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Sierra B. Holt

Ohio University, sh355810@ohio.edu

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Using Costume Collection Artifacts for Historic Style Trends Teaching Modules

Sierra Holt, Ohio University

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Learning the history of style trends is important for merchandising students in order for them to be familiar with the historic influences of fashions today and so that they can effectively forecast and develop new fashions that derive from a myriad of inspirations. Merchandising professionals need to be aware of the past in order to forecast and recognize cyclical and future trends. Accessing textiles and apparel artifacts from costume collections can be an effective and interesting way for aspiring merchants and designers to learn about fashions, cultural norms, and technological innovations from an historic perspective. To achieve this understanding among students in a fashion merchandising program, a set of learning modules was developed. This opportunity gave access to a university-housed costume collection and presentation in which discussions emphasize the relevance of historic fashion trends and fashion product development to contemporary fashion merchandising. The university-housed costume collection has the mission to educate and introduce the concept of historical fashion and textiles to students and the general public by relating the history of fashion with the past. This allows fashion to be celebrated and appreciated through an historical lens.

By exploring the past and understanding the influence of popular culture on fashion, contemporary students are better equipped to analyze their own behaviors related to fashion and dress and to evaluate the way popular culture continues to be documented through dress. The learning modules were created to address the significant area of historic dress of womenswear. The costume and textiles collection was reviewed with the goal of creating a sub-collection of artifacts that could be placed in a hands-on teaching collection. With a sub-collection accessible to students, the learners are enabled to handle and inspect the design, construction, and feel of the clothing and textile items, which gives insight into the zeitgeist, or popular culture, of each garment's era. Students are afforded opportunities to participate in group work and class discussions that further the lessons conducted in the modules, using items in the collection.

Outline of the Teaching Modules

For the first segment of the module, they are given a short history of the style and era, which includes visuals, literature, photographs, and other examples of historical costume. Next, students are introduced to the garments chosen from the hands-on clothing collection. Depending on class size, students are divided into groups and given multiple sources of one type of media from the chosen years. After analyzing their learning experience, student group members present their group work to the class and lead a discussion on how it relates to the lecture and historical costume pieces. Groups will be required to relate and compare how pop culture influences or influenced their chosen fashion piece.

Pilot Launch of the Teaching Modules

I conducted a trial workshop that focused on the historic dress of womenswear, particularly the fashions of the Gibson Girl during the turn of the century, the 1920s Flapper, and the 1930s Hollywood Siren. In the workshop, I discussed the fashions of each female character and how it is related to the life of the young American woman. Included in the discussion were photographs and pieces of historic costume. The lecture ended into a group work session and class conversation.

Assessment of the Teaching Modules

Participants were emailed a link to a pre-survey. The aim of the first, or pre, survey was to measure the student's knowledge about the history of Western fashion. The second, or post, survey measured what the students learned through repeated questions from the first survey and a set of three questions based on the learning module. As the teaching modules continue to be offered, pre- and post-surveys will continue to be administered to enable ongoing assessment and improvement.

Two female University students participated in a pilot workshop and surveys. In the pre-survey, both students revealed that they had not taken a fashion history course prior to the workshop and had not visited a historic costume-exhibition. Both also indicated that they were somewhat interested in taking a fashion-related course.

After participating in the workshop, the students were asked to fill out the post-survey. Both students indicated that they were likely to participate in a course focused in historic costume. Both students answered the three workshop-related questions correctly (documenting learning in the presentation) and indicated an increased interest in fashion history. This increase in interest indicates a positive correlation that strengthens the learning module's mission, and the information gained from this trial workshop will be utilized in future learning modules.

Future Plans

Future learning modules will be conducted in fashion merchandising classes and outside departments that have a similar interest, which include women's history, women's studies, and journalism. As each learning module is conducted, new data will be collected via the determined pre- and post-surveys. This continuation of the learning module will coincide with the building of the University's hands-on collection, which will gradually develop during the school semesters and summer. Once sufficient data has been collected with the first learning module concerning the history of womenswear, two more learning modules will be conducted. These will concern the history of textiles during the turn of the century and the history of menswear from 1900 to 1980. Both of these learning modules will have a similar survey as with the first learning module and will also have a focus based in American popular culture. The ultimate goal of all of these learning modules will be to offer an in-depth look at fashion history and a deeper understanding in how fashion has, and is, influenced by American culture.