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Around Town & Kids

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Dress code

Why do we wear what we do? **Sara O'Reilly** visits the Horniman Museum, which has trawled the world's wardrobe for answers

When you live in London it's easy to stop registering the kaleidoscopic appearance of the population. Lots of races and religions, enormous social diversity, many cultural tribes – that's the status quo here. But a new exhibition at the Horniman in Forest Hill asks us to look at the quotidian catwalk parade all around us with fresh eyes and think more carefully about what's going on when we select our clothes, style our hair or decorate ourselves with make-up, piercings or tattoos.

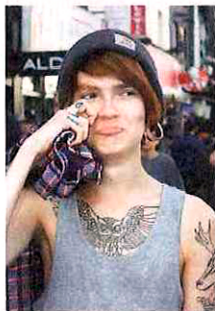
The museum was established in 1901 by Frederick John Horniman, the son of a wealthy tea importer (who used the money he inherited to indulge a passion for travel and collecting). Highlights include a great collection of taxidermy, presided over by a stuffed walrus that's probably better known than the man who founded the museum, and a treasure trove of artefacts relating to dress and other forms of bodily adornment. These rich pickings have produced 'The Body Adorned: Dressing London', a new exhibition which starts by providing an overview of the many and varied functions that are performed by clothes.

As well as protecting us (not only from the elements, but against evil spirits or malign chance – the 'lucky pants' theory crosses continents and centuries), they can indicate status, religion and sex, flag up allegiances and play a significant role in the rituals of birth and death and rites of passage inbetween.

Among the standout exhibits is an Inuit parka, made in the late-nineteenth century from translucent seal gut. It demonstrates perfectly how in places where protection from the elements can mean the difference between survival and death, human ingenuity and skill allow people to make weatherproof garments from whatever's available locally.



Dress to impress
Video installation by the Light Surgeons; below: tattooed boy from the urban portrait project and (right) tunic from Mali, West Africa, with protective amulets



The second part of the show investigates the way worldwide influences and historical functions are assimilated into the dress of Londoners today. It encompasses an audiovisual installation, an exploration of the dress choices of a business woman, a young married couple and a group of teenagers, and a series of striking urban portraits that are the results of a street photography project for young artists and photographers, led by photographer and cultural sociologist Paul Halliday and a Horniman curator.

“What we choose to put on each morning transmits signals that can be interpreted incorrectly”

The traders, travellers, missionaries and anthropologists who collected, classified and studied dress in far-flung parts did so to uncover how the societies they encountered worked and to better understand their attitudes to topics such as nudity and beauty.

Today the collections of museums like the Horniman serve as a rich source of inspiration for fashion designers. They were also lapped up by a wide-eyed public when they were first displayed in the nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries and the curators of this show have been explicit in their acceptance that those early displays were responsible for disseminating inaccurate theories which are now regarded as culturally insensitive. One wall text states, 'These early practices of collecting, classifying and displaying objects helped to create ideas and assumptions of cultural and ethnic differences, some of which are now rejected as racist'.

There are numerous variations on this theme, drawing our attention to the unchallenged assumption, during the height of the Empire, that Britain represented all that was correct, normal and superior, while the dress and customs of other peoples were frequently regarded as base or lacking in sophistication.

Initially the repetition feels unnecessary but it's an intentional ploy on the part of the curators. This becomes apparent in the contemporary portion of the show, where, despite the insights gleaned from the introductory section, it remains tempting to make judgements about people's appearance.

The most engrossing element of this enjoyable show is the work of multimedia production company, The Light Surgeons, whose video installation includes a series of portraits of people in the street in Chelsea, Bethnal Green and the City. Each subject poses for a long period, trying to look steadily at the camera. After a while there's a voiceover in which the individual explains a little about the way they dress.

A tough-looking character in shades says, 'I can see how people judge and think, "Why is he wearing these glasses?" I'm partially sighted and I've had my left eye removed'. A young woman instructs, 'It's best to cover yourself well but try to still look sexy at the same time'. A cocky bloke tells us 'I'm a good-looking man and I like to dress well... my girlfriend tells me what to wear'. A cyclist in specialist gear, who you might have taken for a risk-taker, explained, 'I ride a bike so I'm wearing my high-viz – safety first!'

The videos make compulsive viewing. Some visitors react audibly. As the portrait of a conservative-looking man in a suit ('I work in a bank so you have to look like a banker') appeared on the screen, a man of a similar age, in jeans and a loose short-sleeved shirt paused and murmured 'I remember that', before wandering off, pushing a baby in a buggy, with a preschooler scampering alongside.

What we choose to put on each morning transmits signals that are often interpreted incorrectly by the people we come into contact with. This show will make you think twice before assuming you're fluent in the language of dress.

'The Body Adorned: Dressing London' runs until **Jan 3 2013** at the Horniman Museum, 100 London Rd, SE23 3PQ (8699 1872 / www.horniman.ac.uk). Forest Hill rail. 10.30am-5.30pm daily. Free. www.timeout.com/aroundtown