

Memories of style: Digitizing the Yorkshire Fashion Archive

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Although many fashion archives find it challenging to accurately represent their collections in a digital format, the task the Yorkshire Fashion Archive faced when creating their first electronic catalogue was uniquely difficult, as their collection spans far more than garments. As an archive that aims to represent socio-cultural history through clothing, it also collects oral histories, personal photographs and ephemera related to the garments from the original owners. While putting this information together into one digital record presented challenges, this also provided opportunities to preserve the remembered history of the fashionable history of the Yorkshire region, alongside the objects and ephemera in the collection, to create a textually rich electronic archive.

Clothes are historical documents. We imbue them with our personal histories and identities, and they thereby contain a depth of personal, transient narrative that can be easily lost to history. The details of the era, such as advertisements and pamphlets, or even dresses, gloves, hats and coats, can provide valuable cultural evidence to historians working in the arts,¹ enriching the understanding of a particular period, providing new insights or interpretations, and inspiring new forms of creative outputs. It is the work of fashion archives to collect, curate and preserve this history, and the digital age has brought new opportunities to make this history available. Yet digitizing fashion is a curious process, distinct from digitizing more traditional archival collections. One can photograph clothing and create scanned images of textiles, and yet the digital record will still only ever remain an approximation of the garment it aims to represent. This is where fashion archives diverge from the more traditional ones; collections of letters, manuscripts, advertisements, newspapers and other print matter can be well-represented by image on a screen, where 3-D objects cannot. The challenge in making items in the non-traditional archive digitally available is to find a way to represent all the details of an object, from its physical presence to its unwritten history.

The Yorkshire Fashion Archive (YFA), held by the Design School at the University of Leeds, was set up in 1999, aiming to archive clothing and accessories produced or purchased in the Yorkshire area over the course of the last century. Born from a lack of information concerning the history of dress in the Yorkshire region,² the archive aims to use fashion and clothing to chart the socio-cultural history of the area throughout the 20th century. Although the archive's remit tends toward 20th-century fashion, it does also hold a small number of garments from the 19th century, with records beginning in 1860. The majority of the collection is women's clothing, but it also houses menswear, fabric samples, dress patterns, books, fashion magazines, advertisements and other ephemera amongst the archival materials. As the archive is housed in the Design School, the clothing held in the YFA is frequently accessed by students for inspiration or pattern study and by university staff for teaching purposes, but the concerns of the archive are significantly wider than that. Whilst building a historical record of clothing in Yorkshire, the archive was set up to chart changing local and social attitudes, the changing economy and textile industry, new cultural influences, and the development of Yorkshire life as a whole. The archive's role is to preserve and maintain the physical garments, but it also seeks to

1. J. D. Prown. "Style as Evidence." *Winterthur Portfolio* 15, no. 3 (1980): 197.

2. D. Backhouse and C. Watson. "Untold History: The story of a Yorkshire wedding dress." In *A moda num mundo global: Fashion in a global world*, ed. Isabel Cantista, et al. (Porto: Vida Economica Editorial, 2011), 157.

preserve the stories and social history of them as well. Hence, in addition to collecting clothing, the archive also collects accompanying photographs, films, ephemera and anecdotes related to the garments, thus creating a lively, individual and unconventional collection, entirely unique in the region. The collection itself is almost wholly reliant on donations from the public, but this is what provides the backstory and social interest of the garments.

The aims and outcomes of digitization

Until recently, these records were kept as a series of word-processed documents located on a computer hard drive. Although these records could be found by archive staff, and local access could be granted to researchers and members of the public who wished to make use of the archive, it was not possible to search across these records, and this therefore made it harder to conduct research within the archive, to link the garments to their histories and accompanying photographs, and even to create exhibitions around the contents of archive. In order to address this issue, an electronic catalogue of the garments in the archive was created, transferring all the data from the separate, individual text documents to an interactive, fully searchable system. This process took six months to complete, and was done using Modes Complete, collection-management software used primarily by museums, which allowed a full range of images to be uploaded with each record, along with metadata about the garments, and the associated anecdotes and remembrances from the previous owners of the clothing.

There were several aims in creating this electronic catalogue for the archive. As is the case with most digitization projects, both accessibility and discoverability of the collection were of primary importance, with the ultimate intention of increasing public user access to the collection. In the YFA, this offered the particular opportunity to make garments visible and browsable to those using the archive. With so many objects held in mobile shelving, carefully stored in garment bags or wrapped in acid-free tissue paper and packed into boxes, relatively few would be easily discoverable by a student or researcher, without being able to search across a digital catalogue.

A further advantage in creating methods of digital access to the collection relates to preservation. Access to unique, rare and fragile heritage items can be increased, without additional risks, through digital reproduction and access. Garments were not designed to be permanent records; constant handling and bright light contribute to their decay. Fabric can tear, delicate silks eventually disintegrate and furs can carry pests if not properly stored. Added to this, because the remit of the archive is focussed on the personal histories of clothing, many of the garments are donated to the archive having been worn over the course of many years, and are often in a far from ideal condition to be continuously viewed, handled and studied. Making records available online, with high quality, detailed photographs and scanned copies of associated ephemera, greatly reduces the need to continuously pull delicate garments from storage.

Finally, the electronic catalogue makes it easier to sort and view garments in accordance with date ranges and locations, making it possible to more accurately map developments across the region and place these garments in the wider context of Yorkshire history. Those researching the collection are thus able to uncover and trace patterns and developments in the region, from the cost of clothing to the types of fabrics used. This latter point made finding garments for a recent exhibition at the YFA, on the theme of synthetic fibres, considerably easier.³

Preserving oral histories

However, what remains most interesting about the archive, and what the electronic catalogue was most able to support, is what is largely intangible about its contents. Although clothes themselves can be used as historical evidence, extracting primary data from these sources remains difficult. As has been noted, it is challenging to extract information from clothing compared with more traditional archive material, such as manuscripts; documents speak where garments remain mute.⁴ One can identify fabrics, analyze construction, research the history of manufacturers and roughly pinpoint an era, but this will never reflect the full history behind the garments. It is the stories, anecdotes, remembrances and

3. "The Synthetics Revolution: Man-made fibres and everyday fashion - until December," *University of Leeds*, accessed December 13, 2016, https://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/events/event/3311/the_synthetics_revolution_man-made_fibres_and_everyday_fashion-until_december.

4. V. Steele. "A Museum of Fashion is More than a Clothes-Bag." *Fashion Theory* 2, no. 4 (1998): 329.

personal narrations surrounding the clothing in the archive that preserves what is ephemeral about them. It has often been observed that wardrobes can act as personal archives of their owners, documenting not only representations of class and gender, but also a facsimile of the lived experiences of the wearers.⁵ The YFA does not just consider its holdings evidential of the social history of the region, although many conclusions can be drawn from the garments in its collection alone; instead it strives to also collect and preserve oral histories surrounding clothes, an authenticity that exists beyond of the physical artefacts. Further to this, dress played only a minor role in archives and museum collections until relatively recently. It was thought that fashion was 'unworthy' of being placed in a museum or archive; that its contribution to cultural history was negligible.⁶ It is thus all the more important for the fashion archive to demonstrate how fashion history can inform and contextualize a social, economic and historical narrative.

Adding these stories to the catalogue records, alongside the photographs and metadata about garments adds a depth to the archive and creates a picture of the history of the region that would not be apparent from analyzing the mere fabric alone. The digital cataloguing process allows us to effectively unite the garment with its narrative history. Although the act of archiving itself can remove items from their original context and creators, inserting the voices of the garments owners, the stories of their creation, purchase and wear, adds something new to the historical record.

Digitizing in this archive helps create a more holistic record: a dress and its story exist as one object in a digital file. High quality photographs of a black Mary Quant dress sit alongside details about the garments fabric and construction, stories of its purchase in London and its wear in Leeds, and photographs of its bee-hived owner dancing at a nightclub. These details all weave together to tell a story of fashion and style in 1960s Yorkshire that could not be discovered from studying the garment itself. The history of the region becomes clearer through more complete records, particularly in terms of finances and economic growth. For instance, it is apparent through studying the contents of the archive that, in 1950s Yorkshire, commercially made dresses were generally only purchased for special events and then worn constantly, until they fell apart. A floral dress in the archive from Kitty Copeland, a London-based designer and manufacturer, was purpose bought in 1953 when the owner became a National Council of Women office holder. Another dress in the archive, also from 1953, was part of the original owner's trousseau following her marriage, but was then worn frequently for events throughout the years; the dress is now ripped and stained from its years of use. A pink taffeta dress, from the Yorkshire department store Marshall and Snelgrove, was reportedly purchased for 38 guineas, equivalent to approximately £600 in modern money. As this was seemingly around average for commercially made dresses of the period, it is clear why these designs were beyond the reach of many ordinary Yorkshire women. In another, a woman who donated her swimsuit to the archive recalls that it cost her £4 in 1957. As the salary she earned as a telephonist in Leeds was £3 a week, she had to save for some time before she was able to afford the garment. The average wage during this period was not enough for most regional women to afford shop-bought garments, something which is often clear from the condition of the garments entering the archive, which have often been worn, stained and ripped before ultimately being accessioned. The tears, fading and repairs in these clothes construct a narrative of the life of a garment, from a pristine ball gown to a soiled, well-loved tea dress. The details themselves can help us guess at a garment's past, but to accurately decode it we need to access additional information, tied up in oral histories that would otherwise be inaccessible to researchers.

The cataloguing process also made searching across these narratives possible. Keyword searches can join together stories from individuals who may have never met, illuminating common threads. The years when garments made by Biba, Ossie Clark and Mary Quant were brought up from London to Yorkshire can be immediately pinpointed by a quick search, signalling the changing styles in the region. It is this scale of interconnectivity with the past that allows the archive to represent the complex social history of the region, the changing social mores, multicultural influences or the financial booms and busts. As an example, whilst Yorkshire has primarily been considered a centre of textile and wool production and industry, rather than a centre of fashion,⁷ regionally-made fabrics appear throughout the archive, worked into garments that fit the silhouettes of each era. The Yorkshire region boasted an impressive textile industry that recovered quickly after the end

5. S. B. Cwerner, "Clothes at Rest: Elements for a sociology of the wardrobe." *Fashion Theory* 5, no. 1 (2001): 87.

6. V. Steele. "Museum Quality: The rise of the fashion exhibition." *Fashion Theory* 12, no. 1 (2008): 9.

7. K. Almond. "Made in Yorkshire: Harnessing the zeitgeist." *Catwalk: The Journal of Fashion, Beauty and Style* 3, no. 1 (2014): 7.



Fig. 1. Mary Quant dress, 1963. Image reproduced with the permission of the Yorkshire Fashion Archive.

of the Second World War thanks to the influx of migrant workers to the mills,⁸ so high quality fabric quickly became available again. Wool and cotton were easily purchased from local shops and markets, although the cost was still a factor. Several dresses in the archive were hand-knitted from Yorkshire wool.

Another notable dress in the archive is a black and gold piece that was created in 1957 from three cotton remnants purchased for 16 shillings and 9 pence – around £15 in today's money – from Barnsley market in the mid-fifties. Sewn together for a three-week sea voyage to Calcutta, the original owner designed the dress as a skirt and top, made to be mixed and matched with other items throughout her trip. In 1959, not allowing even comparatively cheap fabric to go to waste, she reworked the garment into a new dress. A full skirted dress of the classic 1950s shape still required a lot of fabric to create, even if it were sewn from a pattern at home with readily available fabric, and the wartime utilitarian style, designed with frugality in mind, remained popular in the north of the country some years after it ceased to be fashionable elsewhere. Using the catalogue to search for fabric types in particular eras, associated with the cost of materials and the stories of the original owners, it is possible to build a detailed picture of the region in this time period.

An archive of memories

In many ways, though, this aspect of the archive gives access to more than additional facts and historical data; the archive sits at an intersection of memory and history. Memory is fallible, and these stories are often recounted in interviews that take place years after the garments were originally bought and worn. A memory of 'catty comments' noted on the catalogue record of a pink floral evening gown goes beyond the simple preservation of artefacts into profoundly post-modern territory. As the philosopher Jacques Derrida writes, 'the archive takes place in the originary and structural breakdown of [...] memory.'⁹ Derrida, here, is concerned with the nature of truth and what it means to preserve truth in archival conditions. Clothing is a physical relic of the past, which transcends the uncertainty of written words; this makes some strides in establishing an intact archive of remembered history. Building from Derrida's ideas, archivist Tom Nesmith acknowledges that 'finding the most reliable media for conveying this understanding'¹⁰ is a challenge within an archive. Communicating understanding

8. P. Jackson. "The Racialization of Labour in Post-War Bradford." *Journal of Historical Geography* 18, no. 2 (1992): 190.

9. J. Derrida. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 11.

10. T. Nesmith. "Seeing archives: Postmodernism and the changing intellectual place of archives." *The American Archivist* 65, no. 1 (2002): 25.



Fig. 2. Cresta evening gown, 1959, purchased from Yorkshire department store Marshall & Snelgrove. The owner remembered 'catty comments' being made about her when she wore this. Image reproduced with the permission of the Yorkshire Fashion Archive.

takes layers of information, which is a large part of the scope of the YFA. The purpose of an archive is not just to collect documents, scraps of historical information and artefacts, but also to hope that this accumulation captures some of the essence of the period and aims to 'transcend or bypass this technical substitute for reality in pursuit of absolute presence of absolute life without any prosthetic, any techne, any archive.'¹¹ The YFA is not a mere facsimile of life, half-preserved garments isolated from the history and personal meaning that they carried. It seeks to preserve what made the garments living creations, and document the voices of real people and Yorkshire life in a unique way – not necessarily as historical truth, but as it was remembered. Derrida argues that, as this means the archive does not stand separately from what it archives, this removes the objectivity from an archive's holdings. It maintains and curates memory, but creates it as well. This, in changing the way we communicate history, changes the way in which future generations perceive history. While the act of archiving typically goes to lengths to avoid such interferences with its materials and make the past static, such as through preserving original order; the goal of this archive, built around the ephemeral idea of preserving social history, is, by necessity, less passive, responsive to user need and user input. It exists to illustrate and embellish, and to shape our understanding of that time beyond that of its physical textile relics.

Ultimately, this is an archive of stories and of memories, which provides an altogether very different means of accessing the past, creating a collection, not of static objects, but of the history of lives lived. Built with its users in mind, and constructing a very different idea of history, the Yorkshire Fashion Archive has curated a unique and accessible collection that produces a different and textually rich way of perceiving the development of Yorkshire social history. The online catalogue allows unity between the multifaceted aspects of collections, from the garments itself to the memories of their previous owners, providing a way to access an interconnected cultural history.

11. *Ibid*, 30.

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