

VANITY FAIR?

Understanding Contemporary Links between Fashion, Museum and Nation

Marie Riegels Melchior

In this paper, fashion is analyzed as a complex system that synthesizes the provision of clothes with the production of symbolic value. Through a case study of Denmark, I question contemporary links between fashion, museum and nation, and introduce the concepts of “fashion nation” and “fashion museology”. I argue that the museum’s and nation’s longing for newness, appeal to attention, and adaptation to the commercial market do not merely constitute a shallow quick-fix; rather, deeper ramifications and potentials arise as fashion promotes cosmopolitan nationalism, one in which cultural heritage and national values are not reduced to defensive strongholds in the face of globalization, but cultivated as renewable resources that can be reinvented in interaction with global society.

Keywords: catwalk economy, fashion nation, fashion museology, cosmopolitan nationalism

Vanity and fashion are often seen as two sides of the same coin. When museums and nations update their public image by associating themselves with fashion, they also associate themselves, by extension, with an impression of vanity, self-interest, and pride in their own achievements. The process of fashioning museums and nations creates a consciousness about identity through styling and projection of appearances. In recent years, the policy makers of many national governments in the traditional fashion periphery (from the perspective of a monocentric fashion system based around historic fashion cities – Paris and London, later New York, Milan and Tokyo, and most recently large metropolises such as Hong Kong and Shanghai) have begun to seek a fashion image, in reaction to both the deindustrialization of Western

countries and the emergence of new industrializing countries outside of the Western world (Breward & Gilbert 2006).

In the Scandinavian region, for instance, the Danish, Swedish and Norwegian governments have launched individual policies since 2005 with the common ambition to promote each country locally and internationally in association with its respective fashion industry and the global image of fashion – the new, the styled, the sexy (Melchior 2011a). These manoeuvres can be understood as symptomatic of the past decade’s belief in the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore 1999), in the future social and economic growth potential of creativity and design. Museums have subscribed to this trend in equal force, via several approaches. Independently of the

collection and exhibition of fashion, more museum managers are embracing a fashion logic – the logic of the production of the new – in order to develop *new museums* (Message 2006). At the same time, the museum institution participates in national government policies promoting fashion and the value of the fashion industry for society: new specialized fashion museums are established, fashion exhibitions are increased and extended, and new fashion departments are launched in existing museums on the foundation of the previous so-called dress departments (Melchior 2011b). Beyond a symbolic production of the new and a tangible object of display, fashion as a mindset guides museums to think in terms of their front-stage, the public space of their institutions, and in terms of the economic potential of continuous production (including new special exhibitions, event programs or products in the museum shop or café) to glean the greatest benefits from the cultural heritage of fashion.

It could be claimed that, particularly in modern westernized culture and daily life, fashion has become an overwhelming phenomenon affecting many diverse practices. The production of newness is a key driving force of contemporary society, as expressed clearly in the media, clothing production, cultural institutions and logics of economy. The ethnologist Orvar Löfgren has introduced the term “catwalk economy” to describe the invasion of the fashion industry and its catwalk performances into the corporate world and the business media (Löfgren 2005). I will argue that the catwalk economy, the economy of the new, extends further into society when nations and museums seek an image associated with fashion. The meaning and consequence for these institutions will be analyzed and discussed, beginning with a short introduction to the concept of fashion, followed by the concepts of “fashion nation” and “fashion museology”, then turning to the selected case of Denmark, where the turn of the twenty-first century marked the explicit onset of the process of fashioning the nation and Designmuseum Danmark. This fashioning process will be revealed not as a shallow quick-fix, but as the bearer of deeper ramifications and potentials for the promotion of

cosmopolitan nationalism – one in which cultural heritage and national values are not reduced to defensive strongholds in the face of globalization, but as renewable resources that can be reinvented in interaction with global society.¹

Theorizing Fashion

Looking at fashion from the perspective of the catwalk economy emphasizes its role as a producer of newness for economic benefit. This relies on an understanding of fashion as a system for the provision of clothes. Referring primarily to fashion research in the second half of the twentieth century, sociologist Joanne Entwistle explains that “[f]ashion is understood as a historically and geographically specific system for the production and organization of dress, emerging over the course of the fourteenth century in the European courts, particularly the French court of Louis XIV, and developing with the rise of mercantile capitalism” (Entwistle 2000: 44). As such, the notion of fashion inherently depends on the momentum of systematic change and the production of a specific product – fashionable clothing or other kinds of bodywear – meaning that it is crafted and made at a certain time in history as a representation of the new, distinct from the conditions of the past and the future. In defining fashion through its system, it becomes a combination of a tangible object – a piece of clothing or other kind of material object with the purpose of body adornment – and a symbolic article producing belief in the newness of the tangible object. Fashion researchers have divergent explanations for the impetus fuelling this production of newness. Some attribute the cause to a battle of social status (e.g., Veblen [1899]1976; Simmel [1904]1998). Others say that changes in the fashion system reflect social and political changes (e.g., Lurie 1981; Barnard 1996). Even others are wary of suggesting causality and promote rather an understanding of the complexity of forces that lead to changes in fashion (e.g., Steele 1985; Wilson [1985]2003; Breward 1995, 2003).

To clarify the complex concept of fashion in order to enable its study, the sociologist Yuniya Kawamura has introduced the need for a clear analytical

distinction between clothing as tangible and fashion as intangible. Fashion is then treated as a system of institutions that produce fashion as a symbolic product (Kawamura 2005). Kawamura describes the distinction and relationship between fashion and clothing as follows: "People are wearing clothes, but they believe or wish to believe that it is fashion that they are wearing and that they are consuming fashion and not clothing. That belief is born out of the socially constructed idea of fashion which means a great deal more than mere clothing" (Kawamura 2005: 2). As such, fashion is an ideology, a myth in the vein of the cultural theory of Roland Barthes – that is, a system of communication (1964). In the study of the fashioning of museums and nations, Kawamura's point is useful in stressing the awareness of what conception of fashion is present – whether it is an ideology or a system for the provision of a specific kind of clothing. Yet limiting fashion to an exclusively symbolic product would prevent the particular understanding of museums and their practice of exhibiting fashion as tangible clothing objects. In other words, this paper relies upon an integrated understanding of fashion as a *complex* system: the provision of clothes involves not only the production of fashion as a symbolic object, but also the dimensions of cultural and economic politics, image building and place branding initiatives, global production networks within the fashion industry, etc.

"Fashion Nation" and "Fashion Museology"

In the contemporary context, linking fashion, museum and nation, fashion's influences on the image building of nations and museums and their interrelationships can be interpreted in two different ways, and I use the terms "fashion nation" and "fashion museology". They are different in their point of view, as one has the perspective of a national government and the other a museum; however, as will be further explained, there are also interrelationships between the two understandings.

The term fashion nation emphasizes the recent orientation of national governments towards the catwalk economy and its associated neoliberal values, which have not been eroded despite the trans-

formation from an economic boom at the beginning of the twenty-first century to the global financial crisis after 2008. Politicians have increasingly expanded their concerns to building an image in a global and competitive context. As the ethnologist Søren Christensen has pointed out, national identity and culture are increasingly seen as competitive components for economic development and benefit (Christensen 2006: 81–82). Fashion's power of imagery, when staged in spectacular catwalk shows and fashion magazine editorials, is harnessed to produce the visual, eye-catching image that projects the nation into contemporary relevance. Fashion's imagery, dynamic nature, and illumination of newness can make sense of place in governmental initiatives for place branding. The belief in fashion is expected, at least by the media, to create receptiveness to a modern vision of a given country, and thereby to stimulate people's desire for the country as if it were a consumer product. A country may become a tourist destination known for good shopping and a trendy atmosphere, as well as a destination for business investment; the country projects itself as a "cool" place where "smart" employees would want to live and work. When a government turns its country's imagery into a fashion nation, the country is commoditized as a symbolic product in the catwalk economy.

Fashion museology, on the other hand, emphasizes the focus of museums – whether of art, design, or cultural history – on fashion and the declaration of new museum ideologies. Fashion museology describes the shifts in museum practices when museums engage with fashion as a system for the production of newness, a subject for display, as well as an object – fashionable clothes – for collection. Museums engaged with fashion are often explicitly oriented to the front stage and the public; the museum's mission centres on communicating with and engaging people in an experience of their cultural heritage. Therefore, the practice of fashion museology can present the museum as a dynamic institution involved in mainstream societal interests, forming a more open, welcoming, and inclusive impression of the museum as a research-based, cultural establishment. From the museum's point of view, the interest

in fashion extends the museum network to include corporate companies and the media, and thereby makes it part of the fashion system, as a system of the provision of clothes; furthermore, the museum's involvement in fashion legitimizes the latter as a factor within the accepted sphere of important cultural heritage. In some museums with a tradition of collecting dress, fashion museology can be seen as a development of the once prevailing dress museology in connection with the institutional dress collection, which is often given the new designation of the fashion collection to mark the transformation from one practice to the next. Thus, fashion museology is concerned not only with the methods of handling dress in a museum context, but more importantly with the purpose of the museum, its relevance to people and society, its appeal to atypical museumgoers, and its future economic viability at a time when most governments are reducing budgets for cultural institutions, if they ever existed (Melchior 2011b). Some aspects of fashion museology might recall the basic aims of the "new museology" declared by museum scholars since the late 1970s (e.g., Vergo 1989), stressing the museum's need for more public inclusion based on self-reflective practices that rarely characterized the previous era's more elitist institutions. Both museological practices share the aim of bringing a new and more diverse audience to the museum, but the critical difference is that fashion museology does so on market terms, not idealistic terms. For the very same reason, fashion museology rarely projects a critical approach to the display of fashion. As in the relationship between fashion and nation, museums assimilate fashion to reflect contemporary cultural heritage and to become more popular, modern and commercially minded.

The link between fashion nation and fashion museology is often the local fashion industry and its competitive manoeuvres in a global supply chain and market. The nation's image building through fashion is mutually beneficial to government and trade, since operating in a global market requires visibility, and local fashion industries tend to support the enhanced projection provided by the imagery of the fashion nation. Local fashion industries

have an equal interest in being accepted and included by museums, giving status to fashion as it is legitimized as important cultural heritage to be collected, researched and displayed for public interest. As such, local fashion industries can be seen as pushing the agenda of fashion towards governments and museums, as well as orienting themselves to a joint vision with governments and museums. The case of fashioning Denmark and Designmuseum Danmark will illustrate how deeply intertwined the fashion nation is with fashion museology and the Danish fashion industry.

Fashioning Denmark and Designmuseum Danmark

Denmark is an instructive example in the exploration and understanding of contemporary links between fashion, nation and museum, although fifty years ago any evidence of these currents would have been implausible. Historically, Denmark has neither been associated with fashion, nor has it perceived itself as such. Danish newspapers, fashion and women's magazines and trade journals from the 1950s make it clear that the dominant understanding placed Denmark's fashion consumers and industry at the receiving end of new fashions brought in from abroad (Melchior 2012). Danish fashion did not produce new styles but rather adopted them based on their international value. This understanding of fashion was founded in a monocentric fashion system in which, from a Danish perspective, new styles in fashion were developed in a few international centres such as Paris and London and then disseminated to the fashion world's periphery.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the perception of fashion in the Danish context has changed. This change is attributed to the profound transformation since the 1960s of the global fashion industry from monocentric to polycentric (Davis 1992: 201). Some fashion scholars describe this change as "democratization" (e.g., Breward 2003; English 2007), since fashion morphed from the privileged domain of artistic creators into an exciting, modern phenomenon of mass production. As a result, Denmark no longer saw itself at the receiving end of fashion.

In the eyes of the local fashion industry and consumers, fashion could develop in Denmark as something new entering the industry through the efforts of young fashion designers working independently, selling their designs to manufacturing companies or working as an employee for a production company. By the end of the twentieth century, the local fashion industry had survived the shift from local production to outsourcing of clothing manufacture, allowing the remaining industry in Denmark to develop into concept houses and epicentres for fashion design, logistics, marketing and sales. The transformation strengthened the industry in terms of export profit, enabling the industry's trade organization to promote its success and importance for the country's economy. Despite the complexity of the figures, the Danish fashion industry claims that the sum of the export profit of Danish wholesale companies of clothing, textiles and leather goods make it the fourth largest export industry among the manufacturing industries in Denmark.² Even so, the Danish fashion industry is not a large industry sector. Statistics from 2008 and 2009 describe the Danish fashion industry in terms of about 620 companies registered as "wholesalers of clothing", employing 11,000 people in Denmark. The industry is financially dominated by three companies (Bestseller A/S, BTX Group A/S and IC Companys) that deliver about 75 percent of the total export profit. In 2009 the industry had an annual turnover of 21.2 billion DKK.

The Danish government has not ignored these developments within the fashion industry. Since 2003, it has considered the fashion industry a paragon of industrial innovation, given its commendable transition from a production-based industry to a knowledge- and design-based industry while simultaneously increasing export profit (the negative side of the story, including job losses and company closures, is rarely mentioned when highlighting the industry's success). Most significantly, this belief in the industry led the Danish government, at the time liberal-conservative (from the election in 2001 to the election in 2011), to launch a dedicated fashion policy in 2005, declaring the potential of the Danish fashion industry to make Denmark/Copenhagen the fifth

global fashion centre, after Paris, Milan, London, and New York (FORA 2005). This move gave shape to the fashion nation: the government, in conjunction with a selection of the fashion industry's companies, supported the establishment of the Danish Fashion Institute, a network organization, to coordinate and strengthen the industry and promote the appreciation of Danish fashion. In other words, the government continued to promote the fashion industry, including the notion of Danish fashion, as a national asset in the public discourse. Fashion as such was translated into Danish, recast as a Danish forte to reinforce the nation's pride (Melchior, Skov & Csaba 2011). Along the way, however, the fashion nation has been challenged by the Danish fashion industry's uncertainty in the national characteristics of its products – in other words, by the uncertainty about the Danishness of Danish fashion. From the perspective of the fashion industry, the mobilization of the nation for fashion (instigated by the government's fashioning of the nation) has been a particular challenge for fashion designers.

Yet the fashioning process of the nation materialized a very different kind of Danishness than what could be expected, one that hardly resembled a national uniform as often popularized by nationalist movements. By way of example, a different kind of nationalism was illustrated at the *World's Greatest Catwalk*, a public event in August 2010 that concluded Copenhagen Fashion Week presenting spring-summer 2011 collections. With government funding and political support, Danish fashion design was displayed through catwalk technology, presenting the new at an unprecedented scale: the 1.6 kilometre pink catwalk broke the world record, and the 200 models nearly did as well. Running through the city centre of Copenhagen and accessible for public view, the catwalk was opened by the Minister of Business and Economic Affairs, who praised the success of the Danish fashion industry. At his side was Helena Christensen, the event's Danish-born patron of 1990s international supermodel fame, whose statement that Danish fashion is democratic fashion was punctuated by pink balloons released into the sky from the main stage in the Town Hall Square. Though de-



Ill. 1: Fashion model and sailor on the pink catwalk at the fashion event The World's Greatest Catwalk. Not a particular Danish look but rather a romantic glance at the internationally popular 1950s lady-like way of dressing. (Photo: Marie Riegels Melchior, 2010)

mocracy is highly valued by Danes and perceived as essential to their collective “we” and self-perception, it had little to do with what was seen on the long catwalk and how the models appeared. Rather, they related to the avant-garde, either in terms of street credibility or high-end fashion design, both images limited to a select few rather than the entire public, as would be expected of something called “demo-

cratic fashion”. Fashion was presented as something much more internationally relevant and, as such, a cosmopolitan phenomenon. The fashioned nation did not project itself based on an insular nationalistic identity, but a globally-connected cosmopolitan nationalism, seeking to keep its roots and stretching its wings at the same time, to use the metaphor offered by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck in his



Ill. 2: In the autumn of 2011 Designmuseum Danmark celebrated the Danish-born fashion designer Peter Jensen's tenth anniversary by showing the exhibition *Peter Jensen's musér*. The exhibition display is part of the museum's decision to focus on fashion in order to draw new attention to the museum. (Photo: Marie Riegels Melchior, 2011)

writings on cosmopolitan society (Beck 2002). In this respect, the fashion nation evinces a much more positive aspect of national identity, open to heterogeneous presentations, most notably ones without recourse to xenophobia or fear of the other, but with the potential to stimulate reflective knowledge of the nation's past and present intertwined with a consciousness of the surrounding world.

In Denmark's fashioning process, fashion museology would simultaneously prove to be an important issue. As an essential part of the organization's foun-

dational manifesto, the Danish Fashion Institute called for the establishment of a fashion museum, mirroring the developments in Antwerp. In 2002, the Belgian city opened its specialized fashion museum, MoMu, to support the young avant-garde Belgian fashion-design scene and to contribute to Antwerp's rejuvenation as a hip, cool city embracing design, innovation and creativity (Debo & Bruloot 2007). At the time, the Designmuseum Danmark also saw a potential in fashion and invited the initiative to take root in existing museums, thereby moderniz-

ing those establishments. Since then, the museum has deepened its engagement with fashion, initiating topical research and staging exhibitions and other public events. In 2009 the museum even declared in its publicly announced future strategy to work for the establishment of a specialized fashion museum within the main museum (Kunstindustrimuseet 2009). In 2010, *Walk on the Wild Side: Margit Brandt Design 1965–1980* was the first fashion exhibition to be developed, researched and curated by the museum, displaying the design history of one of the relatively young (i.e., post-1960) Danish fashion history's earliest and most influential fashion designers. In 2011 the museum opened the special exhibition, *Peter Jensens musser*, highlighting the tenth anniversary of the London-based Danish fashion designer's career. In the same year the museum introduced evening events, called *Fashion Salon*, in which invited speakers and museum visitors debated fashion topics. Finally, the museum initiated a research project on the theme of fashion in museums and development strategies for the museum's future fashion concept.

As a researcher employed by the museum within this project, I have been highly involved in the development of the museum's current fashion initiative. It is clear that, for the museum, fashion brings optimism and credence to the aims of stimulating development, thinking from the outside-in rather than from inside the museum and out, and engaging larger audiences in the Danish cultural heritage and sense of belonging. With its fashion focus, the museum marks its interest not only in preserving fashion's cultural heritage but also in actively developing the heritage of fashion and Danish fashion in particular. The museum is ambitious to play a bigger part in the fashion industry than has historically been the case, particularly as an inspirational source for fashion designers as well as a cultural institution making a significant contribution to Denmark-based fashion research, a young academic discipline in the country. Whether the museum will succeed in its intentions, and whether the museum will succeed in gaining funds for its fashion developments, only time will tell.

Discussion

In critical terms, the celebration of fashion and the catwalk economy (both in times of economic growth and financial crisis) currently taking place in image building nations and museums could be described as a celebration of the surface, of values associated with the superficial, as a celebration of style and luxury. In pursuit of a further understanding, it is relevant to consider what substance this brings to the institutions in question.

In the Belgian city of Antwerp, for centuries known as a trading hub, the focus on fashion and tangible clothing objects was introduced in the 1990s; one of the clear results was the establishment of the fashion museum in 2002, in response to the Belgian textile industry's challenges to keep local production economically viable during the 1980s. Fashion became a destination marker. Local avant-garde fashion designers were celebrated as stars of the city; the ultimate example is the Antwerp Six, a group of young fashion designers educated at the local fashion design school and recognized by the international fashion press for their creative skills at London Fashion Week in the late 1980s.³ A visit to Antwerp in the early twenty-first century includes a guided tour of concept stores of the city's internationally renowned fashion designers as well as a trip to the city's specialized fashion museum, MoMu, primarily displaying the work of local fashion designers along with occasional thematic exhibitions expanding beyond the output of Antwerp or Belgium (Debo & Bruloot 2007). MoMu plays a part in making Antwerp desirable, modern, and most importantly unique. Fashion grants a positive atmosphere to the museum and to the experience of the city through the lens of local fashion design. However, there is a problematic lack of ambition to make the museum a much more critical forum for the understanding of fashion. Fashion museology does not promote strong reflexivity in exhibitions, but asks more directly for visibility and media attention. The challenge is to build and maintain the position and legitimacy of the museum as a knowledge-based institution when it assumes a fashion focus. The same could equally be said of the fashion nation.

It is tempting to jump to the conclusion that fashioning the nation or the museum constitutes a neo-liberal quick-fix. It promotes commercial potential; as the fashion researcher Barbara Vinken has stated in critical terms:

(...) glittering and blinding, fashion draws attention away from the substance of things. It is the very personification of the individual alienated in the rush of consumption, of the self-lost in the brilliant world of commodities. Irrational, capricious, fickle, unpredictable, fashion makes its entrance every season anew, with all the power of seduction of a moody sovereign certain of conquering. (Vinken 2005: 3)

However, as demonstrated by Copenhagen's *World's Greatest Catwalk* event, fashion does have another valuable meaning. When linked to the nation and the museum, fashion can tell stories of internationalism and of the negotiation of global and local implied in the fashion system, as a system of the provision of clothes, today a global enterprise. It makes little sense to nationalize fashion at a time when fashion is transcending national borders (a process, furthermore, that is not unprecedented in fashion history). Fashion must be seen instead as a renewable resource, one that can be reinvented in interaction with global society. At times, its projected image of local sartorial traditions is merely an intermediary step on the way to another new comprised of a heterogeneous palette of historically and geographically diverse styles.

Concluding Remarks: Vanity Fair?

As indicated by the title of this paper I ask: does the current fashioning of nations and museums imply the vanity of these institutions? In this conclusion, I wish to answer with a qualified yes and no. Yes, as fashion is often associated with vanity, and the danger rests in allowing it to remain only at that point. At the same time no, as explained throughout the preceding analysis, the fashioning of museums and nations holds potential beyond the gloss and stylish surface. It can lead these institutions out of insular

understandings and approaches, towards a dynamic and flexible model embracing the new and the different in innovative ways. That is, it draws the institution to what lies beyond itself – it stimulates curiosity about the new.

As previously described, fashion has become a strong force in contemporary society. It influences the performance and projecting of the nation and the development of museums as cultural institutions. By going below the surface of this phenomenon, our understanding reveals some negative consequences among very positive potentials. Fashioning the nation and the museum gives the nation a cosmopolitan-nationalist image and drives museums forward with an eye to the public and a realistic engagement with wider audiences. Fashion, which at first glance signifies the exclusive, high-end, elitist and divisive, demonstrates upon deeper analysis a more complex and welcoming nature that brings inclusion and tolerance to the fore. The fashion nation is not limited by national borders in terms of cultural inspiration and image making; in fact, it is fully expected to interact with the world around. Fashion museology opens the museum towards a broader audience that does not normally visit museums, an audience encouraged by the focus and display of the popular and everyday phenomenon of fashion to find the museum a relevant and worthwhile place to spend their time. This potential must seem worthwhile to develop.

Notes

- 1 The article is based on research in connection with my Ph.D. thesis on Danish fashion, its history, design and identity in the latter part of the twentieth century until the present (Melchior 2012), and my current postdoctoral research project at Designmuseum Danmark on the history and contemporary practices of fashion in museums.
- 2 Based on 2003 numbers, the fashion industry's export profit (e.g. the export of clothing, textile, and leather goods) was 30 billion DKK, making it the fourth largest manufacturing export industry next to the medical industry as the third largest (export profit of 32.1 billion DKK), the agricultural industry as the second largest (export profit of 67.9 billion DKK) and the electronic and machine industry as the largest (export profit 92.1

billion DKK) (FORA 2005: 14).

- 3 The Antwerp Six consist of the following Belgian fashion designers: Dries Van Noten, Walter van Beirendonck, Ann Demeulemeester, Dirk van Saene, Dirk Bikkembergh and Marina Yee.

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Marie Riegels Melchior is a research fellow at Designmuseum Danmark in Copenhagen. In her recent research she focuses on the museological inquiry of fashion in museums. Based on her Ph.D. dissertation she will publish a monograph on Danish fashion: *Dansk på mode! Fortællinger om design, historie og identitet i og omkring dansk modeindustri* (Museum Tusculanum Press, in press).

(mrm@designmuseum.dk)