

THE WARDROBE AS COLLECTION

A RESPONSE FOR PROSPERITY FASHION

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Abstract

The Italian fashion journalist, Anna Piaggi (1931-2012) offered a potential response for prosperity fashion through her singular approach to self-fashioning. Her wardrobe collection, containing approximately 3,000 garments and accessories, contained museum-quality objects which could be likened to the holdings of major museum collections such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Victoria. Consequently, through my PhD thesis, I have argued that the wardrobe collection can be likened to the museum collection. The positioning of the wardrobe as collection then offers opportunity for intersections with broader ideas around slow fashion (Fletcher, 2010). For Fletcher, slow fashion need not solely be the slow manufacture of garments in an artisanal process but can incorporate broader ideas. This research proposes that Anna Piaggi offers a revised consideration of what the slow fashion wardrobe can be and that the wardrobe can become a slowly assembled collection, on par with or likened to a museum collection, that is continuously reinterpreted.

Keywords: *Wardrobe, Collection, Rapid Curation*

INTRODUCTION

The Italian fashion journalist, Anna Piaggi (1931-2012) offered a potential response for prosperity fashion through her singular approach to self-fashioning and collecting. Her wardrobe collection, containing approximately 3,000 garments and accessories, contained fine art museum-quality objects which could be likened to the holdings of major museum collections such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Victoria. Consequently, through my PhD thesis, I have argued that the wardrobe collection can be likened to the museum collection and that the rearrangement of it on the body can be likened to continued object interpretation and display as

practiced in exhibition curating. Whilst it is not necessarily realistic for personal collections of fashion to contain as many items, the positioning of the wardrobe as collection offers opportunity for intersections with broader ideas around slow fashion (Fletcher, 2010). For Fletcher, slow fashion need not solely be the slow manufacture of garments in an artisanal process but can incorporate broader methods and ideas. This paper proposes that Anna Piaggi offers a revised consideration of what the slow fashion wardrobe can be and that the wardrobe can become a slowly assembled collection, on par with or likened to a museum collection, that is gradually and judiciously collected over an extended period and continuously reinterpreted. This paper will discuss what a

collection is, how it intersects with the wardrobe, and how the wardrobe can be interpreted as a collection to then be continuously reinterpreted on the body. This practice of collecting and display is also modeled by museums, as they assemble permanent collections which are consistently reinterpreted through temporary exhibitions or permanent collection changeovers over the long lifespan of a collection. Within that time, preventative measures are taken to extend the life of the object, and conservation is undergone, if required. The same approaches can also be applied to the wardrobe collection. This paper uses a methodology that combines my own personal experience as a curator for over 20 years, along with material object analysis supported by art and fashion history, image and object analysis and study of Anna Piaggi through journalistic articles and interviews (Mida & Kim, 2015; Palmer, 2013; Steele, 1998; Taylor, 2013).

WARDROBE AS COLLECTION

Typically, collections, regardless of the subject matter, are slowly and thoughtfully assembled over an extended period time (Carl, 2024). For the museum, this is often over generations, for the individual, it is more likely over a lifetime. The verb to collect derives from the Latin word *colligere*, which denotes to select, gather and assemble. However, rather than just to gather, what distinguishes a collection from mere accumulation is specificity, discernment and connoisseurship. Connoisseurship refers to a person with expert knowledge able to distinguish original work from forgeries (Preziosi, 1998). Discernment is practiced as collectors make selections based on accumulated knowledge gained through constant research on the subject area and context (Preziosi, 1998). The collection is also often defined by parameters of interest and defining conventions, often to do with a particular type of object, or an overriding ideology. The fine art museum collects representative fine art from across centuries. Modes of selection and criteria are based on a high art context, and from this context terms such as encyclopaedic, museum-like and museum quality recur which reflect various criteria of selection curators apply often around aesthetics, placement in cultural context and condition (Druesedow, 1987). Conversely, the private collector collects to their specific taste (Carl, 2024). Time is invested in sourcing and securing prized objects that meet

the collector's specific ambitions defined by their specific and refined interests. For example, Anna Piaggi travelled to far off locations to seek fine art museum quality vintage garments by designers such as Charles Frederick Worth or Jeanne Lanvin (Clark, 2006) and other lesser known collectors such as Neil Taylor, paid for early 1980s Vivienne Westwood Hypnos and Witches collection items in slow installments as "Taylor diligently purchased each piece, week after week, on lay-by from Elle Boutique in Perth" (Di Trocchio, 2004, para. 8). Over several years Taylor acquired a remarkable collection whilst he worked as a hairdresser and wore his treasured items to nightclubs. Consequently, collecting is defined as "the selecting, gathering and keeping of objects of subjective value" (Muensterberger, 2014, p. 4). The value of the collection is defined by the collector's subjective tastes and what they value. This application of value means that time is invested in the locating, sourcing and acquiring, which then leads to a prolonged relationship with the object. This subjectivity also points to a particular ideological taste, individually developed and tailored. For the museum, this points to a set of objectives of what they represent. For the individual, this is a personally tailored output of their view.

This paper proposes a shift in attitude towards the wardrobe, from one of reactivity in response to fashions, trends and events, to one where the wardrobe is framed as a collection that is accumulated slowly through deep consideration, meaning and attachment, using the framework of a collection to do so. The collection becomes more permanent than transitory and slow considered accumulation can lead to greater attachment to clothing. Benjamin (1969) argues that possession is the deepest relationship one can have with things. The collector is a utopian figure who frees objects from having to be useful, to instead imbue them with history and accumulative meaning (Benjamin, 1969). This aspiration to a deep connection to objects built over time can in turn resolve feelings of anxiety for consumers who feel guilt and shame around excessive and ill-considered purchasing (Petersson McIntyre, 2021) but also relies on a grounding of knowledge around fashion objects and a collector's mindset informed by what items culturally mean and how they relate to the collector and the greater collection. This method suggests a thorough engagement with the objects, where the collection is framed as representative of the

individual, but it also defines one's relationship within society, and position within it and other individuals (Baudrillard, 1994). This approach has intersections with wardrobe studies, a methodological approach that focuses on the use, life cycles and connections between items in a wardrobe, analysing the way clothes relate to each other on the whole or in parts of the wardrobe (Klepp & Bjerck, 2014). But this suggested approach is more specifically aligned with material culture studies in that material culture consists of studying objects and the meaning they hold for people (Gerritsen & Riello, 2015) in the way they are made, used, reused and the meaning they hold within culture. More than the use by the individual as in wardrobe studies, material culture considers the significance of the broader culture and how that then relates to the individual. For Anna Piaggi, she referred to her clothing as friends, as they were all things with many lives (Blanchard, 2005). Her wardrobe items were astutely selected objects that had a broader significance within culture. She selected representative pieces by Zandra Rhodes, Manolo Blahnik and Missoni (Piaggi & Lagerfeld, 1986) to name just a few. In her view, her fashion objects had already lived and would continue to live as long as she continued to wear them (Blanchard, 2005). Han Byung-chul (2022), metaphorically uses the figure of the collector as one who removes things from their commodity character and elevates them to the status of staples of the human world. He reflects on contemporary society's elevation of experience over objects, lamenting the loss of objects and the relationship they have to self, acknowledging that 'Products are charged with emotion by way of storytelling' (Byung-chul, 2022, p. 13). Objects in turn acquire histories over the course of being used over a long time, giving them soul (Byung-chul, 2022) and echoing Anna Piaggi's sentiments that objects can be imbued with many lives through their uses. The reading of a garment as material culture object is also adopted within museums and galleries (Anderson, 2000, p. 375). Within fine art museums, garments are considered for their aesthetic qualities, representative of the designers who made them, how they were used and what they meant within society. Within the model of wardrobe as collection, objects are selected for their aesthetic values, cultural meaning and for the way in which they reflect the greater collection, its narrative and parameters, assembled as a collection to be repeatedly reinterpreted.

Some contemporary fashion commentary invites consumers to rethink their wardrobe in terms of capsule curated wardrobes with a focus on quality and longevity over quantity and trends (Xidias, 2023). This commentary suggests a shift in value to endurance as opposed to instant novelty. Yet, this often leads to an understated selection of items in black, beige, grey and white (Waterhouse & Lai, 2024) that are not distinctive and may not be individually representative. Instead, the collector typically selects items which are distinctive, significant and individual. The art magazine, *See all this*, dedicated its summer 2024 issue to the wardrobe as art collection (Edelkoort, 2004), proposing the wardrobe as a collection. Five collectors were featured, including a couture client, a design curator, a gallerist, a sculptor and an investor. Whilst the couture collector is an unrealistic aspiration for most, the design curator and gallerist provide a more achievable template for the wardrobe as collection, as each amassed idiosyncratic clothes over an extended period of time by designers each collector feels an affinity with (Edelkoort, 2004). Connection, affinity and uniqueness are recurring qualities within the wardrobe as collection which point to a unique attachment, that pleases and represents the collector. This idea of connection also echoes Benjamin's sentiments around possession as the greatest means of connection (Benjamin, 1969). Proposing the wardrobe as a collection addresses the invitation to question existing systems around consumption whilst proposing a novel solution. The mindset of the collector encapsulates an approach, an attitude, a shift in mindset from reactive consumption to slow collecting with the consideration of a personal connection representative of an overall grand collection narrative, often to do with representing the individual. Anna Piaggi provides a precedent for this approach to building a wardrobe as a collection, accumulating it over time, and reinterpreting it repeatedly. This approach provides a potential solution around attitudes of building future wardrobes. For example, Anna Piaggi accumulated her wardrobe of fashion historical and contemporary fashion objects of both high and low fashion from 1967 to her passing in 2012, selecting items for their aesthetic qualities from a variety of historic periods from the eighteenth century to the present day, regardless of overriding fashions or trends. She then coordinated and re-coordinated items on her body in diverse

combinations over her lifetime.

She also assembled her collection in a similar way to many major museums, sourcing objects from comparable sources. For example, she collected regional dress from markets, vintage stores and auctions through the late 1960s to early 1970s. She purchased iconic Ballet Russes costumes at auction alongside Gallery Director James Mollison who purchased a significant collection of Ballet Russes costume for the National Gallery of Australia (Bell, 2010). Anna Piaggi also acquired garments directly from designers, dealers and donors (Piaggi & Lagerfeld, 1986) as museums do today.

Along with Anna Piaggi, a selection of individuals also collected museum-like fashion collections to wear, demonstrating additional applications of this idea. For example, the interior designer Iris Apfel collected and wore vintage and contemporary fashion throughout her life (Horwell, 2024). Contemporary fashion icons, such as Kate Moss and Alexa Chung, are amassing significant fashion collections (Bakshi, 2023). Cate Blanchett owns important pieces of Armani with her use and reuse of them becoming increasingly common (Legardye, 2023). However, the practice is not limited to fashion insiders and celebrities. The increase worldwide of online and retail second-hand marketplaces for the purchase of high quality fashion objects, in combination with increased knowledge and interest in historic and contemporary fashion opens opportunities more broadly for the expansion of collecting wardrobes as collections.

COLLECTION ON THE BODY

Collecting is an infinite pursuit, with the collection never realised (Baudrillard, 1994). This circumstance ensures the economic continuation of the fashion consumption, albeit at a slower more considered pace. In addition, the possession of a collection enables the collector to arrange and reorder their intimate personal microcosm (Baudrillard, 1994). The collection enables the collector to reorder objects to themes and representative ideas. Taking objects out of their original contexts can create new trajectories and displace orders of time (Baudrillard, 1994; Crimp, 1993). The act of possessing a collection invites the freedom to re-narrate the story, context, origins and interpretation of objects, through first selecting and then rearranging. Collectors can create new orders by collecting objects and then displaying them,

not just once, but many times over. This repeated interpretation and display adds to the multiplicity of meanings of an object (Ventzislavov, 2014).

Translated to the wardrobe, garments can be continuously collected serving the purpose of transforming an existing collection through regular rearrangement on the body. Edelkoort reflects on how “one new item can ignite a wardrobe and give new life to oldish garments, as one new artist’s drawings can change an entire room” (Edelkoort, 2004, p. 70). Likewise, within the fashion collection, the addition of a new item, can reinterpret an ensemble. In the example of Anna Piaggi, an alternative hat can change the context and narrative of her ensemble. For example, in 1998 to the book launch of *Anna Piaggi’s fashion algebra: DP in Vogue*, she wore a dress mimicking a book by Jean Charles de Castelbajac with a cape made of printed paper, and a hat by Stephen Jones imitating a folded newspaper boat hat with an Italian flag hovering above it. Using an interpretative methodology derived from fashion curatorial practice, object interpretation combining material culture research, dress and art history and image and interview analysis (Mida & Kim, 2015; Palmer, 2013; Steele, 1998), I interpreted the change in the meaning of the ensemble like so. The folded paper hat celebrated the quality of paper that was being highlighted at the book launch and the Italian flag celebrated her culture. In 2003, she wore the dress again with a different hat. The paper hat was exchanged for the more sophisticated miniature top hat also by Stephen Jones, which was becoming her signature accessory. By 2003, she was more closely honouring her affiliation with London, through the top hat prototype, made miniature to add whimsy and playfulness. The new hat was overprinted with black and white text as if from a newspaper, celebrating the paper-like qualities of the dress, however, the message was one of increasing sophistication and British allegiance. The exchange of headpieces expanded the object biography (Kopytoff, 1986) of each piece in her ensemble. Within the wardrobe, objects can build layered, textured, narratives through repeated use, varied association and layered and accumulated personal stories.

Claire Wilcox commented in 2001, ‘The history of museums is as much made up of its exhibitions as by the sum of its permanent collections. These events mark moments in time and changes in attitude, for curators collect ideas as

well as objects' (Claire Wilcox in Taylor, 2004, p.2). Thus, the presentation of objects within exhibition is as important as the collection contained and collected by the museum. As discrete moments in time, with a clear opening date and closing date, exhibitions mark changes in contemporary attitudes through objects (Claire Wilcox in Taylor, 2004, p.2). Ultimately, the exhibition is about object analysis and interpretation primarily with the use of other objects. Converted to the context of the wardrobe, the ensemble that is created with the reordering of the collection becomes a mark of a time as well. It is reinterpreted and made new through the combinations and readings made with other objects in combination.

Anna Piaggi's practice also addresses the notion of whether fashion needs only be concerned exclusively with the "new" (Clark, 2008, p. 429), providing an example where newness can be achieved through arrangement and thus provides a model for prosperity fashion, where fashion can be rethought in terms of collection, arrangement and reinterpretation over a lifetime, rather than as transient and disposable. Such practice operates outside the dominant fashion system, which is based on the modern concept of novelty and change (Kant, 1974; Svendsen & Irons, 2006) and dictated from above (Simmel, 1904).

In order to maintain the collection, care must be exercised. Such care includes the careful storage of items and appropriate care around cleaning. Tears and abrasions can be mended, with layers of history and historical use built into garments. This calls to mind the aesthetic of Maison Martin Margiela which celebrates the past use of fashion items (Debo, 2008).

CONCLUSION

Anna Piaggi has been described as a work in progress (Blanchard, 2005), pointing to the fact that Anna Piaggi is being forever made and being remade, using her fashion collection to continuously remake herself. This analogy or view, might suggest how we can all continuously aim to remake ourselves with our slowly built, considered and evolving wardrobe collections, that fundamentally represent our own tastes, informed by expertise, aesthetic judgement and intellect to do with materials, fibres and broader aesthetic and cultural ideas. The collection is slowly built and evolves with us. Through this, Anna Piaggi proposes a rethinking of the fashion wardrobe as a collection, not

as capsule collection of beige, but as a representative collection of the self, shaped and informed by cultural history and aesthetic objects. This model is aspirational. It presents a shift in attitude and imagines an alternative attitude to garments, where they are revered, considered and lovingly collected to be repeatedly rearranged on the body over a lifetime. As New York Times fashion writer and journalist Guy Trebay wrote, "the core function of most creative people in an information-glutted age is not innovation but rearrangement" (Trebay, 2004, p. 271). This new fashion model is based on collection and then rearrangement of the individually and affectionately acquired personal fashion wardrobe collection.

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