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Almond, Kevin

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Original Citation

Almond, Kevin (2012) Made in Yorkshire: Harnessing the Zeitgeist. In: Fashioning the City: Exploring Fashion Cultures, Structures and Systems, 19th - 21st September 2012, Royal College of Art, London. (Submitted)

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Made in Yorkshire: Harnessing the Zeitgeist

Key words: Yorkshire Fashion Zeitgeist Design Production Brand

Abstract

This research was inspired by a meeting at The Textile Centre of Excellence in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, instigated by Rita Britton, the owner of the iconic independent fashion boutique Pollyanna, based in Barnsley, South Yorkshire. After conversations with the president of the Huddersfield Textile Society and fashion journalist Colin McDowell, Rita had formed a vision centred on creating a fashion label that combined the use of heritage Yorkshire fabrics with cutting edge contemporary design. The range would be designed, produced and marketed in the Yorkshire region capitalising on the manufacturing and design skills within the county. The intention was to put the concept of a 'Made in Yorkshire' brand on the global fashion map as a credible entity. This investigation seeks to establish the history and culture of fashion in Yorkshire, assessing the viability for creating a fashion brand beyond the confines of a major fashion city. As fashion has become a globalised industry the established fashion powers of New York, London, Milan and Paris have been usurped by cities such as Shanghai, Los Angeles, Copenhagen and Melbourne etc. There has been little expansion however of fashion hubs beyond the nucleus of major cities. Although many designers and consumers of fashion products exist in smaller provincial areas these metropolitan giants overshadow them. Regional centres lack the sophistication and edge of cosmopolitan municipalities and have to tap into different cultures and traditions to inspire them when creating fashion products. Fashion perpetually attempts to harness the Zeitgeist. This is centred in a general cultural, intellectual, ethical, spiritual, or political climate. Fashion reflects this through an ambiance, direction, and mood usually emanating from stylish capitals or resorts that attract those who aspire to be fashionable. There is a relative lack of research that addresses the development of fashion within provinces around the world and how this impacts upon design, production and consumption. This paper seeks to redress this by emphasizing the wealth of fashion related activity within the Yorkshire region that both responds to and creates its own 'spirit of the times'.

Methodology

The research investigates the historical, social, business and aesthetic growth of fashion and textiles production in the Yorkshire region. Established during the Industrial Revolution, Yorkshire's weaving industry has long set the benchmark for high quality made in England cloth. The region's mills continue to produce the majority of England's worsted and woolen fabric, used by many of the world's great fashion brands, such as Burberry, Prada, Gucci and tailors on London's Savile Row. This was recently showcased in a collaboration between ten of Yorkshire's leading textile mills and a sophisticated in-store display presented under the collective brand 'Yorkshire Textiles', that was launched at Harvey Nichols store in Leeds in 2010. This exhibition was the catalyst for raising awareness among consumers within the Yorkshire region and indeed globally about the exceptional quality, heritage and innovation of Yorkshire's fabric mills and stylish ways their cloth can be used in the creation of fashion and textile products.

The literature review identified the history of textiles within Yorkshire and contemporary fashion activities and initiatives. There proved to be little documentation and much information was discovered through Internet sites. I gathered information about exhibitions, fashion and textile shows and events and was able to follow up these contacts by visiting exhibitions or arranging to speak with individuals. I then formulated specific research questions exploring ways in which fashion and textile products had been designed, marketed and consumed within Yorkshire. This questionnaire was sent to over three hundred fashion students and academics in a large University fashion and costume department as well as members of the Northern Society of Costume and Textiles. I enquired about the perception of Yorkshire as a fashion centre and whether fashion products can be established

beyond cosmopolitan global cities? I also asked for memories of fashion in Yorkshire such as significant retailers, designers and dressmakers. I interviewed costume curators and was allowed access to archival material about the department stores Marshall and Snelgrove (Leeds, Bradford, Sheffield, Harrogate and York), Marks and Spencer and the Leeds Tailoring archive. The aims were to develop an understanding of both the historical and contemporary context of fashion and textiles within Yorkshire. The main objectives being to:

- i) Identify the significance of the heritage of fashion and textiles within the Yorkshire region.
- ii) Identify contemporary initiatives that promote the design, production and consumption of fashion and textiles within Yorkshire.
- iii) Identify the feasibility for establishing a 'Made in Yorkshire' fashion brand.
- iv) Develop further ideas for fashion research related to the development of fashion within provinces around the world and how this impacts upon design, production and consumption.

Yorkshire and Yorkshire Textiles

When asked whether Yorkshire was perceived to be a fashion centre Rita Britton answered 'No, but it is our job to turn it into one'. She felt it was more important as a textile centre than a fashion centre however her theory was that if Yorkshire considered its exquisite textiles and developed more exciting things with them this could lead the times in relation to fashion. The basis of this initiative could be like sliding back a glass door to reveal the quality and craft that Yorkshire fashion could trade from. She compared this to fashion brands and labels that have been established beyond cosmopolitan global cities, such as Carpe Dien from the Peruvian region of Italy, who's designer Maurizio Altieri focuses on the artisanship and craftsmanship of the garment. A member of the Northern Society of Costume and Textiles said; Fashion and quality may in some sense seem opposites in a Yorkshire context. Fashion equates to transience and disposability - quality endures. This seems to encapsulate the spirit of Rita's ideas.

The 'Made in Yorkshire' initiative, supported by the Textile Centre of Excellence in Huddersfield could establish a uniquely supportive environment where selected new designers could benefit from a range of services to support the design and manufacture of top quality products in the Yorkshire region. Support could be provided by key partners and include the sourcing of Yorkshire-produced fabrics from manufacturers, the provision of Yorkshire based manufacturing/CMT capacity, commercial testing and distribution through top retail outlets and potentially business start-up grants. It could develop an increased number of new businesses and jobs, with higher than average chances of success through ongoing support from an expert network. The development of increased high quality manufacturing capacity could also serve to re-establish a proportion of prestige manufacturing back to the UK and the region from overseas. This would repatriate the fashion and textile industries and its wealth of skills, which as Maurice Bennett CBE Joint Chairman Long Tall Sally and Kookai described as a 'Lost heritage we have allowed to slip away.' (ASBCI seminar March 2012).

To contextualise the development of a 'Made in Yorkshire' brand, the research identifies the historical growth of Yorkshire's fashion and textile heritage and its legacy of skills and technologies through oral and written histories. It also considers its economic impact locally, nationally and globally. Yorkshire is the largest county in England, situated in the north. It is subdivided into four sections known as the East, West, North and South Riding of Yorkshire. The county combines vast acres of unspoiled countryside from the dales to the bleaker aspects of the Pennines and the Yorkshire coast. There are industrial and market towns and five large cities; Hull, York, Leeds, Bradford and Sheffield in which Yorkshire specific fashion and textiles could be promoted and marketed. It has a variety of natural resources, which include the quality of its water, which is soft and helps to clean raw wool. This was a huge asset with the growth of the textile industry during the industrial revolution as wool was imported in vast quantities for the manufacture of worsted cloth in Bradford and Huddersfield. Locally mined

coal also provided the power the industry needed. The cool, humid climate was also ideal for textile manufacturing.

Yorkshire fashion

When investigating contemporary fashion in Yorkshire it appeared under documented. I wanted to discover designers who operated within the area and what sort of initiatives had been set up to promote and market Yorkshire fashion. The Internet proved to be the most useful tool in this process. A website called Hebe Media – Leeds Fashion Scene (www.hebemedial.com) attempted to pitch Leeds as a global fashion city. Leeds is the largest metropolis within Yorkshire and boasts many independent designer boutiques, luxury stores, Harvey Nichols and Joseph as well as many high street shops. When Hebe Media was formed in 2009 its vision was to drive Leeds into the list of emerging, exciting, international cities. They acknowledged there were some great stories and brands to have emerged from the city and Yorkshire. As they said 'Our Head of Fashion, Shang Ting and I both studied Fashion Marketing and Communication at Instituto Europeo di Design in Barcelona and, after graduation, we both had a number of offers to take jobs in established 'fashion cities' such as New York, London and Shanghai. We made the decision to come to Leeds because we saw the city as a 'blank canvas' (Hebe Media Part 1, 2011, p.1). As with many large cities they identified a thriving creative community that included designers, artists, DJs, models, musicians, actors, marketer's, photographers, stylists etc. The fashion hub centered around Harvey Nichols, which opened its first regional store in Leeds in 1996. They produce many fashion events within the city such as as Vogue FNO, Fashion Vs Football, fashion shows and the collaboration with the Yorkshire textile mills. Hebe Media identified several designers with businesses in Leeds and discussed the challenges faced in facilitating and supporting the path of a 'talented young designer' to 'important fashion brand' beyond the nucleus of a major capital. They recognized their initiative would include finding and nurturing some of the raw talent in the city, helping them with manufacturing facilities, through to having a successful brand based in Leeds.

Several fashion designers and retailers operate within the Yorkshire region These businesses produce ranges of clothing, shoes and accessories that are produced in Yorkshire and are often sold from boutiques featuring the name of designer such as Aqua Couture, Nicholas Deakins or Dawn Stretton. The retailers Marks and Spencer and Burton were both established in Leeds at the end of the nineteenth century. One of the more well known historical dressmaking houses was that of Madame Clapham (established by Emily Clapham) who ran a dress making salon in Hull in 1887. By the 1890's this was highly regarded and attracted world- wide patronage for the quality and style of ladies' fashion produced. Unusually as a local businesswoman with no premises outside the city, she was able to maintain a high profile clientele and compete with the London fashion houses of the period (Hull Museums Collections, 2012, p.1). The region also boasts two important textile societies in Huddersfield and Bradford, which promote the weaving mills in the area and a Yorkshire Fashion Guild, established by the Textile Centre of excellence in Huddersfield.

The questionnaire sent to members of the Northern Society of Costume and Textiles asked them to jot down any significant recollections about Yorkshire based designers and retailers. Many from the society remembered Marshall and Snelgrove a department store originally opened by a Yorkshire man, James Marshall in Oxford Street, London in 1837. The store had branches in Leeds, York, Harrogate, Sheffield and Bradford and was in business until the 1970's. A book published in 1950 by Alison Settle described the impact of this luxury store beyond London, as it expanded by opening stores in fashionable areas of regional cities.

"Today shopping out of London is as keen a business, as smart and competitive as it is in Oxford Street, Regent Street or Bond Street. Life is swifter and more mingled; women no longer come up to London "for the season' if rich or 'for a stay' if moderately well off." (p.5)

Settle analyzed the needs of customers regionally, emphasising that taste away from London, was in danger of being regulated by London. Marshall and Snelgrove stores were designed to be individual and claimed to understand the sartorial needs of its regional customers “Why women want certain types of specialised goods for life that is lived in that district, with its special functions, its differences of climate. (p. 7).

Made in Yorkshire initiative

The seeds for a ‘Made in Yorkshire’ brand were sewn after Colin McDowell asked Rita Britton to take a young designer Nabil Nayal under her wing. He had graduated from the RCA in fashion womenswear and came runner up in the renowned Fashion Fringe competition in 2011 (McDowell, 2012). Nabil, who is from Sheffield wanted to utilise Yorkshire fabrics in his collections, which Rita helped him to source. In their discussions Rita recognized there could be a much greater initiative relating to the production of fashion within Yorkshire. In buying collections for her boutique she had identified there was a new way of branding beginning to emerge. Several of the labels she sourced, including Carpe Dien and MA Cross were focusing on an exclusive way of marketing creating an aura for style and quality. They selected which stores they wanted to sell to and dictated which stores could buy which stock. The creator of Carpe Dien, Maurizio Altieri wanted to remove himself from the fake glitter of selling fashion through his approach to crafting clothes. “The design philosophy from day one was creating timeless, utilitarian, hand-made clothes from the highest quality fabrics that have undergone unique treatments These included leathers that have been washed, distressed, crushed, and buried in soil for months, silver sterling buttons, 12-gauge over dyed cashmere, and hard cottons. The pride in craftsmanship techniques and attention to detail is on par with one that goes into fabric development - .all garments are hand-made, the pants are lined, seams are carefully distressed. The result of this industrious labor is that the soul of the maker can be seen in the clothes. The garments, displayed on meat hooks come with their own tube cases – a sign of respect for a garment” (Fashion Critic, 2006, p.1). Carpe Diem refuses to advertise, produce seasonal collections, fashion shows, and engage in other activities that are expected of a fashion house. Maurizio believes this enforces an appreciation of the garment itself, the purest and most beautiful manifestation of creating clothes.

Conclusion

Separate interviews with Colin McDowell (fashion journalist), Rita Britton (fashion retailer) and Natalie Raw, (costume curator, Leeds Museums and Galleries) revealed differing opinions of fashion in Yorkshire. Colin McDowell felt that; Yorkshire has no profile as a fashion center. “Apart from Rita's shop, Yorkshire had no more claim to being a fashion center than any other county” (personal communication, 2012). On recent visits he had viewed the streets of Leeds, Huddersfield and Sheffield and seen nobody he would call fashionable. He attributed this to being a reflection of the economic situation of many, also because traditionally men and women outside the narrow confines of London’s West End and Knightsbridge do not dress fashionably. He believed these to be the few places in the UK with a strong restaurant culture and social life regularly and frequently lived outside the home. Rita Britton agreed with McDowell’s view but thought it was the job of Yorkshire people to turn the county into a fashion center by leading the times not harnessing them. Similar to creative and cultural groups such as the Arts and Crafts movement or Beatniks it was important to establish an individual identity through underground movements that would return to quality and handcrafting. Natalie Raw felt that people don’t know about Yorkshire and its fashion history, they are therefore surprised about how much is actually going on. She believed that textile companies in the area were pitching themselves as a luxury brand, mainly because of the huge costs of UK production, which dictate it has to be luxurious.

Colin McDowell said for there to be a fashion society huge numbers of people are required to play the

game from the super wealthy to talented young kids who tend to make their own fashion. In the UK, outside London even for the young fashionista it is Topshop, not a little St Martin's grad working in a chicken shed in Dalston! He did not see how any actual designer as opposed to a retailer, could ever make a living outside London. The research goes some way to disprove this idea through its historical and contemporary analysis. For instance in 1950 the view from Marshall and Snelgrove was; "Shopping out of London is seen as smart and competitive as it is in Oxford Street, Regent Street or Bond Street." (Settle, 1950, p. 5). At the 'Made in Yorkshire' meeting, discussion centred around how the initiative could look at key product areas to make an impact on the current market. It was recognised that the Chinese for instance want to buy western labels but they operate on a huge scale placing multiple orders, therefore such a market would need to be supported with a guaranteed infrastructure for manufacture. The initiative would aim to create a supportive environment where new designers could benefit from a wide range of services to support the production of quality products within the Yorkshire region. Support would need to be provided by key partners and could include: sourcing of Yorkshire produced fabric from top manufacturers, provision of Yorkshire based manufacturing capacity, investment and business start-up grants. The initiative would also aim to promote access to a network of: manufacturing, marketing and export advice, business and financial planning. Top end retailers would be needed and the biggest challenge would be manufacturing the garments. The initiative could result in increased new businesses and jobs, with higher than average chances of success through on-going support from the expert network. The development of increased high quality manufacturing could also serve to repatriate a proportion of prestige manufacturing back to the UK and the region from overseas.

The planning and infrastructure of such an enterprise and the business model of Carpe Dien, who craft luxury outside a metropolis suggest its possible to develop fashion beyond major cities. Further research could compare similar world-wide initiatives to 'Made in Yorkshire' such as those in the emerging fashion cities beyond the big four capitals of New York, London, Milan and Paris London. By harnessing a zeitgeist, individual countries could be branded, as could each region within it. This branding builds a fashion identity, which can directly impact on the economy. Consider Italy, The 'Made in Italy' label is synonymous across the Western and Eastern world as a symbol of elegance, quality and refinement (McIntyre, 2012, p.3). Fashion historian Steele stated; 'Not only are there fine quality clothes 'made in Italy', there also exists a conceptual category known as the 'Italian look' which is internationally recognized as a signifier of refined opulence and deluxe modernity, of casual, expensive, sexy elegance. Yet within this category, there is room for a variety of individual styles each of which express some aspect of what foreigners perceive as la dolce vita' (Steele, 2003, p.92). Future research could therefore focus upon 'fashion's world provinces' expanding a global notion of fashion design and production developing greater opportunities for talented designers and manufacturers within a much wider geographical expanse.