

Cultural Heritage

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Design the future through the past

It is no secret that fashion constantly recycles the past. In the collections of the leading contemporary designers, we often find reminiscences of styles from earlier times. Textures, colours, decorative motifs, all reappear: but not in exactly the same form, because the materials and technology evolve at a very high pace and - above all - because the context in which we live has a very profound influence on our mood, our sensitivity, and our taste. We find inspiration in other times and places and reinterpret them following the parameters of our own environment. Whilst citations and returns to the styles and fashions of the past regularly reappear on catwalks and international fashion markets, they are generally updated by a contemporary interpretation of the original lines, cuts, patterns and textiles. Indeed, increasingly frequently, creative directors and fashion designers commence the process of creating their collections by consulting privately-owned or museum or documentation centre-managed textile and fashion archives. This allows them to draw inspiration from their contents with a view to generating new creations which blend all the charm and know-how of the past with new trends and technologies. Historical heritage, then, is fundamental source of information and inspiration.

A designer delving into a brand archive to get inspiration for a new collection or a student researching vintage fashion magazines reveal how fashion heritage is not just entertaining with the past but discovering how the past can be relevant today. Archives previously kept privy to fashion insiders are now increasingly disclosing – the internet and digitisation change the nature and potential of the fashion archives.

The European textile industry has always been keen to preserve representative examples of textile production of the past, either for creative or for educational purposes. Numerous collections of antique and exotic textiles, today preserved in museums, have come from the private collections of textile entrepreneurs or industrial institutes and schools. Many firms have also acquired whole archives or textile samples from other sources. The books of instructions, mainly from Italy and France, which continue to provide material for design departments, are yet another example of the permanent recycling of fashion. These archives are real and proper containers of the know-how, traditions and experiences of the past – in some cases of many centuries in the past – a tangible heritage which is fundamental if we want to transmit the technical know-how and creative skills necessary to design new collections to future generations.

Over the last few decades, the economic crisis which has affected the European textile sector has resulted in the loss of many textile archives. Indeed the failure of businesses and the consequent closure of their warehouses has caused the loss of hundreds of textile samples and designs. In order to avoid breaking the line of continuity which joins past and future textile production – a fundamental feature of European excellence in the fashion sector – it is necessary for museums, cultural institutions and textile companies to protect our textile heritage. The involvement of museums in this initiative could be especially useful both for the dissemination of good practices regarding the protection of heritage collections and the raising of awareness among companies operating in the textile sector. Moreover, museums can effectively convey the importance of conservation and the transmission of historic knowledge. Today, when the distinguishing feature of the quality and prestige of European industry vis-à-vis its international competitors is its cultural value, technology can bring together thousands and thousands of textile samples housed in museums and public and private collections from all over the continent.

Museums and brand archives now make digital copies of their collections and put them online for use in online exhibitions, marketing campaigns and more. As archives are starting to show their material on the internet, more and more people can discover and re-use this material.

One such example is the TEXMEDIN Digital Library, the on-line data base of the TEXMEDIN project, which now contains a first selection of 800 samples (original designs, fabrics, apparel, complements and sample-books) and which holds the potential to develop into a great repository of European textile history. The items that currently make up the TEXMEDIN Digital Library represent the cultural heritage of four countries where the aesthetic tastes and the evolution of the sector have developed in their different ways, but always around certain common reference points. The collection currently represents just a sample of what it may contain in the future and hints to the value it can provide as a basis

for creation and investigation.

Another example is the Europeana Fashion initiative, a branch of the Europeana portal which explores new opportunities for fashion heritage through a series of events and conferences around fashion and digital technology. The opening up of archives to a large audience combined with the power of archives to inspire new forms of fashion culture is the topic of Europeana Fashion. The breadth of the 3 year Europeana Fashion digital archiving project is visionary. It promises to deliver to dress historians and museum professionals what the digital world does best- space and access. On Europeana.eu you can discover treasures from Europeana's open content archives, as well as information about special events and things Europeana is working on.

Since March 2015, the project offers an open archive of over 700, 000 fashion related images, a fashion thesaurus in ten languages and access to the IPR Best Practice Guidelines Manual for clearing the use of digital images in publications and on-line. Fashion content ranges from photographs of historical dress and accessories, to printed and video images, through to illustrations and catalogues. Images will be of a high-res digital quality, suitable both for on-screen study and printed academic requirements (the success of the entire enterprise rests on it).

Europeana Fashion makes accessible previously inaccessible, on-site only fashion archives from institutions dealing with objects of fashion heritage. For example, smaller museums often have in-house digital databases that have not yet been made more broadly accessible on the net, so users literally have to go there to use them.

The project has also proven to be a motivation for several private fashion houses to get their own in-house archives in order (including Max Mara and Bulgari). From client lists and price tags, to records of suppliers and materials, to photos of previous ranges— The digital museum can fit them all in and put them all on display. Speaking at a project's conference, Luca Missoni, Artistic Director Archivio Missoni, outlined his company's remarkable efforts spent collating the brand's design heritage. The digital framework provided by the Europeana Fashion project translates his experience and the Missoni archives into a useable, searchable, friendly digital platform for outsiders to delve into.

With increasing demands placed both on museum curators and museum budgets, gaining firsthand access to objects can be a long, drawn-out process that requires not only sufficient planning, but also, an often impossibly lengthy timeline. Add to this the ever-increasing restrictions on physical storage space and what is actually being collected is often increasingly the result of a process of rejection. Finally, dress objects are fragile and precious. As the field of fashion history continues to gain momentum, recognized for its cultural significance throughout the arts, more people want to see more objects more often. For conservation purposes, those requests can never be fully met. The Europeana Fashion online heritage archive embodies the adage that you can look, but not touch, and is another feather in the researcher's cap, rather than a substitution for it.

In the light of the above considerations and objectives, Fashion Houses, Museums and - more in general - collection holders are increasingly able to exploit their historical archives

through initiatives opening them up to a wider public. One such initiative was launched by the TEXMEDIN project in the form of an open Design Challenge addressing young fashion designers and students to get inspiration from the TEXMEDIN Digital Library and freely express their creative and technical skills into new apparel creations which were then prototyped and exhibited at different European locations.

Exploiting archives can improve the competitive advantage of the textile sector by encouraging new interpretations of the T&C heritage. There is great potential in such sources of information to support both innovation and research into product design and to hone the skills, know-how and creative inspiration of tomorrow's designers.