The Story of a Collector: Research and Exhibition of One Woman's Passion for Fashion

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Abstract
This paper focuses on the donation of one woman's historic fashion collection to the museum of a major land grant institution, and the initial research and exhibition the collection generated.

Keywords
history, collecting, exhibit, fashion

Disciplines
Cultural History | Fashion Design

Comments
The Story of a Collector: Research and Exhibition of One Woman’s Passion for Fashion

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The desire to collect – whether figurines, baseball cards, or clothing - has a long history, and indeed seems to be almost universal (Belk, 1995), and object collections can now be found in at least half of all U.S. households (Danziger, 2002). Clothing and textiles are also collected and exhibited by both individuals and institutions (Steele, 2008). Indeed, many historic clothing collections were founded due to the collecting vision of one person (Heinemann, 2008). This vision can offer museums a unique opportunity to immediately acquire subject depth, as opposed to acquisition of single pieces through donation or purchase over a long period of time. This paper focuses on the donation of one woman’s historic fashion collection to the museum of a major land grant institution, and the initial research and exhibition the collection generated.

In 2007, the Textiles and Clothing Museum at a mid-western university received a collection of 165 garments, hats, shoes and accessories from the Anne Zimmerman estate. The donation also included a paper archives with tear sheets from magazines and newspapers, photographs, slides, notes and interviews, and her thesis. Curators elected to mount an exhibit focused on a portion of the collection, to open in January 2010. Titled The Story of a Collector, the exhibit theme focused not only on the objects, but also on the concept of collecting, and the philosophy of an individual collector. Donated after Zimmerman’s death, the curators soon realized that, with little direct information available to analyze her collecting philosophy, or even a record of the sources of the pieces, it would be necessary to let the objects “do the talking.”

There are many reasons why people collect, including visual enjoyment of acquiring and admiring their collections, to show individualism and a sense of accomplishment, to bond as a community, and to remember or relive the past. Collecting can, however, be a solo practice, thus the collector communicates little to others about his or her process. In analyzing objects in the Zimmerman collection, it was clear that the work of American designers formed a significant portion. In addition, examination of the objects suggested a collecting vision for and awareness of pieces that were important in the evolution of fashion from the 1950s through the 1980s.

While it was unclear when Zimmerman began to collect fashion, her early 1970s thesis research was inspired by an admiration of American design talent. The thesis analyzed the history and designs of Rudi Gernreich, Claire McCardell, Gilbert Adrian, and Norman Norell. According to her thesis notes, she was an early advocate for recognition of the contributions of American
designers, and believed their fashion innovations had not been acknowledged, as indeed they
hadn’t at that point in time. In addition to strength in American designers, the collection
contained pieces by individual designers, as well as unmarked pieces that were excellent
representations of a period or technique. It included depth in the work of two designers – Rudi
Gernreich and James Galanos – both working primarily in California. While Galanos was not
included in her thesis, it is possible that her position as Director of Fashion and Promotions for
Orbach’s Inc., or as assistant fashion editor for the Los Angeles Herald-Examiner, put her into
contact with California designers. In any case, the number of pieces collected from these two
designers suggested she had a clear appreciation of their contributions and importance. The
accessories in the collection, while also representing significant designers, showed an awareness
of the ability of fashion to have a sense of humor. Both a hat by Chicago manufacturer Bes-Ben,
with black cats perched atop the wearer’s head, and a cashmere sweater by Dalton, covered with
appliquééd bees, demonstrated the knowledge and humor of the collector.

As an inaugural exhibit based on the Zimmerman collection, it was decided to focus first on the
four designers from her thesis, plus Galanos. Other pieces selected represented significant iconic
moments in fashion history from 1945 to 1980 including a striped shirt-dress from Claire
McCardell, jumpsuit by Tina Leser, a mini-dress by André Courrèges, and knickers by Ralph
Lauren. In addition, the curators included a few of the quirkier accessories to show the playful
side of the collector. Research for the exhibit was also supported in part from Zimmerman’s
paper archives.

In textile and clothing museums, fashion that was worn and then discarded finds a permanent
home where it is studied, cared for, and exhibited. These garments present opportunities for
better understanding social, economic, technological, and political periods of history, and in this
case to study the process of collecting. Due to the breadth and depth of the Zimmerman
collection, the exhibit garnered coverage from a local television news program and state
newspaper, as well as mentions in regional publications. Visitors included history associations,
sewing guilds, and school groups. By studying and collecting the work of these great designers,
Anne Zimmerman left a legacy from which both students and scholars of fashion can learn.

References

