

Reading the Photograph

As we have seen, photography can capture a moment in time and hold it in place for future generations to enjoy, examine and learn from. They can offer an unbiased window into everyday life, and with proper preparation we can elevate their contents from the two-dimensional to the three-dimensional with artefact recreation. There are several exercises we can undertake to look deeper and interpret the information contained within. The first method I employed was memory. By conducting oral interviews with the subjects of the photographs and their descendants, I gathered contextual information to support my own analyses. With details, however, memory can be fickle. My subjects were much more likely to remember the circumstance of their clothing than the intricacies of design, colour, and fabric. Further methods are therefore required to interrogate the photograph as an original source, to learn as much as we possibly can from this untapped resource.

Recolouring

At the forefront of design stands colour. It is essential, directing mood and emotion, guiding the intentions of the wearer. However, I have seen in my own research that coloured photographs in working class family photographs are very rare until the end of the 1950s. To recreate the garments as they were, we must distinguish the colour as best as possible. I found the question ambiguous in my oral history interviews, as an aspect of memory too often forgot. Contextual historical research into trends can be used to guide decisions, especially regarding uniforms and patterns of specific colourways such as tartans. Despite this, there is so much variance within personal taste that it is almost impossible to narrow down the choices through contextual research alone.

A new method of distinguishing colour, unrefined for the most part although thoroughly tested, is digital recolouring. A software learns how to read colours in black and white images through

a sample size and applies this to new examples. One of the most accomplished of these systems is available through MyHeritage (myheritage.com/incolor). Despite the glowing reviews my own experiences with *InColor* have been mixed. In trying to decipher colour in this image of Cecil, the programme read a beautiful blue sky, a sandy beach, and a tan befitting of a trip to Spain. However, Cecil's presumably bright and colourful Hawaiian print remains woefully grey, with mere tinges of blues and reds; an example of how light can distort colours in black and white photography, perhaps, or a gap of knowledge in the system. This issue is a recurring one, with the vast majority of clothes interpreted in shades of grey or brown, with the occasional purple or bluish tones. In this situation, I used the overall blue tinge suggested by *InColor* with research of extant 1950s Hawaiian shirts to develop a colour scheme.



Figure 1 - Cecil's Hawaiian set, recoloured with digital technology.



Figure 2 - A recoloured page from the Young's album.



Figure 3 - A recoloured page from H. Wright's album of show dancers in full costume.

Form

Distinguishing form in the photograph can sometimes be the easiest step, and sometimes the most challenging. As a maker with pattern drafting experience, my method usually begins with a basic block. Through my research, I discovered that blocks drafted using contemporary systems give the most accurate form (Whife, 1952; Hulme, 1945).

With an analysis of seam placement, to be discussed in a later paragraph, I arrange the pattern pieces upon the block, often in quarter or half-scale to begin with. This minimises wastage of both time and materials. Once the toile is constructed and placed on an appropriate dress form, I directly analyse correctness of form between photograph and scale model.



Figure 4 - A half-scale version of Stella's coat next to the original for comparison. From here I changed the width of the collar,, the depth of the cuffs and the amount of flare in the skirt.

Scale

Reading scale and form in a photograph can employ similar techniques. Scale accounts for the size of an element in relation to another. In historic dress recreation we must pay close attention to scale in the reproduction of patterns, the size and placement of notions and decoration such as embroidery and applique.



Figure 5 - Photographs showing the importance of scale in Cecil's Hawaiian set, and an illustration approximating the correct scale.

Scale is most easily readable in a grid, as an overlay of equally sized squares can give us a numerical value to refer to when making. It is especially useful in pattern drafting, which is usually built upon a system of interconnected numerical values (measurements).

This can be achieved in analogue, by printing on acetate, or in many digital programmes. Grids are particularly useful when calculating the position of components, for example pockets, buttons, and surface decoration. In Photoshop (Adobe, 2021), a grid can be placed on a layer and 'warped' using the 'transform' tool to accurately gauge distances on curved lines.

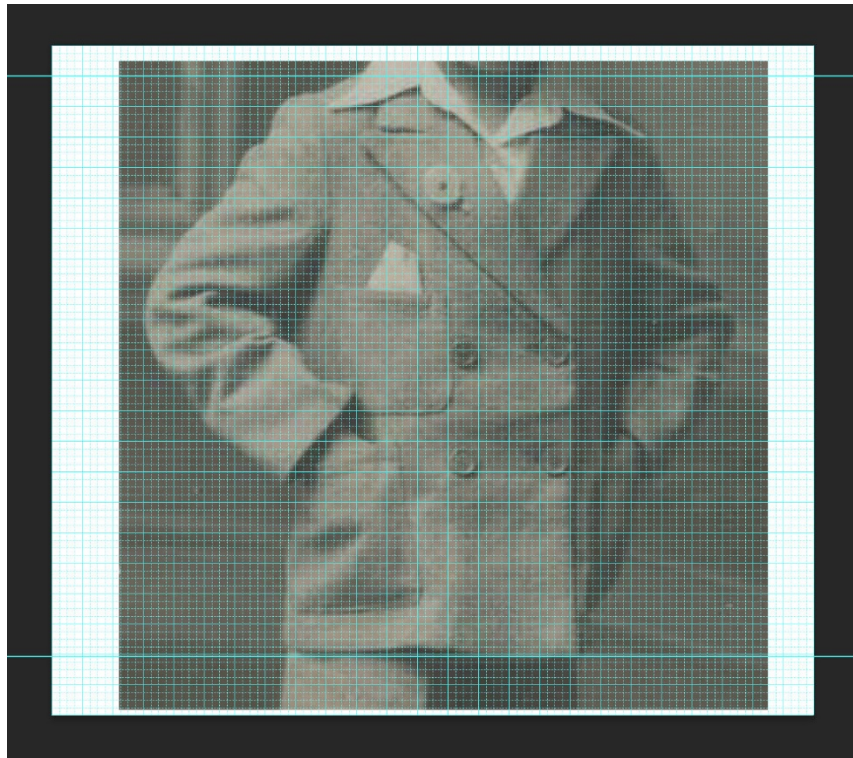


Figure 6 - A grid overlay to determine scale

For figure three, I set up the grid to mark one-inch squares with four subdivisions. Having used contemporary sizing charts to draft my basic block (Hulme, 1945, p.40), I measured the front of the jacket and scaled the original photograph to match. Although the measurements should never be relied upon as a true and correct value, they can supply a guide to be applied to the pattern, to ensure the final project is a visual copy of the original. The flat grid method I used is excellent for surface details but falls short when measuring lines along a curve. I had particular difficulty finding the correct position and shape for the lapel, which I eventually tackled through further research of contemporary sources.

Reading Seamlines

Every garment is built and given shape with seams. They are what transforms a flat piece of fabric into such a complete shape as to fit the organic form of the human body. They are almost invisible to the unwatchful eye when skilfully sewn. Furthermore, in photographs they are often lost to the qualities of light and blur. There remains, however, some clues to interpret them.

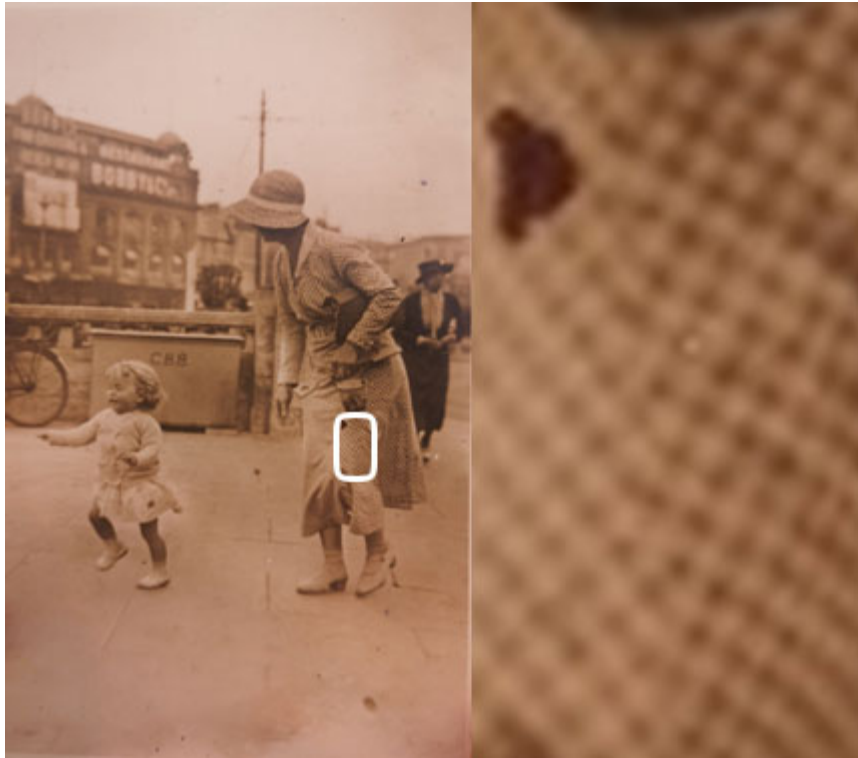


Figure 7 - A seam can be determined in the uneven pattern and apparent change of direction.

In this photograph, we can identify the seam placement through the pattern of the fabric. Although beautifully matched for a bias-cut gingham, there are enough instances where squares clash that we can identify common garment pattern cutting styles in the photograph. With further research we can see how these seams may have continued down the skirt to achieve the desired shape (Countryman, 2001). As previously discussed in chapter one, digitisation can aid this process greatly, allowing us to zoom into the image and identify the imperfect squares of gingham.

Fabric Identification

Possibly the most illusive information to be gleaned from the photograph, identifying fabrics requires a working knowledge of fabrics, and their common uses as a base line. This, combined with ever-invaluable contextual research, can be used to justify a decision on possible fabrics, given what would have been suitable for each garment in a given era.

Some fabrics can be identified by their pattern, such as the gingham above (figure 7), which often narrows down the possible fibre content – it is unusual to find a gingham made from wool, whilst crisp summer fabrics of cotton, linen and silk are readily available. Equally, tartans are rarely to be found made from anything apart from wool.

In higher-quality images it is also possible to zoom in, as I did with the photograph of Rhoda, and study the surface of the fabric. All too often the camera quality, light and motion blur obscure the fabric weave too much to be read.

Light, however, can also be a guide. Perhaps the most accurate means of identifying fabrics is through their reflective qualities. These can be affected by different weaves as well as fibres, and are often distinctive in photographs. Wool, for example, absorbs light in its rough surface, though a spun and woven fibre will photograph differently to a felt or boiled wool, which has a hazy glow. A fabric with particularly distinctive reflective qualities is silk taffeta, which is easily identifiable with its sharp contrast and crisp shine. Identification through light is also the easiest method to test, by photographing viable fabric choices in similar lighting conditions and comparing directly with the original. In figure 8, the cotton fabric is distinguishable from the knitted wool cardigan as it reflects more light, creases easily and folds in crisp edges. The wool absorbs light with little contrast in the shadows and curves smoothly around creases at the elbow.



Figure 8 - Cropped from the Young's album.



Figure 9 - Fabric choice for Stella's recreation, draped over a stand and photographed in similar lighting.

An Untapped Resource

With each of these steps combined, we can tap into the largely underused resource of photography for garment recreation. In conjunction with proper research and skilled preparation, and using digital resources alongside the original source material, the photograph can bolster industry research practice to improve worldwide understanding of working-class dress. A close study of colour prediction (in black and white photography), form, and scale can be fused with the garment-specific analysis of seamlines and fabric identification to achieve this goal to a high standard. Alongside oral history interviews, this analysis can enable us to bring three-dimensional body and life to the two-dimensional image. All that remains is to make the garments whole again through recreations.

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