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Alison Matthews David (review)

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Fashion Victims: The Dangers of Dress Past and Present,

by Alison Matthews David

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. 226 pp., ISBN 978-1-4725-7773-3 (p/bk), AU\$49.99

*Reviewed by Claire Jane Regnault | Museum of New Zealand
Te Papa Tongarewa*

Fashion Victims opens with a story of a horrific, accidental death. The body count grows with each chapter. David's first chronicled death is that of Karen Wetterham, a chemistry professor who died in 1997 after she spilt a few drops of mercury on her latex gloved hand. David employs Wetterham's story to emphasize our expectation that clothing is "supposed to shield our fragile, yet yielding flesh from danger" yet often "fails spectacularly." These spectacular failures and their victims are the subject of this beautiful yet at times intensely gruesome book—a dichotomy perfectly expressed by the opening illustration of a half fashionably dressed, half skeletal couple, ca. 1805 to 1810.

While *Fashion Victims* starts with a story from recent history (that is after the reader has waded through the ill-placed List of Illustrations and Acknowledgements), David's primary foci is dress and its manufacture in France, the United Kingdom, and North America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. David's chosen period is characterized by the industrialization of labor, scientific experimentation, and the democratization of fashion, which in turn gave rise to a myriad of new problems. These included, as Jean-Baptiste Moreau observed in 1778, "the creation of a multitude of poisons unknown in previous centuries." It wasn't only those who opted for fashion's extremes who were affected. A man, woman, or child could fall victim to something as basic as socks. As a writer for the *London Times* opined: "What manufactured article in these days of high pressure civilisation can possibly be trusted if socks may be dangerous?"

Side effects of the industrial age form the basis of each chapter, including the transmission of disease through dress, fabrics treated with dangerous chemicals, mechanical entanglements, and combustible materials. While this might seem to be the stuff of penny dreadfuls, David adeptly shows that they were the unfortunate stuff of daily life. The author skillfully evokes the realities of the worlds in which garments we admire in museums were made and worn. She takes the reader into the chemistry labs where

the color revolution was underway, the stifling workrooms in which hatters and artificial flower makers worked unprotected, and the theatres in which ballerinas pirouetted in front of open flames. Down unsanitary streets where skirts trailed in an assortment of muck, and into fashionable ballrooms where women's gowns and headdresses filled the air with arsenic as they waltzed and fugitive dyes seeped into blistered feet.

David uses the term “fashion victims” in the way it was used in the nineteenth century, when it literally referred to “someone in danger of risking their life by following the latest fashion trends.” The chapters on fashion's hazardous extremes, from fire-grate sweeping crinolines and hobble skirts to Isadora Duncan's infamous scarf, pale in comparison to David's exploration of the relationship between science and fashion. The author's expansive research and storytelling really come to the fore in the chapters on mercury, arsenic-based pigments, and dangerous dyes.

An associate professor in the School of Fashion at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada, David has taken an interdisciplinary approach to her research and drawn on a wide range of period sources, from clothing and fashion plates, to *Punch* cartoons, newspapers, the writings of Marx and Engels, and, most gruesomely revealing, medical reports and collections. As David's scholarship demonstrates, medical accounts provide fashion historians with an untapped wealth of information. She certainly uses it to great effect. Wax casts showing the impact of mercury poisoning on the hand of a twenty-five-year-old hatter and the mouth and teeth of another are in equal parts captivating and repellent. In the chapter on arsenical green, medical illustrations detailing the grisly effect of arsenic on the bodies of artificial flower makers are all the more shocking when viewed alongside the exquisite headdresses and shoes they fashioned. The illustrations make it all the easier to believe that poor Matilda Scheurer, the flower maker whose death opens the chapter, really did see green everywhere before she died.

Textile workers—women, men, and children—are the primary, and most numerous, victims in this book. As Friedrich Engels wrote in 1844: “It is a curious fact that the production of precisely those articles which serve the personal adornment of the ladies of the bourgeoisie involves the saddest consequence for the health of their workers.” David chronicles a litany of work-induced ailments suffered by textile workers, including lameness, respiratory illnesses, swollen genitalia, anemia, cancers, impaired neuromotor systems, mood disorders, abortions, and stillborn children. David's sympathies clearly

lie with the workers, and anger often bubbles beneath her text as she cites numerous damning reports written by doctors that were consistently ignored by employers, heads of industry, legislators, and governments. Indeed, 200 years and numerous deaths lie between Jacques-René Tenon's report on mercury poisoning amongst hatters in 1757, and the eventual decline of its use in the 1960s in Britain, where it was never officially banned. The reason? Mercury was never perceived as dangerous to those who counted—the paying customers.

David contrasts this situation with that of arsenical green, the poisonous effects of which were felt amongst workers and fashionable society. Arsenical dresses left their wearers with unsightly skin eruptions, and were reputed to release clouds of arsenic powder into the air, inciting one commentator to write: "Now if the ladies persist in wearing arsenic dresses, a ball will be as deadly and destructive as a cannon ball." It was fashionable society's eventual rejection of arsenical green, not the "accidental" deaths and ailments of workers, that led to its decline and the development of safe alternatives. In her introduction, David asks who is to blame for these dress-related deaths? It becomes clear, over and over again, that the answer most often lies in economic drivers.

Wishing to substantiate "the dangers described by doctors and chemists in historical texts," David herself turns to science in search of material evidence. While Henry Letheby encouraged women in the midst the 1860s arsenic scare to test their own garments with liquid ammonia, David and her collaborators use X-ray Fluorescence Spectrometer (XRF) to analyse chemical traces in a range of garments. Their analysis of a number of hats confirmed the results of a pioneering study by Victoria & Albert conservators Graham Martin and Marian Kite, namely that traces of mercury remain a threat to those who handle felted hats. While her scientific team found traces of arsenic in a stunning emerald green ball gown, child's dress, and pair of shoes, the results are less conclusive. Having dedicated half a page to the testing, it was frustrating to be left hanging with a breezy comment that "further sleuthing and scientific analysis" was required. As a museum professional, I found these case studies fascinating. However, in the aid of narrative and stylistic flow, they would have benefited from being pulled out of the main body of the text into break-out boxes.

Determined not to let her readers believe that deadly issues associated with clothing have been safely consigned to the annals of history, David interweaves contemporary references throughout the book, and concludes it with a chapter dedicated to the ills of today's fast fashion industry. While

she gives examples of garments dangerous to wearers, including an unintentionally radioactive belt by Alexander McQueen, it is the makers who continue to suffer from the demands of fashion. The book ends with an X-ray of the lungs of a Turkish denim sandblaster from the early 2000s suffering from silicosis. Almost acting as a prequel to Lucy Siegle's book *To Die For: Is Fashion Wearing Out the World?* (2011), which focuses on the negative impacts of globalized fast fashion, David largely succeeds in her aim to "provide a 'usable' past for current debates around issues of health and sustainability in the fashion industry."

While Bloomsbury is enthusiastically promoting *Fashion Victims* as "Fabulously gory and gruesome," it is a serious book. It is well-researched, well-referenced, and richly illustrated. Despite some distracting shifts in tone and heavy-handed word play, which comes across as an unnecessary concession to "populism," it is highly readable, engaging, and accessible. As such, *Fashion Victims* should deservedly attract a wide readership, from historians and museum professionals to fashion enthusiasts. I hope, along with David, that its stories will inspire some form of personal action among its readers. David's fashion victims certainly continue to haunt me.

The book follows on the heels of the successful exhibition *Fashion Victims: The Pleasures & Perils of Dress in the 19th Century* at the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto, which David co-curated with Senior Curator Elizabeth Semmelhack. The exhibition runs until June 2016.

***Drowned/Undrowned*, Sally J. Morgan and Jess Richards**

September 2, 2015, The Pit, Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

Reviewed by Kinglsey Baird | Massey University

When you were about two and a half, you nearly drowned. You were rescued by your pregnant mother, but the breath had already gone from your small body. You've told me about your memories of lying underwater, not able to breathe any more.

So Jess Richards recounts to her fellow performer and lover, Sally Morgan, in their performance *Drowned/Undrowned*, comprising a live reading in three acts and a single channel video projection. The two artists sit on high