Interview blog with Tangerine Boutique

**Tuesday, August 27, 2013**

The Man behind the Fashion History Museum

As a trade member of the [Vintage Fashion Guild](http://vintagefashionguild.org/) I am part of a large community of vintage fashion professionals. All our members are passionate about vintage and work hard to maintain integrity in our businesses.  We are constantly fact checking the history of our merchandise to make sure our goods are properly represented. Whenever we are stumped about something we turn to each other for answers and 99% of the time someone is able to help. Jonathan Walford is a long time VFG member and one of our most knowledgeable. He is always generous with information and never ceases to amaze me. He has written a number of books (which I highly recommend) on vintage fashion and recently opened the [Fashion History Museum](http://fashionhistorymuseum.com/) in Ontario, Canada. I asked Jonathan if he would agree to an interview for my blog so you could all meet the man behind the museum and hear his story.

-When did your passion for the history of fashion and textiles begin? Did you begin as a collector or a historian?

My fascination with historical dress began when I was a kid. My favourite movies were historically set films like: Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, The Great Race, and Thoroughly Modern Millie. I remember crying myself to sleep because my parents wouldn’t let me stay up to watch the Six Wives of Henry VIII on TV, I must have been ten at the time. I began collecting soon after I started working at a museum called Heritage Village in Burnaby, B.C. in the summer of 1977. I was given a collarless shirt to wear as my costume and I figured I could do better than that and began combing the vintage clothing stores of Gastown (the old heritage district of Vancouver) for starched collars, knitted ties, and straw boaters. By the end of the year I was receiving gifts from friends and family members and putting most of my paycheque into buying the oldest pieces of antique clothing I could find. My first dress purchase was a black net dress from the mid 1890s.

-Tell us a little about your journey in the field and how it evolved over time.

When I began collecting, vintage clothing stores were still being run by Hippies who had started their shops in the late 1960s. By 1980 the Punks and New Wavers were buying old clothes and the stock in vintage shops shifted from Edwardian underwear and 30s chiffons to 1950s prom dresses, stiletto-heeled shoes, and leather motorcycle jackets.

I used my collection for producing lectures and fashion shows in the 80s and 90s as a sideline to my museum career. In 1987 I landed the curatorial job for the [Bata Shoe Museum](http://www.batashoemuseum.ca/) collection in Toronto. The museum was not yet open to the public and its collection was held in the basement of the Bata shoe company headquarters. With the help of a healthy acquisitions budget, I was able to transform that collection into the internationally important institution the Bata Shoe Museum has become today. In 1999 I had done all I could at Bata and it was time to move on. As a freelance curator I phased out my fashion shows and instead began creating travelling exhibitions for museums. My first exhibition of 1960s paper dresses debuted in Montreal in the summer of 2001. In 2004 my partner Kenn was taking a leadership course and took the idea of creating a fashion museum as a project for his course. By the end of that year we had founded the Fashion History Museum. Five years later, in 2009, the museum received its charitable status, which qualified us to offer tax receipts for donations and brought us to the next hurdle – finding a home for the museum.

-Your books are beautiful and contain a wellspring of knowledge. They must represent countless hours of painstaking research and appear to be a true labor of love. Could you talk a bit about this?

Even though I had written numerous exhibition texts and museum catalogues, I didn’t consider myself a writer. I have no patience for reading fiction and most academic treatises are mind numbingly dull. I love ‘I was there’ memoirs. I want to read what people thought at the time about what they wore and why they thought it was beautiful or ugly. That information comes to us mostly from period accounts, ranging from private diaries to magazine articles. While I was writing the text for the 1960s paper dress exhibition I came across an archive of period news clippings on the topic. The public reaction about paper clothing in the 1960s ran the gamut from ‘innovative wave of the future’ to ‘the stupidest fashion ever invented.’ I turned this research into the book ‘Ready to Tear’, which doubled as a catalogue to accompany the same-named exhibition. While looking for a publisher for the catalogue, Thames and Hudson rejected the paper dress book for being intended for too specific a market, but asked if I could write a shoe book instead – something I had wanted to do when I was still at Bata. That turned into a three-book contract: The Seductive Shoe, Forties Fashion, and Shoes A-Z. and I am now on my fourth book: Sixties Fashion, which is coming out this October.

The Internet has made researching these books possible. It would have taken years and endless trips to libraries and archives to find what I can get now in the comfort of my own home. With every passing year the access to obscure publications increases, which makes the books feasible.

-The whole concept of creating a museum from scratch simply boggles my mind, yet you and Ken did just that. I am intrigued to learn about your journey from idea to reality in this venture.

We originally moved to Cambridge, Ontario in 2007 because a potential site for our museum was available. That plan didn’t pan out but we liked the town and stayed. Three months ago we were given the opportunity of a space to set up the museum that we grabbed because we had to take a leap of faith and show everyone what we can do and how fascinating a fashion history museum can be. Although we had a shoestring budget, we had some devoted volunteers who really put their backs and time into helping us.

There is about 2,500 square feet of exhibition space in three galleries. The building is an old limestone foundry from the mid-late 19th century and is a beautiful piece of Victorian industrial architecture. There are large Eiffel tower-like columns and thick limestone walls that provide the background for the fashions -- it feels grand. The challenge for us was to turn this space, which had been used most recently as a retail store, into a gallery. We hid existing shelving units with large canvas panels, and the landlord allowed us to reuse lumber we scavenged from taking down changing room walls. We transformed the space on less than $5,000, including electrician bills and professional signage.

-Every dream come true has its memorable stories along the way. Unusual encounters…humorous happenings…moments of inspiration or encouragement… perhaps you could share a memory or two with us?

Tough question to answer because every day there is something that amazes me – some visitor who has something they want to give us or a story about their fashionable past that is amazing or humorous. I honestly can’t think of any specific story at the moment…

-I know absolutely zero about running and managing a museum. What proportion of the collection is generally on display? How often do displays rotate and change. Will you feature “visiting” collections?

We manage about 8,000 artifacts and the museum currently has about 200 of them on display. With everything that needed to be done before we opened I had to install some ‘easy’ exhibitions to start with because I didn’t have time for a complicated curatorial text. So we started with our main exhibition looking at paisley and plaid as recurring patterns in fashion. Starting October, this show will be morphed into a timeline history of fashion from 1760 to 2010 that will become a permanent feature of the museum. The clothes within the exhibition will be changed on a regular basis to keep the show fresh and the artifacts in good condition. This guarantees that there will always be something on display that everyone will like as some people like 20th century designer fashions, while others only come to see Victorian clothes. The smallest gallery has a purse anthology and it will be changed to other accessory exhibitions – gloves, hats, shoes etc. because everything in this gallery is in showcases. The middle-sized gallery will be changed on a rotating basis (between 6 and 12 weeks depending upon the sensitivity of the material on display), and feature different topics and approaches to fashion history. We are planning an annual showcase of recent acquisitions called Open Drawers, and have three exhibitions already in the works: Mod Modes – 1960s fashions, for late fall/early winter; ‘To Meet the Queen’, clothes worn to be presented at court or meet royalty, which will open in the new year; and although we haven’t figured out what to do next spring or summer, we have a fall show planned “It Came From Hollywood’, about costume designers who became fashion designers. We will be borrowing from other collections and museums for these three shows but I doubt we will be hiring any travelling exhibitions in the foreseeable future.

-Where to from here? Will you continue writing? Are there future plans for the museum?

We are in discussion with various people regarding our future and it will take some time before we will know exactly what is happening. In the meantime, it is business as usual and we will continue to travel exhibitions around the world, and I will continue to write books. My next book will be on fashion during the rise of ‘The New Woman 1880-1925 – from tailored suit to the vote’. After that, I would like to work on something more modern. There isn’t a comprehensive book about fashion in the 1970s and 1980s yet… but that will be a few years down the road.