

# Fashion Forward: Costume and Textiles at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

## La moda hacia adelante: indumentaria y tejidos en el Philadelphia Museum of Art

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**ABSTRACT.** The Philadelphia Museum of Art, founded in 1876, is one of the oldest and largest museums in the United States, with an encyclopedic collection of 225,000 objects. The Costume and Textiles Department operates as part of this multi-faceted institution, with a collection that comprises nearly 30,000 objects, about evenly divided between costume and textiles. This article explores the Museum's history and current practices of collecting and exhibiting textiles, historic costume, and contemporary fashion. In the main building, occasional major presentations in the Special Exhibition Galleries highlight aspects of the department's collection; objects are also rotated in a small gallery in the European Wing and featured in the context of other galleries. In 2007, the department moved into the Hamilton Center for Costume and Textiles in the Museum's Perelman Building, affording many new opportunities. Two galleries in this building are devoted to costume and textiles, and the facilities include state-of-the-art collection storage, conservation lab, workrooms, and offices that enhance the care and research of the collection. In addition, a new Costume and Textiles Study Room has increased the accessibility of collection objects to scholars, students, and others.

**KEYWORDS:** fashion, fashion history, conservation, accessories.

**RESUMEN.** El Philadelphia Museum of Art, fundado en 1876, es uno de los museos más grandes y antiguos de Estados Unidos, con una colección enciclopédica de 225.000 objetos. El Costume and Textiles Department funciona como parte de esta polifacética institución, con una colección que comprende casi 30.000 objetos, distribuida equitativamente entre vestidos y tejidos. El presente artículo explora la historia del museo y las prácticas actuales de coleccionar y exponer tejidos, indumentaria histórica y moda contemporánea. En el edificio principal se exponen muestras temporales en las galerías de exposiciones especiales que resaltan aspectos de la colección del departamento; hay también objetos que se muestran en rotación en una pequeña galería del Ala Europea y otros objetos de la colección que se hallan en el contexto de las otras galerías.

En el 2007, el departamento se trasladó al Hamilton Center for Costume and Textiles, en el edificio Perelman del museo, lo que permitió nuevas e importantes oportunidades. Dos galerías de dicho edificio están dedicadas a la indumentaria y los elementos textiles, y las instalaciones incluyen nuevos almacenes de última generación, un laboratorio de conservación y oficinas para el cuidado e investigación de la colección. Además, la nueva sala de estudio de indumentaria y tejidos ha incrementado la accesibilidad a los objetos de la colección a eruditos, estudiantes y otros usuarios interesados.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** moda, indumentaria histórica, conservación, accesorios.

### Introduction: the Growth of the Museum and the Costume and Textiles Collection

In 1876, the city of Philadelphia was host to the Centennial Exposition, celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of the independence of the United States. Conceived as a showcase of art, craft, design, and industry, the exposition also provided the impetus for the founding of the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Art, now known as the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In the nearly 135 years since, the Museum has grown to one of the oldest and largest in the country, with some 225,000 works of art spanning the creative achievements of the Western world since the first century AD and those of Asia since the third millennium BC. The Museum's expanding collections, first displayed in Memorial Hall on the fair-ground, were moved in 1928 to a majestic building atop a hill overlooking the city.

The Centennial Exposition also provided the first costume and textiles acquisitions for what was to become the Department of Costume and

Textiles. Formally organized as a Department in 1893, it functioned as a design and technical resource for textile students at the Museum School, and the first collections were primarily comprised of Turkish, Persian, and Greek textiles and embroideries. By 1947, when galleries dedicated to fashion opened, the Museum had acquired about 300 costumes, most from Philadelphia families. While these fashion galleries displayed costume from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the first gifts of contemporary fashion were acquired at this time—works by ten leading American designers—and a gallery for twentieth-century fashion was added in 1953. Until the late 1980s, the focus remained on developing the collection of historic costume and contemporary fashion; since then, costume and textiles have been considered of equal importance in both building and exhibiting the collection. One of the oldest collections in the United States, it has grown to also become one of the largest, with nearly 30,000 objects, about evenly divided between textiles and costume/accessories.

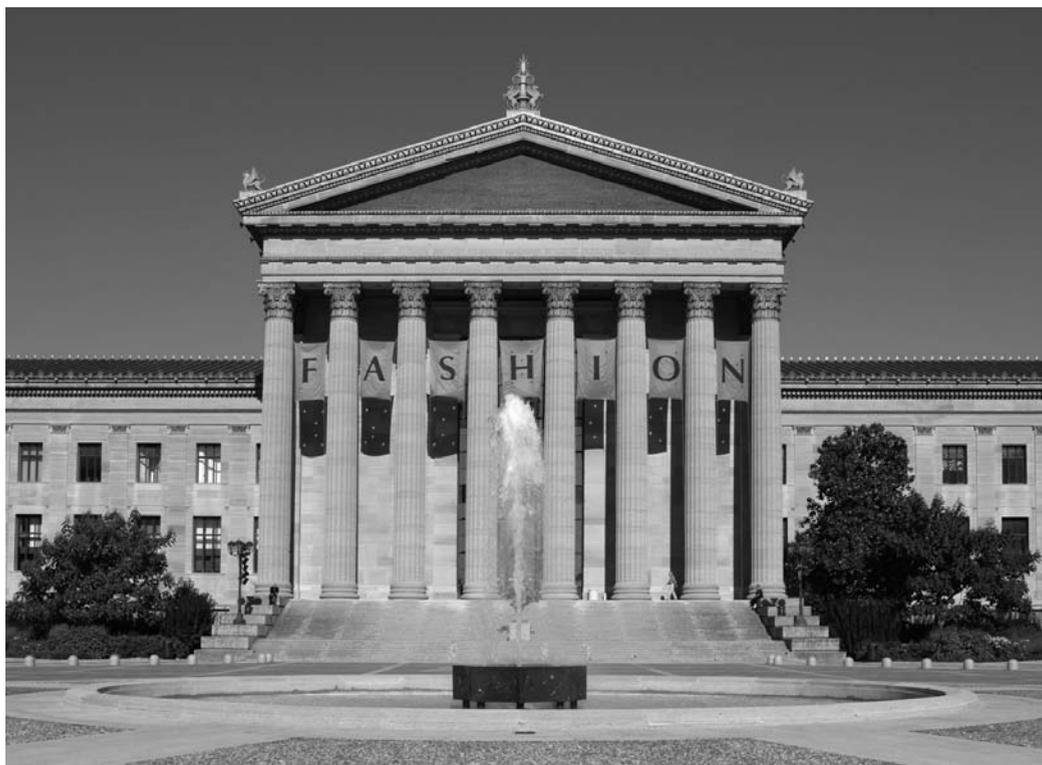


Fig. 1. The exterior of the Philadelphia Museum of Art with banners for the Schiaparelli exhibition (2003)



Fig. 2. Visitors enjoy *Shocking: The Art and Fashion of Elsa Schiaparelli (2003-2004)*

Noted strengths of the textile collection include exceptional American quilts, samplers, Middle Eastern and Asian archeological textiles, eighteenth and early-nineteenth century French printed textiles, and Italian textiles and embroideries from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. The extensive costume holdings feature outstanding examples of Asian and Indian dress, European regional and Quaker clothing, and fashionable dress, undergarments, and accessories from the eighteenth through twenty-first centuries, ranging from court gowns to couture to avant garde menswear. The collection is particularly strong in twentieth-century design, including iconic works by Elsa Schiaparelli and the wedding dress worn by Princess Grace of Monaco, the former Grace Kelly of Philadelphia.

### **The Costume and Textiles Department in the Larger Museum Context**

The Costume and Textiles Department is one of eight main curatorial departments at the Philadelphia Museum of Art; like the Department of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs, it is defined by type of media rather than by geography or pe-

riod, and thus the collections overlap with several other curatorial purviews, such as contemporary craft, for example. Within the large and multi-faceted institution, costume and textiles curators often work cooperatively with staff of other departments. This has ranged from contributing expertise to multi-disciplinary catalogues and exhibitions to working with the education department to develop a program for guides to use dress as an interpretive tool at one of the two historic houses administered by the Museum. Costume and textile objects are shown in some of the 200 galleries throughout the Museum as part of the displays of American and European decorative arts, craft, modern design, and the arts of East Asia and India. Potential acquisitions are sometimes discussed with other departments, as was the case in the recent purchase of an archival collection of 1960s English printed textiles, which will be shown in future modern design installations and well as textile displays.

The departmental collecting policy is consistent with that of the Museum – to collect the finest aesthetic examples of their kind. Potential acquisitions are also considered in context, however,



Fig. 3. The exterior of the Ruth and Raymond G. Perelman Building, opened in 2007

since it is important to build on the Museum's early history as a study collection and to enhance the depth and breadth of the collections. The department continues to acquire important pieces; while funding is sometimes available for purchases, most are gifts, such as a major donation in 2009 from Museum Trustee Mrs. Jack M. (Annette Y.) Friedland of over 140 couture ensembles and designer accessories, including 34 Cardin gowns.

Although the fashion galleries closed in the early 1980s, from the late 1980s until 2007, the costume and textiles collection was showcased in a number of major exhibitions, including *Ahead of Fashion: Hats of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (1993), *Best Dressed: 250 Years of Style* (1997), and *Shocking! The Art and Fashion of Elsa Schiaparelli* (2003). More focused exhibitions and installations also highlighted many facets of the collection, from fans to fashion dolls to fiber art, and since the early 1990s objects from the Department have been rotated in a small permanent gallery in the European Wing. In addition, the Department makes the collection accessible to the public by lending extensively to both national and international exhibitions.

### The New Hamilton Center for Costume and Textiles

In 1999, the Museum acquired a landmark Art Deco building just across the street from the Museum's main building and designed by the same architects. The building, originally opened in 1927 as the headquarters for a life insurance company, was renamed for major Museum donors Ruth and Raymond G. Perelman. The original interior space of 125,000 square feet (38,100 square meters) was expanded by a 59,000-square-foot (18,000 square meters) addition designed by Gluckman Mayner Architects. The Perelman Building, opened in September 2007, has a Skylit Atrium connecting the old and new spaces, and houses five gallery spaces, as well as the library, executive, curatorial and support department offices, and the collections of two departments – Prints, Drawings, and Photographs and Costume and Textiles.

The department's new home, named the Dorrance H. Hamilton Center for Costume and Textiles in honor of the generous donor of funding for the new space, comprises a Study Room; offices for curatorial and collections staff; flexible workrooms



⦿ Fig. 4. The new Textile Conservation lab

⦿ Fig. 5. One of the units in the new Costume and Textiles collection storage



for projects involving research, mounting and dressing, and collections care; conservation lab; and collection storage.

The new costume and textiles storage facilities are a dramatic contrast to the previous costume storage area, a 4,200 square foot (1280 square meters) space constructed in the mid 1970s, with wooden laminate drawers below a series of hanging racks made from commercial piping, which the collection had outgrown by the early 1990s. In the Perelman Building, collection storage is a 38' × 160' (11.6 × 48.8 meters) space with 18' (5.5 meters) ceilings, and is divided into two separate rooms for fire safety purposes. With just over 6,000 square feet (1,830 square meters), the storage space is optimized by the use of 12' (3.66 meters) high compacting storage units and provides approximately two and a half times the previous storage volume. (More information and illustrations of the process of moving the collection, including the preparatory storage survey, rehousing project, and design process, is available on the Museum's website [Philamuseum.org](http://Philamuseum.org) under Research / Conservation / Projects / Costume and Textiles



Fig. 6. Gallery 271 in the main building displays *Fashion's Favorites: From Rococo to Romantic* (2005-2006)

Department Move. Visit <<http://www.philamuseum.org/research/22-398-552-440.html>>.) The new storage, along with the growing use of the Museum's collection database, makes reassessment of the collection much easier, and there is ample scope for many recataloguing and deaccessioning projects in years to come.

Textile Conservation, part of the Museum's large Conservation Department, is housed in the Hamilton Center with the Costume and Textiles Department, ensuring easy access to the collection and communication between curators and conservators. Textile Conservation, previously housed in a tiny office and undertaking treatments in the same two workrooms as the Costume and Textiles Department, now has a new state-of-the-art conservation lab. This large, flexible space, of just under 1,200 square feet (366 square meters), includes a separate wet lab with facilities for wet cleaning and dyeing; fume extraction; a reverse osmosis water system; and a large suction table, allowing for a much broader range of treatment options. In addition to the busy schedule preparing for costume and textiles exhibitions and outgoing loans, Textile Conservation works with other

Museum departments, including European Decorative Arts (responsible for tapestries), East Asian Art (responsible for rugs and carpets), and with departments such as Modern and Contemporary Art, whose galleries and exhibitions increasingly feature textile works.

#### **Increased Exhibition Opportunities: New Galleries for Costume and Textiles**

The opening of the Perelman Building also greatly expanded the opportunities to display costume and textiles. The department continues to produce occasional major exhibitions in the Special Exhibition Galleries in the main building. The traveling exhibition *Gees Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt* was featured in 2008, and the spring of 2010 will see the installation of *Roberto Capucci: Art into Fashion*, the first retrospective in the United States of the work of the Italian fashion designer and artist, specially organized by the Museum in cooperation with the Fondazione Roberto Capucci. The department also retains its small gallery in the main building. In addition, two galleries in the Perelman Building are now dedicated to showing costume and textile objects.



Fig. 7. The inaugural exhibition in the Joan Spain Gallery, *A Passion for Perfection: James Galanos, Gustave Tassell, and Ralph Rucci* (2007-2008)



Fig. 8. Another view of the Joan Spain Gallery, during the exhibition *Shopping in Paris: French Fashion 1850-1925* (2009)



Fig. 9. One wall of the Costume and Textiles Study Gallery, showing a view of Recent Acquisitions from A to Z (2007-2008)

The Joan Spain Gallery on the ground floor is located between galleries dedicated to photography and modern design. It is a versatile space of 2,000 square feet (610 square meters), for changing exhibitions, which are installed every four to six months, typically alternating costume and textiles, with platforms and walls designed and constructed to meet the needs of each new installation. The opening exhibition showcased three Philadelphia-born designers, James Galanos, Gustave Tassell, and Ralph Rucci. This was followed by a loan exhibition of art deco kimono and three exhibitions drawn from the collection: recently acquired quilts, including many African-American examples; highlights of French feminine fashions 1850-1925; kanthas (embroidered quilts from Bengal); and a loan show of North African jewelry. January 2011 will see the opening of *The Peacock Male: Exuberance and Extremes in Masculine Dress*, which draws on 300 years of men's fashions in the collection.

The Costume & Textiles Study Gallery on the floor above, entered by crossing a dramatic bridge across the Skylit Atrium, provides 1,200 square feet (366 square meter) for more informal displays. Two perpendicular walls are enclosed by glass to form a

large vitrine, with the platform depth ranging from 8' 6 1/2" (2.6 meters) to 4' 6 1/2" (1.4 meters) along one side with a diagonal back wall and 41" (1 meter) along the other. Along another wall, six glass-fronted cubicles can display single garments or smaller objects on glass shelves, and the center of the room can accommodate either a large display case for flat objects or a bench, which faces a wall featuring art, a video monitor, and/or didactic labels. The Costume & Textiles Study Gallery opened with an exhibition highlighting the variety of objects acquired by the department during the past ten years. Exhibitions in this gallery change every nine to twelve months, and have since included early 1970s fashions by Kansai Yamamoto; recent donations of women's current runway fashions by seventeen designers; and twentieth-century men's tailoring in Philadelphia, in particular the innovative work of Francis Toscani in the 1960s.

#### **Increased Collection Access: The Costume and Textiles Study Room and Other Initiatives**

While the move to the Perelman Building greatly expanded the opportunities to exhibit the costume and textiles collection, the mandate to increase the



**Fig. 10.** The spacious new Costume and Textiles Study Room, which opened in 2008

collection's availability also included opening a Costume and Textiles Study Room. Although the staff had previously tried to make objects from the collection accessible to scholars, students, and the occasional class, only about 30 visitors a year could be scheduled. The spacious Study Room, furnished with large tables, is just inside the entrance to the Hamilton Center for Costume and Textiles. Individuals, groups, and classes can request appointments to view objects by submitting the appropriate application form. The application clarifies that Study Room appointments are intended to provide information from the first-hand study of objects that is not obtainable in other ways; researchers are therefore encouraged to have completed preliminary research so that requests can be specific and the research as useful as possible. Appointments, scheduled with consideration of other staff responsibilities, are typically for two hours, and curatorial and conservation approval is required for objects to be scheduled for viewing, with restricted access to especially rare or fragile works. In order to lessen both object handling and staff time, object groups were designed for classes to use after consultation with local instructors. Six groups were developed, each with nine or more objects: Great Designers; Eighteenth Century; Nineteenth Century; Women's Suits; Menswear; and Textile Techniques. The Study Room, which officially opened a year after the opening of the Perelman Building, has accommodated several hundred visitors a year, including international scholars, students, costume

designers, artists, groups examining particular areas such as samplers and fans, and graduate and undergraduate classes in costume history, art history, women's studies, fashion and textile design, and studio art.

Another project to increase access to the collection was undertaken in 2008 when Museum Trustees implemented the Digital Age Initiative, which aims to make information and images of eighty percent of the entire Museum collection available via the internet within the next ten years. Although photography of many costume and textile objects is inherently time consuming and problematic, this, along with the curatorial review of catalogue information, is being done as quickly as possible. (To search the ever-expanding online collection database, visit [http://www.philamuseum.org/Collections/Search\\_Collections](http://www.philamuseum.org/Collections/Search_Collections), <<http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/search.html>>.) The department is always seeking innovative ways—through exhibitions, publications, lectures, or online—to present the collection strengths, both old and new, reflect curatorial research, and interest audiences.

The wonderful new facilities for Costume and Textiles provide many more opportunities to allow the collection to engage the international community of designers, students, and scholars, as well as the general public. They also serve to show the continuing commitment of the Museum administration, trustees, and donors to the future of this art form.