

## The Uses of History: Reflections on a HERA FEM workshop – Rokokomania - connecting the past and the present

Copyright Peter McNeil

*To learn about the present in the light of the past means also to learn about the past in the light of the present. The function of history is to promote a profounder understanding of both past and present through the interrelation between them.*  
E.H. Carr. *What is History?* 1961

The not uncontroversial figure E.H. Carr seems to state something very simple, almost anodyne, in his public lecture of 1961. Yet this dialectic is the basis of many unresolved ‘conversations’ between past and present art and design debates, including that of fashion. The most topical is the carefully framed ‘impossible conversation’ between Elsa Schiaparelli and Miuccia Prada displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) as I write. We experience in the writing about and curating of fashion various temporal notions. From the late Richard Martin, we have for the 18<sup>th</sup> century the concept of the ‘Ceaseless Century’, the name of an exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1998. Such exhibits aimed to demonstrate the re-workings, parallelisms and continuities between past and present. So a Versace dress might ‘demonstrate its debt’ to the *ancien-régime* and a Lanvin gently-hooped *robe de style* of the 1910s pays direct *hommage* to both a way of life and also a ‘format’ for the evening dress of a woman of means, living just before WWI. Such exhibitions continue the ideas established by Martin and Harold Koda in their exhibition and publication, *The historical mode: fashion and art in the 1980s* (FIT 1989-90), in which they argued that “[a]n unremitting modernism – a long-standing cult of the new – has seemingly come to a rapprochement with memory and an alliance with history” (15). Designers, of course, as well as the editors and copyeditors at inter-war *Vogue*, popular historians and the intelligent public have always made this connection, albeit in different ways. The issue seems very much on the agenda; the Cristóbal Balenciaga exhibition currently at the new fashion and design space of Paris, Les Docks, is a further example. In the post-war period,

Balenciaga was famed for his cut, designing creative silhouettes with a unique extra space between dress and the body. The exhibition, drawing on his personal archive of mainly 19<sup>th</sup>-century dresses and textiles, makes it very apparent that the silhouette owed as much to the *pelisses* of the 1830s and the fringed *visites* of the 1870s than to aesthetic modernism.

The 5<sup>th</sup> *Fashioning the Early Modern Workshop with Rococo and Knitting Designers*, conducted 13-14 June 2012 at the Carlsberg Academy, Copenhagen, Denmark, explored this question of past and present in terms of contemporary fashion design practice. Carefully brokered by Kirsten Toftegaard, Dr Maj G Ringgard and Prof. Marie-Louise Nosch as a two-day workshop event, it used Toftegaard's concurrent exhibition *Rokokomania* (Designmuseum Danmark 2012) as the *leitmotif* for a series of conversations between thirty participants from many backgrounds and countries. A group of three fashion and textile designers (all women, interestingly) had been commissioned to create design 'interventions' that were integrated in the space of the Rococo show. They had been briefed concerning the curatorial intent and had had considerable time to work on the commissions, due to a delay in the timetabling of the show. This allowed the unusual possibility of much reflection, as well as their considered reaction to the show in the context of the HERA FEM Workshop. Smaller groups of FEM participants sat down for one hour with each designer to discuss and debate their design process and outcomes, providing an invaluable opportunity to test on this occasion if designers might make 'use of (live) historians' rather than general 'uses of history'. On Day 2 we had the privilege to meet experts and designers of contemporary knitting, who also indicated the 'uses of history' for their practice.

Toftegaard's approach to the Rococo was unconventional but not completely unexpected; she has that rare balance of scholarly depth and a respect for practice that is lacking in many. Her exhibition shifted the focus away from the notion of the rococo as a 'style' with its own life-force somehow connected to the

outmoded aristocracy and an etiolated manner of living that delights and confounds the contemporary viewer at the same time. Rather, in the manner of the major *Baroque* Exhibition held at the V&A in 2009, it worked with the contemporary notion of 'crossing cultures'. In Toftegaard's case it was 'sampling' culture, a word derived from music and the synthetic sounds and behaviours of the generation post 1970. 'When we encounter the unfamiliar – and sometimes the unknown – a positive dynamic is unleashed that is instrumental in transporting us to new places' writes Toftegaard in her lively introduction to the exhibition.

The curator had several aims that were skilfully realised. She wished to reveal the specifically Danish inflection of the rococo, inserting Denmark into the cosmopolitanism of 18<sup>th</sup> century European and global history. This was skilfully asserted, to cite one example, through the display of a magnificent wedding gown of imported embroidered Chinese silk, with a firm *provenance* of import in 1767 and wearing in 1768. The Chinese embroiderers, having been probably sent a pattern of a floral trellis, reinterpreted the design by creating regular crescents rather than meandering tresses of flowers. Worn by Bolette Marie Harboe at her wedding to the son of a Chief Factor, who was an agent within a trading company, the garment was an extraordinary example of the taste for the rococo and a regional inflection that was created through a cultural (mis)translation. To this writer it was probably the most extraordinary object on display, being also in very fine condition on a beautiful cream silk ground and rather old fashioned in shape for the date, a good indication that fashion for display does not always match fashion from a 'plate'.

Toftegaard's second aim was to disrupt expectations. Were we going to find only a lot of 'old things' in the exhibition? No. The viewer was immediately faced with a selection of the costumes from the well known Nigerian-born British artist Yinka Shonibare's film 'Un ballo in maschera'. Shonibare is a very 'useful' artist as he can tell a great many narratives, about both the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries,

colonialism and post-colonialism, and everything in between; I have made good use of him myself (McNeil 2012). His work is simultaneously elegant and subversive, deploying the ironies of doubled cross-cultural contact. He creates sculptural *tableaux* very often based on European paintings, in which 'African' cloth that is called 'Dutch' wax-printed cotton (now generally exported from England), wraps the head-less mannequins he poses in patterns that are extremely disquieting. For example, in 2006, he created an installation within the Cooper-Hewitt Museum (of decorative arts), New York, of figures walking on stilts representing the founder-collectors Sarah and Eleanor Hewitt dressed in his fictional 'African' print Victorian dresses. The work brought together ideas of unorthodox female adventure, cultural collecting and imperial power pursued by amateur scholars and tourists in both the nineteenth century and our own time. As Adrienne Goloda notes: 'Like Shonibare, Dutch wax represents both Black and White; the developing and developed world; indigenous and constructed identity'. (Goloda: 91).

The use of this particular Shonibare work worked well in a Scandinavian context, as his costumes for the film of the dance at the masked ball were based on the national costume developed by Gustav III. Both Russia and Sweden under Catherine the Great and Gustav III respectively, developed distinctive national court and even children's dress in the late-18<sup>th</sup> century. Encouraged by the Empress, Gustav III formulated and actively encouraged the adoption of a national dress for his courtiers from 1778. For men this suit of black trimmed with red or blue with white combined French knee breeches with a Spanish cloak and archaic doublet with shoulder slashing, the features indicating Gustav III's personal interest in masquerade and fancy dress, attempts to link his reign to an earlier tradition, and perhaps a personal vanity, in that the tight fitting sleeves of French coats did not suit his shoulder deformity. The corresponding women's court dress incorporated seventeenth-century puffed sleeves and a standing lace collar. Lena Rangström's analysis of this experiment indicates that Gustav III was motivated also by the notion of 'one people, one costume' and the economic

advantage of using Swedish-made textiles, although the King himself continued to order luxury versions from Paris (Rangström 1998: 262). It was startling and rather cheeky to see these costumes made up in garish printed faux-batik by Shonibare; they also made the male mannequins (in my eyes) look very sexy. This was an unexpected outcome; I am not sure we find 18<sup>th</sup>-century men's clothes terribly erotic anymore and that is a pity. New contexts create new viewing positions and that is one role of the museum exhibit.

Here, the impact was, to quote Toftegaard in conversation with our group, a consideration of how we 'stage manage our lives' including our gender identities, and investigate the convergence of art and handicraft. One of her other themes, *Lost in Translation*, was an apt title for the transpositions that took place in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and afterwards from one format and one society to another. Thus an exceptional printed cotton 'Tree of Life' hanging from India c1700-1725 was juxtaposed with Josef Frank's 'Vegetable Tree' design of 1943-45, a new and equally vibrant but modernist 'tree of life'. By the inclusion of Frank's 'Rox & Fix' (rocks and figs) design c1943-45, which makes use of Chinese inspiration derived from landscape painting, Toftegaard underscored the mobile sources of this Viennese-Jewish designer who married a Swede, relocated before Nazi oppression, and then moved to New York for the duration of the war. That the 'Rox & Fix' textile was not revived until 1994 is another indication of how traditions are also inventions, as this textile is an anchor piece of the exquisite Stockholm store *Svenskt Tenn*. Toftegaard's catalogue notes make all of this very clear to the reader. The impact of the exhibition relies on the visual beauty and impact of what was displayed, as well as a thoughtful *mise-en-scène* in which objects and paintings were combined in a subtle modulation of space and light, making use of clever matching, such as the punctuation points provided by a series of 18<sup>th</sup>-century mirrors in the first *salle*.

Fashionable clothing requires a concept and also fabrication; sometimes this process is symbiotic, as in the work of many modernist fashion designers.

Fashion design can also be linked to aspects of the trades and as a vernacular activity with a much longer history. The development of the idea of the fashion designer requires an understanding of the history of making clothes, of the training and organization of labour, and the relative value of technical and conceptual skills. In the twentieth century, most fashion designers have been in dialogue with art, either because they were intellectually curious about this aspect of visual culture, or they wished to ally themselves with the opportunities offered by the status of art. On this occasion a focussed and fruitful conversation was established concerning art, design and practice. As a part of the exhibition the work of three designers – Nikoline Liv Andersen, Laura Baruël and Anne Damgaard - was commissioned and displayed near and within 18<sup>th</sup>-century settings. Several of the garments were kinetic, rotating on disguised electric motors suspended from the ceiling; another was a large installation.

We tend today to think of body parts in isolation and the fashion industry is structured around accessories, the ready to wear and other forms. Yet it is important to note that an early-modern subject might think about clothing rather differently. The art historian Katie Scott, writing on eighteenth-Century 'image-object-space', extends the suggestions made by Daniel Roche that the dramatic transformation of appearances in eighteenth-Century western Europe was matched by a corresponding transformation in the experience of space. Scott reconsiders the way in which we assign meanings to objects, when in the past these latter often bore images on their surface and were necessarily spatial; and spaces were experienced as both images and enclosures, like clothing (Scott). The eighteenth-century century was an age that valued imitation; textiles carried imitations of other forms and textures, fur or feathers, a sensual and a commercial strategy which linked consumer goods into circuits quite different than those we experience today (Benhamou). Viewers were attentive to detail and read the components of their environment in connection with other parts, arts and traditions. Such extravagance was not interpreted as odd or eccentric, but understood as a part of a harmonious fashion performance.

Whereas England had a long tradition of female mantua-makers who produced gowns, it was only in 1675 that Paris permitted a female guild for the making of women's clothing. Male corset-makers continued to provide the understructure and hence overall shape of women's fashion; the female guild provided the embellishment and trimming. De Garsault's *Description des Arts et Métiers* stated that the *maîtresses couturières* lacked the skills and technology found in the male tailor's art. Using an architectural metaphor, Louis-Sébastien Mercier compared the tailor and seamstress to the 'masons of the edifice' and the *marchand de mode* as both architect and decorator. It was therefore interesting at this workshop to consider the continued gendering of fashion design as a female practice in which many of the stars are men.

Anne Damgaard created five wedding dresses entitled *Melankolys* with themes drawn from Watteau's *Embarkation for Cythera*, which exists in two versions (1717; 1718-21), one of which is more rose pink. She made a close study of the Louvre version, paying particular attention to the flow of the red lines on the garments and figures. The Rococo, she noted, is in a way 'too beautiful for its own good', something that has also been an issue for filmic recreations of the period; in her case she made use of *Barry Lyndon* (1975). To the artist, the 'endless joy, loss and love' that is demonstrated in rococo art might be melancholy at the same time. Therefore, Damgaard generated her design in part through an emotional engagement with the rococo. Beginning with ink drawings that were extremely abstract, she shifted to paper cutting – a part of Danish popular culture - and experimentation with new materials, sourced from Japan. Some of these were laser cut polyesters in aqueous shades. Ironically, baroque and rococo silks were frequently of heavy weight, although they appear light in made-up dresses. Damgaard's interest in Watteau was revealing, as he is one of the great artists to show the same dress in rotation. Her newly-designed dresses remind viewers that clothing is both a material covering and an enclosure for the

body. The aesthetic and phenomenological dimension of clothing moving in space is highly significant and often overlooked (Perniola; McNeil 2010).

Laura Baruéil noted in conversation that she is at heart a textile designer. She revealed herself as particularly fascinated by the mutual cultural exchange between Europe and China in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and noted that Danish Chinoiserie was frequently fantastical. She has a strong interest in translating into art something that is not easily understandable and mentioned a certain 'weirdness' about the project that was most pertinent. Her interests were wide ranging, from Chinese literati painting, to the gardens, *papier-mâché* dolls and linked eroticism of the period. She was particularly fascinated by the medium of paper that she observed being worked in various folk art forms on recent visits to China. Her installation was therefore a monochrome of white created in paper and silk. She was interested in creating dresses that cannot be worn or used. A discussion ensued regarding the use of theatricality in her work. Giorgio Riello mentioned that most things entering Europe came from India, not China. 'Yes, I agree, next time I'll work with India' was this designer's excited response. The designer proceeded to show us an exquisite series of textile designs based on Nordic flora that had a *japonese* sensibility. Her passion for the arts of China and Japan and the importance of time and space in which to think and design were palpable.

Nikoline Liv Andersen created an installation of three powerfully dressed mannequins, 'Dance with the Deaf and Dumb Eye'. It was installed in the same space as an 18<sup>th</sup>-century French tapestry-covered canapé (sofa) and in this sense it was in conversation with the strategy of placing a John Galliano dress in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Croome Court tapestry room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art within *AngloMania: Tradition and Transgression in British Fashion* (May-September 2006 ; see McNeil 2009). Andersen described the way in which she decided to tell a narrative that seemed to be critical of the manner in which we consume fashion. Using the notion of Japanese monkeys, she inserted three ceramic monkey heads into the artful high yarn-wigs that garnished her

mannequins. She wished to create mannequins something like rag dolls but of a human size. The dresses were created from a range of materials including drinking straws; her interest was in giving textiles new qualities and possibilities. Andersen has worked in Paris with the couture house Galliano and is also supported by Saga fur development. Her work in different textile and fur media was quite extraordinary, literally painting with fur, gold and silver foils and myriad colours. Her aim was to suggest that we are now thoughtless and blind consumers; her attitude to the fashion industry that has supported her from time to time was ambivalent. Her imposingly dressed mannequins looked out at us, as if to say 'try to look like me'. This was a useful effect within a show that explored a period that was about the interaction and cultivation of self and appearances for the elites in western Europe and North America.

In terms of practice-based research from a designer's perspective, research might take place 'about', 'through' or 'by' design. All are highly loaded and contested notions about which a great deal of exciting discussion and policy is currently being generated around the world (on aspects of this difficult topic see Cross and Dorst amongst others). I believe that one way to consider practice is as 'conversation' in which the generation of new knowledge takes place in a space 'in between' as it were. That is, ideas are generated through the interaction of the design with the environmental setting in which the work is purposefully exhibited, if that was the intent of the designer. This is always the case with site-specific work and commissions for precise museum settings. Such an approach to say a PhD examination of design or art is sometimes called a 'hybrid' piece of research. In conclusion, Toftegaard's *Rokoko* remakes the style and period anew for a new generation of viewers. They might resist its challenges of ridicule, absurdity and impossibility, to see it instead as captivating, synthetic and syncretic, revealing much about the interaction of people and cultures in a world that has been global for longer than many might think.

## Bibliography

Benhamou, Reed, 'Imitation in the Decorative Arts of the Eighteenth Century', *Journal of Design History*, 1991, vol. 4, no. 1, pp 1-13.

Carr, E.H., *What is History? The George Macauley Trevelyan Lectures Delivered in The University of Cambridge January-March 1961*. Penguin. Camberwell Vic. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 1987. (1<sup>st</sup> Macmillan 1961).

Cross, Nigel, *Designerly Ways of Knowing*, 2007, Boston: Birkhauser Verlag AG.

Dorst, K., Cross, N. & Roozenburg, N., *Research In Design Thinking*, 1992, Delft University Press, Delft, The Netherlands.

Goloda, Adrienne, 'Shonibare's Masked Ball. The Silent Danger of Cloth and Construction', *Anamesa. An interdisciplinary Journal*, Spring 2010, 90-96.

McNeil, Peter, 'Libertine Acts: Fashion and Furniture' in Jihn Potvin (ed), *The Places and Spaces of Fashion, 1800-2007*, 2009, Routledge, New York, pp. 154-165.

McNeil, Peter, 'The Structure and Form of European Clothes' in L. Skov, (ed), *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion*, 2010, Volume 8: West Europe, Berg, Oxford and New York, pp. 33-38.

McNeil, Peter, 'Old empire and new global luxury: Fashioning global design' in Glenn Adamson, Giorgio Riello and Sarah Teasley (eds), *Global Design History*, 2011, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 138-149.

Perniola, Mario, 'Between Clothing and Nudity' in Michel Feher with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi (eds), *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, 1989, part 2 (pp. 236-65), New York: Zone.

Rangström, Lena (1998) 'A Dress Reform in the Spirit of its Age' in Magnus Olausson (ed), *Catherine the Great & Gustav III*, Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 261-265.

Scott, K., *The Rococo Interior. Decoration and Social Spaces in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris*, Yale University Press, 1995