

## Reviews (History in Other Media)

*New Zealand in Vogue*. The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Cable St, Wellington. Curated by Claire Regnault. Reviewed 14 and 23 July 2011. Internet: <http://www.tepapa.govt.nz/WhatsOn/exhibitions/Pages/NZinVogue.aspx>.

*NEW ZEALAND IN VOGUE* is currently on display in the Eyelights gallery on level four of Te Papa. This gallery is intended to exhibit objects from Te Papa's History collections. Six large cases usually house objects from the Textiles collection, while across the corridor in cases reclaimed from a jeweller's shop are artefacts from the History and Pacific collections. Unlike other History and Pacific exhibitions on level four, which tend to be permanent exhibitions, textile exhibitions in the Eyelights gallery work on an annual cycle, with regular changeovers bringing welcome refreshment to the display, as well as serving to conserve the fragile objects.

Earlier exhibitions have included *Shawls: The elegant drape* (2004–2005), *Culture Moves* (an exhibition of Pacific dance and dance costumes, 2005–2006) and *Annie Bonza: Fashion explosion* (2006–2007). The two most recent exhibitions have been thematic: *Colours* (2008–2009), which explored objects from the History/Textiles collection based on the colour spectrum, and *Enriching fashion: Eye for detail* (2010–2011), which focused on exquisite details of embroidery, beading and finishing. Other exhibitions have focused on a single collection or designer: for instance, *Mary-Annette Hay: Queen of Wool* came directly from Hay's collection from her time as a publicist extraordinaire for the New Zealand Wool Board.

Previous Eyelights' exhibitions such as *Shawls: The elegant drape* have been about the technical and the beautiful, with emphasis on the practices and skills used to produce the objects on display, rather than on relating the objects to an historical context. Others, like *Kiri's dresses*, were driven by the life and career narrative of the wearer. However, *Queen of Wool* and *New Zealand in Vogue* have attempted to link the objects with a greater fashion and social history narrative, as well as showcasing some stunning objects from the collection.

In the current exhibition, the unifying theme is the impact of fashion magazine *Vogue New Zealand* on the fashion choices of New Zealand women. *New Zealand in Vogue* packs in a large number of themes and concepts for a small show. These include the influence of British and European fashion on New Zealand women and the growth of New Zealand's local fashion industry, as well as special occasions, dressmaking and the pleasures of dressing up. Even the importance of New Zealand's primary production industries is introduced with the display of beautifully finished wool garments through a discussion of the role of the Wool Board.

First published in 1957, *Vogue New Zealand* only survived for ten years. During its short life New Zealand women had easier access to European and British fashion during an exciting period of rapidly changing styles. It included both foreign and locally made fashion, with glamorous photo shoots and recommendations for accessories and cosmetics. Local editors like Michal McKay travelled to Europe to learn about the latest trends and passed them on to home-grown designers.

The role of New Zealand fashion designers is also considered. Once New Zealand companies were able to make gowns and suits under licence to fashion houses such as Dior, New Zealand women no longer needed to take a trip to the northern hemisphere to stock up on the latest fashions. The superb tailoring of the El Jay suits and dresses which feature throughout the exhibition shows the exceptional quality of garments made in New Zealand.

The appeal of special occasion dressing shines through in the exhibition. Dresses made to be worn at that most significant of events, the twenty-first birthday party, appear several times. One (of exotic sari fabric) was made by designer Colin Cole for the then up-and-coming Kiri Te Kanawa (who herself posed for *Vogue*), while another (of stiffened blue-green silk taffeta) was worn by Te Papa's former textile conservator Valerie Carson. A whole case is devoted — and rightly so — to the little black dress, the epitome of elegant dressing. Furs and dainty shoes displayed in several cases add to the luxurious atmosphere.

A case about dressmaking at the end of the exhibition seems rather tacked on. Even the licensed garments were beyond the means of many, but women could, and did, write away for *Vogue* patterns. They could even purchase *Vogue* labels to sew into their finished garments. A pretty summer dress made by Alison Nicholls is on display along with the Singer sewing machine she received for her twenty-first birthday.

The audio-visuals extend some of the exhibition's themes. We are treated to the 1957 *Vogue* gala, which included a catwalk show, in glorious colour. Many glamorous matrons are seen entering the gala in their finest, while I was diverted by one exquisitely dressed woman's attempts to eat a chicken drumstick in polite company. The work of the Wool Board is also highlighted in a film of the World of Wool fashion show at the Lower Hutt Town Hall. These videos give the opportunity to show garments being worn by real people, enabling us to see their movement and shape as the designers intended. Mannequins can only do so much. The videos also show other kinds of garments which are not on display, such as wedding dresses and more informal clothing. It is a shame that casual garments (such as the Audrey Hepburn-esque leggings and oversized sweaters we see in one of the videos) are not on display. Dress history exhibitions seldom include the casual or everyday.

While the magazine pages and audio-visuals show models wearing couture, many of the dresses and suits exhibited seem to be made for more 'average'-sized women, and it is a nice change to see larger dress forms and garments displayed. Perhaps this reflects the reality that the women who could afford these garments were more likely to be mature women than 21-year-olds, Kiri notwithstanding.

The attempts to connect original graphics from the magazine with elements of case design are another nice touch. However, I was concerned about the use of objects, in particular two Shufflebottom pieces made by Crown Lynn, which are unconnected to the fashion history (although of the same period) and were merely being used for decoration, seemingly because they fitted with the black and white theme of the case. Any connections between fashion and design at this time were not made clear for the viewer. The chunky balls of wool in another case detracted from the tailoring and fine details of the suits and coats. There were also several glaring misspellings in the subtitles of one of the audio-visuals which detracted from the overall polish of an otherwise subtly and well-designed exhibition.

*New Zealand in Vogue* should prove to be a popular exhibition, if the lingering glances and pointing fingers of visitors that I saw are any indication. The exhibition nicely connects beautifully made and elegant objects with a greater sense of social and economic history. The nature of the display of textiles means that there will be a number of changeovers, which will give us the opportunity to see new objects, including, perhaps, those casual outfits.

MARGUERITE HILL

*Manatū Taonga — Ministry for Culture and Heritage*