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Fabricating the Body: Textiles and human health in historical perspective

The 2011 Pasold conference was hosted by Exeter University's Wellcome Centre for Medical History, and attracted more than twenty speakers from the UK, Europe, Russia, USA, Canada and Australia. Its aim was to offer an international and interdisciplinary perspective on the historical links between textiles and health. This theme was explored in papers that vividly illustrated the diverse physical and cultural environments in which bodily needs and wellbeing have been depicted and expressed.

The first session began, appropriately, with the head, speakers contributing to a session of 'Hats and Hair'. Emma Markiewicz (Warwick) discussed wigs in 18th century England, including the complex representation of hair both as protection against contagion and potential transmitter of infection. Alison Matthews David's (Ryerson, Canada) presentation described the hazards facing workers who made felt hats, as well as the animals sacrificed for their manufacture. Claire Hughes (Independent Researcher) closed the session with 'Bad Hats', distinguishing male and female 'hat stories'.

The following session moved the focus to a consideration of the nexus between humans and the most commonly exploited of animal products, that of wool. Discussions of 'Wool and Sheep' began with Ann Spurgeon's (Birmingham & Worcester) meticulous description of the human health consequences of 'sheep dipping', intended to eradicate sheep scab. James Stark (Leeds & Thackray Medical Museum) took us further into textiles history with a revisionist account of 'Woolsorters' Disease' in the "worstedopolis" of Bradford in Yorkshire. Stark suggests the classic tale of anthrax infection needed reappraisal since distinct illnesses may have predated the appearance of the anthrax bacillus. Both papers demonstrated the capacity of employees to push for medical investigations and legislative change. Tim Carter (Exeter & Greenwich) continued this thread in a talk on anthrax among carpet weavers in Kidderminster, while Rodney Mace (Independent Researcher) concluded the session by considering the place and costs of wool within the global economy during recent years, focussing on how the production cycle has affected, and continues to affect, both animals and humans.

The final session of the first day reflected how textiles 'covered society'. Sarah Campbell (Oxford) offered a new methodology for utilising tailors' records to measure human body size, while Pamela Dale (Exeter) discussed the desperate poverty of some citizens in the prosperous Victorian textile centre of Bradford. She considered in depth the descriptions provided by female sanitary inspectors as well as the Poor Law. The theme of institutional

clothing continued in an account of patient clothing in mental hospitals during the twentieth century by Nicole Baur and Joseph Melling (Exeter).

The conference dinner was marked by a generous presentation to the organisers by the Pasold representatives and the meal was followed by a presentation of historic films in which textiles and their impact of health figured as a theme.

The second day opened with the session 'Stretching Gender'. Sofia Tsourinaki (S.E.N. Heritage Looms) introduced us to a rich visual display of Peloponnesian 'zonari', the long belt worn by Greek women since ancient times to facilitate pregnancy and avert miscarriage. More recent hazards of pregnancy featured in Vivienne Richmond's (Goldsmiths, London) exploration of the Girls' Friendly Society's Central Needlework Depot. The middle class patrons of the Needlework literally created a network of friendship, guidance and protection for working class girls, setting up meetings and club rooms where needlework was undertaken and dispatching work to deserving girls while counselling them on chastity. The following session addressed 'Modern Fibres', opening with Sue Vincent's (York) discussion of the intriguing history of starch in clothing. Paul Blanc (California) discussed the health hazards of viscose and the culpability of leading firms who understood but ignored its dangers in early twentieth century Europe. Susan North (Queen Mary, London) took us back to the early modern era in a detailed textual analysis of the rich debates on the medicinal properties of clean linen.

The afternoon session began with Kaori O'Connor's (UC, London) vivid narrative on the decline of the girdle the ready exploitation of lycra as a healthful dress for aerobic exercise in the 1960s. The connection of textile technology and well-being continued in the provocative and disturbing analysis of sustainable fashion design in the modern global clothing industry by Joan Farrer (Brighton) and Angela Finn (Queensland, Australia). Their illustrated talk displayed the ambiguities of 'smart materials', including the ways in which computer technology and electrical interactivity within textiles may help or hinder human well-being.

The final session of the conference dealt with textiles and Utopias in history. Joseph Melling (Exeter) considered the gender politics of the 'anti-textileists' in the British nudist movement, particularly during the first four decades of the twentieth century. The medicinal properties of sunlight and the physical and ethical hazards of clothes was a philosophy shared with the European body-culture enthusiasts. Ludmila Aliabieva (Russian State, Moscow) introduced her audience to the avant-garde clothes designers of the post-Revolutionary era in Russia, showing in 'Textiles of future happiness', that these innovators were defeated in debates on price, uniformity and functionality. Sarah Hayes (Exeter) extended the theme of 'Industrial utopia' to the shoe enterprise of Clarks in Somerset and showed how this 'model' enterprise evolved working conditions which were often to the detriment of the workforce.

The conference brought together a range of disciplines as well as scholars addressing textiles in different periods and places, though common themes of technology, environment and custom emerged as key factors in shaping the way animal as well as human health has been

affected by an evolving global economy in which textiles has figured as a major source of trade and economic growth since ancient times. It was agreed that another conference was needed to develop some of the interesting linkages that had been highlighted in discussions of the physical and cultural environments in which clothing had been designed, made and worn.