

Review: Bata Shoe Museum 2022 Founder's Lecture

Amber Butchart Forensic Fashion: Investigating Old Clothes
from the Rag Trade to the Lab

By Sephra Lamothe and Amanda Pearn

Volume 4
Issue 2
Article 1

[doi.org/10.38055/
FS040201](https://doi.org/10.38055/FS040201)

Keywords

Forensic Fashion
Object Analysis
Review
Crime
Connection

Abstract

The Bata Shoe Museum's Annual Founder's Lecture featured fashion historian, broadcaster, author, and curator Amber Butchart, who provided a lecture entitled "Forensic Fashion: Investigating Old Clothes from the Rag Trade to the Lab" for their 2022 event. Butchart is currently the lead Consultant in forensic garment analysis at Alecto Forensics, is listed as a Forensic Garment Analyst on the expert database of the UK National Crime Agency, and conducts training sessions for Crime Scene Investigators (CSIs) with Alecto Forensics (Forensics). The role of a Forensic Garment Analyst within a criminal investigation is to analyze garments associated with individual(s) involved in a case. This includes identifying their possible date of production, geographical origin, areas of wear/repair, and any modifications to support criminal investigations. The importance of forensic analysis of garments is not meant to solve the crime, but to aid in the collection of information to assist with building a strong case while providing a multifaceted approach to the investigation. Butchart's Founder's Lecture discussed a variety of fascinating topics around the development of forensic garment analysis including the history of forensic analysis in popular literature, power of old clothes as a tool to ascertain key insights, standardizing terminology to aid in the communication of forensic analysis, connection of creative and scientific practices, as well as analyzing artifacts as crime scenes.

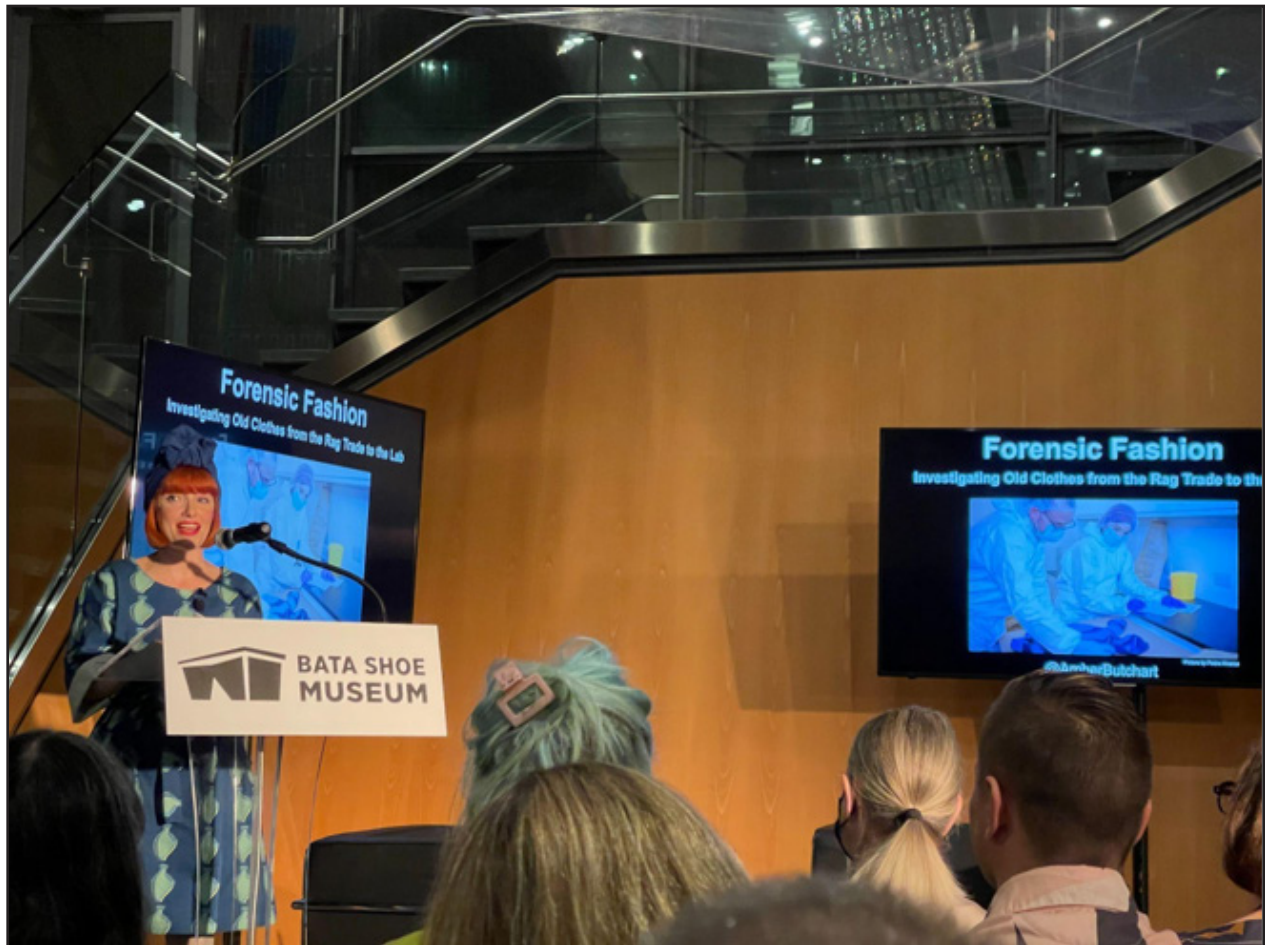


FIGURE 1 AMBER BUTCHART AT THE 2022 BATA SHOE MUSEUM FOUNDERS LECTURE. PHOTO BY SEPHRA LAMOTHE. NOVEMBER 8, 2022.

The Bata Shoe Museum's Annual Founder's Lecture featured fashion historian, broadcaster, author, and curator Amber Butchart, who provided a lecture entitled "Forensic Fashion: Investigating Old Clothes from the Rag Trade to the Lab" for their 2022 event. Butchart is currently the lead Consultant in forensic garment analysis at Alecto Forensics and is listed as a Forensic Garment Analyst on the expert database of the UK National Crime Agency (Forensics). One of Butchart's many accomplishments include a six-part television series with the BBC called *A Stitch in Time*, which explores the relationship between history, biography, and fashion. Butchart's lecture discussed a variety of fascinating topics around the development of forensic garment analysis including the history of forensic analysis in popular literature, the power of old clothes as a tool to ascertain key insights, standardizing terminology to aid in the communication of forensic analysis, and the connection of creative and scientific practices, as well as analyzing artifacts as crime scenes.

Butchart discussed her background within the fashion industry and how her first job following university as the Head Buyer for the international vintage clothing store Beyond Retro (referred to as the “Rag Trade” in the UK) built vital skills, which she implements within forensic garment analysis today (Press). The role of a fashion buyer often entails identifying the brands and/or makers of garments, the approximate date of production, and evaluate garments wear and condition to ultimately determine their worth.

Butchart highlighted how her experience analyzing garments and her understanding of fashion trends/past styles parallels many of the skills required for forensic garment analysis.

WHAT IS FORENSIC GARMENT ANALYSIS?

Forensic garment analysis provides key identifiers regarding the individual(s) associated with crimes through the analysis of a garment's origins, areas of wear or repair, and the modification/alteration of clothing. For example, types of strides or gestures often create wear patterns in certain areas of garments and one can often determine an individual's dominant appendages through the wear patterns of their jackets, tops, and pants. As a Forensic Analyst, Butchart is often presented with photos of clothing, an individual garment, and/or an assemblage of garments. Object analysis and the skills that she developed as a fashion buyer provide information on the make/construction of the clothing, the possible production date of the garment(s), and thus, an estimation of when they were purchased, information on the wear or specific markers may originate from, and any additional information possible to support criminal investigations. To uphold confidentiality and personal objectiveness within a forensic investigation, Butchart is presented with little, if any, contextual information of the case. She stressed the importance that forensic analysis of garments is not meant to solve the crime, but to aid in the collection of information to assist with building a strong case, while providing a multifaceted approach to the investigation.

WHY STANDARDIZING TERMINOLOGY AND RESEARCH PRACTICES MATTER

To increase awareness of the benefits of forensic garment analysis and to encourage its use within wider forensic practice, Butchart conducts training sessions for Crime Scene Investigators (CSIs) with Alecto Forensics (Forensics). When working with CSIs, Butchart stresses an unbiased approach to garment analysis through articulation of plain language and precise observation in order to avoid applying cultural ties and inherent biases into their analysis. Supporting Butchart's approach to garment analysis, in their book *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object-Based Research in Fashion* Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim note that it is natural for observers to draw assumptions based on their observations while also endeavoring to understand the garments and their context (7). Mida and Kim draw on garment analysis procedures predominantly associated with Jules David Brown and further developed by scholars Alexandra Palmer and Valerie Steele to standardize procedure for object research that allows for a researcher's subjective experience to possibly inform, but not bias, their analysis of garments through utilizing a methodical approach that focuses on the objective analysis of the physical construction and visual qualities (20-21). Although our personal experience can provide key insight into deciphering a garment's unique signs of wear, clothing also has the power to influence object analysis which could potentially provide misleading information in a forensic investigation. To maintain objectivity within object based research, researchers should identify one's personal biases and experiences and clearly acknowledge how they may interpret the research (63). Mida and Kim diverge from Prown's procedure of garment analysis within the final step of garment analysis. Prown's final step is deduction in which a researcher considers the experience of wearing the garment and evaluating the cultural beliefs embodied, however Mida and Kim suggest instead that a researcher draws from both personal experience and fashion theory in order to develop a cohesive reflection (31; 63).

Throughout her talk, Butchart advocated for the standardization of clothing terminology to support the communication of forensic analysis. Terminology of clothing is often geographically and/or culturally determined. For example, the single garment of a sweater can be called various names such as a jumper, jersey, sweatshirt, pull-over, or a knit just based on slight differences of the garment, with the chosen terminology often relying on one's country of origin and open to interpretation of the individual. Without standardized terminology of clothing, the reliability of forensic analysis to provide beneficial information is reduced. Butchart stressed that the ability of clothing to engage and open conversations between strangers, signifies the power dress has in forming connections. Butchart also referred to Ellen Sampson's book, *Worn: Footwear, Attachment and the Affects of Wear*, which explores how our entanglement with

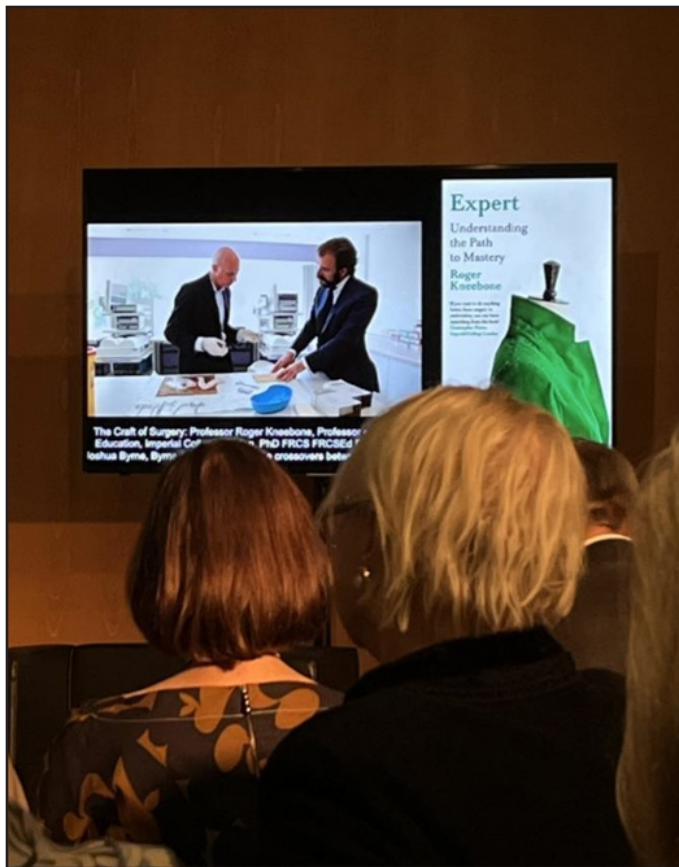


FIGURE 2 AMBER BUTCHART DISCUSSING ROGER KNEEBONE'S PROJECT *UNDERSTANDING THE PATH TO MASTERY* AT THE 2022 BATA SHOE MUSEUM FOUNDER'S LECTURE. PHOTO BY AMANDA PEARN. NOVEMBER 8, 2022.

objects is a social relationship, suggesting that clothing should be understood as an active agent (12). When our bodies meet objects, agencies and experiences are transcribed within them through sweat marks and wear patterns which can leave forensic clues for analysis. These clues are the ways in which artifacts can act as crime scenes themselves, as discussed by Butchart regarding the way she approaches forensic garment analysis.

Her mental rolodex of historical garment inventory and skills developed over years of working as both a fashion buyer and dress historian have allowed Butchart to be perceptive of the clues left within clothing. The skills that dress historians develop through researching objects position them as experts in garment analysis, allowing them to closely read garments to uncover evidence of the lives and experiences of those who wore them (Matthews David 44). Within historical object analysis, dress historians commonly analyze garments with limited contextual information to aid their research.

Similar to a crime scene, dress historians investigate the individual details of a garment such as lace designs, patterns, stitch techniques, types and makes of closures, staining patterns, typography of labels, etc. to derive information which could assist in uncovering the object's story.

The relationship between fashion and crime is an emerging field. Fashion historian, Alison Matthews David's current project, *The Fabric of Crime*, highlights the role that clothing can play within crime such as a tool of disguise or concealment, a weapon, and/or as forensic evidence. Evaluating the role that clothing played within crimes committed from 1840–1940, Matthews David's research highlights both the entanglement of fashion within crime and the potential information that can be derived from clothing within a forensic investigation, supporting the methodology of object analysis within contemporary forensic investigations.

FORAGING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CREATIVE AND SCIENTIFIC PRACTICES

An overarching theme from Butchart's fascinating lecture was one of interdisciplinary connection. Emerging research has an increased focus in bridging diverse disciplines such as creative industries and scientific practice. When creative and scientific methodologies are utilized synchronously, our understanding of their ability to inform one another increases and we begin to build a larger capacity for problem solving. The merging of scientific and creative practices was evident throughout Butchart's lecture but clearly evident in the discussion surrounding the creative practice of embroidery and the surgical repairing of veins. Two disciplines which are commonly thought to be unrelated were offered as an example of marrying creative practices and scientific study, to build better surgical precision (Oakes and Kneebone). Lacemaker and embroiderer Fleur Oakes has been an artist in residence at the Imperial College London's Vascular Surgery Department since 2016, working with the faculty to develop medical education used for public engagement (Lacemaking and Raised Embroidery).

The case study examples selected throughout Butchart's lecture showcase the necessary development of forensic garment analysis and what it currently has to offer, in addition to what the discipline currently lacks. The topics covered effectively wove the audience through the lecture with a plethora of interesting ideas posed, which were evident through the high level of engagement and abundance of questions during the Q&A period. We were left to ponder the future of forensic fashion and how we might, in our own way, expand creative practices into uncharted territories. To learn more about Butchart and her diverse work you can review her website here <https://www.amberbutchart.com/>.

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Author Bio



Sephra Lamothe (she/her) is a second year Masters of Fashion candidate at Toronto Metropolitan University.

Sephra's academic background and previous work experience within Psychology informs her current research interests of material culture, embodiment, and the psychology of fashion, from the 1800s to the present day. Her current MRP focuses on the effects of cultural trauma following large global events on women's relationship with clothing. Sephra is interested in the way people's relationships with clothing are affected by their environment and experiences. Sephra co-curated the Captive Labour exhibition which explored garment production within Canadian Penitentiaries from 1830-the present. The Captive Labour project highlighted the exploitative nature of captive labour within the Canadian Penitentiary system, both historically and today.

ARTICLE CITATION

Lamothe, Sephra, and Amanda Pearn. "Review: Bata Shoe Museum 2022 Founder's Lecture." *Fashion Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2023, pp. 1-11, <https://www.fashionstudies.ca/review-bata-shoe-museum-founders-lecture-2022/>, <https://doi.org/10.38055/FS040201>.

Author Bio



Amanda Pearn (she/her) is a second year Masters of Fashion student at Toronto Metropolitan University

Her academic interests include exploring both traditional and modern facets of the tailoring trade. Her upcoming MRP project investigates how the tailor and client relationship takes shape through a material culture lens. Amanda is also the Founder of Rosebud Studio (rosebudstudio.ca) which offers holistic wardrobe services through bespoke tailoring, styling, and access to professional attire for women entering the workforce. Her favorite place to learn couture tailoring techniques was attending a summer course at the UAL in London.

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sciences humaines du Canada

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ISSN 2371-3453

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