



All images courtesy The International Library of Fashion Research



Unpacking The Fashion Research Library

Elise By Olsen



Fashion is one of our most significant cultural artifacts—an expression of our values and fascinations, and a snapshot of a moment in time with all its social, political, and economic dimensions. Yet because much of its printed matter is created for commercial or informal ends, it rarely receives the thorough study it deserves. Fashion itself is a divisive media, one often construed as ephemeral; it places an undue emphasis on the present moment. For example, fashion shows often last no longer than 20 minutes at most; its subsequent documentation is equally contested, and rarely survives in its entirety. The same fleetingness pervades in publishing too, where yesterday's critical thought is often overlooked or considered secondary to the printed fashion image of the moment.

Today's increasing priority for digitization threatens traditions of physical archiving or preservation, yet there remains a deep longing for the physicality of the publications that we cherished in our youth. As much as the ever-tightening grip of digital media appears to overwhelm, the drive for the necessity of printed media for the aesthete is perhaps more heightened than ever. The printed format is inherently reclusive, sensible, immersive; an antidote to short-lived content, click-bait headlines, and fast-food journalism on a scroll, formed by the "quantity over quality" mentality that has imprinted the domain of digital media. Printed matter is loaded with collectibility, stackability, and longevity wrestling with our attention span. These primitive and authentic materials have another rhyme and another reason and can bring an experience with a presence the digital flicker cannot successfully imitate, replicate, or translate. Considering that fashion's ultimate building block rests in the literal item of a garment, the parallels between the physicality of clothing and the physicality of printed matter remains.

In this fast and accelerated fashion climate, it's crucial—perhaps more than ever—to preserve, document, and mediate fashion-focused printed matter, and have it consolidated in one place. There is a big lack of libraries of fashion in general, and those that exist oftentimes feel dry and institutionalized—solely focused on fashion and costume history, or garment-making or craftsmanship in technical or anthropological terms. They are placed in exclusive and inaccessible spaces, behind paywalls, or as subordinates to clothing or costume collections, or focused exclusively on academic fashion publishing. There is ultimately a need for intellectual enterprise, new narratives, and a healthy collective environment to interact with the actual production and positioning of fashion as it manifests in and through print media; new ways to study, to preserve, to exhibit fashion's other physicality, which often is produced in tandem with the "clothes" we spend so much time discussing.

Perhaps the most cherished archival library for fashion insiders is the Central Saint Martins' library, which stands in between the lines of in-and-exclusivity, being the most comprehensive one-stop-shop for aspiring and established designers, stylists, photographers (incidentally, often comprising alumni of the institution). Photocopiers and scanners are abuzz with old copies of magazines such as *FRUiTS*, *Purple*, *Arena Homme+*, providing an invaluable locality, where these journals and magazines that are often auctioned on eBay for hundreds to thousands of dollars, are free to access for the students—sites of inspirations that constantly re-visited and re-activated. Studying there is essentially a crash course in sourcing inspiration from old magazines, and brands and consultants spend hundreds of pounds on single-day visits to look in the pages.

In building a library for the 21st century, it's important to understand the library as not only a historical "mausoleum" or depository of the past—as fashion theorists have often thought of fashion institutions—but as an

open space for intellectual discourse and creation for the future. If the museum is where fashion garments enter a zombie-like state—half dead, half alive, as "congealed memories of the daily life"⁰¹—the library is where fashion media is endlessly re-activated through reading and study. This foundational and philosophical function of a library—the library as an active site where information is stored, accessed, and somehow brought back to life through the constant perusal by different eyes and fingers—is not just pertinent to libraries in general, but fashion libraries in particular. The unpacking of books, as argued by Walter Benjamin, is a creative act in and of itself due to the chaos that ensues. There is a transformative quality in this unpacking and repacking, similar to how books are visited and re-visited, where the materials employed lose their individual nature in the process: they become part of something larger.

Benjamin's rather poetic reflections on the art and disorder of collecting give rise to the mnemonic qualities that these printed objects represent. Especially in our post-Fordist age, fashion increasingly "happens" or "is produced" in/as media rather than clothes; we participate through looking, not by wearing. As much as the stylist works behind the scenes of a fashion show, a much larger proportion of their time is for the final printed image, one that's often published in magazines. The fashion photographer singularly works in tandem with the outcome of such, whether the image is later published online or on paper. Considering fashion's temporality of biannual, triannual, monthly magazines, it can be argued that the timekeeping of fashion happens in the space of print. This is the biggest oversight of fashion collection institutions, which focus primarily on the fetish of the garment. Of course, fashion publishing dates back to the very birth of fashion as a phenomenon; and since the early 90s in particular, the world of fashion intermediaries has grown to subsume more than half of the industry, making the publishing industry (including, importantly, fashion and fashion photography books) extremely important to study.

⁰¹ Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*. London; New York: I.B. Taurus, 1985, 1.

Founded in 2020, the International Library of Fashion Research will become the world's most comprehensive repository of specialized fashion research and contemporary fashion publications. We will fill a much-needed gap in the preservation of and critical engagement with fashion's printed culture at an institutional level, and build a free, globally accessible resource for fashion researchers, industry professionals, and amateur enthusiasts. International Library of Fashion Research is actively working not only to preserve fashion's past, but to understand its present and contribute to its future.

The library's foundation is based on 5,000+ pieces of all-encompassing and contemporary printed matter (including books, magazines, lookbooks, show invitations, illustrations, ephemera, etc.) from 1975 until the present, based on a seed collection donated by cultural theorist Steven Mark Klein and acquired from various private collectors. The collection will keep growing through donations from global fashion houses, publishers, and practitioners, and is an ongoing and never-ending process. The library's extensive programming and activations are explorations and ways of animating our permanent collection by creating space for study across publishing, curating, education, archival practice, and public engagement. An advisory board—consisting of leading industry voices of international caliber—is established to monitor the breadth and growth of the library's permanent collection, programming and activities. The library will also enter official educational partnerships with global fashion universities through research programs for students.

It will be interesting to see how people—past or present readers or producers, industry insiders, or the very public—will grapple with this printed medium, whether artistically, economically, mythologically, physically, symbolically... We are carving out a space to accommodate new print projects, scholarships, research, and criticism, and initiating a feedback loop that ultimately will deepen fashion as a space of knowledge and mediation. Will there be a new influx on the newsstand, an upsurge not only for the printed medium—its tangibility and tactility—but for the accumulation, preservation, archiving of this printed matter? New narratives, new forms of display, new modes of media are on the horizon... As collectors and archivists, it is our duty to preserve them. ✕

“To renew the old world — that is the collector's deepest desire”

Walter Benjamin