The Object of Fashion: Methodological Approaches to the History of Fashion[i]

Giorgio Riello

Department of History
University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 7AL
United Kingdom
Email: G.Riello@warwick.ac.uk

Public opinion, just like mass media, the press and parts of the academic approaches take it for granted that fashion by definition is something real: the platform shoes in fashion this year; the low-cut dress which could be seen on Parisian catwalks in TV; the tomboy hairstyle of the American rockstar; the sunglasses advertised by the football player. The objects seem to constitute fashion; however we could also speak of fashion as something abstract. Fashion contains patterns of behaviour and ideas (smoking for example is no longer in fashion, as it used to be in Marlene Dietrich's days), and articulates itself through concepts (from grunge to vintage; from look to style), which only indirectly take an interest in the material sphere.

Also on an analytical level, the study of fashion – and in particular the study of the history of fashion – contains both abstract concepts and the analysis of material objects. This short essay is focussing on the role of the object in the history of fashion and dress and will suggest that there exist diverse approaches. Three in particular will be distinguished (the story of dress; what has been called fashion studies; and the material culture of fashion) to evaluate their practices, their values and their shortcomings.

Between Material and Immaterial: Inductive Analysis vs. Deductive Analysis

The fact that fashion at the same time is an (immaterial) idea and a (material) object makes all discussions partial which limit themselves to one aspect or to the other of these approaches to the whole. However this distinction between fashion as material object and fashion as immaterial concept is important because it is the base of two diverse approaches to the study of fashion: on one hand the study of dress and costume and on the other hand fashion theory or fashion studies. To these could be added a third, which I call 'the material culture of fashion', an approach with a methodology which is not yet totally developed.

The study of dress and of wardrobe, which to the largest part is of historical nature (and I actually refer specifically to the history of dress) is an approach to the study of fashion which goes back at least to the second half of the nineteenth century, and which from the postwar period onwards has become one of the leading methodologies within the study of fashion.

The object (a dress, but also a piece of cloth, an accessory etc.) is also the subject of research. The research starts from a ‘concrete analysis’ based on the observation of artefacts often deposited in a museum. Through the analytic attention to the objects, stories of the evolution of forms and colours, but also of the uses may be traced. This is an ‘inductive’ approach in the sense that through precise observations of the objects, a line of interpretation is followed which abstracts itself from the history and the signified of fashion, and which may then be applied to other objects as well.

From the 1980s and onwards, a new wave of study has come to differentiate itself from this approach. No longer based on analyses of the object, what is today defined as ‘fashion studies’ is a number of approaches to the study of fashion which are not only multidisciplinary (integrating sociology, anthropology, ethnography etc) but also heavily ‘deductive’.[ii] Often, coming from the frontlines of theory (from Simmel to Bourdieu, from Veblen to proper schools like that of Cultural Studies from the University of Birmingham), stylized ideas are presented on how fashion is formed, how it penetrates the world, reproduces itself and conditions the social and the power relations between individuals and within society as a collective. In this way, a lot of abstract assertions (in time and space) may be dealt with, which are then ‘applied’ and confirmed through case studies. The object, if not totally ignored, is reduced to a subordinate position in turning theory concrete within the everyday practices of men and women. This approach is deductive insofar as it starts out with abstract ideas, which are applied to concrete cases. (Fig. 1)

Figura 1. Approccio Induttivo ed Approccio Deduttivo

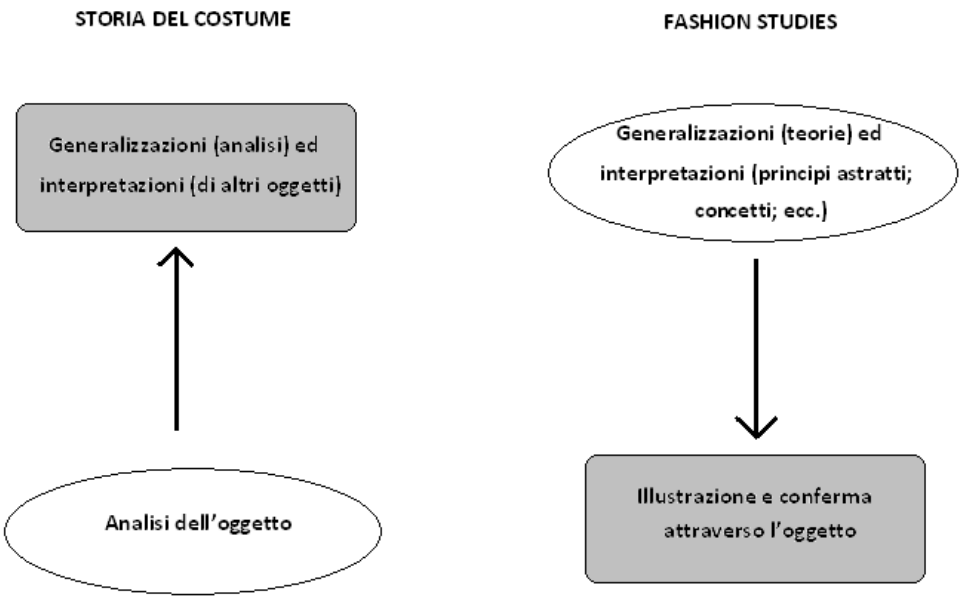

Figure 1

DRESS HISTORY	FASHION STUDIES
Generalizations (analyses) and interpretations (of other objects) (abstract principles,	Generalizations (theories) and interpretations concepts etc.)
Object analysis through	Illustration and confirmation the object

It is not entirely correct to say that whereas in dress history the object is central, fashion studies should totally ignore the objects of fashion. Assertions of genres are common in literature but they leave out that dress history has abstract, interpretive ambitions and that fashion studies has found a particular fertile ground within the research of museum curators, who have the task of preserving and interpreting artefacts. The truth is that the two approaches often support each other and integrate, mixing the empirical with the theoretical, abstract concepts with material precision.

It is not surprising that approaches to material culture have recently entered the domain of fashion studies. The material culture attributes significance to objects from persons who use them, collect them but also produce them sell them and consume them. Thanks to its strive to integrate the material and more abstract aspects, the material culture provides a platform for encounters between different methodologies and approaches.

An example might clarify this; an object like a beautiful English seventeenth-century piece, worked with pearls of different sizes on thread and representing a biblical scene, which was included in the Victoria and Albert Museum collections in London as a rare example of crochet work (Fig. 2). Dress history (and in this case also the history of textile) would interpret it and judge its value from material parameters and parameters of work, through its unique character and its capacity to represent a given style and a certain epoch. Dress history would finally contextualize this object within a series of similar objects, through a careful research presented in specialist publications, in temporal exhibitions or in permanent costume galleries.[iii]

A fashion studies approach would instead start with an abstract interpretation, for example by suggesting how during the seventeenth century women from higher classes were excluded from public life (the paradigm of the so called separate spheres, as analysed by Breward). This object demonstrates the type of activity that came to interest women.

Note the little attention given both to stylistic parameters and to object analysis.

Halfway between these two approaches, however, there is the method of material culture. This poses questions for example about the significance of these objects for the women who produced them, but also about the colours, which were admired at home, within four walls. The research of Ruth Greuter and Susan Frye has shown how this crochet-hook work often had a political content, showing how the women, who were excluded from the politically active domain, were able to communicate their affiliation with state affairs in material work, which has been passed on through time.[iv] The stylistic and narrative evolution of these objects contextualizes the material culture not so much within a historical evolution of the typology of the object, or the style or the material, but through the life of the persons through which these objects did receive their value and signification.

The Object in the History of Dress and Wardrobe

As has been underlined here, one should not think that the three methods hitherto elucidated ought to be placed on different levels of value or complexity.
Often, it is claimed in error that the fashion studies, being more recent, would be methodologically more advanced than (the supposedly 'traditional') dress history. As far as the object of fashion is concerned, dress history remains an important reference particularly because of the vast number of studies carried out. Obviously, I refer to the research gathered during more than 30 years on the pages of journals like Costume (published in the United Kingdom) and Dress (published in the United States).[v]

The object is central not only to the story of dress but also in the way it is read in works by James Laver, François Boucher or Natalie Rothstein.[vi] The scope in which dress history may find its full expression is when the object itself is integrated, that is in the gallery or the dress or fashion show. The object arrives at telling its proper story and to present its own value through its material exhibition. These themes, dealt with by Chiarelli and Sgubin, and by Adelhaid Rasche, make it evident how the story of fashion is not only written but is didactically represented, I would even say on the emotional and the experiential level, by the use of objects. The exhibition on the story of the great Parisian haute couture designer Madeleine Vionnet, held in Pagini in 2009-10, is en example of how a contemporary exhibition may be a vehicle for reinterpreting the role of Parisian couture and a reevaluation of one of its protagonists.[vii] Wonderful dresses, accompanied by sketches, designs and photographs, showed a creative evolution during a space of time of twenty years and beyond. Here is the object which tells a story and does it to a general public, often at least ten times as large compared to those how who would read an entire book on Madame Vionnet.[viii]

I wanted to quote the case of the Vionnet exhibition insofar as similar considerations could also be made concerning permanent galleries in which complex dress histories are told (again through objects). What the public sees is the result of years of research, interpretations and discussions often reduced to simple labels of 100 words which resume, in a direct and precise language, complex concepts and a huge work which most of the time remains invisible. We are dealing with an "archaeological" work, which may not be concluded by studies in archives or libraries, and hardly by studying the object in itself. It equally includes a long restoration process (like the one described by Mary Brooks) which is material, but also includes an interpretive 'restoration' of the object; including later exhibitional problems, which span from the choice of places, to those of windows and dummies; not to speak of the problems of preservation in the gallery as such (textile objects may not be exposed to light for a long time) or the problems of budget, insurance and security of the object.[ix]

To confirm that dress history has not been surpassed by fashion studies, it suffices to mention the fashion exhibitions that have succeeded each other (almost continuously) in Europe and North American, which span from Poiret to Armani, from Vivienne Westwood to Street style, not to mention the space given to dress in exhibitions devoted to certain themes or periods of time. Museums like the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto or the Fashion Museum (formerly the Museum of Costume) in Bath in England have recently invested noteworthy financial resources to construct and modernize their dress galleries.[x] One could say that dress history today is able to communicate with the public at large not so much through publications, but through visual presentations, in the first place those of galleries and exhibitions and in the second place through virtual exhibition spaces on the net.

The exhibition, the gallery or the website are in reality the result of a research which includes hundreds, sometimes thousands of objects.[xi] What we see in the exhibition is only a small part of the materials that are stored in the deposits of the museums. In a certain sense, what is presented to the public is a 'distillate' and often a simplification. Sometimes, the objects that the researcher is using are physically located on different continents and often they may not be analysed as a whole if not through visits to other museums or through collaborations between colleagues.

The work done by the curator in the museum is primarily a work of retrieval of references and information. For example, it is difficult to know if the dress by Paul Poiret exhibited in a New York museum is a unique piece or if similar items may be found elsewhere. This problem may partially be resolved through a tight web of information between museums all over the world, often based on personal contacts. Secondly, the curator may get help from specialist librarians, gathering together various different publications on an object or a theme. All big or small museum departments, including those of textile and dress, have their specialized

librarians and curators who can tell with precision about the state of source materials in any matter.[xii]

It is worth underlining that the object is not only studied and presented, but also ‘contextualized’ on a historical level. The object is situated in a precise time, and for the object of fashion this time is often brief (the fashionable skirt of a certain year; or even the sneakers in fashion of a certain month). On the other hand, the interest of history lies in evolution, often over a long time. This may pose a problem. A certain object, for instance a pair of Nike sneakers, has little to say if it the shoes are not seen in relation to other similar objects (for example the preceding and the succeeding models). The famous graphics illustrating the length of skirts during different years is an abstraction generated from dating and measuring different objects. And it proposes a story of variation, of a dynamism, which no skirt may tell only by itself.

On the one hand, therefore, it is necessary to bring out the unique character of each object, to examine it, if the expression is permitted, at every turn. On the other hand, it is necessary to create explanations, which relate the diverse objects to time (for example the length of the skirts) or diverse objects in space (for example the relation between the trainers and informal clothing). Dress history has found it difficult to reconcile these different approaches and tends to emphasize the ‘special’ object more than the common, offering space to singular stories rather than to ordinary things. In the cases where systems of objects are examined over time, dress history furthermore tends to create a linear history of evolution, which implies a perfect comparability between each object through time. The validity and utility of this principle is questioned in historiography today.

The Object in Fashion Studies

Sometimes, it is argued by colleagues interested in fashion that fashion studies doesn’t need an object. Yuniya Kawamura, for example, in the introduction to her study of fashion called Fashion-ology explains how fashion is a concept and as such has no need to be illustrated.[xiii] Many other colleagues, and not only those in defence of dress history, object to such a choice. Fashion may be regarded as a concept, but as a concept it becomes just as much a practice of its own – social, cultural, economic and personal – through its effects on, and relations to, material objects.

Perhaps it is possible to argue that fashion studies do not leave out the object of fashion, but interprets it, studies in and uses it in ways that differ from dress history. The object appears as central not through its form as an artefact but as object of consumption. Methodologically, fashion studies borrow from anthropology, for example, through its interest in relations between persons and objects of consumption.[xiv] The bottle of coke, the car, the domestic products, saris etc. are all typologies of objects, which form part of recent socio-anthropological studies. Still, non of these tells a story which refers to specific objects (the sari modelled by a certain woman in

the year X; or the bottle of coke drank by Caio in the year Y). Often, objects are dealt with in series, as mass products, which the researcher analyses through their social value rather than through their individual value. The banal, mundane object, which is often not special and no object of collection, appears as much more important in this analytical structure than in dress history research. The importance given to everyday practice and to the 'ordinary' object (as opposed to the extra-ordinary which merits to be included in a museum), pushes the researcher towards interpreting not so much the object in itself as the relations between objects and larger concepts, often of theoretical nature.

The advantages of an approach that combines object with theory are undeniable, but at the same time it is worth underlining how theory here serves as a guide through millions of 'banal' and equal objects. Hence, we here deal with a methodology adapted to analysing the present world of consumerism and commodification, rather than a past where the number of objects is limited. Secondly, some researchers underline how this relation between object and theory in which the theory plays the lion part may be harmful and counterproductive for the analysis of the object of fashion. For example, Aileen Ribero exhorts her colleagues not to give room for what she calls the 'straightjacket of theory', instead preferring a more flexible approach based on a successive series of assessments and interpretations in which the object, that which is really worn, becomes the centre of attention.[xv]

The Object in Material Culture of Fashion

Talking about 'material culture of fashion' may seem like an excessive repetition, a bit like saying 'the day preceding yesterday' instead of 'the day before yesterday', or 'the brother of my father' instead of 'my uncle'. Wouldn't it be easier to talk about 'wardrobe', 'clothes' or 'dress'? We here deal with everyday terms, which may be associated with the concept and the world of fashion without anybody being surprised. Still, just like 'the day preceding yesterday' puts the emphasis on 'yesterday' and the fact that the uncle I am referring to is the brother of my father and not of my mother, this helps to understand the subtle difference between something material with which the idea of fashion may be associated (the dress in latest fashion; the designed piece of clothing) and the concept of fashion that becomes manifest on the cultural level (as well as on the economic and social) through material objects (the fashion of short skirts; but also the IKEA style of our homes).

The material culture is not the object in itself (which we saw was at the centre of dress history), but neither is it a theoretical form (which on the other hand dominated the approach of fashion studies). The material culture takes its interest in the modalities and dynamics through which objects take on significance (and one of these is that of fashion) in human lives. A bikini is not only a piece of cloth which women put on to get a tan. The bikini is a fundamental object in social practice during the second half of the twentieth century: it refers to a certain lifestyle, to the emancipation

of women, to the opposition against the right-thinking in the 50s and 60s, but also to the glamour look of Brigitte Bardot or the curves of Pamela Anderson. While dress history inscribes it within a stylistic and evolutionary course of bathing suits, which goes from the long johns in the late nineteenth century to the topless, material culture seeks to understand the role of this garment within a specific society and how this society has changed just because of the introduction of a garment like the bikini.

The example of the bikini shows how material culture places itself on an intermediary level between materiality and the conceptual. It represents neither the inductive approach used in dress history, nor the deductive approach of fashion studies. Instead, it focuses the successive assessments and interpretations suggested by Aileen Ribeiro, in which theory is confronted with evidence and vice versa. And this generates an interpretive richness of the object, which often leads to a discussion where fashion is only one of many interpretive aspirations. Since material culture asks what a skirt, a sport shoe or a bikini signify for the person who wears it, it does not necessarily sort out the concept of fashion, nor does it necessarily make the skirt or the footwear objects of fashion. It is interesting to notice how many of the studies defining themselves by 'material culture of fashion' discuss personal and affective significances, economic barriers, uses and habits, and gender and age differences. Wedding dresses being passed on from mother to daughter is an important social practice, which surely cannot be explained by fashion. Or the revival of the fashion of the 80s, which definitely is a fashion practice, finally isn't comprehensible without taking into account the difference between generations (the fact that young people today who dress in fashion from the 80s are born during the 90s), new forms of consumption (for example vintage practices) etc.

But how to do research in practice using the methodologies of material culture? Richard Sennett claims that because the fabric, the pot, the instruments and the machineries are material objects, it is possible to return to them again and again, to linger over them in a way that would not be possible in a discussion. Furthermore, material culture does not follow the rhythm of biological life. Its objects do not necessarily decline like in the case of the human body. The history of objects follows another course, in which metamorphoses and adaptations play an important role throughout the generations.[xvi]Sennett observes how the object in itself delivers a historical testimony, in the sense that it belongs both to the past, which the researcher seeks to understand, and to the present in which the researcher writes. In this sense the object for the methodologies of material culture both the subject of research (writing on the production of Chanel's dresses) and the material used to write this history (use of Chanel's dresses as sources).[xvii] Although Coco Chanel and her collaborators are no longer among us, the dresses survive. One could say that they remain a sediment of fashion. It is almost paradoxical that a phenomenon like fashion, which is continuously defined as ephemeral, leaves behind such a consistent quantity of surviving objects.

Two problems remain to discuss in conclusion. Firstly, which are the advantages of an approach combining object, theory and historical research. The object should not be used as mere illustration to pre-established interpretations. On the contrary, the artefact should be used to suggest interpretive hypotheses which documents or other written or visual sources are not able to provide. Let me give an example from my own research on shoes from the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. The analysis of French shoes from the early nineteenth century reveals how their international success was not only the result of their being in fashion, but also that their manufacture, with a sole in two pieces instead of three, permitted a quicker production of lesser cost than in the other European countries. Written sources underline, through numbers and words, the success of French shoes, and fashion literature from the period reports how French fashion had become the latest fashion. However, only the analysis of the shoes themselves gives evidence to an important competitive factor like the mode of production.[xviii]

The integration of the object in historical research, and not only in the field of fashion, has become easier during the last years not least thanks to the creation of vast image banks by the most important museums in the world.[xix] Thousands of the high quality images permit the study of objects all the way down to their finest details. Although the image on screen or in print may not replace the direct observation of the physical object, it may, as Prown has underlined, remain the point of departure for research, as the digital image facilitates data retrieval as well as the selection and comparison of materials.[xx] For example, it allows for comparisons between similar objects within different collections, it gives access to information on the objects that a time were available on request at the museum and allows to create complex logical, material and chronological sequences.

However, material culture has to deal with a disciplinary problem. Just at the moment when new technologies permit simultaneous access to thousands of objects for hundreds of researchers (thus avoiding queues of months for an appointment with a department at some museum) the lack of familiarity with research in the past becomes a significant obstacle. Precisely this capacity of moving freely between diverse objects (for example in textile: from silk to cotton, or from weavings to knittings, from medieval time till today) make it evident that the average researcher does not have the specialist competence to understand these objects, their manufacturing techniques, their materials, but also their uses, the fashion etc. The immediacy of access to objects does not match the complexity of know-how necessary to make good interpretations of these objects.

Conclusion

This short article has sought to illustrate three different approaches through which fashion may be analysed through the use of objects. These approaches are stylized versions of a reality where diverse approaches are integrated, where often theory and material culture coexist under the

same roof in the object. However, each of these approaches offers both advantages and disadvantages which the history of fashion must take into account. In all the cases, the object rests central in the history of fashion, both as an instrument and a complex source which demands of researchers and students not only knowledge, but also practical experience and familiarity with the histories and theories of fashion.

i I want to thank Peter McNeil, colleague and co-author of various works, for the long conversations that have contributed to this article.
ii For a panoramic view of different approaches to fashion studies, see Daniel Roche, The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the 'Ancien Regime', Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 3-22; Lou Taylor, The Study of Dress History, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002; Catherine Richardson, Introduction, in Catherine Richardson, ed, Clothing Culture, 1350-1650, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004, 1-25; Malcolm Barnard, Fashion and History/Fashion in History, in Malcolm Barnard, ed, Fashion Theory, Abingdon: Routledge, 2007, 33-38; Giorgio Riello & Peter McNeil, Introduction: The History of Fashion Reader: Global Perspectives, in Giorgio Riello & Peter McNeil, eds, The History of Fashion Reader: Global Perspectives, Basingstoke: Routledge, 2010.
iii Margaret Swain, Embroidered Stuart Pictures, Princes Risborough: Shire, 1990.
iv Ruth Geuter, Reconstructing the Context of Seventeenth-Century English Figurative Embroideries, in Moira Donald and Linda Hurcombe, eds, Gender and Material Culture in Historical Perspective, Basingstoke: Routledge 2000, 97-111; Susan Frye: Sewing Connections: Elizabeth Tudor, Mary Stuart, Elizabeth Talbot, and seventeenth-century anonymous needleworkers, in Susan Frye & Karen Robertson, eds, Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens. Women's Alliances in Early Modern England, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 165-82. See also: Ann Rosalind Jones & Peter Stallybrass, Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 134-72.
v Costume, the journal published by Costume Society in the United Kingdom was founded in 1966. Dress, a journal published by Costume Society of America was founded in 1975. Negley Harte, 'The Study of Dress' in Giorgio Riello & Peter McNeil, eds, The Fashion History Reader: Global Perspectives, Basingstoke: Routledge, 2010.
vi James Laver, Costume and Fashion: A Concise History, London: Thames and Hudson, 2002 (general editor Amy de la Haye); François Boucher, 20 000 Years of Fashion: The History of Costume and Personal Adornment, New York: Reed Business Information, Inc 1987 (1966); Nathalie Rothstein, Four Hundred Years of Fashion, London: V&A Publications, 1997.
vii Madeleine Vionnet: puriste de la mode, exhibition held at Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, 24 June 2009 – 31 January 2010.
viii Pamela Golbin, ed, Madeleine Vionnet: puriste de la mode, Paris: Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs, 2009.
ix On the evolution of technics and theories of the object of fashion in the museum, see: Taylor, Sudy of Dress History, Id.; Establishing Dress History, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004.
x Museum of Fashion, Bath, UK: http://fashionmuseum.co.uk/; Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada: http://www.rom.on.ca/

xi It goes without saying that the collections of the museums are not all equal, but have different priorities. A museum like Victoria & Albert in London, which holds one of the major collections in the world of fashion objects, has as its mission to present a story of design and specialises itself on objects with an intrinsic value, fashion creations, garments used by famous persons etc. Other museums, like the Museum of London, preserves diverse objects of everyday character, including diverse artefacts found in archeological excavitions. See

Chloe Wigston Smith, Materializing the Eighteenth Century: Dress History, Literature and Interdisciplinary Study, in Literature Compass, vol 3:5, 2006, 968.
xii For example, my own research on shoes in the eighteenth century has led me several times to the shoe museum in Northampton in England. The museum holds one of the greatest collections of shoes in the world, of which only a minimal part are exhibited. To the research in the magazines on the objects I have added the research in the library and in the archive of the museum, where I have made particular use of the information sheets on specific shoes from the century produced throughout the years by the curator of the museum.
xiii Yuniya Kawamura, Fashion-ology: An Introduction to Fashion Studies, Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004.
xiv See for example the works by anthropologists Daniel Miller and Mary Douglas, or by philosopher Jean Baudrillard on the present consumer society.
xv Aileen Ribiero, Re-fashioning Art: Some Visual Approaches to the Study of the History of Dress, in Fashion Theory, vol 2:4, 2008, 320.

xvi ’Because cloth, pots, tools and machines are solid objects, we can return to them again and again in time; we can linger as we cannot in the flow of a discussion. Nor does material culture follow the rhythms of biological life. Objects do not inevitably decay from within like a human body. The histories of things follow a different courxe, in which metamorphosis and adaptation play a stronger role across human generations.’ Richard Sennett, The Craftsman, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, 15.
xvii Elsewhere I have identified three different approaches: the ’story of things’ (where the object is the subject of research); the ’story from things’ (where the object is used as source) and the ’story with things’ (where the object and history interrelate on the same level and the object is able to create its own stories). See Giorgio Riello, ’Things that Shape History: Material Culture and Historical Narratives’, in Karen Harvey, ed, History and Material Culture, Basingstoke: Routledge, 2009, 24-47.
xviii Giorgio Riello, ’La chaussure à la mode: product innovation and marketing strategies in Parisian and London boot and shoemaking in the early nineteenth century’, in Textile History, vol 34:2, 2003, 107-33.
xix Two of the major image banks for research and publications are those of the British Museum (http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database.aspx) and of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (http://collections.vam.ac.uk/indexplus/page/T&C+High+Resolution+Images.html)
xx Jules D. Prown, Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001.