

DIALOGUING WITH OUTFIT – DIALOGUING WITH ICONOLOGY. ON THE PROCESS OF EXHIBITION CREATION

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There are numerous ways of displaying fashion in museums.¹ The choice of a definite one of them can be decided upon by different subjective factors: curator's idea, aesthetical sense of scenography, or objective ones: the size of the allocated budget or accessibility of the facility, etc. The exhibition's space itself is also a factor that can determine its shape. Museum and gallery rooms have made us accustomed to being regular and allowing to tell respective 'chapters' of the exhibition without greater problems. However, when such a verified and transparent arrangement is not possible, other ways need to be sought. Limitations in this respect can yield unexpected and extremely satisfying effects. This was precisely the case of the former stable which was to become stage for a clothing display.

From talks to dialogue

In 2017, the Castle Museum in Pszczyna in southern Poland, some dozens kilometres from the border with the Czech Republic, contacted me on the possibility of mounting an exhibition of the clothing from the Museum Fashions collection that I curate. It is a study and research collection, made up of ca 500 items, of which almost half are outfits. The oldest date back to the early 19th century, while the newest ones come from the last decade. Almost all are made in France, the majority of them by prestigious Parisian fashion houses.² The collection features several thematic sub-categories, which allows numerous display options.³

In order to define the specific shape and the final topic of

the exhibition proposed by the Castle Museum in Pszczyna, since preliminarily only the date and the budget had been defined, it was necessary to view the space in which the clothes were to be displayed. The Pszczyna Museum is a palace and park ensemble of which, in 1870–76, the Castle was remodelled after the design of Aleksander Hipolit Destailleur. Thanks to him the two-floor building on a horseshoe layout was given a 17th-century French architectural costume, which it has retained to this day. However, it was not the impressive Castle interior that was to house the display. The proposed facility for the purpose were the Prince's Stables distanced several dozen metres from the Castle. The current stable complex was raised in the 2nd half of the 19th century during the times of the last Castle's owners the Hochbergs after the design of the architect Olivier Pavelt. The complex contained the Carriage House, the stable together with the tack room, as well as a manège, and later also garages. Over the last decade the Stables were refurbished and handed over to the Castle Museum. The discussed display was to take place in the stable part where horse stalls still exist. The space available included 24 stalls placed symmetrically along both sides of a corridor leading across the whole building. It could also extend to the space by the entry gates dividing the stables into two equal parts (the second part of the stable was to house a hunting-dedicated exhibition).

Although the venue looks impressive as such, it constitutes quite a challenge for an exhibition. A row of identical horse stalls is monotonous, while the stalls shaped as elongated rectangles were little friendly to the display. Additionally, the



1. Overall view of the Exhibition

picturesque ceiling which in itself is the venue's asset could pull the public's attention away from the exhibits. From the beginning of the talks on the shape of the display it was thus clear that telling a story through presenting a set of dummies grouped around one issue was unrealistic. The space divided into small stalls certainly did not allow that. A different means had to be conceived. The only other obvious solution was to place one to two mannequins in each box, adding possibly a small object to accompany them. Therefore, instead of 4–6 topics that the Exhibition could tackle, 12 or 24 mini-stories had to be told. The story ideas emerged promptly, yet the challenge was how to arrange them all in one coherent display. What to do for the public to read it and understand as a whole?

Out of the talks with Ms Dominika Sulińska, the Curator of the Castle Museum in Pszczyna, a scheme emerged for the collection of the clothing that I curate to 'dialogue' with the collection of the Castle Museum. Among the first ideas there was the one suggesting to display outfits in one of the stall rows, and items from the Castle Museum collections in the stalls across. However, this would imply confrontation, not dialoguing. Therefore, it was decided that each of the 24 stalls would display a mini dialogue of exhibits from both collections. At this point also our conversations, namely the talks of exhibition curators, turned into a real dialogue. The works on the display substantially speeded up, though no obstacles as such had been overcome. The challenge resulted from the fact that we both knew only our respective collection well, the one we curated. We thus made study visits to Poznan and Pszczyna. The advantage of the Castle collections was the fact that it was extremely varied, since it

boasted painting, prints, furniture, vessels, hunting trophies, and even several garments. This secured the visual attractiveness since each stall was to feature a clothing item from the Museum Fashions collection and an item from the Castle Museum. Occasionally, we would break up with this principle, and presented more than two items in several stalls. Following the visits and revisits, and the email exchange, our dialogue yielded an expected result. Not only did we succeed in creating 24 mini dialogues, but first of all, we ordered them in such a way that the whole created a logical and coherent narrative. The opening of the Exhibition titled: 'Dialogues in the Mind's Eye. Exhibitions of Attire and Objects from the Collections of the Museum Fashions and the Castle Museum in Pszczyna' took place in June 2018, a year after the first talks.

In search of a deeper meaning

As said above, together with Ms Dominika Sulińska, Curator of the Castle Museum in Pszczyna, we decided that each stall would contain a mini dialogue between items from both collections. We had quite a number of ideas for specific ones: they were of different character, concerned different object features, touched on different values. In order for the Exhibition to gain coherence, however, we needed something that would bond all the elements into one whole, that would allow to see a cohesive message in the 24 stalls. It was Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968), and specifically his research method, namely iconography, that helped us out. According to Panofsky, what comes first is the *pre-iconographical description* that requires our practical knowledge

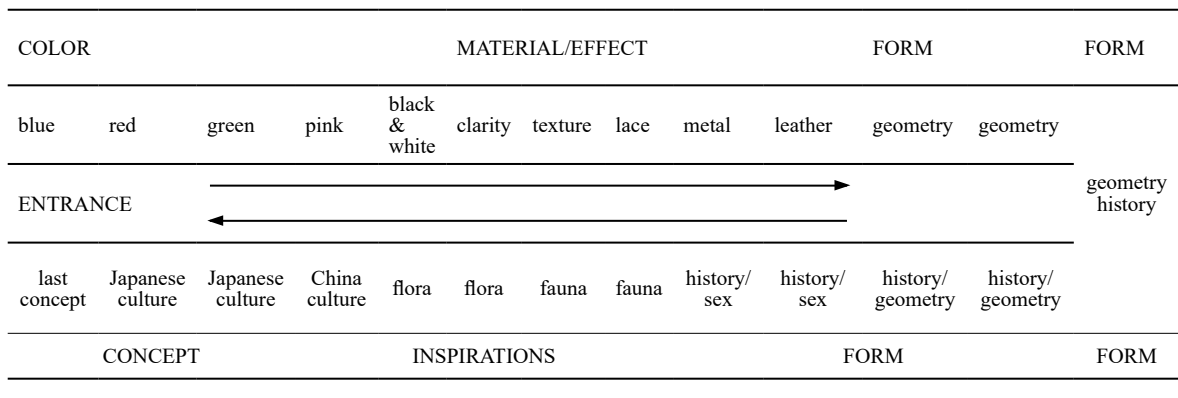


Diagram 1. Exhibition's overall layout

of things and events. Then we have *iconographical analysis* that helps interpret *secondary or conventional images, stories, and allegories* which make up the world, this possible thanks to the knowledge of literary sources, definite themes, and concepts. Finally comes *iconographical interpretation* dealing with symbolic values.⁷

Naturally, our intention was not to analyse art, neither was it to literally apply each of the steps outlined by Panofsky. This was not the topic of our Exhibition. What appealed to us a lot was the superpositions of contents, piling up of meanings: from ordinary observations, through reference to culture, to hidden meanings, namely what is not visible on the surface. Applying Panofsky's logic, we swiftly arranged our dialogues, and the Exhibition gained a purposeful and logical structure.

One of the features that we observe as the first, regardless of the object type, is its colour. And colour precisely was the theme the opening section was dedicated to: we brought together items united through the same colour. The section 'colour' showed and described: blue, red, green, pink, and a contrast: black and white. As much as the first three do not arouse much controversy, pink is different.⁸ Different shades of pink were presented: by a dress in an 18th-century portrait, a 1988 woman's jacket (Chloé), and by a Schiaparelli hat box in *shocking pink*. An interesting dialogue was created in the black and white duo which is easily associated with old photographs and films. Albums with the photographs of the residents of the Pszczyna Castle from a century ago made up a 'set' with a Ted Lapidus *haute couture* overall of crepe printed over with black-and-white photos from films (e.g. from *Queen Christina* starring Greta Garbo). And thus using black and white we 'silenced down' the colour to move onto the next section of materials/textiles and their physical appearance. Here we showed the effect of transparency, both in glass and in an *haute couture* dress by Pierre Balmain made of several layers of crepe. Furthermore, we juxtaposed a Maggy Rouff lace dress from the 1950s with a 'lace-like' openwork effect of a wooden carved frame. We showed leather (artificial) used for a Gianfranco Ferré corset and for a screen from the late 17th century, as well as metal applied in an Emmanuelle Khanh handbag, Paco Rabanne dress, and the 18th-century chain mail garment from the Castle collections. All these juxtapositions featured subdued colours so as not to pull away the

public attention which we wanted on the fabrics/materials.

The next section focused on basic geometrical figures: squares, circles, triangles. In order to expose them, we chose the white of dresses (by Edward Molyneux and Angelo Tarlazzi) and the white of the Castle china.

In this way we reached the last, 12th stall on the left. It can be easily seen that all the dialogues along this side focused on formal features, on surfaces. We did not interpret anything, showing instead how colour, form, fabric/material act. The last, 12th stall, displayed a 1971 dress printed over with a strong colourful pattern based on circles and bike wheels visible in the painting by the Polish artist Leon Dożycki. The dynamics of form and colour (in the dress pattern the influence of simultaneous paintings by Sonia Delaunay can be traced) produced the impression of movement: such an effect can be achieved if form and colour are skilfully used. This was the kind of summing up of the left-hand 'formal' side of the Exhibition, reflecting the first stratum in Panofsky's analysis.

In the middle of the stable, in the corridor between the stalls, a Christophe Josse *haute couture dress* from 2012, flanked by two early 20th-century guéridons was placed. The three golden items as if optically closed the display, but also constituted the point for visitors to rest their eyes on when entering the facility: they built up the perspective and ideally fit in the stables' symmetry, perfectly matching the colouring of the ornamental ceiling. This dialogue tackled drapery that can be regarded both formally: as an arrangement of lines and folds, and as a reference to the culture of ancient Greeks and Romans. Hence the idea to place it centrally – as a connecting element between the left 'formal' side and the dialogues on the right meant to explicitly refer to history and culture, thus the second and third strata of E. Panofsky's methodology.

The right-hand side of the Exhibition, which the public visited walking in the opposite direction: from the centre of the building to the exit, began with the questions of geometry, yet not perceived formally as in the boxes opposite. The topic was more on the silhouette, reference to fashion history, repetition of similar silhouettes in subsequent decades, e.g. leg-of-mutton sleeve (Biedermeier, late 19th century, and the 1980s). The following dialogues showed similar forms of clothes whose meaning differed depending on the attire's function and its 'gender', e.g. the livery of the



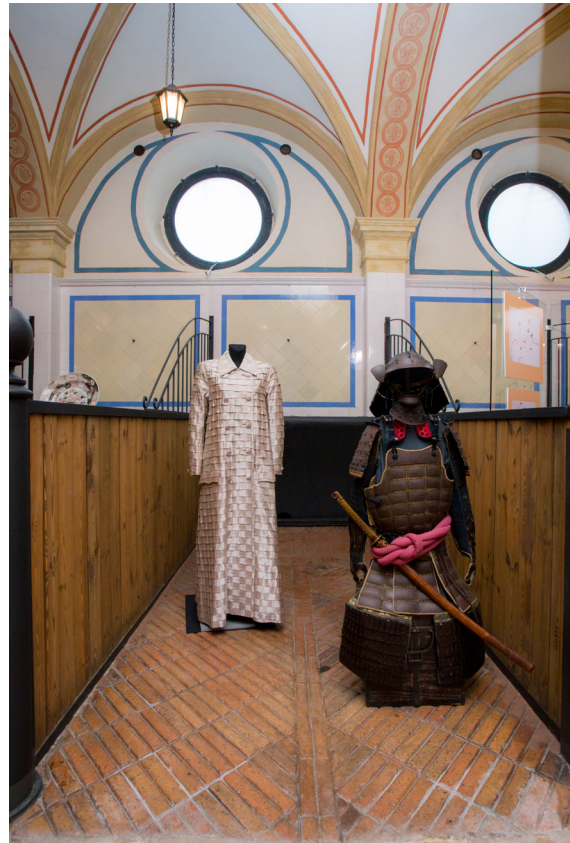
2. Exhibition's central point: dialoguing on drapery

Castle's servants from the early 20th century dialogued with a luxurious Stéphane Rolland jacket from the mid-1990s. Their forms (cut) were very much alike, yet the meaning differed. Similarly as jabots worn by men in the 18th century and by women (Emanuel Ungaro *haute couture*, 1988). In four subsequent stalls we introduced dialogues around nature as the source of inspiration for culture (interestingly, they happened to be placed opposite the stalls tackling the topics of reused materials/textiles). In the case of the topics related to fauna and flora the used scheme implied showing first the literal use of fur or flowers, and then dresses made with textiles featuring patterns of wild-cat spots or flowers. The dialogue in the next stall concerned Chinese inspiration in fashion: a Christian Dior dress from the late 1970s was put side by side with pieces of porcelain and furniture from the Castle Museum in Pszczyna.

The last three stalls reflected the third stratum of Panofsky's iconography where the sense is hidden deeper. Earlier, when still working on the Exhibition, before its opening, we had wondered whether more 'abstract' dialogues based, among others, on our knowledge and aesthetical perception would be clear to the public. Let me add that every dialogue was labelled with the leading motto (e.g. colour, form, etc.) and featured a short caption (ca 300 characters). Despite such assistance there was always a chance that the public might not read our intentions. We decided, however, to take the risk, and chose for the last three stalls three attires by Japanese designers from the Museum Fashions:

a Koji Tatsuno coat, a 'please please' tunic by Issey Miyake, and a 'little black dress' by Yohji Yamamoto. The first, the Tatsuno coat (ca 1992/1993) was put alongside a light dōmaru samurai armour (ca 1829–1840). Both items represented Japanese thinking of design (not a 'simple' inspiration as was in the previous stall) based on severity, functionality, and formal beauty.

Following that the almost abstract shape of the Miyake tunic dialogued with anonymous drawings of Japanese artists from the turn of the 20th century, which though showing figures, seemed almost equally abstract through line



3. Dialoguing on Japan's culture

shapes. The last 25th dialogue (24 stalls plus the drapery one in the middle of the stable) was more conceptual and at the same time as if summed up the Exhibition. It was made up of a simple Yamamoto dress from the spring-summer 2000 collection, and its topic was the very creative process. That is why the black dress featured a white basting thread. It was side by side with a 19th-century sewing kit. We decided that this perfectly commented on the Exhibition's creative process. In the text available during the visit we emphasized that the presented dialogues were subjective, that they were curators' choices, one of many possible. That is why within the Exhibition space (halfway across the stable) there was a spot where we displayed other items from the Castle Museum collections. Visitors were encouraged to create their own 'dialogues in the mind's eye', different from the ones proposed by the Exhibition's authors.

Various facets of attires

When we think of clothing, we most frequently associate it with the category of fashion, however, it is not the only possibility to understand that concept which one can easily find out when looking at the changes occurring over the last years in the methods of studying and displaying outfits. The tendency is, among others, to increase interest in the outfit itself and its materiality, for it to be interpreted in non-fashion contexts.⁹ It is this more autonomous understanding of clothing, allowing to link it to various objects, that the Exhibition in the Prince's Stables was based on. Clothing obviously being a part of artistic crafts can be and usually is displayed alongside other objects representing the same or similar style. Our intention, however, was a freer combination permitting to look at clothing from different perspectives. When working out respective dialogues, we looked into the cases of already known and earlier exhibitions that inspired us to conceive our own solutions. For example pink on its own was the protagonist of the 2013 exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.¹⁰ The issue of 'material', in that case feathers, was the topic tackled by the Exhibition 'Birds of Paradise' at the Fashion Museum Antwerp (Antwerp MoMu).¹¹ The grasping of formal similarities in textile patterns and painting was suggested to us by 'Cubism and Fashion' displayed at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET)¹² and the oeuvre of the female artists who did not avoid designing clothes, like Sonia Delaunay¹³ or Sara Lipska.¹⁴ Drapery as such was one of the key topics tackled at the MET display titled 'Goddess. The Classical Mode'.¹⁵ Repetition of similar silhouettes in different periods or references to the sex also frequently appeared in museums;¹⁶ similarly as pointing to nature as inspiration,¹⁷ discussing culture of a given country,¹⁸ or interpreting designer's output in the context of the country of his or her origin.¹⁹ We were encouraged to set up the most conceptual combinations by the exhibitions putting art alongside clothing in Wolfburg²⁰ or Vienna.²¹ However, the greatest inspiration and the source of ideas was found in the collections themselves that we put together. And it was them that gave this unique character to our Exhibition.

Nevertheless, in order not to get lost in the multitude of possibilities and perspectives, when working on our Exhibition, I created a diagram that helped to better illustrate the ideas we applied, and facilitated communicating our ideas to other people.

In the study of clothing three essential aspects can be distinguished: material (quite obvious) and immaterial ones, the latter connected with the relations which the attire establishes with the individuals wearing it, and how it is perceived by others, from the outside. Thus, subsequent aspects relate to what is external and internal in the context of relations and materiality. All in all, this gives four quarters of the schematic circle. The borderline between them is not always sharp and clear-cut. Quite simply we cannot physically cut the garment and attribute the pieces to the respective quarters. They all make up this one and very attire, so all the aspects interpenetrate. The same applies to the methodology we use to study clothing and fashion. The methodologies interlace, and thus we cannot pick one that is the best. The selection of tools depends on which of the

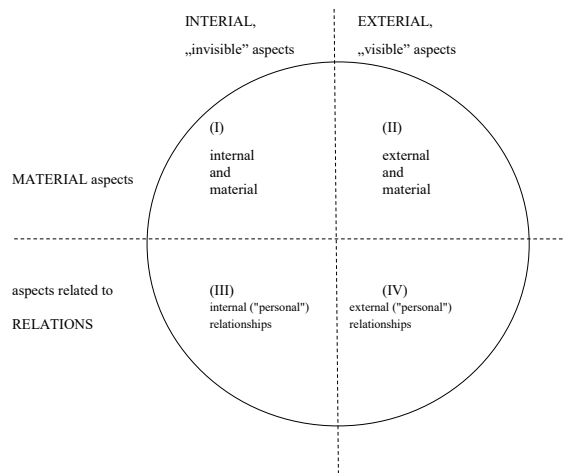


Diagram 2.

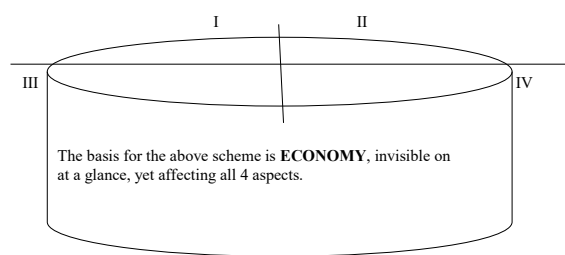


Diagram 3.

aspects, namely which quarters out of the scheme we want to analyse. Our main focus can be technology (I), style (II), psychology (III), or sociology (IV). That is why studying fashion, clothing, requires knowledge of various clothing-related aspects; it requires a multi-disciplinary approach. Although this four-quarter scheme, taking into account four aspects of an attire, seems to satisfactorily describe the way we look at fashion and clothing, clearly one last element is missing which in real life is not always patently visible. That is the economic perspective. Often overlooked in the study of style, it however actually never disappears. What is more, it constitutes basis for everything that is related to outfits. Therefore, the scheme should not be circular, but cylindrical.

Conclusions

It seems quite obvious that each of the above-mentioned aspects could be (and has been) the subject of a museum display. The aspects can obviously be linked between them, showing in this way more dependences, more examples of how clothing functions in our life, our culture. The Pszczyna Exhibition focused on three out of the four quarters; however, it was quarter II that was mostly referred to, this shown in the below diagram.

The overall division was quite clear: the stalls on the left dialogued within material issues (quarters I and II), whereas what dominated in the stalls on the right were external aspects (quarters II and IV). As it can be clearly seen the

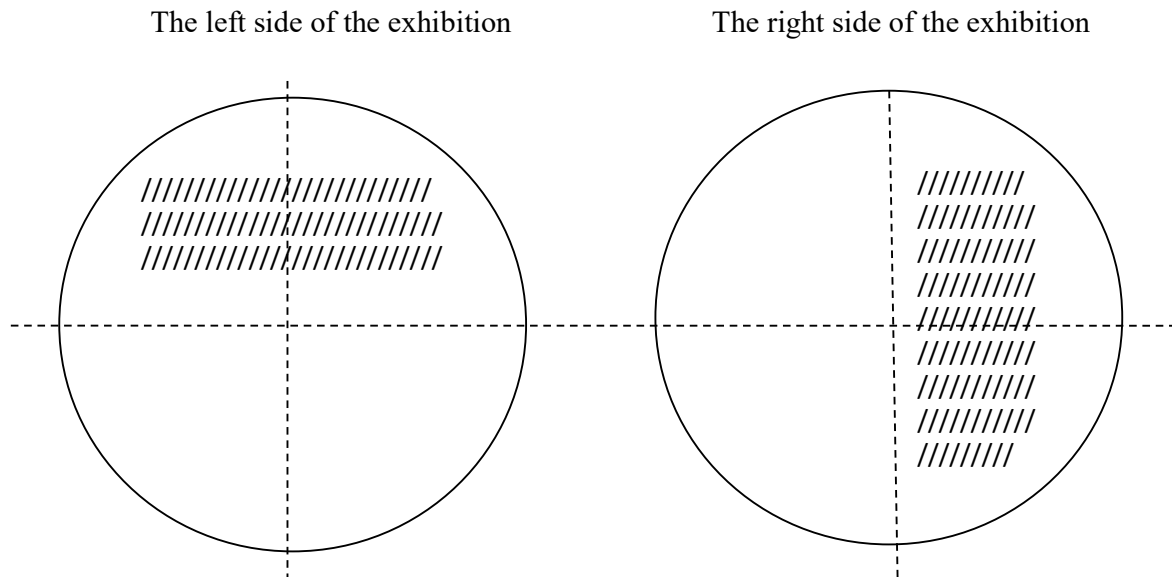


Diagram 4.

(Photos: P. Szaradowski)

only quarter, we have left unexplored was quarter III dealing with the attire's relation to the individual wearing it. This for a very simple reason that the collections of the Museum Fashions feature very few clothes that can be associated with definite individuals, so this aspect is harder to investigate.²² We thus renounced it, focusing predominantly on what is external. Neither did we go deeper into the economic aspects, leaving them putative, thus not visible to the Exhibition's public.

Obviously, the reality more often evades schemes than subdues to them, yet despite all we sometimes need to root an exhibition in theory, in a scheme. First of all, to be able to more easily and clearly take visitor through it. There is one more interesting reflection: it is encouragement to think about an attire as an integral whole, that an outfit always

boasts some potential in each of its aspects, and it is up to us, museologists, curators, to decide whether to put this potential to use and show. The very Exhibition 'Dialogues in the Mind's Eye' also showed that it is worthwhile combining different views, integrating them. This also has a substantial educational value, since it allows not just to see the fashion, but also the outfit – a garment that someone designs first, creates, and later wears. A thing that is worth interest.

For the Exhibition, the Castle Museum in Pszczyna won a distinction in the competition for the Prize of the Silesian Voivodeship Marshall for the 2018 Museum Event in the category: Exhibition.²³

Abstract: The process of an exhibition being created in a space difficult to arrange, i.e. within the former Pszczyna Castle Stable, is discussed. In its concept, the display bonded the collection of the Castle Museum in Pszczyna in a dialogue with the study collection of the Fashion Museum. The Author analyses the manner in which the use of Erwin Panofsky's iconology allowed to create a cohesive narrative composed of 25 minor stories of clothing, fashion, their

mutual relation, and reference to the surrounding objects. This, in turn, leads to the deliberation on clothing itself and its aspects that can be investigated through different research means, in some cases concentrating on its material properties, in others, on the cultural ones. Therefore, the conclusions reached are of a general character, allowing to be used in a preparation of similar exhibitions also in other spaces.

Keywords: Erwin Panofsky, iconology, exhibition creation, Castle Museum in Pszczyna, Fashion Museum collection, outfit, fashion, dialogue.

Endnotes

- ¹ The latest studies on the topic: J. Petrov, *Fashion, History, Museums: Inventing the Display of Dress*, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, London 2019; see also: *Fashion Curating. Critical Practice in the Museum and Beyond*, A. Vänskä, H. Clark (ed.), Bloomsbury, London-New York 2018.
- ² The collection is called Muzealne Mody [Museum Fashions] (www.muzealnemody.org), and its part is available online on the Europeana Platform, https://www.europeana.eu/portal/en/collections/fashion?f%5BDATA_PROVIDER%5D%5B%5D=Muzealne+Mody&q=&view=grid
- ³ Until that moment the collection items had been displayed four times: in Poznan (Castle Cultural Centre, 2013), Lodz (Central Museum of Textiles, 2014), Kutno (Regional Museum, 2015), and Torun (Centre of Contemporary Art, 2016).
- ⁴ http://www.stajnieksiazece.pl/o_stajniach/historia [Accessed: 24 Feb. 2020].
- ⁵ One of the many inspirations for such an attitude was found in the Exhibition 'Schiaparelli and Prada: Impossible Conversations', MET 2012, <http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2012/impossible-conversations>.
- ⁶ The Exhibition was open on 13 June–30 Nov. 2019. I would like to take the opportunity to extend my gratitude to all the employees of the Castle Museum in Pszczyna who contributed to the project for their assistance and commitment, particularly to Ms Monika Sulirńska.
- ⁷ E. Panofsky after: http://tems.umn.edu/pdf/Panofsky_iconology2.pdf [Accessed: 28 May 2020]
- ⁸ See: Pink: *The History of a Punk, Pretty, Powerful Color*, V. Steele (ed.), exhibition catalog, Museum at FIT, Thames & Hudson, London-New York 2018.
- ⁹ See: P. Szaradowski, *Wystawy mody i ubiorów – zagadnienia i problemy metodologiczne* [Fashions and Clothing Exhibitions in a Museum – Methodological Issues and Problems], 'Muzealnictwo' 2017, No. 58, pp. 181-7; see also: P. Szaradowski, *Uwagi dotyczące kostiumologii i historii mody jako dyscyplin naukowych w Polsce* [Remarks on Costumeology and History of Fashion as Academic Disciplines in Poland], 'Historia@teoria' 2017, No. 2, pp. 199-209, <https://pressto.amu.edu.pl/index.php/ht/article/view/12370>
- ¹⁰ Exhibition 'Think Pink', 3 Oct. 2013-26 May 2014; see also: 'Pink: The History of a Punk, Pretty, Powerful Color' mounted in 2018 by New York's Museum at FIT (Curator: Valerie Steele); Exhibition online at: <https://exhibitions.fitnyc.edu/pink/> [Accessed: 15 March 2020].
- ¹¹ *Birds of Paradise. Plumes and Feathers in Fashion*, K. Debo (ed.), exhibition catalog, MoMu, Lannoo, Tiel 2014.
- ¹² R. Martin, *Cubism and Fashion*, exhibition catalog, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1998.
- ¹³ E.g.: *Color Moves. Art & Fashion by Sonia Delaunay*, M. McQuaid, S. Brown (ed.) exhibition catalog, Smithsonian, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, New York 2011.
- ¹⁴ *Sara Lipska. W cieniu mistrza* [Sara Lipska. Overshadowed by the Master], exhibition catalogue, Królikarnia – Oddział MNW, Warszawa 2012.
- ¹⁵ H. Koda, *Goddess: The Classical Mode*, exhibition catalog, MET, New York 2003.
- ¹⁶ See e.g.: Linda Loppa talking to Dobriła Denegri, in: Cuda niewidy [Wonderingmode], exhibition catalogue, Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej, Toruń 2013, pp. 8-10; 'Tenue Correcte Exigée' at the Paris Musée les Arts Décoratifs (2016/2017).
- ¹⁷ E.g.: 'Force of the Nature', Museum at FIT, New York 2017; Exhibition online at: <https://exhibitions.fitnyc.edu/force-of-nature/> [Accessed: 15 March 2020].
- ¹⁸ 'China: Through the Looking Glass', exhibition at the MET in 2015, Curator: Andrew Bolton. Preparations for it were the topic of Andrew Rossi's documentary *The First Monday in May* (2016).
- ¹⁹ 'Balenciaga and Spain' at the De Young Museum in San Francisco (2011); topic interpretation prepared by Curator Hamish Bowles.
- ²⁰ 'Art & Fashion. Between Skin and Clothing', Kunstmuseum w Wolfsburgu, Wolfsburg 2011.
- ²¹ 'Reflecting Fashion. Kunst und Mode seit der Moderne', Museum moderner Kunst (mumok), Vienna 2012.
- ²² This aspect can be in a way recreated if we proposed someone to put on a given outfit and like this allow a new relation to be established between the piece of clothing and the person wearing it.
- ²³ <http://www.zamek-pszczyna.pl/aktualnosci/index/Wyroznienie-dla-Muzeum-Zamkowego-w-Pszczynie/idn:569> [Accessed: 15 March 2020].
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