



Interstoff 1961. Buyers and sellers at the Interstoff event. Courtesy Messe Frankfurt GmbH.

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Two competing fashion fairs on a global market: Interstoff in Frankfurt and Première Vision in Paris

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For a long time, the study of fashion belonged to the realm of costume and design history. It is only recently that scholars have started to study fashion as a major economic and business activity. My research aims to study fashion from the multidisciplinary perspective of geography, business and economic history, and management, without ignoring the cultural aspects of this most glamorous industry. My project draws on the new culturally-informed field of business history to step inside the fashion system and examine its ever-altering supply chains and changing production and consumption relations and locations in the fashion industry in the last 150 years. Fashion can only be studied as a system which functions far beyond the national level. For centuries the production of raw materials, manufacturing and markets have had international and transnational dimensions. In my research, the main actors in the fashion industry are explored, including manufacturers, designers, intermediaries, trade associations, fashion fairs, fashion forecasters and retailers. Overarching research questions are: What were the main drivers of changes in the fashion system? Was it technology or relative factor costs? Why has the West, until this day, played such an important role in the industry? What was the role of symbolic capital and intangible factors like creativity and human capital?

A fine example of the historical and global evolution of the fashion industry is the changing role of fashion fabric fairs and the competition between the two most important fabric fairs after World

War II, Interstoff in Frankfurt, Germany and Première Vision in Paris, France. These fabric fairs competed with one another to become the foremost event until the end of the 1990s. In 1999, Interstoff was discontinued in Frankfurt and, at first glance, it appeared that Première Vision had won the competition because it became the number one fabric fair in Europe and still is. However, after taking a more historical and global approach, I came to the opposite conclusion.

Interstoff was set up in 1959, 13 years before Première Vision, as a spin-off from a general consumer fair organized by Messe Frankfurt. It had, like all trade fairs, many functions. However, right from the start, Interstoff was not just a temporary marketplace for the international textile industry but was it also a trend-maker. For at least 30 years, Interstoff's biannual events were the place to be in the global textile business with all major players going to Frankfurt twice a year, not just to buy and sell, but also to see the latest trends in fabrics and colours. Nonetheless, in Europe, it was difficult for Interstoff to compete with the selective and protectionist fair policies of Première Vision which could position itself as the gatekeeper of European, and particularly Italian, weavers. As Interstoff could not pursue this selective policy, many European exhibitors increasingly preferred to move to Paris and visitors followed suit to see the latest trends during the 1990s. Interstoff could not follow the same strategy because, according to German law, the exclusion of Asian exhibitors, such as was done in Paris, was illegal. It would also contradict Messe Frankfurt's internationalization strategy which aimed to organize new fairs outside Germany, particularly in Asia. The exclusion of Chinese exhibitors, for example, would have immediately led to countermeasures by the Chinese government and textile industry.

Although Messe Frankfurt had internalized fashion forecasting by means of expensive international trend events, it was no longer able to attract the top segment of industry during the 1990s. Its non-selective and open attitude towards all textile manufacturers in the world was in direct contradiction to being an exclusive, trendsetting, leading fair. In addition, Première Vision could also play the Parisian card of being part of the leading fashion capital where fashion predictions were made for the rest of the world. For Interstoff, it was nigh on impossible to win this competition about exclusivity. However, at the end of the 1980s, Messe Frankfurt had already decided to export the Interstoff brand, including trend forecasting, to Asia. Indeed, it was the first mover on the Asian textile fair market and became the most important fabric fair organizer in China. Messe Frankfurt's move to China may have been a clever decision as the growth rate in the last thirty years in China was incomparably higher than in Europe and the textile market was much more lucrative

there. Its strategy was also based on the philosophy that markets have to follow production, which was now mainly taking place in China, instead of Europe. Furthermore, this move also contributed to the geographical expansion of the European fashion and textile industries to China and supported Chinese firms to become major actors on the world market which was a direct consequence of the liberal trade policies that growing numbers of nationalist politicians in the West began to regret. This example clearly demonstrates the importance of a historical and global approach to the study of the fashion industry.

Further reading

Blaszczyk, Regina Lee ed. *Producing Fashion: Commerce, Culture, and Consumers*. Philadelphia, 2008.

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