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OBSERVANCE OR DEPARTURE

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Elaine Webster

CTANZ Symposium 2023 5–7 May, Opera House, Oamaru

The annual symposium of the Costume & Textile Association of New Zealand (CTANZ) was held this year in Oamaru, a town that has successfully converted its own nineteenth-century glory days into heritage tourism. The symposium theme of tradition was indeed appropriate in this historic town. The symposium was held in the restored Opera House, set among the grand buildings of the old quarter, where the white stone remains a solid reminder of success and optimism. The Opera House itself embodies the binaries of observance of tradition and departure from it, with coloured lights playing over the neoclassical facade at night, bathing it in red and purple. Inside the Opera House, it's all modern conference venue. This ambient contradiction set the tone, bringing together people who shared a love of cloth in all its forms, from far and wide, and with research interests also widespread and diverse, yet clustered around sub-texts of adaptation and change, mystery and loss.

The symposium also marked 21 years since the first CTANZ symposium, providing a good excuse to eat cake. And all through the weekend, the coronation rumbled away with barely acknowledged significance, like a familiar song, if only we could remember the words. The pomp and ceremony of ancient monarchy coincided nicely with the conference theme, and might explain why so many of us switched on the TV after the conference dinner; if only to witness the bizarre costumes, the hats, the furs, the jewels ...

How do we respond to the rich textile heritages that shape collections and contemporary practice? This and related questions were explored in 32 presentations over the three days. Running in parallel, an exhibition of works created or collected by members was shown in the Waitaki Museum gallery space. The exhibition showcased the breadth and scope of members' practices, including work from both *tangata whenua* and *tangata te tiriti*.

With the exception of the plenary sessions, papers were offered in two streams, so everybody missed half of them. What follows are a few highlights from the half I attended, aiming to show something of the richness and diversity of the 2023 symposium.

The keynote address was given by Dr Patricia Te Aropo Wallace (Ngāti Porou). Tradition for her was the vitality of the past enriching the present. Wallace was particularly interested in how Māori weavers met technical challenges long ago. She untangled the mysteries contained in archaeological textiles, recovering knowledge through replication/reconstruction and experiment, drawing on contemporary weavers' practical understanding and her own deep scholarship. The deeper she looked, the more she saw – and the more questions emerged.

This experience of uncovering endless questions struck a chord with the audience, perhaps because tradition has its feet in the past and, as LP Hartley said, the past is another country. Presenters approached their material from different angles, working with limited information and certainty, and always with an eye to the people and the cultures behind them.

Who made, owned, wore or collected these particular textile objects? How were they created or produced, and how were they used? What are they made of, what meanings did they hold in culture and society? What do they tell us about those societies and cultures, and our own? Such questions are fundamental to material culture research, and arise from the object's being more or less connected within its own context. Some of the challenges for textile research are to identify and dismantle assumptions about objects *and* context, to differentiate between intentions and outcomes/consequences. We simply have to keep asking, keep looking for evidence, interrogating, sleuthing. Questions upon questions.

Several presenters tackled the difficulties that curators face with provenance. Chloe Searle used one such encounter to dig deeper into a range of archives. As curator at the Waitaki Museum, she had sought expert opinion on age, construction and rarity of garments held in the collection, an important step in determining the significance and value of individual items. However, expert advice contradicted certain provenance information in the museum records, releasing a swarm of questions. In her efforts to resolve these errors and omissions, Searle researched the donor, using multiple online archives to piece together a clearer picture of the person and her life. Part of what Searle discovered was a dead end, while other threads were more fruitful, such as genealogies.

Also hunting for provenance were Māhina Marshall and Karen Richards of Broadgreen Historic House, Nelson, the home to over three thousand textile items. They discussed exhibiting specific examples in the collection where provenance was known and shared with the viewing public. But in a recent exhibition there were several items about which little or nothing was known, so they tried something new: they made it up. Provenance stories were told and people were asked to guess if the story was true or not. While the tour groups may well have been more gullible than the CTANZ audience, this approach certainly highlighted the power of provenance to bring an object 'to life' (and also perhaps, the dangers of misinformation). Broadgreen House also held a national competition to write a fictional provenance story for two dresses, with the intriguing title: *The Secret Lives of Dresses*.

Writing about dresses was the topic of Karin Warnaar's presentation on Essie Summers (1912–87), one of New Zealand's most successful (yet under-recognised) authors, who published 57 books in her lifetime and achieved global sales in excess of 19 million. Warnaar was even able to link Summers' romance fiction with Virginia Woolf, who briefly mentioned "frock consciousness" – an acute awareness of clothes.

Summers made interesting use of dress in her books, and was apparently unusual in doing so. She used clothes as points of discussion about social conventions and change, and conjured pictures and memories with the outfits she described – such as a turquoise quilted nylon housecoat and a safari suit worn with a cravat. Summers also made good use of clothes as rapid character sketches – the vamp in tight leopard print – and for dramatic effect, when the heroine was chased by a bull, an adventure that left her Dacron petticoat in tatters, the eloquent shreds conveying a panicked scramble over barbed-wire fence and blackberry.

Textile history is an important strand of costume and textile research, and Angela Lassig drew on multiple archival sources to trace the evolution of the blue serge shirt from a traditional men's 'slop' pre-1820 to the garment of choice for new immigrants through the 1850s onward. She asked if the blue serge shirt was as much an egalitarian garment in New Zealand's early colonial times as it was in Australia. Lassig used several sources to establish the popularity of the blue serge shirt among working men in New Zealand from early colonial times. This conclusion leads naturally to more questions requiring further exploration, and I remain curious about why the coat-like garment was called a shirt.

Through study of a few garments and cloth fragments held in museum collections, textile conservator Tracey Wedge explored the attitudes of early missionaries towards dress and its role in their missionary work, contrasting this with non-missionary early settlers. Items included a fragment of flower-sprigged muslin said to be from Hannah King's wedding dress (1812), a linen shirt of her husband's and two christening gowns, one of which was reputedly worn by the first white child born in New Zealand. Wedge found no evidence to support this or other stories told about these items, and yet they carried the significance of imagined history. The fragments also told a very real story about

how the early settlers made provision for themselves, and for the objects of their missionary work. Much can be learned from heart-shaped reinforcing, since such style details are associated with fashion moments, and can settle questions of dates, provenance and use, at the same time exposing the storytelling power of material culture.

Saturday morning began with a fashion parade and talk put on by volunteers from the Victorian Wardrobe. Formed in 1993 to organise fundraising events and publicity for the Oamaru Whitestone Civic Trust, the Victorian Wardrobe also provided Victorian-style costume for public hire. Their aim was to be able to dress lots of people attending heritage events and celebrations, and to foster enjoyment and interest in the cultural heritage of Oamaru.

The Wardrobe currently holds over 2500 items of Victorian-style costumes and accessories available for hire, thanks largely to the abilities and dedication of a succession of wardrobe mistresses and many, many volunteers. Behind the scenes the volunteers sew, mend, wash, iron and catalogue the costumes. They cared about authenticity, using heritage patterns as much as possible, and presumably fashion books to help create the total ensemble. In this sense, the Victorian Wardrobe observed tradition. They were most emphatically *not* steampunk, that departure from tradition for which Oamaru was perhaps even better known.

Donna Campbell (Ngā Puhī, Ngāti Ruanui), Ranui Ngarimu (Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Mūtunga) and Catherine Smith have been researching Te Rā, the sole remaining customary Māori sail in existence, reputedly collected by Captain Cook over 200 years ago and now in the collection of the British Museum. This extraordinary tāonga holds rare knowledge – of materials, weaving, joining and patterning techniques and processes – and was simply invaluable to the study of early Māori textiles. This tāonga was coming home on loan for six months during 2023, to be exhibited in Christchurch and Auckland.

Starting with a single sheet of paper in the Hocken ephemera collection, Katherine Milburn opened the door to the almost forgotten world of debutantes. It was the programme for a Charity Ball touted as the society event of 1966, to be held in the Dunedin Town Hall. Further research revealed that 56 young women were in fact presented to the Catholic bishop at the ball. Milburn discovered descriptions of what they wore, detailed rules of etiquette they were given, and evidence of rehearsals run by the woman who steered them through the whole process. She also unearthed photographs of the event, and even a dress. She brought to life the people, the dresses and the times in rich detail – and then outlined the demise of the debutante ball. Milburn's presentation illuminated the value and uses of printed ephemera for research into both past and contemporary society.

Dinah Vincent took a more personal approach of family history to make sense of the going-away dress, while Jane Groufsky discussed national identity as projected through the official uniforms worn by attending heads of state at Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meetings, and worn by former Prime Minister Helen Clark.

Uniforms of another kind were the focus of Scott Pilkington's work. He looked for continuity and change in the uniforms worn by tramway workers, but struggled to find mention of uniforms in any records of the many tramways that have operated in New Zealand. Pilkington gleaned a certain amount from photographs, and found in Papers Past a plea for summer uniforms in Auckland, as the tramway uniform was "too heavy for hot weather." Material evidence was more-or-less limited to badges and insignia held in the collection of the Auckland Museum of Transport and Technology. These badges evoked a time and place with considerable charm.

Badges were also the subject of Stephanie Gibson's talk "Tiny Objects, Big Stories," investigating the social history of badges in New Zealand. She called badges mini billboards, carrying messages out into the world. With Claire Regnault, Gibson has written a book on the same subject, *Tiny Statements: A Social History of Aotearoa New Zealand in Badges* (Te Papa Press, 2023).

Other researchers offered insights into contemporary concerns, such as Rebekah Harman who explored developments in the world of commercial textile dyers. Good alternatives have been developed that reduce the notoriously high costs of colouration on the environment, but the new processes were not being adopted. In her work Harman explored this resistance to change.

In her study of virtual fashion, Tyla Stephenson asserted the real material cost of virtuality and its impact on the environment, exploding the myth that virtual fashion is environmentally neutral. The impacts exist already as technological cost and, in any case, embodiment continues. People still wear clothes in life, still buy technologies to support virtual use and virtuality is itself produced in the world of reality. To Stephenson, the notion of green virtual fashion was techno-fantasy.

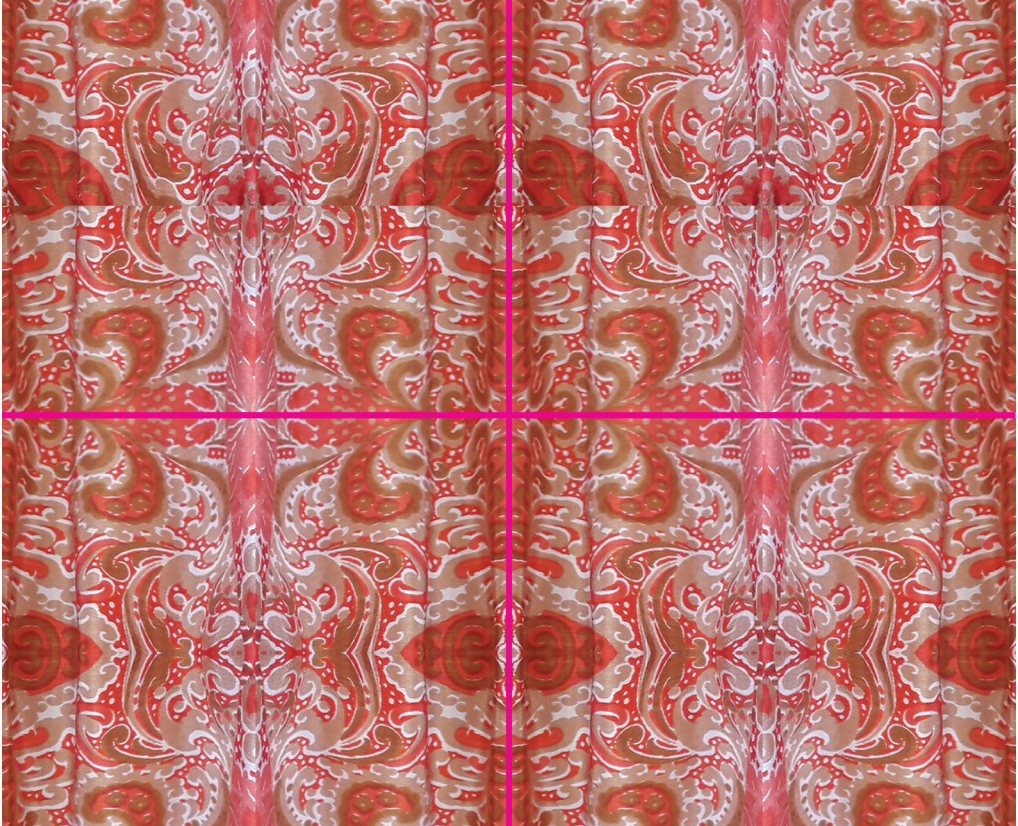
Rekha Rana Shailaj explored the dichotomy of tradition and modernity both in fashion discourse and in practice, by working within the limits of the Indian sari and asking when a sari was not a sari. Exploring this question, Rekha experimented within the fixed length and width of the sari to create new designs, while also respecting the inherent zero-waste of the sari's uncut design. She cut and re-joined and draped in new ways, creating extraordinary garments that were hybrids of the modern and traditional. In the process, she decolonised the sari and restored it as non-Western dress in a multicultural diaspora. As part of that great diaspora, Shailaj had experienced erasure of the sari. Inevitably, her exploration included identity, and who defined it.

Co-presidents of CTANZ, Stella Lange and Natalie Smith reflected on the history of CTANZ, marking 21 years since the inaugural symposium was held in Auckland in 2002. They paid tribute to the dress and textile professionals who met one day in a cigar bar in Auckland to establish the association, capturing the zeitgeist of increased interest in fashion, dress and textiles everywhere. Since the first one-day symposium in 2003, many memorable symposia have been held in various locations throughout New Zealand. Developing alongside these regular meetings were the website and the association's journal, *Context*. More recently, an increased digital presence has connected the diverse membership through blogs and Facebook. CTANZ is a richly stimulating space where members connect and share their research in dress, textiles and fashion.

The CTANZ 2023 Symposium theme of "Traditions: Observance or Departure" was an entirely fitting choice to mark the association's own dynamic history and the research concerns of its members.

Long live CTANZ, and thanks to all involved for another stimulating symposium.

Elaine Webster has worked with cloth and dress since she could thread a needle, initially as a maker, designer and artist, then as a student and academic in Clothing and Textile Sciences at the University of Otago. An early member of CTANZ, she attends the symposium most years. These days, she writes.



CTANZ SYMPOSIUM

COSTUME AND TEXTILE ASSOCIATION OF NEW ZEALAND

ŌAMARU 5 - 7 MAY 2023

TRADITIONS: OBSERVANCE OR DEPARTURE



Registrations are now open, for more details visit:
<https://events.humanifix.com/ctanz-symposium-2023>