

Media Reviews

Health Hazards of Fashion: A Review of Bata Shoe Museum's Exhibit, *Fashion Victims: The Pleasures and Perils of Dress in the 19th Century*

On the third floor of the *Bata Shoe Museum* in Toronto, an enormous grey poster catches your attention. A gentleman, dressed smartly in a three-piece suit with a velvet jacket and lining, clutching a beaver top hat, stands and stares into the distance. Next to him is a frail woman with a weary expression, seated on a wooden chair, with her hands rested on the frills of her gown. A bonnet tied with a large ribbon covers her spiralled curls. These are the fashion victims of the nineteenth century: their pleasures of dress and style nearly indistinguishable from the perils of their fabrics and refined figures.

This exhibit, *Fashion Victims: The Pleasures and Perils of Dress in the 19th Century* opened in June 2014 and runs until 2016. Co-curated by Bata senior curator Elizabeth Semmelhack and Alison Matthews David, Associate Professor of the history of textiles and dress at the School of Fashion at Ryerson University, over 90 artefacts display a different take on what it means to be a 'fashion victim'. This beautifully curated collection of shoes, clothing, accessories and advertisements reveal the intersections of fashion, science and health. Fashion is presented as more than a style of dress – it was a way of living, from the green embroidery on the extravagant lady's boots, to the leather stencils used to construct worker's boots. This small glimpse into the past makes us revel in a world that was just entering the perils of mass production of commercial goods.

David's expertise in the intersections of the histories of dress and medicine sweeps through the exhibit, raising awareness of the political and economic effects that underlie the social obsession with fashion. As David explores in her book, *Fashion Victims: The Dangers of Dress Past and Present* (Bloomsbury, August 2015), clothing posed health hazards to both its makers and wearers. The increase of manufacturing and chemistry introduced new dyes and technologies during the nineteenth century, producing marvellous fabrics, new luxurious styles and extravagant elegance. But it also brought new health risks: from poorly ventilated factories and new jobs such as the shoeshine boys, to thread laced with poison and dresses made of flammable materials, fashion was dangerous as much as it was enviable. The industrialisation of shoemaking introduced a variety of formidable and fashionable footwear at different price points. The sewing machine additionally brought the mass production of shoes, which were sold in department stores, allowing for product consistency at an accessible price. Technologies such as the sewing machine also transformed traditional jobs and the domestic space; as jobs for tailors were replaced by machines, thousands of women were employed in new shoemaking factories to work the machines.

Women's fashion in the nineteenth century saw a number of drastic changes alongside luxurious trends. Narrow, flat shoes, constructed to make walking around easier for the woman, became a popular fashion trend, while reflecting cultural ideals about female delicacy and domesticity. Yet, made as straights with no left or right forms, these shoes were incredibly painful as they negated the natural architecture of the foot. Another dangerous trend was steel-cage crinolines, which were deemed a solution to the number of underskirts women had to wear, but they miscalculated a woman's awareness of her own width – brushing against fireplaces brought frequent death to these skirts.

Some medical practitioners rooted the cause of particular diseases directly to fashionable choices. One trend for fashionable women was to dress like Greek goddesses. Their light, gauzy fabrics of cotton muslins, thin luminous silks or translucent tulle were considered scandalous by the old guard, especially as it was the trend for women to dampen themselves in water before dressing. Wearing wet, thin fabrics frequently led to severe cases of pneumonia; furthermore, since this trend exposed bosoms and arms, young women supposedly succumbed to ‘muslin fever’ from being underdressed for cold weather. A pair of boots and gloves on display that once belonged to fashion icon Empress Elisabeth of Austria additionally notes the obsession with thinness, and the extents to which women would go to be fashionable.

The high heel, the cultural icon of the fashionable woman, was reintroduced in the mid-1850s after a period of banishment during the early nineteenth century for its associations with aristocratic debauchery. A displayed ‘Louis Heel’ of a pair of boudoir slippers reflected a highly erotic image of femininity, going a long way in framing women’s roles as consumers rather than producers. At the same time, these shoes were used for a different social purpose: to undermine the growing suffrage movement and the outspoken voices of women. By reintroducing the high heel, such shoes reinforced negative associations of destabilised social positions and customs of women.

The history of chemicals and synthetic dyes is deeply entrenched in the history of nineteenth-century fashion. ‘Perkins purple’, the first synthetic dye, was discovered by British chemist William Henry Perkins accidentally while he was trying to find a cure for malaria. This happy accident brought forth a new age of colour in fashion; by 1858, this new ‘mauve’ colour made from toxic coal tar became incredibly popular as it spread throughout the fashionably minded, and the exhibit showcases selected items, including a pair of French boots from c. 1860. Wearers of fabrics dipped in mauve dye frequently developed skin rashes (encouraging the moniker ‘mauve measles’). Newer, brilliant colours were created as a result of chemical and technical innovation, but they were also incredibly toxic.

At the centre of the exhibit is its star artefact: a faded green high-waisted gown from the 1860s on loan from a private collector in Australia. The green thread has been tested for arsenic, a common chemical that was used to create the green shade. Allowing people in grey urban cities to reclaim the greenery of nature, green was used at many different levels of domesticity. The dress is displayed in front of a green trellis wallpaper, next to a desk with a sewing machine and green thread clearly displayed. Even as medical practitioners raised awareness of the dangers of arsenic green – it caused skin rashes, delirium, and even death – some of the fashionably minded women still continued to wear their toxic green clothes. Women were not the only victims of coloured trends in fashion. Men in the 1860s adored socks in rich colours of pinks, oranges and reds, until it was discovered that the alkaline compound of the red dyes caused severe chemical burns on the bottom of the feet in some men. Bright red, associated with health and vigour, was also found in children’s clothing and toys, causing rashes and severe illnesses.

The exhibit addresses the dangers of both manufacturing fashion and wearing it. Workers making toxic chemical dyes and women stitching the dresses would frequently become ill from prolonged contact with toxic chemicals. The introduction of cheaper materials also posed dangers. For instance, beaver hats, a necessity for any gentleman, became highly fashionable. As demand rose for more affordable versions, beaver was replaced with a poorer quality fur and mercury was used as an adhesive. Mercury poisoning was present in both wearers and workers, creating popular tales of ‘mad hatter

disease'. Another example on display is the replacement of the more expensive tortoise shell hair combs with celluloid hair combs. The new celluloid compounds were cheaper, but they were unstable and easily combustible: any heat source was enough to cause the comb to explode, whether in the factory or on a woman's vanity table. Economics also transcended class. The gentleman's stiff demands on polished boots paralleled the poor conditions of penniless and homeless shoeshine boys, who were found all over urban streets. The polishes they used for shining shoes frequently put their health at risk. A shoeshine boy's kit consisted of brushes, rags, polish and a box that also functioned as a stand for customers. Polish contained nitrobenzene; despite smelling quite pleasant, it oxidised iron in blood on contacted with the skin, causing dizziness, nausea, cyanosis and even death. Moreover, these boys were vulnerable to abuse from people taking advantage of their impoverished situation.

By approaching fashion history through material history, *Fashion Victims* connects the fashions of the aristocracy with the risks to poor factory workers to present a unique way of viewing our medical past. The exhibit's focus on parallel histories – the pleasures and perils – is even obvious in the space. As soon as you walk through the doors, a black and white floor and arched window displays welcome you. After walking through colourful and softly lighted displays, I turned a corner and found myself in a concrete area void of colour. Most of the displays on manufacturing and perils of factory workers are contained here, which supposedly is used to represent the bleakness of urban life. But honestly, I thought the exhibit was still under construction.

Fashion Victims: The Pleasures and Perils of Dress in the 19th Century is on exhibit at the Bata Shoe Museum until 30 June 2016.

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doi:10.1017/mdh.2015.50

In the Shadow of Ebola (documentary film, 27 minutes)

In his new film *In the Shadow of Ebola*, Gregg Mitman captures every family's nightmare, the choice of who to save and who to let go. Here, it is not the choice of who to pull off the tracks in the approach of a speeding train, but who to put on a flight out of Monrovia when Ebola came to call last year. Mitman's film is important and documents heroic efforts to persevere in the face of a massive calamity in a small country already traumatised by a protracted civil war (1989–2003). It is unvarnished and will upset most, but how can you sugar-coat a disease which killed more than 14 000 people in one season (March 2014–2015)?

Mitman, a professor of the history of science, medicine and the environment at the University of Wisconsin, had travelled to Liberia with Emmanuel Urey, a PhD student at the University of Wisconsin, in June 2015, when it quickly became clear they would need to abandon plans for their original research project. Instead, Mitman and his collaborators, including British filmmaker Sarita Siegel and Liberian self-taught videographer Alex Wiaplah, focused their lens on Urey. Urey's two children were staying with his mother-in-law in a small home behind the John F. Kennedy Hospital. They were thrilled to have a visit from their father, and we see happy scenes of a family reunited at the beach. Urey, who already holds a masters degree in public health, had been filled with hope, studying abroad to further his passion for improving access to medical care. Himself a former refugee of