

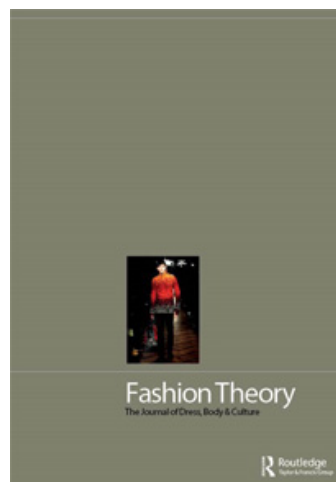
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Yanqing Zhang

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**Reviewed by  
Yanqing Zhang**

# Constructing Swedish Fashion Identity

Yanqing Zhang is currently a PhD candidate at Stockholm University, working on the project “mFashion” at Mobile Life VinnExcellence Center. Since her graduation from the Center for Fashion Studies at Stockholm University in 2009, she has been involved in research concerning the aesthetic aspects of everyday technology as well as the connections between fashion and mobile technology.  
[celia@mobilelifecentre.org](mailto:celia@mobilelifecentre.org)

***Svenskt Mode (Swedish Fashion): 2000–2015, Sven-Harry's Art Museum, Stockholm, May 23–August 31, 2014***

Cities like New York, Paris, London, and Milan have long been considered as capitals of high fashion. Paris is known for its classic elegance, and New York for its casual and modern chic. Now many other cities are aiming to build a strong voice in the fashion world. As fashion historian Christopher Breward (2006) says:

The status of fashion capital has now become a goal for urban boosters and planners, part of the wider promotion of the “cultural economy” of major cities. In a rapidly changing global fashion system, new centers like Shanghai are making claims to join the ranks of Fashion’s World Cities.

The Scandinavian countries find themselves in a similar situation, and are trying to promote their national images in the fashion world (Melchior 2011). The exhibition “Svenskt Mode 2000–2015” (Swedish Fashion 2000–2015) at Sven-Harry’s Art Museum in Stockholm displayed such an orientation. This exhibition aimed to sketch a picture of contemporary Swedish fashion and to construct a Swedish identity in the global fashion scene. This was the first time that an exhibition has been devoted to the important aesthetic and conceptual transformations of Swedish fashion design, and examined the first 15 years of the twenty-first century. It contained a large variety of objects showcased in four halls and on the walls by the stairs or on the roof of the building, which covered almost the entire four floors of the museum.

The fashion industry in Sweden has been developing rapidly, especially in the area of fast fashion, as represented by Hennes & Mauritz AB (H&M). This has led researchers in fashion studies to look at Swedish fashion history. For example, Melchior examines how the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Sweden, and Norway) promote fashion to build their national images (Melchior 2011). For the Swedish case, she discusses the large mass-fashion industry represented by H&M, government support, cultural practices, and education, all of which contribute to the construction of a Swedish fashion image. It is the political and cultural institutions that have nurtured the rapid development of Swedish fashion. Today, Sweden has many important fashion brands, including both international fast-fashion groups including H&M and Lindex, and designers’ brands like ACNE and Ann-Sofie Back. Moreover, like other fashion cities, Stockholm holds its own Fashion Week twice a year and has promoted many local designers. Stockholm Fashion Week attracts international fashion insiders from all over the world, such as the famous blogger Sussie Lou.<sup>1</sup> This unprecedented exhibition came at a time when Swedish fashion could be proudly presented as an important part of the global fashion scene.

“Svenskt Mode 2000–2015” was exhibited at Sven-Harry’s art museum, located in central Stockholm, Sweden. This museum is dedicated to contemporary and classical art and endeavors to explore and expand the concept of “Art.”<sup>2</sup> Although the status of sartorial fashion as a legitimate form of art remains a subject of debate, it is apparent that an increasing number of fashion exhibitions are being held in museums all over the world, and many influential fashion scholars, such as Anne Hollander (1993) and Valerie Steele (1998), favor the view that fashion is related to art and museums. The curators of this

exhibition believed that fashionable garments could be objects of admiration in a museum and this opinion was clearly revealed in the selection of pieces and how they were displayed. Curating has become a powerful method to turn “dead” clothing into pieces of art awaiting an admiring viewer.

The project was initiated by Michael Elmenbeck, founder of the magazines *Bon* and *Bon International*, and Cia Jansson, creative director of Swedish *ELLE*. Both have been working in fashion media for many years. They were assisted by a group of fashion journalists in selecting what to display. Hence the exhibition reflected the perspectives of these persons who play an important role as “gatekeepers” in making aesthetic judgments (Kawamura 2005: 79). The exhibition was an outcome of the implementation of their power as fashion authorities in shaping the public view of what is Swedish fashion. Michael Elmenbeck writes in the exhibition catalogue that this exhibition could “enable a larger audience to see and learn all these amazing and unique creations that have previously only been seen on the catwalk or in the fashion press” (Strömquist 2014). The selection mostly included items that had been seen on the runway or in the fashion press, which reveals the gatekeepers’ view of fashion: that is, as high fashion related to designers’ creations, trend setting, expert styling, and so on.

The exhibition was thematically organized. It consisted of four main sections, each containing several themes. Men’s and women’s wear were curated together, but most of the items were from women’s wear. The first section was titled “Reform, Denim, Arty, Stardom,” and the organizing themes were explained in the introductory texts on the wall to help visitors understand them. “Reform” referred to emerging silhouettes with a touch of humor and a playful DIY feeling. The selected items included Back’s draped skirt, Rodebjer’s printed long dress and jumpsuit. These are established Swedish designers’ brands that are now expanding to international markets. They looked simple but had interesting design details, such as asymmetrical pleats on a Back’s white skirt. “Denim” was one of the most important features of Swedish fashion displayed (Figure 1). The importance of jeans has already been recognized as a key characteristic of Swedish style (Falck 2011). Among the exhibited jeans and denim garments, five of the outfits showcased were from ACNE studios, one of the most famous Swedish brands, known for its denim-oriented and avant-garde design. For instance, a pair of loose-fitting jeans from 2001 and a unisex blazer from 2003 were matched to create a casual masculine look. An off-the-shoulder denim mini-dress had beautiful lines on top, making it look soft and feminine in contrast to such a relatively heavy and hard fabric. Next to it was a dark-blue denim jacket designed by Back, with straight lines and a clean cut. Thus denim is not only a particular type of fabric, but can also present a variety of styles.

**Figure 1**

The display of a corner of the theme “Denim.” Sven-Harry’s Art Museum, Stockholm.  
 Photograph: Yanqing Zhang.

**Figure 2**

Mannequins dressed in designers’ clothes are hanging high up in the hall under the theme “Arty.” Sven-Harry’s Art Museum, Stockholm.  
 Photograph: Yanqing Zhang.



In the central part of the hall, “Arty” outfits were displayed, characterized by either creative prints or artistic decoration. Some were displayed on mannequins on the central stage, while some were hung high up under the ceiling (Figure 2). Another theme, “Stardom,” included a few stage costumes and red carpet looks created for local celebrities. For instance, it displayed a white smoking suit from the brand BLK DNM for Swedish actress Noomi Rapace. BLK DNM was founded by Swedish designer Johan Lindeberg, who also built the brand J. Lindeberg. This section included a long dress and a vest from

the House of Dagmar worn by Icona Pop when they were performing in New York; a costume suit from the brand Tiger of Sweden worn by Pelle Almqvist, the lead singer of the rock band “The Hives.” Pictures of the artists wearing the clothes were placed together with the introductory texts. Stars or celebrities are important fashion leaders who usually set trends and have many followers. It is important for fashion designers to have celebrities as clients, since the fame of celebrities helps promote their brands.

The second section contained five themes exhibited in another hall. “Volume” referred to inflated forms, which could be draped or sculptured with many layers of clothing. “Comfort” emphasized the functional aspect of Swedish fashion design—making clothing that is comfortable to wear and suitable for everyday life. For example, we could see loose-fitting knitwear that was appropriate for the cold weather in this country. The theme “Contrast” presented outfits that combined stunning dresses with functional jackets for both glamor and everyday use. “Masculine” showed how Swedish fashion designers borrowed techniques and aesthetics from menswear to create strong looks for women. The most important theme in the section was “Black.” Black has always been an important color in fashion with its symbolic meanings of mourning, elegance, or darkness, as previous research has discussed (Steele 2007). This theme occupied the entire central part of the second hall, where audiences could see a large group of black outfits created by 18 designers (Figure 3). Unlike the typical meanings of black, as symbolizing mourning or darkness, Swedish fashion designers explored diverse meanings and expressions for the color through new shapes and combinations of materials. For example, black could be experimental, as in Sandra Backlund’s sculptural nylon top; elegant, as in Whyred’s maxi dress; retro, as in Lovisa Burfitt’s corset dress; or sporty, as



**Figure 3**

Part of the central stage of the theme “Black”. Sven-Harry’s Art Museum, Stockholm.  
Photograph: Yanqing Zhang.

**Figure 4**

The display of the theme “Studio” on the second floor. Sven-Harry’s Art Museum, Stockholm. Photograph: Yanqing Zhang.



in The Local Firm’s leather pullover. Black could have various expressions and visual effects.

The second floor housed the third section, with the themes “Studio” and “Details” (Figure 4). The theme “Studio” explored the creativity, techniques, and innovations of Swedish fashion design in the mid-2000s. Designers made sculptural, architectural, and artistic shapes from unconventional materials, integrating traditional craftsmanship with new ideas. They were experimenting with new aesthetic expressions to build their own voices as fashion designers. The clothes in this section were exhibited in a wide space that was artistically decorated; it had red walls and a few spotlights shedding light on the exhibited garments. Although viewers could get very close to the garments, the atmosphere as a whole made them outsiders only able to admire and appreciate the objects at a distance, like looking at a renaissance painting. Indeed, most of the pieces in the section were more like works of art than wearable clothes for the wider public. They typically showed the curators’ view of “fashion as art.” An important designer in this section was Sandra Backlund, known for her sculptural knitwear. She fused futuristic design with familiar and tactile materials to exaggerate the form of the female body and change its proportions (Figure 5). We could also see the brand “Fifth Avenue Shoe Repair,” which was known for its avant-garde styles but sadly closed in 2014 after 10 years. Four pieces from this brand were displayed and all of them either had dramatic silhouettes or were made of unconventional materials, such as a red dress with a big skirt and a sculptural dress made of metal. In addition, there were three pieces from a young brand, AltewaiSaome, established in 2009. These garments were more wearable than the other pieces in this section. The designers mixed different fabrics and created interesting silhouettes. On the right-hand side of the same hall, many



**Figure 5**

A black paper dress made by Sandra Backlund in 2007. Sven-Harry's Art Museum, Stockholm. Photograph: Yanqing Zhang.



fashion illustrations and sketches were displayed on the wall. There were also boxes showcasing jewelry and accessories, which belonged to the theme “Details.”

Diversified means of fashion representation, such as short films, fashion photography, and fashion illustration could be seen on the walls of the staircases between floors. There was a multimedia room in the basement where visitors could see fashion films, interviews with designers, etc. Most of the clothes in the images were showcased in the exhibition. After all, fashion is not just clothing, but an idealized fantasy. The curators wanted to create such a fantasy by showing alluring images from fashion photography and illustration. There were also slide shows of runway images from three periods: 2000–2005, 2006–2010, and 2011–2015. The runway is often where new fashion trends are presented. Standing there and seeing images automatically changing, visitors could see the evolution of fashion trends on the Swedish fashion stage during the last 15 years. In all, the use of multimedia to display the fashionable clothing also contributed to a more enjoyable and dynamic experience of the exhibit.

The last section, “Forward,” focused on the new generation of young Swedish designers. Each outfit was showcased in a glass box in a

different place on the museum terrace. Outstanding among all the designs was an outfit designed by Naim Josefi, winner of the Swedish version of Project Runway in 2012. This consisted of a sleeveless blazer vest top and pants with black-and-white graphic prints matching his signature 3D-printed couture shoes, and was part of his collection “Melonia”. These were the first 3D-printed shoes in the world. The designer explained that the idea came “from the ecologic concept of no material waste.” The shoes were made from homogeneous material, making them easier to recycle. This pair of shoes well demonstrates the design philosophy of the new generation of Swedish fashion designers: future fashion should embrace technology and be sustainable. Other designers, like Caroline Kummelstedt and Ida Klamborn, continued following the Swedish design traditions, such as “comfort” and “reform,” as shown in previous sections in the exhibition.

In general, this exhibition has drawn a grand picture of recent Swedish fashion, covering a large number of clothing items from many key Swedish designers and a variety of exhibited objects. Although the title “Svenskt Mode 2000–2015” might indicate an exhibition of recent history, it was not narrated chronologically, but thematically, with each theme depicting one of the key features of Swedish fashion aesthetics during this period. The curators’ aim was to use these key words to build a Swedish fashion discourse and construct a Swedish fashion identity. Fashion theorist Kawamura argues that the taste for fashion is influenced by culture, context, and history. This influence is exerted through a “fashion system,” which means institutional and cultural arrangements that cause particular cultural objects to be adorned in specific ways (Kawamura 2005). This exhibition reveals such an institutionalization, in which clothing made by Swedish designers is transformed into fashion through fashion gatekeepers’ perspectives, the museology of clothing, the celebrity effect, a star-designer system, fashion weeks, and image production by multimedia tools. The Swedish fashion system constructed in the exhibition imitates the Parisian fashion system discussed by Kawamura that centers on the runway and a hierarchy of designers (Kawamura 2005).

On the one hand, this exhibition gives viewers a chance to recall important examples of Swedish fashion during the past decade and to learn the key words of Swedish fashion aesthetics. On the other hand, it pushes us to ask questions about what Swedish fashion represents. It is not difficult to find that the exhibition is actually not as broad as the title “Svenskt Mode 2000–2015” makes it appear. If we see fashion as a cultural institutionalization process including production, diffusion, and consumption, this exhibition actually did not cover all these aspects of Swedish fashion. Consumption, for example, is conspicuously absent. Swedish fashion is closely related to mass fashion and to street fashion (Melchior 2011). Even the runway styles are inspired by street fashion and could easily be transformed into people’s everyday wardrobes. As

Sussie Lou said after attending Stockholm Fashion week: “Nonchalant, wearable and easy-going pieces are styled in a way that filtrates down to the achingly cool stance of the way people dress in Stockholm.”<sup>3</sup> Although there were themes, such as “Comfort” and “Jeans,” that tended to orient toward everyday fashion, the curators displayed the garments in a way similar to art, distancing Swedish fashion from everyday contexts. This ruled out some of the interesting things occurring on the street in Swedish fashion, such as the slim-fit silhouette, the vintage craze, and fashion bloggers. In this sense, the exhibition of “Swedish fashion” should rather be called “Swedish fashion design.”

In addition, the exhibition would have been more informative if it had elaborated more on the importance of the selected objects and provided better introductions to brands and designers. The labels only included the name of the brand or designer and the year. There was no contextual information. This shortcoming makes it more necessary to buy the exhibition catalogue, which contains revealing explanations by insiders, including interviews with curators and essays on the main themes presented in the exhibitions. This beautifully made 130-page catalogue also includes a great deal of editorial fashion photography, detailed information, and close-up images of each curated piece. It is a good supplement to the exhibition. Moreover, all the introductions to the themes in the exhibition as well as the articles in the catalogue were in Swedish, which indicates that the exhibition was mainly intended to educate the local public and shape their views on what is Swedish fashion design.

To sum up, the exhibition “Svenskt Mode (Swedish Fashion): 2000–2015” revealed the main aesthetic features of Swedish design over the past 15 years. Although the exhibition had some limitations, it played a significant role in institutionalizing Swedish fashion and constructing the Swedish fashion identity in the contemporary fashion world.

## Notes

1. She is the author of the influential fashion blog “Style Bubble.” See <http://www.stylebubble.co.uk/>
2. See the museum’s official website: <http://www.sven-harrys.se/en/om-oss/>
3. [http://www.stylebubble.co.uk/style\\_bubble/2011/08/out-of-place.html](http://www.stylebubble.co.uk/style_bubble/2011/08/out-of-place.html)

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