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Christine Boydell

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Christine Boydell

## Review Article

# Fashioning Identities: Gender, Class and the Self

Christopher Breward, Becky Conekin and Caroline Cox (eds), *The Englishness of English Dress*, Oxford and New York, Berg, 2002; pp. xiv + 219; ISBN 1 85973 523 1

Wendy Parkins (ed.), *Fashioning the Body Politic: Dress, Gender, Citizenship*, Oxford and New York, Berg, 2002; pp. xi + 260; ISBN 1 85973 587 8

Leigh Summers, *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*, Oxford and New York, Berg, 2001; vi + 302; ISBN 1 85973 530 4

Dominique Veillon, *Fashion under the Occupation*, Oxford and New York, Berg, 2002; pp. xi + 205; ISBN 1 85973 548 7. [Originally published in French as *La Mode sous l'Occupation*, Paris, Editions Payout, 1990]

In his postscript to *Fashioning the Body Politic*, Roger Griffin accuses scholars of distortion in their favouring of written documents and observable socio-political phenomena at the expense of the symbolic and semiotic. He singles out the importance of dress noting that ‘what people wear to conceal and expose their persons can take the historian to the core of complex social and political processes of stability and change, conformism and challenge to the status quo’ (225).

Yet writers on the subject of dress, in particular, feel the need constantly to justify the existence of the field, which is the case with three of the four publications here. It is true that dress has been neglected as a serious subject of study, having been considered trivial, frivolous and irrational, and its association with fashion and the female consumer has meant that scholars have been reluctant to study it systematically. Until the mid-1980s dress history was categorized as decorative art and was studied and documented by collectors, curators, art and costume historians. The focus was on authenticating and dating with an emphasis on detailing cut, construction, style and documenting the work of couture designers. The work of the Cunningtons,<sup>1</sup> James Laver<sup>2</sup> and Quentin Bell<sup>3</sup> are typical of the ‘hem-line’ histories that dominated the

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1 For example, C. W. & P. Cunnington, *Handbook of English Costume in the Nineteenth Century* (London 1959).

2 For example, James Laver, *A Concise History of Costume* (London 1969).

3 Quentin Bell, *On Human Finery* (London 1976).

field and have been so much criticized.<sup>4</sup> But in 1985 the publication of *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, written by the sociologist Elizabeth Wilson,<sup>5</sup> saw the emergence of a body of scholarship that acknowledged dress and fashion as crucial in the conveyance of multiple meanings. Wilson examined fashion as a cultural phenomenon that should be understood 'as an aesthetic medium for the expression of ideas, desires and beliefs',<sup>6</sup> which approach did not divorce items of dress from the body, as had previously been the practice. The book was published at a time when the focus of art and design history was moving away from connoisseurship to discourses that included feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism and semiotics, which encouraged debates on identity and representation. Such discourses have become crucial to studies of dress and fashion.

The four texts under consideration are published in Berg's series 'Dress, Body, Culture' and reflect their desire 'to articulate the connections between culture and dress'. The publishers have been central in moving forward the field of study, encouraging scholars from a variety of disciplines to consider issues relating to identity and meaning. They are also responsible for the production of the journal *Fashion Theory* which since 1997 has provided a forum for interdisciplinary and international analyses of the intersections of dress, body and culture. The majority of their publications draw on cultural studies' preoccupation with textual analysis, audiences, consumption and questions of identity.

Nineteen ninety-seven also marked a moment of self-reflection, as the subject debated the gulf between object-based histories and more theoretical approaches to dress at the conference *Dress History: Studies and Approaches* held in Manchester.<sup>7</sup> The field has been spurred on by material culture studies to consider the consumption of dress from elite fashion to commonplace clothing. Scholars from other disciplines are also beginning to acknowledge the important role dress can have in aiding our understanding of broader social and cultural issues. For example, Beverley Lemire's studies of dress have uncovered the economic and social significance of clothing in the early-modern period.<sup>8</sup> In the last few years dress has also been a frequent concern of historians writing in the journal *Textile History*.<sup>9</sup>

4 A number of recent publications outline the development of dress history: Christopher Breward, 'Cultures, Identities, Histories: Fashioning a Cultural Approach to Dress', *Fashion Theory*, 2, 4 (December 1998), 301–13; Lou Taylor, *The Study of Dress History* (Manchester 2002); Babara Burman and Carole Turbin, 'Material Strategies Engendered', *Gender & History*, 14, 3 (November 2002), 371–81.

5 Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London 1985).

6 *Ibid.*, 9.

7 Selected papers from the conference were published in *Fashion Theory*, 2, 4 (December 1998).

8 Beverley Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain* (Oxford 1991); Beverley Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory 1660–1800* (Basingstoke 1997).

9 *Textile History*, 33, 1 (May 2002). This issue was devoted to dress of the poor.

The perspective of the social historian is evident in *Fashion under the Occupation*, a recent translation of Veillon's *La Mode sous l'Occupation*. This largely empirical study describes a short, although significant moment in the history of France and explores the effects of occupation on French fashion. It begins by recording Paris's status in 1939 as the centre of haute couture and follows the initial effects of the declaration of war and the subsequent attempts by the German occupiers to hijack haute couture and remove it from Paris to Berlin. Whilst much of the book is concerned with élite fashion, the valiant attempts by the majority of women to 'make-do-and-mend' and 'keep up appearances' are also covered. The book's original publication date of 1990 may go some way towards explaining the lack of a theoretical perspective. The book places dress in its social context and charts the survival of the country's fashion industry. Veillon begins by establishing the atmosphere surrounding the pre-war couture shows with Paris as the centre of international fashion. She describes the way in which the country coped with the Germans' requisitioning of vital supplies of fabrics and clothing and the implementation of rationing and clothing coupons. Throughout hardship and shortage many individuals worked tirelessly to ensure the survival of Paris's haute couture industry. This was partly in order to keep a skilled workforce employed, but also to preserve an important element of the country's cultural heritage and one which, it was thought, in better times would be crucial in France's economic recovery.

Through her discussion of the structures of rationing, and specifically the 'couture coupon', Veillon demonstrates that the majority of the customers of couture continued to be the well-heeled French women and discounts the commonly-held view that Paris couturiers spent the war dressing the wives of the occupier. She also concludes that the hardships of the war resulted in the greater acceptance of artificial fibres by the industry and the acceleration of the take-up of ready-to-wear.

In both occupied and free France it was considered the duty of women to take care of their appearance. But in the two territories there were conflicting notions of what was considered appropriate femininity. It is this issue of multiple versions of femininity that links the four publications considered here. However, Veillon fails to problematize the construction of specific kinds of femininity during the 1940s, a subject analysed much more thoroughly by Kirkham in her discussion of British women's experience.<sup>10</sup> In her discussion of couture customers Veillon acknowledges the view expressed by many at the time, that it was the universal function of the Parisian woman to continue to be elegant, citing Lucien François's comments in the magazine *Votre Beauté* (13). However, such notions are mentioned rather than queried.

Women were encouraged to show themselves off to best advantage whether

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10 Pat Kirkham, 'Fashioning the Feminine: Dress, Appearance and Femininity in Wartime Britain' in Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (eds), *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema* (Manchester 1996), 152–92.

they were in the occupied territory or not. In the final chapter 'Vichy, Fashion and Women', Veillon devotes a little more time to the question of appropriate femininity. The unoccupied portion of the country experienced a new morality that mainly had its effect on the female population, who were expected to focus on their roles as wives and mothers and demonstrate a certain respectability and decorum. Too much artifice, in terms of appearance (associated with American ideals) was to be rejected in favour of a more 'natural' beauty. Veillon refers to government propaganda that was included in women's magazines, advising them of their duty to look good, providing tips on how to achieve this using the scant resources available.

Veillon relies on verbal description in order to convey the appearance of the clothes worn by French women during the second world war. The inclusion of visual material is negligible which is a missed opportunity, as some visual analysis would have aided a more rigorous discussion of identity and representation. Illustrations would have been extremely useful in demonstrating the stark contrast between the effects of wartime conditions on the majority of women compared to the handful who continued to wear the creations of the surviving couture houses.

The construction of identity, and in particular different kinds of femininity, is dealt with much more vigorously, and lies at the heart of the other three books being considered here. Gender has been a crucial vehicle for forcing the field of dress history to approach the subject from a more theoretical perspective. In recent years a number of writers, informed by the perspectives of cultural studies, have identified the important role clothing has played in defining feminine and masculine identities.<sup>11</sup> The three remaining publications under scrutiny all reflect the ability of dress to convey meaning and signal identities. In addition, they all consider notions of belonging and resistance, as well as the relationship between dress and the body.

A central concern of Leigh Summers's *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset* is the construction of an appropriate middle-class feminine identity. The book has been developed from Summers's doctoral thesis and is rigorously researched, challenging simplistic explanations of the corset as an object of female oppression. She uses the corset ('worn by 75% of women in civilised countries' (97)) as a way to understand women's view of themselves 'as women, as sexual beings, and as women in relationship to men and wider society' (3). But she also clearly outlines the corset's other function as a means of regulating and disciplining women's supposed unruly flesh as well as their irrational minds.

An increasing number of studies of material culture acknowledge the multiple meanings associated with artefacts and Summers admirably demonstrates

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11 For example: Christopher Breward, *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, Fashion and City Life 1860–1914* (Manchester 1999); Sean Cole 'Don We Now Our Gay Apparel': *Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford and New York 2000); Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton, *Women and Fashion: A New Look* (London 1989).

this with the corset and the various layers of femininity it signified. In 'Child, Corset and Constructing Female Sexuality' she outlines the corset's role in training girls from an early age to know what it meant to be female. Under the guise of protection, healthy development and support, the corset 'was the first item of juvenile material culture to be sexualised' (63), as it defined a slender waist, a site of female objectification since the 1830s. It was intended, via corset-wearing, to instil in young girls appropriate behaviour that was considered so essential for the Victorian woman. The corset and outerwear worn by girls restricted movement, creating a rigid, obedient body. Summers explains the increasing popularity of juvenile corset-wearing in the second half of the nineteenth century as a response to threats to accepted adult social order from first-wave feminists, who were demanding roles for women beyond the domestic. A theme of the paradoxical nature of the corset is also addressed by describing its ability to both emphasize the sexual desirability of young girls as well as to repress their own emerging sexual desire. Yet it operated as a means of protecting its wearer from both her own desire and that of others.

The contradictory nature of the corset is discussed in the subsequent two chapters. Here Summers examines notions of debility and morbidity, respectively. 'Corsetry and the Reality of "Female Complaints"', describes how an ideal femininity during the period was one in which women appeared incapable. A large number of female complaints were blamed on corset-wearing, yet the medical establishment rarely recommended the removal of the corset as a means of alleviating symptoms. In fact, Summers speculates that, as various medical specialisms were being established in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was not in the interest of male doctors to reduce the number of women suffering complaints. She argues that the continued use of the corset and the damage sustained provided them with 'unlimited opportunities' for intimate examination of their female patients with the (added) possibility of moving their careers forward (118). The pallid demeanour, breathlessness and fainting resulting from corset-wearing represented a visible passivity — 'the epitome of an ideal femininity' (137). But the corset, argues Summers, also allowed women to be sexual. In 'Breathless with Anticipation: Romance, Morbidity and the Corset' she suggests that the corset presented two conflicting messages. On the one hand, the debility resulting from tight-lacing presented a virginal fragility that was encouraged by Victorian popular novels and sought after by many women, while on the other, it presented women as dangerously sexual. Summers goes beyond simple explanations for the existence and longevity of the corset. She rejects the idea that the corset was simply imposed by men or that it was only worn by middle- and upper-class women. Rather, her enquiry acknowledges the corset as a multi-functional item that possessed various and contradictory meanings.

The role of clothing in determining appropriate femininity is also dealt with in many of the essays included in the *Englishness of English Dress* (a collection of papers presented at a conference held at the London College of Fashion in 2000). The premise of the collection is 'that the ephemeral surfaces of fashion-

able dress are as heavy with nationalist sentiment as any of the plastic, visual and folk arts' (1). The book deals with a wide range of dress-related topics, ranging from discussions of designers and consumers to rural dress and fashion photography, with the aim of generating debate and examining the powerful myths and traditions that surround the notion of 'Englishness'. A couple of the contributions, in particular, are concerned with constructions of femininity. Catherine Horwood's 'Dressing like a Champion: Women's Tennis Wear in Interwar England' explores how the various codes of dress exposed class insecurities and ideas about modesty in relation to women (45–60). A conflict existed between the need for a certain freedom of movement in order to play the game combined with the requirement to maintain standards of modesty appropriate for an English middle-class woman. For example, Horwood cites the discussions that took place relating to the suitability of specific items of dress for tennis. The exposing of bare legs in 1929 caused a certain amount of controversy in the press, as did the suitability of trousers and divided skirts two years later. American women players were blamed for threatening English reserve and femininity with their perceived 'masculine' appearance (57). In '“What a Deal of Work there is in a Dress!” Englishness and Home Dressmaking in the Age of the Sewing Machine', Barbara Burman asserts that the idea of 'femininity' is deeply rooted in notions of 'Englishness' and her essay examines the place of the sewing-machine in prevailing ideologies of femininity across two centuries (79–96). Like Horwood, Burman also addresses the important role that clothes have in the presentation of acceptable appearance. She tells us how working-class women have frequently used their dressmaking skills not only as a crucial means of increasing the family's income but also as a way of presenting a respectable appearance to the rest of the world.

By concentrating on newcomers to these shores, Carol Tulloch presents a rather different approach to Englishness. Her contribution maps the transatlantic journey of West Indian women (61–76). They arrived in England in the 1950s and 1960s wearing clothing that reflected their desire to create a good impression and their pleasure in coming to England, while at the same time hiding anxieties about their migration. She examines the resulting 'split-self' and how it is unified by dress, as the material link between the place of origin and the new home (64).

In Wendy Parkins's edited collection *Fashioning the Body Politic: Dress, Gender, Citizenship* the national and historical context of the essays varies enormously. But a frequently-visited theme is the ability of dress to communicate political participation and protest. At many periods in history different clothes have indicated different political affiliations and seemingly ordinary dress became a powerful symbol of political struggle. Richard Wrigley in 'The *Sans-culotte* in Revolutionary France' explores how a political collectivity was demonstrated visibly through a 'uniform' (19–47). During a very short period (1792–4) working men's clothing — the red woollen hat, short jacket and loose-fitting trousers (rather than breeches) — set those who wore it apart

from those more influenced by fashion, and operated as an unofficial political uniform.

The theme of collective identity could not be more clearly expressed than by the Italian fascists in their adoption of the black shirt. In 'Peeking Under the Black Shirt: Italian Fascism Disembodied Bodies', Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi explains how the shirt signified Italy as a harmonious whole, being an anti-fashion garment invested with highly symbolic power (145–65). Donning the black shirt indicated the rejection of the individual in favour of the state, as did the blue shirt worn by the Falange Española party, explained by Mary Vincent as 'emblematic of discipline, hierarchy and violence' (168).

As in the *Englishness* collection, there are several contributions in *Fashioning the Body Politic* that inevitably address the creation of national, as well as political identities. In 'Subjects into Citizens: The Politics of Clothing in Imperial Russia' (49–70), Christine Ruane charts the swings in meaning associated with Russian traditional dress. Since Peter the Great's insistence on the adoption of European fashions at court at the beginning of the eighteenth century as a sign of modernity, traditional Russian styles were associated with backwardness. By the 1830s European dress was considered the norm and the adoption of Russian traditional dress was regarded as subversive. However, by the end of the nineteenth century it was in favour again, in response to a renewed interest in asserting national identity, supported by Nicholas II and his court. An identity beyond the national was attempted in the adoption of the uniform of the scout and guiding movement in Britain and its colonies in the interwar period. Here Tammy Proctor illustrates how nationalism was sidelined in an effort to create a 'rhetoric of world citizenship' (130) with the uniform acting as a unifying symbol across several countries.

Throughout this collection it is made clear that women were often excluded or sidelined from political activity and citizenship and the kinds of identities open to them were often limited. In Wendy Parkins's essay on the suffragette movement in Britain, "'The Epidemic of Purple, White and Green": Fashion and the Suffragette Movement in Britain, 1908–14' (97–124) the ingenuity of women in finding a voice and a political identity is ably demonstrated. Although they wore fashionable and conventionally feminine clothing in the Women's Social and Political Union colours of purple, white and green, it was the use of such femininity out of context that had a striking effect. The suffragettes wore their fashionable clothes whilst participating in traditional protests (such as stone-throwing) helping to forge an identity as 'the subject-citizen'. They were skilful in manipulating the meanings of feminine dress to their own ends and fashion formed a crucial tool of feminist agency.

Whilst the main focus of both these publications is collective, rather than individual identity, the theme of fashioning the self is included in *The Englishness of English Dress*. As we have seen, the ability of clothes to communicate a number of messages simultaneously is an increasingly common theme in many studies of dress. But the focus on the individual and the use of clothing to fashion oneself is a subject that has only been of recent concern.



Such an approach reflects a growing preoccupation with the consumers of fashion and, in particular, women's attitudes to purchasing and wearing clothes. The work of Amanda Vickery on women in the eighteenth century is important in this respect,<sup>12</sup> as is the collection *A Second Skin: Women Write about their Clothes*<sup>13</sup> and *Through the Wardrobe; Women's Relationships with their Clothes*.<sup>14</sup> Such preoccupations should be seen in the context of the investigation of the meaning of things in the formation of the self that has developed in material culture studies.<sup>15</sup>

The Korner Archive at the London College of Fashion formed the basis of the exhibition held in 2000 that provided the cornerstone for both the conference and the book *The Englishness of English Dress*. The archive represents one woman's wardrobe operating as a kind of autobiography. Cecile Korner came to England in 1935 with her future husband, a Jewish banker from Germany. Her clothes tell the story of her attempt to become an 'English-woman'. According to Breward, Conekin and Cox, her elegant and simple wardrobe represents 'the genteel and unostentatious rhythms of upper-middle-class post-war London' (3). Her clothes reflect her life as an upper-middle-class wife and mother, but they are also emblematic of one woman's interpretation of what it meant to be English. A portrait of another woman, Maud Messel, is outlined in Lou Taylor's essay, 'The Wardrobe of Mrs Leonard Messel, 1895–1920' (113–32) which draws on examples of her clothes (and those of many of her female relatives) in Brighton Museum and Art Gallery's dress collection. They tell the story of a woman with a very particular sense of style who patronized a series of London court dressmakers who, complains Taylor, have been woefully neglected. Both accounts, however, fail to address the tendency of collections (particularly those held by museums) to reflect the clothing of wealthy consumers and neither explore the reasons why an individual's wardrobe might have survived.

Elizabeth Wilson pointed out as early as 1992 that whilst the practice of transforming bodies through adornment had been acknowledged for years by anthropologists as a significant activity, there had been a lack of attention to western fashion.<sup>16</sup> She alerted the student of dress to the works of Foucault, who identified the body as a social construct as well as a biological creation.<sup>17</sup>

12 Amanda Vickery, 'Women and the World of Goods: A Lancashire Consumer and her Possessions 1751–81' in Brewer and Porter, *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London 1993); idem, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (London 1998).

13 Kirsty Dunseath (ed.), *A Second Skin: Women Write about their Clothes* (The Women's Press 1998).

14 Ali Guy, Eileen Green and Maura Banim, *Through the Wardrobe: Women's Relationships with their Clothes* (Oxford and New York 2001).

15 See, for example, Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (Oxford and New York 2000).

16 Elizabeth Wilson, 'Fashion and the Postmodern Body' in Juliet Ash and Elizabeth Wilson (eds), *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader* (Pandora 1992).

17 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (Harmondsworth 1977).

The question of the role played by clothes in this construction is obviously critical. This was addressed by Joanne Entwistle in *The Fashioned Body* in which she asserts that ‘human bodies are *dressed* bodies’.<sup>18</sup> Embellishment, whether in the form of clothing or by some other means, provides bodies with meaning and identity and makes them social. So important is dress in this respect that depictions of naked bodies are usually dependent on fashions in dress. Entwistle goes further and presents the idea ‘of dress as a situated bodily practice as a theoretical and methodological framework to understanding the complex dynamic relationship between the body, dress and culture’.<sup>19</sup>

The acknowledgment of the importance of the body in discussions of dress is apparent in many of the contributions in *Fashioning the Body Politic* and in *The Englishness of English Dress*. In the latter Rebecca Arnold’s essay ‘Vivienne Westwood’s Anglomania’ (161–72) outlines the way in which Vivienne Westwood appropriates various clothing symbols of the British aristocracy (past and present) to create garments that make women more aware of their bodies. But discussions about the body are a particular preoccupation for Leigh Summers. A key premise of *Bound to Please* is that women’s bodies were regarded as inherently imperfect and less evolved than men’s, and therefore needed the corset as a vital aid to support and contain the irrational female bodies beneath (166). In ‘Corsetry and the Invisibility of the Maternal Body’, Summers examines how women used the corset for their own ends. She points out that it helped them to disguise pregnancy, allowing them a few extra weeks of relative freedom before they were ‘confined’. She also notes the role of tight-lacing in deliberately encouraging miscarriage. In the chapter ‘Not in that Corset: Gender, Gymnastics and the Cultivation of the late Nineteenth-Century Female Body’ the anxieties surrounding uncorseted bodies are investigated. At the time there was a preoccupation with the negative effects of physical exertion which it was felt created threatening female bodies that flew in the face of the sexual and maternal.

In ‘Corsetry, Advertising, and Multiple Readings of the Nineteenth-Century Female Body’ Summers analyses the variety of female bodies represented in magazines and newspapers for both male and female consumption. These ranged from the demure and virginal to the sexually provocative and the New Woman (identifiable by her spectacles!). Women’s bodies were commodified through advertisements such as those that depicted dismembered torsos as in Sewell’s ‘Rival Corset’ (1884). Such images of corset-wearing women appeared on the advertising pages of newspapers, and were accessible to a male audience as they appeared amongst products such as cigars and watches aimed at male consumers. The final images date from the 1890s and comparisons are made between erotic postcards and corset advertising, between which there was little difference, and Summers concludes that it was the advertising of these artefacts that legitimized semi-pornographic depictions of women.

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18 Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body* (Oxford 2000), 6. Emphasis in the original.

19 *Ibid.*, 11.

The past accusation of triviality so frequently thrown at fashion has occasionally been turned on its head and exploited for serious purposes. In 'Tailoring the Nation: Fashion Writing in Nineteenth-Century Argentina' (71–95) Regina Root explains how intellectuals turned to writing for fashion magazines such as *La Mariposa*. Revolutionary ideas were subtly disguised within apparently innocuous discussions of fashionable dress and so escaped the scrutiny of the censor. Dominique Veillon, too, explores the manner in which the French repeatedly used fashion as a potent weapon in order to maintain some lever over the occupying Germans.

There are a growing number of publications that deal with dress as a serious object of study so it is difficult to account for the insecurities that continue to be expressed in the introductions to many publications. Between them, the books reviewed here demonstrate a rich and interdisciplinary field of study. Dress and adornment are universal practices, the production of clothes a key industry in many countries and their study is essential if one is to understand fully our individual and collective attempts to express identities. Whilst it is crucial for fashion and dress studies continually to reflect and debate, it is surely time for scholars to cease constant self-justification.

Christine Boydell

is Principal Lecturer in Design History at De Montfort University, Leicester. She has published articles on gender and design and is co-editor, with Mary Schoeser, of *Disentangling Textiles: Techniques for the Study of Designed Objects* (London 2002).