

text by Sonya Topolnisky

art by Bryan Partington

# EXHIBIT

fashion in the world of

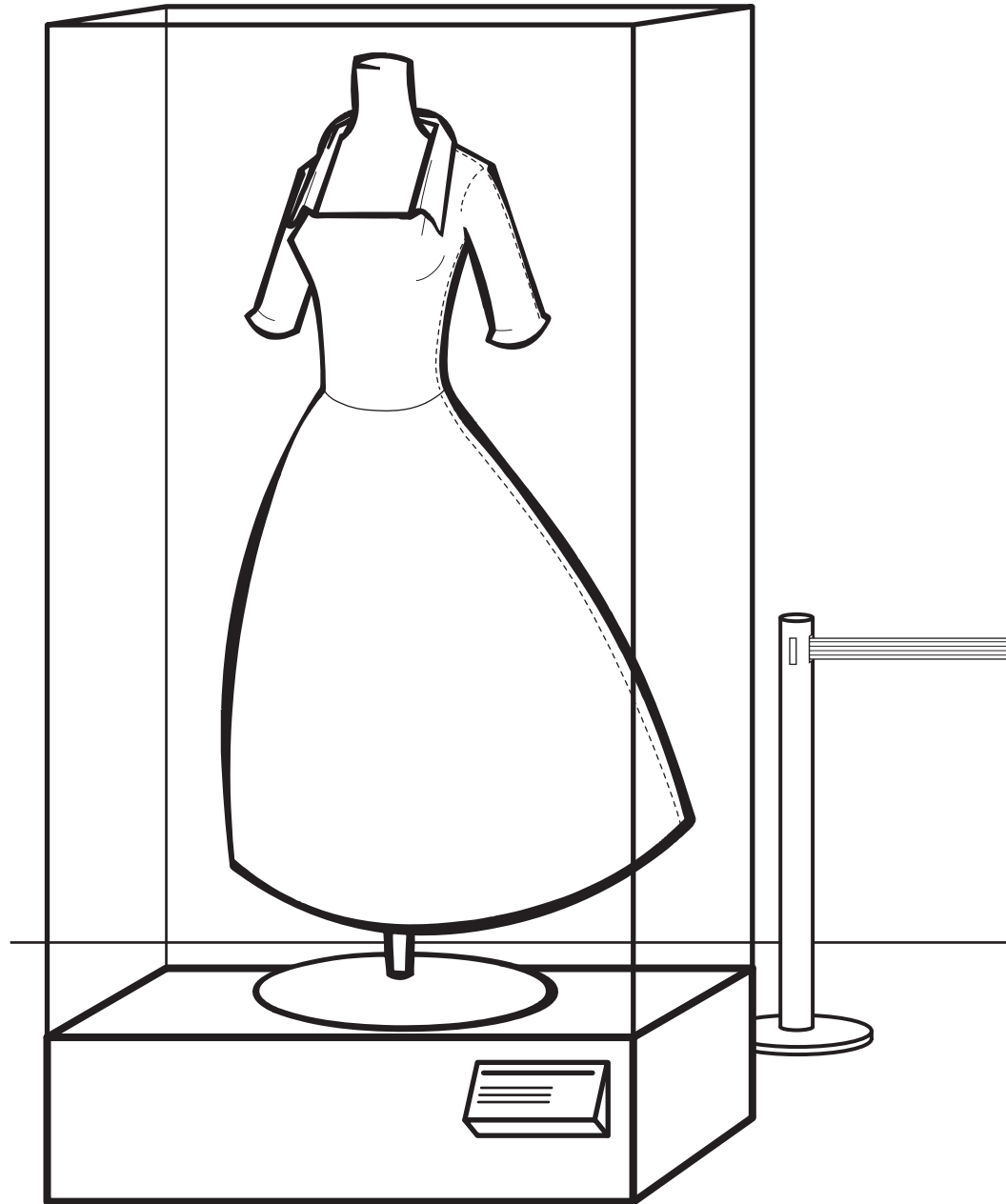
Clothes are everywhere. This means that people who love looking at clothing and how individuals fashion themselves are in a privileged position as observers. It's never hard to trigger imagination. It could be recognizing a favorite designer's latest shoes on the subway or spotting a traditional Indian print on a stranger's backpack. It could be seeing a jacket from a music video that was a hit three years ago. And if the sartorial clues that jump out at us by simply walking down the street weren't enough, there is no shortage of fashion press. Clothing can be examined without real bodies in it - shop mannequins in windows display the latest styles. Racks upon racks of garments for sale, both old and new, are just waiting to be pawed through. Some are more enticing than others, but they all have secrets to reveal about the culture that produced them: Who is buying them? What artistic talent went into making them? This is how it starts - the obsession with getting information out of clothing and style, finding out what they are signifying. This rabid curiosity can land you face first in the study of dress history, trying to position taste, materials, and design in a larger cultural context. The diverse outlets for examining clothing make it accessible, but there is one venue showcasing garments that not everyone (at least outside of major cities) has access to - the display of costume in museums.

Costume exhibitions have been gaining notoriety in relation to the study of dress history and as part of popular culture. Pouring over catalogues from past costume exhibitions and comparing them with what is visible now suggests changes over time, but what is really going on at the curatorial level in costume exhibitions today and what does this mean in terms of positioning fashion as art or as a historical document? What are the issues at hand when garments are the focus of museum exhibitions? To answer these questions, I have been lucky enough to confer with four experts with experience in costume exhibition about the challenges they face. The questions raised invoke issues extending well beyond the scope of this piece and illustrate some of the concerns that recur in the study of dress history at large.

## Setting the Stage

The presentation of dress in a museum context is a relatively recent one.

The costume department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York became a department in its own right in 1959. Since then it has become one of the foremost collections of its kind. It was the first experience both Michele Majer and Phyllis Magidson had

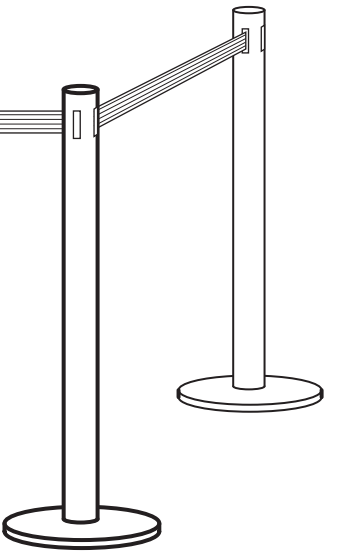
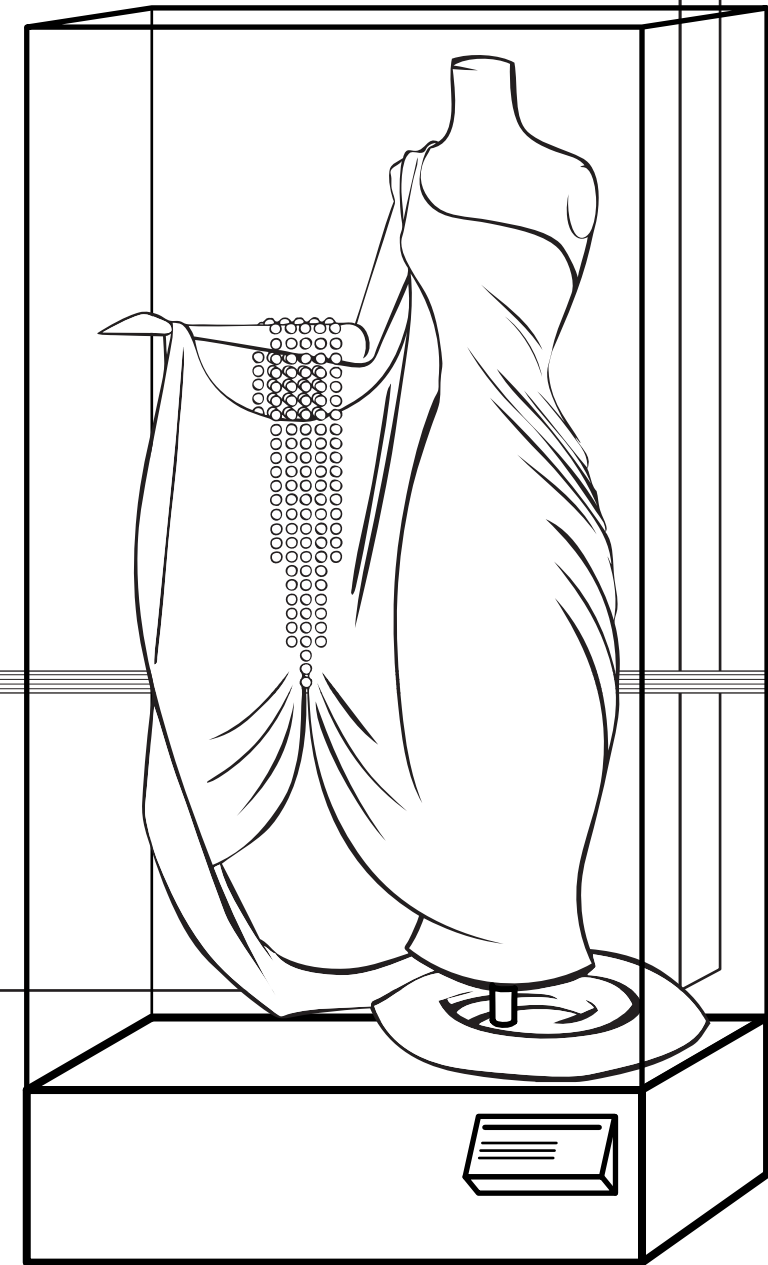
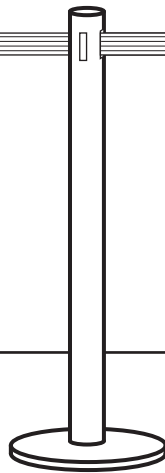
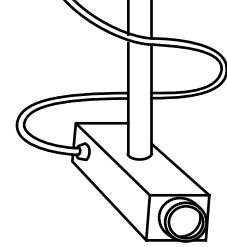
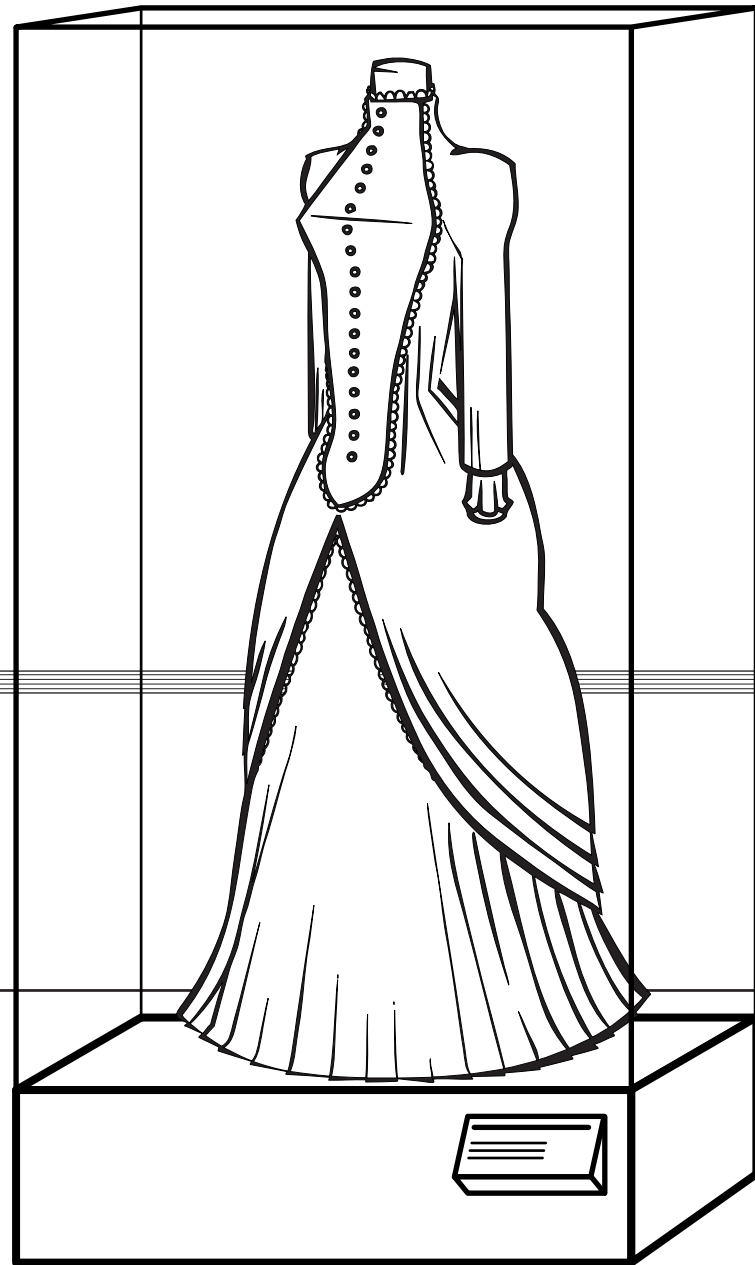


working in costume exhibition, under the direction of the notorious Diana Vreeland. This former editor of *Vogue* presented her highly theatrical but dubiously accurate debut exhibition at the Met in 1980. Despite mixed reviews it is still credited as one of the first claims for fashion as an aesthetic medium worthy of display in a museum, and it got people talking about dress and its cultural significance.

The costume department at the Museum of the City of New York preserves garments and accessories from the mid-eighteenth century to the present. Its goal is to "engage visitors in exploring the past, present and future of the five boroughs of New York City." Along

similar historical lines is the McCord Museum of Montreal, whose costume and textile collection is the leading collection of Canadian dress and reflects corresponding changes in Canadian history.

Although acquisitions by costume collections never marched in lock step with the development of dress history as a field of study, the two have had significant influence upon each other. The prejudices against fashionable dress are manifold, but for our purposes Elizabeth Wilson best sums up the traditional view: "Fashion is defined by it being not-art, and that because it deals with surfaces and with self-adornment it is a direct manifestation of superficiality and van-



ity.” However, as Michele Majer points out, costume history is finally getting some hard-earned respect in academia. The divide that had existed for a long time between object-based clothing historians (those interested in the material) and non-object-based art, social, cultural, and economic historians (whose interests are more theoretical) has lessened considerably. Museum collections conserve the materials that provide the evidence for researchers. Whether your investigation is centered on how a garment was constructed, or about how a specific shape reflected the concept of sexuality at the time, being able to see the actual garment in three dimensions is invaluable for finding the answers to your questions.

Both historical and contemporary garments are displayed in a variety of venues; from the street and store front to film and print. Yet the museum exhibition is a special case. Shannon Bell Price explains that “museums provide seeing objects first hand dressed properly in the round in a way that other media cannot purely because of their 2-D medium.” Film does have the advantage of giving insight into how garments – particularly historical garments – move on the body, which according to Majer is very important. Magidson also points out how it gives a feeling for scale and how peoples’ bodies have changed, explaining: “when you look at eighteenth century materials and realize how in America the genetic pool in subsequent centuries has radically changed the body type which gives

a feeling for height, placement of arm holes and the ways costume affected the way people lived.” Phyllis Magidson has noticed that films in recent years have made an attempt to embrace the structural elements of historical costume, more so than in the past. But, despite this, there is a general agreement that costume exhibition offers a unique perspective. It affords the opportunity to spend time with a garment in three dimensions and to see how it compares to related objects from the period, particularly paintings and furniture. Majer cites the current Poiret exhibition at the Met as a highly successful example of what a museum can offer in presenting a fully-integrated aesthetic context for a costume display. An institution of that scale that has strong holdings in art, design, and the

decorative arts surely has an advantage in designing exhibitions.

This leads to another aspect that distinguishes the display of costume from other media. Since everybody has to wear clothes they can relate to it on a more immediate level than, say, an exhibition of sculpture, where they might not have the same kind of everyday experience. This direct physical connection we have to clothing can be both a blessing and a curse when it comes to presenting it in museums. On one hand, it can help engage the viewers right away – drawing them closer to the subject and making the balance of the content easier to absorb. However, as Bell points

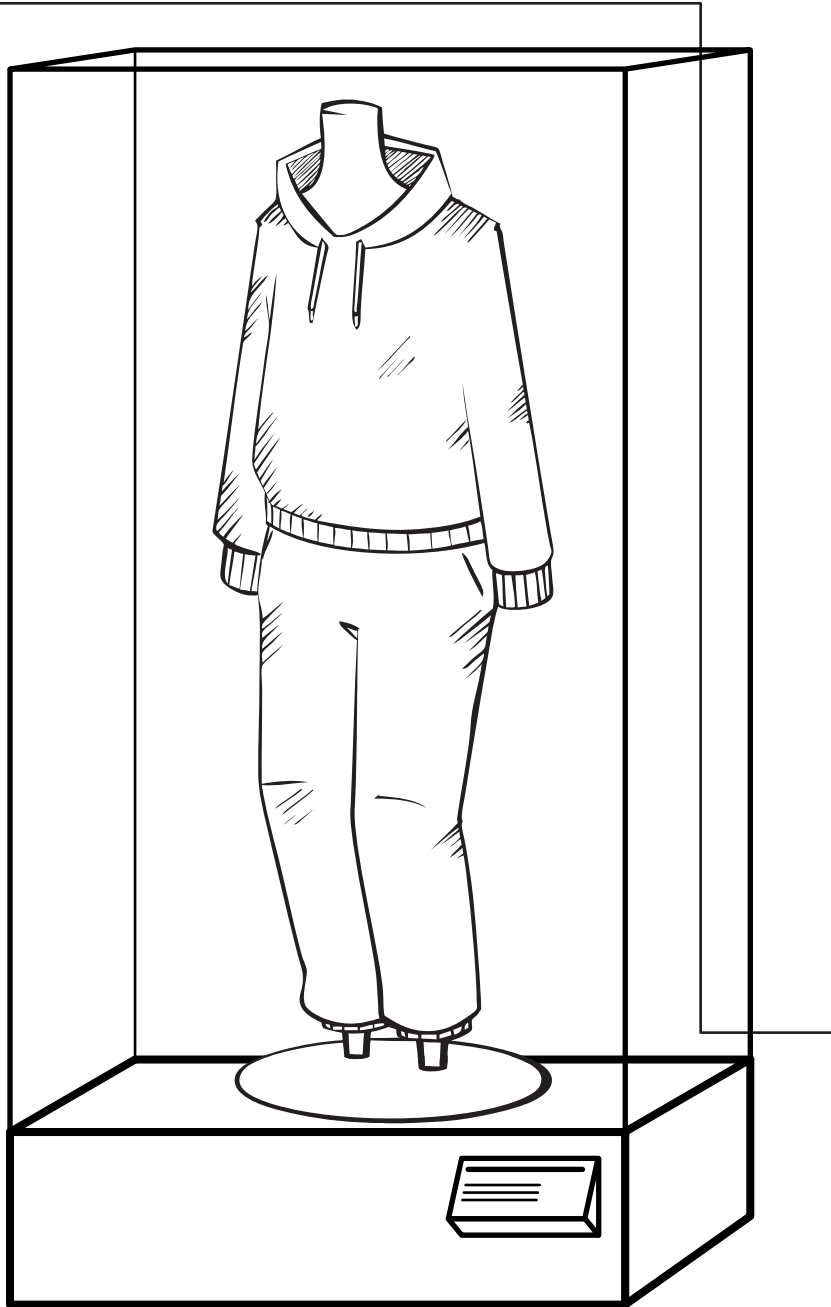
out, visitors who look at pieces at a purely subjective level, like asking, “Would I wear that?” might undermine the larger points the curator is trying to make. Cynthia Cooper believes that it is difficult for people to see something they feel so familiar with in a historical context rather than as something for consumption. She suggests that “our audiences have largely lost the ability to view objects from the point of view of the producer, and the familiarity with the same objects as consumers leads them to view dress on display in those limited terms.” We can only hope that as the study of dress progresses and museum exhibitions continue people will get used to the idea that garments can be appreciated in different ways. Clothing’s role as an “everyday” object can also be

used to emphasize the contrasts between the past and present, or high-end design and regular off-the-rack items. Majer explains that sometimes the object itself, like an elaborately embroidered man’s eighteenth century suit or a highly architectural Charles James evening gown, clearly conveys its distance from the everyday. This can help people not only conceptualize changes in style over time, but how people’s lives might have been to allow for that type of garment to be acceptable.

#### Is It Art?

The dark cloud looming over this subject needs to be touched upon, or maybe skirted around at this point.

# S H O P



Arguments over dress as art, craft, or cultural artifact will probably never be resolved, but maybe they don't need resolving. There are museums for art; "fine art," as it is traditionally conceived. There are also institutions that focus on the decorative arts, history museums, and finally those whose collections are so extensive that they cover it all. Each collection reflects the values of the institution and the stories they are trying to tell. It comes down to specific curatorial choices.

The MCNY and McCord are both history museums and are more interested in garments as social artifacts offering connections to broader historical ques-

tions. The McCord's collection documents what was produced and worn in Canada, and how that fits into Canadian history as a whole. Similarly, the MCNY focuses on the history of New York City, where the clothing industry has been very important to the economy from an early date and reflects the multiplicity of the demographic of the city. Taste level is another crucial factor in deciding what to acquire at MCNY. It not only shows how the local fashion industry compared to the establishment in Paris, but preserves specific examples of garments worn by famous historical figures to legendary events and performances. The contribution of items for fashionable aesthetic qualities, or as examples of creative genius, are not as significant as their role as missing link in history.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art (where art is right there in the name) is not as tightly bound to a historical approach. The Met's original mission was to "encourage and develop the study of the fine arts and the application of arts to manufacture and practical life." This couldn't be more appropriate to the costume department, where they strive to integrate their exhibitions within the larger context alongside art, design, and the decorative arts. Shannon Bell Price explains: "All decorative arts and other art mediums (such as video), have gone through a stage of having to define themselves against more traditional art forms. I am not convinced that costume exhibitions always succeed, or should necessarily strive to succeed, in putting fashion on par with traditional fine arts, but it is important to contextualize fashion in relationship to fine arts and let visitors decide for themselves".

The fashion as art/fashion as cultural history question gets even more convoluted when you consider the success of the exhibitions themselves. Those that tend to garner the most attention are monographic presentations - presenting the oeuvre of a single designer, as opposed to those with a more historical bent focusing on larger themes. All the experts I questioned agree that, on the whole, monographic presentations tend to attract larger crowds based on name recognition; like Armani, Dior, Chanel... It is easy to be cynical and credit the commercial influence that these names continue to hold but, as Magidson points out, they are historically relevant because although the name may be legend, the actual product can fall into obscurity. It is also easier to follow a single thread in a linear history than to embrace something more conceptual. The perception that a canon of fashion design exists is comparable to the canon in the history of art. The appeals to visitors (and the criticisms) are also similar: Some artists get glorified as geniuses while those whose work falls outside acceptable standards get maligned or ignored. Cynthia Cooper believes that history museums play a crucial role in breaking this mold by choosing to highlight the cultural significance of dress as opposed to its merit as a discrete art object. They make space for things that may otherwise have been overlooked.

Whether its focus is historical, aesthetic, or a bit of both, the opportunity to study clothing in the stillness of a museum can help us understand it in new ways. The small number of institutions with costume collections speaks to how it had been marginalized both as an art form and as historical document. Although existing departments continue to face challenges, they fulfill a crucial role in the study of dress history for scholars and, perhaps more importantly, as a catalyst to getting the public to reconsider the importance of dress in society past and present.