Digital Curatorship Practices for Fashion-Heritage Experiences

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Introduction: Corporate Archives as Levers for Heritage Experiences

Fashion corporate archives are a complex and heterogeneous system and represent an invaluable source in preserving the company's historical memory (Martin and Vacca, 2018). As preservers and conservators of the heritage brand (Urde, Greyser, and Balmer 2007), these archives collect design and production documentation capable of reconstructing the intrinsic value in relation to the social, geographical, and production context and a specific period of history (Vacca 2014). Indeed, embracing a multifaceted function, they have long been a repository for a plethora of objects, encompassing a diverse array of garments and accessories, technical documentation, and ephemera (Pecorari 2021).

In looking at companies' archives, their relationship with heritage is characterized by the need to enhance brand recognition and celebrate the historical memory of the company while using it as a means for legitimation purposes on the market, zealously protecting intellectual property rights due to competition, an aspect amplified by the increasing digitization of collections (Martin and Vacca 2018; Vandi, 2022). By documenting the trajectory of a brand's evolution, they foster a sense of connection and loyalty among employees, customers, and visitors while building the foundation of the company's public relations and marketing strategies (Urde, Greyser, and Balmer 2007). Therefore, corporate archival legacy becomes a living cultural heritage if adequately preserved and enhanced, because it can become a knowledge generator (Martin and Vacca, 2018).

Despite this discourse, looking at culture-intensive environments (Bertola et al. 2016), fashion has always faced issues when dealing with its representation and dissemination to the broader public. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, "fashion seemed 'unworthy' of entering the museum" (Steele 2008) because of concerns about its perishable nature and the impermanence of materials, as well as its association with superficial pleasures, gendered female interests, and a perception of low

culture. Nevertheless, museums and archives often faced criticism for their detachment from vital socio-economic contexts, reinforcing the idea that they have traditionally been focused on preservation only and guided "by principles of elitism, exclusivity, and remoteness from the general public" (Pecorari 2019, 8).

When it comes to representing company heritage, it is usual that the brand exhibits often focus on the creative director rather than the product, with garments' esthetics used as a means of validation for the designer's indisputable talent, not considering at all that "fashion is a landscape defined by an endless interweaving of references within other references, where past and present promiscuously fuse" (Sisca 2020, 107). While it has been demonstrated that contemporary fashion manifests collective creativity and results from a radical system characterized by creativity and innovation as well as industrial processes and crafts that give products identity, meaning, and values (Bertola et al. 2016).

From a curatorial perspective, representation of fashion heritage through exhibitions still tends to be staid, shaped by an object-focused tradition and scholarship rooted in dress or costume history. Indeed, fashion exhibitions often tend to circle around the final outcome, focusing on the showcased esthetic of the physical artifact the archive preserves rather than delving into the creative process that led to that artifact being assembled and realized.

On the other hand, the digitization of collections and the necessary redefinition of archives into digital repositories – to be more accessible and inclusive – are positively impacting fashion curatorial practices, which have been rethought with new methods that extend and hybridize the physical and digital dimensions of fashion cultural reservoirs (Vacca and Vandi 2023). In light of these changes, the article will digress into the evolving "performative" role of curatorship in the knowledge representation of fashion heritage, with a specific focus on corporate archives, analyzing how digital grafts recontextualizing the archive and unveiling its stories in more expansive ways, engaging new audiences in more inclusive and in-depth fashion narratives. This article will discuss in depth the role of the archive as "metamedium" (Vacca and Vandi 2023), the centerpiece from which a variety of experiences can be developed in relation to the nature and form of the documents, the object and the field of interest, and the functions that archives, from time to time, must carry out.

1. Approaches to Fashion Curation

Traditional curatorial paradigms have historically focused on presenting knowledge intrinsic to historical collections, achieved mainly through exhibitions (Celant 1996). Exhibiting fashion has always been considered a design practice born from the necessity to bring value to design research (Marchetti 2015). According to Clark (2018), fashion curatorial practices are the tools to represent knowledge of archival artifacts, making historically oriented exhibitions that arrange extant garments according to epoch and style addressed to the broader public. This traditional approach has often positioned the object as the center of a chronological framework, emphasizing it linearly, in which its history serves as the focus and foundation of the entire exhibition.

While effective in conveying historical context, this methodology can sometimes limit the exploration and interpretation of the items' multidimensional aspects because it cannot represent their intrinsic value and meaning or explore the relational content among objects on display. As pinpointed by several authors (Calanca 2020; Peirson-Smith and Peirson-Smith 2020; Vacca and Vandi 2023; Vandi 2022), this approach often overlooks and does not represent the intangible and tacit knowledge that shapes and belongs to the object itself. Therefore, this approach is often intentionally didactic and straightforward, designed to facilitate a pure learning experience for the audience. In this paradigm, the curated and produced exhibition has the purpose of showcasing and fostering understanding. Here, the curator's presence and interpretive perspective are intentionally subdued, ensuring they do not overshadow the main object of focus. Consequently, the techniques employed for public engagement with cultural artifacts, and the subsequent methods used to convey their narratives often show a degree of simplicity. This tendency is discernible in the reliance on conventional tools such as didactic textual panels positioned throughout the exhibition space. While these conventional tools provide information, they sometimes fail to capture the intricate layers of intangible knowledge embedded within the object, which may still find space in the exhibition catalogue.

Nevertheless, fashion curation is by its very nature a critical practice (Vänskä and Clark 2017). During recent times, especially in the last twenty years, curating approaches also started to become a means of presenting fashion and providing and performing an external curatorial critique of the narrative exhibited, extending the narrative's temporality but still observing the exhibition medium (Stevenson 2008). Recent scholars and

curators advocate preserving object-based research within fashion history yet melding it with interdisciplinary consumption and material-culture analysis for a nuanced socio-cultural understanding.

The process of building relationships highlights the intrinsic value of the archive within its social, geographical, and production context (Martin and Vacca 2018), as well as the design and manufacturing aspects behind it. This approach combines extensive archival and interdisciplinary research, allowing a balanced perspective. It recognizes that materials like sketches, photos, letters, and print advertisements are as tangible as garments, enabling multi-vocal fashion narratives (Peirson Smith and Peirson Smith 2020).

This innovative curatorial approach is evinced in the in-depth study of the archive and its implicit relationships and amplifies the value and meaning of the object on display within a polysemous system. In this context, the object is often surrounded by what Judith Clark (2018) defines as "props" or "attributes" as secondary explanatory exhibition elements contextualizing dresses. "Having agreed upon the historical fiction created by the exhibited dress, props give us the detail." (Clark 2018, 303) In this curatorial approach, props function as "curatorial deepenings" portals to unveil the layers of knowledge retained within objects, aiding the acknowledgment of fashion heritage.

Through re-mediation acts (Bolter and Grusin 1999), props shape the exhibition to take the form of a set or a diorama in which objects are explained and complicated by shifting the selected timeframe and involving different actors in the ecosystem. While these thought-provoking strategies (Vänskä and Clark 2017) ease the contextualization of fashion within its historical and cultural milieu, the cross-referencing often remains conceptual and insufficiently descriptive. Consequently, employing such techniques sometimes implies a high level of a priori knowledge of fashion history and curating, restricting the dissemination and didactic power to a small audience with an expert background.

2. *Fashion Curation toward Multimedia Integration*

In his well-known "Archive Fever," Jacques Derrida suggests that the methods for transmitting information shape the knowledge produced in the archive (Derrida 2002). Being exhibition design a medium in its own right (Celant 1996), fashion-heritage collections evolved and adapted historically, especially in recent years, to include emerging methods and technologies for transmitting information (Giannachi 2016). In the past,

the work of fashion archives was to collect, curate, and preserve history. The digital age has brought new opportunities to make archives into open structures transferred and accessible through public spaces (Martin and Vacca 2018).

Indeed, prompted by the disruption of the pandemic, the digital has been central in rethinking companies' archival dissemination practices in the fashion sector (Vacca and Vandi 2023). On one hand, increasing implementation and availability of software and platforms have pushed companies toward digital data recording and inventorying to preserve and restore historical objects and born-digital artifacts. On the other hand, the digital has entailed a rethinking of "the power of display" (Staniszewski 2000) that is the curatorial experience and that information users can access and retrieve "through mediums and spaces, whether physical, digital or both" (Loscialpo 2016, 243). Even though the digital has expanded the portfolio of media in the "non-object based form of art" (Schnapp 2013) to represent and disseminate fashion knowledge virtually, curators still keep on "experimenting with the exhibition genre to test the potential of objects to elicit different meanings and experience" (Healy, 2013, 325). Yet digital technologies and multimedia installations still significantly extend the performative space, developing curatorial narratives starting from the object and moving toward transversal analytical perspectives. Throughout the past few years, the digital shift has stimulated the introduction of digital technologies in exhibition settings in various ways:

1. As a first layer, the use of video and audio documentation in the making of exhibitions offers little curatorial digressions within the exhibition path.
2. As a second improvement, the use of interactive devices such as the exhibition's smartphone applications enables users to have personalized access to and more analytical understanding of the exhibition.
3. Connecting the exhibition with a web site has become a way to expand the exhibition beyond the time of the opening of the show and the exhibition space, extending unrestricted access to the archive.

Technology can explore inherent and invisible cognitive dimensions, yet if only the object is exhibited, the most commonly adopted approach by contemporary curators is to add some virtual elements to the physical exhibition, creating visual artistic effects around it that reinforce the theme of the exhibition, highlighting the esthetics and thematic surface already

conveyed through the object. This was the case of *Gucci Cosmos* (2023), a comprehensive retrospective hosted in the spaces of the West Bund Art Center in Shanghai made of eight immersive worlds that brought together audio, video, and kinetic experiences to celebrate the brand's evolution through its iconic products. Here, technology was employed to represent some of the brand's stylistic and inspirational codes, both traditional and modern, such as equestrian and bamboo bags projected on video walls and even creative director Alessandro Michele's twins represented through gigantic holograms that served as gateways to the exhibition. Yet the exhibition did not involve extensive interaction between the visitor and the object, nor did it allow a personalized exploratory journey. The emphasis is placed on enhancing the thematic essence of the exhibit through carefully curated virtual elements, enriching the overall experience without altering the predetermined narrative structure. This approach balances traditional exhibition methods and modern technological enhancements, inviting attendees to engage with the fusion of physical and virtual realms while still adhering to guided storytelling. Indeed, the visitor's role remains observational, immersed in an environment that complements and accentuates the displayed objects, rather than tailoring the journey to individual preferences.

The second strand of practice deals with integrating technology in the physical and virtual realms, giving rise to engaging and playful experiences reminiscent of gaming environments. This integration has found significant traction, particularly within the realm of fashion retail. In this context, the concept of a "simulated space," proposed by Dernie (2006), gains prominence. Indeed, the visitor's perception model pivots around interaction, offering a multifaceted learning journey that encompasses not only visual stimuli but also auditory and tactile sensations. This convergence of sensory inputs allows a more holistic engagement, breaking away from the traditional observational approach and paving the way for immersive encounters, guaranteeing access what is usually inaccessible. In these instances, the technology transforms the exhibition space into an interactive platform where visitors become active participants and can access the intangible side of the exhibited heritage, disclosing dimensions of touch, motion, sound, and olfaction. Such an approach not only amplifies the educational aspect but also heightens the entertainment quotient, effectively "popularising the performative construction of a fashion heritage discourse" (Pecorari 2019, 13), formerly centered on the physicality of heritage (Smith 2011).

The *Louis Vuitton X* exhibition held in Beverly Hills in 2019 commem-

orated the 160th anniversary of Maison Louis Vuitton and featured an extensive collection of iconic pieces and unique collaborations among Maison Louis Vuitton and several artists and creatives. The setting was divided into thematic rooms showcasing a selection of archival items ranging from the iconic trunks to artifacts resulted from diverse collaborations with other designers such as Karl Lagerfeld or Rei Kawakubo. The interesting aspect of this setting was that each room was activated by a set of augmented-reality (AR) explorations in the form of filters that allowed visitors to interact with the curatorial themes of each space using AR devices distributed to visitors at the entrance. Guests could aim these devices at specific exhibited items, unlocking filters to activate that object with extra insights and providing them with a playful opportunity to engage with and creatively explore the content both in the physical and digital space. In this way, the archival objects become the major assets to spark explorations about exhibiting history and culture in fashion in our times.

Integrating digital elements within a fashion exhibition may also provide access to a vast and rich amount of archival information about the "behind the scenes" of the exhibition and the garment's esthetics. By overcoming the limits of physicality and materiality, technology goes beyond traditional "props" and serves as an additional portal to open access to a broader and enriched pool of information, independent of the physical constraints that would otherwise limit the display space. "Regardless of the size, dimensionality or time-dependency of this data, digital technology allows for its immediate access through many different output media" (Nofal et al. 2017, 223). This approach enables visitors to experience in real time a more extensive body of content, details, and contexts related to the showcased garments even though they are not physically exhibited.

Unlike the confines of a traditional exhibition space, the digital realm offers the opportunity to delve deeply into the brand's evolution, the inspirations behind each creation, and the intricate specifics of collections. This allows audiences greater degrees of interaction and more personalization opportunities, becoming able to co-curate their experiences and continuously engage and participate in the museum's activities or projects to extend users' experience beyond the physical visit. This shift to community-centred perspectives (Schnapp 2015) allows companies and museums to build and consolidate relationships with their users.

The *Gianfranco Ferré Design Principles* exhibition of drawings promoted by the Gianfranco Ferré Research Center and the Italian Cultural Institute of Los Angeles in 2023 exemplified how digital integration can significantly enrich the visitor experience within a fashion exhibition. By incorpo-

rating QR codes as augmented guides, the exhibition, which was only of drawings, bridged the gap between physical and digital realms by structuring information networks around two-dimensional drawings and precious archival documents accessible to visitors online. These QR codes acted as gateways to a vast archive of information, providing attendees with insight into the designer's creative journey and design principles. This approach transcended the spatial limitations of the physical exhibition, granting visitors access to an open-access catalogue with contextual details related to fashion shows and editorials linked to the original illustrations and the garments showcased in the exhibit space.

By transitioning toward complete virtuality, digital platforms offer the opportunity to present comprehensive and in-depth narratives that reconstruct the past as a network of artifacts, interconnecting diverse pools of information. The recent advances in artificial intelligence are provoking more interest in the visualization of large corpora of archival data that enable augmented archival research by aggregating a network of information. This concept allowed the design of new visualization methods to present each collected piece alongside ephemera documents such as sketches, paper patterns, fashion-show images and videos, press releases, and advertisements. Although these platforms can enable further connections among diverse archival collections, attempts aimed at this outcome remain rare. This was the essence of Europeana's initial project and remains a goal pursued by the European Union today in establishing a collaborative digital space for European cultural heritage, wherein the rich tapestry of Europe's cultural legacy can be accessed, explored, and appreciated anew.

An interesting example is altr.space, an online platform that provides brands and institutions with a unique solution to showcase and commercialize fashion archives. Besides providing the framework for brands to digitize their collection, the site also invented an innovative way to display materials on the screen and to allow their realization. As an example, at the archive of ESMOD – a fashion design school in France with several locations – they carefully redesigned how its preserved patrimony could be featured through a virtual platform online. Taking an iconic garment, originally designed by ESMOD founder Alexis Lavigne, who later became couturier to Empress Eugénie for riding wear, they set it in motion through a digital twin or, in AR, through the support of a phone. At the same time, all the ephemera are gathered around the still garment and accessible through a simple click. Hypertexts allow the exploration of further information connected with the displayed garment.

3. Conclusions and Future Directions

This article explores changes in contemporary society's cognitive and communicative patterns, stressing the new opportunities digital technologies provide, by looking at some particular circumstances of corporate archives in the fashion sector. Considering the structure and the systems that curators can use, we argue that digital technologies profoundly influence and change the role of the curator and her approach to representing fashion-heritage knowledge.

Digital curation (Cassella 2015) aimed at preserving, managing, and adding value to archival data throughout its life cycle from the physical to the digital generates new sources of continuous and immediate information and knowledge dissemination and retrieval. This approach introduces an intriguing perspective regarding the transformative impact of technological media on the very essence of knowledge. It shifts the curator's role from proposing and designing the exhibition's narrative, setting, and result to a figure who crafts dynamic narratives that go beyond physical spaces and static displays and enable connections among historical artifacts and other heritage collections. This form of curation allows the contextualization of fashion within broader cultural, historical, and social landscapes, fostering a deeper understanding of its significance. As a consequence, the increased accessibility and inclusivity of the narratives performed allow accelerated involvement of the audience in the co-curation of personalized fruition paths. "In such a scenario, online curation becomes *networked co-curation* and shifts the attention from what is produced to how it is performed under the socio-technical conditions and relations that characterise the current state of the Web" (Dekker and Tedone 2019).

By combining traditional approaches from fashion curators, designers, and academic experts in heritage domains and connecting them with interdisciplinary figures dealing with technological media, curation is positioned as the optimal critical practice that opens up new ways of conceptualizing, theorizing, and communicating fashion. Moreover, this exchange of knowledge overcomes the walls of the archive, allowing audiences to become curators of their own experience through conversational learning (Burdick et al. 2012), favoring a continuous dialogue and relationship between institutions and the public.

As an added point, digital curation enables what is defined as "serendipitous exploration" (Toms 2000), meaning interacting with a source of information and learning something beneficial without having any predetermined goals. As experts curate content and guide experiences, the

conversational nature of learning also encourages and leaves the designed path open for unexpected discoveries. Visitors can come across new insights and perspectives through interactions with curators, peers, and technology, strengthening a sense of excitement and boosting exploration.

Within this expanding landscape, the archive becomes a "metamedium" (Vacca and Vandi 2023), serving as a dynamic hub where interdisciplinarity and inclusivity are at the baseline, and technological implementation becomes the booster for experiencing synchronous, real-time interactions and diachronic, historical perspectives emerging from the archive.

Nevertheless, the process of digitizing fashion is set apart from the digitization of more conventional archival collections, mainly composed of textual and visual documentation that can be effectively conveyed through images on a screen. The intrinsic three-dimensional and tangible nature of fashion made of intricate constructions, layerings of textiles, and material details still cannot be adequately digitalized and experienced digitally. Therefore, the challenge of rendering archival items fully experienceable digitally has not yet been met and lies in finding a technologically supported means of encompassing objects' features and implicit knowledge – from their tangible presence to their unwritten historical context (Hall 2017).

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