

Sacrament, is surely about looting (the relics were eventually retrieved by police). What of the Virgin Mary's miraculous survival and her turn to look down on us from a Basilica window? This is museum gold! I also wondered about the tacky whiteboard for messages from visitors. Surely it would have been better to have a memorial wall on which visitors could pin messages of love and support (using specially designed cards)? And where are the heroic, overworked and chronically under-paid fire-fighters? Despite these and other questions, I walked away from Rolleston Avenue sobered by — and reflecting on — many of the things I had seen or heard. The exhibition made a deep impact. Canterbury Museum staff deserve high praise for what has been accomplished under very challenging circumstances.

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**Figure 1:** Christchurch Mayor Bob Parker's Orange Parka and 'Munted' T-shirt, Canterbury Quakes Exhibition, Courtesy of Canterbury Museum.

*Black in Fashion: Wearing the Colour Black in New Zealand*, New Zealand Fashion Museum in association with the Museum of Wellington City and Sea, 1 Brandon St, Wellington, 24 February–18 March 2012. Reviewed 14 March 2012. Internet: <http://www.fashionmuseum.org.nz/>.

ONE OF THE SIDE-EFFECTS of 'pop-ups' — shops, exhibitions and the like — is the interesting juxtapositions that can occur. The exhibition *Black in Fashion: Wearing the Colour Black in New Zealand* was a prime example. It popped up next door to *Brides on Thorndon* in central Wellington for a few weeks in early 2012. The shop and exhibition shared a doorway: left to ivory, white and pink; right to a sea of black. The contrast continued inside: soft and light on the one side; industrial chic on the other.

This is the second exhibition organised by the New Zealand Fashion Museum, the brainchild of fashion designer Doris de Pont. It is a new and welcome direction for museums in New Zealand. The Fashion Museum exists virtually and physically only

through temporary exhibitions mounted around the country. The museum also aims to boost research into New Zealand fashion history, and to this end brought out the book *Black in Fashion* (Penguin, 2012) and arranged talks to accompany the exhibition. It is all very exciting for scholarship in this area.

Curated initially to coincide with the 2011 Rugby World Cup, *Black in Fashion* was part of the New Zealand International Arts Festival. The exhibition's introductory panel gave a nod to the wider context: the festival was a good time to ponder the question 'why do so many New Zealanders wear black today?' because 'the arts are described as colourful; yet an orchestra is typically dressed in black and in the auditorium black also appears to be the colour of choice'.

The space was an ideal venue to display the 70 or so garments. Concrete floors, exposed lighting and wooden pallets kept the focus on the pieces. The venue was not large, and some of the paths between objects were tight, but many of the garments could be viewed in the round. It was an opportunity to see textures and detailing: the elegant back straps of the Konstantina Moutos evening gown or the intricacies of Amalia O'Neill's 'Bête Noir' crinoline, corset and sexy-as-hell boots.

The intimate viewing was let down by the design and siting of many interpretive panels. White typeface on a black background rarely works, and placing panels at or near ground level asks far too much of the viewer. A couple of older women behind me spent as much time squatting, stooping and squinting as looking at the pieces.

The garments and accessories covered more than a century of dress. The earliest item, dated from 1892, was also among the most striking — a black silk and lace wedding gown worn by Julia Torrens, and which was still in the care of her family. The most recent pieces were from major contemporary designers — Karen Walker, Nom\*D and Cybèle — as well as the street clothes of musicians or gang members.

There were the expected items: black singlet, Skellerup gumboots, All Blacks jersey. The unexpected appeared too: black duffel coats synonymous with generations of Otago University students, Chris Knox's jandals and t-shirt, costumes from *Once Were Warriors*. Some pieces showcased the skills of the seamstress: Ponsonby dressmaker Mrs White copied a picture to make Jacquie Swift's 1961 cocktail dress. Others highlighted the quotidian, such as the fisherman's knit jumper. Music reviewer Grant Smithies described this as the 'uniform' of the Dunedin Sound, chosen not as a fashion statement but because it was warm and cheap, and showed neither cigarette burns nor beer spills.

What was absent was any real engagement with the question emblazoned on the introductory panel: 'why do so many New Zealanders wear black today?' It would be unrealistic and repetitive for every panel to address that question, but I expected more than what was given. Beyond the stories about the black rugby jersey, there was little about the alleged New Zealand propensity to wear this colour. The description of Julia Torrens's wedding gown in the introductory panel was one of the few to connect New Zealand and black. Links were general rather than specific: 'Referencing a long tradition of metal music and t-shirts, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome made their band t-shirt black', accompanied by the garment worn by this Auckland band. Some panels made a sweeping reference to the colour black: 'Black ... it's perfect for any occasion', Nom\*D's Margarita Robertson was quoted as saying in connection with her piece — a comment that could apply to any black garment. In some cases, the text rejected any association with black: the panel for Cybèle's 'Iridescence Dress' stated that 'Black is not a colour synonymous with the Cybèle label'.

One function of an exhibition, of course, is to pose questions, to encourage the viewer to think, to explore a range of ideas. That was certainly an intention of *Black in Fashion*: 'The exhibition canvasses ideas and proposes connections. Displaying this selection of garments is a visual and concrete way to consider whether there is something essential about New Zealanders' affair with the colour black.' All well and good, but

the interpretation did not really follow through with this. Too often, the information accompanying the garments was far too general, or simply silent: we read about Tama Iti, but not why he may have worn those particular clothes, and we are left wondering how a black wedding frock may have signalled financial success in nineteenth-century New Zealand.

Perhaps 20 people visited the exhibition in the couple of hours I was there — a good number for mid-week in Wellington. Only one wore enough black to qualify her for entry in the exhibition's 'best in black' competition. I remembered exhibitions I have seen in other countries that linked black and fashion, sometimes to a national scene and sometimes not; I reflected on the academic and popular literature about the association between black and Western fashion in the twentieth century; I thought about a public service conference I attended recently in Melbourne where the women wore black suits.

*Black in Fashion* certainly brought together a great range of garments and provided a welcome and focused look into this country's fashion history. However, saying something often does not make it so, and the notion that New Zealanders have a special relationship with black has become almost trite. *Black in Fashion* bought into that: its premise was that the colour black holds sway sartorially in this country — a statement rather than a query. The chance to consider something different, or even whether there is any New Zealand spin, was largely missed — along with the chance to pose questions about the items in the exhibition and the colour black. New Zealand fashion history is a rapidly growing area of interest, and we could do with more research (and more exhibitions) in the field. Maybe then some of the assumptions about our fashion choices will be interrogated more thoroughly.

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