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Interwoven Spaces: Exploring Berlin as a Fashion City

PhD Candidate Business History



Three mannequins of the clothing company "Wolf & Schlachter", Berlin ca. 1935; Jewish Museum Berlin, donated by Peter Sinclair, formerly Peter Jacob

Berlin is seldom ranked among the names of traditional fashion cities such as London, Paris, New York and Milan. In an article from January 2018, the industry periodical *Business of Fashion* shared the thoughts of a Berlin-based designer: "Berlin has never had an active garment-making industry." The designer's comment is far from correct. Rather, it confirms the somber prognosis of Werner Dopp from 1962 who wrote in celebration of the 125th anniversary of the Berliner ready-to-wear industry. Dopp described the industry, which forty years before had employed 180,000 people and had a turnover of more than a billion marks, as "going to the dogs". He expressed concern that the industry (and the world) had forgotten its past. His statement seems strangely applicable today. Clearly, Berliner fashion, and the international fashion community, has forgotten its roots. Roots which stretch back past the twentieth century, and reached a crowning point during the Interwar period.

Prior to the late 1930s the German clothing industry, predominantly based in Berlin, was the second largest export industry and employer. Yet this substantial industrial impact is little recognised in contemporary discussion, either social or academic. Only a small number of scholarly works on early twentieth century Berlin fashion exist, specifically within the economic history and business history disciplines. Of the academic work on the Berlin fashion industry during the Interwar period, most originates from the fields of sociology, gender, material or fashion studies. The available literature, much of which is directed towards the German audience, focuses predominantly on the ready-to-wear (*Konfektion*) industry and department stores (*Warenhäuser*) of the city. These subjects bring into stark relief the role of the Jewish community in the construction of early- twentieth century German garments and the development of the surrounding sector. There remains little analysis of the broader structures of the Interwar fashion sector which may provide an understanding of fashion within the city, its spatial and economic aspects, actors and networks. My research aims to resolve this issue, exploring the Berlin fashion industry of the 1920s and 1930s. Addressing the regional dynamics and structure of the city of Berlin within a broader global network, it aims to shed light onto not only commodity chains, actors and intermediary structures but also intangible representations in media and Berliner fashions' place within global flows. This will provide insight into the relationships between Parisian designers and consumers, Berliner makers and international department stores.

Methodologically tying the fields of business history, economic geography and fashion studies together, this research employs the theoretical concept "fashion capital" or "fashion city" as a base to analyse the development of Berliner fashion during the Interwar

period. This concept allows for the examination of structures, systems, agents and interwoven spatial dynamics. It has recently been suggested that there are a range of types of fashion city which hold different positions in a broader global network. Scholarship predominantly addresses the development of contemporary fashion locations across the globe through the outsourcing of manufacturing and advertising, franchising of firms, and online consumption options. However, what is stressed is the potential heterogeneity of fashion locations. These new perspectives provide excellent suggestions for the study of diverse fashion cities within both contemporary and historical periods, indicating the key role of internal creation, specialisation, and positions within regional, national and global fashion and consumption networks.

A case representative of Berliner fashion is the women's clothing firm Wolf & Schlachter whose coats are pictured above. Founded in 1919, the firm operated out of the fashion cluster situated around Hausvogteiplatz, in the centre of Berlin. Although the firm moved three times they remained located in this ready-to-wear district. The firm specialised in women's clothing and coats, key products of the Berliner industry as a whole. Wolf & Schlachter's nature as a ready-to-wear producer is playfully indicated in the above image through reference to off the rack purchases, as the models appear to hang in the coats which are displayed on a framing rail. The Jewish firm, like many others in the Berlin fashion industry, was export oriented. This, according to Christoph Kreutzmüller, Eva-Lotte Reimer and Michael Wildt, is the reason for its continuation following the National Socialist seizure of power. Wolf & Schlachter is representative of the export focus, clustering and specialisation common to the Berlin industry, however its case is only one of many within the broadly connected Berlin-based, regional and international networks that my research aims to analyse.

Further reading

Ahmed, Osman. "Can Berlin Turn Its Fetish for Failure Into a Fashion Success Story?" *Business of Fashion* (2018) [<https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/intelligence/can-berlin-turn-its-fetish-for-failure-into-a-fashion-success-story>] (visited 26 January 2018)

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and symbolic production in urban formations." Luciana Lazzaretti and Marilena Vecco, eds. *Creative Industries, Entrepreneurship and Local Development: Paradigms in transition in a global perspective*. Cheltenham, 2018: 79-100.

Dopp, Werner. *125 Jahre Berliner Konfektion*. Berlin, 1962.

Kreutzmüller, Christoph, Eva-Lotte Reimer and Michael Wildt. *Fashion and Persecution: The Fate of Jewish Clothiers in the Nazi Dictatorship on the Premises of Today's Justice Ministry*. Remembrance, Reflection, Responsibility vol. 2. Prepared by the Federal Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection. Berlin, May 11, 2017.

Westphal, Uwe. *Berliner Konfektion und Mode: Die Zerstörung einer Tradition 1836-1939*. Berlin, 1992.