Recreation for Museums: How embodied research can bolster collections of working-class garments.

Working-class items are missing from museum collections. It has created a gap in information available to the public, and one that many of us have a direct or ancestral connection to. The majority of these fashions have been lost to time, the clothes worn until they could not be worn any more, reused, re-purposed and refashioned until they no longer resembled the items they once were. My research has considered the possibility of recreating these clothes from surviving artefacts: pictures that, contrary to daily clothes, have been treasured and preserved in family photo albums in even the poorest of homes.

Firstly, I shall discuss the lack of working-class items within museum collections, defining the gap in further detail. This is particularly evident in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, where the emphasis is on collecting items that wow and amaze over recording public history. This museum and many others share the ethos of the Designmuseum Danmark, who will collect an item 'which in one way or another belongs to the avant-garde.' (Toftegaard in Melchior et al, 2014, p. 147). A lack of surviving examples due to endless wear and re-purposing could also contribute to this void of representation.

Secondly, I shall consider the myriad benefits that recreations can offer museums, drawing evidence from projects that have already utilised them. I shall discuss how interacting with garments through touch can engage visitors, a practice rightfully frowned upon regards to delicate extant artefacts that is reconsidered due to the recreation, which is new and robust. I shall also consider the issues with using these recreated items within exhibitions, including communication and future research.

National Collections: Missing Pieces

National museums, with their extensive resources for acquiring artefacts of excellence, have very few items regarded as working-class. These museums cater to a wide audience who themselves are often seeking beauty and opulence not associated with menial, every-day wear, despite these items representing a vast and highly relatable part of our history. This seems a missed opportunity when various times throughout history have seen more working-class people than any other, such as Robert's description of a working-class that 'was reaching its zenith in the 1950s', directly in line with my research period (2020).

Whilst a few confirmed working-class artefacts exist within the searchable collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute I have found that they are far from accessible, with the term 'working-class' only finding twenty-four results, the majority of which air from such famous houses of design as Chanel and Worth. To this end, I set out to form a glossary of searchable terms, though soon found that no synonyms were any more successful.

Table 1 - An analysis of searchable terms for working-class artefacts in the Costume Institute's searchable collection.

Terms	**Count**	**Unique results**	**Unique confirmed working-class**	**Accession number(s)**	**Unique possible working-class items**	**Accession number(s)**
Working-class (working class)	24	N/A	2	2009.300.2759a–g 2009.300.3164	1	2009.300.2926
Rural	5	3	1	C.I.52.39	0	N/A
Crafts	115	Many	0	N/A	10	2009.300.1774 2009.300.2732 1971.121.5 1975.179.4 2009.300.1707 1975.179.5 C.I.X.51.10 39.13.227 C.I.41.145.6 C.I.44.80.6
Handmade	98	Many	0	N/A	1	1973.248.2
Local craft	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Searching the term ‘crafts’, as we can see from table 1, found many more results, many of which seem to be traditional garments from Romania and Eastern Europe. These items, though they have a high possibility of belonging to working-class families, regretfully held little to no information within the online catalogue. Description sections that had so often been filled with cultural significance even when information regarding the individual item is missing were left frustratingly bare.

My research uncovered three possibilities:

Firstly, that surviving working-class items with cultural significance, value and providence are rare and difficult to acquire. This is supported by my previous research into working-class garments, as many of the items were made from poorer quality materials that decayed faster than the silks and jewels of royalty or were worn and re-purposed until nothing remained (Worth, 2020, p. 3).

Secondly, that there is a lack of public interest in these items, dissuading museums from collecting them as they pose no future worth, and also causing a deficit in the number of items exhibited. It could be said that many working-class artefacts do not have the ‘compelling creative distinction or virtuosity [required] to astonish and amaze’ (Koda et al. in Melchior et al., 2014, p. 44). This could also suggest why items that could possibly be working-class have little to no information attached, as they would have forfeited the careful interrogation that exhibition pieces require for display.

Finally, working-class items, certainly from the last century, might not be considered valuable by museums as there is a bustling trade in vintage garments from private sellers. A multitude of websites accessible to the public, including Etsy, eBay and Facebook Marketplace, have many examples of vintage clothing from my research period (1930 to 1959) available to buy at auction. These items have not yet gained value through age and remain a commodity and,

even, are worn daily by enthusiasts. However, the further back in history one seeks, the more this availability wanes. When researching extant garments to support my case studies, I found plenty of examples of 1950s coats, many inspired by the same Dior collection of my example. As for the 1930s two-piece suit, there were very few garments available through auction and none that were too similar to my own.

Local Collections: Specialisms and Audience

This trend continues with the collections of smaller institutions. My research has discovered that working-class clothing, if present at all within collections, is extremely rare. As I initially thought the opposite more likely, this stresses the core components of the issue: that working-class garments have not been preserved as they were not valued by the times that bore them, that many of these items were worn and reused until they no longer resembled what they once were and that a lot of working-class garments have joined public circulation in the vintage clothing market.

A questionnaire I put to establishments within Dorset only confirmed these points further.

Duncan Walker, curator at the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, found no working-class garments within their collection whatsoever. The value of such items is usually impacted by the rare status of the artefacts, the significance that individuals place in their clothing, and by the descendants of individuals who might look back upon their ancestors' lives and find information scarce. Where working-class garments are preserved, they are often the uniforms of the house employees rather than every-day wear. In other cases, the clothes are those handed down by wealthy employers, adding to the ambiguity of the term 'working-class dress'.

Walker concludes with the thought of 'how they were probably worn to destruction and that such things tend not to be preserved in favour of more high status material within families.' (2021).

Many examples that can be found on the aforementioned public selling platforms are also in various states of preservation and disrepair. Closer inspection upon a 1930s evening dress of burgundy silk, sourced for *The Ballad of the Cosmo Café,* revealed multiple alterations to the sleeves, hem, and the removal of a zip. As costumiers, we altered it even further to suit the purpose of the role (Howard and Pride, 2021), a practice that eats into the supply of working-class clothing even further.

Sandy Powell notes this supply of vintage wear to the film industry and its degenerative nature (2020). Extant garments gradually become too fragile to wear on busy film sets and could very well be destroyed in the process. After their usefulness has run out, these items are either too damaged or bound by the semblance of worthlessness to be elevated to the status of 'artefact'.

Recreations for Museum Display

Recreations can fill this gap, providing a three-dimensional visual and tactile resource that can be used as an educational tool as well as a display element. They can be used in a traditional sense, in displays and exhibitions, to show the general public what working-class fashions might have looked like for their great grandmothers, and even before. They would provide an exhibition that speaks to the ordinary spectator in a way that the riches of kingly residences cannot.

Hilary Davidson discusses a common museum practice, wherein extant garments that are too fragile to be displayed or missing items necessary for display are recreated to complete the image and successfully communicate dress history (2019, p.6). This enables museums to share

fashions that would otherwise be lost in a similar way to working-class garments: through overuse and misappropriation. The practice of recreation can be much more successful with a surviving garment for the recreator to examine, however these recreations are just as limited by available materials as those interpreted from photographs. These benefit my research as they prove that recreations are already used successfully throughout exhibitions.

Recreations can also be used as an educational tool to offer viewers an in depth look into the construction of the garments that might not otherwise be possible. They would be able to handle the garments, as there is a much lower risk of damage compared to surviving examples. They are robust enough that they can be frequently moved, to be taken on touring exhibitions with low risk of damage and taken into schools for educational talks. They have not succumbed to the diseases of time that we so often associate with fragility. With recreations, a complete reversal of the 'do not touch' policy can be observed. This means that viewers can have a hands on, tactile and highly valuable experience to remember. They can feel the weight of the clothing and the quality of the fabric, exploring the way these clothes have been put together.

Probably the greatest benefit of using recreations in the museum is their ability to offer interactivity and boost engagement. Visitors can even try them on and experience first-hand what it might have felt like to wear such items, as an example of living history. Katy England of Salisbury Museum found this approach particularly useful when engaging with young people. Her initiative, *Look Again*, asked visitors to examine artefacts much more closely, and contained a section where they were invited to try on reproductions of historical fashions for themselves, (England, 2021). England spoke of how this experience boosted visitor numbers and highlighted an interest in interactivity, especially with younger visitors.

The recreations are not without their limitations, however. First and foremost, it must be made clear to the audience that the garments are not genuine artefacts from the time period. This can

be a difficult task, often limited itself by the bounds of an exhibition. Ideally, the photographic source material would be included along with a description of why the research has taken place, although this is not always possible or, indeed, helpful. England faced similar difficulties when naming the collection at Salisbury. Previously known under the term 'costume', commonly used within the dress history sector but differently understood outside of this discipline, guests were confused as to whether the artefacts they were viewing were examples of historical dress or theatrical re-imaginings for stage (ibid.). For recreations, every effort should be made to communicate the status of the items on display.

Additionally, recreations must be properly catalogued within collections to avoid future confusion. As the result of cumulative research undertaken on garments that only exist within a two-dimensional and often monochromatic photograph, they should not be used in place of primary sources for historical research. They are valuable as tools of display and education but cannot be interpreted as accurate, as previously discussed.

Do Recreations have a Place in Museums?

Even so, recreations are absolutely necessary to museum collections. Without extant garments of working-class origins, this sector is almost entirely forgotten and lost, and will be again if we continue forward in the manner of only collecting items for their material value.

The recreations represent an area of our history that is woefully understudied, and they could spark interest from future generations to rectify this problem. They provide a platform for future researchers to study the specialism in depth. With a whole new methodology on the horizon, recreations can be used to research objects that no longer exist and were thought lost for generations.

Additionally, recreations can be highly beneficial for heightening public engagement, drawing in the demographic of working-class and working-class descendants with new representation within the collections.

To conclude, there is both interest and opportunity for recreations within museum collections, as Walker declares his questionnaire. Definitively, he states: ‘the idea of turning to photographic sources etc and creating accurate replicas is possibly the only option.’ (2021).

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