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Embodied History: Wearing Historic Dress and Textiles in the Cavalcade of Costume

Dr Helen Margaret Walter

Presented by the charismatic Mrs Betty Penny over a period of 35 years in the second half of the twentieth century the Cavalcade of Costume was a unique type of theatrical performance. Based on her own collection of historical costume, it was designed to teach audiences about the History of Dress, and featured amateur performers dressed in original period garments. The collection was subsequently transferred to the museum context when Mrs Penny established the Blandford Fashion Museum in 1990. Comprising around 1500 items of dress and textile ranging in date from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century, these garments still form the nexus of the museum's collections, although the museum now holds over 5000 artefacts. The musem also holds an archive of video footage, newspaper clippings, programmes, and photographs of the Cavalcade of Costume.

This is not the only collection of historic dress and textiles in the UK that started in this way. Small, local collections such as the Bedales collection at the Petersfield museum, and more high profile museums like the National Trust's Killerton House and the nationally important Talbot Hughes collection at the V&A, were all started as collections of historic garments that were designed to be worn rather than preserved, either as theatre costume (in the case of Killerton and Bedales) or as fancy dress (in the case of the Talbot Hughes for sitting for portraits), all of which could be considered as forms of embodied history. As a result of alterations and other interventions performed on the garments during their tenure as embodied objects, their history as performance costume has often been viewed as an inconvenient side step between the original context of the garment and its place as a conserved object in the heritage sector, and has also lead to the questioning of their status as authentic historical artefacts. At the Blandford Fashion Museum, this has resulted in a number of items being relegated from the main collection to the museum's handling and education collections, and the image and paper archive of the Cavalcade of Costume has never been either catalogued or researched.

Drawing on writing on conservation and fashion in the museum context, and on the idea of the agency of the object over the course of its life, this research attempts to reconcile the wearing of items of historic dress and textiles with the idea of preserving dress as an element of the historical record. Working not only from the visual and written records of the Cavalcade of Costume, and the objects themselves, but also from the testimony of those involved in the Cavalcade of Costume project, it argues that Mrs Penny's work should be seen in the context of the practice of embodied history, rather than as a deviation or aberration from the preservation agenda.

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