

## Dossiê 5

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## FROM COLLECTION TO ARCHIVE: CONSIDERATIONS ON RUI SPOHR'S PERSONAL ARCHIVE

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**Resumo:** Neste artigo, retomo alguns pontos abordados em minha tese de doutorado, que buscou compreender como o costureiro gaúcho Rui Spohr (1929-2019) construiu sua imagem e seu espaço de atuação a partir de Porto Alegre. Levando em consideração o trabalho de enquadramento da memória, conforme Michael Pollak, busco demonstrar como o processo de organização da narrativa e da autoimagem de Rui Spohr se relaciona à constituição de seu acervo pessoal, um lugar de memória que, revisitado, se abre a novas possibilidades.

**Palavras-chave:** moda; memória; arquivos de moda; Rui Spohr.

**Abstract:** In this paper, a few points from my PhD thesis are revisited. As its aim was to comprehend how Rui Spohr (1929-2019), a couturier from South Brazil, built his image and a fashion field all the way from Porto Alegre. Taking into account the concepts from Michael Pollak, I demonstrate how Rui Spohr's process of building personal memory, as well as his self-image, is related to the organization of his personal collection, a place of memory that when revisited opened up a range of new possibilities.

**Key-words:** fashion; memory; fashion archives; Rui Spohr.

In the fashion universe, the word collection is used to designate, according to Doris Treptow (2013), a selection or set of clothing and accessories that are aesthetically harmonious - and coherent from a commercial point of view. In addition, the collections are expected to be manufactured and delivered for a certain time of the year, and are generally designed with a very specific target audience in mind.

Collection is also associated with the definition and organization of museum spaces. It comprises objects remarkably different in nature - artistic, historiographical, botanical, zoological - and is what makes up these spaces, which are open to the public and are aimed at the acquisition, study, exhibition and the transmission of both material and immaterial heritage.

As we take a look at both of these definitions, which apparently belong to completely separate worlds, it not only helps us perceive fashion in its material dimension, but it also offers clues regarding the organization of a collection, in this case by Rui Spohr. The gaucho couturier, who gained notoriety participating in Rhodia's actions during FENIT (the national textile industry fair), documented, organized and cataloged, with the help of his wife, Doris Spohr - materials and documents throughout his entire life, that play the role of a career record.

Thus, this article aims to understand how this collection constitutes a place of memory that helps us sustain the narrative that Rui built for himself, as well as to bring up other stories - and possibilities. It is also possible to highlight peculiarities, as well as the treatment given to certain events and objects.

Next, some of the collections and documents that support my PhD thesis will be examined. These records reinforce Rui's autobiographical discourse and, at the same time, provide a very promising opening: as a source for research, they can take on new performances as they refer not only to Rui's days, but to the times of the society where he lived and to the field in which he worked.

### **The importance of Archiving in Rui Spohr's narrative**

Rui Spohr had a long-standing performance. If the objective were to transform him into an entry, punctuating important dates and events in chronological order, it would be as follows.

Born Flávio Spohr, in the city of Novo Hamburgo, in 1929. In the late 1940s,

he started to write a column on fashion at *Gazeta de Novo Hamburgo* (local newspaper). In 1949, he presented his first parade at a local ball of the *União dos Estudante*.

In 1952, after his father passed away, he left Brazil and headed to Paris, where he studied at the schools of the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture* and the *Guerre-Lavigne* (Esmod, today). He returned to Brazil in 1956 and settled in Porto Alegre. Between 1957 and 1958, he wrote the column "What's New" for the newspaper *A Hora*. In 1960, he married Doris Uhrl, who was then his assistant. Between 1962 and 1964, he was part of a team of tailors at *Rhodia Têxtil*, whose set of advertising and actions sought to promote national culture, associating his production with the creation of Brazilian fashion.

In the 1970s, he opened his own store on Miguel Tostes Street, in Porto Alegre, a mix of workshop and atelier, where he started offering *prêt-à-porter* (ready-to-wear) with his signature, in addition to tailored clothing. In the late 1980s, he started teaching at a styling course aimed at the leather-footwear industry.

In the early 1990s, he celebrated forty years of couture with a photographic exhibition and led parade-like fashion shows, open to the general public. Since the 2000s, his work has been featured in expos, exhibitions and art galleries, becoming a target for academic research and honors: the testimonies of his career far surpass his lifespan and his legacy is what makes him a reference for future generations. In 2015, he launched a capsule collection along with a coloring book, which revisits his past and his successful image. In 2017, he stopped all activities in haute couture. In 2018, the store on Miguel Tostes Street closed down, ending his career definitively. He passed away on April 30, 2019.

In 1997, Rui Spohr released his autobiography, *Memórias Alinhavadas* ("Tacked Memories" - 1997) SUGIRO REFERENCIAR, written in partnership with Beatriz Viegas-Faria. The book takes us, at first, to Rui's experience as a student in Paris - details of his arrival, with two suitcases in the small room of "*5ème étage, sans ascenseur*", in Montparnasse, where he lived; his definitive installation in Porto Alegre; and the construction of his professional space. And in the end it evokes some significant facts from his childhood.

There was also strong concern to report episodes considered important or unusual in these texts, such as the influence of Evita Perón, then Argentine first lady all dressed by Dior; his participation in fashion shows promoted by *Rhodia* in the 1960s; and also the story of the bride who kept saying: "My veil will fall!". Sometimes, Rui is

concerned with informing the reader, in a pedagogical tone, on his views of the role of a fashion professional - what he calls "my truth" -, as well as registering outbursts and advice. Rui's autobiography, when aggregating a discourse that had already been consolidated throughout his career, delimits milestones and alludes to "memory facts" - which, according to Michael Pollak (1992), are "[...] expressions that they make more reference to notions of memory, that is, to perceptions of reality, than to the positivist factuality underlying such perceptions "(POLLAK, 1992, missing page number). These memory facts are constantly being taken up again, enabling a framing process. Framed memory, Pollak teaches, is more specific than collective memory: it is not constructed arbitrarily, it produces an organized discourse. Still for Pollak (1989, Page number is missing), "[...] the work of framing memory feeds on the material provided by history. This material can certainly be interpreted and combined with any number of associated references ”.

Alessandra Vaccari (2015), in the field of History and Theory of Fashion, argues that the discourses produced by fashion designers are used as a source of research, because, when understood critically with the appropriate context and correct approach, they help understand how these professionals write and create fashion history, in addition to other aspects of life itself.

Thus, Rui's autobiography, seen as a source of research, functions as a place of memory - in which the whole of his life story is condensed. According to the perspective proposed by Vaccari, autobiographical reports can be understood beyond a selection of facts that, narrated, help to consolidate an image of the self. The act of writing, organizing and making memories public is also an archival process. The selection, ordering and classification of events in a narrative determine the meaning to be given to life itself.

In Rui's case, it is still evident that the arrangements and rearrangements of this narrative are based on the records and documents that make up his personal collection. The archived materials, while helping unveil the process of building an image of oneself in the symbolic field, through material traces (documents, clothes, photographs) constitutes a sort of physical memory that confirms the veracity of what is reported in his autobiography. Revisited, the records help to create new layers for this already established and well-known narrative.

The organization of these archives follows a more or less intuitive logic: folders separate year after year, models made to measure and also photographic re-

cards, press articles and correspondence. Added to this material are clothes, accessories, trims and a vast collection of magazines.

Based on the interest of researchers from several different areas, the Rui Spohr collection underwent a detailed survey and, thus, was divided into four collections: objects collection, text collection, iconographic collection and textile collection. The collection of objects consists of materials in metal, wood and fabric. The text collection consists of paper-based documents from different sources, such as newspaper clippings, books, notebooks, magazines, folders, single sheets and more. The iconographic collection includes drawings made in graphite and pastel pencils, as well as black and white and colored photographs - from the period between the 1940s and the present day.

Therefore the set of collections can be seen as an archive of the most diverse sources, integrating their life story with the history of the society in which he lived and operated. Although the selection of objects started at Rui's own will, organizing those items became the task of Doris Spohr, his wife. As guardian, she helped elaborate a speech on the stored objects that ended up being incorporated into Rui's "official history".

### **The Collection as (self-)reference**

Alessandra Vaccari observes that, in recent years, fashion companies have started valuing their archives more and more - which, many times, are used to reinforce a corporate image or to feed the creative process of their designers (VACCARI, 2012).

A good example can be seen in the 2014 documentary "Dior and I", directed by Frédéric Tcheng. In it the creative work of Ralf Simons - in his debut at the Christian Dior maison - gained prominence, making a few differences very evident: Dior entered the history of fashion as a couturier-creator who used his childhood memories in his family's garden in Granville, - with his drawings, "he turned women into flowers." Simons, current artistic director, has never drawn a sketch. He takes his creative references from the images created by Dior himself.

At one point Ralph Simons observes a set of photographs, or even shows a model bearing originals by Dior, created in 1950. When visiting an exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou, he didn't hesitate to call the artist, Sterling Ruby, and ask for his permission to transform his work into fabric. Gradually, Ralf Simons' first haute couture collection for Christian Dior revealed itself from the archives that make up the

brand's memory. Elin and Colin Renfrew (2010) call this process - which consists of analyzing previous collections, or even old ones looking for inspiration - "archivism". It is a way of updating the brand, based on its own aesthetic references or striking models.

Given the right context and proportions, in October 2015 there was an attempt to update the Rui brand, which observed a very similar process to that shown in the documentary that recorded the work of Ralf Simons for Dior: archive elements were brought up to incorporate creative work in the present. (PICTURE 1)

Picture 1 – Coleção Cápsula Croquis (Capsule Sketches Collection).

Ricardo Lage, 2015



Source: Rui Spohr's personal archive.

This collection was composed by a scarf, a T-shirt and a coloring book, contemplating that which brings the seamstress and the artist's gesture closer: the sketches. The designs chosen for the prints were those that illustrated the early years of Rui's collaboration for the newspaper *Correio do Povo*. Specially for the t-shirt, modeling of the time was adapted, to emphasize the concept of re-reading.

The pieces were sold by Pandorga Store, a space for designers and small

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brands in the fashion business, visual artists at the beginning of their journey (BORTHOLUZZI, 2015). By placing himself next to the next generation of young creators, Rui communicated both with the vanguard and also the young public. The series of images produced for the release<sup>1</sup> of the products brought past and present together presenting new possibilities from pieces preserved in Rui's collection. It was a way of saying that his place in the fashion world as a reference remained - and would continue to do so.

Despite all efforts, Rui Spohr definitively ended the production of his *prêt-à-porter* in 2017. In the following year he also stopped producing tailor-made clothing in his workshops. And even without naming a successor, Rui's stylistic references continue to be updated under the eyes of fashion college students.

The Fashion Design School at Uniritter, in Porto Alegre, encourages their students to choose local brands as references for the development of their own creative projects, following fashion-oriented design methodologies. In this context, in 2014, designer Melissa Assis searched for inspiration in Rui Spohr's collection to design her own collection for the Fashion Design II class. The pieces were part of the DNA Sul parade, promoted by Uniritter. (PICTURE 2).

Picture 2 – Development of the collection inspired by Rui's work. Melissa Assis, 2014



Source: Melissa Assis, personal archive.

In her creative process, the designer looked for striking features of Rui's style, which she then combined with her own stylistic preferences, resulting in new arrangements that brought together the style of both. The avant-garde meets tradition, in order to create new possibilities together (PICTURE 3).



Picture 3 – Model for Melissa Assis, 2014



Source: Melissa Assis, personal archive.

### A place for (other) story(ies)

Apart from being a place for fashion designers looking for inspiration, Rui's collection now receives researchers from several different areas. Thus, revealing not only the stories inserted in Rui's personal narrative and trajectory, but also to other narratives, which form from and are organized around his creations.

This possibility became evident in the research that later evolved into the dissertation of anthropologist Aline Lopes Rochedo. She biographed a dress created by Rui, that belonged to Heloisa Pinto Ribeiro. The dress was acquired in 1971 and was used again by Heloisa on her 80th birthday in 2011. Also, the piece was indicated by Rui as representative of his work to be part of the Moda exhibition, held at the Brazilian Museum (MAB), from the Armando Alvares Penteado Foundation (FAAP-SP), in 2012. Rochedo, besides observing the dress's change in status, also sees that once inside the museum space, Rui was then inspired to claim his rightful place as artist, potentiating disputes over the object (ROCHEDO, 2015).

Despite not being part of the collection, the "Heloisa"<sup>2</sup> dress is representative of a series of other pieces that, in context, refer to its owners or have their own history. In this sense, one can observe, for example, the dress "da Célia" or even the dress "da Madi", which are both inventoried in Rui Spohr's collection.

The "Célia" dress was worn by journalist Célia Ribeiro in the early 1960s. It draws more attention for the material than for the design itself: it is a black model, *fourreau*<sup>3</sup> style, made with a specific type of straw used for making hats. The material was donated by a client (it was part of their mother's old stock, who was a hatmaker<sup>4</sup>)

<sup>3</sup> Dress with straight and adjusted modeling, can be long or short.

<sup>4</sup> According to Doris Spohr, the hat shop started operating at the end of the 19th century, set in a house, at 513, Fernando Machado Street. In 2011, that house housed Casa M, which was part of the activities circuit of the 8th Mercosul Biennial. The imported materials were hidden until they were discovered in the 1960s and donated to Rui. In addition to the dress, skirts and other models were made, but only the "Célia" dress returned to the collection.

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and later transformed into a dress. In 2013, the model was photographed for a special edition of the women's session "Donna", from the newspaper Zero Hora, in honor of Rui Spohr. The caption of the image reads: "this gala dress is original in the material it is made of: black straw, used to make hats. Rui won from a hatmaker who went out of business". That is, in addition to taking Rui's signature, the distinction of its user and the rarity of the material created new layers of value and temporalities to the model (PICTURE 4).

Picture 4 – Dress worn by Célia Ribeiro, 2013



Source: Zero Hora Newspaper

The "Madi" dress was created by Rui for the event Agulhas da Alta Moda, in 2000. Created by Jô Clemente for the benefit of APAE in São Paulo, the event brought together more than 50 seamstresses from all over Brazil. From Rio Grande do Sul, Rui Spohr and Luciano Baron were the invited representatives. The black model, with co-

lored corsage, embroidered with a technique called “needle painting” draws attention by the movement of 143 rolets, which replace long sleeves.

Picture 5 – Rui Spohr and Madeleine Muller, 2000.



Source: CARAS magazine.

The dress was worn by model Madeleine Muller<sup>5</sup> (the Madi) that same year, in an article for CARAS Magazine (PICTURE 5).

À época, Muller disse sentir “que o vestido a escolheu”, pois foi convidada a desfilá-lo em vários momentos de sua carreira e também da carreira de Rui: At the time, Muller said she felt “that the dress chose her”, as she was invited to exhibit it many times in her career and in Rui’s career also:

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<sup>5</sup> Madeleine Muller started modeling for Rui at age 17. According to her, Rui was responsible for her short hair (Louise Brooks style). She became a well-known model on the local circuit, being selected for a presentation by Paco Rabanne in Porto Alegre, in the late 1990s. In addition to her modeling career, she also works as a fashion producer and, recently, dedicates herself to the area in studies on fashion and sustainability. Madeleine Muller is also a master in Communication Sciences from the Fernando Pessoa University and author of the book *Admirável moda Sustentável - vestindo um novo tempo* (2018).

Each time I got inside the dress, I became another woman. And it seemed almost like the dress was changing too, following my identity changes and always representing me in some way. That dress has a life of its own. I am part of it and it is a part of me too.

When reflecting on clothes, their use and their circulation, the anthropologist Peter Stallybrass, in *The coat of Marx* (2004), takes the coat of his late friend, Allon White, as the starting point. For Stallybrass, inhabited by our bodies, clothes constitute us, in a way, as individuals: they carry memories and make us think about the relationship between things as objects of use.

As the anthropologist Daniel Miller observes, the way our society organizes itself in relation to clothes, especially before the French Revolution, is decisive for them to be treated in a way that corresponds to identification or carrying meaning and stories. This also corroborated that the approach to clothing, as a way of understanding societies and their way of life at a given time, was judged superficial:

The concept of person, the perception of the self and the experience of being an individual are radically different at different times and in different places, and partly in relation to disparities in clothing [...]. Clothing plays a considerable and active role in the constitution of the particular experience of the self, in determining what the self is (MILLER, 2013, p. 63).

Going back to Stallybrass' ideas and bringing them closer to those of Miller, it is possible to say that we live in a "society of clothes", that is, exchange value takes the form of clothing. They start to function as a means of incorporation and their need goes beyond a functional character: it is also symbolic.

Dessa forma, o vestido "da Madi", apesar de não lhe pertencer, acabou por carregar também memórias que se misturam à sua atuação como modelo: guarda uma espécie de história própria e oculta. Ao integrar o acervo, os registros dão conta especialmente da participação de Rui naquele evento. Apesar de o vestido ter sido usado por outros modelos, a relação de Madi com ele ultrapassa esse espaço narrativo. This way, the "Madi" dress, despite not belonging to her, ended up also carrying memories that mix with her performance as a model: she keeps her own and secret history. When integrating the collection, the records give special account of Rui's par-

ticipation in that event. Despite the dress being used by other models, Madi's relationship with him goes beyond this narrative space.

### Final considerations

The constitution of the Rui Spohr archive contains his intention to document and catalogue his own life, cared for by Dóris Spohr, his wife. As a place of memory, it reinforces the narrative condensed in his autobiography, *Memórias Alinhavadas* (1997), given that most of the material saved was taken up from the book. Because the autobiography is a selection of facts, ordered in order to make sense of a life story, the set of materials kept is also part of this selection process.

By building an image of himself, Rui managed a series of speeches, which contributed to the work of framing his memory, as he reordered his references, updated facts and incorporated the materiality of his creations. When the story of his life starts to incorporate new stories, he expands the meaning of his own actions, attributing a mythic force to his performance.

Accounting Rui's history, the collection ends up gathering documents and objects that go beyond his trajectory. The memories contained therein are not only those of Rui, but some are also related to him. Objects and documents offer an opening: they can become starting points for new investigations traced from the very act of dressing - and also from memories. They can also acquire new meanings if reordered and incorporated into the creative process of other professionals.

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