



INGRID MIDA  
ALEXANDRA KIM

THE  
DRESS  
DETECTIVE

A PRACTICAL  
GUIDE TO  
OBJECT-BASED  
RESEARCH  
IN FASHION

B L O O M S B U R Y

THE  
DRESS  
DETECTIVE

Bloomsbury Academic  
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square  
London  
WC1B 3DP  
UK

1385 Broadway  
New York  
NY 10018  
USA

[www.bloomsbury.com](http://www.bloomsbury.com)  
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First published 2015

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**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4725-7398-8

PB: 978-1-4725-7397-1

ePDF: 978-1-4725-8053-5

ePub: 978-1-4725-8054-2

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Mida, Ingrid.

The dress detective : a practical guide to object-based research in fashion / by Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim.  
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4725-7398-8 (hardcover) — ISBN 978-1-4725-7397-1 (pbk.) 1. Fashion—Research—Handbooks, manuals, etc. 2. Clothing trade—Research—Handbooks, manuals, etc. 3. Fashion design—Research—Methodology—Handbooks, manuals, etc. I. Kim, Alexandra. II. Title.

TT497.M54 2015

746.9'2072—dc23

2014049148

Designed by Evelin Kasikov

Cover image: Detail of sleeve on cream silk bodice, c.1890s.  
Gift of Alan Suddon, Ryerson FRC1999.06.006.  
Photo by Ingrid Mida.

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A PRACTICAL GUIDE  
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INGRID MIDA  
ALEXANDRA KIM



SOCIETY OF  
ANTIQUARIES  
OF LONDON

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# Foreword

Stella Blum, former Curator-in-Charge of The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, and the first director of the Kent State University Museum, believed deeply in the education of those embarking on careers focused on dress and dress history. Her philosophy for object-centered research was based on her oft-repeated phrase, "learning to look." In this book Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim provide a pathway for this essential skill. What the authors describe as "Observation," "Reflection" and "Interpretation" is precisely what Stella Blum had in mind. Real looking is not something one can accomplish with a quick glance, and indeed, the authors advocate "slow looking." It is so easy today to take a quick digital image of an object and assume that the image will tell you everything you need to know, anytime. To the chagrin of many, upon viewing an image apart from the object, it is almost impossible for the image to have captured all of the information necessary to adequately understand the complexity of detail, or the significance of any specific item of dress.

The difficulty of understanding the dress artifact increases the further removed the researcher is from the time and place of the object's creation. The conventions of making a dress at any given moment in history, and in any particular place, are part of a broad and inclusive cultural context. In many cases, both the wearer and the maker are unknown. With bespoke examples of Western fashion the decisions of the client and dressmaker or tailor together determine the garment. Was the client conservative or avant-garde? Was the maker attuned to the fashion of the time? What were the political, social, and economic considerations? In the case of apparel created outside the tradition of Western fashion, the necessary explorations of time and place expand profoundly. Very often there are no absolute answers, and the researcher finds it necessary to hypothesize.

## OPPOSITE

**Bodice of cream silk ladies' jacket**  
c.1914. Gift of Katherine Cleaver, Ryerson  
FRC2014.07.473A. Photo by Ingrid Mida.

The reader will find Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim especially helpful in the formulation of research hypotheses. The authors have listed questions within the text, and as a checklist in the appendices, that the researcher should ask when looking at a dress artifact. These questions provide a sound basis of inquiry. Observable facts alone are only part of the process of understanding a garment. It is only natural for an observer to make assumptions about a piece of clothing based on personal experience. Discovering which of these assumptions are warranted and which are not is critical to understanding the reality of the object. The authors term this aspect of study "Reflection." It is only after careful observation and reflection that the artifact can be understood thoroughly enough to be interpreted through exhibition or publication.

Apart from mass-produced clothing, each dress artifact is as unique as the person who ordered, purchased and wore it. It might even be argued that observable facts of wear make mass-produced garments unique. The ambiguities to be found in any object-based study of dress make the interpretation of the artifact fraught with issues. Many objects belie the most widely proclaimed theories. As the authors advise, fashion theory can only assist the researcher in the analysis and evaluation of the evidence gained through observation and reflection. There are rarely absolute conclusions, but there can be well-reasoned hypotheses. Above all, it is the cultural complexity inherent in the dress artifact that resists generalization.

*The Dress Detective* reveals the challenges facing those committed to object-based research in dress and dress history. In doing so it provides a guide for the thorough understanding of a dress artifact. Those of us who have spent our careers considering the questions detailed in this book know the rewards of "learning to look." We know the frustrations and pleasures of deciphering cultural contexts, and the sense of accomplishment when understanding is achieved. Dress is so much a part of life that its cultural significance is often overlooked. Any item of apparel has much to reveal about the time and place of its creation, and the unique forces that gave it shape and substance.

Jean L. Druesedow

*Kent State University Museum*  
*November 18, 2014*

# Acknowledgments

It takes a cadre of people to produce a book. The authors would like to acknowledge all the staff at Bloomsbury involved in the production, especially editor Emily Ardizzone, who initially suggested that we take on this project.

There are many people that facilitated the research and photography of garments used in the case studies: Katherine Cleaver, Charlotte Fenton, Lexy Fogel, Lu Ann Lafrenz, Jazmin Welch, and especially Robert Ott, Chair of the School of Fashion at Ryerson University. We wish to express our appreciation to those that assisted with our research, including Neil Brochu, Hilary Davidson, Sophie Grossiord, Laure Harivel, Patience Nauta, and Catherine Orman.

We also give sincere thanks to our friends and colleagues, who supported the need for this book, including Jean Druessedow, Edwina Ehrman, Amy de la Haye, Alison Matthews David, and Lou Taylor.

We are very grateful to the Society of Antiquaries of London for choosing us as recipients of the 2014 grant from the Janet Arnold Fund, to facilitate the purchase of images for this book. We would also like to express our thanks to the Sir Arthur Conan Doyle Literary Estate for permission to include the extract from *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle*.

Finally, we would like to extend our deepest thanks to our families who cheered us on through the most difficult moments, including Dan Mida, and the late Magdalene Masak, as well as Henry Kim, Sheena and Patrick MacCulloch, and Laura MacCulloch.

Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim

# Introduction

*“Then, what clue could you have as to his identity?”*

*“Only as much as we can deduce.”*

*“From his hat?”*

*“Precisely.”*

*“But you are joking. What can you gather from this old battered felt?”*

*“Here is my lens. You know my methods. What can you gather yourself as to the individuality of the man who has worn this article?”*

*I took the tattered object in my hands and turned it over rather ruefully. It was a very ordinary black hat of the usual round shape, hard and much the worse for wear. The lining had been of red silk, but was a good deal discoloured. There was no maker’s name; but, as Holmes had remarked, the initials “H. B.” were scrawled upon one side. It was pierced in the brim for a hat-securer, but the elastic was missing. For the rest, it was cracked, exceedingly dusty, and spotted in several places, although there seemed to have been some attempt to hide the discoloured patches by smearing them with ink.*

— SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE (1892: 75)



**Figure 0.1.**

**Illustration of Sherlock Holmes and Watson by Sidney Paget for “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle,” *Strand Magazine* January 1892, p.73.**

In this scene between Sherlock Holmes and Watson from *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle*, by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Watson struggles to read the clues in an ordinary black hat (Figure 0.1). For Sherlock Holmes, its appearance—discolored red silk lining, the initials, the dust, the spots—tell a story of a man who was an intellectual, was once well-off, but who had fallen upon hard times, recently had his hair cut, and whose wife had ceased to love him.

Unlocking the personal and cultural narratives hidden in the folds of a garment is a little bit like being Sherlock Holmes. A dress detective looks for and interprets the clues, including the details of cut, construction and embellishment, evidence of how the garment was worn, used or altered over time, as well as the relationship of the garment and its materials relative to the body and the period from which it came (Figure 0.2). The close analysis of dress artifacts can enhance and enrich research, providing primary evidence for studies that consider fashion and clothing from perspectives such as history, sociology, psychology, and economics.

Material culture analysis is a research methodology that considers the relationship between objects and the “ways in which we view the past and produce our narratives of what happened in the past” (Pearce 1992: 192).

Clothing and accessories, including hats, footwear, jewelry, hairstyles, tattoos, and other forms of body adornment (hereafter referred to as “dress”), are objects created by man and thus reflect the cultural milieu in which they were designed, created and worn. Unlike the textual accounts of history, ordinary objects such as clothing can be seen as “less self-conscious and potentially more truthful” about a culture (Prown 1982: 4).

The study of material culture has a long history as a discipline, especially in the fields of anthropology and art history. In fashion studies, some scholars do not appreciate the value of examining actual garments, dismissing such work as no more than a cataloguing exercise. In 1998, curator Valerie Steele wrote: “Because intellectuals live by the word, many scholars tend to ignore the important role that objects can play in the creation of knowledge.



**Figure 0.2.**

**Cream silk bodice c.1890s.**  
Gift of Alan Suddon, Ryerson  
FRC1999.06.006. Photo by  
Ingrid Mida.

Even many fashion historians spend little or no time examining actual garments, preferring to rely exclusively on written sources and visual representations” (1998: 327). In 2013, curator Alexandra Palmer echoed this sentiment when she wrote: “The seemingly old-fashioned museum-based approach of fashion studies, which begins with a description of the object, is a complex and underutilized approach for new scholars” (2013: 268).

This book aims to serve the scholar who is unfamiliar or new to object-based research in fashion, and includes checklists and case studies to articulate a skillset that has, until now, largely been passed on informally, typically from curator to assistant. Written in plain language, this book can also be used by anyone with a family heirloom or dress artifact to help discover the biography of the object.

The book begins with a brief history of object-based research in fashion studies, highlighting the work of some key players who have advocated for this type of research over the last century; for example, Doris Langley Moore, Jules David Prown, and Alexandra Palmer. Chapter 2, “How to Read a Dress Artifact,” introduces a *Slow Approach to Seeing* as the praxis to yield optimal results from an examination of dress artifacts. Subsequent chapters reveal and explain the steps of Observation, Reflection, and Interpretation. The selected case studies in the latter half of the book illustrate how this approach can be used with a variety of different types of Western dress artifacts, dating from the early nineteenth century to the present day, and are ones that might typically be encountered when using a museum or study collection. These case studies articulate the methodological framework for the process, illustrate the use of the checklists, and show how evidence from the garment itself can be used to corroborate theories of dress or fashion. The “Checklist for Observation” and the “Checklist for Reflection” are included as appendices.

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# 1

## A Brief History of Object-based Research with Dress Artifacts

**OPPOSITE**

**Figure 1.1.**

Detail of Jenny dress, 1921.  
Gift of Jane Dowsett,  
Ryerson FRC2001.02.002.  
Photo by Ingrid Mida.

*These surviving clothes illustrate the reality of children's dress in all its different qualities of fabric and construction.*

*The identities of the children who wore them do not always survive with the clothes, but each surviving garment bears the imprint not only of the child who wore it, but also of part of a way of life.*

— ANNE BUCK (1996: 15)

Whether saved at the back of a closet or preserved at great expense in archival storage as part of a museum or university study collection (Figure 1.1), dress artifacts have a history that can be read and interpreted. In an analysis of the surviving wardrobes of the Messel family, curator Amy de la Haye wrote that clothing that is kept beyond its fashionable life often has “symbolic qualities” and holds “personal memories” for the owner (2005: 14).

Although we all wear clothes, it can be difficult to unpack the multifaceted narratives embedded within these objects, since garments as artifacts embody “complex composites with multiple histories” (Palmer and Clark 2005: 9). Designed to be worn or adorn the body, garments incorporate functional elements, as well as symbolic and aesthetic qualities that echo the cultural norms of a particular time and place. Inherent in the design and production of clothing are technical choices reflecting the cost and availability of materials (Figure 1.2), such as the use of a zipper instead of buttons, or synthetic fabrics instead of natural fibers. The garment or accessory can also reveal the multitude of design choices that may serve to highlight or obscure certain parts of the body, reinforce or neutralize gender, or imbue political or social messages. In its use and wear, dress is subjected to the demands and whims of its owner, bearing the marks



**Figure 1.2.**

**Button on men's tailcoat, 1932.**  
Gift of Maureen Harrington,  
Ryerson FRC2002.02.001A.  
Photo by Ingrid Mida.

and strains of wear, as well as decomposition from the effects of light, moisture, pests, and soiling.

Collecting dress artifacts to illustrate the history of Western dress is a relatively new aspect of museology. Although many museums initially preserved garments within their textile collections, or collected artifacts from aboriginal or indigenous peoples as an anthropological exercise, the formation of separate departments collecting objects of Western dress did not occur until well into the twentieth century. For example, the Victoria and Albert Museum opened in 1852, and established its first collection of dress, as opposed to accessories or decorative textiles, after receiving the costume collection of the painter Talbot Hughes (1869–1942) in 1913. Similarly, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York opened in 1866, but the Costume Institute was not established until 1946.

The terms “dress” and “fashion” are sometimes used interchangeably, and although the precise definitions are contested, there are subtle differences in meaning. The term “dress” is used in this book in reference to all clothing and accessories that exist in material form, including hats, footwear, jewelry, hairstyles, tattoos, and other material forms of body adornment. The term “fashion” is used to describe garments and accessories that adorn the body in a manner that reflects the “the cultural construction of embodied identity,” as it is defined by the journal *Fashion Theory*.

Object-based research has its origins in the fields of anthropology and art history, and many renowned scholars, including Igor Kopytoff and Daniel Miller from these disciplines, have made important contributions to the field of material culture research.<sup>1</sup> Within fashion studies, the history of object-based research using dress artifacts is comparatively brief, and this chapter focuses on some of the key figures whose work has particularly influenced the approach to studying dress artifacts that is advocated in this book.

Among the first to appreciate the value of studying dress artifacts was private collector and self-taught dress historian **Doris Langley Moore** (1902–1989), who argued that the evidence found in the garments themselves belied the optical illusions seen in print (1949: 16f.). Langley Moore measured over 2,000 dresses, corsets and other garments with a waist, to refute the myths that women wore corsets to achieve an eighteen-inch waist, and that women had grown taller since the eighteenth century (Langley Moore 1964: 21). Her impressive collection (Figure 1.3) became the foundation of what is now the Fashion Museum in Bath, England, where research appointments are available to students and visiting scholars.<sup>2</sup>

**LANGLEY MOORE COLLECTION**

**Object:**

**Country:** **Date:**

**Inscription  
or label:**

**Material:**

**Measurements:**

**Description:**

**Source:** **Room:**

**Case:**

**Approximate value:** **(For remarks see other side)**

Figure 1.3.

Doris Langley Moore  
Collection Record Card,  
undated. Private collection.

Another early advocate for object-based research was dress historian and curator **Anne Buck** (1910–2005). During her tenure as Keeper of the Gallery of English Costume, at Platt Hall in Manchester, England, between 1947 and 1972, Buck championed rigorous research of surviving garments as a way of better understanding how dress of the past was produced, worn and appreciated.<sup>3</sup> She viewed dress as a natural part of the history of culture and society, using literature, oral history, and archival material to complement evidence found within the garments themselves. She advocated the examination of dress objects to identify alterations and recycling, not only as evidence of the shape of the wearer, but also to illustrate changes in fashion, taste, and status (Jarvis 2009: 136). Anne Buck also had a keen interest in the dress of the ordinary person, expressing the view that working class dress was as important as the clothing of the elite.

**Janet Arnold** (1932–1998) is perhaps best known for her meticulously drawn patterns and line drawings of historic dress in her series of books, *Patterns of Fashion*. These books have offered detailed insight into examples of surviving garments for museum curators, conservators, and dress historians, as well as providing inspiration to costumers and designers. Arnold's work advocated the value of inspecting garments first hand, and continually demonstrated the way in which studied observation could yield key information about construction and the wearing of dress. Her 1973 *Handbook of Costume* delivered a guide to the riches of dress collections held in many British museums, and also offered advice about taking a pattern from surviving garments.

Although art historian **Jules David Prown** was not the first to propose a model for artifact study, his advocacy for object-based research is still cited by fashion scholars.<sup>4</sup> In 1980, Prown wrote an article called “Style as Evidence,” in which he suggested that stylistic analysis, often used as an art-historical procedure, could be of value to scholars in other fields. Prown argued that style, defined as “the way something is done, produced or expressed,” offered a non-textual link to the past that was more authentic than textual accounts. Using case studies of furniture and silver tea sets, Prown concluded that the analysis of the stylistic qualities of those objects allowed “direct sensory experience of surviving historic events, not necessarily important events, but authentic events nonetheless” (1980: 208), and that this type of engagement could yield “a different kind of cultural understanding” for those that could overcome their reluctance to work with non-textual materials.

In 1982, Prown published an oft-cited article, “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” which articulated his suggested methodology by which to conduct object-based research. Prown reiterated that beliefs are presented less self-consciously in objects, and therefore offer a more truthful expression of cultural beliefs of another time, and also that objects can serve as primary evidence of the cultural views of those that made, purchased or used those items, and by extension, the society from

which they came. Prown intentionally framed this approach in general terms to be applicable to all types of objects, ranging in functionality from those created to serve utilitarian purposes, such as machines or musical instruments, to those expressing purely aesthetic functions, such as art. Prown's categorization of object utility also included items such as clothing that serves both functional and aesthetic purposes. Prown stated that objects that survive the test of time give the researcher the opportunity to have a direct sensory experience with the past, as well as offering a more honest and representative retelling of the past than might exist in written form. Borrowing from the fields of art history, archeology, and science, Prown's methodology for object analysis is set out in three discrete stages of investigation that are defined as Description, Deduction and Speculation. These broad stages of examination are broken down further into specific steps, in order to guide the researcher through this type of analysis for any category of object. Within the article, Prown noted that clothing, as a form of adornment and a reflection of personal identity and values, was an area that was ripe for future research (1982: 13).

**Valerie Steele**, the Director and Chief Curator of the Fashion Institute of Technology Museum, New York, was Prown's student at Yale University, and used his methodology for object-based research while she was a student, to analyze several nineteenth-century garments, including a bodice and skirt (1998: 330). In doing so, she became one of the first fashion scholars to adopt Prown's methodology for the study of dress artifacts. In one of the early articles in the journal *Fashion Theory*, Steele encouraged this type of research, and wrote that it can "provide unique insights into the historic and aesthetic development of fashion" (1998: 327).

**Alexandra Palmer**, the Nora E. Vaughan Curator of The Textiles and Costume Collection at the Royal Ontario Museum, in Toronto, has long advocated an interdisciplinary approach to fashion scholarship that includes material culture analysis. Noting the influence of Jules Prown in her book *Couture and Commerce: The Transatlantic Fashion Trade in the 1950s*, Palmer traced the production of couture fashion in Paris and distribution in North America to assess how real women adapted, wore and altered couture pieces to suit their lifestyle. In studying actual couture garments and tracing their origin, use and afterlife, Palmer also challenged the myth that couture was worn by elite women for a single season and then discarded. Palmer noted that few academics succeed in combining material culture with other research methods, and "remain bound in theoretical rhetoric" or adopt it "as decorative illustrative material" (2001: 8). Palmer explained her methodology as a combination of object analysis, oral history, archival research, and other documentary research. In *The Handbook of Fashion Studies*, Palmer reiterated that object-based research is not an innate aptitude of the researcher; even while it may be "assumed that we already have the necessary critical skills to evaluate fashion, when in fact it is a research skill that is learned like any other form of scholarship" (2013: 268).

In the book *The Study of Dress History*, **Lou Taylor** considered the history and nature of the void between the research of object-focused dress and textile historians and the research of economic and social historians. Noting the marginalization of fashion research as a continuing issue for academics in the field, Taylor concluded that the “most dynamic research in dress history has indeed now fused artifact-based and theoretical approaches. Where the ‘valid’ fine line is to be drawn between Prown’s process of ‘leading out’ from the object into theory, or working back from theory to object is the essence of future debate” (2002: 85).

## CONCLUSION

Although there is a rich legacy of object-based research in dress, there is no singular framework that offers a clear and systematic approach to the study of dress artifacts. The work of Jules Prown, although developed for artifacts in general, seems to be the methodology that continues to be cited by fashion scholars, including the 2014 book *Exhibiting Fashion: Before and After 1971*, by Judith Clark and Amy de la Haye, with a case study of a Chanel outfit worn by Diana Vreeland.

Dress artifacts are unique, embodying the haptic qualities of cloth, the aesthetic and structural qualities unique to fashion, the traces of the person that used and wore the garment, as well as aspects related to its production and distribution. These multi-layered and complex dimensions can be difficult to unravel, especially in a garment that might conflate stylistic interpretations of the latest fashions, or that has been altered to suit multiple wearers. Valerie Steele once wrote that many of her students had difficulties with the deduction and speculation steps of the Prown process, and often ended their essays with “a string of unanswered questions” (1998: 331). The authors’ experiences in guiding students in museum and study collections has shown that many students are unsure about working with dress objects, especially in terms of what to do with the evidence that they have gathered. The following chapters are intended to minimize the anxiety and confusion by developing a practice-based framework unique to dress artifacts that articulates each of the steps necessary to read and reflect systematically on the evidence contained in a dress artifact. In doing so, we have taken on Patricia Cunningham’s call to fashion scholars: “We should do whatever it takes to answer our research questions and, above all, when we think our questions take us beyond artifacts, we must shift, look back, and then reconsider the artifact. There is more there than we think” (1988: 78–79).