

Avant Garde Fashion and the making of historic interiors: the pursuit of authenticity through handmaking processes

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ABSTRACT

Interior design scholarship has explored the convergence of fashion and interiors through an analysis of textiles, historic styles, cross-disciplinary work, and the expression of modern identity (Myzelev & Potvin, 2017; Fisher et al., 2013; Berry 2018). This paper builds on the existing literature through an examination of the celebration of handmaking in fashion and interiors. Specifically, this paper examines Haute Couture's focus on handmaking and how it manifests in the historic interiors that fashion companies preserve. It argues a possible migration of concepts from the field of fashion to historic preservation through the idea of making. To study this migration, this paper focuses on the fashion and interiors of Italian fashion house, Prada. Prada's well-received adaptive reuse projects across the globe make it a particularly relevant brand to study the connections between high-end fashion and historic interiors. Also, Prada published a series of promotional booklets that document their preservation work, providing rich resources for analysis. It has also initiated several fashion projects, such as the "Made In" line in 2010 and the Milano Handmade Collection in 2012, that demonstrate an emphasis on traditional craftsmanship. To study Prada's focus on handmaking, a thematic analysis of its promotional material, both visual and verbal, was conducted. The analysis focuses on two sites: Cà Corner della Regina in Italy and Rong Zhai in China. In order to analyze the promotional material this paper employs Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun's (2016) well-established six steps of thematic analysis: 1) familiarizing oneself with the data, 2) creating initial codes, 3) looking for themes, 4) reviewing potential themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report. Notably, this research adopts a deductive approach to

coding, starting with an initial set of codes that were based on the theory of authenticity. For the purposes of this paper authenticity is defined as associated with “genuineness and truth (Newman & Smith, 2016, 610).” Historically, handcraftsmanship connects to authenticity in both historic preservation and fashion. In historic preservation a connection between handcraftsmanship and authenticity is illustrated in the writing of foundational scholar John Ruskin (1819-1900). In fashion scholarship, an emphasis on handcraftsmanship can be traced back to Walter Benjamin’s theory of “aura,” which refers to a unique existence of the work of art that is harmed by mechanical reproductions (1968). Accordingly, authenticity serves as an apt theoretical foundation for the examination of handmaking in both historic interiors and high-end fashion. This research demonstrates that handmaking, and the authenticity it establishes, is central to Prada’s branding and preservation of historic interiors. More broadly, it demonstrates the value of “making” to both fashion and historic interiors. The analysis reveals that in both these fields handcraftsmanship reflects an embrace of tradition, nostalgia, and exclusivity. By extending the “confluences between fashion and the interior” to an analysis of “making,” this research deepens our understanding of the theoretical connections between fashion and interior design (Berry, 2018, 170).

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