**Fashion city or museum of fashion? Exploring the mutually beneficial relationship between London’s fashion industry and fashion exhibitions at the Victoria and Albert Museum**

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**Abstract**

As the commodity chains supporting the fashion industry have become ever more global and complex, so the work of constructing and maintaining the reputations of fashion cities such as London has also needed to evolve. Museums have played a key role in this process through their dissemination of discursive narratives about the places, spaces, and people that constitute London’s symbolic fashion capital. Taking the Victoria and Albert Museum as a primary case study, this paper explores how changes to the networks and processes of the fashion city in the decades following the Second World War were connected to the growth of fashion within the museum. Looking at two key exhibitions: *Britain Can Make It* (1946) and *Fashion: An Anthology* (1971), it traces how the museum responded to processes of deindustrialization and cultural change by bringing the city’s commercial fashion cultures into the museum space, resulting in the museum becoming an important site for the fashion city. Finally, it asks whether the legacy of this process has resulted in increasingly narrow and homogenous fashion exhibitions that have the potential to harm London’s fashionable reputation by excluding many of the diverse networks and places that make the city’s fashion culture unique.

Key words: *fashion city; museum; fashion exhibition; consumption, culture industry*

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In the spring of 2019, I joined a snaking queue in the Victoria and Albert Museum’s recently renovated Sackler Courtyard. The assembled crowd was international, well-heeled, and buzzing to have secured tickets to the museum’s sell-out exhibition *Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams*. As we slowly wound our way in to the building and through the exhibition, iPhones snapped selfies in front of the striking set designs and friends enthused over the clever lighting, used to highlight the artistry of the garments on show. In spite of the waiting and occasional jostling, there seemed little doubt that people were enjoying themselves.

However, exiting the exhibition via the gift shop, I couldn’t help but note that, for all the pleasure of its visual spectacle, there had been an uncomfortably fluid boundary in the museum space between two different types of public interaction – the dissemination of historical knowledge and the consumption of heritage branding. Although exquisitely staged, the exhibition told a story that perpetuated the trope of Christian Dior as a genius designer in a manner reminiscent of the publicity material produced by the Dior brand itself. Aside from a single room dedicated to ‘Dior in Britain’, this reductive narrative omitted much of the rich mixture of people, places, business trends, and geopolitics that had shaped Dior’s business and designs. As a result of these omissions, the exhibition seemed disconcertingly disconnected from the world outside the walls of the museum.

This disconnect between the exhibition and its host city can be partly attributed to the fact the exhibition was an almost direct transfer of *Christian Dior, couturier du rêve,* which originally ran from July 2017 to January 2018 at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, to mark the 70thanniversary of the founding of the House of Dior in that city. In Paris it drew 700,000 visitors – the most the Musée des Arts Décoratifs had ever seen for a single exhibition – and in its 2019 transfer to the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) reached an audience of almost 595,000, beating the record set by the 2015 fashion exhibition *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* (BBC 2019; Young 2018). These numbers give a sense of the increasing value of this genre of blockbuster fashion exhibition to museums and fashion brands alike, offering museums a vital boost to public engagement, visitor numbers and income streams at a time of diminished public funding (Lindqvist 2012), and providing valuable ‘slow marketing’ to fashion brands (Pinnock 2019).

To date there has, however, been little critical engagement with what these exhibitions mean for public understanding of the fashion cities in which they are located. The growing presence of fashion within museums over the past fifty years raises important questions about the role such institutions play in creating and perpetuating the discursive narratives about ideas of creativity, exclusivity, and cultural capital that form and sustain the reputations of fashion cities (Casadei and Gilbert 2018; Rocamora 2009). In order to begin to answer these questions, this paper explores how London’s museums, and in particular the V&A, came to be significant spaces within the fashion city. It seeks to understand the role played by the city’s wider fashion businesses and networks in the production of two notable events that transformed the museum into a site of fashionable consumption – the *Britain Can Make It* exhibition of 1946 and 1971’s *Fashion: An Anthology*.

This is achieved through research into the archival records of fashion businesses and industry groups – such as the Council of Industrial Design – and the V&A’s own exhibition planning records. These materials are further contextualized through research into the critical receptions these exhibitions received in the popular, fashion, and trade press in order to understand their impact on the reputations of both the museum and the wider fashion city. Comparative study of this material confirms how London’s changing fashion industry influenced the presentation of fashion in the city’s museums. In doing so, it highlights the value that historical and cultural geographies of the fashion city have to illuminate the fields of museum studies and fashion history. Moreover, it indicates how the museum’s role in the contemporary fashion city is intimately connected to the history of its collecting and display policies, and the individuals and institutions that shaped these (Message 2006, 18).

These exhibition case studies reveal how museums such as the V&A have enhanced our understanding of contemporary Western fashion cities by shaping the stories told about what fashion is and where it is located in the city. They show how museums worked with individuals and organizations from the fashion industry to provide spaces in which to perform fashion and disseminate discursive narratives that told – and reconfigured – the story of the city’s unique fashion culture in the wake of processes of deindustrialization. This paper thus aims to critically unpack the development of the V&A as a space of fashionable consumption, and to understand how this has mutually benefitted both the museum as an institution and London’s status as a world fashion city. But it also considers the longer legacy of the increasingly prominent role of fashion within the V&A, questioning how the recent homogeneity of the stories its exhibitions tell about London fashion might present a future challenge for a city whose fashionable reputation grew not just on the names of globally recognized designers and brands, but on the premise of skilled makers and creative diversity.

**Museums and the making of a modern fashion city**

The mechanics of what makes a fashion city have formed the basis for numerous studies by geographers and anthropologists since the early 2000s. Many of these have focused on two key questions; what makes a fashion city in the contemporary period (Breward and Gilbert 2006; McRobbie 1998), and how do fashion cities give a competitive advantage to businesses operating within them (Rantisi 2004). These studies look at a variety of global locations and across different tiers of fashion cities, but have generally maintained a tight focus on how fashion brands and industry bodies, such as national fashion councils, produce or maintain the value and status of the fashion city in question (Martinez 2007; Brydges and Hracs 2018), for example through the staging of events such as fashion weeks and trade fairs (Lavanga 2018) or in the sharing of skills and ideas through agglomerations (Moon 2009).

Although these studies give important insights into the workings of different fashion cities, their relatively narrow focus on the primary activities of making, selling, and promoting fashions neglects other networks, spaces, and institutions that contribute to the production of symbolic status in fashion cities. While clusters of design and manufacturing-related activities undoubtedly still play an important role in many fashion cities (Rantisi 2004; Crewe 1996), as production chains have become more geographically diverse and complex, the ability of cities to provide attractive spaces for facilitating the branding and communication of fashion has grown in importance (Jansson and Power 2010). Producing this symbolic capital relies on a broad network of fashionable actors. For example, Paris – the most iconic fashion city of the past two hundred years – may have symbolic capital powerful enough to imbue fashion products with a heightened desirability and authenticity (Power and Scott 2004, 7), but, as Agnès Rocamora (2009) has discussed, this power lies as much with the media, literature, and film industries, who create symbolic value through their discourses, as it does with the designer brands and the *Fédération Française de la Couture*.

This paper responds to calls to take a broader view of the actors that make up the networks of the fashion city, and particularly to consider the role of museums as cultural intermediaries (Casadei and Gilbert 2018, 86). London hosts five of the twenty most visited museums in the world, including the V&A (Art Newspaper 2019). A revolving array of temporary exhibitions concerning both historic and contemporary fashion and textiles can also be found in the Fashion and Textiles Museum, founded in 2003, and fashion objects form an important part of both permanent and temporary displays at the Museum of London. Numerous other London museums have also hosted fashion exhibitions in recent years, including the Design Museum, the Royal Academy of Arts, Somerset House, and Kensington Palace. The quantity of these exhibitions and the extensive publicity they receive makes them a significant factor in popular perceptions of London as a fashion city.

Yet, in spite of its contemporary significance, fashionable dress did not find a prominent role in museums until relatively recently. Indeed, it was not until 1977 that the V&A incorporated ‘dress’ into the name of the textiles department (Wilcox 2018). In order to make sense of the processes that connect the fashion city to the rapid change in the status of fashion within museums, this paper is informed by a growing awareness of the importance of exploring the history and heritage of fashion cities in order to appreciate how they have come to function in the present (Wubs, Lavanga & Janssens 2020). As Patrizia Casadei and David Gilbert’s (2018) work demonstrates, fashion cities are complex and multiple, and in order to understand them better we should pay more attention not just to the present circumstances of fashion cities but also to how the nature of an individual fashion city can change over time.

The importance of the discursive narratives about fashion cities and the actors who tell them grew as the commodity chains supporting the fashion industry became ever more global and complex in the latter part of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, leading to processes of deindustrialization that removed many of the distinctive making cultures – such as bespoke tailoring and skilled embellishment – that had previously given substance to the fashionable reputations that sustained the symbolic capital of major Western fashion cities. Piecing together how the V&A came to collaborate with London’s fashion industry by embracing and championing contemporary fashion helps demonstrate the mutual benefits of a close relationship between the fashion city and its cultural institutions during this period of change. It reveals how, over time, the V&A became an important site for London fashion with enormous power to shape public understanding of the fashion city through the production of symbolic narratives. Unpicking the production of these within fashion exhibitions provides an opportunity to understand the role of the museum in the perpetuation of what Godart (2014) describes as the existing ‘fashion oligarchy’, in which Paris, London, Milan and New York have managed to maintain their power as world fashion cities since the mid-twentieth century in spite of the entrance of new domestic and global players into the fashion system.

**London’s shift from material to symbolic fashion city in the aftermath of the Second World War**

London’s long and close relationship with fashion can be traced from the eighteenth century rise of the West End as a place to obtain fashionable goods to the city’s current status as a global fashion capital (Breward 2004). Over this period, London has survived and thrived by constantly adapting to changing conditions, but its resilience was sorely tested by the period of particularly intense change that resulted from the Second World War.

During this time London’s fashion businesses were forced to adapt to a new reality in which the city was no longer a site for the large-scale production of high-end fashion. The destruction wrought by the blitz and regulations governing the wartime production of clothing – which benefitted large-scale production-line manufacturing processes, rather than the small workshops and skilled makers that made up most of the London industry – caused a sharp decline in both the number of people and firms manufacturing clothes in the city.[[1]](#endnote-1) These new manufacturing trends had significant impacts on the way London fashion was promoted by both design houses and retailers. Participants in the city’s fashion industry were compelled to adapt their promotional techniques for selling the new types of branded, ready-to-wear clothes that were mass manufactured outside of the city. In response, retailers and manufacturers placed an increased emphasis on the prestige of London as a centre for creative design, bolstering London’s symbolic capital in order to counter the decline in its reputation as a centre of skilled manufacturing (Bide 2020).

As London transitioned from material to symbolic fashion city, the V&A provided a key site for a new type of fashionable production: fashion not as material goods but as ‘an experience to be consumed’ (Casadei and Gilbert 2018, 87). But associations with the business of London fashion have not always found an easy home at the V&A. Like other major European national museums of art and design, the V&A did not initially value fashion objects as worthy of display, collection, or study. Examples of fashionable dress were primarily collected for their value as historic textile objects, and there was little contemporary collecting throughout the first half of the twentieth century, leading to substantial gaps in the collections and a disconnect between the museum and the spaces, networks, and processes of London fashion (Taylor 2004, 156-7; Clark and De La Haye 2014, 14). The disruption to the symbolic hierarchies of international fashion caused by the Second World War provided a catalyst for change in this regard, prompting fashion industry organizations and businesses to collaborate with museums in London, New York, and Paris to produce exhibitions that promoted the creativity of local fashion makers to both the home and export markets.

Although Paris was not totally cut off from international fashion networks and markets during the period of Nazi occupation, it did encounter increased difficulties regarding the creation, promotion and retail of fashion products in a way that significantly diminished its primacy as the world’s fashion capital (McLoughlin and Taylor 2020, 14). Cultural institutions in New York helped the city’s designers and fashion businesses capitalize on this opportunity by celebrating their creativity and originality. In 1944, Bernard Rudofsky curated the first fashion exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. Entitled *Are Clothes Modern?* the exhibition confirmed the creative credentials of modern American ready-to-wear designers, such as Claire McCardell, who were beginning to emerge out of the shadows of their Parisian counterparts (Rudofsky, 1947). Commercial partnerships fueled further displays of fashionable goods in museum spaces. In 1945, Enka Rayon sponsored an exhibition of contemporary *American Fashions and Fabrics* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, featuring creations by well-known New York designers including Adrian and Hattie Carnegie that were inspired by pieces from the museum’s collections.[[2]](#endnote-2) Made up in Enka Rayon fabrics, these garments celebrated the supremacy of modern American design and technology by making connections between the city’s commercial cultures and its cultural institutions. Then, in 1947, the Metropolitan Museum of Art invited the Bloomingdale Bros. Inc. department store twenty blocks uptown to ‘present The Wardrobe of a Woman of Fashion’ as a temporary exhibition within the museum, bringing together the one of the city’s most revered cultural spaces with one of its most renowned commercial ones.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Meanwhile, the conclusion of the war in Europe allowed Paris fashion to return to the international stage. In 1945, the *Chambre syndicale de la haute couture parisienne* organized an exhibition entitled *Théâtre de la mode*, featuring scaled doll versions of couturier’s latest designs. These were shown against painted stage sets depicting a mixture of fashionable locations in Paris such as Paix en le Place Vendome and bombsites, eliciting sympathy by reminding visitors of the impact of the war on the city (Garfinkel 2007, 42-46). The dolls transferred to London in September 1945, before touring various European and American cities throughout 1946 in an attempt to remind an international audience of the refined skills and creative cultures of Parisian couture (Garfinkel 2007, 47). Unlike the Bloomingdales exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the *Théâtre de la mode* displays were consciously non-commercial in their theatricality and attendees could not buy the miniature products on display. But both examples demonstrate how fashion cities responded to wartime disruption by consciously bringing together commercial goods and the spaces and techniques of museum display in order to assert their relative design and cultural capital.

***Britain Can Make It*: displaying contemporary fashion at the V&A**

When the Council of Industrial Design staged a triumphant exhibition of British product design in London in 1946, they chose the Victoria and Albert Museum as a venue. This was in part a practical choice – the museum space was designed to accommodate a large number of visitors, and most of its collections were still being stored off-site, having being evacuated during the war (Clark and De La Haye 2014, 25). But the use of the nation’s most significant venue for design history also raised the status of the works on display by declaring that they deserved to be in the museum space. This had particular resonance for the fashion displays at *Britain Can Make It* since these featured a broad range of fashion objects, from couture evening gowns to mass-manufactured Utility ready-to-wear.[[4]](#endnote-4) As such, *Britain Can Make It* is probably the earliest example of an accurate representation of London’s breadth as a fashion city within a museum context.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The exhibition used painted backdrops to situate the garments in locations in the city’s West End, such as Covent Garden and Hyde Park, demonstrating the symbolic importance of London in conveying ideas of fashionability. However, these sets were not used to ground the fashion designs in a tangible geography of the city, but to evoke a general and pleasurable idea of fashionable cosmopolitan London. In reality, the corner of Hyde Park in which the mannequins recline in figure 1 was torn up by a V2 bomb in March 1945 and was used as storage for bomb rubble until at least 1949.[[6]](#endnote-6) The proximity of the museum and the park make it likely that visitors would have been aware of this discrepancy, highlighting that the escapist presentation of an idealized fashion city formed a key part of the exhibition’s overall offer: a tantalizing glimpse of a future of unbridled consumption at a time of rationing and acute shortages.

Exhibition organizers achieved this consumer offer by drawing on the expertise of London’s best-known West End retail display designers.[[7]](#endnote-7) London shoppers would have noticed that Ashley Havinden’s design for the ‘Men’s Wear’ section closely resembled the celebrated displays of Simpsons of Piccadilly, and that the draping ‘Dress Fabrics’ would not have been out of place in the windows of Liberty’s department store. For the avoidance of doubt, the exhibition even included a ‘Shop Window Street,’ with displays designed to evoke the experience of window shopping. For the visitor moving through the exhibition, this evocation of commercial shopping space would have been further strengthened by the division of goods into sections – dress fabrics, children’s wear, sporting goods – mirroring the experience of shopping within a department store.

By explicitly blurring the space of the museum and the spaces of London fashion retail, *Britain Can Make It* brought mass consumer culture into a space previously reserved for the preservation of high culture and the educational promotion of ‘good taste’ (V&A 2019). *Britain Can Make It* remains the most popular exhibition ever staged at the museum, with over 1,432,546 visitors in total (Clark and De La Haye 2014, 33). This suggests that, after five years of war and lingering austerity, there was great public appetite for such a celebration of pleasurable consumption.

But the popular success of this significant moment of connection between the museum and the fashion city failed to evolve into a series of more regular displays of contemporary fashion within the V&A, or result in a more permanent role for the museum as a site within the fashion city. This can be partly explained by visitor feedback. While the presentation of fashion at the exhibition received praise from publications with a vested interest in supporting London fashion in the post-war race to ascend the global hierarchy of fashion cities, such as *British Vogue* and *The Ambassador*, a Mass Observation survey of visitors found that the fashions were the least popular part of the exhibition. More significantly, the same survey also identified that visitors felt frustration that, in spite of the similarity between the exhibition design and retail spaces, they could not actually purchase the items they had seen in the museum to take home with them.[[8]](#endnote-8) This dissatisfaction with the blurred boundaries between retail and museum space was compounded by the fact that *Britain Can Make It* was a hurried project, resulting in variable design and a lack of overall coherent vision (Maguire and Woodham 2007, 19). Although it drew from retail expertise, many sets compared poorly to the increasingly distinctive and co-ordinated design of London’s retail spaces, where display designers attracted international praise for the new and novel methods of presenting visually stimulating content for customers (Bide 2018). By creating a visitor journey that too closely replicated a shopping experience within the museum, the exhibition designers merely gave visitors a less satisfying imitation of what was on offer in the commercial spaces of the fashion city.

Any discussions about the presence of contemporary fashion in the museum that might have been triggered by *Britain Can Make It* were further hindered by a growing backlash against the perceived encroachment of mass culture by leading intellectuals, who raised vocal concerns about the debasing effects of commerce on culture (Maguire and Woodham 2007, 12). While museums and exhibitions briefly played a significant role in the fashionable ambitions of New York, Paris, and London, these activities were born out of the cultural economies of the Second World War, and were only really tolerated as part of an establishment belief that museum spaces should play a role in aiding national morale and promoting specific consumer behaviors, such as buying local goods to support the post-war export drive.

Although the V&A appointed its first specialist curator of dress, Madeline Ginsburg, in the 1950s, the two decades after the Second World War saw a curatorial backlash against exhibitions seen to promote contemporary fashion businesses, even accidentally. Internal memoranda among V&A staff members show the depth of this concern when discussing the 1958 exhibition *The House of Worth: A Centenary Exhibition of Designs for Dresses*. Although this exhibition was highly historical in its content, the way it was used by Worth’s PR team as a promotional tool was perceived by curatorial staff as a threat to the V&A’s reputation for neutrality and professionalism due to the potential benefit the Worth business could receive.[[9]](#endnote-9) These memoranda make it clear that the museum did not see any benefit from aligning itself to London’s symbolic fashion capital or representing the city’s contemporary fashion industry.

***Fashion: An Anthology*: embracing popular consumer culture in the museum**

As processes of deindustrialization and change in London’s fashion industry gathered pace during the 1960s, the distinction between the promotional activities of the fashion city and the museum as a space for artistic and academic appreciation of historic dress and textiles came under increasing strain. The separation of the two finally came to an end at the V&A in 1971 with the exhibition *Fashion: An Anthology*, conceived and curated by the fashion illustrator, photographer, writer, and costume designer Cecil Beaton. Beaton revolutionized the V&A’s fashion collection by sourcing more than 400 items through appeals to designers and socialites across his extensive network. These objects told the story of ‘modern’ fashion and included works by the most significant designers of the twentieth century. By celebrating contemporary, rather than historical, designers, the exhibition filled substantial gaps in the museum’s dress collections and transformed the V&A into a commercial and social space for the fashion city.

To understand the museum’s changing attitude towards fashion, it is necessary to look to broader changes within the fashion industry and popular culture. During the 1960s, the proliferation of new types of man-made fibres and manufacturing technologies resulted in an increasingly efficient, expansive, and international ready-to-wear manufacturing industry through process integration and product diversification (Paris 2010). As clothes became less expensive and the latest styles more accessible, fashion was no longer the preserve of a wealthy elite, and a new generation of art school trained designers and entrepreneurs found success in London selling clothing to their peers (Evans 2004, 119). The boutiques they opened contributed to a changing conception of London as a fashion city, replacing its reputation for grand department stores and bespoke tailoring with a more democratic and youthful vision and diversifying the geographies of London fashion.

London was not alone in undergoing a transformational shift in its fashionable reputation at this time. In 1969, Milan hosted its first *Milanovendemoda* textile and fashion trade fair, starting a process that would see it take over from Florence as Italy’s leading fashion city in the 1970s (Segre Reinach 2006). Even Paris, the capital of *haute couture*, began to embrace the creative potential of *pret-a-porter* designs in the 1960s (Romano 2012). Across Europe and North America, this changing understanding of fashion is connected with a growing acceptance of twentieth century fashion objects in museums. As such, although Beaton’s exhibition marked a notable shift in practices of fashion curatorship (Clark and De La Haye 2014, 6), *Fashion: An Anthology* should be understood as part of a broader international trend towards large-scale specialist fashion exhibitions (Fukai and Moeran 2010), alongside notable exhibitions such as *American Women of Style* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (December 1975 to September 1976) and *Paris 1945-1975: Elegance et Creation* at the Musee Galliera in Paris (May to August 1977).

*Fashion: An Anthology* drew on the energy of the fashion city in the mid-to-late 1960s, which centered around ideals of ‘innovation and pleasurable consumption’ (Breward 2006, 8). Like the encompassing design and sensory experiences of the city’s most famous fashion boutiques, the entire exhibition was designed as a consumable sensory experience (figure 2). However, unlike *Britain Can Make It*, the exhibition did not attempt to directly replicate shop design, but to bring together and blur the boundary between fashion retail and museum space. Music played and designer perfumes were pumped out into an exhibition space designed by Michael Haynes, a commercial window display dresser best known for his work for Jaeger.[[10]](#endnote-10) The novelty of this type of commercial display design within the V&A featured heavily in the exhibition’s press release. Moreover, the release explicitly connected the new geographies of the contemporary fashion city with the museum space, promising visitors would experience ‘the originality and liveliness’ of the contemporary London fashion retail experience.[[11]](#endnote-11)

The commercial overtones of the exhibition display space can be understood as a marker of London’s increasingly democratic relationship with fashion. Collaborations with commercial powers such as the Dior Salon and Biba, which both designed and fitted out the exhibition spaces in which their garments were displayed, enabled visitors from a diverse range of ages and social backgrounds to experience what it was like to participate in some of the most exclusive fashionable spaces in the city. In turn, the diversity of garments displayed – ranging from *haute couture* made for the royal family to ready-to-wear garments that some visitors might recognize from their own wardrobes – revealed the museum’s growing interest in the new cultures of London fashion.

Many of the new generation of London fashion designers featured in the exhibition focused on cultivating pop culture rather than high culture appeal and achieved this by opening up new sites in the city for fashionable consumption. These designers shifted the boundaries of London fashion beyond establishment Mayfair and diversified London’s fashionable geographies, most prominently adding Carnaby Street and the backstreets of Soho (Cole 1997), but also incorporating the Kings Road, Kensington, and even the second-hand stalls of the Portobello Road. The exhibition explicitly made connections to these spaces, both through direct reference to stores and by making subtler nods, such as Beaton briefing journalists that a spectacular Mainbocher sequined jacket was ‘found in a Kensington antique market.’[[12]](#endnote-12)

Just as these spaces enabled fashion designers to differentiate themselves from their international rivals by utilising their connections to street style fashions (Breward 2004), so the V&A, by enthusiastically accepting Beaton’s proposal for this exhibition, positioned itself at the forefront of a broader cultural renegotiation of the relative values of heritage and modernity, and elite and popular culture (Edwards 2006, 42). Sir John Pope-Hennessy (then V&A director) insisted that the exhibition included items visitors would not usually see presented in the museum space, such as ready-to-wear fashions, and that these mass-culture objects be presented as ‘exemplars of art and design.’[[13]](#endnote-13) Visitor numbers suggest Pope-Hennessy was right to imagine a public appetite for this: *Fashion: An Anthology* attracted 90,000 visitors, making it the ninth most popular exhibition in the museum’s history when it closed (Clark and De La Haye 2014, 74). Although *Britain Can Make It* was arguably the first exhibition to join together the museum and the commercial spaces of the fashion city, it did so as an anomaly, at a time when the building was largely empty of its permanent collections and so not functioning as a conventional museum space. By the time of *Fashion: An Anthology,* the objects of London’s popular fashion cultureswould be enthusiastically presented alongside and equivalent to the museum’s treasures.

But not all visitors were convinced that elevating fashion within the museum space could adequately replicate the pleasures of fashionable consumption. As one reviewer noted, there was ‘a certain melancholy’ about the idea that the garments on display would never get to attend another party now they had become part of the museum’s collection.[[14]](#endnote-14) In order to understand this fear that bringing fashion into the museum might diminish the enjoyment the public expected to derive from it, it is helpful to look at another contemporaneous fashion exhibition – *Mary Quant’s London,* staged at Kensington Palace by the London Museum between November 1973 and September 1974 (Dyer 2020). This exhibition was also designed by Michael Haynes, who once again worked to evoke the city’s retail spaces within a museum setting by using music and lighting to recreate the atmosphere of Quant’s *Bazaar* boutique.[[15]](#endnote-15) In order to achieve an effective representation of youth culture within the extremely un-swinging establishment spaces of Kensington Palace, Haynes, the curators, and Quant herself worked to distance the exhibition from the institution of the museum and make connections to other, external, spaces. In press interviews, Haynes described hunting for props across the city in ‘a hundred junk shops’;[[16]](#endnote-16) the museum briefed journalists that many of the items on display were not museum pieces, but on temporary loan from a range of real-life Londoners and would return to be worn on the city’s streets once the show closed;[[17]](#endnote-17) and the *Daily Mirror* reassured readers that, in spite of having an exhibition devoted to her work, Mary Quant herself was ‘hardly a museum piece.’[[18]](#endnote-18) This concerted press strategy shows that those involved understood a tangible tension between elevating and diminishing fashion by placing it in a museum – that bringing fashion into the museum was not enough to transform the museum into a fashionable space. In order to achieve this, it first needed to distance itself from popular understandings of what a museum looked like and what it contained.

**Embedding the V&A within the fashion city**

Shifting public expectations and perceptions regarding the role and place of fashion in the V&A was a slow but dynamic process in the twenty years after *Fashion: An Anthology* closed. The exhibition had significantly enhanced the V&A’s dress collections, and the work of collecting and displaying twentieth century fashion was further boosted by the curatorial appointment of Valerie Mendes in 1973 and the appointment of Roy Strong as director in 1974. Strong was enthusiastic about the place of fashion in the museum and supported Mendes’s work collecting both contemporary fashion objects and archival and business records relating to fashion (Wilcox 2018). Under their influence, the museum increasingly collaborated with London’s fashion businesses on contemporary collecting and small-scale displays and exhibitions such as *Liberty’s, 1875–1975: An Exhibition to Mark the Firm’s Centenary* (July – October 1975) and *British Fashion for Winter 1979,* which saw a retail display transferred from Simpsons of Piccadilly for display in the museum (Wilcox 2018).

Archive materials indicate fashion exhibitions were viewed by the museum as a tool by which they could signal continued relevance at a time of cultural change and attract publicity in a world increasingly interested in celebrity culture (Cashmore, 2006). The private view invitation lists for fashion exhibitions contain notably more celebrity names than other exhibition genres, from fashion designers and models to actresses, pop stars, socialites, and, most importantly, journalists covering the social and celebrity columns of newspapers.[[19]](#endnote-19) But it is also clear that the museum understood this relationship with the contemporary fashion industry was a two-way process. While it had much to gain from aligning itself with the mass culture appeal of fashion, it also had a vested interest in supporting and promoting the symbolic capital of London fashion.

The museum’s evolving collecting and display policies regarding contemporary fashion during the 1980s demonstrate an understanding of how London’s fashion businesses, designers, and institutions successfully renegotiated the city’s diminished status as a manufacturing centre by developing a reputation for innovation, built on the industry’s creative links to the spaces and individuals associated with the city’s subcultures and countercultures (Stanfill 2013). In 1986, Strong commissioned Mendes to chair a committee on the subject of the museum’s Twentieth Century Acquisitions Policy (Wilcox 2018). Some of the committee’s work resulted in collaborations that saw the museum showing and promoting the work of new and emerging contemporary London fashion designers, for example hosting an exhibition of Levi jackets customized by famous designers in partnership with Blitz magazine, and providing a location for the display of work by nominees of the Lloyds Bank Fashion Awards.[[20]](#endnote-20) This association between the V&A and London’s reputation as a centre for innovative fashion design and promotion was cemented in 1994 with the opening of the exhibition *Streetstyle: From Sidewalk to Catwalk, 1940 to Tomorrow*, in which the V&A made a decisive claim to be more than a space of historic and high end fashions.[[21]](#endnote-21)

By the start of the twenty-first century, the V&A had come to serve as a core site for London fashion. In 1999 the museum began to host *Fashion in Motion* events, a series of live contemporary fashion shows, and in 2009 the museum co-hosted an exhibition opening with the British Fashion Council as part of London Fashion Week.[[22]](#endnote-22) As part of this process the V&A positioned itself as an institution connecting London’s fashionable past and present. This has been achieved particularly effectively though the presentation of the museum as a vital resource for inspiring London fashion designers, a narrative that features across a range of exhibitions – from grand retrospectives of well-known designers such as *Vivienne Westwood* (2004) to smaller displays of work by fashion graduates from the nearby Royal College of Art in *Future Fashion Now* (2009-2010).[[23]](#endnote-23) The presentation of the museum as a space that inspires creativity ties in to a much longer history of design education at the V&A (Romans 2005, 42-45), but it also signals the growing importance of London’s fashion history in training the city’s emerging fashion designers to find ‘meaning’ in their work (Murphy 2011). This demonstrates the growing importance of heritage to the fashion city, and the connected roles that cultural institutions such as museums and higher education institutions play in disseminating heritage discourses.

The role of the museum as a site for knowledge exchange between London’s fashionable present and its past has also served to further centre the institution within the city’s fashionable geographies. This was made explicit in *Hats: An Anthology by Stephen Jones* (2009), which was timed to coincide with the release of Jones’s A/W 2009 collection ‘Albertopolis’, featuring hats inspired by objects from the museum.[[24]](#endnote-24) The exhibition presented the museum as a site for collecting the best of London’s historic and contemporary fashionable creativity in a manner reminiscent of the role of the South Kensington Museums in the nineteenth century, when the ‘procession of objects from peripheries to centre symbolically enacted the idea of London as the heart of the empire’ (Barringer 1998, 22).

This process highlights a key shift in the power dynamics of the fashion city. The extreme deindustrialization London experienced from the mid-1990s onwards left the city almost entirely devoid of fashion manufacture. As Brenner and Schmid have discussed, our understanding of ‘the city’ and its boundaries and forms is increasingly challenged by the changing realities of the urban in the twenty-first century (Brenner and Schmid, 2015). Like other established Western fashion cities, London has seen the networks of makers, cultural intermediaries, and consumers who used to operate within its defined metropolitan geographies dispersed across nations and continents as supply chains stretched and grew in complexity under the new international division of labour. Devoid of the skilled making cultures upon which London’s fashion industry built its reputation, the institutions that support the fashion city have turned instead to narratives emphasizing its creative fashion heritage. V&A fashion exhibitions – such as *The Golden Age of Couture: Paris and London 1947-57* (2007-2008) – increasingly highlight how the sites of past skilled making cultures, such as Saville Row, continue to inspire London fashion even when the city is no longer a hub of garment manufacture.[[25]](#endnote-25) These exhibitions make it clear that, in the absence of substantive creative making cultures in the city, cultural institutions such as the V&A have become vital for sustaining the discourses of creativity that support the city’s fashionable reputation.

**Conclusion: reassessing the benefits of fashion exhibitions**

Tracing the processes by which contemporary fashion came to be an integral part of the V&A’s collections and public programs reveals the role the museum has played in re-characterizing London’s ability to maintain and further develop its identity as a fashion city since 1945, and the benefits both the museum and London’s fashionable reputation have derived from this. After the disruption of the Second World War, *Britain Can Make It* provided an important moment of connection between the museum and the fashion city. However, it took the cultural and technological shifts of the 1960s for the V&A to understand how this relationship could be mutually beneficial. As processes of deindustrialization gathered pace, the V&A assisted the construction of London’s distinctive reputation for innovation through exhibitions that made connections between the fashion industry and the city’s subcultures and street cultures. Through this shifting exploitation of the city’s material heritage and geographies, the V&A raised its own status as a fashionable space and has become one of the foremost sites for the visual consumption of fashion globally. Indeed, the museum has been so successful towards this end that today it holds tremendous, and largely unquestioned, power as a gatekeeper of the heritage narratives that support London’s continuing claim to be a fashion city.

The museum has utilized this fashionable reputation to stage increasingly large, frequent, and popular fashion exhibitions. These have provided a financial lifeline during a period when the V&A has, in line with the wider museum sector, become increasingly reliant on commercial activities, corporate support, and philanthropic donations to compensate for shrinking public funding (Rentschler 2002; Lindqvist 2012). As part of this process, museum exhibitions have needed to compete more actively with the visitor attraction sector (Lennon and Graham 2001), transforming the museum visitor into a consumer (Ramm 2014).

The questions this raises about possible conflicts between the commercial and non-profit aims of museums form part of broader discussions about the changing role of museums in increasingly plural and diverse societies (Weisbrod 1998; Gourievidis 2014). Curators today are expected to make their collections accessible to a broad audience, and it can be necessary for them to act as institutional gatekeepers in order to help visitors make sense of a complex world (Balzer 2015). At the same time, the sense of belonging and identity produced by museums and heritage sites lend these spaces a responsibility to show visitors more diverse historical narratives in order to promote tolerant and inclusive societies (Ashworth et al. 2007; Bennett 2006). In this vision, museums play a key role in resisting the narrow concepts of heritage and national identity reinforced through the presentation of ‘a past made easy to embrace’ (Lowenthal 1995).

It is notable that fashion exhibitions remain largely absent from these public debates about the cultural and social role of museums. Yet many of the narratives presented in spectacular blockbuster exhibitions like *Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams* clearly overlook the diversity and moral complexity of the fashion industry. These narratives connect fashion almost exclusively, and in a fundamentally exclusionary way, to the spaces and activities of the city’s contemporary but also historic establishment, such as couture dressmakers and their clients. Not only is this historically reductive, it is also potentially problematic for the fashion city because it threatens the distinctiveness of London’s fashionable reputation by omitting much of the diverse cultural influences that have made London a place where ‘the rawness of everyday life’ inspires innovative fashion (Buckley and Clark 2017, 3).

This paper thus concludes by suggesting that, in the face of increasing homogeneity among global fashion cities and increasing consumer awareness of the moral complexities of the fashion industry, the V&A could reinvigorate the distinctiveness of London’s symbolic fashion capital by presenting exhibitions that test the boundaries of the fashion city as it is currently understood. This approach offers many potential benefits. Fashion in museums is too often seen as a shorthand for popular and public facing, without proper consideration of what that might actually mean in terms of objects and narratives on display (Svensson 2014, 199). The prevalence of the named designer and high-end fashion object on public display stems from an assumption that maintaining visitor interest requires a parade of increasingly visually spectacular items, but, as Marco Pecorari (2014) has argued in relation to the work of MoMu in Antwerp, evidence suggests that museums could actually increase their appeal by moving the focus of exhibitions away from the spectacle of couture towards the activities of mass consumption and mass production. Certainly, many visitors to *Mary Quant* (V&A, April 2019 - February 2020) seemed to show clear and enthusiastic engagement with the photographs and stories of ‘ordinary’ Quant consumers. Moreover, telling more diverse stories – such as those of the predominantly immigrant and female workforces who made London fashion throughout the twentieth century – has the potential to significantly increase the diversity of exhibition audiences (Ross 2016, 61).

Of course, these arguments must be weighed against the need for museums such as the V&A to financially sustain themselves through commercial activities. Exhibitions that have attempted to diversify the mediated narratives that dominate popular understandings of London as a fashion city, such as *The London Look: Fashion from Street to Catwalk* at the Museum of London (October 2004 – April 2005), have their relatively disappointing ticket sales cited as warnings of this approach, in spite of the fact that *The London Look’s* visitor numbers were likely impacted by other factors, such as marketing, and the exhibition was highly successful in terms of academic legacy and engagement with younger audiences.[[26]](#endnote-26) This is a reminder that the box-office success of an exhibition should be measured against its longer-term legacy. If the V&A’s blockbuster fashion exhibitions fail to support London’s claim to distinctive fashion cultures, then the museum cannot provide the mutual benefit that this paper has shown to be so important to maintaining a successful relationship between a fashion city and its cultural institutions. In doing so the museum risks causing real harm to one of the city’s key creative industries and, in turn, losing the prestige the museum is conferred through their status as a space within one of the world’s foremost fashion cities. The value of London fashion to the national economy means that providing sufficient public funding to support the presentation of diverse fashion exhibitions in London museums should be understood as both a public and economic good, and the role of museum exhibitions in supporting the city’s creative industries should be embedded as part of broader industrial policy.

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**Figure Captions**

Figure 1: The ‘Hyde Park’ scene featuring non-Utility day clothes in the Fashions Hall at *Britain Can Make It,* Victoria and Albert Museum, 1946. (Design Council Archive, University of Brighton Design Archives, DCA0568)

Figure 2: A display from *Fashion: An Anthology*. Victoria and Albert Museum, 1971. This photograph demonstrates the extent to which the exhibition transformed the V&A into a space of fashionable consumption for visitors, disrupting the familiar gallery space by installing a series of clean, bright spaces, often laced with surreal and futuristic imagery. (Colin Davey/ Camera Press London)

1. The *Census of Productio*n records for the 1950s and beyond show a decline in both the number of people and firms manufacturing clothes in London. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Catalogue for ‘Exhibition of American Fashions and Fabrics, 1945’. MMA 1945, Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Catalogue for ‘The Wardrobe of a Woman of Fashion, Spring-Summer 1947’. MMA 1947, Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Britain Can Make It: Catalogue Supplement, 1946. GB-1837-DES-DCA-14A-17, Design Archives, University of Brighton. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Although these were described as British fashions, they were predominantly London fashions due to the national dominance of the city’s bespoke and wholesale couture industries. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Air Raid Damage Report for Speaker’s Corner, 1945. Westminster City Archives. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. ‘Britain Can Make It Report’. *Display, Design and Presentation*, October 1946. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. File Report FR 2441[1]. Mass Observation Archive. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. *The House of Worth: A Centenary Exhibition of Designs for Dresses* press pack, 1958. V&A Archives, MA/29/28 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Jackson, W. “Beaton show of the century.” *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 October 1971, 8.  [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The press release describes the display having ‘all the originality and liveliness of the best shop windows in London in recent years and is something altogether new in the museum world’. MA/29/122/1, V&A Archives. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. *Illustrated London News*, 1 October 1971, 62. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Registered Papers 70/375A, V&A Archives. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. *Kensington Post*, 22 October 1971, 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Sinclair, S. “All set for the Mary Quant nostalgia show.” *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 August 1973, 15.  [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Sinclair, S. “Now, the Quant Show—In a Museum.” *The Daily Telegraph*, 26 November 1973, 15.  [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. “Show of Quantity.” *The Daily Telegraph*, 11  July 1973, 16.  [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Smith, L. “Mary socks it to ‘em.” *Daily Mirror*, 29 November 1973, 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. *The Fabric of Pop* private view invite list. 1974. MA/29/81, V&A Archives. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *Blitz designer collection of Levi Jackets*, 1986. MA/29/385, V&A Archives. *Lloyds Bank Fashion Challenge*, 1992. MA/29/411, V&A Archives. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *Streetstyle: From Sidewalk to Catwalk 1940 to Tomorrow* press pack, 1994. MA/51/3/6, V&A Archives. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. The launch party for *Hats: An Anthology by Stephen Jones* (2009) was cohosted with the British Fashion Council and timed to coincide with London Fashion Week. MA/51/3/21, V&A Archives. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. *Vivienne Westwood* press pack. MA/51/3/16, V&A Archives. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. *Hats: An Anthology by Stephen Jones* press pack, 2009. MA/51/3/21, V&A Archives. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. *The Golden Age of Couture: Paris and London 1947-57* Media Release, 2007. MA/51/3/19, V&A Archives. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. 14,838 of the 34,616 visitors to *The London Look* were students. Personal correspondence with Dr. Lucie Whitmore, Fashion Curator at the Museum of London, 12 March 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)