

# Global Fashion as a Tool in the Ethnographic Museum

Wessie Ling      Daan van Dartel

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## Abstract

How does global fashion factor into a reconfiguration of the dress and textile collection in the ethnographic museum, and vice versa? What role do global histories play in reshuffling museum collections at this moment of cultural change? In what ways can global fashion be considered part of the grand global narrative? And to what extent can it be used as a tool in the grand scheme of museum collection, narration, curation and presentation in the ethnographic setting? This article scrutinizes these questions by analyzing the operations of ethnographic museums in diverse and multicultural societies. It uses global fashion as a tool in the conceptual and everyday handling of ethnographic artifacts. Here, global fashion does not point to a stylistic form of dress in a given locality. Indeed, our study expands on the work of Ling and Segre Reinach, who determined that fashion-making allows for multiple layers of world encounters involving intriguing cultural dynamics, and applies it to museum operations. The National Museum of World Cultures, the Netherlands, is taken as a case in point, through which archival research findings are analyzed to underpin global histories and explore global fashion as a conceptual framework for museum practice. We conducted qualitative research via an internal workshop on Global Fashion/Narrative in the Ethnographic Museum (Jan 2019) in which sixteen museum curatorial professionals assessed global fashion as a tool for museum practice in an ethnographic setting. The aim of this study is to propose global fashion as an interdisciplinary conceptual framework for museum practice in, but not exclusive to, the dress and textile venues.

**Keywords:** global fashion; ethnographic museum; decoloniality; fashion curation; museology.

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**Wessie Ling:** Northumbria University (United Kingdom)

✉ [wessie.ling@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:wessie.ling@northumbria.ac.uk); <http://wessieling.com>

She is a Reader in Fashion Studies at Northumbria University. Co-editor of *Fashion in Multiple Chinas: Chinese Styles in the Transglobal Landscape* (2018), she has written widely on Chinese fashion with entries to Bloomsbury's *Encyclopedia of East Asian Design* (2019). Her recent co-edited special journal issues include Modern Italy on "Italianerie": *Transculturality, Co-creation and Transforming Identities between Italy and Asia* (2019) and the present one, *Global Fashion* (2019). In 2018, she was ASEAN Research Fellow at the Research Institute of Languages and Cultures of Asia at Mahidol University and Rita Bolland Fellow for Textile and Fashion Study in the Research Centre of Material Culture at the National Museum of World Cultures, the Netherlands (2018/9).

**Daan van Dartel:** National Museum of World Cultures (Netherlands)

✉ [daan.vandartel@wereldculturen.nl](mailto:daan.vandartel@wereldculturen.nl)

She is curator of popular culture and fashion at the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands. She is an anthropologist and museologist, working on contemporary culture related to the history of ethnography collections and museums. Exhibitions she worked on include Body Art, Cool Japan, Fashion Cities Africa and Things That Matter, where she addressed issues of fashion, identity and cultural appropriation. Van Dartel has written articles on batik, Japanese designer Hanae Mori, and is currently researching on Surinamese kotomisi dress and fashion.

## Introduction

In 2014, the Tropenmuseum (transl. Tropical Museum) in Amsterdam, the Afrika Museum in Bergen Dal) and the Museum Volkenkunde (transl. Ethnology Museum) in Leiden merged to become the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (NMVW, transl. National Museum of World Cultures). Working in close cooperation with the Wereldmuseum (transl. World Museum) in Rotterdam, NMVW is now a collective of major ethnographic museums in the Netherlands, with about 450,000 objects and over 600,000 photographs cataloguing the diversity of world cultures. Among them, Tropenmuseum, Museum Volkenkunde and Wereldmuseum house significant Indonesian textile collections. Important Mexican textile collections are also part of the original collection in Volkenkunde. These collections are said to be the best outside of their country of origin. Built on the foundation of these renowned collections, textiles were placed in permanent museum exhibitions, where they were highlighted as an integral aspect of dress culture of specific localities. For example, until 2009, Tropenmuseum mounted a permanent Indonesian textile exhibition with historical garments and cloths combined with fashion by contemporary Indonesian designer BinHouse. The exhibition was later dismantled in favor of creating a space for educational purposes, leaving a vacuum of textile exhibitions in the museum and across NMVW.

It was not until 2015 that NMVW appointed a curator in Fashion and Popular Culture, the first in an ethnographic museum worldwide. Concurrently, the backdrop of decolonization spanned the museum sector worldwide, as did the obsolescence of ethnographic museums. The treatment of the Dutch colonial period in public spaces has been the subject of contested debate in recent years, one which Dutch museums are quick to respond to and take action upon. They are among the most proactive museums to implement radical measures to descale the negative impact of colonization by rewording bigoted terms, offering transparency on the colonial legacy from the museum collections and developing a national policy regarding claims for colonial heritage. For instance, Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum has removed any terms that might be considered radically charged or offensive from the digitized titles and descriptions of their 220,000 artworks,<sup>1</sup> in spite of criticism on rewriting history; the Mauritshuis in The Hague, home to national treasures including Vermeer's *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, has removed the bust of the namesake slave-trader founder as part of a reorganization of its collection to reflect a "growing discussion in society" about the country's slave-trading past;<sup>2</sup> Amsterdam Museum bans the term *Golden Age* to describe the 17<sup>th</sup> century, an era strongly linked to Dutch national pride, when the Netherlands was at its pinnacle as a military and trading power, as an effort to address the concurrent poverty, war, forced labor and human trafficking.<sup>3</sup>

Given the conventional remit of ethnographic museums to display indigenous "people-as-objects"<sup>4</sup> as genuine exotics, staging cultures necessarily silent, they are under pressure from diverse and multicultural societies to transform themselves, to take a critical stance toward ethnography, colonialism and the museum's own history. As the country's major ethnographic museum, NMVW has been at the forefront in the reflection on the shackles of colonial relations. It has set out to reinvent itself and enhance its value to the Dutch and world community by proposing new approaches. Their radical measures include a recent museum publication, *Words Matter/Woorden Doen Ertoe*<sup>5</sup>, the first, in the Netherlands

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1. Amah-Rose Abrams, "The Rijksmuseum Removes 'Radically Charged' Language from Its Collection," *Artnet News*, (December 11, 2019), <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/rijksmuseum-racially-charged-language-collection-391220>, (accessed July 15, 2019).

2. Gordon Darroch, "Dutch Museum Row Reopens Uneasy Debate about Colonial Legacy," *The Guardian*, (January 15, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/25/dutch-museum-row-reopens-debate-colonial-legacy-mauritshuis-hague>, (accessed July 15, 2019).

3. Daniel Boffey, "End of Golden Age: Dutch Museum Bans Term from Exhibits," *Guardian*, (September 13, 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/13/end-of-golden-age-amsterdam-museum-bans-term-from-exhibits>, (accessed September 13, 2019).

4. See Mirjam Shatanawi, "Tropical Malaise: The Demise of Museums of 'Non-Western Peoples'," *Bidoun*, vol. 10 (Spring, 2007), 42–4, <https://www.bidoun.org/articles/tropical-malaise>.

5. National Museum of World Cultures, *Words Matter/Woorden Doen Ertoe* (Leiden: National Museum of World Cultures,

and worldwide, bilingual guide to word choice in the cultural sector, offering explanations and alternative suggestions of bigoted terms, many of which are still used prevalently across the museum sector. More recently, in March 2019, the publication of *Return of Cultural Objects: Principles and Process* provided advice to the Minister of Culture, the final authority to grant the return of objects, and developed a national policy in the Netherlands regarding claims of colonial heritage.<sup>6</sup> Its effort to include fashion in the museum is particularly bold, as clothing collections in ethnographic museums, or in most regional museums, are often referred to as *dress* or *costume*, but never as *fashion*. It is not without reason that the museum has incorporated fashion as part of the mechanism of decolonization, since decentralization has effectively changed the agenda and development of fashion studies in recent years. In particular, dress, textile and fashion outside of the dominant Euro-America are re-appraised and scrutinized in order to revise the seemingly Eurocentric fashion discourse.

Global fashion has thus been introduced on the agenda, facilitated by case studies from around the world in anticipation of the debate on the concept of fashion from multiple perspectives. The creation of a new role in fashion curation not only taps into the revolution of fashion theory, but it could well be seen as a first in ethnographic museums worldwide, since historically, fashion was not part of the ideology that ethnographic museums inhabited and conveyed. An increased acquisition of fashion pieces and the consideration of textile and dress collections through the lens of fashion have subsequently been on the rise. Given its ethnographic setting, the museum has a keen interest in acquiring global fashion, which is linked to its existing collection, in the hope of shuffling collections from past centuries and offering contemporaneous meanings to the existing archive. This poses immediate questions regarding the definition and role of global fashion in NMVW, its relation to the museum's existing collection and its position in the grand scheme of museum practice.

The connection between global fashion and the activities of NMVW can be seen through the work of the Research Centre for Material Culture (RCMC). As a flagship research institute within NMVW, RCMC provides a focal point for research on ethnographic collections in the Netherlands. Serving the three named museums under the umbrella of NMVW, RCMC initiates interdisciplinary research projects and programs to address the historical and contemporary meanings of NMVW collections; their role in national and global histories; and the contemporary societal questions around issues of heritage, cultural identity and belonging that these objects raise. The center acts as a think tank for NMVW, exploring the pursuit of research through a handful of fellowships, organization of thematic seminars and debates, and dissemination of research and findings. To direct the fashion curator's activities toward the zeitgeist of global fashion discourse, RCMC fosters critical approaches that incorporate global fashion in the museum's practice. Such initiative is taken through the work of Rita Bolland Fellows with whom NMVW collections are examined under the rubric of a transglobal landscape underscoring postcoloniality, transculturality and multifaceted practices.

Despite the welcome dual effort of NMVW and RCMC to adopt global fashion in the museum, fundamental questions arise, along with questions about methods of implementation. For instance, what exactly is global fashion? What is its role in NMVW? How does global fashion relate to transformations within the collections of dress and textiles in NMVW, and vice versa? What role do global histories play in reshuffling the museum collections at this moment of cultural change? In what ways can global fashion be considered part of the grand global narrative? And to what extent can it be used as a tool in the grand scheme of museum collection, narration, curation and presentation within the ethnographic setting? This article scrutinizes these questions by situating the operations of the ethnographic museum in diverse and multicultural societies. It uses global fashion as a tool in the conceptual and everyday handling of ethnographic artifacts. Here, global fashion does not point to a stylistic form of dress in a given locality, but a site for multiple layers of world encounters that lead to intriguing cultural dynam-

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2018).

6. See Tropenmuseum, 2019, <https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/en/about-tropenmuseum/press/dutch-national-museum-world-cultures-nmvw-announces-principles-claims>, (accessed July 15, 2019); "Dutch Museums 'Willing' to Return Stolen Art to Former Colonies," *The Archaeology News Network*, (March 10, 2019), <https://archaeologynewsnetwork.blogspot.com/2019/03/dutch-museums-willing-to-return-stolen.html#db8UfD1sF4hVxjkE.99>, (accessed May 15, 2019).

ics.<sup>7</sup> Our aim is to consider global fashion as an interdisciplinary conceptual framework for museum practice in, but not exclusive to, dress and textile.

In doing so, this article will first examine the intriguing relationship between fashion and ethnography through the lens of the museum in order to dissect the operation of global histories. The research findings from RCMC Rita Bolland Fellows will then be analyzed to substantiate the underpinning of global histories and the essence of global fashion as a conceptual framework for museum practice. How the framework of global fashion can be executed as a tool in the ethnographic museum was discussed in an internal workshop on *Global Fashion/Narrative in the Ethnographic Museum* (Jan 2019) in which sixteen curatorial professionals from NMVW participated in order to generate qualitative findings. This article encapsulates these findings as a preliminary proposal for NMVW to incorporate global fashion as a tool in museum operation.

## Fashion, Ethnography and the Museum

Fashion exhibitions have proliferated in recent years across the museum sector, given its accessibility and popularity across class, gender and generations. *Christian Dior: Designer of Dream* in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (2017–8) then the Victoria & Albert Museum (2019), *China: Through the Looking Glass* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2015), *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2011), then the Victoria & Albert Museum (2015), and *Louis Vuitton-Marc Jacobs* in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (2012), among many others, are blockbuster shows that have won a global following. Fashion exhibitions are not limited to museums that house a fashion and textile collection; in fact, increasingly, they are seen in contemporary art museums and galleries, as well as commercial and retail settings. Even regional museums have benefitted generously from the stardust of fashion exhibition. When the Bowes Museum in County Durham staged *Yves Saint Laurent: Style is Eternal* (2015), the first exhibition in the UK to present a comprehensive display of the French designer's work and life, the exhibition was extended for three months following huge popularity. Indeed, it is believed to be the most popular exhibition in the Bowes Museum's history, attracting three times the usual number of visitors: an estimated figure of more than 70,000 visitors to the exhibition was claimed.<sup>8</sup> The fruitful collaboration of the Fondation Pierre Bergé with the Yves Saint Laurent exhibition is leading a new path to museum expansion in international partnerships and raising the profile of regional museums abroad. In fact, the museum has recently expanded its international reputation by furthering its cultural links with China, opening up a dialogue with venues across the United Arab Emirates and exploring opportunities for collaboration on the Museum's expanding touring exhibition program.<sup>9</sup>

That fashion exhibitions appeal to cross-cultural demographics, thereby widening participation, has raised an eyebrow in other unlikely institutions, such as ethnographic museums. For instance, conceptualized in Royal Pavilion and Museums in Brighton (UK), in 2017, Tropenmuseum staged *Fashion Cities Africa* (2017–9) (Figure 1) thereafter Afrika Museum (2019–20), an exhibition on fashion from Africa and the urban fashion scene. Fashion from the African subcontinent, incomparable with the household name of Yves Saint Laurent, is unfamiliar to many. The exhibition features creative works from four major African cities: Casablanca (Morocco), Johannesburg (South Africa), Nairobi (Kenya) and Lagos (Nigeria). From street wear to couture to experimental to low-key styles, the exhibition enables the wearers, makers and cognoscenti to express their identity, personal style and background, and it plunges the visitor into the vibrant and varied fashion scenes that are influencing the world of fashion.

7. Wessie Ling and Simona Segre Reinach, "Fashion-Making in the Transglobal Landscape," in *Fashion in Multiple Chinas: Chinese Styles in the Transglobal Landscape*, eds. Wessie Ling and Simona Segre Reinach (London, Oxford: IB Tauris/Bloombury, 2018), 1–12.

8. Maev Kennedy, "Yves Saint Laurent Exhibition Extended After Museum's Visitor Numbers Triple," *The Guardian*, (October 11, 2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2015/oct/11/yves-saint-laurent-exhibition-extended-bowes-museum>, (accessed July 15, 2019).

9. The Bowes Museum, "The Bowes Museum Leads the way to Raise the Profile of Regional Museums Abroad," 2019, <https://www.thebowesmuseum.org.uk/About-Us/News/Detail/ArtMID/3381/ArticleID/4373/The-Bowes-Museum-Leads-the-Way-in-Raising-the-Profile-of-Regional-Museums-Abroad>, (accessed July 15, 2019).

ion. In an effort to engage the home audience with the somewhat unfamiliar subject of fashion from the African subcontinent, Dutch designers who are heavily influenced by their African roots were incorporated into the exhibits. Despite a thoughtful installation and floor plan aiming to provide visitors with a unique experience that would allow them to engage with the varieties of fashion from Africa, audience numbers at the show were not as high as expected. Many factors might have contributed to this surprising result, among them, the general perception of fashion from Africa as being non-existent, which likely dampened the excitement of the exhibition. From a curatorial perspective, the tension between fashion and ethnography deserves some considerations on the evaluation of the show. Some curators at NMVW believed that visitors would not normally expect dazzling fashion exhibitions in an ethnographic museum; thus, the motivation to visit was insufficient. Whether or not this belief is true, one cannot deny the intriguing relationship between fashion and ethnography, particularly as it relates to the positioning of fashion in NMVW.



Figure 1: Fashion Cities Africa at the Tropenmuseum, 2018–9. Photographer: Irene de Groot. Courtesy of Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen

Established in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, ethnographic museums functioned as a showcase for colonial endeavors in the colonies on the basis of beneficence and profitability. The International Colonial Exhibition in Paris (1931) is a perfect example of the two opposing views of such endeavors (Figure 2). While fascinating products and achievements of all French colonies and overseas dependencies were featured in the pavilions across the Bois de Vincennes, anti-colonial convictions arose amongst the French Communist Party, artists, writers and the colonies in France. Criticism pertaining to the crimes, exploitation and imperialism of the time, alongside the glorified colonial achievement, was showcased in the exhibition.<sup>10</sup> It is unsurprising to see the *Musée des Colonies* (transl. *Museum of Colonies*) renamed to *Musée de la France d'Outre-Mer* (transl. *Museum of France Overseas*) (1935) and, later, to *Musée Nationale des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie* (transl. *Museum of African and Oceanian Arts*) (1960s). Since most collections were housed at the *Musée du Quai Branly* (est. 2003), the original building became the *Musée Nationale de l'Histoire de l'immigration* (transl. *National City of Immigration History*) (est. 2007) in order to showcase the immigration history of France and the role that immigrants played in the economic development, social evolution and cultural activities of the country. Strong imperial roots are thus a prevailing precedent of ethnographic museums, which have eventually been transformed and renewed to reflect the sentiment of time, history and cultural policy.

10. Catherine Hodeir and Michel Pierre, 1931, *l'Exposition Coloniale* (Brussels: Editions Complexe, 1991).



Figure 2: Left: Poster for International Exhibition of Colonies, Paris, 1931; Right: Poster for anti-colonial exhibition in the same year during the International Exhibition of Colonies in Paris. Title of the poster reads ‘the truth about the colonies.’ Courtesy of Musée Nationale de l’Histoire de l’immigration

The use of collections in the ethnographic museum as a resource for research was traditionally aimed at understanding ethnographic and cultural historical questions in the lives of particular communities. The colonial governments learnt about their colonies in order to understand how to dominate them. Such imperialist projects and the embedded power structure have carried on to museums today. Kassim<sup>11</sup> stated the following:

[t]he way exhibitions are constructed usually assumes a white audience and privileges the white gaze.... To many white people, the collections are an enjoyable diversion, a nostalgic visit which conjures up a romanticized version of Empire, [whereas] [f]or many people of color, collections symbolize historic and ongoing trauma and theft.

Accordingly, the museum is not neutral; it is a white temple guarded by “the beauty of the institution that collects and protects its imperial hoard.”<sup>12</sup>

For early ethnographers, it was more important to capture the differences rather than similarities when describing the Other. People’s garb was an embedded colonial project from which the Other was created for the preservation of a power structure and hierarchical relationship.<sup>13</sup> This was congruent with stasis, tradition and the unchanging nature of these societies that westerners encountered. Along this line of thought, it is difficult to imagine how fashion, based on the idea of prevailing change, constant innovation and temporality,<sup>14</sup> could fit into the early ethnographic project of otherness. Yet museums operated with such a mindset and are now in danger of becoming irrelevant to the increasingly diversified and multicultural societies. The deep-rooted colonial thinking in 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe

11. Sumaya Kassim, “The Museum Will Not be Decolonialised,” *Media Diversified*, (November 15, 2017), <https://mediadiversified.org/2017/11/15/the-museum-will-not-be-decolonialised/>, (accessed July 15, 2019).

12. Kassim.

13. Angela Jansen and Jennifer Craik, *Modern Fashion Traditions: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity through Fashion* (Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2016).

14. See for critical readings of Georg Simmel, “Fashion,” *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 62, no. 6 (1957): 541–58; Jennifer Craik, *The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion* (London: Routledge, 2003); Diana Crane, *Fashion and its social agendas: Class, gender and identity in Clothing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

now clashes with contemporary issues, such as racism, white privilege, migration and decolonization. In particular, anthropology and ethnography, as academic disciplines in museums, have historically been accustomed to featuring the function of objects. The formation of collections from as early as the 17th century spurred the study of the cultures that produced the objects destined primarily for display. The ethnographic museum must confront “its fundamental flaw: the dichotomous model on which the institution itself is based.”<sup>15</sup> Pressure is mounting for ethnographic museums today “to acknowledge that the Other doesn’t exist outside the Western realm [so much as they] have never really represented other cultures in the first place; [by and large, they] represent Western culture and its outlook on the world.”<sup>16</sup> This is particularly telling with respect to the representation of the creative labor of the Other. With regard to dress and textiles, the maker, be it craftsmen or the production line, was hardly celebrated. Instead, the wearer was highlighted and became the source of generalizations about his/her culture. In other words, the work of the maker was taken to stand for a practice which was then generalized to represent the entire culture of practice. There was little room for the understanding of individuality; indeed, the Other has often been objectified and/or used as a figurehead for generalizing a defined culture. The culture of the Other was, in many instances, clearly demarcated, with people categorized according to a registered behavior.

The creative individuals in dominated Western cultures are recorded and represented in a converse fashion, however. The creativity and genius of the makers and designers are celebrated in museums, and the wearer of their creations is hardly known, unless the person is a renowned figure of some kind. Indeed, artisans and craftsmen in many regions are part of, if not central to, the eco-system of fashion creation.

Only by giving equal weight to and acknowledging these unsung heroes can we understand and appreciate the creativity of the Other. The way in which makers and processes in the production line allow the audience to appraise the embedded beauty and artistic value of fashion can be exemplified in *The Fabric of India* (2015–6, Victoria & Albert Museum) (Figure 3). Focusing on the production of textiles in the Indian subcontinent, the exhibition showcases the technical aspects of textile production by introducing visitors to various materials, dyes and weaving techniques. It allows the viewer to understand the workshop process behind a piece of art and the complexity of its manufacture, an aspect that is often overlooked in museum exhibitions. With the aid of video screens, visitors can immerse themselves in the production process. The exhibition does not end with textiles, but shifts towards clothing, in all its fashionable detail, as India spread its visual effects to English ladies’ dresses and Japanese male kimonos.<sup>17</sup> The power of the show, according to Menkes,<sup>18</sup> is in the fact that it brings the history of textiles up to date in a display of 20th-century clothing, breathing new life into the exhibits by using the museum’s imaginative vision. The exhibition consequently aided the museum by acquiring additional Indian textile and clothing and expanding its fashion collection in South Asia, the benefice of which has extended to the museum’s current reassessment of its incorporation of global fashion in its collection. In an effort to address the transcultural underpinning of fashion and textile and, more importantly, diversity and inclusivity, and given the low record figures from visitors of black and minority ethnicities, the museum has closed the permanent fashion exhibition until 2021 in order to rethink the strategy of narrating, displaying, curating and exhibiting (global) fashion.<sup>19</sup> Fashion curation and exhibitions have only gradually emerged as a field of study in recent years.<sup>20</sup> Curating global fashion pushes the study a

15. Mirjam Shatanawi, “Tropical Malaise: The Demise of Museums of ‘Non-Western Peoples,’” *Bidoun*, vol. 10 (Spring, 2007), 43, <https://www.bidoun.org/articles/tropical-malaise>.

16. Shatanawi.

17. Rosemary Crill, *The Fabric of India* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum Publishing, 2015).

18. Suzie Menkes, “The Fabric of Fashion: How to Make a Museum Show Sing,” *British Vogue*, (January 6, 2016), <https://www.vogue.co.uk/gallery/suzy-menkes-the-fabric-of-fashion-exhibition-at-the-victoria-and-albert-museum>, (accessed July 15, 2019).

19. Divia Patel, “The Fabric of India,” in *Curating Fashion in and out of the Ethnographic*, conference presentation (Amsterdam: Tropenmuseum, January 30, 2019).

20. See for a more extended reading on fashion curation and exhibitions, Sonnet Stanfill, “Curating the Fashion City: New York Fashion at the V&A,” in *Fashion’s World Cities*, eds. Christopher Breward and David Gibert (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 69–88; Valerie Steele, ed., “Exhibitionism,” *Fashion Theory*, special issue, vol. 12, no. 1 (2008); A. O’Neill, ed., “Fashion Curation,” *Fash-*

step further by considering clothes and textiles from the periphery, i.e., non-Euro-American dominant regions, their relation to the dominant fashion centers and vice versa.



Figure 3: The entrance of Fabric of India at the Victoria & Albert Museum, 2015–6. Courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum

## Global Histories, Global Fashion in NMVW

At NMVW, an attempt has been made to reactivate existing collections and rebrand the archive using fashion as a new way to view the so-called ethnographic textiles. Fashion, as a method, can offer different viewpoints on historical and contemporary textile collections. For example, more attention can be devoted to the identity of the makers, who, in ethnographic projects, have seldom been highlighted. Changes in dress and textiles, innovation, creativity, craftsmanship, production line, distribution and consumption are part of the fashion system, and self-fashioning and identity-making are compulsive ingredients within it.<sup>21</sup> The concept of fashion, both as a topic for thematic exhibition and a tool through which to reinterpret existing collections, is considered purposeful in the ethnographic setting of the museum.

The museum aligns itself with recent academic efforts in the revision of fashion theory with which increasing case studies from around the world have generated debate regarding the notions of fashion in a variety of cultures. Through the joint force of decentralization, de-westernization and decolonization in the study of fashion, change as an ever-present factor across cultures has repeatedly been highlighted.<sup>22</sup>

*ion Theory*, special issue, vol. 12, no. 2 (2008); Judith Clark and Amy De La Haye, *Exhibiting Fashion: Before and After 1971* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Marie. R. Melchior and Birgitta, Svensson, eds. *Fashion and Museums* (Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2014); Flavia Loscialpo, "From the physical to the digital and back: Fashion exhibitions in the digital age," *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2016): 225–48; Annamari Vanska and Hazel Clark, eds., *Fashion Curation, Critical Practice in the Museum and Beyond* (Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2018); Julia Petrov, *Fashion, History, Museums. Inventing the Display of Dress* (Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2019).

21. See Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, revised and updated version (New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Yuniya Kawamura, *Fashionology* (Oxford: Berg Publisher, 2004); Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Social Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (London: Polity, 2015).

22. Joanne. B. Eicher, Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Kim K. P. Johnson, *Dress and Identity* (Fairchild Books, 1995); Linda Welters and Abbey Lillethum, eds., *The Fashion Reader* (Oxford: Berg Publisher, 2011); Angela Jansen and Jennifer Craik, eds., *Modern Fashion Traditions: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity through Fashion* (Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2016).

As such, no tradition exists without prevailing change. The artistic and creative values of dress in historic eras from varied regions and cultures should be and have been re-appreciated, for innovation and change in non-Western clothing cultures evolve in ways similar to that of other cultural phenomena. There has been a gradual resistance to the notion of the non-stagnant nature of the Other, as their tradition is equally susceptible to change and fashionability. Fashion itself is considered by many a paradigm of modernity, and if change is a criterion for modernity, then there are co-existing modernities.<sup>23</sup> Understanding fashion across the face value of global fashion creates an accessible tool for the museum, through which contemporary issues in society can be addressed.

One must bear in mind that NMVW prides itself on being a museum about people (*museum over mensen*), with a prevailing belief that there are more similarities than differences among people worldwide. With respect to fashion, the museum encompasses all sorts and forms, from haute couture to designer innovation to street wear to subcultural style. However, challenges are still rife when applying fashion in the collection, given the elementary practice of attributing the label of *fashion* to clothing objects. Rooted in the colonial mapping of the world, people and objects, the addiction to museum categorization has divided the world into fixed geographic sites that have compartmentalized the artifacts by origin. This is not helpful with regard to fashion, as it assumes authenticity while neglecting its transcultural dynamics.<sup>24</sup> More importantly, fashion is contextual and relational; a piece of textile or clothing might be considered fashion in a certain environment, but not in another. Social groups, the opinionated and the legitimate, are fundamental to its contextualization. A case in point here is not so much about ‘what’ fashion refers to, rather, ‘when,’ or in which conditions something has claimed to become fashion.<sup>25</sup>

In light of the outdated essentialism in the structure of NMVW, the museum was divided into distinct regions, each with its own curator, exhibition space and collection. Such a format is far from ideal, however, because only half of the globe is represented in this compartmentalized world. The particular historical relationship of the museum to its subject was assigned to a curator. The extent to which transcultural and intra-territorial infiltration in the production of cultures remains questionable. In September 2018, a cultural turn was seen when new curatorial roles, based on regions such as China, Southern Africa and Papua, in globalization, (colonial) photography, colonialism and its afterlife, among others, were introduced to the museum; their areas of responsibility were subsequently aligned with the transglobal landscape that encompasses histories, people and cultures. Evidently this was the museum’s acknowledgement towards the cultural fluidity and transcultural interactions among people, objects, regions and countries through histories. It is hoped that these curators will view cross-regional collections, examine transcultural dynamics and engage with social issues and contemporary phenomena to offer new meanings to the existing and future archives.

## Examining NMVW Archive

Concurrent with these new roles were RCMC fellows who were tasked with decolonizing the museum archive through transcultural interactions and global histories in their examination of historic artifacts. With regard to the archival study of textile and fashion, Rita Bolland Fellows adopted a pivotal role in unpacking stereotypes, connecting transglobal threads and challenging conventions through mundane, seemingly ordinary objects. In her cross-examined archival study, art historian and Dubuffet expert

23. See critical reading in Shumel N. Eisenstadt, ed., *Multiple Modernities* (Transaction Publishers, 2002); Agnes Rocamora and Anneke Smelik, eds., *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists* (London: IB Tauris, 2015).

24. Peter Jackson, Nicola Thomas and Claire Dwyer, “Consuming Transnational Fashion in London and Mumbai,” *Geoforum*, vol. 38, no. 5 (September 2004): 908–24; Jie G. Fowler and Les Carlson, “The Visual Presentation of Beauty in Transnational Fashion Magazine Advertisements,” *Journal of Current Issues and Research in Advertising*, vol. 36, no. 2 (2015): 130–56; Anne Peirson-Smith and Joseph H. Hancock, eds., *Transglobal Fashion Narratives: Clothing Communication, Style Statements and Brand Storytelling* (Bristol: Intellect, 2018); Wessie Ling and Simona Segre Reinach, *Fashion in Multiple Chinas: Chinese Styles in the Transglobal Landscape* (London, Oxford: IB Tauris/Bloombury, 2018).

25. See critical reading in Ingrid Loschek, *When Clothes Becomes Fashion: Design and Innovation* (Oxford: Berg Publisher, 2009).

Sophie Berrebi<sup>26</sup> created a bridge between art and ethnography by focusing on fashion. How fashion circulates across time and space and acts as an accumulation of different cultures is exemplified by her study of the Breton shirt captured in photographs. Starting from the present time and looking back in time and across different cultures, the idea was to explore the imaginary clothing, taking specific objects from the museum collection as starting points.

Typically portrayed as a staple in civilian French fashion, the Breton striped shirt was first introduced in 1858 as the uniform for all French navy seamen in Northern France (Figure 4). It was not until 1917 that it made fashion headlines, with Coco Chanel incorporating Breton striped shirts into her nautical collection. The popularity of the collection was facilitated by a sexual revolution, when French women tore off the then-fashionable heavy corsets and began to adopt the casual striped *marinières*. By the 1950s, the Breton striped jumper was adopted by intellectuals and artists alike; from Brigitte Bardot to Jean Seberg to Pablo Picasso to Marcel Marceau, French *marinière* fever spread to Hollywood, with more celebrities, like Audrey Hepburn and James Dean, being seen in the blue-and-white stripes.



Figure 4: River boat with Kru men as rowers. From *Impressions of Angola*, by José Augusto da Cunha Moraes, ca. 1870. Collection NMVW. Coll. No. RV-A-274-40. Courtesy of Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen

Through a detailed examination of historic photographs inside and outside the museum archive, Berrebi<sup>27</sup> contested the common understanding of Breton shirts by unveiling its hidden facet. That the stripes were historically worn by enslaved people, bore a racial and class connotation and were repulsed by the socially superior is an undisclosed story that could have eroded French pride in the iconic stripes. Berrebi's photographic examination shows that an ordinary garment can transverse time, space, cultures, class and race. More important, however, is the revelation that common knowledge circulated in the mainstream offers only half a view, if not a Eurocentric view, of the evolution of material culture. True global history is impossible to achieve when the disguised story of the Other is

26. Sophie Berrebi was Rita Bolland Fellow for Textile and Fashion Study at RCMC in NMVW, 2018. See her archival research for RCMC in Sophie Berrebi, "Sailor Shirts and Photographs: A 'Research Diary'," Research Centre for Material Culture, 2018, <https://www.materialculture.nl/en/open-space/sailor-shirts-and-photographs-research-diary>, (accessed July 15, 2019).

27. Berrebi.

dusted over. Through a cross-examination with and outside of the NMVW archive, Berrebi skillfully wove the adoption of the striped shirt in various localities across time and space to uncover a new history and meanings that have challenged popular convention and prerequisite knowledge.

Transcultural artifacts appear to be prevalent in the NMVW archive. Also pertaining to stripes, Ling<sup>28</sup> highlighted a plastic bag from 1980s Hong Kong and a contemporary nylon bag that was from Saudi Arabia, but made in China, in the archive (Figure 5). At first glance, they warrant little attention in artistic value, yet, after close examination, they have revealed a fascinating global story. Generally known as the *China bag* or *laundry bag*, it has different names in different regions across the world and has adopted new meanings in various localities. Transnational by birth, the bag's plastic sheeting was first manufactured in Japan in the 1960s, and then in Taiwan in the 1970s. Hong Kong imported a great deal of the plastic material for industrial use and subsequently created a carrier bag using the lightweight, durable and water-resistant material. One of its many connotations has evolved from its popular use by Hong Kong citizens, who frequently traveled between Hong Kong and mainland China in the 1980s when the mainland adopted an open policy, encouraging population flow between the two regions. The bag thus has an intimate connection with the social history of Hong Kong and the lives of its people. As a piece of material culture, it embodies the collective creativity of Hong Kong's industrial design, while serving as a symbol of frequent border crossings. Recent decades saw the bag become a cultural icon in Hong Kong, as contemporary artists and designers reinterpreted its contemporary appeal. Further afield, it has been adopted as a utility bag in strikingly similar ways across different geographical areas.

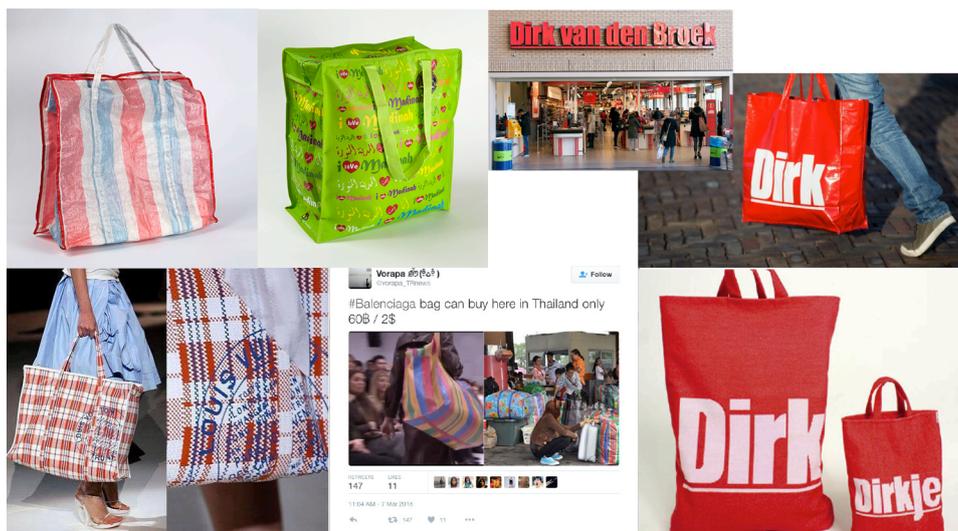


Figure 5: The fashionisation of China Bag. From top left to right to bottom left to right: China Bag (Collection NMVW. Coll. no. RV-5374); Made in China Saudi Arabia plastic bag (Collection NMVW. Coll. no. 7071-77); Dutch supermarket, Dirk, shopping bag; Louis Vuitton interpreted China bag, 2007; twitter showing the contrasting value of Balenciaga interpreted Thai plastic bag and the original Thai plastic bag; designer version of Dirk shopping bag by Dirk van den Broek, collected in Bag and Purse Museum, Amsterdam. Courtesy of Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Louis Vuitton, Dirk van den Broek

In exceptional circumstances, the same bag, in Ghana, is entwined with a history of politics, immigration, dislocation, fear, fracture and sudden enforced exile when illegal Ghanaian immigrants were given

28. Wessie Ling was Rita Bolland Fellow for Textile and Fashion Study at RCMC in NMVW, 2018/9. She has researched on the cultural history of China bag in Wessie Ling, "Bag of Remembrance: A Cultural Biography of Red-White-Blue, from Hong Kong to Louis Vuitton," in *European Fashion: The Creation of a Global Industry*, eds. Regina Blaszczyk and Veronique Pouillard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 283–301. She has then expanded its scope of study with the archival materials in NMVW. Also refer to Wessie Ling, "Global Fashion as a Tool in and out of the Ethnographic," in *Curating Fashion In and Out of the Ethnographic*, conference presentation (Amsterdam: Tropenmuseum, January 30, 2019).

fourteen days to leave Nigeria under the 1983 Expulsion Order. Packed with the entirety of their possessions, moving in haste with fear for their safety, the Ghanaians valued the bag as an immediate necessity. Pointing to the repeated upheavals in Ghana and Nigeria, today, many Ghanaians continue to associate loss and division with the cheap, practical and functional bag.

The embedded stories of the bag in various regions are nearly infinite. The most notable and perhaps controversial example of its iteration is the Louis Vuitton plaid bag of 2007. The replica of the ubiquitous plastic carrier bag was labeled with the well-known Louis Vuitton logo in a passport-stamp style. Such cultural appropriation has been criticized for operating in a one-way, top-down power flow from the hegemonic West to the Other.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, “exploitation chic” found ways to expand when, for instance, Balenciaga appropriated the Thai version of the bag in its 2016 autumn–winter collection. Widespread Instagram posts featured fashionable Thai youngsters with their authentic plastic bag, following the release of the Balenciaga bag. In a surprising turn, Balenciaga triggered Thai pride in their own ubiquitous plastic bag. The interpretation of contemporary Thai designers can now be found in a handful of tourist shopping spots in Bangkok.

Over time, the bag has been upgraded from polypropylene to nylon in a variety of printed colors. When ‘I “heart” Madinah’ is enthusiastically printed on a nylon plastic bag showing just how the spread of made in China produces to Saudi Arabia and many different parts of the world (Figure 5). In the Netherlands, the carrier bag makes a frequent appearance in the laundry shop typified by Dutch supermarket shopping bags in nylon, bright red color. The increased awareness of sustainability promotes the bring-your-own-bag culture that subsequently grants the sturdy plastic carrier bag a visible appearance on all street corners.

In essence, a mundane plastic carrier bag has seemingly connected to the world with global cultures, sentiments, belongings and identities. That the Ikea carrier bag, also made in China, was voted as part of the everyday design item in the Design Museum in London and a designer version of the Dirk (a Dutch supermarket) shopping bag is displayed in the Bag and Purse Museum in Amsterdam shows that transcultural dynamics are at play and, more important, people, cultures and everyday practices have threaded through global histories.<sup>30</sup>

## Global Fashion as a Tool in NMVW

The objects examined by Berrebi and Ling revealed two very different global stories. Their common ground is the interwoven thread that link localities across the world with global stories and sensitivities. These archival studies have unveiled the fact that the stories of the studied objects, like many artifacts in the museum archive, resided neither in regional study nor fashion history. Global fashion, reviewed in these studies, is not restricted to certain geographic zones. This is clearly evidenced, as Berrebi<sup>31</sup> started with a classic French iconic item and then uncovered its intriguing relation to the slave trade in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Ling’s<sup>32</sup> China bag, which has induced many different versions, evoked varied sentiments and cultural identities across the globe. The stories unfolded within these objects demand to forge an interdisciplinary methodology. Pointing global fashion towards a defined aesthetic and stylistic form of a given locality would only return people to the old compartmentalized world of museum categorization.

29. Wessie Ling, “Bag of Remembrance: A Cultural Biography of Red-White-Blue, from Hong Kong to Louis Vuitton,” in *European Fashion: The Creation of a Global Industry*, eds. Regina Blaszczyk and Veronique Pouillard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 283–301.

30. Wessie Ling, “Global Fashion as a Tool in and out of the Ethnographic,” in *Curating Fashion In and Out of the Ethnographic*, conference presentation (Amsterdam: Tropenmuseum, January 30, 2019).

31. Sophie Berrebi, “Sailor Shirts and Photographs: A Research Diary,” Research Centre for Material Culture, 2018, <https://www.materialculture.nl/en/open-space/sailor-shirts-and-photographs-research-diary>, (accessed July 15, 2019).

32. Wessie Ling, “Bag of Remembrance: A Cultural Biography of Red-White-Blue, from Hong Kong to Louis Vuitton,” in *European Fashion: The Creation of a Global Industry*, eds. Regina Blaszczyk and Veronique Pouillard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 283–301; Wessie Ling, “Global Fashion as a Tool in and out of the Ethnographic,” in *Curating Fashion In and Out of the Ethnographic*, conference presentation (Amsterdam: Tropenmuseum, January 30, 2019).

The triangular interplay of common belief, time and space specified in Ling and Segre Reinach's<sup>33</sup> study of Chinese fashion and its application to the analysis of Sino-Italian fashion co-creation<sup>34</sup> are useful here in considering the framework of fashion-making. Dissecting stereotypical beliefs and situating material culture across time and space enable the transcultural flow of fashion to come to the fore. Because decentering fashion necessitates the confrontation of prerequisite knowledge and common understanding, we are expected to unlearn and relearn global fashion when it is showcased in the (ethnographic) museum. As such, we propose the use of global fashion as a conceptual framework, an interconnecting force typified by multiple encounters of world cultures and the transcultural. Beyond a single style or stylistic look, it would only be appropriate to consider global fashion's capacity to interconnect the world; circulate people, goods, and ideas; and map out multiple cultures and identities. That global fashion brings out multi-layered encounters between the subject and its outside world often goes beyond the dichotomy of Orientalism and Occidentalism. The outcomes are, therefore, necessarily transcultural and essentially hybrid, offering distinctive stimuli for re-imagination; and they are often underscored by co-creation.

Through focus group discussions with curatorial professionals at NMVW, we analyzed the conceptual framework of global fashion and the possibility of incorporating it into museum practice. It is understood that new meanings for otherness deserve critical attention in the ethnographic setting of the museum. Sitting alongside the current de-colonial movement, global fashion,<sup>35</sup> as outlined by the participants, can decenter the Euro-American system and offer inclusiveness in fashion (Curatorial Group A). Such points of view are seemingly aligned with the recent effort of fashion scholars who have proactively situated fashion within global histories so that its emergence can be traced across the world.<sup>36</sup> According to the participants (Curatorial Group A), it is necessary to reframe how clothing is perceived, question fashion's ambiguous operation between inclusion and exclusion and challenge the notions of style V fashion in the ethnographic context. So much as the ethnographic collection is concerned, the importance of material qualities rather than the agency of wearers and makers can be stressed. Outside of the material culture, global fashion can be used as a tool to reflect global culture and reiterate global citizenship, with its expected possession of the worldview (Curatorial Group B). To many, fashion is subjective, causing opinions to form, as well as, often, disagreements. On the other hand, it is an accessible language, enabling discussion on the environment and societal issues. Deeming global fashion a subject of examination not only widens the Eurocentric approach of fashion theory, but also actively engages a wide range of audiences with socio-cultural phenomena (Curatorial Group A).

However, this is not to imply that we accept the face value of global fashion without recognizing its unfavorable condition. The topic of fashion is often considered frivolous, ambiguous and unworthy of serious attention (Curatorial Group A, B, C & D). At times, it is also gender divided. Fashion exhibitions generally entice more female than male audiences. It could alienate many who feel the pressure to conform or are not interested in beauty and appearance. Its performability and spectacle nature are often separate from reality (Curatorial Group A, B, C & D). The level of expectation of a fashion exhibition has, in recent years, been raised drastically when blockbuster shows are staged in key Euro-American fashion capitals. That allure, excess and fantasy are expected by most could equally place pressure on investment in fashion exhibitions. While it has the potential to engage with important social and global issues, it can equally hinder meaningful discussion (Curatorial Group C). A case for consideration is problematizing fashion as a means for engaging with contemporary issues and a wider audience (Curatorial Groups A, B, C & D). Yet, this requires skillful management and a directional approach whenever

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33. Wessie Ling and Simona Segre Reinach, "Fashion-Making in the Transglobal Landscape," in *Fashion in Multiple Chinas: Chinese Styles in the Transglobal Landscape*, eds. Wessie Ling and Simona Segre Reinach (London, Oxford: IB Tauris/Bloomsbury, 2018), 1–12.

34. Wessie Ling and Simona Segre Reinach, *Fashion-Making and Co-Creation in the Transglobal Landscape: Sino-Italian Fashion as Method, Modern Italy*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2019): 401–15.

35. Linda Welters and Abbey Lillethum, *Fashion History. A Global View* (Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2018).

36. See for critical reading in Javier Gimeno Martinez, *Design and National Identity* (Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2016); Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil, eds., *The Fashion History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2010); Linda Welters and Abbey Lillethum, *Fashion History. A Global View* (Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2018).

(global) fashion is employed. A careful refocus of the agenda can balance the museum's investment in fashion exhibition and expectation of the audience, enabling the exhibition to bridge local and global audiences.

With respect to engaging with the public, redundant museum categorization raised concern among the participants. This categorization is not only restricted to the origin of artifacts, but also to the types of audiences. It is not useful to compartmentalize communities (Curatorial Group D), for one member can often wear many labels. More often, labeling smothers the identity of individuals. Indeed, the taxonomy of communities limits the mobility of audience participation. Instead, considering global fashion as a general container of shared experiences and histories allows the practice of sharing to expand and infiltrate into one community after another. That global fashion is a site for sharing, an encounter of people, objects, cultures, global histories and contemporary debates can address wider societal issues and challenges faced by today's ethnographic museum (Curatorial Groups A, B, C & D).

## Conclusion

As a vibrant method of inquiry, global fashion as a conceptual framework enables the reactivation of new energy to be injected into existing museum collections of past times. As demonstrated in the discussion, it can be applied to collect, narrate, curate and exhibit artifacts in the ethnographic museum. Its usage can clearly apply to museums with a fashion collection, given the transcultural underpinning of fashion and textiles. The usefulness of global fashion is its ability to retell global stories, refocus museum agendas and re-center preconceived dominant power in both the institutional hierarchy and the relation to otherness. It can also address wider societal issues and challenges faced by today's ethnographic museum. How the incorporation of global fashion in museum practice can be manifested in collecting, narrating, displaying, curating and exhibiting fashion and textile artifacts is a case in point for future research.

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## Appendix

Focus Group Workshop on *Global Fashion/Narrative in the Ethnographic Museum*

15 Jan 2019; Research Centre for Material Culture; National Museum of World Cultures; the Netherlands

<b>Group/Participants</b>	<b>Discussed Questions</b>
Curatorial Group A: • NMVW Curator x 3 • Modemuze Curator x1	How could global fashion be implemented in the ethnographic museums? Contextualize global fashion in the ethnographic setting.
Curatorial Group B: • NMVW curator x2 • NMVW Exhibition Maker x1 • Textile Research Center Curator x1	What are the drawbacks of global fashion? What are the benefits of using global fashion as a tool to collect/narrate/curate/exhibit dress and textiles in the ethnographic museums? What can/cannot be done about it?
Curatorial Group C: • NMVW Curators x3 • NMVW Exhibition Maker x1	What are the drawbacks of using global fashion to collect/narrate/curate/exhibit ethnographic dress and textiles in the museums? What can/cannot be done about it?
Curatorial Group D: • NMVW Curators x3 • Lecturer at Amsterdam University x1	Can global fashion be used as a tool to engage with communities and the public? How?
Curatorial Groups A, B, C and D	What is the capability of global fashion as a tool to address wider issues faced by the (ethnographic) museums today?