

# INCUNABULA

When my project work was nearing its completion, an unexpected opportunity arose to do some further experimentations in ways I had discarded, for various reasons, when developing *Lowride*. I was invited to design a piece to be produced in collaboration with London-based architect and artist/3D-designer Tobias Klein and the 3D-printing company Materialise (represented by Joris Debo). The project was brought to us by Kaat Debo, curator of the Antwerp ModeMuseum, and my supervisor Kurt Vanhoutte. Kaat Debo, in turn, had been invited by Alison Moloney of the London College of Fashion to participate in her *1914 Now* project, a series of essays and films “expressing a moment in fashion or dress from 1914”, in direct response to Rem Koolhaas’ brief *Absorbing Modernity, 1914 to 2014*, laying out the ideas behind his edition of the Venice Architecture Biennale (the 14<sup>th</sup> International Architecture Exhibition) entitled *Fundamentals*.<sup>1</sup> Roughly, the original idea was to develop a dress, using not only 3D-printing techniques but also an innovative way of growing crystals on the polyurethane surfaces produced by the printing. The dress would then be filmed by Marie Schuller of SHOWstudio, to be shown during the architecture biennale at Spazio Punch in Venice (6 November to 14 December 2014) and to feature in an international tour of fashion film festivals, gallery installations, and evening screenings.

In my design contribution to this collaborative and interdisciplinary project, I decided to work with lace-like patterns, specifically based on Irish crocheting, using a design inspired by the way in which women dressed in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, ‘liberated’ from the corset, using the fashion of the flapper dress, and with influences from orientalism (hinting at Japanese kimono’s). This was an excellent opportunity to play with the juxtaposition between

- the (historically important) local and the global
- extremely new experimental techniques and old, traditional ones
- the artificial (3D printing) and the seemingly organic (crystal-growing)
- liberation vs. containment
- conservation vs. disintegration (or even ‘decay’)

From the start I had in mind the title *Incunabula*. This happens to be the title of the electronic music album I was listening to when struggling with technical choices in the design of *Lowride*. More importantly, it also seemed most appropriate for the task we were facing – and my collaborators agreed:

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<sup>1</sup> See Moloney (2014), and in particular the contribution by Kurt Vanhoutte & Kaat Debo (2014)

*Incunabula*

1. The earliest stages or first traces in the development of anything.
2. (With sing. *incunabulum*.) Books produced in the infancy of the art of printing; *spec.* those printed before 1500.

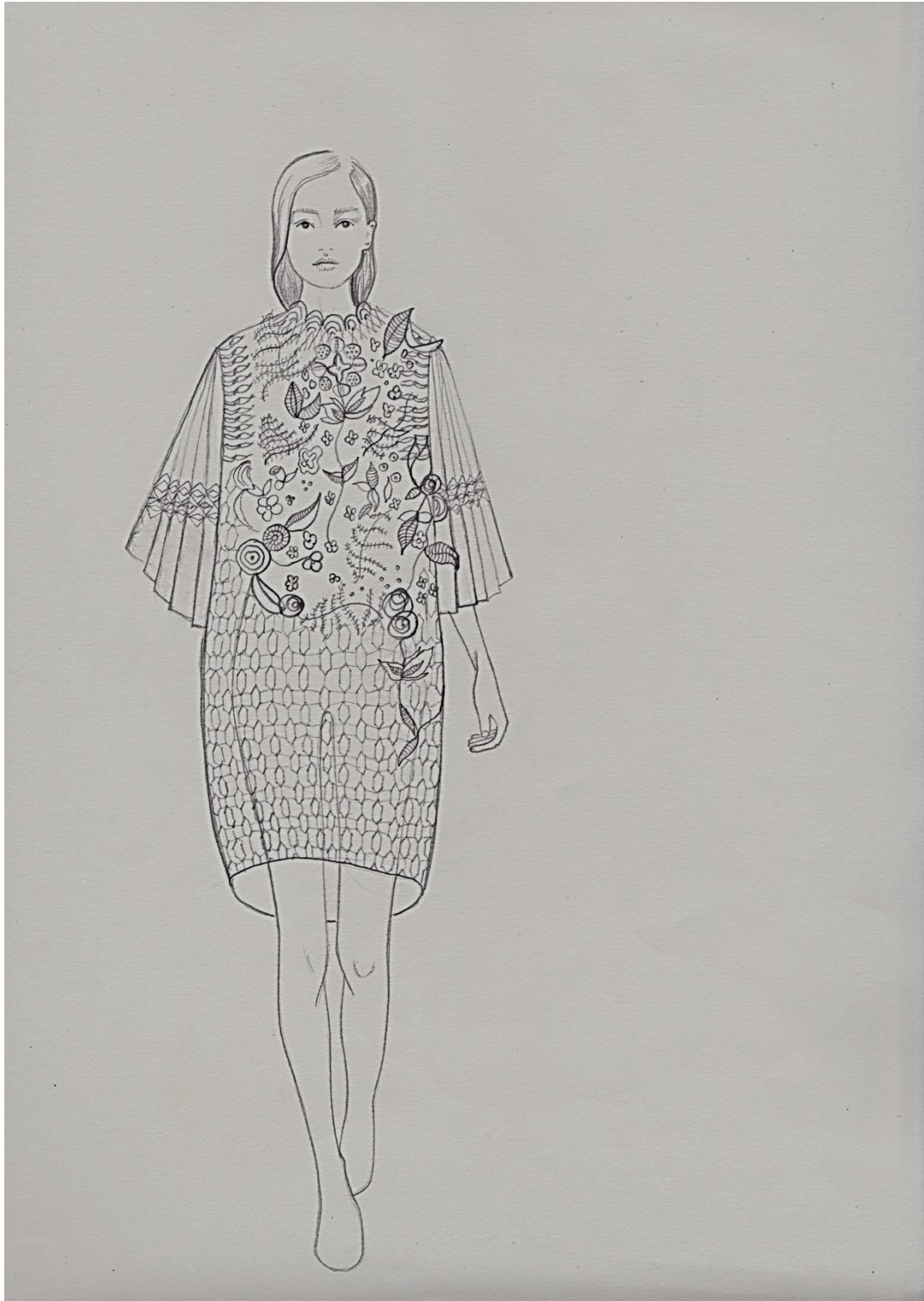
(Oxford English Dictionary)



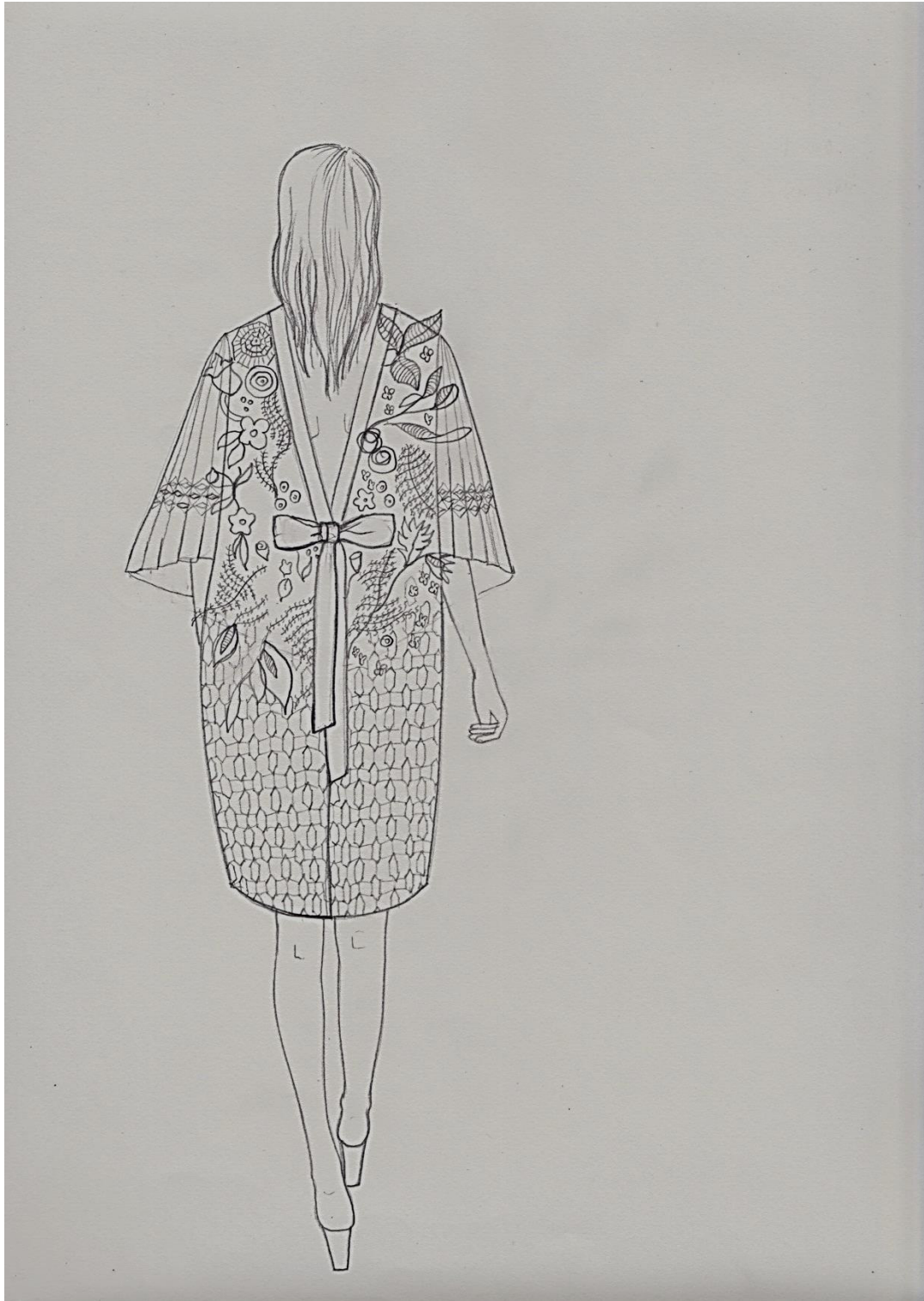


**Images 85 to 93.** A small selection of inspiration sources for *Incunabula*

Designing the dress in consultation with my partners was an exciting experience, leading to the drawings in Images 94 to 96, and to the pattern try-outs in Images 97 to 99.



**Image 94.** *Incunabula*, drawing 1



**Image 95.** *Incunabula*, drawing 2



**Image 96.** *Incunabula*, drawing 3



**Images 97 to 99.** Try-outs for the *Incunabula* patterns

Then the most challenging part of the project followed. The artistic concept seemed to work well. As designer of half a dozen fully-fledged fashion collections, I was already used to

the struggle for compatibility between conceptualization and the material constraints of garment production. But I had no idea what would be waiting in the marriage between art and true engineering. I could only look in amazement at the ingenuity with which Tobias Klein translated the design into printable pieces to be delivered by Joris Debo.



**Image 100.** A fragment of 3D-printed materials for *Incunabula*

Truly unprepared for the reality of engineered components, the hardest – for me – was the struggle to shape them into the intended patterns of the dress. Not only shaping the less flexible materials was a challenge. I felt literally thrown back to a literal interpretation of architecture in fashion, an interpretation from which I thought I had been emancipated in the course of my earlier design work by focusing on dialogue instead of literal translation. Clearly, some of the values I had come to cherish, such as a pleasant sense of touch, had evaporated. Art and engineering really seemed at odds with each other. The outcome was not a wearable dress. It embodied new contradictions. While the liberation from corsets had been one of the inspirational starting points, we had produced something experienced by the models wearing it as cruel straightjackets. In the words of the wearer in Marie Schuller’s film, the garment felt like “the anatomy of a failure”; it had failed its purpose of really being a garment.





**Image 101.** Still from Marie Schuller's *Incunabula* film

The visual poetics of Marie Schuller's film may be seen as an invitation and a starting point for dialogues at a more sustained and advanced level. Possibilities cannot be explored without risk. *Incunabula* deserves its name. It is no more than the earliest stage of a development that must still prove its fruitfulness. It may therefore be a stepping stone in a process that may be better able to reconcile architectural *Fundamentals* (including, for Rem Koolhaas, doors, floors, ceilings, and the like) with fashion fundamentals (which include flexibility and touch).

The experiment, moreover, showed once more that meaning is not restricted to what an artist may intend. The dress was obviously painful to wear. The model in the film describes it as aggressive and evoking a sense of violence. While this was not at all intended, the dress may therefore perfectly fit – as much as Walter Van Beirendonck's helmets in his "Crossed crocodiles growl" – the critique of a world at war that is at least mildly suggested by the title *1914 Now*.