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The object of fashion: methodological approaches to the history of fashion

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Abstract

This essay considers the role of artefacts in the historical study of dress and fashion and suggests the existence of three different approaches. The field of *history of dress and costume* has a long tradition going back to the nineteenth century. It adopts the methodologies of art history and considers artefacts as central to the analysis of different periods and themes. In the last few decades the emergence of *fashion studies* has been interpreted as a distancing from artefacts. It is here claimed that fashion studies brought theoretical rigour and embraced a deductive methodology of analysis in which artefacts still played an important function. The final part of this essay introduces the reader to what I call the *material culture of fashion*, a hybrid methodology borrowed from anthropology and archeology in which the object is central in the study of social, cultural and economic practices that are time specific. It shows in particular the challenges and paybacks of such an approach.



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Public opinion, the mass media, the press and many academic approaches take it for granted that fashion is something real and material: the platform shoes in fashion this year; the low-cut dress that can be seen on the Parisian catwalks; the tomboy hairstyle of an American rock star; or the sunglasses advertised by a famous English football player. The objects seem to embody fashion. However, we could also refer to fashion as something abstract. The remit of fashion includes patterns of behaviour and ideas (smoking for

example is no longer in fashion as it used to be in Marlene Dietrich's days), and articulates itself through a series of concepts (from grunge to vintage; from look to style), which only indirectly take an interest in the material sphere.

At an analytical level, the study of fashion—and the history of fashion in particular—includes both abstract concepts and material objects. This essay focuses on the role of the object in the history of fashion and dress and suggests the existence of at least three different approaches, namely: a) the

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history of dress; b) what is now called fashion studies; and c) what I call ‘the material culture of fashion’.

BETWEEN MATERIAL AND IMMATERIAL: INDUCTIVE VERSUS DEDUCTIVE ANALYSES

The fact that fashion is at the same time an (immaterial) idea and an (material) object makes all discussions partial and therefore limited to one aspect or the other. However, such a distinction between fashion as material object and as an immaterial concept is important because it is the basis of two diverse approaches to the study of fashion: *the study of dress and costume* and *fashion theory or fashion studies*. To these could be added a third, which I call ‘*the material culture of fashion*’, an approach whose methodology is not yet fully developed.

The study of dress, which to the largest part is of a historical nature (and I actually refer specifically to the history of dress) is an approach that goes back at least to the second half of the nineteenth century, and that from the post-war period onwards has become one of the leading methodologies within the study of fashion. The object (a dress, but also a piece of cloth, an accessory etc.) is also the subject of research. The research starts from the observation of artefacts often preserved in museums. By focusing on the object itself, one can trace the evolution of forms and styles, changes in colours, as well as find precious indications on the social and cultural meaning of such an artefact. This is an

“inductive” approach in the sense that through precise analyses of objects, abstracts interpretations are produced for a more general understanding of the meaning and history of fashion.

Since the 1980s, a new wave of studies has come to differentiate itself from this approach. No longer based on analyses of the object, what is today defined as “fashion studies” is a number of different approaches to the study of fashion which are not only multidisciplinary (integrating sociology, anthropology, ethnography etc.) but also heavily “deductive”.¹ Often, coming from the frontlines of theory (from Simmel to Bourdieu, from Veblen to larger schools such as Cultural Studies), stylised ideas are presented on how fashion takes shape, how it penetrates the world, reproduces itself and conditions the social and the power relations between individuals and society. These abstract assertions (in time and space) are then “applied” (confirmed, critiqued or challenged) through case studies often involving the analysis of artefacts. Objects are often reduced to a subordinate position in turning theory concrete within the everyday practices of men and women. This approach is deductive insofar as it starts with abstract ideas that are subsequently applied to concrete case studies (Figure 1).

It is not entirely correct to say that whereas in dress history the object is central, fashion studies ignores the objects of fashion. Assertions such as these are common in the literature, but they forget that dress history has abstract, interpretive ambitions and that fashion studies has found a particular fertile ground within the research of museum curators, who have the task

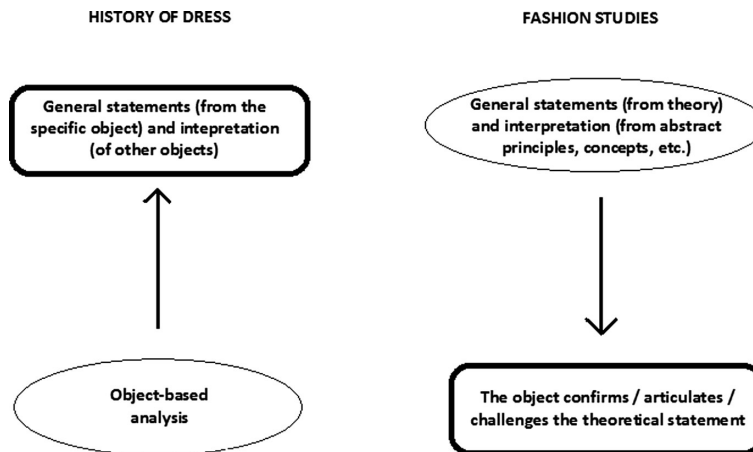


Figure 1. Inductive vs. deductive Approaches

of preserving and interpreting artefacts. It would be better to say that the two approaches often support each other, mixing the empirical with the theoretical, and abstract concepts with material precision.

In this sense, it is not surprising that approaches to material culture have recently entered the domain of fashion studies. Material culture is the attribution of meaning to objects by the people who produce, use, consume, sell and collect them. Thanks to its strive to integrate the material and more abstract aspects, material culture is a platform for the mixing of different methodologies and approaches.

An example might illustrate this point: an object like this beautiful seventeenth-century English lace, worked with pearls of different sizes on thread and representing a biblical scene, now at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, is a rare example of needle lace (Figure 2). Dress history (and in this case also textile history) interprets it and assesses its value according to material criteria and in particular the quality of workmanship. It is valued for its capacity to capture a given style and a certain epoch. Dress history also contextualises this object within similar objects, often through careful research published in specialist works, and exhibition catalogues.²

Fashion studies would instead start with an abstract interpretation, for example, by observing



Figure 2. Part of an English needlework lace with pearls and beads, c. 1640–70. Size: 12.7 × 17.8 cm. © Victoria and Albert Museum, T.317–1912.

that during the seventeenth century women from higher classes were excluded from public life. This object demonstrates the type of activities that occupied the time of noble and wealthy women. Little attention is given both to stylistic parameters and to object analysis.

Halfway between these two approaches, material culture poses questions about the significance of these objects for the women who produced them, but also those who admired them within the domestic walls where they were often displayed. The research of Ruth Greuter and Susan Frye has shown how embroidery and needlework often had a political content, showing how the women, excluded as they were from the political sphere, were able to communicate their position in state affairs in their material work.³ The importance of these artefacts is here contextualised not so much within a historical evolution of the typology of the object, or the style or the material, but through the life of the people who interacted with these artefacts attributing them meaning.

THE OBJECT IN THE HISTORY OF DRESS AND CLOTHING

One should not think that the three methods hitherto elucidated ought to be placed on different levels of value or complexity.

Far too often, it is incorrectly believed that the more recent and theoretically sophisticated fashion studies are ‘more advanced’ than (the supposedly “traditional”) dress history. As far as the object of fashion is concerned, dress history remains an important reference point particularly because of the wealth of studies carried out over more than a century. Obviously, I refer in particular to the research gathered during more than thirty years in the pages of journals such as *Costume* (published in the United Kingdom) and *Dress* (published in the United States).⁴

The object is central in the history of dress as seen in the works of James Laver, François Boucher or Natalie Rothstein.⁵ But it is in the gallery of costume or in an exhibition that the object is truly at the centre of the narrative. Through its materiality, the object conveys its own history and value. These topics show how the history of fashion is not just written but is also didactically and emotionally conveyed through the

medium of objects. The exhibition on the great Parisian haute couturiere Madeleine Vionnet, held in Paris in 2009–10, is an example of how exhibitions may be a vehicle for reinterpreting the role of Parisian couture and re-evaluating one of its protagonists.⁶ Beautiful dresses, accompanied by sketches, designs and photographs, showed her creative evolution during a period of more than twenty years. Here the object is the vehicle to narrate a story for a public many times larger than the restricted number of people that will read an entire book on Madame Vionnet.⁷

I want to mention the case of the Vionnet exhibition because similar considerations can be made concerning permanent galleries in which complex dress histories are conveyed through the use of artefacts. What the public sees is the result of years of research, interpretations and discussions often reduced to simple labels of a few hundred words which summarise, in a direct and precise language, complex concepts and are based on a huge work that most of time remains invisible. This is a ‘work of excavation’ that is not confined to studies in archives and libraries or to the analysis of the object in itself. It includes instead also the process of restoration, that is material, but also interpretive; the many problems connected to the display of the object which span from the choice of a suitable location, to similarly suitable cases and dummies; not to speak of the problems of preservation in the gallery (for instance textiles cannot not be exposed to light for a long period) or the problems of budget, insurance and security of the object (Figure 3).⁸

The fact that dress history has not been superseded by fashion studies is demonstrated by the success of fashion exhibitions that are increasingly an integral part of life of European and North American museums. Well attended shows such as those dedicated to Poiret, Armani, Vivienne Westwood or Street style – not to mention the space given to dress in wider exhibitions devoted to specific themes or historical periods – show the importance of dress and fashion for the wider public. Museums like the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto or the Fashion Museum (formerly the Museum of Costume) in Bath in England have recently invested noteworthy financial resources to construct or moder-



Figure 3. Straw hat and the dress work by Miss Heather Firbank (1888–1954) in 1909–10. © Victoria and Albert Museum, T.23&A-1960. Dress cannot be easily shown without the use of mannequins. The international council of museums has over time created precise guidelines on how textiles and dress should be exhibited. Such guidelines exclude for instance their wearing as a way to show them to the public.

nise their dress galleries.⁹ One could say that dress history today is able to communicate with the public at large not so much through publications, but through visual presentations, in the first place those of galleries and exhibitions and in the second place through virtual exhibition spaces on the web.

The exhibition, the gallery or the website are in reality the result of a research which includes hundreds, sometimes thousands of objects.¹⁰ What we see in the exhibition is only a small part of the materials that are preserved in the storerooms of museums. What is presented to the public is a “distillation” and often a simplification. It is also a complex and costly type of scholarship. Sometimes, the objects that the researcher uses are physically located on different continents and often they may not be analysed as a group or in conjunction with each other without visits to other museums or through collaborations between colleagues.

The work done by the curator in the museum is in the first instance one of investigation and of retrieval of information. For example, it is difficult to know if the dress by Paul Poiret exhibited in a New York museum is a unique piece or if similar items may be found elsewhere. This problem may partially be resolved through a tight web of information between museums all over the world, often based on personal contacts. Second, all large and small museum departments, including those of textile and dress, have specialised libraries and curators who are aware of the present and past literature on a specific object, theme or debate.¹¹

It is worth underlining that the object is not only studied and presented but also “contextualized” at a historical level. The object is situated in a precise time that for a fashion object is often quite brief (the fashionable skirt of a certain year or even the sneakers in fashion in a certain month). On the other hand, the interest of history lies in chartering the evolution of things over a long time. This may pose a problem. A certain object, for instance, a pair of Nike sneakers, has little to say if the shoes are not seen in relation to other similar objects (e.g. the preceding and the following models). The famous graphics illustrating the length of skirts during different years is an abstraction generated from dating and measuring different objects in time. It proposes a story based on variation over time, a dynamic narrative which no skirt by itself can tell.

It is therefore necessary to bring out the unique character of each object, to examine it, if the expression is permitted, in all its pleats. But this is not sufficient. It is also necessary to create explanations that put different objects in relation to one another in time (e.g. the length of the skirts) or in space (e.g. the relation between the trainers and informal clothing). Dress history has found it difficult to reconcile these different approaches and tends to emphasise the “special” object more than the common one, paying more attention to the stories of unique artefacts rather than to ordinary ones. In the cases where systems of objects are examined over time, dress history furthermore tends to create a linear history of evolution, that implies the existence of a perfect congruency between different objects through

time. The validity and utility of this principle is today increasingly refuted by historians.

THE ARTEFACT IN FASHION STUDIES

It has sometimes been argued by colleagues interested in fashion that fashion studies does not need an object. Yuniya Kawamura, for example, in the introduction to her study of fashion entitled *Fashionology* explains how fashion is a concept and as such has no need to be illustrated.¹² Other scholars, and not only those who defend dress history, object to such a choice. Fashion may be regarded as a concept, but it is part of social, cultural, economic and personal practices that are material and involve material objects.

Perhaps it is possible to argue that fashion studies does not leave out the object of fashion, but interprets it and uses it in ways that are different from dress history. The object is often present not in its materiality but as an object of consumption. It is not by chance that fashion studies borrows from anthropological methodologies as this discipline has been long interested in the relationship between people and objects of consumption.¹³ A Coca-Cola bottle, a car, a domestic product, a saris etc. are all typologies of objects that have been studied in recent socio-anthropological works. Still, none of these works is specifically interested in telling stories which refers to specific objects (the sari modelled by a certain woman in the year X; or the Coca-Cola bottle drunk by Mr Z in the year Y). Often, objects are taken as ‘types’ (as in the case of mass products) that researchers consider because of their social rather than their individual value. The banal and mundane object that rarely is part of a museum collection appears as much more important in this type of analysis than in dress history research. The importance given to everyday practices and to “ordinary” objects (as opposed to the “extra-ordinary” object which merits to be included in a museum) pushes the researcher towards interpreting not so much the object in itself but in relation to larger concepts, often of a theoretical nature.

The advantages of an approach that combines object with theory are undeniable, but at the same time it is worth highlighting how theory acts as a guide to sieve millions of “banal” and anonymous objects. Hence, we deal with a

methodology suitable to analyse the present world of consumerism and commodification, rather than a past where the number of objects was limited. Second, some researchers underline how the relation between object and theory, in which the theory plays the lion's part, may be harmful and counterproductive for the analysis of the object of fashion. For example, Aileen Ribeiro exhorts her colleagues not to give room for what she calls the "straightjacket of theory", preferring instead a more flexible approach based on an overlapping series of assessments and interpretations in which the object, what is worn, remains central to our attention.¹⁴

THE ARTEFACT IN THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF FASHION

Talking about the "material culture of fashion" may seem verbose, a bit like saying "the day before yesterday" instead of "the other day" or "the brother of my father" instead of "my uncle". Wouldn't it be easier to talk about clothing or dress instead of "material culture of fashion"? "The day before yesterday" puts the emphasis on "yesterday". The fact that the uncle I am referring to is the brother of my father and not of my mother, helps us to understand the subtle difference between something material with which the idea of fashion may be associated (the dress in latest fashion; or a designer garment) and the concept of fashion that becomes manifest at a cultural (as well as economic and social) level through material objects (the fashion of short skirts; but also the IKEA style of our homes).

Material culture is not the object itself (which as we saw is at the centre of dress history), but neither is it a theoretical form (which dominates the approach of fashion studies). Material culture is instead about the modalities and dynamics through which objects take on meaning (and one of these is that of fashion) in human lives. A bikini is not only a piece of cloth which women put on to get a tan, but it is a key object in a specific social practice during the second half of the twentieth century: it refers to a certain lifestyle, to the emancipation of women, to the opposition against right-wing bigotry in the 1950s and 1960s, but also to the glamour look of

Brigitte Bardot or the curves of Pamela Anderson more recently. While dress history inscribes an object like the bikini within a stylistic and evolutionary course of bathing suits, which goes from the long-johns of the late nineteenth century to the topless, material culture seeks instead to understand the role of this garment within a specific society and time and asks for instance in what ways this garment helped in fostering social change by scandalizing the puritans in society and amusing the more daring.

The example of the bikini shows how material culture places itself on an intermediary plane between the material and the conceptual. It falls neither within the inductive approach used in dress history, nor within the deductive approach of fashion studies. Instead, it focuses the successive assessments and interpretations as suggested by Aileen Ribeiro, in which theory is confronted with evidence and vice versa. This generates an interpretive richness in which fashion is just one of the object's many attributes. Since material culture asks what a skirt, a sport shoe or a bikini signify for the person who wears them, it does not necessarily take the concept of fashion as key to such a meaning, nor does it make a skirt, a sport shoe or a bikini objects of fashion. Many of the studies that I have defined as part of the "material culture of fashion" discuss instead personal and affective meaning, economic barriers, uses and habits, as well as gender and age differences. Wedding dresses passed down from mothers to daughters are part of an important social practice that surely cannot be explained by fashion. Similarly, the revival of 1980s fashion – today a practice that is fashionable – cannot be comprehended without taking into account the age difference between generations (the fact that young people today who dress in 1980s fashion were born in the 1990s and therefore see it in historical terms), and new forms of consumption (e.g. vintage practices) etc.

How is research carried out through the methodologies of material culture? Richard Sennett explains that: 'Because cloth, pots, tools, and machines are solid objects, we can return to them again and again in time; we can linger as we cannot in the flow of a discussion. Nor does material culture follow the rhythms of biological

life. Objects do not inevitably decay from within like a human body. The histories of things follow a different course, in which metamorphosis and adaptation play a stronger role across human generations'.¹⁵ Sennett observes how the object is a historical testimony, in the sense that it belongs both to a past that the researcher seeks to understand, and to the present in which the researcher carries out his or her study. Within the methodologies of material culture, the artefact is both the subject of research (as in the writing on the production of Chanel's dresses) and the material used to write this history (the use of Chanel's dresses as sources).¹⁶ Although Coco Chanel and her employees are no longer among us, the dresses survive. One could say that they remain as sediment of fashion. It is almost paradoxical that a phenomenon like fashion, which is continuously defined as ephemeral, leaves behind such a considerable quantity of surviving artefacts.

Two problems remain to discuss in conclusion. First, what are the advantages of an approach combining object, theory and historical research? Objects should not be used as mere illustrations to pre-established interpretations. On the contrary, artefacts should be used to propose interpretive hypotheses that documents or other written and visual sources are unable to provide. Let me give an example from my own research on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century shoes. The analysis of French shoes from the early nineteenth century reveals that their international success was not only the result of their fashionability but also of their manufacture, with uppers made of two pieces instead of three. This allowed quicker and cheaper production than in the other European countries. Written sources report, through numbers and written words, the success of French shoes, and the fashion literature of the period reports how these French shoes were the latest fashion. However, only the analysis of the shoes themselves provides evidence of an important competitive advantage in the mode of production.¹⁷

The integration of the object in historical research—and not only in the field of fashion—has become easier during the last years not least thanks to the creation of vast image databases by the most important museums in the world.¹⁸

Thousands of these high-quality images allow us to study objects in great detail. Although the image on a screen or in print cannot replace direct observation of the material artefact, it may be, as indicated by Prown, a starting point for research, as the digital image facilitates data retrieval as well as the selection and comparison of artefacts.¹⁹ For example, the digital age allows for an easy (one might say 'easier') comparison of similar objects in different collections. It also allows access to information on artefacts that once upon a time were difficult to retrieve. Finally it allows the creation of complex logical, material and chronological sequences of objects.

Material culture has however to deal with a series of methodological problems. I will cite just the one that I think is most relevant for students. Just when new technologies give access to thousands of objects for hundreds of researchers (thus avoiding long waits for an appointment with a department at some museum), the lack of familiarity with previous research becomes a significant obstacle. It is precisely this capacity of moving freely between diverse objects (e.g. just within textiles: from silk to cotton, or from weavings to knitting, from medieval times to the present) that highlights how the average researcher does not have the specialist skills to understand such a range of artefacts. The easiness of access to museum artefacts does not match the complexity of knowhow necessary to produce good scholarly interpretations.

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to illustrate three different approaches through which fashion may be analysed. These approaches are stylised versions of a reality where diverse approaches are integrated as often theory, history and material culture coexist under one roof. However, each of these approaches offers both advantages and disadvantages, which the history of fashion must take into account. In all three approaches, the material object is an important tool for the creation of historical narratives. It is a tool and a source that requires not only knowledge on the part of researchers and students but also practical experience and familiarity with the histories and theories of fashion.

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Notes

1. For an overview of the different approaches to fashion studies, see Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the "Ancient Regime,"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3–22; Lou Taylor, *The Study of Dress History,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 2002; Catherine Richardson, "Introduction," in Catherine Richardson, ed, *Clothing Culture, 1350–1650* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 1–25; Malcolm Barnard, "Fashion and History/Fashion in History," in Malcolm Barnard, ed, *Fashion Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 33–38; Giorgio Riello & Peter McNeil, "Introduction: The History of Fashion Reader: Global Perspectives," in Giorgio Riello & Peter McNeil, eds, *The History of Fashion Reader: Global Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Routledge, 2010).
2. Margaret Swain, *Embroidered Stuart Pictures* (Princes Risborough: Shire, 1990).
3. Ruth Geuter, "Reconstructing the Context of Seventeenth-Century English Figurative Embroideries," in Moira Donald and Linda Hurcombe, eds, *Gender and Material Culture in Historical Perspective* (Basingstoke: Routledge 2000), 97–111; Susan Frye, "Sewing Connections: Elizabeth Tudor, Mary Stuart, Elizabeth Talbot, and seventeenth-century anonymous needleworkers," in Susan Frye & Karen Robertson, eds, *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens. Women's Alliances in Early Modern England* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 165–82. See also: Ann Rosalind Jones & Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 134–72.
4. *Costume*, the journal published by Costume Society in the United Kingdom was founded in 1966. *Dress*, a journal published by Costume Society of America was founded in 1975. Negley Harte, "The Study of Dress" in Giorgio Riello & Peter McNeil, eds, *The Fashion History Reader: Global Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Routledge, 2010).
5. James Laver, *Costume and Fashion: A Concise History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002) (ed. Amy de la Haye); François Boucher, *20 000 Years of Fashion: The History of Costume and Personal Adornment* (New York: Reed Business Information, Inc 1987, or. ed. 1966); Nathalie Rothstein, *Four Hundred Years of Fashion* (London: V&A Publications, 1997).
6. *Madeleine Vionnet: puriste de la mode, exhibition held at Musée des Arts Décoratifs*, Paris, June 24, 2009–January 31, 2010.
7. Pamela Golbin, ed, *Madeleine Vionnet: puriste de la mode* (Paris: Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs, 2009).
8. On the evolution of techniques and theories of the object of fashion in the museum, see: Taylor, *Study of Dress History*, Id.; *Establishing Dress History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).
9. Museum of Fashion, Bath, UK: <http://fashionmuseum.co.uk/>; Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada: <http://www.rom.on.ca/>
10. It goes without saying that the collections of the museums are not all equal, but have different priorities. A museum like the Victoria & Albert in London, which holds one of the major collections in the world of fashion objects, has as its mission to present a story of design and specialises itself on objects with an intrinsic value, fashion creations, garments used by famous persons etc. Other museums, like the Museum of London, preserves diverse objects of everyday character, including diverse artefacts found in archaeological excavations. See Chloe Wigston Smith, "Materializing the Eighteenth Century: Dress History, Literature and Interdisciplinary Study," in *Literature Compass*, vol. 3:5, 2006, 968.
11. For example, my own research on shoes in the eighteenth century has led me several times to the shoe museum in Northampton in England. The museum holds one of the greatest collections of shoes in the world, of which only a minimal part are exhibited. To the research in the magazines on the objects I have added the research in the library and in the archive of the museum, where I have made particular use of the information sheets on specific shoes from the century produced throughout the years by the curator of the museum.
12. Yuniya Kawamura, *Fashionology: An Introduction to Fashion Studies* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004).
13. See for example the works by anthropologists Daniel Miller and Mary Douglas, or by philosopher Jean Baudrillard on the present consumer society.
14. Aileen Ribiero, "Re-fashioning Art: Some Visual Approaches to the Study of the History of Dress," in *Fashion Theory*, vol. 2:4, 2008, 320.
15. Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 15.
16. Elsewhere I have identified three different approaches: the "story of things" (where the object is the subject of research); the 'story from things' (where the object is used as source) and the "story

- with things” (where the object and history interrelate on the same level and the object is able to create its own stories). See Giorgio Riello, “Things that Shape History: Material Culture and Historical Narratives,” in Karen Harvey, ed, *History and Material Culture* (Basingstoke: Routledge, 2009), 24–47.
17. Giorgio Riello, “La chaussure à la mode: product innovation and marketing strategies in Parisian and London boot and shoemaking in the early nineteenth century,” in *Textile History*, vol. 34:2, 2003, 107–33.
 18. Two of the major image banks for research and publications are those of the British Museum (http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database.aspx) and of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/indexplus/page/T&C+High+Resolution+Images.html>)
 19. Jules D. Prown, *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001).