

Colloque *Re-membering the Body*
Institut d'ethnologie / Musée d'ethnographie
Neuchâtel, 6-8 septembre 2012

Quatrième panel | Techniques du corps et muséographie

Communication

Disembodied Dress: Clothing in Museum Exhibitions

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In the context of culture, dress has different layers of meaning. To name only the most salient: First, garments protect the body from environmental influences. This function necessitates certain technical qualities of textiles. Second, as a semiotic code dress signifies as an important means of visual communication. Every culture has developed one or more semiotic systems of communicating through the consciously fashioned appearance of the human body. And third, through their direct sensual impact on the body and its physical functions clothes contribute to shaping individual self-perception, self-experience and the sense of personal identity. The cut of a garment forms and restricts postures and movements, draws attention to the way certain parts of the body feel or limits the sensual perception of certain body parts or functions. In all these contexts dress directly relates to the human body. In effect, clothes are much more closely linked with the body than most other artefact categories.

It is striking that this close relationship between the human body and the garments which cover it appears not to be reflected in museum exhibitions. Of course the range of possibilities to display fragile objects like textiles is strictly limited by conservational considerations. But still certain fashions of presentation can be retraced through the last century. For many decades sartorial exhibits used to be presented on life-like dummies, thus trying to reproduce the visual code of the overall appearance of the dressed human body. The last 20 to 30 years contrastingly viewed a growing tendency to present articles of clothing on more and more abstract mounts. If dummies are used at all they are faceless and discolored. For the most part, clothes are fitted on headless dressforms. Some recent exhibitions have been employing completely invisible mounts while arranging the garments in a way that still follows the body shape, making the clothes look like empty wrappers of an absent body. Clothes in exhibitions are mostly displayed as works of art, as examples for certain techniques of craftsmanship, or as historical documents – but they hardly ever appear in relation to the human body.

The paper discusses some examples of this apparent “disembodiment” of dress in museum exhibitions and asks what kind of information can be gained from sartorial exhibits in these contexts. Based on these considerations I will explore if and how the afore mentioned different aspects of dress-body relationship might be – or maybe even actually are – successfully displayed in an exhibition setting.

Protective functions of textiles can easily be explained and illustrated in technical terms, but they are hardly ever the main focus of an exhibition of clothing. However, as a side issue they may often enable additional insights.

The contribution of garments in creating a certain visual code is in exhibition settings often exemplified by juxtaposing the textile with photographs, paintings or video material that show the clothed body “in action” in its original setting. Many exhibitions make use of these tools with varying success. In most cases the human body in its relationship to the displayed clothes remains a side issue.

The third aspect is the most difficult to display. Is it even possible to convey the feeling of dress shaping individual perception and personal identity through the exhibition medium? Short of installing a dressing room and encouraging visitors to try on the garments on display (which for conservational reasons is of course out of the question) it seems hardly possible to approach the direct physical experience of dress in an exhibition. So an indirect approach is necessary.

The museum exhibition has been characterized as a place of visualization. Visualization in this context means “the explanatory illustration of absent issues”¹. From this perspective, the very absence of the body in the exhibition would enable its visualization. The same might be true for other ways of perception. By stimulating the visitor’s imagination in certain ways, an idea or even illusion of an experience may be created. The paper will conclude by discussing some examples.

¹ Schärer, Martin R.: Die Ausstellung. Theorie und Exempel. [The Exhibition. Theory and Example.] München 2003, p. 83.