DATS

Dress and Textile Specialists

Conference programme 2023

Networks and interchange:
knowledge, skills and cultures across spaces

Quilted and embroidered jacket, made in Japan for the Western market, c.1898. Image courtesy of the Museum of London, 56.83/1

Schedule

Thursday 5 October

Ulster Museum Lecture Theatre

09:00 Arrivals

09:10 Welcome with Lisa Mason, DATS Chair

09:15 Keynote: Professor Catherine Harper, The British University in Egypt

The Stained and Bloodied Cloths of Ireland: a textiles and material culture view of Irish shame, oppression, morality and repression.

09:45-10:45 Ireland & networks

- *Another clean shirt…*
  Valerie Wilson, Curator of Textiles at Ulster Folk Museum (National Museums NI)
- *Design and Modernity in Ulster's Interwar Linen Industry*
  Catherine O'Hara, Lecturer in Design History, Belfast School of Art
- *Net works: Insights from the study and conservation of a set of lace curtains from The Argory, Co. Armagh*
  Erinn Dunlea and Clara Low, Textile Conservation Limited

10:45-11:15 Refreshment break

11:15-13:00 Migration & transfer

- *Chintz: British India Connections*
  Madhu Manipatruni, Artist
- *Finding new perspectives on Paisley Museum's shawl collection and the Paisley Pattern.*
  Catriona Baird, Textiles Curator, Paisley Museum, OneRen
- *The Flower, the Labour, and the Sea: Seeing through the intoxication of Parsi Garas*
  Bhasha Chakrabarti, Artist

Questions (& comfort break)

- *Masseys for the Masses: Harry Massey and a London Fashion Empire*
  Liz Tregenza, Lecturer in Cultural and Historical Studies at London College of Fashion
- *Tartan at V&A Dundee*
  Kirsty Hassard, Curator, Exhibitions, V&A Dundee

13:00-14:00 Lunch

& *Mending in Archives Working Group (MAWG)* discussion table with Kate Sekules, Bard Graduate Center, Pratt Institute, Parsons NYC

Schedule

14:00-15:30 Community & collaboration

- *Fragments of Our Time exhibition*
  Uthra Rajgopal, Independent Curator
- *The Play's The Thing exhibition*
  Robyn Greenwood, Collections Manager, Royal Shakespeare Company
- *Reworking Collections through Hats Made Me*
  Yona Lesger, Curator, Hat Industry & Headwear at the Culture Trust
- *The Making of Crown to Couture at Kensington Palace*
  Polly Putnam, Curator, Collections, Historic Royal Palaces
  Libby Thompson, Textile Conservation Supervisor of Costume, Historic Royal Palaces

15:30-16:00 Refreshment break

16:15-16:45 Keynote: Rachel Dedman
Embroidery and the Intifada: stitching resistance in Palestine

16:55 Close

Coppi restaurant
St Anne's Square, Belfast Cathedral Quarter

18:30-20:00 Conference dinner (pre-booking required, meal at own expense)

Friday 6 October

09:00-10:00 DATS Annual General Meeting, Ulster Museum & Zoom

Please arrive for 09:00 OR 10:00, as the museum is not open to the public before 10:00

10:00-11:00 Ulster Museum curator talks, on gallery with Charlotte McReynolds & colleagues

11:00-12:15 Transition to & visit Ulster Folk Museum (via walking & train*, at own expense)

Opportunity for quick refreshments at the museum cafe, or as takeaway.

12:15 Introduction to Ulster Folk Museum, with Valerie Wilson

12:30 Lunch / visiting Ulster Folk Museum - delegates are free to depart when ready

*Walking from Ulster Museum to Botanic Avenue Station, walking from Cultra station uphill to Ulster Folk Museum

Abstracts & biographies in schedule order

Keynote

The Stained and Bloodied Cloths of Ireland: a textiles and material culture view of Irish shame, oppression, morality and repression.

Professor Catherine Harper, The British University in Egypt

Ireland – North and South – has sustained significant change in the last 100 years, accelerating at the end of the twentieth century with legalisation of contraception, divorce, gay marriage, the end – or at least reduction – of the 'Troubles' in the North, and freedom to choose abortion and reproductive autonomy.

In parallel to this, many instances of societal and ecclesiastical abuse, sexual repression, superstition and cruelty, have come to light through a series of scandals including the use of unmarried mothers as unpaid labour in laundries throughout Ireland until the mid-1990s, the deaths of women in hidden childbirth and babies in mishandled miscarriages, the unhealthy entanglement of Church (Catholic and Protestant) and State (Northern and Southern), and the persistent racism seen in the infamous direct provision accommodation for asylum seekers in the so-called 'land of a thousand welcomes'.

This presentation tells the stories of cloth and clothing, textiles and materials that have been actually or symbolically stained by blood or other body fluids in Ireland's last 100 years – since partial independence from Britain. By focusing on the role of these in the range of events and experiences of shame, oppression, morality and repression that have been instrumental in forming Irish culture, it seeks to 'lance the boil' of Irish social history, celebrating the movement of the island of Ireland into post-Church, post-conflict, post-nostalgia modernity that, while a painful transition, is a vital part of a country coming to terms with its past and looking to its future.

Biography: Professor Catherine Harper has held senior academic leadership positions at large multi-faculty and specialist institutions. Educated to doctoral level in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, she is motivated by education for social transformation, cross-cultural understanding, justice and tolerance.

Professor of Textiles since 2011, Catherine was awarded the title of Chair Professor of Design and the Catherine Harper Textile Lab established at Woxsen University, India in 2022. She also sits on the Academic Advisory Board for Cindrebay School of Design. She has served as Editor-in-Chief of Taylor & Francis' TEXTILE: Cloth & Culture since 2004, and her most recent publications include an essay, Textiles from Cradle to Grave, for the Textile Reader of the 4th Hangzhou Triennial of Fiber Art, China (2023), and two essays (The Red Hand/s (Lámh Dhearg) of Ulster and other bloody Irish flags… and Bloody Textiles, Bloody Sunday, Bloody Ireland for the multi-volume Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of World Textiles (2024).

As a visual artist, Catherine Harper has exhibited in Europe, North America and Australasia, and her work is held in many private and public collections, most recently being acquired by the Seamus Heaney Home Place.

Ireland & networks

Another clean shirt…

Valerie Wilson, Curator of Textiles at Ulster Folk Museum (National Museums NI)

"The practical knowledge of needle-work, with its appendages of cutting out and repairing etc. must be regarded as very useful to all females, but particularly so to those of the humbler classes, whether applied to domestic purposes, or as a mode of procuring remunerative employment"

This statement, from an Irish National School sample book of the mid-1800s, outlines the objectives of an institution aiming to foster a network for needlework education in Ireland. The published curriculum was comprehensive, including garment construction, embroidery and mending. Pupils who received instruction from specially trained teachers left school well equipped with the skills to find work in textile industries throughout Ireland.

Related networks of agents and outworkers developed, from embroiderers working in their own homes to the large stitching factories providing employment for tens of thousands of women whose work, for over 100 years, kept local and global markets supplied with high quality linens and clothing.
This paper will examine the background to needlework education in Ireland and how this network intersected with the networks that underpinned embroidery and garment making industries in Ulster, based on needlework sample books, garments, photographs and archival material in collections at the Ulster Folk Museum.

Biography: Valerie Wilson is Curator of Textiles at Ulster Folk Museum (National Museums NI). She has curated exhibitions on dress and textiles, contributed to journals and lectured widely on Ulster's textile history. Her current research interests are focused on needlework skills, and the stitching industry in Ulster.

Design and Modernity in Ulster's Interwar Linen Industry

Dr Catherine O'Hara, Lecturer in Design History, Belfast School of Art

This paper examines the role and status of design in one of Ulster's best known linen firms: the Old Bleach Linen Company from Randalstown, Co. Antrim. Founded in 1864, the company registered their designs from the 1870s and considered design and designing integral to their success and, in a declining industry, their survival too. By the Interwar period they had developed new linen dress fabric and furnishing fabric ranges, featuring in modish and elite markets such as American and British Vogue. Their design origins and evolution grew from exceptional design education in London with an ambition to offer well designed modern linen. Using primary source material from several national and international archives and private collections, this paper considers and critiques how they achieved that.

Biography: Dr Catherine O'Hara is a lecturer in Design History & Post Graduate Tutor at the Belfast School of Art, Ulster University. Her research is based around the role and status of design, design education and design reform in Northern Ireland, with interests in the interwar period and the Ulster linen industry.

Net works: Insights from the study and conservation of a set of lace curtains from The Argory, Co. Armagh

Erinn Dunlea and Clara Low, Textile Conservation Limited

The Argory is an Irish gentry house built in the 1820s in Co. Armagh, Northern Ireland which is held by the National Trust. In its Drawing Room hang a set of eight highly decorative, off-white lace curtains believed to be a rare and significant survivor of what may once have been a typical feature of the homes of Ireland's landed gentry. Each measuring over four metres in length, the curtains have a complex layered structure of bobbinet and muslin embroidered with a network of chain stitch lines forming motifs of flowers and foliage, with supplementary knotted net.

Work to conserve the curtains for reinstatement in the property is being undertaken by Textile Conservation Limited, an independent studio in Bristol. The resources of the studio, which facilitates the conservation of large textiles, have allowed the curtains to be hung, draped and laid out in full for extended periods during conservation providing an ideal opportunity for close study and documentation. Technical examination points to a combination of machine and handmade elements inspired by various traditional lace-making practices in Ireland. These revelations about the manufacturing techniques and materials and later repairs complements contextual research undertaken at The Argory and will inform visitor interpretation and public engagement.

Biographies

Erinn Dunlea (she/her) is a graduate conservation intern at Textile Conservation Limited. She graduated from the MPhil Textile Conservation programme at the University of Glasgow in 2022, and holds a BA (Hons) Fine Art and Visual Culture from the National College of Art and Design, Dublin.

Clara Low (she/her) graduated with an MPhil in Textile Conservation from the University of Glasgow in 2019. Since qualifying, she has worked as a textile conservator at the V&A in London and at National Museums Scotland in Edinburgh, before joining the team at Textile Conservation Limited in August 2022

Images courtesy of The National Trust and Textile Conservation Ltd.

Notes:

Migration & transfer

Chintz: British India Connections

Madhu Manipatruni, Artist

My current research interest is in Chintz textiles, their arrival at British shores and their eventual decline during the Colonial Era. These printed and painted Indian cotton textiles became popular in early 17th century Britain and Europe. Often hand painted, dyed using natural dyes these cotton textiles (as seen in the image below) threatened local wool industry leading to a ban on Indian cottons - through series of Calico Acts. Through my research, I have been looking at the impact of these protectionist measures. A recent commission also lead me to explore Lancashire textile collections and early textile (Cotton) printing industry. Chintz is also known as Kalamkari in South India has faced a decline over the colonial era, unable to sustain against the cheap imports from the industrialised world. These Chintz textiles, remain a significant source of history and stories that connect British and Indian history across many centuries I would like to present, my findings and my work in response to the history and objects through recent work and commissions.

Biography: Madhu is Indian origin artist based in Peterborough. Her practice includes drawing, painting and textile works. As artist and a woman of Indian heritage, her work draws on traditions, materials and processes from her roots in India. She has been exploring hidden histories of Chintz textiles supported by a grant from Arts Council of England. She is one of the artists selected for the Lancashire textile Gallery commission, where she is exploring the influence of Indian subcontinent on fashion and textile production practices, found in Lancashire Textile Museums. She will be showing her work in British Textile Biennial 2023.

Notes:

Finding new perspectives on Paisley Museum's shawl collection and the Paisley Pattern.

Catriona Baird, Textiles Curator, Paisley Museum, OneRen

The history of shawl production in Europe during the late 1700s and 1800s is fascinating and complex, with scope for endless research approaches. At Paisley Museum we have been undertaking new research into our collections, which encompass around 1200 shawls, 100 pattern books and associated collections material. I will share some of the challenges and findings of this research.

We have been looking at how, when and why shawls came into the collection and researching key people and related events. This has highlighted some connections with shawl collections held in the other 19th century shawl producing towns in Britain.

The important discussions ongoing in the museum world and wider society about the decolonisation of collections, has encouraged focus on colonial aspects of the history of shawl production locally and the connections with the historic shawl trade in Kashmir and highlighted related objects and stories.

Working with communities of South Asian heritage living in the West of Scotland has provided valuable perspectives on the shawl industries and teardrop pattern historically and also in contemporary culture. This work has fed into the creation of new interpretation and displays for current museum audiences and suggested further interesting research directions.

Biography: Catriona Baird is Textiles Curator on the Paisley Museum Re-Imagined Project, which is currently redeveloping the museum as part of the cultural regeneration of the town. Her work on the project involves collections research, interpretation development and work with local communities, partners and contractors on the creation of new displays across the museum.

The Flower, the Labour, and the Sea: Seeing through the intoxication of Parsi Garas

Bhasha Chakrabarti, Artist

I will be presenting the research behind my latest body of paintings and collages which draw upon the complex and dark history behind the beguiling parsi gara and its entanglements with the wickedly orchestrated opium market in China. Although garas are associated with the Parsi community in India, the elaborate motifs on these rich and painstakingly embroidered sarees, of moths, dragons, fungus, boats, and cranes, are primarily Chinese. Early examples of garas were, in fact, made from re-purposing actual Chinese embroidered silks. These rare silks first arrived in India by way of Parsi merchants, working with the British government, who were looking to fill the opium crates on their journey back home after having dumped the drug in Canton. Textiles for their wives were the perfect fillers and a desperately addicted Chinese population traded these otherwise precious commodities away easily. Upon receiving these silks, Parsi women began commissioning local craftsmen in India to copy these embroidery patterns onto sarees as borders and pallus, resulting in the iconic parsi gara; valued till today as one of the finest forms of handiwork on the subcontinent. My works look at the ways in which these the alluring gara was dependent on intoxicating opium, and in drawing out the painful histories of exploitation which these commodities have bewitched us into overlooking.

Biography: Bhasha Chakrabarti is an artist based between Honolulu, New Delhi, and New Haven. She graduated with an MFA from the Yale School of Art in the Spring of 2022. The artist has exhibited in solo and group shows at Dhaka Art Summit (Bangladesh), Jeffery Deitch (Los Angeles), Hales (New York), Experimenter (Kolkata), and Museum of Art and Photography (Bangalore). Chakrabarti is the recipient of the 2023 South Asia Artist Prize (SAAI) awarded by University of California, Berkeley. She was a semi-finalist in the Smithsonian's 2022 Outwin-Boochever Portrait Competition and was awarded a Beinecke Research Fellowship in 2021 and the Fountainhead Residency in 2020.

Masseys for the Masses: Harry Massey and a London Fashion Empire

Liz Tregenza, Lecturer in Cultural and Historical Studies at London College of Fashion

In 1936 Harry Massey (1901-1972) was profiled by the American fashion journal Women's Wear Daily. The journal described him as fitting 'an American description of a high-powered go getter, [...] a sort of financial trust for numerous British dress manufacturing businesses, an organiser of companies and a dynamic salesman.'[1] This points to the significant role Massey played in the mid-twentieth century London ready-to-wear fashion industry. However, Massey's name has been forgotten from the trajectory of British fashion history. This paper will trace Massey's businesses from Whitechapel to Harringay and then on to Mayfair, exploring how he operated highly successful fashion brands across different sectors; from wholesale couture to mass-produced fashion.

Central to this paper is a consideration of the significance of an entwined network of Jewish immigrant entrepreneurs who helped to transform the British ready-to-wear industry. Massey, born Harry Masoff in Odessa (then an important city in the Russian empire), was a Jewish émigré who arrived in London as a child, rising quickly from extreme poverty to affluence. This paper will demonstrate not only Massey's personal skills, but the importance of familial relations and wider networks of Jewish makers, businessmen and promoters for helping to secure the success of his various business ventures.

Biography: Dr Liz Tregenza is a lecturer in Cultural and Historical Studies at London College of Fashion and runs her own vintage business. She previously worked extensively in museums. Her book, Wholesale Couture: London and Beyond, 1930-1970, was published in 2023.

[1] B.J. Perkins, 'U.S. Dress Houses in England are Found Becoming Anglicized', Women's Wear Daily, 15 April 1936, 1, 36.

Tartan at V&A Dundee

Kirsty Hassard, Curator, Exhibitions, V&A Dundee

Tartan, the first major exhibition in Scotland in 30 years to focus solely on the iconic textile and pattern, opened at V&A Dundee in April 2023. The exhibition presents a radical new look at a globally recognised design. Traditional and rebellious, adored, and derided, tartan is a pattern of endless contradiction. Tartan's grids have survived, revived, connected, and divided communities worldwide.

From a checked cloth woven in multiple colours in the Highlands, tartan's distinctive pattern can now be found upon every surface imaginable. No other textile pattern has been categorised to such a degree, with more than 11,000 known examples of tartan recorded worldwide proving its iconic grids continue to offer unlimited possibilities and inspiration.

Using Tartan as a case study, I propose to explore how the exhibition's curatorial discourse has included examples of networks and interchange through examining tartan's trajectory as a global textile, its symbolism as a textile of local and international identity, and its design evolution.

Biography: Kirsty Hassard is a curator in the exhibitions department at V&A Dundee, and co-curator of Tartan.She was previously assistant curator in the Furniture, Textiles and Fashion department at V&A South Kensington. She has published on women's work, and the relationship between fashion and print culture in the eighteenth century.

Lunchtime discussion table

Mending in Archives Working Group (MAWG)

Kate Sekules, Bard Graduate Center, Pratt Institute, Parsons NYC

Taking the notion of network and interchange literally, I would like to host a lunchtime discussion table for a structured and generative exchange of ideas around the theme of mending.

Following my talk at last year's conference, Collecting Damage: The Mend as Museum Object, questions arose and lively talk flowed around how to approach mended objects in collections. This was a dilemma many stakeholders had encountered, or, if they hadn't, one that they quickly perceived as a component of museum policy that is potentially vital for expanding cross cultural representation and interpretation, since it reaches liminal areas of textile production and maintenance, honouring centuries of ghost labour: in short, a silenced category of material voice.

When similar discussions arose at the British Museum's Mending and Making workshop in February, I established the Mending in Archives Working Group (MAWG), with a mission "to make mends in collections legible, searchable, and meaningful," and to generate standardized vocabularies for typologies of repair. Mending specific search terms are generally absent from records, partly owing to lack of representation in controlled lists in standard name authorities such as the Getty AAT. Let this DATS gathering of experts collaborate in creating the emergent taxonomy of mending!

Biography: Kate Sekules is completing her dissertation "A History and Theory of Mending" at Bard Graduate Center. She lectures on the history, contexts, and practice of textile repair, and is assistant professor of fashion history at Pratt Institute, and Parsons, NYC. Her book MEND! A Refashioning Manual and Manifesto is published by Penguin.

Notes:

Community & collaboration

Fragments of Our Time exhibition

Uthra Rajgopal, Independent Curator

Fragments of Our Time is a contemporary textile art exhibition featuring South Asian artists from the UK, USA, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. Curated by Uthra Rajgopal for the 2023 British Textile Biennial (BTB) and brought together for the first time, these artworks consider this year's BTB theme of sustainability in the context of the environment, economics, and society. The materials, techniques and concepts highlight themes of labour, networks, migration as well as our spiritual and emotional connections to textiles. From natural fibres and natural dyes to found objects, discarded clothing and debris, this exhibition presents an extraordinary display of woven, stitched, dyed, collaged, and felted artworks, ranging from the immersive to the delicate.

The Whitaker Museum and Art Gallery in Rossendale was originally built in the 19th century as the home to a former textile mill owner. It is set within the dramatic and historic landscape of Lancashire and has been specially chosen as the venue to host this exhibition. The artworks will be positioned as interventions in this museum which has a rich collection of industrial objects, fine art, problematic curiosities from around the world and zoological specimens. In doing so, we hope to generate unexpected connections and conversations.

Biography: Uthra Rajgopal is an Independent Curator with a specialist interest in South Asian contemporary art and textiles. She works with artists from the subcontinent and the Diaspora, exploring issues around home, identity, labour, migration, and displacement.

The Play's The Thing exhibition

Robyn Greenwood, Collections Manager, Royal Shakespeare Company

Throughout 2022, the Royal Shakespeare Company's Creative Placemaking and Public Programmes team worked closely with three community groups local to Stratford upon Avon to find new ways of curating and interpreting the permanent exhibition: The Play's The Thing. This paper explores the process of collaboration through co-curation, the challenges and successes, and the legacy of this inch wide, mile deep community engagement.

Our process used LUMA's Human Centred Design approach and met the National Standard for Community Engagement. Co-curators got to Look at previous exhibitions, understand the principles of curation and then make their own displays in the gallery. This ensured we interpreted our objects in a new way through participants lived experience and expertise. As such we learned new ways our material can speak to and interest our communities.

The project enabled key moments for advocacy and relationship strengthening between our organisation and local community, as well as unique opportunities for participants to access the RSC's Museum Collection. As we continue to find ways of opening up the Collection, we are excited to see where this work will lead us.

The 2023 Co-curating Collections project has been made possible by ArtFund support; the national fundraising charity for art.

Biography: Robyn Greenwood is the Collections Manager for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC). She is responsible for leading the care and curation of the RSC collection and ensuring the widest possible engagement with the RSC□s heritage. Robyn has over 13 years of collections management, care, access and curatorial experience. She has been an instrumental part of two costume heritage based National Lottery Heritage Projects at the RSC in the past decade. Robyn thrives on interpreting individual/social aspects of performing arts related materials at multiple levels and has curated digital content and in gallery exhibitions and experiences for the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, the University of Bristol Theatre Collection, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Association of Performing Arts Collections (APAC). She has also written pieces for various industry publications and international and national exhibition catalogues where RSC material is featured. Robyn has served on the APAC board for 4 years and is current Chair. Robyn holds an BA honours in English and French from Acadia University and a first-class honours MA in Histories and Interpretations of Art from the University of Bristol.

Reworking Collections through Hats Made Me

Yona Lesger, Curator, Hat Industry & Headwear at the Culture Trust

Luton was the historic heart of the British hat industry with the highest percentage of people employed. Due to the quality of Chilterns' straw and Luton's advantageous location, the industry thrived from the 18th century. With the decline in hat wearing from the 1960s, the industry deteriorated. This history is reflected in the Culture Trust's collection which specialises in women's straw hats from the 19th century to mid-20th century. The Caribbean and South Asian people attracted by Luton's many job opportunities are not represented in the collection. With just six months to curate Hats Made Me (22 April – 10 December 2023), one of the largest hat exhibitions to have been staged in the UK, a main aim was to increase the ethnicities and cultures represented in the collection and exhibition.

The presentation will start with a brief summary of Luton's hatting history to explain the Trust's collection and the exhibition's challenges. It will then share the three approaches taken to achieve better representation, namely contemporary designer collaborations, local community engagement, and strategic purchases. It will lastly look at the reinterpretation of the existing collection and the exhibition's object framing to optimise the voices of people of colour.

Biography: Yona Lesger is Curator, Hat Industry & Headwear at the Culture Trust. She previously worked on V&A East, the Theatre & Performance galleries, and Fashioned from Nature at the V&A. She holds degrees in Performance Costume from the University of Edinburgh and History of Art from the Courtauld.

Notes:

The Making of Crown to Couture at Kensington Palace

Polly Putnam and Claudia Acott-Williams, Curators, Historic Royal Palaces
Libby Thompson, Textile Conservation Supervisor of Costume, Historic Royal Palaces

Crown to Couture is the largest exhibition ever put on by Historic Royal Palaces. The displays sprawl over twenty rooms of the palace. There are over 200 hundred objects on display from over 100 lenders. At the time of writing, the exhibition has had over 200,000 visitors since it opened in April and has reached 81% of our income target. These talks will introduce the themes and purpose of the show and share lessons about how to form successful collaborations with members of the fashion industry and display dress items from with a date range of 350 years and a huge range of sixes and cultures. Being assured in the history of our palaces has allowed for new ways of viewing and understanding art works, items of historical fashion. Most importantly, it has allowed us to put on an exhibition at a Royal Palace that has inclusion and representation at its heart.

Biographies:
Polly Putnam is a collections curator at Historic Royal Palaces. She has particular responsibility for Kew Palace. She has a particular interest and specialism in the Georgian interior, particularly wallpapers and furnishing textiles. She was recently the historian on Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story and one of the curators of Crown to Couture at Kensington Palace.

Libby Thompson is Textile Conservation Supervisor at Historic Royal Palaces. She has particularly responsibility for the nationally designated Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection and sites her recent work on the Elizabethan embroidery the Bacton Altar Cloth, as a highlight of her career. She was the project supervisor for the conservation and mounting of textile objects for Crown to Couture.

Notes:

Keynote

Embroidery and the Intifada: stitching resistance in Palestine

Rachel Dedman

This paper examines the role of embroidered dress in the Palestinian resistance movement of the 1970s-1990s. It traces Palestinian embroidery's adoption as a touchstone of national heritage following the Nakba of 1948, and argues for its subsequent politicisation, through PLO policy and the ubiquitous representation of embroidery by Palestinian Liberation Artists.

During the First Intifada uprising, 1987-1993, 'Intifada Dresses' were made and worn by women living in refugee camps and villages of the West Bank, and by those in the diaspora. At a time when Palestinian symbols were banned in public, traditional motifs mingled with doves, rifles, and signs of allegiance to political parties, embroidered in national colours. While protest is associated with immediacy, embroidery is by its nature hand-made, private and slow. Intifada dresses, years in the making, render material the conceptual and psychological strength of the Intifada, through the labour of women.

This paper argues that such dresses rendered women's bodies sites of explicit political agency on the front line of protest, and explores the implications of this for broader readings of Palestinian embroidery in gendered terms. For men in Palestine, embroidery is licit only as political prisoners in Israeli jails; Palestinian militancy is marked, mediated and fashioned by embroidery's practice, for both genders.

Based on four years of fieldwork, research and curatorial practice for the Palestinian Museum, this research challenges nostalgic, romanticised approaches to indigenous craft, arguing for a critical understanding of Palestinian dress as political material enmeshed in a nexus of gender norms, socio-economic forces and dynamics related to labour and class.

Biography: Rachel Dedman is the Jameel Curator of Contemporary Art from the Middle East at the V&A, London. Recent projects for the V&A include Beirut Mapped, a commissioning platform for Lebanese artists, and Jameel Prize: Poetry to Politics, an exhibition of eight contemporary artists and designers from the global south.

Rachel is the curator of Material Power: Palestinian Embroidery for Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, and The Whitworth, Manchester, in 2023-24 – an exhibition which evolved from her work for the Palestinian Museum, Birzeit, on the cultural and political histories of textiles and dress. Rachel curated several exhibitions and authored two books on this subject—At the Seams, 2016, and Labour of Love, 2018.

Before joining the V&A, Rachel spent six years as an independent curator based in Beirut, Lebanon, curating exhibitions and working with artists across the Middle East and Europe. She is published extensively in contemporary art and academic contexts, and holds degrees in the history of art from St John's College, Oxford University, and Harvard University, where she was the Von Clemm Fellow in 2012/13.

Notes:

Venues & travel:

For more information on the conference venues and their location in Belfast, please click the hyperlinks in the schedule pages.

If you are travelling to Belfast by plane, Belfast City airport is the most convenient and lands you nearer the venue.

Belfast International airport is a 30 minute drive or around one hour public transport transition outside of the city. Travelling in to the venues from Belfast International may add a considerable taxi fee.

Attendance bursaries:

If you are a DATS member and require financial assistance to attend the conference, please email DATS Chair Lisa Mason with a short note about yourself, why attendance is important and what help you may need: L.Mason@nms.ac.uk

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