The Crafted Newsletter

A Fashion Legacy

This week I'm back with another exhibition report - this time Fashion City at Museum of London Docklands. When I booked my ticket to this exhibition it was going to be the closing day, but happily it's been extended until early July which is probably a reflection of its popularity.

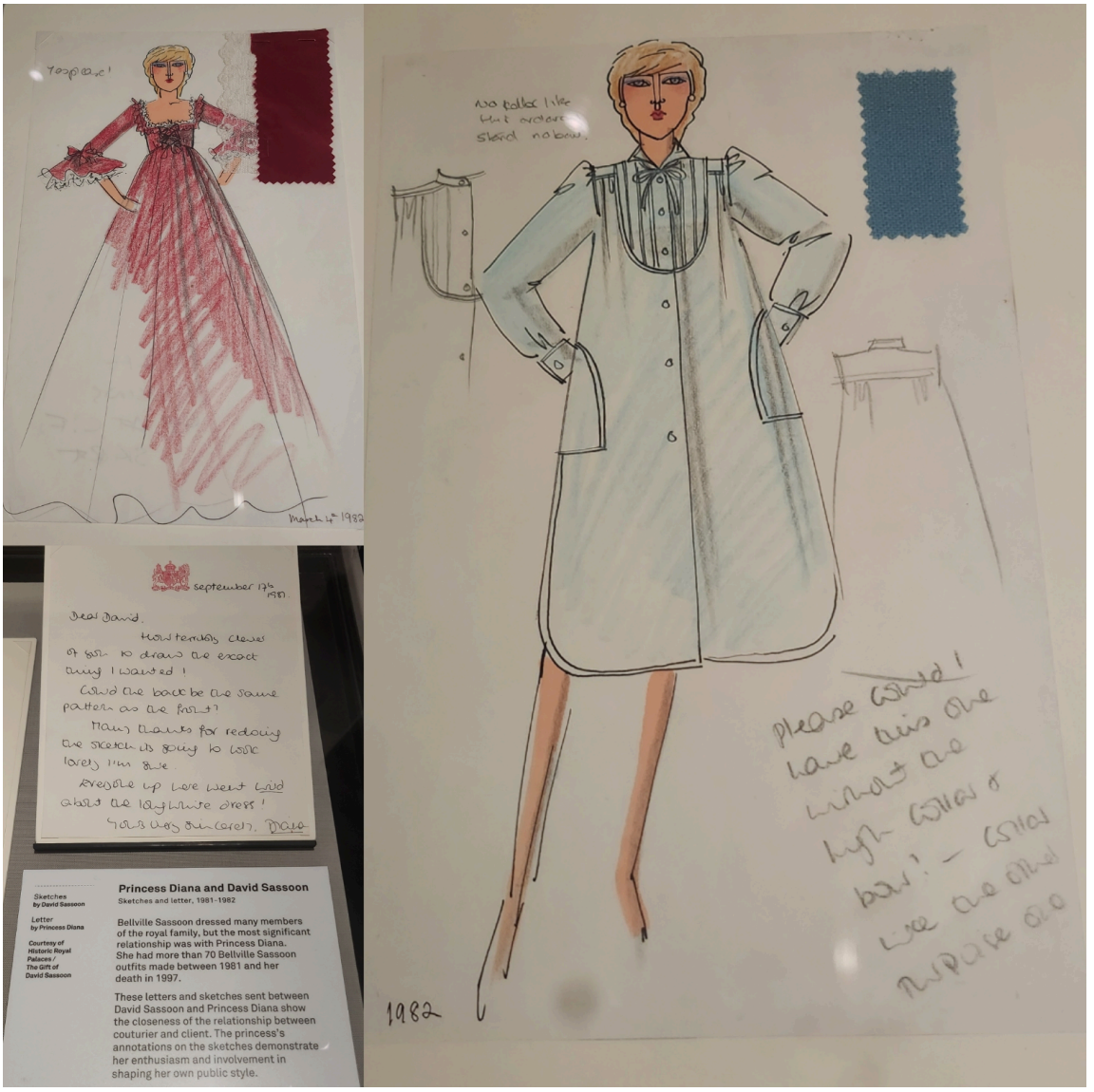
As the strapline says, this exhibition focuses on the generations of Jewish immigration to London and the cultural and economic impact on the city's fashion industry. Also, it's a tiny detail but I love the dotted line and notch & dot pattern markings used in the exhibition typography - it appeared on the information boards throughout.

The exhibition follows a timeline starting from the earliest Jewish presence in London, the establishment of predominantly Jewish communities in East London and continues through the 19th and 20th centuries and the progress of the fashion and related industries. It also follows a geographical line, from East London where the poorer communities and large-scale production workshops were located, to more affluent and aspirational West London - home of the couturiers and retail stores.

The image above show two outfits sewn by Sophia Neshaver (later Sophie Rabin, 1902-1982) who migrated from Poland with her family in 1914, settling in Whitechapel. She started work as a blouse maker two years later, aged 14, married a Lithuanian tailor in 1925 and went on to work as a bespoke dressmaker in the West End. I liked how the display of these two garments she made for herself in later years highlighted how they demonstrated her skills and knowledge of fabric, but also how best to take construction shortcuts without impacting the design!

In general I thought the exhibition did a very good job of telling the stories of many "ordinary" people - I mean people who were clearly talented and made sometimes significant contributions to their csociety, but who aren't necessarily household names. Most of the names listed on the information boards were given in two forms - the original name and the later anglicised versions, and it was highlighted several times how Jewish people had sought to assimilate and minimise their Jewishness in the face of racism.

It also tackled the stereotype which associated Jewish people with the garment trades - pointing out that many other professions were once closed to Jews, and that the continued risk of persecution meant that many learned the value of a "portable trade", that also didn't necessarily require a common language - and that high numbers of migration during the war periods increased the need for charitable support and practical education, which often focused on teaching skills like tailoring and other associated trades that people could start to earn a living off quickly, with minimal to no financial outlay.



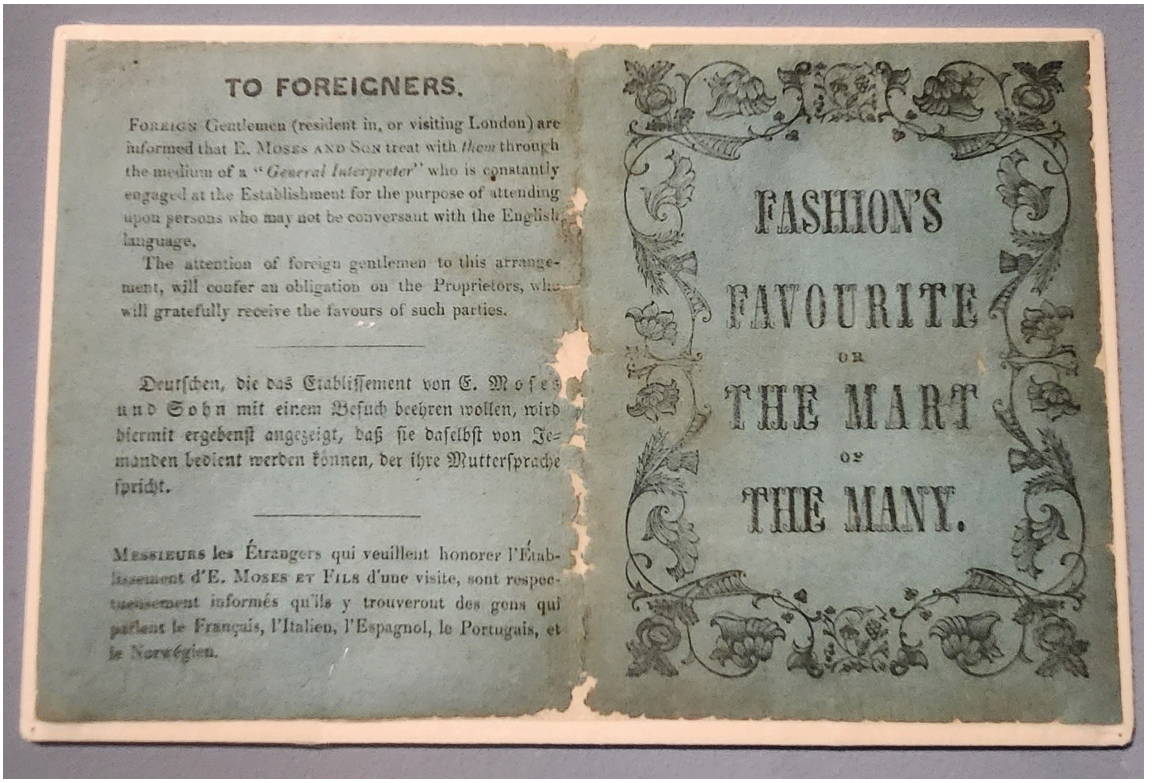
The second half of the exhibition was focused on 20th and 21st century West End London, the rise of the high street retail chains and the designer couture studios. I had no idea that so many British high street fashion staples originate in earlier Jewish-run tailoring companies or were headed by Jewish people - Marks & Spencer, Moss Bros, Wallis, River Island (formerly Chelsea Girl) as well as iconic West End boutique brands like Mr. Fish and Cecil Gee.

The sketches above were in the couture room, showing an exchange between designer David Sassoon and Princess Diana. Especially given my recent focus on fashion sketching and creative briefs, I thought it was really interesting to see Diana's annotations on David's sketches, requesting tweaks. She clearly knew exactly what she wanted and you can see she viewed it as a collaboration.

In general there were quite a few "behind the scenes" exhibits which I really appreciate - not just finished garments, but ones that never got finished, or sample pieces, or design sketches.

It was interesting to reflect on the fact that the success of many of these tailoring companies and their ability to use their skills to meet increasing demand for cheaper clothing really lead to the shift to mass manufacturing of ready-to-wear clothing and that ultimately, although this exhibition rightly celebrated the

success stories of Jewish-led fashion in London, those practices were the beginning of the road to today's fast fashion crisis.



One last item, jumping back to the earliest phase of the exhibition - as a linguist I particularly appreciated this 1847 booklet from E. Moses & Son - which on the back cover advertises the services of their "in-house interpreter"! While the English claims to have a dedicated "general interpreter" to serve "persons who may not be conversant with the English language", and one of my German colleagues tells me that the German promises that customers will be served by someone who speaks their language, the French is more specific and says that the customers will find "people" (probably general staff) who speak French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Norwegian.

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