

## **'Seeing Touch Anew': Clothing, Gender, and 'The Victorian Tactile Imagination'**

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Attending a conference on the tactile imagination draws attention to the unnoticed feelings and sensations that surround us every day. This was certainly the case on Saturday, 20 July 2013, when I — and, I suspect, my co-attendees — became somewhat overburdened with the everyday reality of our sensory experience. Just hours earlier, the sun had risen on a clammy, stifling, misty city. Now, as we took our seats in the lecture theatre for the first paper of the conference's second day, it was with an ever-heightening awareness of our surroundings, as papers rustled, windows thumped open and closed, and hands nervously tightened around water bottles. On any other day, these experiences might present themselves as nuisances or peripheral distractions, but this event was somewhat different. For this conference, as I was to learn, invited us to consider — or reconsider — the significance of the tactile, from the awe of the post-Burkean sublime, through the seemingly frivolous modern ephemera of Egyptian mummy-themed lip balm, to the apparently mundane, routine act of answering the postman's knock. Indeed, these interplays between touch and texture, sensation and social roles, weaved themselves determinedly throughout the day's discussions. And, as one whose work focuses primarily upon objects — or, more accurately, representations of objects — the opportunity to spend a day considering the significance of touch and physicality felt long overdue. If I began with high-but-unspecified hopes of interdisciplinary collaboration, I ended with some much-needed reflections upon touch and gender. But, above all, the conference reminded me to leave a space — both figurative and literal — for the tactile, and it is this issue, among others, that forms the focus of this report.

After the second day's fascinating first plenary address, during which Constance Classen explored the 'allure' of Egyptian mummies to the Victorians, my real work of the day began, in the session 'Touching the Natural World'. This two-paper panel confronted questions about gender, bodies, and landscape, alongside issues of texture, sight, and feel-

ing. We started with Alan McNee's discussion of the specialist — and specifically male — genre of mountaineering literature in a paper entitled 'The Haptic Sublime and the "cold stony reality" of Mountaineering'. On the surface, my research could not be more different from McNee's; I am interested in how Victorian fashionable femininity is represented in fiction and the visual arts. But it soon became clear that we deal with surprisingly similar themes: I, too, am concerned with physicality, but in terms of women's, rather than men's, experiences. Indeed, this interest directed my own contribution, my paper, 'Growing Desires: Ferns and Femininity in the Nineteenth Century', offering a different consideration of both gender and landscape. It examined the so-called Victorian 'fern craze', or 'pteridomania', a very tactile pastime that took over middle-class recreational life in the mid-nineteenth century. This hobby involved the study, collecting, and cultivation of ferns, and was portrayed as being particularly appealing to fashion-conscious young women. Looking at a range of material, including articles from the *Morning Post*, short 'girlhood' stories, illustrations from the *Graphic*, and finally, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's 1876 novel *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*, my paper explored ways in which fern-collecting reshaped contemporary understandings of feminine touch and deportment. Often, it sharply undermined the familiar ideal of serene, elegant femininity, and instead legitimized the exploration of spaces traditionally deemed unsuitable for female recreation. In doing so, I suggested, women were offered opportunities to engage with the natural world in a physical, direct way, as they dug with trowels, tore their skirts, and scrambled down muddy banks in pursuit of the latest botanical 'specimen'.

Several of these accounts fancifully resituated the middle-class woman within both an exciting and a perilous context, foregrounding the significance of personally locating, touching, and retrieving a much-coveted new fern. And while these reports made a somewhat incongruous (and at times, a humorous) comparison with those discussed by McNee, this juxtaposition brought some fascinating issues of touch and gender into sharp relief. For, even when faced with the unstable, earthy, and slippery terrain of the natural world, women were nonetheless expected to preserve and protect their personal appearance in line with contemporary perceptions of the 'feminine'. Indeed, the ensuing discussion led to some illuminating points of comparison between these two, ostensibly different, papers, drawing upon issues of surfaces and texture, be that of the rugged mountain landscape or women's fashionable negotiation of an elegant 'carpet' of ferns in a wooded glade. What emerged overall was the

pervasive and insidious power of the perceived differences between male and female touch, and of the limitations that these placed upon both men's and women's experiences.

The following panel, 'Textured Visions: Writing, Painting, Photographing Fashion', which I chaired, facilitated a different exploration of the relationship between vision, texture, and tactility. Clare Mullaney's paper, 'Weaving Queer Narratives: Employing Clothing to Refashion Temporalities' detailed how, in certain narratives, clothing functions as a symbolic means of 'refashioning' temporal distance, and could even mediate unspoken sexual desire between women. Particularly resonant here was Mullaney's consideration of the white dress in Vernon Lee's 1890 story 'Oke of Okehurst; or, a Phantom Lover', in which, Mullaney argued, the garment functions as an erotically charged 'bridge' between the two female characters. During this discussion, the dress became significant in two distinct ways: firstly for its tangible properties; but secondly, for the way in which it catalyses imaginative desire that is, seemingly, just as potent as any physical contact with the human body. And, while Lynda Nead's 'Dressing the Surface: Fashion and Aesthetics in Franz Winterhalter's *Portrait of the Empress Eugénie Surrounded by Her Ladies of Honour*, 1855', discussed some very different items of clothing, this paper drew attention to related issues of gender and touch. In her talk, Nead made a compelling analysis of Winterhalter's painting, bringing together fashion history and 'theoretical debates on haptic vision', to form a new discussion of 'the fabrication of textured atmospheres'. In a beguiling consideration of the artistic, sensory, and aesthetic meanings of fabric and dress, Nead powerfully evoked the portrait's 'layers of painted pleasure'. And in doing so, her paper allowed us the space to reflect not only upon the painting's intellectual implications, but to acknowledge and process our emotional responses to its complex and contradictory beauty.

The panel's final paper, presented by Sarah Parsons, was entitled 'In Praise of the Overwrought: Reconsidering William Notman's Montreal Studio Portraits'. This made an engaging exploration of the Scottish-born Notman's studio work, examining a number of images, including his photographs of Mrs MacKenzie. These, as Parsons showed, reveal an evident concern both with the display of clothing and with the tactile quality of fashionable female dress; there was a real sense in which Notman engaged with, and even shaped, the sitters' aspirations and self-image. And while studio pictures from this period are sometimes regarded as being repetitively alike in their conventions, this was not the case here. With each image that Parsons explored, I was struck anew by the differences, as well

as the similarities, between them. Each photograph had a fresh story to tell, about femininity, about the body, and about clothing. Through her paper, Parsons brought these to light, revealing the cost and implications on the personal as well as the aesthetic level. What the panel revealed overall was the significance of the *process* of representation — be this through writing, painting, or captured through the lens of a camera — and how this can shape both the meanings of dress and our responses to it.

The final plenary address, Hilary Fraser's 'The Language of Touch in Victorian Art Criticism', brought new and interesting perspectives to bear upon these issues of gender, sexuality, and physicality. In this paper, Fraser reconsidered the photograph as both a cultural and a tactile artefact, drawing attention to its status as a portable, tangible art form, and noting the central significance of touch to all aspects of the nineteenth-century photographic process. Examining the work of two female photographers, Lady Clementina Hawardan and Julia Margaret Cameron, Fraser discussed the tenacious appeal of the photograph to its Victorian viewers. Particularly interesting was Hawardan's work, which, despite drawing upon a limited range of costumes and props, nonetheless gained critical acclaim for its 'experimental' depiction of girlhood and young womanhood. Perhaps, then, Hawardan's photographs moved beyond the realm of conventional portraiture, to become, as Fraser speculated, images to trigger thoughts and emotional responses. From here, her paper moved onto an intriguing analysis of the human body itself as a tactile object of desire, an argument that might prompt interesting alignments and juxtapositions with Classen's earlier discussion of the physical appeal of the preserved, mummified body. Indeed, Fraser argued, the very performance of art writing could itself be 'erotically charged, and intimately entwined with developing discourses upon sexuality', thus generating separate meanings and textures as a medium in its own right.

As the conference drew to a close, most striking to me was the symmetry of the day's discussions, the final round-table session raising similar issues to those addressed in Classen's opening talk. For these papers, and many others, stimulated questions about the human condition, and of how emotion can be evoked, conveyed, or even confused through our tactile relationship with objects. Equally, objects need not function purely as displacement devices; rather, they present their own, unique charms that can engender myriad sensations. But perhaps there are alternatives that are just as appealing. As Fraser's paper revealed, the very vocabulary of touch is rich in its scope, prompting its own feelings and sen-

sations, while the colour and texture of paint can, as Nead's paper on art and fashion demonstrates, prompt an imaginative experience that might match or even surpass the 'real' one. What emerges, then, are several different, but equally valid, versions of the tactile, negotiated through the cerebral, the intellectual, the emotional, and the visual — all of which combine, and even compete, to produce unique, resonant, haptic experiences.

On a personal level, I was left with much to consider. As scholars, we can become so intensely engaged with our subjects that it can be difficult to 'see', 'reach', or even 'touch' our material anew; our own perspectives become so safe and familiar that to reposition ourselves can present a perpetual challenge. Throughout my paper, I had been keen to explore the relationship between the 'reality' of fern collecting and contemporary notions of femininity, which became both a powerful and a divisive concept during the nineteenth century. Now, in the light of the day's discussions, I was prompted to reconsider and challenge these connections. In my paper, I had shown that fern collecting was both a private and a public act, and one which afforded opportunities for intimate, and surprisingly tactile, interactions between men and women. As Catherine Horwood and Sarah Whittingham have noted, ferns were linked with flirtation, romance, and courtship, fiction of the period often featuring marriage proposals within the fern-shaded coolness of the conservatory.<sup>1</sup> I also argued that in certain sources, ferns perform a more complex function as they symbolically counterpoint romantic, sexual, and familial relationships, even acting as a displacement device for frustrated or forbidden touch. What I had concluded was that touch both complicates and mystifies Victorian female experience, exposing interesting disjunctions and contradictions in nineteenth-century perceptions of femininity. But what I also came to realize was that, in considering these issues in the abstract, intellectual sense, I had, perhaps, neglected the subjective female experiences that had brought these fictional and artistic works into being in the first place. The personal and the emotional, I realized, needed its space alongside both the haptic and the aesthetic. And indeed, it seemed both

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Horwood, *Potted History: The Story of Plants in the Home* (London: Lincoln, 2007), p. 123; and Sarah Whittingham, *Fern Fever* (London: Lincoln, 2012), pp. 214–18. Furthermore, Isobel Armstrong notes that, during the nineteenth century, 'fiction [...] makes countless references to the erotics of the conservatory', which, she suggests, was 'the space both of taboo and licence'. See Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 182–83.

neat and fitting that a conference about tactility had brought me back in 'touch' with my subject in such an immediate way.