

Novel Dressing

“What gown and what head-dress she should wear on the occasion became her chief concern. She cannot be justified in it. Dress is at all times a frivolous distinction, and excessive solicitude about it often destroys its own aim”. *Northanger Abbey* (1818)¹

The recent exhibition “Persuasion: Fashion in the Age of Jane Austen” (22 May – 8 November) curated by Roger Leong for the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) presented a delightful selection of period clothing, accessories, furniture, paintings and print illustrations which broadly surveyed a dynamic period of English costume and dress from the 1770’s to 1830.² These fluctuations in fashion occurred during the lifetime of one of the world’s most beloved authors, Jane Austen (1775-1817), and inevitably find their way into the discourse of her novels. More broadly, the exhibition alluded to the indelible cultural impact of Austen’s works across a wide variety of media, but most notably in television and filmic adaptations stretching back to c.1938.³

Such is the ubiquity of all things Austen, the displays seemed perfectly familiar and strangely ‘modern’, as if the viewer had merely wandered onto a present-day movie set, instead of harkening back some 240 years.

Indeed, this particular aspect of ‘Austen-mania’ was to prove a fruitful one for NGV’s International Fashion and Textiles team. The relative paucity of men’s apparel from the period posed a quandary, as it left the show lacking balance. “Austen’s novels always seem to revolve around eligible young men”, remarks Leong, “So when I told an academic friend of mine, Peter McNeil⁴, that I was planning a Jane Austen exhibition and that all we had were women’s fashion from the period, he very quickly responded with the brilliant suggestion that we find a man’s outfit and put it in the very centre of the exhibition”.



The challenge of locating a genuine ensemble (a jacket and breeches or pantaloons) from the early 1800s proved more taxing. “I searched high and low but I always knew this would not be easy as this is precisely the period which is the hardest to find as a collector or curator”, Leong admits.

A solution was found when the British costume house Cosprop⁵, who regularly collaborate with museums on exhibitions of theatrical and film costume, agreed to lend a riding habit made for the captivating BBC series of “Pride and Prejudice” (1995). Designed by Dinah Collin, it included the suit, boots and hat Fitzwilliam Darcy (as immortalised by Colin Firth) partially divests himself of before diving into the lake at his Pemberley estate. “In some ways to only have the one costume for Mr. Darcy makes it become symbolic of all the male heroes in Austen’s novels”, Leong comments.

Standing full-length in a large case the loan made for many a squealing ‘Darcy moment’ amongst gallery patrons.⁶ “But we still