



FASHION  
FORWARD

THE NINTH FASHION FORWARD SYMPOSIUM

EMBODIED RESEARCH: LEARNING THROUGH MATERIAL CULTURE

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On August 29th 2021, **Fashion Forward** held its ninth public symposium, a speaker series on the topic of Embodied Research.

### Speaker Series:

The speaker series included three 15-minute lectures with an audience-lead Q+A session at the end. Doris Domoszalai-Lantner, Marielle Van Luijk, and Lucy McConnell came together to discuss this compelling subject.

**Doris Domoszalai-Lantner** began the session by introducing the concept of embodied research, or research that transcends the conventional text-based method and is instead given concrete, 3D form through demonstrations, exhibitions, performances, and more. She outlined the importance of material culture—tangible physical sources of information—in research, and its systemic neglect in academia.

Referencing scholar Elizabeth Wayland Barber, whose book *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* underscored just one of the many reasons for this ongoing repudiation of critical sources, Domoszalai-Lantner pointed out that the field of fashion, from which so many of our material culture sources originate, is predominantly female, and thus, critically undervalued.



To demonstrate the breadth and versatility of embodied research, Domoszalai-Lantner presented a wide range of case studies, starting with her research on the Busójárás, a festival in southern Hungary where participants dress up in extraordinary costumes and commemorate both the end of Ottoman rule and the end of winter. Taking part in this 6-day long celebration in 2020, Domoszalai-Lantner was able to physically experience and see the details of the Busó sheepskin costume, while learning about its history and cultural implications by interviewing and observing the festival's fellow participants.

This kind of embodied research exemplifies the intricacies inherent in the study of material culture, and the importance of deriving knowledge not to be found in text-based research practices.

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Much of Domoszalai-Lantner's work concerns archives, which are inherently physical places where whole bodies of works are preserved and intimately studied. She recalled her research of early 20th century designer Eta Hentz's archive at the FIT Library department of Special Collections, and of Jean Paul Gaultier's 1986 Russian Constructivist collection in the designer's Paris archive. Domoszalai-Lantner has also founded and managed several archives, including those of major fashion conglomerates, private ultra high-net-worth individuals, and also experimental ones, such as the social media-based Quarantine S/S20. The latter was established during and as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, collecting and showcases images and texts that demonstrated sartorial practices from all around the world during this formative period of time.



**Marielle Van Luijk**, a collector of Hungarian folk dress, addressed the topic as a means of learning and performing tradition. Van Luijk, who is of Dutch and Hungarian descent, started to collect and wear folk dress as part of a quest to learn about her heritage. She self-identifies as a modern Zoltán Kodály or Béla Bartók, both musicians and composers who were also ethnographers researching folk music in the 20th century. As part of her research methodology, Van Luijk travels the country, meeting the women who own and wear folk clothing in order to learn about their pieces and experiences first hand.

Through her embodied research, Van Luijk has learned that folk dress was "...worn daily until roughly the Second World War, when traditional peasant life was changing, and industrialization took off." In addition, communism and access to modern clothing brought different trends forward, deeming traditional clothing uncomfortable and unfashionable. Tragically, she says, many of these pieces were burned, leaving few original extant examples.

These garments are telling of their wearers as well as the values their society holds dear. Through the different applications of stripes, embroideries, and colors, they show differences in class, income, and beliefs. Looking at a piece, one can tell whether its wearer is Catholic or Protestant, married or single, already a mother, wealthy or poor. These are subtleties that textbooks tend to overlook, and which she has been slowly learning as a collector and practitioner of oral history. Unfortunately, textbooks and archival collections skip on the details and at times lack authenticity tend to be the ones that get referenced in research. She is mindful of the limitations of her own research as well, however. Since there are not a lot of extant original pieces in circulation, she sometimes reconstructs original ensembles to the best of her knowledge and abilities using a combination of both old and ribbons, fabrics, and embroideries. Moreover, Van Luijk is cognizant of representation; she says that "while I tend to wear the clothes of younger and wealthier women on Instagram, it is not representative of all folk dress in the region, but only a small fraction of it, and not their everyday customs either."

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**Lucy McConnell** presented on what is now known as the Paisley shawl, and its ability to depict shifts in culture, technology, and the economy. Imported to Europe and the U.K. from Kashmir, India in the 18th century, the Paisley shawl rapidly became wildly popular, with demand triggering an entirely new industry being set up in Scotland to imitate the original pieces. It remains an emblematic piece of material culture to this day.

McConnell gave an overview of the Paisley shawl's long and impactful history. She noted that the most sought out shawls remained the originals produced in Kashmir, but as European manufacturers realized the commercial potentials, imitations were made using vastly different methods that ensured quick and economic production. Although the imitations were first produced all over Europe, the city Paisley, in Scotland, soon became the leading manufacturer. This centralized production had several advantages, including reduced cost, a strong system of transportation, and the increased skill of the weavers themselves. Technological adaptations and advances were frequently made by weavers to their looms, effectively providing a point of reference for future researchers with which to determine when certain shawls were made. Manufacturing was indeed so prevalent in this Scottish textile town, that the shawl once known as the "Kashmir shawl" came to be ubiquitously known as the "Paisley shawl," a great source of national pride to this day.



McConnell noted that in the early 19th century, the trade for Paisley shawls grew exponentially both nationally and internationally, and gave rise to popularity of the shawls across all socioeconomic classes. By the 1870s, fashions changed, and consumer demand began to fade. While the Paisley shawl's popularity has dramatically declined since then, it still serves as a crucial example of how material culture sources serve as an imprint of larger contexts, and can be powerful vessels to tell stories about the economy, society, innovation, and national identity.

At the end of her presentation, McConnell held a live object analysis session utilizing various Paisley shawls from her own, and a community organization's collections. Trained eyes, such as McConnell's, can recognize differences not only between originals produced from the fine fur of Kashmir goats and their more economic adaptations, but also tell the social and economic context of the decade that the pieces were produced, based on colors, patterns, and weaving methods.

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The aim of this symposium was to help facilitate a discourse embracing inclusivity and diversity. We will be continuing this series in 2021 by featuring speakers from various backgrounds to discuss issues such as global inclusion, social research, and more.

### ABOUT THE SPEAKERS



**Doris Domoszlai-Lantner** is a New York-based fashion historian and archivist. She holds an M.A. in Fashion and Textile Studies: History, Theory, Museum Practice from the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), and a B.A. in History and East European Studies from Barnard College, Columbia University. She is a regular author for various journals and publications, including *The Psychology of Fashion* and *Vestoj*, as well as a speaker at international venues, including Oxford University, and LIM College. She has founded and developed several private and corporate fashion archives. Most recently, Doris co-founded Fashion Forward in 2020.



**Marielle Van Luijk** is a professional musician and teacher, and folk dress collector who enhances her study and performance practices with material culture. Marielle, who grew up between Holland and Hungary, states: "As long as I can remember, I have had a passion for Hungarian folk clothing and for the Hungarian culture as a whole. I started to collect Hungarian folk clothing as a teenager when I started my first job, and have not stopped ever since. While collecting folk clothing, I also learn about the history of the people who wore these fantastic costumes, by doing first-hand research like visiting the previous owners in their local towns and talking with them. Every costume that I own has its own personal story."



**Lucy McConnell** is a Dress and Textile Historian with specialisms in textiles produced in Paisley, Scotland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the British government's Utility Clothing Scheme during the Second World War. Lucy is currently undertaking her Ph.D at the University of Huddersfield, England. Within her research Lucy seeks to unearth the hidden histories of individuals and groups involved in the manufacture and sale of garments and textiles, through exploring the social, cultural, political, economic and technological histories within the written record and imbued in material cultures of extant objects. Through her research interests, ranging from the eighteenth century to the present day, Lucy has worked on several projects from exhibitions, displays, and archiving, to written publications, conference presentations and guest lecturing, workshop facilitation, and advising on historical costume for television.

### ABOUT FASHION FORWARD

Fashion Forward's mission is to explore complex issues in culture, society, technology, and sustainability through the lens of fashion. Often either dismissed as trivial, or completely overcomplicated in academia, we aim to take the abstract concepts that exist around fashion and create and curate accessible knowledge that is socially responsible, approachable, and understandable for all.

We envision a society in which learning is enjoyable and easily accessible. By bringing together the most cutting edge researchers, pioneering industry experts, and passionate advocates, we seek to create educational programming that is both enriching and relatable to all. After all, dressing is a daily part of life that we all share. By exploring its spectrum of meanings and functions— from serving as a source of livelihood, to expressing identity, and empowering us both individually and collectively— fashion taps into the many facets of storytelling, and ultimately, provides a lens through which to understand humanity.

For more information on our work, please visit [www.fashionforward.io](http://www.fashionforward.io) or find us on social media:



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