

Love in Fine Fashion: A Fresh Approach to an Exhibition of Wedding Dresses

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Abstract

Love in Fine Fashion was an innovative exhibition of wedding dresses and accessories at the McCord Museum in Montréal, Canada. The exhibition expanded on conventional museum storytelling practices. On one level, it related true stories of garments and accessories, of brides, their weddings and ensuing lives, and on another, a playful, fictional tale of a courtship, and in yet another layer, histories of common expressions that refer to clothing and accessories.

The fictional courtship story was built on a series of common figures of speech in English and French. Each sentence was created from an expression, and illustrated by a wedding dress or accessory in the exhibition. The sentence directed the visitor's gaze to a design feature or detail in the object. A free bilingual audio-guide told the story of the expression. In wall text, stories of ten couples mirrored historical developments in the institution of marriage itself over two centuries, and foregrounded the experiences of real brides.

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Introduction

Wedding dresses survive in great numbers and are seemingly ubiquitous in all collections of dress. It stands to reason that museum exhibitions of wedding dresses are equally ubiquitous. They allow institutions to display one of the strengths of their collections. They also tend to draw large audiences. And yet from a curatorial standpoint, the inevitable mandate of a wedding dress exhibition is often dreaded. Hackneyed and overwrought subject matter and expectations of a celebratory tone are at odds with current public debate on the institution of marriage. (Hertz, 2012) It is not the aim of this paper, however, to expound on the pitfalls of the wedding dress exhibition as a genre.

This paper will discuss a recent exhibition of wedding dresses that aimed to bring a new twist to this well-known exhibition theme. The McCord Museum's exhibition *Love in Fine Fashion*, held from November 20 2014 to April 19 2015, featured some thirty wedding dresses and thirty accessories, dating from 1816 to 2008, in a 4,000 square-foot gallery. This exhibition was in and of itself a marriage—of two very distinct concepts. If marriage most typically has the aim of merging two distinct entities to create something greater than the sum of the parts, then this exhibition had very similar aspirations.

A marriage of two disparate concepts

One of these two exhibition concepts was a proposal to show wedding dresses from our collection to highlight the time span and stylistic range it encompasses. Several factors supported such an idea. For one, the McCord Museum's Costume and Textiles collection of over 18,000 objects contains approximately 150 wedding dresses; database records that account for the dresses and all the many accessories that accompany them total about 375. Many of these items had never been displayed; others had only ever been displayed only once

or twice. Our institution was due to revisit the crowd-pleasing topic; our last exhibition of wedding dresses had actually been a series of two, one following on the other, both in 1978.

While making a selection of objects from a single collection to trace the stylistic history of dresses and the social history of weddings may seem a fairly expedient task, conservation treatment and mounting of such widely varied and complex garments are not. Production time and costs for such an exhibition seemed to warrant a concomitant investment in research and content.

Arguably it may not always be necessary to aim to break new ground in an exhibition, but we found ourselves at odds with the idea of the Museum investing heavily in a wedding dress exhibition that would not show substantial differentiation with others of the genre in its content. The types of histories to which our collection speaks are essentially similar to those packaged and presented to the public so many times by so many other institutions. While the geographical specificity of our collection can always impart a certain regional flavour, and the individual specificity of some wedding stories can always add a fresh touch to the histories our collection allows us to tell, the McCord Museum's desire for novelty in its approach seemed to require an entirely different positioning from those of other exhibitions.

At the same time as the wedding dress-themed project was on a shortlist of potential exhibitions, so was another proposal. It had been generated in reaction to a call for exhibition projects to take the form of highly innovative installations of our historical collections, with strong visual impact, but requiring little scholarly work, relying instead on the interpretations of an outside artist to create meaning. Such projects were to be neither research-intensive nor research-based in the traditional sense.

In the winter of 2013 we developed the idea for an exhibition to be based on a series of common figures of speech in language that reference clothing, such as "at the drop of the hat" or "the shoe is on the other foot;" such expressions were to inspire playful installations of disparate objects. The first step in that process was the creation of a bank of such expressions, both French and English to cater to our audience needs in Montréal, a very bilingual French-speaking city. This preliminary step yielded strong and very satisfying results, with several further ideas about how the expressions might be organized within an exhibition space. Nonetheless, the project was shelved for lack of a strong visual proposal to go along with the expressions.

Early in 2014 both projects were revived quite abruptly when we received a mandate to open a costume show that fall. With about six months lead time, we needed to use one or the other of the above two proposals. As we started to look at objects in storage to get a better sense of our wedding dress holdings, we were unable to escape thinking about the expression-based exhibition proposal simultaneously. As a result, each wedding dress brought to mind one or even several of the expressions in our bank. For instance, a shantung dress from 1957 with its perfect bound buttonhole called forth the expressions "to buttonhole someone," and "she was as cute as a button." A cap and collar set worn by an eighteen-year-old bride in 1816 seemed to suggest she may have literally "set her cap" for her groom. And the wide flaring lace cuffs on a dress from 1930 made us wonder if the bride might sometimes have made remarks "off the cuff." Furthermore, it was striking just how many of the expressions relating to dresses also described human behaviours, often objectionable ones. "Embroidering the truth," or getting "hot under the collar" can be very damaging to relationships.

What ensued was a sort of curatorial epiphany, or in common parlance an "aha moment." Each figure of speech or expression could be placed at the heart of a sentence. These sentences

could be ordered so as to weave a fictional story. The story could unfold in an exhibition--of wedding dresses of course. Each expression could reference a single garment or accessory, and the story would be revealed, sentence by sentence, and object by object, as the visitor moved through space and looked at the garments. Each figure of speech would not only serve to build the story but to draw the viewer's attention to a design feature or special detail in the garment. Where necessary, a magnifying glass would be placed over the detail to draw the viewer's attention to the relationship. (Figure 1) Set in a gallery environment populated by objects that had all witnessed courtships and marriage, what better story could there be than one which related the ups and downs of a courtship or romance, and triumphantly ended in marriage as so many such stories do.



Figure 1: A magnifying glass drew attention to the flaring lace cuff referenced in the sentence “She sometimes made off-the-cuff remarks.”

Thus the exhibition simultaneously layered three very distinct types of information. Firstly, the guiding organizational principle was the fictional and playful story of a courtship. The major developments in the story provided eight major themes, each of which had an expression as its title. For example in a section entitled “Were they Cut from the Same Cloth?” we grouped garments and accessories made of the same fabric, silk satin, but from different time periods. (Figure 2) The story was crafted to work in such a way that it was spelled out clearly in the main theme titles, echoed in the expressions in each of the two languages, and for visitors who read both languages, told without any repetition. Secondly, the exhibition gave information on the history and meaning of the figures of speech used in these sentences. It did so not through additional text, but rather through a free bilingual audio-guide. And finally, at a core level the exhibition had the expected historical content, relating true stories of garments and accessories and their design, and of brides, their weddings and ensuing lives. The latter content corresponded closely to what visitors expect from an exhibition of wedding dresses, and yet the story-based structure organized it in a completely unexpected way.



Figure 2: The zone entitled “Were they cut from the same cloth?” featured dresses made of silk satin.

A fictional narrative

The eight thematic zones and their content are here briefly outlined. Although the entire selection of garments was balanced in terms of the time span covered, each zone featured items from a variety of periods with no chronological order. The very first zone, roughly translated as “Colourful Beginnings,” featured coloured wedding dresses. (Figure 3) The first sentence, which related to a plaid dress, stated that “her past was by no means checkered;” the second, linked to a blue dress, that love came to her “out of the blue.” A gold beaded purse showed that “he thought she was worth her weight in gold.” Eight coloured objects were featured in this section, and thereafter until the sixth zone, all the garments and accessories were white.



Figure 3: The entrance to Love in Fine Fashion.

The second thematic zone, "*Il La Trouvait Fine Comme une Soie*" translated literally as "he thought she was as lovely as silk" or "he thought she was lovely" presented garments and accessories made from silks of different weights, weaves, and textures. The third zone, "*Était-elle la perle rare*," referring to rare pearls or beads, featured garments with bead and rhinestone embroidery. The label for a pair of shoes with a rhinestone ornament stated that "he thought she was a true gem." (Figure 4) A sleeveless dress from 1927 with a heart and arrow embroidered in pearls at the centre front of the dropped waistline was accompanied by the line: "She didn't wear her heart on her sleeve."



Figure 4 Shoes with rhinestone buckles informed visitors that "He thought she was a true gem."

Silk satins were the common feature of dresses and accessories in the fourth zone, “Were They Cut from the Same Cloth?” A bias-cut dress from 1930, with the statement “She had a strong bias towards him,” was particularly appreciated by visitors. The fifth zone, entitled “*Elle n’a pas toujours fait dans la dentelle*,” an expression that evokes rather brusque behaviour while playing on the French word for lace, *dentelle*, featured lace dresses. In front of a pair of openwork knit stockings and satin garters, the visitor was prompted to wonder if she would ever “pull up her socks.”

After four themes all illustrated with white dresses, the sixth zone came back to dresses in coloured fabrics from the 1870s and 1880s and queried “*Quelle tournure prendront les choses?*,” meaning literally in English “What turn will things take?” *Tournure* is also the French word for bustle. Visitors were asked to choose one of two possible outcomes. Would she have him in her pocket? Or would their love begin to fray? Each expectation for the future of the relationship directed the visitor to a different zone.

The seventh and next to last zone, entitled “Things Came Apart at the Seams,” featured an unhappy ending for the couple. (Figure 5) It was inspired by the sheer number of expressions that relate to the way clothing wears out and comes apart. It provided an ideal and unusual opportunity to display some significantly damaged objects without treating or trying to camouflage that damage. Although often only worn once, many of our wedding shoes and dresses presented very typical deterioration for artefacts of their type. In this zone a threadbare pair of shoes told visitors that “their love had worn thin;” a patched muslin bodice from the early nineteenth century affirmed that “they tried to patch things up a bit;” a shattered silk bodice lining from the early twentieth century illustrated love that was “in tatters” and a pair of stockings with visible mending revealed that “she could not mend her broken heart.” The final ending in the eighth zone was an alternate, happy one. A dress with ornamentation of bows and knots proclaimed “And so they tied the knot.” And in the final showcase two pairs of gloves from 1846, worn by an actual couple, told visitors that the couple were like “hand in glove.” (Figure 6)



Figure 5: The zone entitled “Things came apart at the seams,” featuring damaged wedding dresses and accessories.



Figure 6: The final showcase in Love in Fine Fashion.

Historical content

While the story structure imposed the overall organization of the exhibition, it also had some unexpected impacts on our choices regarding the presentation of historical content. Because of our unapologetic creation of a fiction, it seemed all the more important to generate a strong layer of fact-based stories of brides and objects within the exhibition. The research for these stories generated some unforeseen issues.

One of these issues pertained to the dating of the objects. Unlike most costume items that generally document a period of wear that may last several years, wedding dresses bear witness to a particular day, even if they are worn for a longer period. Such an exceptionally precise date appeared to be a powerful tool to enable a visitor to imagine the object's place in history and feel a sense of connection with its wearer. The decision to have the label indicate a precise date for some objects highlighted a frustrating lack of provenance and story for other items where details were not known. It became imperative to try to ascertain a precise wedding date wherever possible, particularly as web-based resources now facilitate this type of research. We were eventually able to confirm the wedding dates for all but two of sixty objects. This task

proved to be a significant research endeavour, but generated a wealth of minute fragments of historical data on each bride that we might not have discovered otherwise.

In pursuit of the same objective of highlighting object histories, each label was to feature a sentence or two about the bride, her wedding or the object itself. In the midst of writing these stories it became apparent that the constraints of the fictional story had overshadowed another important consideration for our institution. We had chosen dresses from a group of brides with very little diversity in their ethno-cultural origins and religious backgrounds, running counter to the expectation that as a history museum we should present the histories of a broad and representative spectrum of society.

The response to this dilemma was twofold. Firstly, while we retained the two sentences on each object label, we did not always name the bride or her place of marriage. Some of the histories pointed out aspects of a bride's experience, like her hand-stitched dress, or her acquisition of step-children along with a husband, that might have applied to any bride of any walk of life. To further highlight what diversity there actually was amongst the group of women, we chose ten whose more complete stories were elaborated on large wall panels, accompanied by their photographs, and spread throughout the exhibition. (Figure 7) They included a spectrum of brides, younger and older, wealthy and poor, rural and urban; Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish and sometimes blended couples, a beaming gay couple, happy stories of long lives together and sad stories of marriages cut short by death and divorce—in other words, the full gamut of the history of the institution of marriage. Through an organic process, this exhibition became as much about creating compelling historical stories as it was about working with a fictional story. (Figure 8)



Figure 7: A wedding dress from 1880 next to the bride's photograph and story.



Figure 8: True stories of brides featured on the walls of the exhibition.

Conclusion

Ultimately *Love in Fine Fashion* experimented with museum storytelling practices, and the incorporation of multiple layers of information. With an unconventional fictional narrative running through the exhibition, the importance of enticing the visitor into the smaller factual stories, told in either 150 words on the wall or 50 words on the label, became paramount. Ultimately the true scholarly exercise revealed itself as the crafting of these microhistories seamlessly and strategically so they might convey historical information about the experience of marriage over time. Our newfound understanding of the power of the stories that wedding dresses and accessories can tell has provided us with a new framework for appreciating the wedding dresses in our current holdings and guiding our future acquisitions.

Sources

Hertz, Carrie. 2012. "The Wedding Dress on Display." *Museum Anthropology Review* 6(1): 63-69. <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/mar/article/view/1907/2039>.