



## **Fashion in Transit, A Multi-modal Exhibition Exploring the Symbiotic Relationship Between Transportation and Fashion**

Mona Maher, Kat Roberts, Christine McDonald, Joshua Johnson, Denise Green  
Cornell University

Keywords: fashion exhibition, curatorial scholarship, digital scholarship, transportation

**Introduction** In this paper, we present the research, design, and installation of the physical and digital exhibition, *Fashion in Transit*. This exhibit explored various ways in which fashion enables bodily movement throughout history, and how transportation infrastructure has impacted changes in everyday clothing. The exhibition was conceptualized before the Covid-19 pandemic, which has dramatically impacted how bodies are able to move in the world, and what those bodies look like when moving physically. Initially, the exhibit layout sought to inspire bodily movement--that is, the exhibit would draw people to visit the university campus, where garments and artworks would be mounted in two different locations, the university art museum and the fashion collection, thus requiring the visitor to transport themselves between locations; however, the campus was closed to visitors for the academic year, so only approved students, staff, and faculty affiliated with the university were able to physically attend, and the curators were challenged to create a digital experience of being “in transit” through fashion and textiles. In this paper we discuss the exhibition's concept, how it impacted the organizational structure of the exhibit based on the work of Green et al. (2021), and the ways we pivoted the exhibition amidst the challenges that arose with the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Method:** *Fashion in Transit* was initially researched and designed digitally as a final project for a hybrid course offered in fall 2020 that combined curatorial education and hands-on archival garments research in a Zoom classroom. The students in the course were invited to extend their curatorial work into a multi-sited physical display in Spring 2021. The team consisted of the instructor, two students in an Apparel Design graduate program, one MFA student, and an undergraduate student double-majoring in Classics and Africana Studies. Students began by searching through available university archives, sourcing vintage and antique items not found in the collections and cooperated with other museums to borrow digital pieces that were relevant to the concept. The “soft-opening” of the exhibition occurred digitally at the end of December 2020, and a complete opening in physical and revised digital realms on March 30, 2021.

**Challenges:** The creation of this exhibition came with a number of unusual challenges due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, museums were not open to the idea of loaning the items used in the digital display for the physical one. Students studying in remote mode could not participate in the installation and photography process but aided in website design and other digital aspects. Despite these constraints, the curators, with the guidance of a faculty advisor, sought to build a robust, highly interdisciplinary exhibition that utilized a wide range of primary and secondary resources found within the university by collaborating with numerous departments, programs, and archival collections. The exhibition truly embodies the multi-sited needs of curation at a time of necessary distance, focusing on bodies in motion but also employing curators from different disciplines and time zones. The exhibit emphasized bodies

on the move.

**Results:** We interpreted our concept through the interplay between fashion and transportation that enables bodies to move through time and space. We categorized movement using the verbs: swimming, sliding, riding walking, flying, rolling, carrying, and orbiting. *Fashion in Transit* features items from the late 19th century to present that include clothing and accessories worn by bodies in motion. We also explore the aesthetics of transportation mechanisms themselves to analyze how fashion affects and is affected by the transit swarm. At a fundamental level, clothing itself functions as a form of transportation: shoes for walking, wingsuits for flying, skis for sliding, and soft robotic exoskeletons that facilitate arm and hand movements, are among many other possibilities included within this exhibition. Modes of transportation have also impacted dress and brought about new fashions, like dusters for early car travel, aviator jackets and sunglasses, uniforms for transit workers, and activewear for running, snowboarding, swimming, hiking, among other activities. The manufacture of clothing, shoes, and accessories also relies upon transportation infrastructure, which shapes distribution networks and transnational material flows within complex global apparel supply chains. The transit swarm of fashioned human bodies around, across, above and through physical space takes many forms. Alongside, artistic photographs visualized “transit” in an artistic way to contemplate movement on a more poetic level, diving into what it means to be a body in motion.

**Discussion:** Based on our research, garment design has improved in its ability to better provide comfort, safety, functionality, and in accommodating a wider range of body movements. For instance, a walking gown from 1874 displayed in this exhibit was created from ten yards of fabric and did not necessarily accommodate bodily movement as compared with garments made today. Additionally, the design of women’s biking garments changed at the end of the 19th century to provide comfort and greater mobility. The Covid-19 pandemic has changed people’s lifestyle and thus their relationship with their garments. With this change has come a greater demand for comfortable and functional features. This unique time also provided opportunities for the exhibit’s curators to think creatively about how to more fully utilize available resources, both within and outside of their university. This rethinking led to the forging of relationships across wide interdisciplinary fields which brought new perspectives to the concepts, yielding new opportunities for collaboration. The experience of successfully creating a physical and digital exhibition during this time serves as a lesson for how curators can strive to meld the affordances of both methods when planning future exhibitions.



### References

- Green, D. N., Du Puis, J. L., Xepoleas, L. M., Hesselbein, C., Greder, K., Pietsch, V., ... & Estrada, J. G. (2021). Fashion exhibitions as scholarship: Evaluation criteria for peer review. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 39(1), 71-86.