



## **1<sup>st</sup> HERA Workshop**

**11-12 November 2010**

**Victoria and Albert Museum, London**

### **Report**

The first HERA workshop brought together curatorial staff and academics from six countries along with a group of PhD students working on early modern fashion.

There were three themes to the first day's activities. The first focused on defining innovation itself. Evelyn Welch was concerned to ask what constituted novelty in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? She began by discussing a series of prints by Giovanni Stradano on 'new discoveries' laid great stress on objects and technologies that were not known to the ancients. These included windmills, printing and engraving, sugar milling and the manufacture and use of 'holy wood' or guaiacum, a product thought to cure syphilis. Some of these novelties could be patented but many (such as glasses or stirrups) were products rather than processes; in most cases they did not fit neatly into the early modern guild system. The workshop was interested in asking if fashion products, which range from the folding fan to beauty patches or wigs were seen as 'new' in similar ways. What was the relationship between their desirable nature and the often conventional attacks on fashionable 'trifles' that were made by preachers and moralists throughout the period?

The second section of the meeting provided an opportunity to present new work by early career scholars at different stages in their PhD research on early modern fashion. Isis Sturtewagen had literally just started her research on clothing and the consumer revolution in the Low Countries as part of a large project led by Professor Bruno Blondé from the University of Antwerp. This project will compare the consumption of clothing, furniture and tableware in the Low Countries between 1450 and 1650, allowing us to see the changing balance of investment that families made in these three categories of goods over time. At the other end of the spectrum were a number of students who were about to submit their dissertations, including two papers on Scottish dress in the eighteenth century which demonstrated the rich resources, both archival and material, that exist in elite family attics in Scotland.

In the afternoon, two of the postdoctoral researchers set out the work on which they have been engaged for some time. Maj Ringgaard (based at the Centre for Textile Research in Copenhagen) presented some of the issues to do with studying knitted objects in early modern Scandinavia while Corinne Thépaut-Cabasset (who has recently been appointed to the postdoctoral position at the V&A) discussed the challenges of finding information about early modern French court dress in the

French archives. Despite the destruction of much of the wardrobe material for Louis XIV, she was able to find considerable documentation for the 'passports' that were required to send out clothing and other fashionable goods from Paris to other European courts. These provide a rich resource for understanding the exchange of goods and notions of fashion at the highest elite level.

On our second day, we spent a privileged morning under the guidance of Susan North to examine some of the early modern knitted objects in the V&A's collections. This allowed us to return to some of the key questions: what constituted novelty in a traditional technique such as knitting and how do you use objects as evidence for early modern fashion practices. The objects that we examined, particularly the knitted jackets were generally of the highest quality and posed challenges to our notions of fashion hierarchies. Here knitting was certainly the equivalent to woven brocade and had the advantages of providing light, body-fitting warmth and elegance.

We concluded our workshop with a presentation by Dr Lesley Miller on how she and her team are planning the redisplay of the Europe, 1600-1800 galleries and the ways in which the HERA project can inform this work.

Evelyn Welch

21-12-2010