarity in museum collections of such a preparation makes [...it] of some historical interest” and that therefore, “there is a value [...] in retaining examples of perhaps redundant preservation techniques.”¹¹ For those researching outdated curatorial preparations for the purposes of display therefore, Cash’s Quaker bonnets, adapted by Harrison, would hold a similar fascination.

Howard Sutcliffe, Head Textile Conservator at the Detroit Institute of Arts, has written on the re-interpretation of their Tiraz Textile collection. [SLIDE 14] These medieval textiles had, during their excavation in 1920, been cut from items of eleventh century clothing and in the 1980s the curatorial decision was taken to frame them and hang them on a wall. Twelve years ago, they were conserved and re-hung, to overcome their decontextualization and to alter their interpretation by visitors. Despite the apparent tragedy of their past treatment, Sutcliffe says that, “the decision to reverse a past conservation treatment is not one that should be taken lightly and certainly should not be based on aesthetics alone.”¹²

[SLIDE 15] In summary, today we may view the adaptations Harrison made to Cash’s Quaker bonnets as ‘cringe-worthy’; the incongruous addition of feathers for display purposes is far removed from the stringent conservation and curatorial practices most in the museum and heritage sector hold themselves to today. Harrison’s additions alter researchers reading of these ordinary items of dress, and mislead the viewer into questioning their authenticity as Plain garments. But the instinct to undo

⁸ Present Imperfect: Disorderly Apparel Reconfigured. LCF.

⁹ Fashion Unravelled. FIT. May 25, 2018 – November 17, 2018

¹⁰ E. Geoffrey Hancock & Georgina Brown (2014) “An unusual preparation of an eighteenth-century spider and its consequences”, *Journal of the Institute of Conservation*, 37:2, 110-119.

¹¹ E. Geoffrey Hancock & Georgina Brown (2014) “An unusual preparation of an eighteenth-century spider and its consequences”, *Journal of the Institute of Conservation*, 37:2, 110-119.

¹² Howard Sutcliffe, “Tiraz textiles: a review of past treatments in preparation for the opening of the new Gallery of Islamic Art at the Detroit Institute of Arts” *Journal of the Institute of Conservation*, 34.1.(March 2011: 39 – 52) 45

such past treatment may be short-sighted. In a time when conservators are seeking to manage change in their collection objects, and there is an active movement towards celebrating the altered and the imperfect, it may be more appropriate for spaces such as Killerton to celebrate the story of these items evolution, and preserve them as an illustrations of redundant curatorial techniques.

THANK YOU