

# Review: Who's In and Who's Out in Fashion (Studies)?

By Jaclyn Marcus

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Despite its relatively recent growth, the field of fashion studies is already known for its many transformations. This year's College Art Association of America (CAA) Annual Conference featured an exciting new panel on the interdisciplinary nature of dress, entitled Who's In and Who's Out of Fashion (Studies)? Chaired by Sarah Scaturro, chief conservator at the Cleveland Museum of Art, and Ann Tartsinis, doctoral student at Stanford University's Department of Art & Art

History, the session addressed the question "Is there a correct or wrong way to do fashion studies?" and aimed to explore what is traditionally defined as "fashion studies" within the discipline. This panel review includes an introduction to the development of the field of fashion and dress, an overview of the topics and case studies presented during the session, and a question and answer session with the Co-Chairs of the panel.

Despite its relatively recent growth, the field of fashion studies is already known for its many transformations. In 2002, fashion scholar and contributor our first issue of *Fashion Studies* Lou Taylor drew attention to what she called “the great divide,” exploring the “disjuncture [that has] long existed between object-based dress history and the fields of social and economic history” (64). Since then, fashion historian Giorgio Riello has further explored methodologies in the field, and the tension between approaches for studying the history of dress and costume, fashion studies, and the material culture of fashion, (2011); sociologist and *Fashion Studies* editorial board member Sophie Woodward has highlighted the material turn as well as qualitative methods for studying fashion (2016); and dress historian, curator, and *Fashion Studies* editorial board member Hilary Davidson has coined the term “the embodied turn,” centred on the process of making and reconstructing fashion (2019). These scholars, among many others, demonstrate the rapidly developing, and often contested, field of fashion studies.

Given this changing disciplinary landscape, it is apt that Sarah Scaturro, head of conservation at the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art from 2012–2020 and incoming chief conservator at the Cleveland Museum of Art, and Ann Tartsinis, doctoral student at Stanford University’s Department of Art & Art History and curator, chose to create and co-chair the panel Who’s In and Who’s Out of Fashion (Studies)? at the College Art Association’s Annual Conference this year, a conference that brings together over five thousand art practitioners each year. Asking the question “Is there a correct or wrong way to do fashion studies?”, Scaturro and Tartsini’s session aimed to explore what is traditionally defined as “fashion studies,” ultimately arguing and advocating for fashion as an interdisciplinary field that has the ability to transcend traditional boundaries and welcome the work of others (“WHO’S IN AND WHO’S OUT”).

The panel featured both discussions of these themes and case studies that enacted the varying methodological approaches available to the fashion scholar. The session opened with Hazel Clark, Professor of Design Studies and Fashion Studies at Parsons School of Design, the New School, and her presentation entitled “Fashion Studies Now—If It Did Not Exist We Would Surely Have to Invent It,” and continued with Lauren Downing Peters, Assistant Professor in Fashion Studies at Columbia College Chicago, and her presentation entitled “Fashion Studies at the Frontlines: Reflections on the Possibilities and Pitfalls of Undergraduate Fashion Studies”; Ben Barry, Chair and Associate Professor at the School of Fashion at Ryerson University, and Alison Matthews David, MA Fashion Program Director and Associate Professor at the School of Fashion at Ryerson University, each co-founders and

co-editors of the journal *Fashion Studies*, and their presentation entitled “Fashion Studies is Everywhere: Locating Ourselves in an (Inter)disciplinary Field”; and Alexandra Palmer, Nora E. Vaughan Fashion Costume Senior Curator and Chair of the Veronika Gervers Research Fellowship in Textiles & Costume at the Royal Ontario Museum, and her presentation entitled “What is the Point and Future of Fashion Studies for the Museum?” These exciting and thoughtful presentations were followed by case studies by Neville McFerrin, Visiting Assistant Professor at the College of Arts and Sciences at Ohio University, entitled “A Time For Fashion: Ephemeral Modernities, Neoclassical Politics, and Pompeian Women”; Christopher Rudeen, doctoral student in the History of Science Department at Harvard University, and his presentation entitled “Dressing Wounds: The Skirt as Medicine and Fashion”; and concluded with a presentation from Ellen Sampson, artist and material culture researcher, and her presentation entitled “Fashioning Research — Embodied Knowledge, Bodily Practices and the Role of Practice-based Research in Fashion Studies.”



Figure 1. Co-founders and co-editors of *Fashion Studies* Dr. Ben Barry and Dr. Alison Matthews David present “Fashion Studies is Everywhere: Locating Ourselves in an (Inter)disciplinary Field” at the Who’s In and Who’s Out of Fashion (Studies)? session at the 108th College Art Association Annual Conference. Author’s photograph.

As Scatturo and Tartsinis explain, in 2016, after six years Ann left her position as an associate curator at the Bard Graduate Center Gallery in New York to pursue a PhD in Art History at Stanford University in California. Shifting from curatorial work in fashion, design history, and material culture to the academic study of Art History revealed the multiple ways in which the professional and disciplinary boundaries are carefully monitored, the most glaring aspect of which was the lack of doctoral programs that would support fashion-based research in the U.S. in Art History or otherwise. Furthermore, relocating to the West Coast underscored the geographic challenges of studying fashion away from the fashion-focused intellectual centers of New York and the United Kingdom. While Ann recognizes how fortunate she has been to find a supportive network of faculty at Stanford, she is also acutely

aware that many are not so lucky. Similarly, as a conservator of fashion Sarah felt out of place in discussions that were happening in both theory-driven fashion studies and practice-based conservation arenas. In an attempt to bridge these two disciplines, much of her writing has tried to foreground the importance of the conservator in the materialization of fashion. In order to speak to both disciplines, she has consciously developed two different styles of writing to appeal to each, even though the content of her argument is the same.

In light of the exciting perspectives shared at the Who’s In and Who’s Out of Fashion (Studies)? session, I was fortunate to be able to learn more about the process and thoughts behind the creation of the panel from Scatturo and Tartsini themselves:

## Why did you decide to create a panel on fashion studies for this year's CAA conference?

We noticed a certain policing of borders that has impacted scholars both in and out of the traditional field of fashion studies. There have been scholars who have spent over forty years in the trenches “doing” fashion studies even though there were few clearly defined pathways for them to situate and defend their standing within traditional academic and museological structures. Much of their work has shaped the field as we know it and this discussion would not be happening without their critical efforts. And then there have been scholars outside of fashion studies who were happily ensconced in their defined disciplinary positions that use fashion as subject to examine through their traditional frameworks. Both those scholars operating in and out of fashion studies have reason for anxiety — if you are “in” fashion, then you are constantly having to define and defend your position, whereas if you are “out” of fashion then you have to be careful to not be dilettantish — you need to do the work to understand how fashion operates at a systemic, economic, and cultural level in order to fully explore its potential as a lens through which you can interrogate your subject matter.

# What do you think is a strength of this panel, and what is exciting to you about the work that was presented?

After the panel, a member of our audience came to us with an important critique — that it was really an Anglo-American perspective that we were presenting. They were right. There were a few reasons for this, of course — our panel was composed of people belonging to CAA, those that had submitted abstracts, those who could pay for the conference and travel to Chicago, those who spoke English. We believe our panel was an initial gesture in the right direction, but of course, the format — seven ten-minute papers — was bound to represent only a few of the needed perspectives, leading it to ultimately lack a cohesive assessment of the boundaries of the field. Ad-

mitedly, we wanted even more diverse voices in the room, such as those from anthropology, the industry, economics, etc.; but it was exciting how the different perspectives in the room united to speak to the future of the field on multiple levels: academic (both undergraduate and graduate), across multiple subject areas and practices, as well as in the museum. We appreciate that the panel spoke to “local” concerns: What the future of fashion studies is and how to make it more inclusive from localized and subjective positions. And perhaps that was the true gist of the panel — that fashion studies will never look the same wherever it is practiced and by whoever will practice it.

# Can you speak to your decision to include both presentations on the field of fashion studies and case studies?

Case studies are crucial to understanding HOW fashion studies works in practice. We found it thrilling to hear from colleagues in completely different disciplines who were shedding light on fashion history in new ways. For example, Neville McFerrin, a Classicist, showed how “fashion” surely existed in Roman times, echoing a discussion that is still being had by fashion studies scholars who are disputing that “fashion” came about in early modern Europe. Christopher Rudeen showed how the skirt was used as a medical technology related to mental and physical health issues. We also were so pleased to feature Ellen Sampson’s crucial work on affect and embodiment, as she is both a rigorous scholar and creative practitioner. It’s important to realize, even though we didn’t designate them as such, that the presentations about fashion studies as

a discipline were, in fact, case studies in themselves. For example, Hazel Clark discussed fashion studies in comparison with design studies, along with bringing in Parsons’ approach to the field; Ben Barry and Alison Matthews David talked about the very real issue of understanding how disciplinary boundaries function within the funding apparatus, finding that they needed to link themselves with established scholars in other disciplines in order to get grants; Lauren Downing Peter’s talk was both logical and innovative in sketching out what an undergraduate fashion studies degree might look like; and lastly, we wanted to have the museum perspective present through Alexandra Palmer’s presentation which traced developments (both positive and negative) that have happened in the field over her forty-year career.

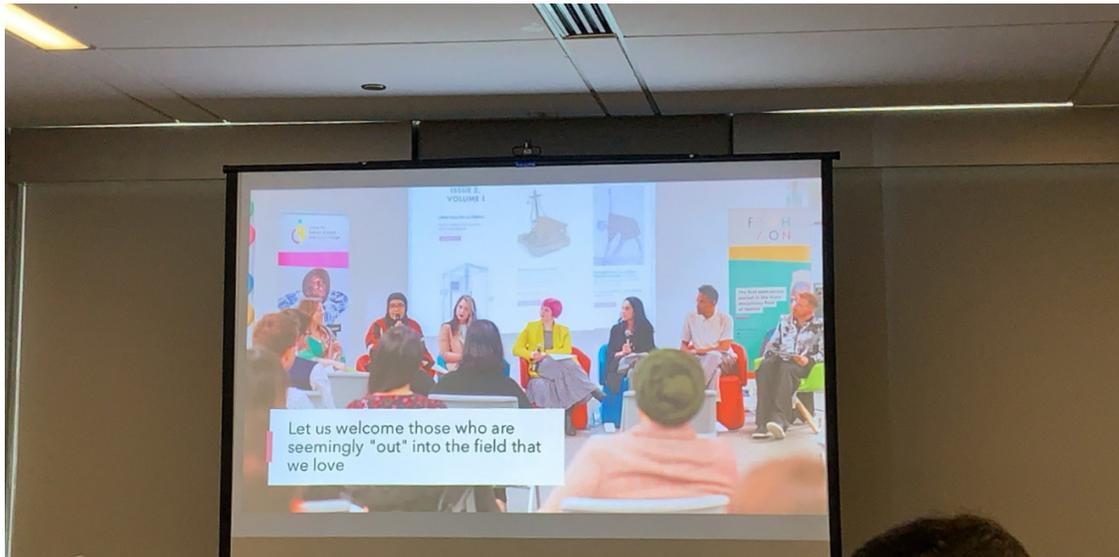


Figure 2. A slide from the “Fashion Studies is Everywhere: Locating Ourselves in an (Inter)disciplinary Field” at the Who’s In and Who’s Out of Fashion (Studies)? session portraying a *Fashion Studies* event at the 108th College Art Association Annual Conference. Author’s photograph.

Once the panel ended, participants and attendees could be seen mingling and discussing the presentations across the room long after the session’s official time had passed, smiling and laughing as they did so. The panel had sparked ideas and conversations, and it became apparent that many of the guests in attendance felt that there was more to be said. As e-mails and business cards were exchanged and research interests shared, it seemed that by questioning, challenging, and stretching the boundary of fashion studies a sense of community was continuing to be built.

The development of the field of fashion studies has ties to that of the fashion journal. In the abstract for their session, Scaturro and Tartsinis cite the 1998 special issue of the now well-known and respected journal *Fashion Theory* as beginning the discussion surrounding fashion studies' various methodologies and approaches, an important moment in fashion history that was raised during the panel as well. In the "Letter from the Editor" from the issue, Anthea Jarvis writes: "The history of dress and fashion was not studied seriously in academic circles before the 1960s" (209). Despite this, in 1997 the Gallery of Costume in Manchester, England hosted a conference centred on the study of fashion, where papers focused on methodological approaches including object-based research, art history, and economic and cultural studies perspectives, much like the panel hosted by CAA over twenty years later. It was this conference that inspired the special issue of *Fashion Theory* and its subsequent legacy in the field. Building on this tradition, *Fashion Studies* is proud to review this year's Who's In and Who's Out of Fashion (Studies)? panel, and we look forward to continuing to support the development of the field as accessible, diverse, and interdisciplinary.

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