



## Victorian Parasols: Scientists, Artisans, Historians, and Curators in Conversation

Cordula van Wyhe (1), Vanessa Jones (2)

(1) University of York

(2) Leeds Museums and Galleries

Until the early 20th-century parasols were a widely-used dress accessory both of function and for fashion. Not only did they shield their owners from summer heat and the then loathsome tanning, but they also registered aesthetic taste and signalled affiliation to certain groups and classes. The many materials and complexities involved in parasol manufacture gave women the possibility of fashionable play and imaginative choices when making, up-dating, or purchasing a parasol. The manufacturing of these objects supported vast and often exploitative industries, both locally and globally. Trading networks, spanning from South America to the North Atlantic and Eastern Asia, supplied materials, including rare woods, silks, baleen (a product of the whaling industry), precious stones, silver, and ivory. The significance of the parasol as an everyday dress accessory of the past is evidenced by the richness of museum holdings across Europe and the US. Yet, parasols have rarely been exhibited or researched beyond a very few, specialist studies. To energise research and public engagement with these fascinating objects, the Digital Museum of Dress Accessories at the University York, UK ([dmda.york.ac.uk](http://dmda.york.ac.uk)) has entered a collaboration with Leeds Museums and Galleries (UK). The research group consisted of Chris Holland (material scientist, University of Sheffield), Sonia O'Connor (archaeological scientist, formerly Bradford University), Mary Brooks (textile conservator and textile historian, University of Durham), Vanessa Jones (assistant curator, Leeds Museums and Galleries), Rick Sutton (artisan bone carver, Coventry), Cordula van Wyhe (art historian, University of York).

Early results of our collaboration have led to a reappraisal of the long-held binaries of matter/form, body/dress. Our collective examinations of parasol handles and canopies made us appreciate that materials such as bone, ivory, silk are not simply passive matter upon which design imprints itself, but are in a state of exchangeability and connectivity (as well as dissonance) with form and the human hand or machine. The very materials themselves involved in manufacture, both inspire and limit possibilities. By extension, materials engineer the shape and the movement of the dressed body.

The mass-production of parasols during the 19th-century took place in a cultural environment that was dominated by debates about the relation of industry and art, the machine and ornamental design. For the curator, scientist, artisan and art historian to meet to understand a Victorian parasol and its materials and manufacture was invaluable for historicising the matter/form binaries in an entirely new light.

[info@artbiomatters.org](mailto:info@artbiomatters.org)

<https://www.artbiomatters.org/>