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# 'Gendering Objects at the V&A and Vasa Museums'

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## **Draft – For Open Access**

**James Daybell, Kit Heyam, Svante Norrhem, Emma Severinsson, ‘Gendering Objects at the V&A and Vasa Museums’.**

### **Abstract**

This article presents two case studies which are the result of an application of a gendered interpretative tool to the collections at the Victoria & Albert Museum (London) and the Vasa Museum (Stockholm). Objects and their gendered narratives within the museums’ collections have been researched across their lifecycle from commission and manufacture to consumption and display in a museum setting.

This research has been developed in close co-operation between researchers/curators/museum professionals. It responds to a need for museums to have gender better integrated into narratives of the past and present. Transforming curatorial and curatorial practice is at the heart of this work, and the research seeks to develop best practice guidance on making diverse gendered history more visible in the museum space.

The team of researchers, curators and museum professionals have identified and researched a selection of early modern objects and their gendered narratives within the museum’s collections. This article uses two hats held at the Vasa and V&A to demonstrate this methodology. Woollen and beaver hats are gendered in terms of their intended wearer; the predominantly female labour of the wool industry; the impact of the beaver skin trade on Native American gender dynamics; and the status of headwear as an index of anxiety about gender nonconformity. An innovative outcome of the research has been a raising of the awareness of gender (which encompasses women and men, femininities and masculinities, sexualities and identities) as an important interpretative category within the museum environment, and the important role this can play in generating diverse narratives that have wider societal impact disseminated through curatorial practice, as well as educational and public programming.

### **Author Biographies**

**James Daybell** is Professor of Early Modern British History at the University of Plymouth and Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. An expert in early modern social, cultural and political history, he has produced more than fourteen books on subjects ranging from early modern correspondence, gender and politics, and public history. He is Principle Investigator on the AHRC-funded project 'Gendered Interpretations of the V&A and Vasa Museums'. He is co-Director of Cornerstone Heritage and with historian and TV presenter Dr Sam Willis is co-Director of the *Histories of the Unexpected* public history brand.

**Kit Heyam** is a Lecturer in Early Modern English Literature at King's College London. Previously, they were Research Fellow on the AHRC-funded project 'Gendered Interpretations of the V&A and Vasa Museums' (Department of History, University of Plymouth). They specialise in sexual/gendered transgression in medieval and early modern history and literature: their first monograph (forthcoming, Amsterdam University Press) investigates the development of Edward II's queer reputation. They work publicly and academically towards increased historical representation of queer experience: their article 'Gender Nonconformity and Military Internment: Curating the Knockaloe Slides' (Critical Military Studies, 2019) proposes a methodology for curating historical trans possibility.

**Svante Norrhem** is Associate Professor in the Department of History, Lund University. An expert in early modern gender, cultural and political history, he has published several books and articles on topics like gender and politics, gender and diplomacy, international relations in Europe, but also 20<sup>th</sup> century LGBTQ-history. He is co-Principle Investigator on the AHRC-funded project 'Gendered Interpretations of the V&A and Vasa Museums'. He is project leader for early modern research project *The Aristocratic Household as Academy*.

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## **Keywords**

Gender; Interpretation; Objects; Museum;; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Vasa Museum, Stockholm

## **Introduction**

This article is based on research undertaken as part of a series of international collaborative projects which collectively have raised awareness of gender as an important interpretative category in museology, developed a gendered interpretative tool, and applied it in the context of two major international museums, the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London and the Vasa Museum in Stockholm.<sup>1</sup> Museums are powerful cultural centres for individuals and communities to undertake life-long learning and to foster behavioural change; and through a process of co-production the project team, which involved researchers and professionals from these two international beacon institutions, sought to have gender better integrated into narratives of the past and present. At the root of this project is a belief that narratives of the past are fundamental to people's sense of self, community and identity – and thus it is imperative that these narratives be diverse, and that this diversity be reflected in a variety of sites where narratives are made. Museums are reorganising themselves to be well-placed to engage with new and diverse audiences in order to represent these diverse narratives (Sandell et al. 2010; Adair and Levin 2020; Swedish Exhibition Agency 2015), and an awareness of gender (which encompasses women and men, femininities and masculinities, sexualities and identities) is crucially important here. However, while many museums have identified a need to better integrate gender into their interpretative pathways and curatorial practices, the question of how to raise awareness – often with limited financial resources – of the many gendered histories hidden behind museum objects has created an interest in finding new methods of approaching this problem (see e.g. Adair and Levin 2020; Anderson and Winkworth 2014; Callihan and Feldman 2018; Grahn 2006 and 2007; Grundberg 2014; Laskar 2019; Ruiz 2018).

Our thinking about gendered museum interpretation was initially shaped during a two-year project involving an international research network, which generated dialogue between four university nodes (University of Plymouth, Lund University,

Leiden University, and University of Western Australia) and curators and the research department at the V&A; as well as professionals at Skarhult Castle, Sweden, The Museum of London, The Worshipful Company of Glovers, Powderham Castle in Devon, Catherijne Convent in Utrecht and Cultural Heritage Leiden. Through a series of workshops held from 2015-2017 we developed an interpretative methodology for understanding objects, exhibitions and the past through the lens of gender, power and materiality, as important power constellations that affected the design, form and function of objects. We used this methodology to study the gendered history of gloves across their lifecycle from commission and manufacture to consumption and display in a museum (Daybell et al forthcoming). This first phase of the project worked to raise awareness of gender as an important interpretative category in curatorial practice, and the significant role this can play in generating diverse narratives. These narratives can then have wider societal impact when disseminated through interpretation, as well as educational and public programming for schools and the general public. Studied from the perspective of gender, our research offers possibilities of obtaining a thicker description of objects: this is capable of enhancing visitor experience, as part of the museums' strategies to bring audiences back for revisits, and also of helping to stimulate behavioural change relating to gender and diversity of experiences.

The second phase of the project sought to develop and implement this interpretative methodology in a museum environment, working with our existing partners at the V&A and with a new partner, the Vasa Museum in Stockholm, in order to develop new pathways to knowledge exchange and a methodology which offers museums the opportunity to change practice. In so doing, the project brought together two very different museums as a way of facilitating international exchange. The V&A, as a world-leading design museum with a vast collection (and 4.3 million visitors in the year 2018-19) is a very different kind of museum from the Vasa, one of Sweden's most popular museums with 1.5 million visitors recorded in 2019. Built around the magnificent wreck of Gustavus Adolphus's seventeenth-century warship, the Vasa is effectively a single object military museum, and outwardly at least appeared more difficult to gender. In both institutions, however, the project was enabled by Directors of Research, curators and other staff who were sensitive to gender as an interpretative category. At the V&A, the LGBTQ network was an invaluable collaborator, and the

Vasa museum as a whole was in many ways already significantly advanced in gendering its collection, as evidenced by the pioneering exhibition on 'Vasa's Women'.

At the heart of this project was the identification and analysis of a selection of 10-20 objects at the V&A and Vasa Museum by the project teams in the UK and Sweden, in order to unlock their gendered narratives. This phase of research employed the new gendered interpretative methodology for understanding objects. As a result of our research, each object has a two-page biography/narrative, which identifies gender as one of a cluster of determinants that inform its existence and meaning. The interpretative materials our research generated will be used at the V&A and Vasa museums in the longer term for signage and pathways around the museum, for pedagogic materials that will be embedded into education literature and programmes, in guidebooks and tour guide manuals, and in frameworks for public workshops and podcasts. In particular, findings from the project have achieved global reach through dissemination via the 'Histories of the Unexpected' podcast, which is co-produced by project co-director James Daybell with the TV presenter and historian Sam Willis, and which has had nearly two million downloads in more than 150 countries around the world.

A further key output of the project was the facilitation of knowledge exchange of the conceptual implications of gendered interpretative pathways between international partner institutions, achieved by holding two workshops in London and Stockholm with the project team and museum practice professionals (curators, cataloguers, conservators, education and outreach and public programming), as well as a series of public engagement activities at both museums (public talks, gendered pathway tours, up-close-and-personal sessions with the objects, the V&A's Friday night late, curatorial symposia). As a result of these workshops and activities we are in the process of co-producing a final report with recommendations for how to create gendered interpretative pathways for use in other museums.

### **'Gendering Objects' Methodology**

The methodology used to gender objects at the V&A and Vasa museums reflected our threefold aim: to make visible the gendered aspects that made an object

meaningful to early modern people; to recover the gendered impact and significance of the object in its broadest sense, within and beyond the society it was made for; and to provide a means of diversifying gendered representation within the museum. Consequently, the objects were approached with a set of research questions which aimed to contextualise them broadly, and to investigate the gendering of the following:

- **Materiality:** The raw materials of the object, the role of different genders in sourcing them, and the impact of sourcing these materials on the gender dynamics of the societies involved.
- **Production:** Who made the object, and what gendered rules or conventions (such as guild membership structures) governed this process, including whether anyone is known to have transgressed them.
- **Use:** Who, in a gendered sense, the object was made for, and how it was used – including whether the object was implicated in gendered rituals, transactions or gestures, and whether different genders were perceived differently when using it.
- **Design:** How any design elements – particularly those with classical or other narrative allusions – affected the way the object was gendered.
- **Interpretation:** Turning our lens on curatorial and historiographical practice, we asked what gendered assumptions had been made about the object; how those assumptions were ideologically informed; and how, and in what context, a specific object was presented to the audience.

Essential to this methodology was an approach less biographical than prosopographical: that is, focusing not on the biography of a single object, but on what can be determined about objects of that type or material makeup (Daybell et al forthcoming). This meant that, while our research was informed by the specific circumstances of the specific object in the V&A or Vasa, it was not limited by them. This has important implications for the transferable applicability of our methodology: the broad set of research questions can be applied to any museum object, including one whose collection records are sparse.

Objects at the two museums were selected to exemplify the breadth of the methodology across the museums' collections, both in terms of geography (establishing the methodology's utility for objects made and used outside of Western

Europe) and in terms of object type (moving beyond clothing to include ceramics, games and medical apparatus). In this article we have chosen to concentrate on hats as a case study, since examples of this particular type of object exist in both museums. As well as allowing for cross-institutional comparison, hats in themselves are a particularly good example of the potential of gendering museum objects, since they demonstrate well how our methodology uncovered meaningful gendered history at each stage of the research process outlined above. Additionally, the case of hats demonstrates the importance of this methodology not just for recovering the gendered meanings of objects in their historical context, but for making visible marginalised gendered histories.

### **Case Study 1: The V&A hat**

Object 1562&A-1901 at the V&A – on display alongside other dress accessories in the museum’s Medieval and Renaissance galleries – is a flat cap made in sixteenth-century England. Made from knitted and felted wool, and worn as an everyday item of clothing by men below the rank of gentleman, this cap is one of fourteen similar hats held by the V&A thanks to the 1571 Cappers’ Act. Described later as an ‘Act made for the Continuance of making of Caps’, this act mandated the wearing of ‘a Cap of Wool knit, thicked and dressed in *England*, made within this Realm, and only dressed and finished by some of the Trade of Cappers’ on Sundays and holidays (Ruffhead 1763, 600). It extended to ‘Every Person above the Age of seven Years... Except Maids, Ladies, Gentlewomen’, and aristocratic men, clerics, and the wardens of London livery companies. This phrasing, which notably refers not to ‘men’ but to ‘Every *Person*...except [women]’, is a pertinent example of what Hilda Smith has termed early modern ‘false universal’ discourse, in which ‘man’ is conflated with ‘human’ (Smith 2002, p. x). This discourse has important implications for both curatorial and historiographical methodology: as Smith argues, ‘Although we are most apt to think the greatest potential for excluding women is their simple omission, in reality, thought patterns and popular expressions that encourage the visual and linguistic linkage of men [and, we would add, other dominant groups such as white or heterosexual people] to the universal human condition are more significant’ (Smith 2002, p. 13).

Smith’s observations concerning the pervasiveness of ‘false universal’ discourse are also useful in framing an investigation into the role of women and girls

as apprentice cappers and members of cappers' guilds. Women, Smith suggests, are less likely to be identified by their occupation (such as 'weaver') in early modern documents, but are instead identified 'as a wife or widow with a descriptor indicating that she wove'; consequently, this discursive practice has led historians to underestimate the role of women in guilds (Smith 2002, pp. 14, 83-4). Equally, as Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos has shown, apprenticeships and guild memberships provide only a partial view of how girls and women acquired skills, since their training was far more likely to have been informal or combined with domestic work (Smith 2002, pp. 45-6; Ben-Amos 1994, 146). Hence, when Ben-Amos discovers women apprenticed as housewives in the households of cappers in early sixteenth-century Bristol, it is possible that some of these women acquired skills in capping and contributed to the family trade (Ben-Amos 1991, pp. 229-30). Ben-Amos also identifies both female apprentices and widows working in felt-making, a craft important to hat production (Ben-Amos 1991, pp. 238, 243). While these women might not have been defined as cappers or felt-makers in early modern discourse, then, it is clear that female labour contributed to hat manufacture.

That this gendered economic history is not often made visible in museums is owing to the double bind of 'false universal' discourse. Firstly, if women are often excluded both from references to 'cappers' and from formalised apprenticeship processes or guild membership in early modern documentary sources, this makes researching their labour a more difficult task, meaning that they are underrepresented in the historiographical work on which museum interpretation is based. Secondly, a reference to 'cappers' in museum interpretation – while technically gender-neutral – is still, owing to the weight of historiographical habit and the pervasive sexism of contemporary society, liable to be read by museum visitors as referring to men. Given that male is still too often perceived as neutral in contemporary discourse, while women's gender is specifically 'marked' (McConnell and Fazio 1996) – and given that public assumptions about the past still tend to minimise women's autonomy (Sturtevant and Kaufman forthcoming) – gender neutrality in museum interpretation risks failing to challenge the fact that past subjects are often presumed male until proven otherwise (Heyam 2019, p. 5).

In any case, the truly integral nature of women's labour to the process of cap-making is made most visible if we consider its earlier stages, and the material makeup of the V&A's woollen cap. Women's work, along with that of children, was central to

the early modern English wool industry (Muldrew 2012; Oldland 2018, p. 7). Women owned and bequeathed sheep (Fudge 2013, pp. 190-91); were employed as shearers, for which they were paid about 16% less than men (Clark 1919, p. 62); and, above all, spun wool for a small, barely liveable wage (Clark 1919, p. 95; Jones and Stallybrass, p. 104). Moreover, spinning was ideologically 'defined...as women's work', and women's spinning – regardless of their economic class – was 'praised as evidence of chaste industriousness' (Jones and Stallybrass 2000, p. 104). The V&A's woollen cap, then, has the potential to function metonymically within the museum, standing for and calling attention to the contribution of these largely anonymous working women from lower social orders to the material construction of any objects in its collections containing wool. Jones and Stallybrass's research on early modern wool also illustrates the importance of looking beyond documentary evidence of work and trade when gendering objects, and the value of literary sources as evidence of the gendered discursive field surrounding particular objects or activities.

Gendering the V&A's woollen cap thereby provides a means of making visible the unacknowledged and largely unnamed female makers whose work is present throughout the museum. Moreover, analysis of how caps like this were worn reveals that gendering early modern hats can also contribute to the gendered diversification of museum interpretation, beyond increasing the visibility of women's history. As outlined above, the 1571 Cappers' Act circumscribed hats like the V&A cap as headwear for men from the citizen class; this social delineation reflects the role of headwear as an index of status (Hayward 2002, p. 1; Postles 2008, pp. 4-5). Additionally, however, headwear functioned as an index of gender. For numerous early modern commentators, gender was apparently 'proclaimed through the visibility of the head' (Jones and Stallybrass 2000, p. 79), and anxieties about gender nonconformity were frequently articulated with reference to headwear. In particular, people assigned female at birth who wore male-coded hats – as opposed to a female-coded hood or coif (Mikhaila and Malcolm-Davies 2006, p. 28) – were used as synecdoche for concerns about gender nonconforming fashion more broadly. The clergyman Thomas Stoughton inveighed in his 1622 tract *The Christians Sacrifice* against those who had 'changed their sex', exemplified by 'Men wearing long haire like unto women, and women cutting off their haire like unto boyes, or beardlesse yong men, wearing nothing thereon but hats, putting them also off to such as they meete' (Jones and Stallybrass 2000, p. 79). Stoughton's gender transgressors are not only

wearing the wrong headwear, but using that headwear in gendered gestures: a woman who doffs her cap to someone she meets in the street is engaging in two simultaneous forms of gender nonconforming behaviour. Similarly, the 'man-woman' of the 1620 pamphlet *Hic Mulier* is accused specifically of swapping female-coded for male-coded headwear, and the 1644 dialogue *A Looking-Glasse for Women* compared women in hats to 'Hermophrodite[s]' (Anon 1620, fols. A4<sup>r</sup>-A4<sup>v</sup>; T.H. 1644, fol. B4<sup>r</sup>). Accusations of wearing men's hats carried implications of sexual transgression, and Laura Gowing has identified a 1593 defamation case in which the epithets 'whor' and 'quean' were coupled with the mocking instruction 'putt of the white kerchief and putt on a flat capp' (Gowing 1993, p. 11; c.f. Anon 1620, fols. A4<sup>r</sup>-A4<sup>v</sup>).

Clearly, if hats like the V&A cap are presented simply as men's clothing in museum interpretation, this history of resistance to and disruption of gendered norms will remain underacknowledged. Indeed, this may even lead to curatorial misinterpretation: the V&A's catalogue text for another cap, object 1566-1901, notes that 'Its size suggests it may have belonged to a young boy or an adult with a smallish head', without explicitly acknowledging that this may make female ownership more likely. Yet this observation has implications beyond recognising the history of how women have consistently defied the norms of gendered clothing and behaviour. The broad category of early modern people who were assigned female at birth and wore men's hats is likely to have included people motivated by aesthetics or fashion; people seeking greater economic independence; people for whom male presentation provided safety in the street; people advertising their sexual availability to men; people seeking to attract women sexually through masculine presentation; and people for whom masculine expression was congruent with their own gendered subjectivity. It is important, then, that curation of objects like the V&A's cap, which have been used to facilitate gender nonconforming behaviour, avoids homogenising motivations for that behaviour. Some, but not all, of these people can be accurately described as 'women'; in order to make the 'trans possibility' of objects like this cap available to museum visitors, it is crucial to avoid fixing these past subjects in a single gendered identity category (Heyam 2019, p. 5).

### **Case Study 2: The Hat from the Vasa ship**

While it is possible to trace the gendered history of the V&A cap back to its raw materials, a felt hat that survived under the surface for more than 300 years, and which

is now part of the huge collection of objects at the Vasa museum, presents other methodological problems: what methodology do you adopt when you know almost nothing about the object? Perhaps the best place to start is the context of the hat's survival. The felt hat, which belonged to an unknown and nameless sailor, was found in a chest on the wreckage of the Vasa ship. The chest in which it was found would have been an important object to the sailor, as he would have kept all his belongings in it. He would have cleaned it, decorated it and used it for storing clothes, letters and other personal items. It would also have been used as furniture, such as a table or a chair. The hat, which was broad-brimmed with ribbons tied around it, was stored together with lots of other items: a thimble, a small knife, silk ribbons, wax, a comb, two pairs of shoes, a wooden spoon, a tool, coins and a small keg and fragments of a purse. The chest's owner owned quite a number of things compared to others in the same position (Kaijser 1988, p. 74). In other words, the chest was a time capsule of the material everyday of a seventeenth-century Swedish sailor.

Focussing on the hat, where does one begin in reconstructing its gendered history and meaning? What can we know about the hat of an unidentified owner? The Vasa museum's collections database gives very limited information. From the search fields that are populated we can read, for example, that the hat *may* be produced of beaver skin. However, we cannot know for sure without chemical analysis of the object itself, a process that is costly and time-consuming. It is therefore not possible to complete the gender biography of the hat from the object alone. Instead analyses need to be extended and contextualised by other material artefacts among the contents of the ship.

Besides this hat, two other intact hats were found on the ship, as well as fragments of ten other hats. Two distinct types of hat are represented by this sample, both of them men's hats that were fashionable in Europe during the early seventeenth century. One type is characterised by a wide broader brim – like the one in the chest – while the other features a high crown. These two distinct types of hat were popular at the same time, although the one with the lower crown was a later style and remained in fashion for a longer period in the early 1600s (Ginsburg 1990, p. 46; Amphlett 2003 p. 106). Over the course of the seventeenth century, hats became smaller, with broad-brimmed hats with high crowns starting to disappear during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). Madeliene Ginsburg points out, that the wide-brimmed hat was difficult

to wear: a man witnessed in 1616: 'Every puff of wind deprived us of them, requiring the employment of one hand to keep them on'. Clearly then in battle, hats with wide brims were impractical, which may explained their decline in use (Ginsburg 1990. p. 46).

The Vasa database also gives us information on origin, suggesting that the hat might have come from the Netherlands. Knowing the origins is significant from a gender perspective since hat-making in Europe was restricted as a male only profession in some areas but not in others. In 1649 hat-makers in Frankfurt refused to employ journeymen from the Hessian town Fulda because women were allowed to work in the industry there (Wiesner Hanks 1986. p. 151-8). The Netherlands seems to have been particularly open to letting women work in hat-making in the 1600s with the result that German journeymen refused to travel there for the fear of tainting their honour by working side by side with women (Stuart 1999. p. 214).

Information about this specific hat's origin does not, however, tell us anything about its owner, that he was Dutch nor that he had travelled to the Low Countries. Hats were often inherited, passed from one generation to another, and there was an international second-hand market in clothing, a trade in which both men and women were involved throughout Europe (Bellavitis 2018. pp. 220-22; Deceulaer 2008. pp. 16-17; Wiesner-Hanks 1981. pp. 8-9). It is possible that several people had owned the hat before and it is also possible that hats were used as currency at the time (Rimstad 2017, p. 74). Many traders accepted second-hand garments as exchange for new clothes (Lemire 2012, pp.146, 148). Just as with other garments and accessories, hats were recycled and repurposed. A worn-out hat could, for example, become insoles for shoes (Rimstad 2017. p. 75). Unlike today, clothes and textiles had a high value and were often the most valuable thing a person owned. Garments were taken care of in order to ensure durability; they were often later bequeathed in wills and they were recycled as long as possible. Had the broad-brimmed Vasa hat not gone under with the ship in 1628 it would most likely have gone through a recycling process involving, at different stages, both men and women. Instead it was found and brought up in a rescuing process that was exclusively male, an activity in which women were prevented from taking part.

Felt hats of the type found in the Vasa chest were in fashion throughout the 1600s, and much can be gleaned about its gendered aspects by studying what we know about similar examples of this type. Some historians see the broad-brimmed hat as the first example of the trickle-up effect of cultural transmission. Traditionally the predominant characteristic of the earliest fashion systems has been what has been called a 'trickle-down' effect in fashion, whereby elite trends trickled downwards to the lower social orders. However, this type of broad-brimmed felt hat provides an example of how fashion spread from below, a process in fashion theory called the trickle-up effect, whereby fashions that began among the populace took root among the wealthy (Rimstad 2017, p. 77). Felt hats of this sort were typically worn by men within Sweden during the 1600s. However, this was not always the case: some women, and other people assigned female at birth, especially within the upper echelons of society, donned felt hats. This is a part of the process through which fashion spread from men to women (Rimstad 2017, p. 72). Although the phenomenon is rare, some paintings show women – such as the Danish king Christian IV's daughter Leonora Christina, Queen Mary of England (in 1633), Anne of Denmark (in 1617), and Isabella Brant (wife of the artist Peter Paul Rubens, in 1610) wearing felt hats (Rimstad 2017, p.74; Ginsburg 1990, p. 45). Maybe the most famous example is the portrait of Queen Christina of Sweden (1626 –1689), the daughter of Gustavus Adolphus who commissioned the Vasa, wearing a hat with a broad brim and high crown while riding a horse. These women all had a high cultural, social and economic status and all the hats that they are portrayed in are of male style and fashion. It is possible that they had less to lose in femininity because of their elevated positions.

Women adopting men's fashion was not new or unusual: at the end of the 1500s, for example, hunting and riding became popular among women, resulting in their use of functional male garments such as jackets, waistcoats and hats (Saccardi 2018, p. 60). The spread of male fashion to female wardrobes thus had two explanations. Firstly, high-status women adopted male fashions to show their importance and they probably had more freedom to experiment with fashion. Wearing men's attributes could threaten their value in femininity, but their economic and social status gave them more space to challenge the gender division in fashion. The other explanation is functional – that elite women started to adopt male interests and this

created a need for more functional clothes. An intersectional perspective unveils that class and gender interact and can explain how fashion works.

Another interpretative clue for decoding the gendered dimension of hats is decorations, which were commonplace in the 1600s as means of showing status or personal taste. Decorations might include ribbons, pearls, feathers and even gloves tucked into hatbands (Rimstad 2017, p. 75). The sailor's hat from the Vasa ship had two silk ribbons – a sign of female involvement in its production – and one of them was tied in a bow (Kaijser 1982, p. 74). Sailors often decorated their hats, embellishing them with ribbons or buttons to make them more personalised (Lemire 2016, p. 5). The brims were broad and were often held up by brooches (Lester and Oerke. 2004 p. 26; Rangström 2002, p. 65). At the end of the century, feathers became more popular in both female and male hats, although most people used simpler decorations (Morris, Lester and Oerke 2004, p. 27).

In the 1600s there was a public debate about luxury fashion and the immorality of wearing luxurious garments, particularly by women because it indicated that a woman might be frivolous and immodest. Unsurprisingly, decorated hats came under discussion. Not everyone liked the fashion of wearing hats. Johannes Johannis Rudbeckius, the founder of the first Swedish secondary school in 1623, Rudbeckianska Gymnasiet, had strict rules for the students. He disliked opulence and was against pointed hats (Norlin 1869, p.163).

Decorations might perform other functions as well, including more personal communications. For example, the Swedish aristocrat Sten Sture, a law protector during the period 1512-1520, wore a small silk glove in his hat ribbon during a naval battle. The glove was a gift and greeting from his wife to be (Rangström 2002, pp. 47–48), worn perhaps as a token of affection or memento to bring him luck. The hat band on the Vasa hat may then have had several different meanings, including decoration, memento or keeping the hat in the right shape.

During the 1600s clothes were central to the ways in which gender was communicated visually and materially. Hats, and the way they were worn, have been read as a way of expressing masculinity (Stadin 2005, p. 43). Furthermore, it is possible that decorative elements, such as the bows on the Vasa hat, were used as

to signify masculinity. While bows are not associated with manliness today, gender was – as we have seen – displayed differently during the 1600s.

## **Conclusion**

For a long time and up to recently museums mostly got away with presenting gender-blind exhibitions to an audience that most often did not expect, or perhaps in many cases even did not want, anything else. A need to attract new and wider groups of visitors has increased an interest in seeking to become more relevant to groups who visit museums less frequently, while simultaneously sustaining repeat visits from existing regular visitors. This project is about making museums more relevant and inclusive by revealing the fuller stories behind museum objects.

By gendering objects at the V&A and Vasa museums we not only wish to make visible the gendered aspects that made an object meaningful to early modern people, but also to recover the gendered impact and significance of the object in its broadest sense, within and beyond the society it was made for. Moreover, we want to provide a means of diversifying gendered representation within the museum. The implementation of the interpretative methodology has revealed both the possibilities that lay therein – as shown by the case studies above – and the challenges museums face when trying to integrate gender analysis into their existing procedures. One such issue is the burden of a gender-biased organisational history which, for example, is seen in cataloguing and earlier research perspectives. Most cataloguing, as well as previous object research, was done at a time when gender analysis was not considered important, resulting in the existing knowledge being at best limited and at worst misleading or inaccurate. To integrate gender at a museum thus means that one has to start from the beginning.

This project has indicated that thorough gender integration is a long-term commitment whose success relies upon the involvement of all departments in a museum, including curators, educators, guides researchers and communicators. It is not just about new research on specific objects, but also about making this new knowledge available through different channels to staff as well as external museum experts and visitors. Besides the obvious need for new research, this also includes labelling objects in new ways to make them searchable, re-writing guide manuals and educational materials, re-writing textual information and re-thinking how the museum communicates its exhibitions to its visitors. In order to make this work in a holistic way,

it means that staff from all categories across the museum have to be part of the integration process. This worked very differently in the two museums, because of their differing size and set up. The Vasa is a highly unified museum, which had the benefit of mobilising the entire institution behind the project from the Director to the research team and other departments. Contrastingly, the V&A's vast size necessitated a different approach, working with the research department, specific curatorial teams, and the LGBTQ group, who provided expertise and cross-institutional collaboration.

The decision at the Vasa museum to open a temporary exhibition called 'Vasa's Women' was both a result of a raising awareness of the importance of gender, and a starting point for a more thorough integration process – which is part of this project. Instead of showing the warship Vasa as just a warship – commissioned by the warrior king Gustavus Adolphus and intended to send men into war against other men – a new interest arose to tell a fuller story about the ship and its societal context. Thus the story of the shipyard's female manager, the many female suppliers of timber, the women who owned iron mills where cannon balls were manufactured, and not least the women who went down with the ship as it sank in 1628. As a result, visitors will in the future not only meet a gendered story about a hat, but also, among others, the gendered histories about a dress, the many wooden figures that decorated the ship, games played on the ship and even the gendered history of the vessel's cannon balls.

Research on the V&A's woollen cap and the hat from the Vasa museum reveals the numerous curatorial opportunities offered by a gendered interpretative methodology which studies materiality, production, use, re-use, design and interpretation. Attention to the materiality of textile objects has the potential to transform not just interpretation of individual objects, but interpretation of entire museum collections. Every object with woollen, spun or woven elements has an unacknowledged history of poorly-paid female labour as well as of women involved in trade and distribution of goods; when combined with recent research into the importance of women's labour and investment to the silk industry, this methodology invites a wholesale gendered reassessment of costume collections. In the case of objects containing flax – including embroideries on linen canvas – the working bodies of these women are even more integral: early modern flax-spinning frequently involved the application of saliva to moisten the thread and keep it pliable (Jones and Stallybrass 2000, p. 105), meaning that the bodily traces of early modern women may remain, unseen, in many museum collections. More broadly, given the importance of

this female labour to the wool trade, museum objects that were originally purchased or commissioned by medieval or early modern wool-merchants can be said to rely on women's labour; this is also true of historic properties.

Alongside this important opportunity to re-evaluate and reveal the centrality of women's work in shaping museum collections, the cases of the cap and the hat also demonstrate the importance of asking questions about what happened when the gendered rules surrounding objects were broken. Gendering objects is not just about making visible gendered conventions or stereotypes whose significance has been forgotten; it is also a much-needed opportunity to diversify our sense of gendered behaviour in the past, and to recover histories which will resonate with trans and gender nonconforming visitors. This group, whose history is still largely absent from museums – and particularly from the representation of pre-twentieth-century history – are still marginalised in contemporary society and thus stand to benefit substantially from museum representation, both in terms of its potential to combat social isolation and in terms of its capacity to undermine politicised claims that trans experience is a recent phenomenon (Heyam 2019, pp. 8-9).

Finally, by using the methodological tool museum objects such as the cap and the hat can be placed in a global context. An object itself, the material, or part of it, was sometimes imported and thus offers the large group of visitors from all over the world – at the Vasa no less than 80 percent of all visitors come from abroad – a gendered history involving not only Britain or Sweden. The growing consensus concerning the social agency of museums makes the diversification of gendered interpretation, in terms of both women's history and queer history, an increasingly urgent task; the case studies presented here demonstrate the potential of everyday objects to facilitate this aim.

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