

Fashion History: A Global View  
Abby Lillethun, Montclair State University and Linda Welters, University of Rhode Island  
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Summary by Christine McMahon

In a collaborative effort, Professor Abby Lillethun from Montclair State University and Professor Linda Welters from the University of Rhode Island presented a lecture on a project that they have been working on together. Teaching in similar fields, the two historians have joined together to explore fashion history and to question why it is limited to the West beginning in the fourteenth century.

To broaden the scope of the field, Welters and Lillethun defined the term “fashion” in their 2011 book, *The Fashion Reader*. They identify it as “changing styles of dress and appearance that are adopted by a group of people at any given time and place.” This definition was the basis of their presentation. Other terms closely associated with fashion are dress, which encompasses all forms of body coverings, and costume, which consists of historical, dress up, theatrical and Halloween clothes. The two terms arguably can be used interchangeably, depending on what exactly you are referring to. The study of costume history follows the study of art history, being that the two disciplines are closely related. Art history curriculums tend to follow a more westernized path after Ancient Greece, Rome and Egypt. Because of this, costume history focuses on the West as well, without much reference to other cultures after ancient times.

Along with this issue, Lillethun and Welters made two main arguments regarding the beginnings of fashion. The first is when fashion technically started. Scholars and books by scholars claim that it began in the fourteenth century. The basis for this claim is that tailored clothing started at this time. This occurred due to economic changes such as capitalism, growth of towns and marketplaces, and an emergence of an open society/mobile class system. But strictly recognizing dress that fits to the body, however, neglects other forms of expression that can be considered fashion, such as fabrics and drapery. Draped garments are often seen in Ancient times that incorporate details that can be seen as decorative fashion. In the Middle Ages, loose-fitting tunics and mantles come about. Extremisms in accessories also indicate earlier forms of fashion, such as pointed shoes and long, trailing sleeves in the early Middle Ages. Texts from romance literature also show evidence of fashion that dates before the fourteenth century. Sumptuary laws from the eleventh century support Lillethun’s and Welters’ claim as well.

The historians’ second critique pertains to why it is not earlier in Europe during ancient times. Roman women’s hairstyles back up this point. Women in ancient Rome used a variety of wigs to decorate themselves, showing early signs of other forms of dress that can be considered fashion. Just as fashion trickled down in the seventeenth century, women of the Imperial Court started certain wig fashions and were then copied by women citizens and freed slaves in urban areas. Other areas of the world saw early stages of fashion as well. The Ottoman Empire experienced changes in taste in textiles used for dress, while Chinese makeup, specifically lip fashions, changed over time as well. Nigerian wrap styles also display a fashion evolution outside of the west.

As we learned in the first lecture this semester from Naomi Thompson, inclusion is a key part in successfully attaining diversity, and fashion is no exception. Cultures from various regions of the world have long shown their evolutions of fashion and must be included when discussing fashion history.

## INCLUSION

Costume History 9:00

Traditional Dress 19:00