

Fabulous Fashions, Dress History Dilemmas, and the Death Throes of Dichotomy: Fashion Stories, Ethnicity and Geography

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Abstract

The term 'non-western' is founded on dichotomy. Used to qualify the word 'fashion', 'non-western' implies that a series of west/non-west relations alters our understanding of what fashion can be. Some form of difference is also inscribed between 'western fashion' and 'non-western fashion'. How can such meta-geographical concepts of west and non-west be mapped onto a spinning globe, especially in relation to fashion's multiple cultural systems, global flows and cosmopolitan associations? This paper interrogates some aspects of understanding 'non-western fashion', by focussing on issues of taxonomy, cultural heritage, textile history, fashion and national identity. Fashion historiography and the notion of story telling are used to consider the potential of fashion as a vehicle for communicating geography (telling stories of the land) and ethnicity (telling stories of a shared culture). In tracking stories of western and non-western fashion heritage across India, China and Europe, and from the 19th century to the present day, this paper offers reflections on the possibilities and pitfalls of using 'non-western fashion' as a critical term.