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Liminal Luxury: Establishing the Value of Fancy Dress Costume

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ABSTRACT The study and contextualisation of one early twentieth-century fancy dress costume from The John Bright Collection, London, provides an opportunity to challenge the socialised assumption that fancy dress costume is a short-lived, skill-less and superficial spectacle. Like many examples of this sartorial form, the Good Luck dress examined here shares characteristics with clothing termed, with little hesitation, luxury.

KEYWORDS: fancy dress, costume, saturated experience, hand-made

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when costumed entertainments were widely popular across continental Europe, Canada and the United States of America, fancy dress costume could be considered a luxury. In London, the

department store Liberty & Co. produced dressing-up guides written by self-appointed experts to advise discerning members of the upper-middle class on how to achieve costumed distinction in cloth and cosmetics; in Canada, successive Governor-Generals hosted fancy dress entertainments for their social and political elite; and on both sides of the Atlantic, plutocrats commissioned costumes from the Parisian couture house of Worth.¹ In the twenty-first century, the connection between fancy dress costume and luxury seems much harder to define. Since the 1970s and 1980s, when fancy dress costume and events experienced a period of pronounced commercialisation, the sartorial form has come to be seen as a short-lived, skill-less and superficial spectacle that lacks credibility.² Within the fashion industry, specifically, designers and commentators are typically quick to downplay any association – material, technological, ideological – between fancy dress costume and the clothes and dress accessories that are marketed to consumers.³ And yet if we move beyond socialised assumptions about fancy dress costume, many examples of this sartorial form, from the present and the past, share characteristics with clothing termed, with little hesitation, luxury.

Items of fancy dress are frequently hand-made, and often involve many hours of labour to produce. Constructed from a bricolage of materials, fancy dress costumes are invariably creative and often involve feats of great technical skill to assemble and to wear. Reflecting more nuanced contemporary discussions about luxury items that enable people to experience transitory and unique sensations, fancy dress costume is as an item of dress that is typically worn at a moment set apart physically and psychologically from the rules and mores of people's lives. This enables it to become a conduit for the conveyance of deeply-felt personal messages; for people to have the luxury to express themselves in public as they might never normally be able to. The sale of historic fancy dress costumes for thousands of pounds at recent auctions in the United Kingdom and United States of America would appear to underline the point that articles of dressing up can make clamorous, if not always eloquent, cases for their consideration as luxury items. This paper pursues this claim by using a single example of fancy dress costume, a Good Luck dress from The John Bright Collection, London.⁴

The Good Luck costume consists of three parts: a dress, hat and sash (Figure 1). The white cotton knee-length dress has a low-waisted and pleated skirt. It is 94 mm long, 53.3 mm across the shoulders and 45.7 mm around the waist. The dimensions of the dress suggest it was worn by a girl or young woman. The decoration and construction of the costume support this inference. The three parts of the garment are handmade and decorated with a random pattern of duplicated symbols conventionally associated with good fortune: a cat with an arched back, a horse shoe, a frog and a four-leaf clover. The symbols have been applied with black paint,

**Figure 1**

'Good Luck' costume c.1920s. Photographed by Jon Stokes with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Courtesy of Cosprop Limited.

probably by means of a stencil because the outlines of some are blurred. Finishing details have been added with a fine black pen. The rear of the dress is decorated with the in-filled silhouette of a large sitting black cat, its tail fashioned from a length of black tassel. The hat consists of a black ruched silk cap with a cotton trim. This band is necessary to ensure the hat remains in place when worn. Across its front, 'GOOD LUCK' has been sewn in an irregular stem stitch. The uneven appearance of the sewing is probably the result of limited proficiency on the part of the maker, rather than limited time. A pencil outline of the capital letters can be glimpsed beneath the stitches. This guide, which was presumably drawn to facilitate neatness, suggests that time was spent in the hat's preparation. One possibility is that the unpractised needle worker was left handed and had a problem with untwisting the thread because it was being worked in the wrong direction.⁵ The sash is likely incomplete. It survives as a short, thin cotton strip decorated with similar lettering to that on the trim of the hat, with the notable difference that 'GOOD

LUCK' is here written in paint. In sum, the costume is a hesitant creation. The cotton panels are cut and stitched awkwardly, untidily, and details have been applied with an enthusiasm that does not correlate to the faltering appearance of the finished garment. This would suggest the maker possessed rudimentary clothes-making and drawing skills, and support the contention that they were young. The date of the dress is unknown although its silhouette and high rounded neckline, which are similar to an evening gown of the 1920s, suggest a plausible time of construction. Amendments to the costume, elucidated below, support this view.

The rudimentary construction of the costume provides the first reason why it is permissible to associate it with luxury. If the garment is placed within its cultural and social frame, which is likely to be in the early 1920s, department stores in the UK, which had existed since at least the late-nineteenth century, were only beginning to demarcate spaces for children's products and to target children in their advertising.⁶ Hitherto, children's goods had been sold to women who were conventionally regarded as the chief purveyor of household and family-related goods and services.⁷ Considering that the owner and wearer of the dress was likely a girl or young woman, it is possible this hesitant creation represents an early engagement – something of a 'first contact' – with contemporary commercial culture, in which the materials, even pattern, were purchased for an upcoming costumed festivity. The fact the garment was kept and subsequently preserved certainly speaks to it having a deep personal value above its limited intrinsic value.

Even if the dress were not symbolic of a capitalistic rite of passage, it was influenced by commercial trends. The dress is a personal adaptation of a popular Good Luck outfit from the early twentieth century. A more sophisticated interpretation of the costume appears in a catalogue from London fancy dress supplier Weldon's, which features many of the symbols that appear on the John Bright Collection dress.⁸ The repeat design of swastikas hanging from the Weldon's variant is a conspicuous feature and one mirrored, in part, in the hand-made costume. A large swastika has been painted across the front of the dress and along the back, just above the hem. In the early 1920s the swastika had been a polyvalent symbol and it was conventionally associated with well-being and good fortune. The rise of National Socialism in Germany during the 1930s limited its meaning, which became socially repugnant.⁹ The changed, and now negative meaning of the swastika, caused the dress to be altered. This act of modification provides another reason why the concept of luxury is applicable when discussing the garment.

At some time, a roughly-cut white cotton panel was stitched across the swastika that appears on the front of the dress. The same process of covering up was done to hide the swastika on the rear of the dress. The cotton patches are thin and the panels are translucent. Across the centre of the front panel, 'Good Luck' has been

written in black marker in a very uneven hand; the 'G' looks to have been written with a different pen entirely because it is much thicker than the other seven letters. Four rough shapes, ostensibly two horseshoes and two four-leaf clovers, have been drawn near to the corners to try – for the most part, unsuccessfully – to cover the invidious symbol beneath. The impulse to censor, to cover the swastikas, was presumably governed by the owner's desire to make another wearing of the costume socially acceptable and possible. The need to amend the dress was perhaps all the greater because the political charging of one of its motifs would have been untenable within the convivial environment where it was probably worn. The alterations provide further indications of the owner's pride in their handiwork and the positivity this stoked within them: they derived a sense luxury through their craft.

The decision to retain and revise this garment demonstrates how an unexceptional costume, most likely worn for a parochial entertainment, acquired new meanings – personal and social – as the circumstances in which it was worn changed. The owner, likely a young woman or girl, was presumably aware of this and consequently chose to alter the garment to avoid offending those around them, and from causing personal embarrassment to herself. The owner's material and psychological investment in their costume, and the possible feelings of luxury this engendered, can be usefully explained through Beverly Gordon's concept of saturated experience. According to Gordon, women in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America were inclined to create occasions, often 'self-contained, enchanted "worlds"', that provided heightened sensory awareness to increase the emotional, intellectual and social satisfaction they derived from undertaking routine domestic tasks.¹⁰ Dressing up provided a particularly powerful saturated experience. The making of garments stimulated the senses – chiefly sight, touch and hearing – and when worn, a costume enabled its wearers to have an embodied experience, 'where they were relating to other cultures and time periods in the most direct and personal way possible.'¹¹ Gordon argues that aesthetic sensitivity and enjoyment was greater for women than men because of the more insular and domestically-centred lives they led, which typically involved more repetitive, and on the face of it menial, tasks that offered limited scope for interaction with adults.¹²

As I summarize elsewhere, a growing body of scholarship acknowledges how social changes during the nineteenth century provided women with greater opportunities to explore their personal and collective identities.¹³ For example, Diana Crane has shown how women explored the 'non-verbal communication' facilitated by their clothing to become active participants in the period's 'commercialist culture'.¹⁴ G.J. Barker-Benfield has drawn attention to rising literacy rates among British women, which enabled them to attain a greater independence through deep play; that is, participation in challenging

activities, typically shared with other women, that enabled them to explore greater freedoms. Barker-Benfield provides examples of women gambling and paying in to lotteries, attending tea parties and dinners.¹⁵ It is possible that the women who engaged in the activities described by these scholars were seeking, however subconsciously, to advance their public roles. At the very least, they were pursuing experiences that enabled them to be transported somewhere else, to a more fantastic realm. This desire for a unique, enriching experience elides with contemporary discussions about the democratization of luxury in which people seek to become somebody else, or perhaps more accurately, wish to engage more deeply with a part of themselves that adherence to conventional mores and public modes of behaviour – Erving Goffman’s ‘veneers of consensus’ – precludes.¹⁶

Simple though it is – unremarkable in many respects – the rudimentary cutting and sewing of the dress, the faltering application of the symbols and its small size, suggest it was the work of a girl or young woman who lacked experience in clothes making. The costume appears to have been a luxury for its owner, a conduit, perhaps, to explore her gendered identity and incipient adulthood. As a cultural artefact that provides a window into these complex ideas and values, it could even be suggested that the costume is something of a luxury for historians. Its analytical value is potentially all the greater for being a humble example of one person’s aspirations and experiences. The costume’s inclusion in the John Bright Collection certainly goes some way to highlight the burgeoning interest and respect for historic items of fancy dress that have been appearing in auctions and fetching high prices with greater frequency in recent years, in Europe and America.

Some of the costumes to appear at auction have had a more secure and impressive provenance than the Good Luck ensemble reviewed here. For example, the costume worn by William Montagu Hay at the Devonshire House Ball to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1897 sold through London-based Kerry Taylor Auctions in December 2018 for £3,000. The estimate for the ensemble had been £800-1200.¹⁷ The price reached by this costume is equivalent to a Worth beaded butterfly gown of c.1912 that was sold through the Charles A. Whitaker Auction Company in April 2017 for \$3,250; the estimate had been \$800-1200.¹⁸ In April 2019, Chicago-based Hindman Auctions sold an Arabian Nights-style costume for \$213. This sum may seem modest in comparison to the previous lots, but it far exceeded the estimate of \$80-120 and the costume was sold in relatively poor condition. The condition report advised that there were ‘numerous missing or loose sequins and fragile and ripped fabric of the trousers. The ensemble is sold for study and is not stable enough to be worn’.¹⁹

The contemporary desire to own examples of historic fancy dress costume contrasts with views from the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries, when these garments appear to have been considered as possessing a limited, time-bound value. For example, in the eighteenth century, the antiquarian and politician Horace Walpole lent out his costumes, suggesting he attached no deeply-held feelings to them.²⁰ In the twentieth century, photographer and socialite Cecil Beaton repurposed items from his dressing up box.²¹ In his diary for 1942, he notes that the impoverished socialite Marchesa Luisa Casati sold off 'relics' of her fancy dress 'as the Queen of Hearts, a tarnished, theatrical necklace, or bits of worthless finery from the bottom of a trunk'.²² Beaton's attitude appears to have been shared by one journalist who concluded his account of the 1897 Devonshire House Ball with the observation that 'the frocks which once graced a society leader will soon perhaps be found in the second-hand cloth shops of Bayswater and Whitechapel'.²³ We need to be mindful that this comment is laden with disdain for social privilege, but the sentiment did contain some truth. The Cleopatra gown of ball guest Minnie Stevens fetched £9 at auction in 1911, approximately £730 in twenty-first century sums.²⁴ This figure may hint at a buoyant market in second-hand fancy dress costume, but it compares poorly with the original cost of commissioning costumes for this grand festivity, even allowing for the fact that those prices which can be ascertained are known because they were probably unusually high; for example, the Duke of Marlborough's Worth costume may have cost as much as £860,000 in today's sums.²⁵ The change in attitude towards second-hand artefacts of fancy dress costume since the nineteenth and twentieth centuries seems to reflect broader shifts in the conceptualisation of luxury, where an increasing emphasis is now placed on craftsmanship and the pursuit of liberating personal experiences. Albeit catering to different tastes and budgets, the public collection of the Good Luck costume and the private acquisition of William Montagu Hay's costume are both examples of this appreciation.²⁶ It is evidence that fancy dress costume does have a claim, personally and culturally, to luxury, a luxury that is potentially all the more compelling for existing in people's every day (Figure 1).

Notes

1. Wild, *Carnival to Catwalk: Global Reflections on Fancy Dress Costume*, 16–20.
2. Ibid., 2.
3. Wild, 'We Need To Talk about Fancy Dress', 2.
4. <https://www.thejohnbrightcollection.co.uk/costume/fancy-dress-costume-and-headband/>. Accessed: September 2019; Wild, *Carnival to Catwalk*, 34.
5. I am grateful to Philip Sykas for his guidance here.
6. Trentmann, *Empire of Things*, 199–210.
7. Cook, *The Commodification of Childhood*, 41–65.
8. *Weldon's Fancy Dress for Ladies and Gentleman*, 43.
9. Gudgel, 'Distinctive Dress of the Nazi Party', <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/BEWDF/EDch8811>. Accessed July 21, 2020.

10. Gordon, *The Saturated World*, 1.
11. Ibid., 109.
12. Ibid., 11–15.
13. Wild, 'Romantic Recreations', 192.
14. Crane, 'Clothing Behavior as Non-Verbal Resistance', 241–68.
15. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility*, 198–9.
16. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin [Anchor Books, 1959], 1969), 21.
17. <https://kenrytaylorauctions.com/archive-list/?id=104&sts=archive&paging=2#sthash.sc00AhmN.dpbs>. Accessed September 2019.
18. https://www.liveauctioneers.com/item/52334990_worth-beaded-butterfly-fancy-dress-gown-c-1912. Accessed September 2019.
19. <https://hindmanauctions.com/items/10407162-fancy-dress-or-theatrical-costume-1900-20s>. Accessed September 2019. With thanks to Timothy Long.
20. Ribeiro, *The Dress Worn at Masquerades in England, 1730 to 1790, and Its Relation to Fancy Dress in Portraiture*, 38.
21. Comparison between contemporary photographs and surviving garments in Beaton's wardrobe indicates that he recycled decorative elements from his clothing. Wild, *A Life in Fashion*, 42–5, 50–1.
22. Beaton, *The Years Between: Diaries 1939–44*, 129.
23. Murphy, *The Duchess of Devonshire's Ball*, 118.
24. Wild, *Catwalk to Carnival*, 43.
25. Ibid., 42.
26. An accessible summary of contemporary attitudes to luxury accompanied the Victoria and Albert Museum's exhibition 'What is Luxury?' that ran between 25 April and 25 September 2015: Scholze and Wierzbica, 'Defining Luxury', 6–13.

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