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Letter from the Editors – Look of Austerity Special Edition  
Beatrice Behlen, Bethan Bide & David Gilbert

In the last decade, since the financial crisis of 2008 and the “Great Recession” that followed, the term “austerity” has had new currency. It refers to a particular form of economic policy, of deficit reduction effected primarily by cuts in public services and welfare payments. Yet “austerity” also refers to more than the economic, identifying a wider mood expressed in cultural forms including fashion. The renewed currency of the term also directs attention back towards earlier periods, notably an “age of austerity” in the 1940s and early 1950s. During the 2010s, the fashion industry has drawn upon designs and styles from those times, alongside a growing interest in antique clothes from the period among enthusiasts, collectors and museum collections. In Britain, the Imperial War Museum recently curated a major exhibition, *Fashion on the Ration: 1940s Street Style*, in London in 2015–2016, and Manchester 2016–2017. Owen Hatherley’s recent polemic, *The Ministry of Nostalgia* (2016), highlights profound differences between Britain in the late 1940s and “austerity Mark Two,” and argues that a nostalgic obsession with that past can act as a distraction from the violence of contemporary neoliberalism. However, a range of new fashion scholarship questions and challenges some of the mythologies of this period. Such work highlights how fashions in different places were bound up with distinctive forms of identity and political culture, as well as the effects of economic shortages and hardship. This research has the potential to undermine simplistic connections between different times and very different politics.

It was this renewed interest in the cultural meaning of austerity as well as the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War that prompted us to convene a two-day conference on *The Look of Austerity*, held at the Museum of London on 11–12 September 2015. The conference re-focused on the experience of obtaining and wearing clothes during the hard times of the 1940s. By encouraging engagement with a variety of sources and methodologies, it explored austerity’s effects on everyday experience, including making, mending and recycling, as well as the history of fashion design. Contributions examined austerity’s impact on the look of people and cities, and challenged established fashion histories of the time. This special edition on the subject of fashion and austerity includes extended versions of some of the key papers from the conference, and develops some of its wider themes.

The conference was generously supported by an Educational Programme Grant from the Paul Mellon Centre for the Studies in British Art, with further support from the Museum of London, from Royal Holloway, University of London, and from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. This allowed us to invite contributors with a wide range of geographical perspectives. While the conference brought fresh insights into the familiar fashion history territories of post-war Britain, France and the USA, what was perhaps most distinctive (and gratifying for the organizers) was a decided shift of focus towards central and eastern Europe.

A central theme of the conference was the importance of different kinds of international interconnections in fashion histories of the period. Several contributions identified the complexities behind the often-told story of Dior’s New Look and its international diffusion.

Dominique Veillon and Sophie Kurkdjian considered the wider recovery of the French fashion industry after the war, highlighting the interconnections and disjunctures of different national fashion systems. The way that the New Look was transformed in local contexts was the subject of Nickianne Moody's examination of British responses, and Mila Ganeva's insightful analysis of its representation and symbolic significance in film and print media in both East and West Germany. Rebecca Jumper Matheson's discussion of United States Army Surplus CARE packages sent to Europe showed rather different kind of international interconnections, particularly the ways that aid, political ideology and the promotion of fashion were inter-mixed. The vicarious influence of Hollywood on yearnings for fashion in post-war Britain was central to Ellen Wright's analysis of glamor and cultures of female desirability.

A feature of the conference was distinctive new work on austerity fashion in Britain, marked particularly by a wide range of sources and methodological approaches. Alison Slater offered a fresh, unexpected perspective on the realities of fashion for young working-class women through oral history, while Julie Ripley offered an alternative view of fashion and leisure through examples of hand-knitted swimsuits. Sonia Ashmore's discussion of fashion shopping in the 1940s West End examined print advertisements and the trade press. Others highlighted the strategies for successful commercial activity during rationing and shortage. Judeth Saunders discussed the post-war expansion of Clarks shoes, while Edwina Ehrman highlighted the promotion of a recovering high-end sector in her presentation on fashion at the 1946 "Britain Can Make It" exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Men's fashion during austerity was tackled by Danielle Sprecher and Geraldine Biddle-Perry, whose papers discussed respectively the manufacture and social meaning of the British Demob suit. Deirdre Murphy gave insights into the impact of austerity on the British court, and the tensions between a perceived need to retain social distinction and growing public resentment of displays of opulence. The conference also considered representations of austerity fashion in literature. Anne Scott-James was editor of the British edition of *Harper's Bazaar* between 1945 and 1951. Felice McDowell's paper explored the thin line between fact and fiction in Scott-James' "auto-fictional" novel *In The Mink* (1952). The fashion historian, theorist and novelist Elizabeth Wilson was then interviewed by Amy de la Haye, discussing the role fashion plays in Wilson's fiction, notably *War Damage* (2009), set in austerity London.

The two papers from the conference on the British experience in this special edition present contrasting perspectives of austerity fashion. Rebecca Arnold considers fashion's representations in 1940s London, focusing on Cecil Beaton's photography of bomb damage. Against the rubble and damage, images of couture took on new meanings, of survival and patriotism as well as luxury and desire. Arnold extends this paradoxical reading of fashion's imagery beyond what has been described as a "ruins gaze," towards a wider aesthetic of austerity in the late 1940s. Lynda Nead's paper extends both the timing and scope of the analysis of austerity fashion. Nead connects the immediate post-war period with a longer time frame that extends into the 1950s, but also crucially sets common tropes of austerity Britain against a postcolonial reading of the politics of color. Nead explores the contemporary relationships between the colors of clothing and skin, and the politicization of particular chromatic hues; the grays and beiges of austerity fashion became a marker of restraint,

respectability and Britishness to be set against the dangerous bright colors of the clothing of new migrants.

The turn to eastern and central Europe in the conference brought new perspectives. Some papers focused on fashion's relationship with new post-war regimes and ideologies. Katalin Medvedev examined fashion under the Communist regime in Hungary, while Lea Vene and Ivana Culjak analyzed everyday dress and fashion magazines in Yugoslavia. The two papers published here, Irene Guenther's study of Berlin and Agata Zborowska's study of Poland, both focus on extreme circumstances immediately after the Second World War. They show the power of fashion, particularly how small details of dress, fabric or improvised make-up held great significance, even amid the rubble of wrecked cities.

The final papers in this edition feature two of the conference organizers opening out consideration of austerity fashion from the 1940s. David Gilbert's paper looks more generally at the interaction between fashion and austerity, tracing the uneasy relationship between the study of fashion and consideration of economic factors. He rejects any simple notion that fashions can be read off from economic indicators, but also challenges claims that fashion floats free of the wider influence of affluence or austerity. Bethan Bide draws upon her family history and research at the Museum of London to examine private and public histories of austerity. She argues for new approaches, particularly in museum displays, that disrupt standard narratives and historical orthodoxies. She calls for a focus on the materiality of surviving fashion items, and ways that they are imbued with the small details of past lives in marks of wear and repair. These clothes, then, are not examples to be used in telling orthodox narratives of fashion history, but points of connection to personal and family histories.

This relationship between fashion and memory was a feature of the conference, particularly in discussion, where conversations turned to parents and grandparents, and the clothes they wore in wartime and post-war austerity. Such memories are not always comfortable or nostalgic; they also highlight that fashion and clothing were part of histories of turbulence, violence and the dislocation of refugees. In a short, poignant intervention, conference organizer Beatrice Behlen used a photograph of her family, focusing particularly on the details of their clothes, to discuss the experience of expulsion from the German city of Breslau, as ethnic Germans were forced to leave territory ceded to Poland at the end of the war. In her paper, Agata Zbrowoska discussed the same city, Polish Wrocław, but a few months later. German clothing and other goods left behind were taken, worn, used and sold in a time of extreme hardship, but also a time when fashion culture was being remade. Seventy years on, these two opposing stories of ruined streets, treasured possessions and the desire to look good even in the worst of circumstances were powerfully reconnected.