

Clothing Childhood, Fashioning Society: Children's Clothes in Britain in the Twentieth Century

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Conference Review by Kaori O'Connor, Research Fellow, Department of Anthropology, UCL
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Childhood is developing into a mainstream field of contemporary enquiry across the social sciences and humanities, legitimised by new degree courses and research centres, dedicated e-lists and special interest groups in organisations like the AAA, American Studies Association and the American Popular Culture Association. Yet, strikingly, the study of the material culture of childhood – especially clothing – has not kept pace. A number of factors have contributed to the privileging of the inner child over the outer – the avowed determination of ‘child-focussed’ studies to reflect the ‘real’ child, not adult projections; the anti-consumerism and moral panics that studies of childhood consumption in Euro-America tend to evoke; and the tendency within the academy to see ‘kid’s stuff’ as frivolous and superficial. Equally unhelpful has been the penchant of many dress, costume and textile historians for cloth and clothing of the periods during which natural fibres and craft- and hand-work were the norm – the Victorian era is a particular favourite – perpetuating the notion that the enchantments and distinctions of making and meaning do not apply to synthetic fibres or operate in the arena of mass production, a misconception that has remained largely unchallenged since the 1989 publication of Weiner and Schneider’s edited volume *Cloth and Human Experience*. Finally, there is a lacuna in the field of clothing itself: contemporary fashion

theory doesn't deal with children, only with adults. From this perspective, before the little black dress, there is nothing but a big black hole. Yet the children's wear industry is one of the most buoyant in the fashion trade, and has been throughout the twentieth century. So why is it invisible in academic analysis? There is a clear need to make childhood material through its clothing, and face up to the questions - whose childhood is it anyway, what is it wearing, and why?

This was the background to the two-day conference that I organised with Professor Pat Hudson, Director of the Pasold Research Fund. The Pasold (see <http://www.pasold.co.uk>) is the leading private funder of textile studies and related social, cultural and economic history, supporting individual research, conferences, workshops and publications including the journal *Textile History*. It is keen to encourage work by students and recent graduates as well as established scholars. The Pasold owes its existence to the success of the Ladybird brand of children's clothing which, under the direction of the fund's founder Eric Pasold OBE and his brothers, became the largest and most successful company of its kind in Europe in the post-World War II era, and this added a unique dimension to the conference. It has always been my view that material culture studies and anthropology 'at home' have suffered from lack of contact between the academy and industry. Ladybird was at its height during a key transitional period of great change in society, childhood and children's clothing. Putting the history and ongoing development of the Ladybird brand on the conference agenda, provided the rare opportunity to see childhood from the producers' perspective.

The conference, the first of its kind, dealt only with the twentieth century and with children's clothing in Britain, to give depth and focus to the event and also to generate a cohesive body of comparative material. The keynote speaker was Professor Daniel Thomas Cook of Rutgers University-Camden, USA, whose acclaimed 2004 book *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry and The Rise of the Child Consumer* on children's clothing in America was a landmark study in the field, both for its subject and its innovative use of trade journals rather than fashion magazines as primary research sources. Opening with a paper entitled *Fashion for Whom? Display, Ambiguity and the Performing Child*, Dan highlighted the increasing social personhood of children over the twentieth century, and the degree to which retailing is now pitched

at the imagined perspective of the child, finishing with three points for future scholarly work in the field – don't shy away from ambiguity; remember that there is more than one childhood; and maintain a keen eye on multiple observers.

The conference was arranged in six themed sessions: Design, Marketing and Gender; The Business of Children's Wear; Knitting and Childhood; Home Made Clothing; Promoting Children's Clothing and Designer Children. Clare Rose's (University of Brighton) Democratic Design and Edwardian Children's Clothing used contemporary photographs, documents and catalogues from 1900-1914 to reveal tensions between conformity and distinctiveness, democracy and elitism, mass-produced and 'designer' styles, that are still with us today. Katrina Honeyman (University of Leeds) showed that, although they did not publicise it, the Leeds multiple tailors produced boyswear as part of their core business from 1900 to 1940, revealing a previously unsuspected 'youth' market long before it was thought to have emerged with the sharp young suits for which Leeds later became famous. Alison Carter's (Museum of Hampshire) paper From the Liberty Bodice to the 28AA Bra: Revealing Stories in the Girls Underwear Department 1900-1940 established the intensity of the childhood memories embedded in the rites of passage of wearing these most intimate of clothes, and the suitability of oral history techniques for recording them.

It is too often forgotten that fashion is a business, as well as an art, and the second session was devoted to Ladybird as a case study. Stanley Chapman (University of Nottingham) gave a definitive account of the economic background to Ladybird's success in Pasolds Limited, 1930-1970: The Strategies of the Leading British Manufacturer of Children's Wear. However, no matter how efficient the production and innovative the technology, a business like Ladybird could not be successful unless its products captured the cultural zeitgeist. My paper (Kaori O'Connor, UCL) Ladybird: the Making of a Cultural Icon in the 'Golden Age' of British Childhood, examined the cultural values and constructions of childhood embodied in one of Ladybird's best-selling designs, the iconic dressing gown worn by the young Babyboomer cohort. Finally, in Manufacturing and Distributing Children's Wear in a Changing Retail Scene 1970-2000, Bramwell Rudd (formerly Courtaulds Plc) analysed the economic and social changes that led to the end of independent companies like Ladybird.

The textile and technique most closely associated with children's clothing is knitting, and Sandy

Black's (London College of Fashion) rich visual history *Knitting for Children: Fashioned with Love* illustrated the striking conservatism of knitting for babies and children which has hardly changed for more than a century, based on her ongoing research into patterns in the V&A and other archive collections. Linda Newington (Winchester School of Art) gave a preview of *In the Loop*, a three-day international conference on all aspects of knitting, to be held at the Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, on 15-17 July 2008 (enquiries to J.A.Horgan@soton.ac.uk).

In the early part of the twentieth century, infants' and children's clothing was made or adapted at home, not mass produced, giving mothers and carers literal involvement in the construction of childhood, as shown by Barbara Burman's (Winchester School of Art) paper on simple garments of the interwar years that embodied current ideas of child health, taken from a popular children's dressmaking manual. The domestic economies of the poor are well-recorded, but those of the middle classes are largely unknown. Mary Clare Hewlett Martin (University of Greenwich) presented the wardrobe biography of three generations of a professional family to illustrate the genteel strategies of re-making and re-cycling, practices that are assuming a new importance in the light of the need to sustain natural resources and prolong the life of clothes. Noreen Marshall's (V&A Museum of Childhood) *Bargains for the Kiddies: Children's Clothing from the Selfridges Bargain Basement 1925-1935* showed that, then as now, bargains are not always as economical as they seem, and traced Selfridges offerings from eastern Europe to Oxford Street, demonstrating that the global movement of children's clothing is nothing new. The Ladybird brand is now owned by Woolworths and in *Chinese Whispers: Long Life and Igloos to the Eskimos* Paul Seaton, Woolworths and Ladybird Archivist, and author of the Woolworths Virtual Museum (<http://museum.woolworths.co.uk>) returned to globalisation, describing the cultural value placed on the 'typically English' look in the new children's wear markets of Asia into which Ladybird is expanding, focussing on China where the brand is especially favoured because, for the Chinese, the ladybird is a symbol for good luck.

The emergence of designer children was one of the distinctive clothing developments of the twentieth century. In *Little Devils Wear Denim*, Pennie Alfrey (University of Loughborough)

presented a forensic approach to denim, peeling back the taken-for-granted meanings and associations that surround this now ubiquitous fabric. Annebella Pollen's (London College of Communication/University of the Arts, London) *Mass-produced Dressing Up Costumes and the Commodification of the Imagination* explored the intriguing world of princesses, fairies, Disney characters and the occasional puzzling occupational costume. In *Brand Values: Clothing the Second-Hand Designer Child in the late 20th Century*, Alison J Clarke (University of Applied Arts, Vienna) traced the emergence of the designer child, identified the most desired children's wear brands, and followed the clothes into a sartorial second life, through new social formations based on designer children's clothing exchange that are emerging on the internet via ebay.

All Pasold conferences conclude with a session on resources for future research. Hilary Davidson (Museum of London), spoke of the need for museums to expand their holdings of 20th century children's clothes, a field that has been widely overlooked until now. Katherine Baird (Manager of Archives and Special Collections, London College of Fashion) described the research collections held there, including the Woolmark archive and the newest addition, the recently opened EMAP Archive. EMAP are the publishers of Britain's leading trade journals on clothing and fashion, including *Drapers Record*, *Menswear* and *Fashion Weekly*, and the collection includes some 700 volumes dating from 1870 to the present. These journals are the equivalent of those American publications that Cook used for *The Commodification of Childhood*, bringing the conference full circle.

This highly enjoyable conference benefited from its interdisciplinary constitution. Taken together, the papers provided new insights into past and present, producing material that came together in unexpected ways, and generating stimulating dialogue that is ongoing. We all felt the event would establish a new and valuable research field. I hope that, for anthropologists, the work begun here will highlight new possibilities in ethnography at home, in the material culture of childhood, and in the anthropology of business and brands. Generally, it greatly enriched studies of contemporary childhood, demonstrating once again the value of material culture. A publication arising from the conference is planned, as a group we are looking to generate further collaborative efforts and research projects.

Interested parties are asked to contact me.

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