

Tracking Circus Costume Silhouette Changes Through Time: Visual Archival Research for Functional Apparel Design

Jenny Leigh Du Puis, Cornell University

Keywords: Archival research, circus costume, functional apparel

Introduction/Background

Circus artists are performers with specific costume needs determined by their acts. (Bicât, 2012). Due to the extreme physicality of their movements and body impact with their various apparatus and/or act partners, it is necessary to devote particular attention to the functional aspects of design in the development of their costumes. As a result, information is needed for the designer to make appropriate decisions about the silhouette, materials, and construction of the garments. While industry training can provide useful hands-on experience, it is not possible for all costume designers and technicians to have access to this type of instruction. Hence, it is important to develop knowledge resources in this area. One of the methods through which this knowledge can be explored is to utilize archival resources for the purpose of functional apparel design research. In this way, historical artefacts can be used as information sources for designers – from photographs and videos to physical garments, circus materials act as valuable primary references in the design research process. As physical circus costumes may be difficult to access in person, visual materials such as photographs, videos, and circus show programs can be used as references to 1) track changes in circus costume silhouettes through time and 2) develop circus costume design research garments. Thus, the objectives of the present research project were to explore the phenomenon through thematic visual analysis of historical resources, and to use the resultant information in the development of design research garments for a future study involving wear tests with circus professionals. The following research questions were raised: How have circus costume silhouettes changed over time? How can circus costumes be developed through the use of historical, visual archive resources such as photographs, show programs, and video? What are the benefits and limitations of using only visual resources in this process?

Process

The positioning of the researcher includes their experience in both circus costume design and fashion history. Through the lens of functional apparel design practice, the research project was devised as a way to 1) explore how photographs, show programs, and video can be used to track the historical progression of circus costume, and 2) develop design research garments, which can be used in future functional design wear testing by trained circus performers. To explore the phenomenon, the project was divided into two parts: historical visual artefact reference analysis, and design research garment development.

Hundreds of circus performer photographs and circus show programs were accessed through the John and Mable Ringling Museum Archives. Viewing over 100 years' worth of images accompanied by knowledge of fashion history provides interesting historical context – whereas female circus performers were wearing corsets while performing in the 1800s, corsets in

circus costume of today's performances are mainly used for shows set in a historical time period. How, then, did circus costumes evolve over time? For richer context, show programs from the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus were examined for a visual thematic analysis, and further photographs from additional online archives and image searches gathered for comparison. A preliminary visual timeline was created, and acts subdivided by discipline and apparatus type. Two categories were ultimately chosen: Tightwire and Trapeze acts. The reasoning for these selections was due to their prevalence in circus imagery in popular culture and recognition as acts with detailed functional and safety needs related to their costuming. It was also decided to track changes in both male and female costuming looks over time to more appropriately represent the circus community. Visual references were compared across archive sources to gain a broader perspective, and basic silhouettes noted and sketched across decades.

While each circus performer has their own specific costuming needs related to their acts, there are broader conclusions that can be drawn in regards to garment type and silhouette. For example, males in flying trapeze acts typically wear tights, leggings, or fitted pants with sleeveless or short-sleeved, fitted tops. Where historically these male performers could be found in leotards or unitards, the torso may now be covered with a separate top that can connect to the bottoms via vertical elastic straps connected to buttons on the pants at the waist. Common embellishment body zones for these costumes include the sides of the legs, waistband, and torso, but rarely the knees. Tightwire performers wear slippers or boots with a leather sole, and while their garment silhouettes may be a little more varied than the strictures imposed by the aerodynamic needs of flying trapeze, the garments are typically fitted to the body rather than voluminous in nature. This may be due to the tricks performed in the act, however, while posed and action photographs are a valuable visual resource, without video or in-person viewing of an act or discussion with performers it is impossible to draw definitive conclusions about the movement-related design elements of the clothing.

Conclusions

The information found in circus performer photographs, show programs, and videos may provide key knowledge about the types of garments worn based on apparatus type or act. Through examination of these historical visual references, it is possible to track the silhouette changes of garments worn while performing, within the greater context of time period, prevailing show aesthetics, and trends in materials. While some of these costume trends are visible to an untrained eye, experiential knowledge is required for deeper understanding in functional design for the kinds of acts examined in this research project. Materials selection, direction of stretch, closeness of fit, and other important functional needs cannot be determined through analysis of images and video alone.

Although it is possible to draw general conclusions by tracking circus costume silhouette changes over time through the use of historical visual references, it is inadvisable and even dangerous to rely on these conclusions alone for the development of functional costumes for circus performance without additional input from experienced circus practitioners. Thus, for the purposes of this project, it is important to include the researcher's perspective and experience in circus costume design and construction, situated alongside knowledge of fashion history. Due to

their expertise in the area, it is possible to use historical visual references such as photographs, show programs, and video as knowledge sources for functional circus costume design research. In this way, historical imagery can be combined with experiential knowledge to develop design research garments for future wear testing with circus professionals.

However, if a researcher's intent is purely aesthetic (such as for a runway show, photo shoot, or patternmaking study), it is possible for this research approach to benefit through analysis of circus costume silhouette changes over time. As historical visual resources such as photographs and videos are not always used in functional design research projects, it is important to distinguish the intent of their use: aesthetics-focused projects may benefit greatly from the present project, while functional design research must employ deeper knowledge and expertise on the part of the researcher before using the results of this study to develop costumes for active circus performers.

Reference

Bicât, T. (2012). *Costume and Design for Devised and Physical Theatre*. Marlborough, UK: The Crowood Press.