You Are What You (Co)Curate: A Participatory Approach To Fashion Curation In The Digital World
Introduction

The process of digitisation of cultural heritage started more than 20 years ago and brought about several changes in the way heritage could be visualised and re-used. Initially, this process aimed at taking cultural artefacts out of dusty galleries, libraries, archives, museums, and bringing them closer to both scholars and professionals from the creative industries as well as to the broader public. Despite such technological advances, the major problem remained that simply digitising collections did not necessarily lead to a shift in their mode of consumption or fruition. Archives and museum collections were swelling to unprecedented sizes leading to a ‘crisis of accumulation’ where the cultural relevancy of these bodies became subsumed by their obsession with listing and preservation.

Established in 2014, the European Fashion Heritage Association (EFHA) was a network of over 40 fashion heritage institutions from 14 European countries, as well as a digital repository with an impressive quantity of digitised fashion heritage artefacts. Nevertheless, the lack of personnel, the lack of a coherent and clear curatorial approach, a poor digital marketing strategy, and the increasing amount of competitors amongst other factors led to a ‘crisis of accumulation’ and, thus, to a lack of popularity of EFHA’s digitised collection of nearly one million archival pieces. Although EFHA was famous for its annual conferences during which prominent speakers from across Europe presented thought-provoking lectures, there was still a lack of focus on strengthening the link with a key target audience that might be even more important in the future, e.g. students and particularly those working with fashion, textiles, art, and design.

In a March 2020 interview, Marco Rendina, the Managing director of EFHA, noted: ‘We would like to exploit this raw material in the best way, in creative ways, so that we can engage further audiences, give visibility to our members and we can also help curators and students building their own narratives. I think that we would like to put on the table this asset and in a way create a virtuous circle in which people can reuse this content and at the same time publish new content which can become engaging and can be reused by other users, and so on.’

This teaching case was written by Fraser White, Joyce Stefanova, Ting Fang Yu, Shih-Po Weng (master students at ESHCC), Mariangela Lavanga (Assistant Professor at ESHCC), Carla Gatt (Senior Case Writer at RSM Case Development Centre), and Ben Wubs (Professor at the ESHCC). The teaching case is based on field and desk research. It was prepared as an assignment in the course CH4128 Heritage and Fashion. The course was part of the curricula of the Erasmus Mundus Master Global Markets, Local Creativities (GLOCAL) and the Master Cultural Economics and Entrepreneurship, both at the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication (ESHCC). The course was developed under the project ‘RE-FRAME FASHION’, co-funded by the Erasmus+ KA2 Strategic Partnership program of the European Union (ref. no. 2018-1-NL01-KA203-038957). Further support was received by the HOKA funding for innovation in education in Dutch universities, by Léonie Ridderstap (the ESHCC Education Innovation Consultant) and by the Community for Learning and Innovation (CLI) at Erasmus University Rotterdam. We thank Marco Rendina, managing director of the European Fashion Heritage Association (EFHA) for his support in developing challenges for students and his availability throughout the entire course. Copyright © 2020 Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, and RSM Case Development Centre, Erasmus University. No part of this publication may be copied, stored, transmitted, reproduced or distributed in any form or medium whatsoever without the permission of the copyright owners. Please address all correspondence to cdc@rsm.nl.
How did EFHA cope with the increasing amount of challenges? What were the strengths of its competitors? Could the already existing content of EFHA be curated in a better way in order to become more attractive for students? Could the weaknesses of EFHA become their strengths and put them in the front line?

**Organisation Background**

The European Fashion Heritage Association (EFHA) was established in 2014 as a non-profit organisation. The association participated in Europeana, a web portal financed by the European Union containing digitised museum collections ranging from archaeology, art, fashion, maps, manuscripts, newspaper, sport, etc. As part of Europeana, EFHA engaged fashion institutions (Brand archives, Museums, Research institutions, etc.) in the valorisation and exploitation of fashion heritage online. EFHA attracted more than 40 public and private fashion institutions from 14 European countries. The aim was and still is to digitise and provide free access to the unique European fashion heritage. In doing so, EFHA digitised fashion heritage from GLAMs (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) and from fashion companies’ archives, and in doing so, it contributed to the digital transformation of the entire fashion heritage field. The collection includes more than one million digitised fashion objects, including historical dresses, accessories, catwalk photographs, drawings, sketches, videos and fashion catalogues.

This international fashion heritage hub aimed to create the experience of a digital heritage made of GLAMs (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) and brands for researchers as well as creatives, who wanted to be involved in the world of digitalisation, online access and valorisation of fashion heritage resources, in order to contribute to the digital transformation in the domain. The growing network strengthened their European identity and unlocked the full potential of shared fashion heritage for creatives, scholars and fashion lovers. However, their goal was to involve about 10 more institutions in one year. Furthermore, on Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr, EFHA shared both daily and monthly archival material and updates from experts from institutions of the network with more than 30,000 social media followers in total. The aim was to have target audiences enjoy curation of unveiling stories, episodes and events connected to past and contemporary fashion heritage, while they also aimed for a 20%-25% gain within one year. The Association was trying to engage students, not only as consumers but also as co-creators. They required students to co-create their social media platforms, as the one they were focusing on- Tumblr- was outdated and no longer as popular as Facebook and Instagram.

EFHA believed that uncovering and sharing the vast wealth of fashion heritage assets stored in public and private museums as well archives across Europe would empower these institutions, raise their visibility and link them to new audiences, as well as allow a broad fruition and re-use of their collection for work, for study and for fun. However, this does not happen overnight. How can EFHA exploit the full potential of its repository to reach new audiences?

EFHA believed that uncovering and sharing the vast wealth of fashion heritage assets stored in public and private museums and archives across Europe could empower these institutions, raise their visibility, and also link them to new audiences, allowing the full exploitation of their shared fashion heritage for work, for study and for fun.
Co-curating An Extensive Repository of Digitised Fashion Heritage Objects

EFHA held a vast and extensive online archive of more than one million fashion heritage objects offered by their range of partner organisations. Set against a competitive online landscape, the organisation felt that it was not enough to simply hold these items in a repository function. Instead it became clear that the act of curation was necessary to outreach target audiences and to ensure relevancy and visibility. Storing the online collection was the easy part, but using expertise to select, contextualise and curate this collection in an engaging way became one of the organisation’s key challenges.

Confronted with this challenge, several different curatorial activities were devised. Different categories of content were developed and offered on the blog or ‘Journal’ section of the EFHA website itself. In ‘Object Focus’, a unique or curious item from the collection would be selected and explained – such as a 19th century Spanish corset, or a Yves Saint Laurent cloak from the 1970s. In ‘Fashion & History’ objects from the archive were selected to tell the history of specific periods or movements related to fashion, for example the link between fashion and the arts and crafts movement or tell the history of specific designers or artists. In ‘Runway Archive’ iconic runway moments and collections from fashion shows in recent history were identified and explained.

The section ‘EFHA World’ enabled country specific profiles. Two striking examples were ‘Greek Fashion – 100 inspirational and creative years’ and ‘From Serbia to the World: Fashion Illustrations of Milena Pavlović Barili.’ In ‘Greek Fashion’, local designer and curator Nikos Saridakis was invited to select and write about a number of Greek items from the archive, and in doing so discuss the Greek fashion history. Similarly, in the Serbian case, fashion history curator Stefan Žarić presented a famous Serbian fashion illustrator, his exhibition in New York, and the state of the fashion industry in Serbia.

For five years, EFHA also hosted a conference on different topics related to fashion heritage. In 2019 the conference on the political implications of fashion heritage was held in the London College of Fashion and curated in collaboration with Parsons Paris College of Art and Università IUAV di Venezia. In 2018, the conference was held in Paris at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs. Usually, the annual conferences attracted between 100 and 200 participants; they offered opportunities for collaborations between different partner organisations in the network and the sharing of knowledge and expertise. For each conference, a podcast was produced in which the papers presented at the conference were made available online. Although the organisation felt this was a promising platform, resources restricted its production to the duration of the conference itself rather than throughout the year.

EFHA would also use external platforms as a means of curating materials. The organisation was present on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. On Instagram for example, the EFHA posted daily images from the archive along with a short description. On Twitter the organisation would post links to its journal articles, and daily posts of content from the archive under different hashtags – #jewelmonday, #paperwednesday, #runwayfriday. Although using strategies to promote online engagement with general audiences, the low number of followers remained the main struggle for the EFHA. In February 2020, its Twitter followers were 11.3 thousand (compared to that of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London which had 1.3 million), and its Instagram followers 7.4 thousand (V&A had 1.3M).

Tumblr was also used as a means of co-creating content with partner institutions. Each month in 2018, a partner was chosen, and a theme was selected to create a particular issue. EFHA partnered with the digital curation course at the fashion school in Paris, where it
arranged a co-creation challenge. Students were asked to devise a capsule curation where they selected up to five pieces from the archive and created a narrative. The students were then evaluated by their professors and their work published on the EFHA Tumblr account. The project has been described as crowdsourced curation. Although deemed a success, it was never replicated after the initial period. One reason for this may be the overall decline in prestige of the Tumblr medium itself. With the decline of its favoured Tumblr medium, the EFHA found itself with the need to find new platforms and methods to curate its content.

A missing gap: The need for more digitised Resources, Networks and Opportunities

In 2014, when EFHA was established, there was an increased interest in how digitisation of cultural heritage could help students in both their practical and theoretical research and development. Such repositories help build the network between students and experts in several ways as they:

- provide access to unique primary sources that had previously been unused or used for an initial presentation only to be stored in closed archives afterwards;
- lead to expert partnerships between institutions and individuals;
- stimulate bottom-up initiatives, and enable students to use a wider variety of resources in their work;
- expand participation not only by creating new content but by developing new work and teaching practices by increasing digital literacy skills in staff and students, building up institutional capacity, and exploring new possibilities for further work and collaboration.

While developing the first and the second paths, EFHA did not have the required organisational capacity and support to focus enough on the third and fourth ones, which was a pity since the interest from the side of the students was already existent. In 2013 during the launch event of the Zandra Rhodes Digital Study Collection, Joanna Lumley\(^1\) emphasised: ‘It’s so important for students to be able to look at HOW things are done.’ Indeed, students wanted to see how garments were made without having to travel to another city or country. Instead they wanted to save time and money and browse through a big number or artefacts from their studio.

How many students approximately are we talking about? Was there really a missed opportunity gap? In 2019 Business of Fashion (BoF) published a list of the best fashion-related schools in the world\(^2\), which included 66 fashion schools in 23 countries. Their survey reached over 13,000 students and recent alumni, which was about one third of the total amount of students in these universities. This fast calculation shows that penetrating this group of students could be a gold mine for the future of the EFHA.


Would it be hard for the EFHA to penetrate this target audience? Previous studies showed the struggles and needs of students working in fashion-related fields. An easily accessible functional digitised repository that was linked to various smart and interactive devices could be the answer to their problems. In 2016, i-D magazine reached out to different fashion students and noted their experiences in the field. “It’s gut wrenching when you’re finally doing what you love, but are stressed out of your brains, and feel mentally and physically helpless,” undergraduate Jordyn Smith wrote in an email. Smith was not the only one of this opinion. Fashion-related studies came with a high level of stress, but with the use of a digitised fashion heritage repository that was low in cost, the stress could be dramatically reduced. Such a possibility could boost their creativity via unique interactions and good customer service. Such a repository could facilitate the design process of the students as well as support them while making crucial decisions about their next collection.

Another vital point that many students emphasised was the importance of networks and partnerships. ‘Many, if not most, of the great creatives in fashion have been poor at business, from Poiret to Yves Saint Laurent. The solution may not be to teach them business but to help them find the right partner - just as YSL found Pierre Bergé,’ said Roger Tredre, an associate lecturer at Central Saint Martins, in conversation with The Guardian. During an interview in March 2020, Marco Rendina commented that he also shared this view: the most valuable asset of EFHA was its extensive network.

What do fashion-related students actually need? They would without a doubt benefit from a uniform platform with both a digitised repository, challenges and tasks that they could work on while using the digitised pieces, according to Kate Rushton. ‘Why not have a platform for fashion companies to post challenges for students to solve? In return, students could receive University credits for their submissions, internships, and rewards. These challenges would be open to other students as well. Students at the same University could be encouraged to form teams of students from different disciplines, such as business, IT, etc. It would be a great way to get students to collaborate and really understand the challenges for the fashion industry all over the world.’

Lastly, a better digital marketing strategy could have reached all individuals, who do not have the possibility to travel or visit fashion heritage institutions for one reason or another. This would also make the topic more relevant when considering the worldwide outbreak of the coronavirus. In moments of instability, coming from external factors, the EFHA could have earned more benefits had they already penetrated online educational platforms, such as Canvas or Moodle. This niche could have been addressed by ‘producing learning material and online courses’, but also ‘developing a regular podcast’ as Marco Rendina shared in an interview in March 2020.

---

Other Voices of (Co)curation From Around the World

In 1995, two of the world’s top runway photographers, Marcio Madeira and Don Ashby, launched the project firstVIEW, which was the first online runway fashion database. After the launch, it was updated with more high-quality photos and videos. Of course, the means of the platform were commercial, but together with Vogue.com, which had a database dating back to 1991, it has been the biggest archive of runway images used by students from fashion-related courses.

Bloomsbury Fashion Central was another prominent platform for various fashion-related resources that encompassed Berg Fashion Library (scholarly resources) and Bloomsbury Fashion Photography Archive. The latter offered exclusive and powerful access to a vast and fast-expanding library of rare and iconic images from the late 1970s until the 2000s. Over 90% of images were available online for the first time, and all were copyright-cleared for educational use. The online archive was curated by Dr. Valerie Steele, Director of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, and it also included supplementary content like articles, biographies, videos, and teaching and learning resources for students.

In 2011, fashion designer and style icon Zandra Rhodes decided to open up her brand archive for educational use, collaborating with the University for the Creative Arts (UCA) to digitise it and create an online educational resource with over 6,000 garments and a series of design drawings. Zandra wanted her archive to inspire and educate future generations, so the aim of the whole project was to digitise part of her collection and create a worldwide fashion resource. Alongside the archive, there was a series of tutorials, where Zandra demonstrated techniques and also unique interviews in which she was talking about what had inspired her to become a designer. This was the first initiative of its kind that offered educational and research opportunities for prospective generations of designers. UCA also used the collection in their training on research data management for artists and designers.

Again in 2011 Valentino Garavani launched his Virtual Museum, which was the second private initiative that aimed at digitising a designer’s personal archive after Zandra Rhodes’s project. The online museum displayed the designer’s work over the last 50 years and was available as a downloadable desktop app. ‘I see it as part of my legacy,’ said Valentino for an interview with Vogue. ‘I am happy that thousands of students, young designers and fashion people will be able to see and study my work in every aspect and in a manner easy and accessible for the younger generations. However, it is also important to remember things of the past, to review the fashion that has shaped our lives. I would call it Future Memory.’

In 2011, Google Art Project was launched and since its launch, it impressed its users with user friendly design and fluid interface in comparison to previous platforms of its kind. Back in 2011, its aim was to become the global gateway for accessing the entire collections of museums worldwide. Its interface includes zoom, timeline, search by colour, thematic exhibitions (more than 3,000), and categories (artists, mediums, art movements, partners, names of objects, and places).

On April 3, 2012, Google announced a major expansion to the platform as it signed partnership agreements with 151 museums and arts organisations from 40 countries. Google also launched a second version of the website with new Google+ features, enhanced search capabilities, and a series of educational tools. The platform became available in 18 languages.
Conclusion

While there were several organisations with similar goals and functions to EFHA, the key to finding success for these organisations was adopting curatorial approaches to find the most appropriate target audience for the capacity of the organisation. EFHA could never compete with Google’s resources, and would never have the individual following of an institution such as the V&A, but as a repository of more than one million images and a network of more than 40 institutions, its assets were real. Moving forward though, it could no longer excuse poor quality online content and a fragmented approach to its online audiences. How could its curatorial strategy better carve out a niche in this saturated online landscape? Were students the only viable target audience? With the right approach, could EFHA improve the professional lives of fashion students as well as enshrine the continued relevance and visibility of the organisation?
References


Image (Cover): Tie of printed silk with an abstract design, designed by Emilio Pucci, Italy, 1960s. (Credits: Emilio Pucci, 1960/69; Providing institution: Victoria and Albert Museum; Provider: Europeana Fashion; Identifier: http://mint-projects.image.ntua.gr/europeana-fashion/http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O88521-T.462-1985. The image has been cropped from the original)