Dress is a silent language, full of meaning and nuances that come not with words, but with our appearance. It includes hairstyle, body modifications, footwear, jewellery, make-up and so much more. Dress is a highly diverse field of study that helps to explain how we communicate, not with words, but with our appearance. What does it mean when a man wears a suit and a necktie, or when a woman covers her face with a veil? Why has there been a recent surge in tattoos? And how do people react when they see a man with a set of nose-rings? Why do some people prefer to wear cotton clothes, linen, or even hemp? And why do some Chinese men and women starting to wear modern clothing? Why are some people still wearing traditional garments, such as cheongsams or Adolf Hitler’s uniform? Why do some people dress with the silent language of dress.

And dress is not limited to garments. It also includes hairstyle, body modifications, footwear, jewellery, make-up and so much more. Dress is a highly diverse field of study that helps to explain how we communicate, not with words, but with our appearance. What does it mean when a man wears a suit and a necktie, or when a woman covers her face with a veil? Why has there been a recent surge in tattoos? And how do people react when they see a man with a set of nose-rings? Why do some people prefer to wear cotton clothes, linen, or even hemp? And why do some of us don Ni Hao shoes at Christmas? Dress is also a resource for historical and archaeological observations. Which dress language did people speak hundreds, or even thousands of years ago? Why was the Egyptian pharaoh, Tutankhamun, entombed with a footstool? Why are some people still wearing traditional garments, such as cheongsams or Adolf Hitler’s uniform? Why do some people dress with the silent language of dress.

The Textile Research Centre (TRC) was established in 1993 with the express aim of studying and teaching on the subject of textiles and dress, rather than, for example, focusing on (Western) high fashion items, art historical aspects, or the ‘ethnic’ garments from one particular part of the world. Instead it takes a more holistic approach. It looks at textiles and dress from a wide range of angles inherent to the objects themselves, within the framework of the basic question as to why people use or wear the garments that they wear. In other words, the collection focuses on the basic elements of the ‘language of dress’: the fibres and dyes used, the production methods, the cut and shape of the garments, their decoration, the producers and the wearers, and how these items link in with each other and with different groups around the globe. The TRC has been actively engaged in collecting and studying and presenting a wide range of textiles and garments from Asia. Some sub-collections stand out. The TRC houses a wide and very diverse collection of items from Afghanistan: a large part of the collection was assembled during various fieldtrips in the country between 1978 and 2011. Most of these items date to the latter half of the 20th century and represent the main groups living in the country, including Baloch, Hazara, Nuristani, Pashtu, Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek groups. Many of the TRC’s Afghan items were on display in a TRC exhibition entitled Well-Dressed Afghanistan, which was held at the TRC in 2010/2011. The same display is also one of a series of TRC online exhibitions.

The TRC Exhibition

The TRC Collection is one of the few public collections that looks at the whole world of textiles and dress, rather than, for example, focusing on (Western) high fashion items, art historical aspects, or the ‘ethnic’ garments from one particular part of the world. Instead it takes a more holistic approach. It looks at textiles and dress from a wide range of angles inherent to the objects themselves, within the framework of the basic question as to why people use or wear the garments that they wear. In other words, the collection focuses on the basic elements of the ‘language of dress’: the fibres and dyes used, the production methods, the cut and shape of the garments, their decoration, the producers and the wearers, and how these items link in with each other and with different groups around the globe. The TRC has been actively engaged in collecting and studying and presenting a wide range of textiles and garments from Asia. Some sub-collections stand out. The TRC houses a wide and very diverse collection of items from Afghanistan: a large part of the collection was assembled during various fieldtrips in the country between 1978 and 2011. Most of these items date to the latter half of the 20th century and represent the main groups living in the country, including Baloch, Hazara, Nuristani, Pashtun, Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek groups. Many of the TRC’s Afghan items were on display in a TRC exhibition entitled Well-Dressed Afghanistan, which was held at the TRC in 2010/2011. The same display is also one of a series of TRC online exhibitions.

Another Asian/Middle Eastern sub-collection is that of badla. This name refers to the use of a narrow, flat metal thread (plate, lamella) to create various knotted effects. It can be found, with different names, in India, southern Iran and Egypt. The Indian pieces in the TRC collection include items made for the home market (notably sari) and for export, such as a badla overdress for an Omani Bedouin woman. In the TRC badla collection there is also a special item, namely a 1920s European flapper dress made from two Egyptian shawls decorated in the badla manner.

A third sub-collection that should be mentioned is that of Chinese lotus shoes. Since 2007 the TRC has been building up a collection of these minute shoes worn by mainly Han Chinese women up to the early 20th century. The collection not only includes a range of shoes from different parts of the country, but they also represent different occasions, such as weddings, funerals, burials, and so forth. In addition, items relating to the production of lotus shoes, including a range of tools, are also included in the collection. Many of these shoes were on display in a TRC exhibition (2012/2013) about decorative and protective footwear, and are also included in yet another TRC online exhibition.

TRC exhibitions

Apart from expanding its range of online exhibitions, the TRC also organises two to three temporary and actual exhibitions per year, and for the organisation of many of these the assistance is given by interns and students from a range of educational institutions, who in this way acquire practical experience in handling textiles and setting up displays. Exhibitions in the TRC Gallery have ranged from African kanga (2009), decorative footwear, including the Chinese lotus shoes (2010), Afghan dress (2011), Chinese shoes (2012), and garments from Yemen (2015), to more technical exhibitions, about the history of embroidery, about weaving and about textile printing.

In addition, exhibitions from outside are set up at the TRC to encourage textile crafts in general. These exhibitions covered the subjects of lace (2014) and that of weaving with 16-shaft badla (also 2014), and also displays and workshops set up together with Taiwanese indigo dyers and weavers (2016), with Indonesian weavers (2017), with Taiwanese basketwork weavers (2018) and with the UNESCO indigo printer, Georg Stark (2018). The craftspeople are encouraged to sell items at the TRC during the exhibitions in order to support and publicise their work.

This year the TRC set up an exhibition about 500 years of velvet production and velvet clothing, and is based on the TRC’s extensive collection of fifteenth century (and later) velvet and velvet garments. In the summer of 2019 the TRC is organising the Out of Asia: 2000 Years of Textiles exhibition, to coincide with the 11th International Convention of Asia Scholars. There is, in sum, plenty to talk about, with the silent language of dress.

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