

Maude Bass-Krueger

**Research Proposal**

**Dress History and New Materialisms in France:  
Thinking, Displaying, Recreating and Wearing Historic Dress  
in Nineteenth-Century France**

As a postdoctoral fellow at the Zvi Yavetz School of Historical Studies, I propose to expand and revise my dissertation for publication and further my research on the intersection between dress history and material culture in nineteenth- and twentieth-century France. As part of this fellowship, I also plan to write a new research paper for publication on the first exhibitions of costume in France—a subject that has hitherto been largely unexplored despite its importance for the history of French cultural history, material culture, and collecting. My dissertation, “Costume History in Nineteenth-Century France: Historicism in Fashion, Historicism and Fashion,” which I will defend at the end of July, explores both how and why clothing became historicized. I argue that questions raised by the materiality of historic garments were central to the rise and popularization of dress histories, exhibitions, reenactments, plays, and to certain transformations in contemporary fashion. The work of nineteenth-century historians, collectors, public officials, and couturiers inaugurated modern dress history, whose historiography remains largely unexamined. The Zvi Yavetz or Thomas Arthur Arnold postdoctoral fellowship would not only allow me time to revise my research in view of publishing a monograph from my dissertation, but would allow me to develop my research on the history of costume exhibitions in order to turn this original work into an academic paper. More importantly, a postdoctoral fellowship at Tel Aviv University would grant me the occasion to work with Professor Billie Melman, whose work on the culture of history has been an important reference for my own research and whose insight on my project would be invaluable to its revision. Professor Melman has agreed to take me on a faculty mentor.

My dissertation probes the relationship between materiality and the symbolic, economic, social, and political value of historic dress in nineteenth-century France. It looks historically at how the “matter” of dress came to be recognized by historians, curators, and the general public. Chapter One reveals the role played by Jules Quicherat (1814-1882), the first professor of medieval archaeology at the *École des chartes*, in helping clothing to be seen as a valid material source within the writing of French history. Drawing on a critical analysis of texts, visual sources, and material culture to support an overarching theoretical argument on the role of the fashion industry in French history, Quicherat’s *Histoire du costume en France* was first modern history of French fashion.<sup>1</sup> As I show, Quicherat’s originality was founded in his archaeological methodology: he elevated costume history to a field of scientific inquiry while integrating it within a Romantic narrative about the cohesive development of French identity and industrial manufacturing from the Gauls to the Revolution. Quicherat’s positivist methodology, which compared texts and objects in order to reach historical ‘truth,’ combined the scientific authority of an archaeological study of costume with a popular narrative about French identity that was inspired by Jules Michelet’s historical Romanticism.

My second chapter looks closely at the debates that arose over display practices, exhibition politics, groups of organizers, and authenticity within the first exhibitions of historic dress.<sup>2</sup> By the early twentieth-century two very different display practices had evolved for the historical presentation of fashion. In early chronological displays, garments were assembled alongside contextual textiles, accessories, and pictorial representations; in later *tableau vivant* displays, recreated

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<sup>1</sup> Jules Quicherat, *Histoire du costume en France depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu’à nos jours* (Paris: Hachette, 1875).

<sup>2</sup> These founding exhibitions are the ‘Musée Historique du Costume,’ 1874, organized by the Union Centrale des Beaux- Arts Appliqués à l’Industrie; the ‘Costumes Anciennes,’ at the Exposition des Arts de la Femme, 1892, organized by the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs; the ‘Musée Rétrospectif des Classes 85 & 86: Le Costume et ses accessoires, 1900, organized by the ‘Comités d’Installation des Classes 85 & 86 for the 1900 Exposition Universelle; the ‘Costume de la Femme à Travers les Ages,’ 1900, organized by the designer Felix for the 1900 Exposition Universelle.

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dress was mounted on wax mannequins and displayed within thematic vignettes. By 1900, the practice of dress history had shifted from the hands of scholars and historians such as Quicherat to artist-collectors such as Maurice Leloir (1853-1940). This shift was accompanied by a spectacularization of dress history that was part of the wider cultural interest in historic dress reenactments, fashion historicism, and historical romanticism examined in my dissertation.

In both cases, dress was seen as a portal to the past and a way to revive France's illustrious history in an era shaken by the loss of the Franco-Prussian war (1870-1871), the violence of the Paris Commune (1871), and the ferocity of the Dreyfus Affair (1894-1906). Costume exhibitions were also testaments to the past, present, and future glory of French industry—an increasingly anxiety-making topic as the end of the nineteenth-century drew near and the French grew increasingly concerned with the advances the English were making in the industrial arts. Not only does this chapter examine the debates that arose around the materiality of historic dress within the early displays of costume history but it also studies the way in which historic dress came to be seen as an artistic object worthy of display. While examining theoretical views on the relationship between authenticity and materiality of historic dress, this chapter traces how dress history was institutionalized first as an industrial art, then as a decorative art, and finally as a singular art necessitating its own museum.

I would use the postdoctoral fellowship to rework this chapter into an article for publication in a peer-reviewed journal—in Tel Aviv University's journal of *History & Memory*, for instance. The article, "The Problem of Materiality in the Museum: The First Exhibitions of Costume in France, 1874-1920," expands the chronology of my chapter in order to include two more early costume exhibitions. It would focus more particularly on the debates around costume's place within the industrial arts and differing opinions on the display of historic versus recreated garments. My application includes an article I published in the peer-reviewed

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journal *Costume* based on my World War I research; I have attached this as an example of quality of research that I am proposing for this new article on materiality and museums.

Chapter Three explores the symbolic function of dress reenactment within the historical imagination of nineteenth-century France. The practice of recreating and wearing historic dress to fancy dress events and in local historical pageants allowed participants to actively explore the French past in order to resolve social or political conflicts and create emotional attachments to the nation or the pays. Historic *travestissement* also helped the middle class and bourgeoisie appropriate France's visual culture of its own past and present. Nineteenth-century politicians used historic dress reenactment as an ideological, pedagogical, culture, and political tool, thus infusing the reenacted garments with meaning: pageant organizers emphasized revival of local history as a way to "activate commerce, stimulate artists and spread throughout the people this ease, so necessary to maintain social order, as well as that which imprints in men a national character that does not stem from need or deprivation."<sup>3</sup>

My fourth and fifth chapters, which are currently in progress, explore the uses of historic garments in theatre and in couture and confection. The chapter on theatre investigates the way that historic dress was codified to represent historical figures from France's past while the fifth chapter addresses the transformation of historic garments into fashionable jackets and dresses. This chapter looks specifically at garments conserved at the Art Décoratifs and the Palais Galliera in order to understand how and why eighteenth-century garments were re-sewn into fashionable dress.