

“Fashion Is Changing All the Time, Everywhere” A Brief Overview of the Field of Fashion and Dress Studies

Mina Rocés in conversation with Valerie Steele



Valerie Steele is director and chief curator of The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, where she has organized more than 25 exhibitions since 1997, including “A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk”, “Pink: The History of a Punk, Pretty, Powerful Color”, and “Paris, Capital of Fashion”. She is also the author or editor of more than 30 books, including *Women of Fashion*, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex and Power*, and *The Berg Companion to Fashion*. In addition, she is founder and editor-in-chief of *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, the first scholarly journal in Fashion Studies.

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MINA ROCES: Good morning, thank you for having agreed to this interview. We would like to do a brief overview of the field of Dress and Fashion Studies. You are one of the pioneers in this field and the editor of Fashion Theory.

VALERIE STEELE: Fashion Theory, yes. The first peer reviewed scholarly magazine for Fashion Studies.

MINA ROCES: Now there are a couple more, but it is still considered the one that everyone wants to be published in. Could you tell us how Fashion Theory began, and what made you decide to start this journal at a time when Fashion Studies was not yet considered an established field in academia?

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VALERIE STEELE: Well, it started almost by accident. I was at a conference of the Costume Society of America in 1996 and Kathryn Earle was also attending. She was then the managing director of Berg (Publishers), which was starting to publish books on fashion and dress history. She asked me if I would be on her board of advisors for the list of fashion books that they were publishing and I said: “Sure, I am happy to be on your board of advisors, but what you really should be publishing is a journal for Fashion Studies, because there are not that many books coming out and there is quite a bit of competition for them from other university presses. What you really need is a journal, because then people could publish their work in progress – if they had an early chapter or if they were stepping outside their normal subject matter to study fashion [...] – and this would be a place where scholars all around the world who were working on fashion could communicate with each other. We could have book reviews. We could have exhibition reviews.” She went back to think about it and the next day she said: “Would you like to edit the magazine?” Of course, I agreed. But she was in England, and I was in New York, so it was all done by email. A year later the first issue came out and it was very exciting.

MINA ROCES: *When was this?*

VALERIE STEELE: In 1997. It was exciting because the journal was peer reviewed, it was scholarly, interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, international. The very first issue included an article by Dorothy Ko about foot binding in China. We had an article by Irene Guenther about “Nazi Chic”. I knew the photographer Roxanne Lowit and I asked her if we could use one of her photographs of the three supermodels Naomi Campbell, Christy Turlington and Linda Evangelista on the cover. We got a lot of press. People were surprised and interested that there was a scholarly journal about fashion, because the popular idea was that fashion was a very superficial topic that scholars avoided. This had certainly been the response that I got when I was in graduate school in the early 1980s: that fashion was considered a totally frivolous topic. And interestingly, even by the 1990s that was still the case.

MINA ROCES: *And even now, some people still think it's frivolous.*

VALERIE STEELE: Yes, well. There was a young graduate student at Columbia University in the Sociology Department, Yuniya Kawamura, who wanted to write about fashion in modern society. And, despite the fact that Thorstein Veblen and Georg Simmel were sociologists, her professor said that this was not a scholarly topic. When the first issue of *Fashion Theory* came out, she

showed it to her professor: “Look, there is a scholarly journal, and that proves it is a valid topic for a PhD.” They backed down, I was on her dissertation committee, and she went on to have quite a career writing about fashion.¹ There was really a desire for this field.

MINA ROCES: The journal, now, is interdisciplinary. But what was the approach to Dress and Fashion Studies at that time? Was it usually only anthropologists who engaged in this field?

*VALERIE STEELE: You had some historians, sociologists, art historians, anthropologists, but everyone was very isolated. Fashion Theory was important because it provided a place where they could encounter each other. Fashion writing has tended to be primarily descriptive; it was less analytical. That is why I came up with the idea of calling it Fashion Theory. I found that title when I was doing research in the Bibliothèque Nationale – there was a 19th century fashion magazine called *Fashion Théorie* which was an interesting mix of Franglais, the word “fashion” in English and then “theory” in French. I thought this was perfect. My approach to fashion had always been to see it as an embodied phenomenon. I wanted to combine dress, body and culture, as I believed that dress and body were inextricably connected. That it wasn’t just about the body, but included also the self, who you are, your identity.*

In 1985 when my PhD dissertation was published as *Fashion and Eroticism*, Elizabeth Wilson wrote *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*. A bit earlier, Ann Hollander had published *Seeing through Clothes*. In France, in the 1980s you had male historians, such as Daniel Roche and Philippe Perrot, who were writing about 18th and 19th century fashion in Paris. So, there were definitely a few scholars, but they were isolated and Fashion Studies didn’t have any place in the academy.

MINA ROCES: I remember that even in the early 2000s it was difficult for me to get into a conference in London with a paper on dress; it was rejected. I also noticed that the field was Eurocentric except for a few exceptions on China and Japan. Most studies were on European dress. Am I right? If scholars were doing research on dress and fashion, they were usually writing about European dress, not even American.

1 See for example Yuniya Kawamura’s books *Doing Research in Fashion and Dress: An Introduction to Qualitative Methods* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), *Fashion-ology. An Introduction to Fashion Studies* (2nd edition, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), *Sneakers: Fashion, Gender, and Subculture* (Dress, Body, Culture) (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), and *Fashioning Japanese Subcultures* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012).

VALERIE STEELE: You certainly had scholars in America writing about American fashion history, but the field overall was quite Euro-American, that's true. Though there had always been some scholars working on Asian dress and fashion history. Back during the Cultural Revolution, there was Shen Congwen, an eminent professor in Beijing, who wrote a history of Chinese dress, as that was a safe topic to write about. He could publish on this topic without getting into political trouble. And, of course there was Akiko Fukai in Kyoto, who was writing and putting on exhibitions that were quite sophisticated. But there wasn't much work being done by European or American scholars on Asian fashion and Asian dress. I think that was partly because of the stereotype that Asian dress has been unchanging for centuries. This idea existed for many centuries in the West. Montesquieu, for example, talked about unchanging Chinese dress and this interpretation just kept being repeated over and over. That was one of the perceptions that I wanted to disprove when I did my exhibition and book on *China Chic*. You only have to look at Chinese sculptures from different epochs to see that the clothes that people were wearing in sculpture or in painting changed. Fashion was changing all the time. It was astonishing to notice that there was so little awareness of the world of dress and fashion in other cultures. So, yes, the field was predominantly Eurocentric.

MINA ROCES: *When would you say the field took off?*

VALERIE STEELE: With the global turn, eventually Asian topics took off. That was an important development towards looking at the global world of dress rather than only the American or European. I would say that it really took off at the very end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. Suddenly there were more people studying dress. There were new possibilities to get jobs as professors teaching dress or fashion history. The popularity of fashion exhibitions exploded. There was the hope that you could curate an exhibition, even though realistically there were only a few jobs in the museum world for dress specialists. Still, scholars started to feel there was at least a possibility that they could find a professional place for themselves. There was still not really any home in the academy. Very few Fashion Studies departments existed at major universities, except in a few art schools such as the University of the Arts London, where you could do a Master's or PhD degree in Fashion Studies or Fashion Curation.

MINA ROCES: *And these are still mainly postgraduate programmes, right? Because there are very few courses on Fashion History or Fashion Studies or Dress History in most universities.*

VALERIE STEELE: Few, yes. There might be one or two [courses] depending on the interest of a particular professor. If there is someone in the Art History department, for example, you might find a course there, but there was no established or recognised field of Fashion Studies or Dress Studies. When I was at Yale University in the late 1970s and 1980s, I stubbornly wrote a fashion paper in every single class. If I did a course, for instance, on 18th century England, I examined the character of the Macaroni fashion; if I was taking a class on the Social History of Impressionism, I focused on paintings about fashion. Whatever the main topic of the course was, I turned it into fashion.

MINA ROCES: *Should we distinguish between Dress Studies and Fashion Studies?*

VALERIE STEELE: Well, I'm not sure how helpful it is ultimately to distinguish between them. I would like to hear from you how you perceive the difference.

MINA ROCES: *For me, Fashion Studies is part of Dress Studies. Dress Studies is everything about clothing and adornment, as well as bodily practices. But I see Fashion Studies as more about dress styles that change over time. I guess I am defining Fashion Studies in opposition to studies on national dress. The study of the history of couture and cultural constructions of luxury that change through time and is connected to changing concepts of status. I would locate Fashion Studies in that space, but there is a clear overlap and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the two.*

VALERIE STEELE: The problem with distinguishing between them that way is that fashion is not simply a European, Euro-American phenomenon or a Western phenomenon. It's quite clear that there are examples of fashion in non-Western cultures that go back as far as 8th century Heian Japan. So, the distinction that way I think is problematic. Also, it's tended to be Dress Studies being more associated with certain fields like Anthropology or Object Studies, like Museum Studies, and then fashion being more Cultural Studies, or in the museum world more about flashy shows with lots of technology. I think it is more important to view Fashion Studies as a continuum, because there are no clear breaks between fashion and dress. Of course, you are right in a sense: fashion can be considered a subcategory of dress. When I started *Fashion Theory*, I defined fashion as "the cultural construction of the embodied identity". From the beginning on I would use "fashion" like a verb – you are fashioning yourself – so I included dress and adornment as part of the study of fashion.

MINA ROCES: *I agree. If you use “fashion” as a verb, then dress and adornment are interchangeable. Then, “fashioning” the body doesn’t have to do with changes in season, luxury or changing times. And the old discussion of whether a kind of middle class is needed to call a certain dress a “fashion” becomes less important. What do you think were the key debates in the study of dress and fashion? I would instantly think of the relation between dress and the body, and then the shift to performativity and performing identity through dress.*

VALERIE STEELE: In a way the changing themes in Dress and Fashion Studies have changed according to fashions in the Humanities and in the Social Sciences. Different theories appeared about how to approach fashion: one was the debate on “object versus idea” – are you viewing fashion as a material object? As a concept? As a system? We have certainly seen a movement away from the chronological histories of dress to a more thematic-based approach, to studies that are more analytic rather than descriptive. Many more theories suggest analysing fashion through different lenses: the lens of gender, of sexual identity, of class, of racial aspects, of decolonisation, certainly also the lens of ethnic or national identity, looking at, for example, Japanese or Chinese fashions.

Globalisation has been a major trend in recent years and here of course Asian scholars have had an immense impact. Japanese scholars have shown that what we would call fashion today existed at least since the Heian period, that is, since about 800 CE. Every season the fashion changed, Heian aristocrats could not wear the previous season’s clothes or they would be laughed at. It wasn’t so much the silhouette of the clothing that changed so abruptly, but its colours, patterns, etc. And Chinese historians, too, demonstrated that fashion existed across different dynasties in China. We can see that Indian textiles travelled all over the world, globally transforming fashion from South East Asia to England and beyond. These insights forced Western scholars to admit that fashion was not a purely Western phenomenon. I think that this was immensely important, providing a base for other scholars to start looking at the patterns of what’s going on with fashion systems in all parts of the world.

MINA ROCES: *Has the Asian context made a major contribution in terms of rethinking how Western scholars approach fashion?*

VALERIE STEELE: A huge influence. Take another example, the introduction of Western fashion to the court of Japan under the Meiji regime, and how it evolved later to the fashion of middle-class urban Tokyo in the 1920s. Young people started wearing Western fashion. That confrontation between Western dress and Japanese dress encouraged dress scholars to find ways of examining

hybrid dress and the way societies like Japan indigenised Western fashion in the project of modernisation. In studying this, Asian scholars have had a tremendous influence on the global study of fashion. Or just think of the huge fashion weeks that are organised in Tokyo or Shanghai or Beijing nowadays. I am really looking forward to seeing more studies of this kind, for example, in Korean Studies, in South East Asian Studies, there is still a lot more work to be done.

MINA ROCES: Yes, definitely, Dress Studies is relatively new even though it has existed a long time in terms of studies of textiles and costume as material objects.

VALERIE STEELE: I remember well a big conference on Fashion Studies in 1997 in Manchester, England. There was almost a battle between the object-based curators and the theory-based academics. The curators complained about the use of special terminology by the new Fashion Studies scholars. You clearly noticed the differences between object-based and theory-based approaches. Everywhere throughout the conference, there were huge tensions. More recently, however, curators have been organising exhibitions based on academic scholarship, such as “Black Fashion Designers” and “From Sidewalk to Catwalk”, a pioneering show on street style in London.

MINA ROCES: So you think it is important then to have both, the academic world and the exhibition world working together?

*VALERIE STEELE: I think exhibitions are very important, because many more people visit them than read academic books and articles. Even the colour of mannequins is significant. Most are white but you can hire mannequins in a wide variety of skin colours, from pale, tan to dark black. We deliberately use a range of different-coloured mannequins for all of our shows to avoid the impression that fashion is “just something for rich white people”. This is just one example of how the way exhibitions are presented can be very exclusionary without anyone thinking about it at all. And of course, such experiences in exhibitions spill over to academic research as well. Now, with Black Lives Matter growing, there is also a growing interest in Black fashion, and questions such as decolonising the museum and decolonising fashion have become important issues right now. For too long, I think, we’ve looked at fashion primarily as a field of visual culture. [...] We’ve looked so much at consumers, but not so much at making fashion and the issues connected to production. Sustainability, too, has become an enormous topic. I receive lots of papers at *Fashion Theory* about sustainability and fashion.*

MINA ROCES: *True, ethical fashion is a new thing. In addition, scholars have started to write about the sewing itself, about the people who actually sew their clothes. [...] Are there any kinds of research gaps you would like to see filled in the near future?*

VALERIE STEELE: Well, I think a truly global fashion history would be really good. My long-term aspirations would be that all of these regional in-depth studies lead to a truly global history. So that it wouldn't just be a few pages about, for example, China, and otherwise mostly Western fashion history but that all the different research findings would be integrated and we would see much better what was happening, an exchange of cultural ideas all along. There have been a few great exhibitions on that but there is still a lot more work to do. Then, there are a lots of small gaps. I am starting to get quite a lot of articles from African scholars, which is really, really great. What is interesting is, oddly enough, we still don't get many articles from French scholars, even though we get them from Chinese and Korean scholars and other people whose first language is other than English. So that's kind of odd. And of course, there is a lot of good research coming out of Russia; there is even a Russian edition of *Fashion Theory*.

MINA ROCES: *Certainly, Russia is a very rich site for Fashion Studies. What do you think are the biggest challenges in doing Fashion Studies?*

VALERIE STEELE: I think the most striking challenge is that there is still no home for Fashion Studies in the academy. And that means that scholars continue to have a hard time. They may not be lucky enough to have a job that enables them to do research on their subject. There still aren't so many jobs for researchers who are doing Fashion or Dress Studies. So, I think, that is a real issue. [...]

MINA ROCES: *Now, if at the end of this interview we turn to the focus of this special issue, which is on politics and dress, what comes to your mind?*

VALERIE STEELE: Thinking of politics and dress ... I first have to think of the colour pink – I remember for example photographs in the *Washington Post* depicting thousands of women at the women's march in Washington, DC, all wearing pink pussy hats. When I did my show "Pink: The History of a Punk, Pretty Powerful Color"², I also included pictures of pussy hats in the book and

2 The exhibition was shown from September 2018 to January 2019 at the Museum at FIT, New York. For the accompanying exhibition catalogue see *Pink: The History of a Punk, Pretty, Powerful Colour*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2018.

the show. Politically it was clearly a message of resistance for American women directed against Donald Trump and his remark that he grabbed women by the pussy. When news came out that protestors were planning to wear these pink hats, Petula Dvorak, a feminist journalist at the *Washington Post*, wrote an article that said: “Please sisters, back away from the pink. This will make a serious subject seem to be frivolous and girly.”³ We have already seen pink being used by gay men in the 1980s. Taking it from the Nazis and then making it into a symbol of gay pride and gay activism. Since 2006, we have as well the Gulabi [“Pink”] Gang in North India and their pink sari movement, a women’s movement against male violence and violence from upper caste people.

MINA ROCES: *Yes, that’s true.*

VALERIE STEELE: They said that they chose pink because other colours were already occupied, like orange is associated with the Hindu nationalist party BJP.

MINA ROCES: *And green is generally associated with the Muslims.*

VALERIE STEELE: That’s it, green is associated with the Muslims, exactly. Although pink was traditionally a unisex colour in India, obviously even the very poor low-caste women know at some level that globally pink has become a colour symbolic of women’s protests. Now, we have seen protest clothes used in many contexts – from Afro-centric clothes used in the 1960s and 70s as part of restoring dignity to African Americans in the civil rights movement in the United States, to umbrellas as a symbol for the democratic protests in Hong Kong. There were various “Colour Revolutions” around the world. But I think that their usefulness varies considerably depending on the relative degree of freedom of expression in any given country, [...] obviously in an authoritarian and totalitarian governed country the protests will just be crushed. In this case using special “activism” dress is just like painting a target on yourself.

MINA ROCES: *That’s right. Certainly, in authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia activists have used colour-coded clothing as a “uniform” to symbolise their cause and unite the members of their group. A couple of examples include the red shirt and yellow shirt protesters in Thailand, and the yellow revolution that deposed Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines. But, as you said, a colour code also makes you vulnerable. It is a common cliché to say that fashion is political. But it is also true the other way round – that political actors use fashion to em-*

3 See Petula Dvorak (2017): The Women’s March Needs Passion and Purpose, Not Pink Pussy Hats. *Washington Post*, 12 January 2017.

power themselves – whether they are in political power or whether they are marginalised. Dress can actually be a very powerful way to communicate symbolic messages in visual form. [...] There is still the common perception in both society and academia that fashion is associated only with elites who use it to display wealth and status. But as this special issue demonstrates, fashion has been mobilised by oppressed groups as part of the costume and ideology of their resistance. At the same time, we hope to underscore the point that fashion is very important to every ordinary person – and can be deployed for subtle forms of defiance, as weapons of the weak to restore dignity to the oppressed and exploited. We hope that in showing that the issue of what to wear is also about politics, resistance and empowerment, then maybe dress and fashion will become better accepted as a field worth studying. [...]

VALERIE STEELE: Thank you so much. That was fun, this was a great interview.

MINA ROCES: *I am glad you enjoyed it. Thank you very much.*