



“I Don’t Want to Ruin Anything”: Student Perspectives on the Use of Historic Clothing for Design Education in the Post-Pandemic Age of Digitization

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Physically handling historic garments situates fashion as an embodied practice and encourages students to think differently about fashion (Entwistle, 2000). Being able to understand the physical experience of wearing garments is particularly crucial for design students, as a dependency on visual inspiration does not provide them with an adequate understanding of how to translate their ideas into actual garments. Despite recognition of the importance of object-based learning (e.g., Cobb et al., 2020; Banning & Gam, 2020), recent scholarship pertaining to university collections emphasizes the need to move towards digitizing collections, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Shephard and Pookulangara (2020), “Digitization has become necessary to improve the educational value of these collections both in the classroom and beyond” (p. 392).

Although the virtual accessibility of historic costume has many advantages, the digital experience cannot replace the benefits of hands-on engagement with historic objects (Cobb et al., 2020; Shephard & Pookulangara, 2020; Steele, 1998). In addition, historic collections possess a plethora of design inspiration, techniques, and methods that may reinforce and enhance fashion design students’ understanding of various techniques (Gam & Banning, 2012; Mackretti, 2011). Object-based learning “has the potential to improve students’ ability to acquire and retain subject knowledge, overcome barriers to difficult areas of learning, and improve transferable skills and employability” (Hannan et al., 2013, p. 164). The very fact that some historic dress artifacts exist in collections, demonstrating “painstaking workmanship, the patient repairs and revisions, and the sheer endurance of the garments” (Severa & Horswill, 1989, p. 63), is a testament to the values that previous wearers placed on their clothing and quality of the materials used, which can lead to critical discussions around the fashion industry today.

The purpose of this study was (a) to better understand how historic clothing collections can provide both subject-specific knowledge and transferable skills and (b) to gain insight into students’ perceptions of working with these objects after becoming more accustomed to digitization and remote learning since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. Over the course of three workshops held in the spring of 2022, 31 students from two sections of a design course were exposed to a variety of topics and learning activities using historic garments, with each two-hour workshop building off the previous one and techniques they learned in their design studio class. This study used a historic clothing and textile collection belonging to a large land grant institution in the Southern United States. At the time of the study, the students had not had the opportunity to see or work with the collection previously. To understand the impact of the workshop intervention on student learning, pre- and post- reflective surveys were constructed and administered after receiving IRB approval. The students’ questionnaire responses confirm that this was the first time that many of them had seen historic clothing up close, with many mentioning that this was indeed a unique educational experience for them.

Workshops were structured utilizing Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory (ELT). The foundation of the ELT learning processes is (a) concrete experience, (b) reflective observation, (c) abstract conceptualization, and (d) active experimentation (Kolb, 2015). For each workshop, Kolb's ELT was used as a guide to construct the information delivered, activities, and student outcomes. The first workshop introduced students to the importance of historic clothing and textiles, ways of studying material culture, and preserving objects. The second workshop focused on encouraging the students to adopt a "slow approach to seeing" (Mida & Kim, 2015) and to pay greater attention to small construction details, such as stitches, buttons, zippers, and hooks. The third and final workshop focused on the use of historic garments for modern inspiration through both design and merchandising perspectives.

Through constant comparative analysis (Tesch, 1990), four themes emerged that include (a) facing anxiety, (b) continuous learning, (c) reserving judgement, and (d) storytelling. Before the start of the first workshop, 77% of student responses mentioned having concern about "not knowing enough" or feeling worried about physically handling artifacts. In subsequent survey responses, numerous students mentioned that they had gained confidence and reduced their anxiety by learning to slow down, focus on details, and accept learning as a continuous process that takes time. As one student stated, "it's okay not to know everything!" Aside from facing anxieties and embracing the idea of continuous learning, each set of post-reflective surveys included responses that indicate that working with historic garments encouraged students to reserve judgements and avoid making assumptions about the people who made or wore the clothing. For example, one student mentioned, "It is too easy for us to assume/jump to conclusions about materials and it is important that we always consider things beyond initial thoughts/assumptions." Learning to reserve judgements also correlated with students finding an interest in learning what types of "stories" historic garments can reveal, with 35% of respondents specifically mentioning this as a key takeaway. "There are a lot of things that can give hints to the story of a garment," observed one student, "but they can be deceiving at first glance." Another student added "[..] it is really special to be able to see and touch these stories."

The perspectives explored in this study provide a number of important implications for educators. Firstly, the responses show that it is important not to rely on digitization for all forms of fashion education, as what is helpful for history students may not be as helpful for design students. For example, student responses emphasize the importance of using historic garment collections to showcase design imperfections and signs of wear, which are helpful for design students and not typically captured in digitized images. Secondly, the findings point to the potential to use historic clothing collections to teach a number of transferable and critical thinking skills, such as acknowledging biases, reserving judgement, and enjoying the process of learning instead of being focused on finding the "right" answers. Thirdly, responses demonstrate the value of students using historic collections in multiple ways and through a variety of learning activities in order to broaden their perspectives on design and material culture at large. Beyond fashion education, the findings underscore the importance of instructors from any discipline to become aware of and to react to their students' current anxieties, challenges, and needs. These results will be used to develop further design workshops that are intentionally focused on exposing students to historic garments in order to overcome personal biases and anxieties, as well as to propagate more inclusive and sustainable thinking by highlighting the stories behind a garment. As one student noted, "it is important to understand the past to make informed decisions for the future."

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