

Fashion Archives  
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April 15, 2020

Summary by Zhanique Waite

Many fashion houses, both big and small, keep archives of past pieces. The concept of a fashion archive is recent, beginning in the 1980s when fashion brands began to develop them, yet the number of archives has increased in only the last five to ten years. With the rising interest in growing these private collections comes the need for people to maintain and preserve them. These people are fashion archivists. Sarah Byrd is a freelance fashion archivist, teacher, and historian. It was through her education in theatrical costuming that she developed an interest in how clothing can tell stories. Working as an archivist has allowed her to learn the stories of various brands and how to preserve them.

On the surface, it seems that fashion archives are merely collections of clothing. However, from an archivist's perspective they are collections of memories. An archivist's job is to keep those memories alive by preserving the objects in a collection. Similar to a costume conservator, an archivist must know the proper way to store clothing, what storage solutions are appropriate, and have a knowledge of fashion history. Museums and archives essentially share the same goal: to preserve and protect objects in order to keep them for as long as possible. In fact, an archive can be considered a brand museum. It is a display of objects which are defined not by their price tag but by their value as an object of study. Not all archives are managed by clothing brands. Archivists also work with individual private collections. Many archives do not have proper organization systems, either because the objects are constantly used or are packed away in bins and left untouched. An archivist will work with a client to develop a system of organization to best fit the needs of the garments. Digital work is another aspect of an archivist's job, especially since more archives are looking to develop online databases for their objects. Digitizing a collection is an exercise in cleaning up the language many archives use to refer to garments. A knowledge of fashion history and fashion from non-Western cultures is helpful for an archivist when categorizing and referencing items. Digitizing in a team is helpful not only because tasks can be divided, but because everyone working on the project can share the knowledge they possess.

There is a financial issue when it comes to maintaining large fashion archives. Is it worth the expense it to maintain something without much monetary gain? A fashion archivist seeks to answer this question, and ultimately that answer is "yes." There are a few reasons why an archive is useful for a fashion house. First, an archive contains the story of the brand. Keeping a collection of garments from a brand's inception to its most recent work shows the evolution of the brand. Each piece carries memories associated with specific time periods in that brand's history. An archive is also a reference tool. For times when trends are recycled, brands can search their archives to see what they were producing at the resurgent time period. They can choose to create new pieces based on what is in the archive or reissue pieces with modern updates. Other uses of pieces from an archive include being part of museum exhibitions, as reference for costume in movies and television, and as an aid during legal disputes.

Fashion archivists, and by extension the archives they work to maintain and show the worth of, are important because they preserve the stories and memories associated with objects. Their work not only preserves the past, it connects the past to the present and future.