

DECOLONIZING THE GAZE

BY CATERINA PECCHIOLI IN COLLABORATION WITH VICTOR R.B. ABBEY-HART



Schiavarelli la sfilata haute couture primavera estate



alzalura

in piedi,
di tempo
di un
comune



Giacca in lana vergine
Marta Bertoni



Chiarissimo in lana vergine
Marta Bertoni

MUSCOSO DA PRESSIONE IN PIELLO
IL CERVICALE HA UNO SCALFO
UNA MANICA IN VITTO

Chito in setola argentea
1000 - 1200 - 1400



FEBRUARY 19 - MARCH 20, 2026 | OPENING: FEBRUARY 19, 5-8PM

OPEN: TUE: 10AM-2PM, MON, WED, THU, FRI: 4-7PM
LDM GALLERY, VIA DE' PUCCI 4, FIRENZE



Il grande frigio per il padiglione del Museo delle

Perché la
contorno del loro storia e del loro mondo in una
distanza che si trova a Venezia nel corso di maggio di
la sua storia e soprattutto nella sua architettura in
mentali e in due grandi sedi: l'Esposizione Coloniale
sua storia e la sua storia. In un'epoca di
per un giro del mondo si vestiva sotto a un'epoca
che di fantasmi e sogni: non più un'epoca
non) in un semplice gioco d'arte, bensì una
sua storia e quella di Venezia
Dati questi di una presenza l'Esposizione Coloniale
sua storia e quella di Venezia
una storia e quella di Venezia
Dati questi di una presenza l'Esposizione Coloniale
sua storia e quella di Venezia
una storia e quella di Venezia

Sono i molteplici volti del mondo che si presentano
vinto a presentarsi con la stessa autorevolezza di di lì
darsi l'idea di un più grande. Sono questi
suggerisce a chi per sempre rimane il grande regno di
l'immagine stessa della epistola degli edifici il
loro profilo disegna sul cielo o represso il mare



Il padiglione del Museo di

DECOLONIZING THE GAZE

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INTERVIEW WITH CATERINA PECCHIOLI, VICTOR R. B. ABBEY-HART

SPELA ZIDAR: Caterina you have been developing *Decolonizing the Gaze*, your international participatory project, for almost three years now. In the project you use interdisciplinary approaches to research colonialism by investigating fashion and textile design. Can you tell us how and why did this research start?

CATERINA PECCHIOLI: For several years I have been exploring the role of fashion as a field that is not only connected to aesthetics, but also to its capacity to act and have an impact on social and political levels.

In particular, in 2019 I co-founded the art and fashion platform B&W-Black&White, *The Migrant Trend*, which is committed to empowering and promoting intercultural fashion by migrant designers and brands or those with a migratory background. A community has emerged that demonstrates how fashion can also function as a tool for recognition, empowerment, and identity claim-making. Further insights can be found in the interviews with designers collected in articles co-written with Enrica Picarelli, the project's scientific consultant and collaborator at B&W [1].

Starting from this approach to fashion, when the Museo delle Civiltà — which houses the collections of the former Colonial Museum — invited contemporary artists to engage with garments, accessories, and textiles from sample exhibitions originally intended to promote the colonial enterprise and serve commercial purposes, I thought it would be interesting to discover how the African designers from the B&W community would reinterpret these objects — which hybridize African and Italian heritage — and what meanings and reflections might emerge.

The project is an attempt to analyze the period of Italian and European

colonialism — through the perspective of designers and artists from countries with a colonial history — starting from material culture, aesthetic forms, and the formal characteristics of these artifacts, in order to uncover meanings that can help us better understand the past and how it continues to resonate in the present.

[1] C. Pecchioli, E. Picarelli (2022). *Designing Identity. A Visual Proposition to Study Migrant and*

Second-Generation Fashion in Italy. In: *Atti del Convegno "Migrazioni, cittadinanze, inclusività"*. Tab Edizioni. Roma.

C. Pecchioli, E. Picarelli (2021). *Designing Identity: Migrant, Refugees and Diaspora Fashion in Italy*. In: *The Culture, Fashion, and Society, Notebook 2021*. Bruno Mondadori / Pearson. Milano-Torino.

SZ: Victor, how does your expertise in fashion design and profound knowledge of contemporary Ghanaian and Italian fashion contribute to this project? Is there a part of the research that you find particular interest in?

VICTOR R.B. ABBEY-HART: My strength lies in bridging Italian precision with contemporary Ghanaian identity. Italy refined my expertise in tailoring, structure, and luxury craftsmanship. Ghana shaped my understanding of cultural storytelling and modern African expression. This dual perspective allows me to approach the project with both technical excellence and cultural depth. The part of the research that interests me most is the evolution of modern Ghanaian fashion within global luxury spaces, how African identity can be expressed through structured, minimalist, internationally relevant design without losing authenticity. That balance is at the core of *Victor-Hart*.

SZ: Together with other fashion designers from the countries with colonial past you developed your research in the deposits of museums in Italy and the Netherlands, in particular Ex_Museo Coloniale, Museo

delle Civiltà in Rome, critically examining fabrics, clothing and archive materials. How did the objects, photos, archival materials allow you to examine new points of view and to identify new meanings in fashion practices and body politics that were widespread during the colonial period? How much has the interaction between you helped you to recognize the effects of your findings on the individual and the collective imagination? Examining museum collections you uncover the thin line between cultural influence and appropriation. Today, how far are we able to distinguish between the two, do you think that we have enough instruments for that in general?

VAH: Working inside the archives of former colonial institutions, especially studying garments, textiles, photographs, and documentation was deeply revealing. Objects that were once displayed as "ethnographic material" begin to shift when you examine them closely. You start to see not just fabric, but power structures. Not just silhouettes, but imposed identities. Not just ornament, but controlled representation of the body.

The archival photographs were particularly important. They showed how clothing was used to classify, exoticize, or "discipline" bodies during the colonial period. Through that lens, fashion becomes political; it shapes how bodies are seen, ranked, and remembered. Re-examining these materials allowed me to question who framed these narratives and whose voice was absent.

The dialogue with other designers from countries with similar colonial histories was essential. Individually, you see fragments. Collectively, patterns emerge. Our exchanges helped transform research into awareness not only about aesthetics, but about the psychological impact these images and objects still have on collective imagination. You begin to recognize how certain silhouettes, materials, or "tribal" references still

carry unconscious colonial framing.

Regarding the thin line between cultural influence and appropriation I believe we are more aware today, but awareness alone is not enough. Influence requires context, credit, and reciprocity. Appropriation extracts without responsibility.

Do we have enough instruments to distinguish the two? Intellectually, perhaps more than before. Structurally, not yet. Institutions, fashion systems, and markets still operate within imbalanced power dynamics. The real instrument is critical education, understanding history, authorship, and economic impact.

For me, the goal is not to reject cultural exchange, but to rebuild it ethically where reference becomes dialogue, not dominance.

CP: The collective engagement with these materials by designers with backgrounds in countries marked by a colonial history, both during the visit to the storage archives and through a workshop at the Museo delle Civiltà, sparked an exchange of observations, comments, and critical questions. This dialogue brought to light several aspects of what the encounter between different heritages in the production of these hybrid objects entailed, not only in terms of aesthetics but also regarding the symbols and messages they conveyed.

For example, the analysis of the use of feline skins emerged from a question Victor asked his mother when he showed her a 1930s feline fur coat seen in the archive (visible in the research-table photograph). He asked whether she would ever wear such a garment. She replied no, not 'till the president is still alive, because doing so would represent an usurpation of power in relation to the authority recognized in Ghana. The use of feline skin in a 1930s fur coat therefore does not acknowledge, but rather erases, the authority it represents in the colonized country.

This reflection also led us to consider how the Schiaparelli Spring/Summer 2023 collection (visible in the research-table photograph)

featured sculptural feline heads on the shoulders of garments, seemingly unaware of the colonial and domination iconography such imagery evokes. In terms of style and symbolism, the lion's head presented in the 2023 fashion show recalls the "safari aesthetic" and its display of animal heads as trophies, channeling the ultimate goal of taming the "savage" and the "primitive", a violent narrative that Italian Fascism embraced to justify its military campaigns in Eastern Africa.

These and other exchanges made us more aware of how essential such confrontation is in recognizing that fashion, while at times offering compelling aesthetic solutions by hybridizing artisanal techniques and materials from Italy, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Libya, also played an instrumental role in the creation of stereotypes and the assertion of superiority, especially during periods of colonization and racist ideology.

The Schiaparelli collection, presented to a Western gaze as inspired by the Furies in the Divine Comedy by Dante Alighieri (as stated by the collection's creative director Daniel Roseberry), through a critical gaze - raised by Victor's question to the Italian public "Would you wear this to visit Africa"? - evokes instead a history of foreign cultural, symbolic, and political domination.

Acknowledging the role of fashion — and its instrumental use in the creation and dissemination of stereotypes, particularly during colonial and racist regimes - could help both Western and non-Western designers to be more aware and critical of the iconographies and stereotypes embodied by Western fashions connected to this complex historical heritage.

From this dialogue, the fashion designers who took part in the workshop — Tsegaye Abebe, Delvin Nosakhare Ekhaton, and Abbey-Hart — introduced a situated perspective, sharing personal stories connected to their diverse cultural backgrounds, colonial and migratory experiences, and proposing fashion, design, and graphic projects that add new, plural, and non-Eurocentric narratives. For instance, Delvin Nosakhare

Ekhator's collection *More than Just a Daydream* was inspired by the glass beads found in the archival sample books (some produced in Murano for the African market), which brought him back to a memory he had taken refuge in during his imprisonment in Libya, when his grandfather was invested with an honor marked by the donation of beads[2].

From this creative process also arose the *Poster Series* in the exhibition, co-designed with Victor, which aimed to stimulate critical thinking.

The musealization of these materials — testimonies of a dramatic historical chapter — has made it possible to preserve hybrid and ethnographic objects that have reactivated the rediscovery of symbols, materials, techniques, influences, and cross-cultural exchanges. These elements have shaped the aesthetics and collective imagination of both contexts, albeit in different ways, influencing fashion trends and everyday dress practices, and revealing, as Yinka Shonibare states, “[...] how African (and European) identity is in fact the result of encounters, sometimes forced, between different cultures.”

[2] Graduation project by Delvin Nosakhare Ekhator for Accademia Costume & Moda in Rome that was selected for ACM talents 2024. See: <https://accademiacostumeemoda.it/talents2024/ba-costume-e-moda/nosakhare-ekhator/>

SZ: How far, in your opinion, has colonialism, in terms of fashion and vestment practices as well as relationship with the body shaped collective imagination and perception of others in former colonizing countries as well as in the countries with a history of colonization? How does fashion contribute to a social change?

VAH: Colonialism deeply shaped global fashion hierarchies. European dress codes were positioned as the standard of “modernity,” while other vestment practices were framed as exotic or inferior. This influenced how bodies were perceived, ranked, and represented both in colonized and colonizing societies. Those perceptions still inform today's luxury

systems and ideas of authority. Fashion contributes to social change when it challenges those inherited standards when it reclaims narrative, repositions marginalized aesthetics as powerful, and restores ownership. Fashion is never neutral. It either reinforces hierarchy or reshapes it.

CP: As just mentioned, the colonial period deeply influenced iconography, which in turn continues to shape clothing aesthetics, as highlighted in our posters “Gucci or Colonial?” and “Real Wax?” And as Victor states talking about the “global fashion hierarchies”.

What I would like to add — particularly in relation to the social change that fashion can generate — is that the production of these hybrid objects made during colonialism, characterized by a syncretism of African and Italian heritages, together with the work of contemporary African and Afro-descendant designers active in Italy today, invites us to rethink Made in Italy as the result of significant interconnections with Africa. This perspective frees it from the nationalistic idea of a “pure” brand confined within national borders, and instead incorporates new narratives of cultural hybridity and multiple belongings that reshape the imaginary of Italian fashion.

Within this framework, fashion becomes a tool of claim-making, particularly regarding the right to multiple identities — such as the migrant identities of African and Afro-descendant designers active in Italy, who today still struggle to gain visibility and recognition in the face of a widespread social attitude that tends to invisibilize and exoticize differences for racial reasons.

Indeed, the platform B&W approaches fashion as a critical lens through which to address questions - and activate processes - of trans-cultural dialogue, citizenship and the right to human mobility, and as a medium to explore social, cultural, and economic change.

These interconnections and processes of cultural mixing break with classical notions of monocultural identity and citizenship, introducing

new forms of social recognition and cultural identity.

SZ: You are both also visual artists who combine in your research aesthetics, history, and activism. In what way do you transform complex topics in visual art? How important is a strong visual effect for you?

CP: My work engages with different media that I select, adapt, transform, and manipulate according to the intentions of each project. The aesthetic dimension of the works serves to draw viewers in, and then confront them with the reflections the work seeks to provoke.

For several years now, my practice has combined artistic research, community-based practice, collective practice, activism, and interdisciplinary artistic production. I see art as a possible vehicle capable of making a tangible impact on processes of social change.

One example is the project *B&W-Black&White, The Migrant Trend*, a spin-off of my collective *Nation25*, which evolved from a visual research on migrants' trend, and ways of dressing, into a social promotion association. Among its achievements, it initiated the first scholarship for an asylum seeker at the Accademia Costume & Moda in Rome.

VAH: I transform complex topics by reducing them to powerful visual symbols. History, activism, and politics are layered subjects — but visually, I translate them into silhouette, material, tension, and contrast. A rigid structure can speak about control. Exposed seams can suggest vulnerability. Monochrome palettes can express resistance or clarity.

I don't illustrate theory, I embody it in form.

A strong visual effect is essential. It creates immediate impact and emotional entry. But impact alone is not enough the work must hold depth beyond the first glance. For me, the visual is the doorway; the meaning is what stays with you.

SZ: Fashion is a vast topic, influencing not only our relationship with our bodies and culture but it is heavily impacting our planet as well,

especially the part of the countries with a history of colonisation. Do you also include this aspect into your research?

VAH: Yes, absolutely.

Fashion cannot be separated from history, power, and global impact, especially in countries with a history of colonisation. The industry has long extracted resources, labor, and cultural references without restoring value. That reality is part of my research.

I examine where materials come from, who produces them, and how narratives are constructed. For me, decolonising fashion is not only about aesthetics it is about structure: ownership, authorship, and production standards.

Through my brand: *Victor-Hart*, I aim to reposition African identity within a framework of precision and luxury not as a trend, but as authority. I am also intentional about responsible production, limited runs, and longevity in design. Creating fewer, stronger pieces is a conscious decision against disposable culture.

So yes, sustainability for me is both environmental and cultural. It is about protecting the planet, but also protecting narrative, dignity, and creative ownership

CP: The environmental impact of fashion is one of the issues that we are increasingly addressing through *B&W-Black&White* projects. The brands mapped by the platform, for example, place strong emphasis on environmental responsibility, often proposing ecological solutions rooted in their cultures of origin, as well as upcycling projects. We also introduced this theme in the latest *B&W-Black&White Lab*, developed within the framework of the *DOMIS - Donne Migranti e Inclusione Sociale project* (led by Terra di Artemide, with the support of Fondazione CR Firenze), guided by Victor, Chiara Fontanella, and myself, which will be presented in a LdM Gallery on March 6.

It is true, as you say, that the communities most affected by colonialism

have also suffered the greatest ecological impacts, and they are often the same communities that offer alternative models and solutions that colonial and capitalist systems have attempted to remove, replace, or uproot.

I will examine more closely this relationship between colonialism and environmental impact, through my new project: *2749 Social Cartography: The Photo Archive of Decolonial Ecology*, winner of the Strategia Fotografia (2025), Promoted by the Directorate-General for Contemporary Creativity of the Italian Ministry of Culture. This participatory project reflects on the relationship between humans and nature across different cultures and will lead to the creation of a collective photographic archive - created with Indigenous and diasporic communities between Philadelphia and Rotterdam. The project will culminate in a textile work representing a speculative map of the world in the future.