

The Museum at FIT FASHION CULTURE Podcast
Undressing Fashion Conservation

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES IN]

[VALERIE STEELE]

Hi, I'm Valerie Steele, Director and Chief Curator of The Museum at FIT, the most fashionable museum in New York City.

[UPBEAT MUSIC CONTINUES]

[VALERIE STEELE]

Welcome to our Fashion Culture Podcast Series, featuring lectures and conversations about fashion.

[MUSIC CONTINUES]

[VALERIE STEELE]

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[COLLEEN HILL]

Hi, I'm Colleen Hill, curator of costume and accessories at The Museum at FIT. I'm joined by the museum's assistant conservator, Callie O'Connor. Callie and I worked together on the spring 2024 exhibition *Statement Sleeves*, which includes about 70 examples of striking sleeve styles from the 18th century to the present. Callie did some incredible conservation work for objects in the exhibition, and I've asked her to speak about some of those processes today. But before we begin, Callie, can you give a brief description of what your role at the museum entails?

[CALLIE O'CONNOR]

Of course. Before every object goes on exhibition, it first gets examined by a conservator. It's at that point that, if the condition of the object is too poor or unstable to be dressed safely or if it's too visually degraded to be understood in the context of the exhibition, we will propose a treatment to either stabilize areas of weakness or return the object to its original appearance as much as we're able to.

[COLLEEN HILL]

Great. So, let's begin by talking about what I think is a real fan favorite in the exhibition, and that's a dress by the American designer Pauline Trigère that dates to about 1970. It's made from a fantastic rainbow-hued fabric woven in a large check pattern. And as if the fabric isn't striking enough, this full-length dress features long sleeves that split over the wrist and then extend in panels of fabric that reach all the way to the floor. And it's a style that's known as a "hanging sleeve," which actually originated in Asia centuries ago. Callie, what was one of your first observations about this dress?

[CALLIE O'CONNOR]

When I first examined the Pauline Trigère dress, I noticed that the shirring at the waist looked unfinished, almost like a belt had once covered it. Fortunately, identical dresses have survived elsewhere, and images, descriptions, and measurements of this missing sash belt were publicly available online. I was able to use this information to make a reproduction of the sash to return the dress to its intended appearance. This original sash had been designed to coordinate perfectly by utilizing the same bias-cut woven rainbow plaid as the dress itself.

[COLLEEN HILL]

Could you explain the bias cut to our listeners who are maybe less familiar with clothing construction?

[COLLEEN O'CONNOR]

Yeah, a bias-cut garment is where, rather than cutting the garment pieces vertically or horizontally along the fabric grain, the pieces are cut at a forty-five-degree angle to the top and bottom edges of the fabric. And what this does is that this creates a more fluid and slinkier silhouette in the completed garment because the fabric actually stretches more off-grain than it does on. But the most noticeable effect of the bias cut in this fabric is that this bright plaid pattern runs diagonally through the dress rather than vertically.

[COLLEEN HILL]

So can you tell us a little bit more about your process in determining how to make a replacement sash for the dress?

[CALLIE O'CONNOR]

I first had to draw a pattern for the sash. To do this I took the length and width measurements from the other surviving sashes and the waist measurement from the dress in our own collection. And I then made a mock-up to ensure that it fit and looked appropriate on the dress. But, really, the true challenge of creating a convincing reproduction was recreating the woven plaid which was made up of seven different

colored yarns crossing vertically and horizontally in the weave to create twenty-eight different shaded squares.

If there were ever a place to have actually this fabric faithfully reproduced by weaving it on a loom with color-matched yarns, FIT is one of those places. But at the time, we didn't have the materials, and expertise required for us to do that successfully.

We do, however, have the ability to digitally print fabrics on-campus at PrintFX, which is a full-service digital printing department available to staff and students at FIT. PrintFX can digitally print any image or design onto fabric and for this project we selected a Belgian Linen that was a close match in look, feel, and drape to the Trigrère dress fabric.

[COLLEEN HILL]

What information did you provide to FIT's PrintFX lab to assist in the reproduction?

[CALLIE O'CONNOR]

We needed to create a high-resolution digital image of the plaid for printing onto the fabric and to do this a large span of fabric from one of those beautiful sleeves was photographed flat by our Museum Photographer, Eileen Costa. This provided enough of the pattern repeat for her to recreate the plaid in Photoshop to the correct dimensions. And this was actually the most time-consuming and difficult part of the whole process.

But once the digital file of the plaid pattern was created, Print FX printed a series of small samples of varying color saturations so we could find an accurate color match to the dress fabric after the sample had been washed.

[COLLEEN HILL]

I'm sure visitors are wondering why this new fabric would need to be washed?

[CALLIE O'CONNOR]

In conservation, we work hard to ensure that any materials we use are safe to be near our objects for long periods of time. In the case of this printed fabric, we wanted to wash away any unfixed ink that could rub off onto the object. But we're also concerned about harmful organic compounds that can be released from a material as it degrades over time. In conservation, we choose materials that we know don't produce compounds that are hazardous to the object. It was for this reason that I constructed the reproduction sash with an orange-dyed cotton lining rather than an orange suede lining as the original had. Cotton is actually a much safer material to remain in contact with the object for the length of the exhibition.

Once constructed and tied onto the dress, the completed replica sash is almost indistinguishable from the original woven fabric and I think it effectively visually completes the dress.

[COLLEEN HILL]

It absolutely does. Whenever I take visitors through the exhibition, I always point out the replica sash and they honestly can't believe it's not original. There's another rainbow-hued installation as visitors enter the exhibition, where they encounter a rack of thirteen hanging garments that we've organized by color, and I selected each of those because it also features an interesting sleeve. I was inspired to create this lineup based on the way I curated much of the show. Many of the museum's garments are hanging in collections storage—which listeners might not be aware of— and collections storage is really like a state-of-the-art, climate-controlled closet. Part of my selection process involved walking through each aisle in collections and making note of sleeves that caught my eye. It also occurred to me that we often identify garments hanging in our own closets by their sleeves. But part of making objects ready for display—even if it's something as seemingly simple as hanging garments on a rack—requires intervention from conservators. Callie, how did you tackle this request?

[CALLIE O'CONNOR]

While the majority of garments in our exhibitions at MFIT are indeed dressed on mannequins, there are instances like this in most exhibitions where a curator desires something to be mounted in more creative ways. These mounts are designed and constructed collaboratively with the curator and conservators to ensure the object's safety while mounted, but these are often the most fun and challenging projects in the exhibition development process.

Each of the thirteen garments on the rack in *Statement Sleeves* hangs to display their right sleeve and they appear to hang on their hangers as all clothes do in our own closets. But, most commercially available hangers are damaging to garments and they cause distortion to the shoulders after hanging for long periods of time. And it's for this reason, when garments in our collection have to be stored on hangers, we construct specialized padded hangers to best support the garment long-term.

I applied this same principle when I designed and constructed these custom "invisible" hanger mounts for each of the thirteen objects hanging on this garment rack. I wanted them to look as if they were hanging just on a metal hanger, but the hanger underneath the garment was actually built out with conservation-tested padding to support the shoulders.

[COLLEEN HILL]

And believe it or not, this process was even more complicated than it initially sounds. How were the specific objects I chose posing a challenge for you?

[CALLIE O'CONNOR]

What made these mounts challenging was that the garments on the rack spanned in date from 1924 to 2019 with seven different decades represented. And what most people don't realize is that shoulderlines of garments, just like waistlines and hemlines, change over time, and these different shoulder shapes need a variety of supportive padded hangers. But, for these mounts, I had to use one single type of hanger with a contemporary shoulderline which was exceptionally unforgiving to the shoulders of the earlier pieces hanging on the rack. So to compensate for this I had to use a significant amount of padding to build up a different shoulderline on top of the hanger structure.

Additionally, some of the garments on the rack are made of sheer materials or are completely open at the front. This presented an added challenge that required masking the padding underneath with fabric that matched the color and texture of the garment itself. I also slightly padded the sleeves to ensure that they were visible next to their neighboring garment. And the result is a deceptively simple looking, but very visually engaging display of sleeves.

[COLLEEN HILL]

Not only did this part of the exhibition turn into one of the most popular stops for visitors to stop and take a photo, it also allowed us to show quite a number of garments in a small amount of space. One of the things I loved about curating *Statement Sleeves* was that the majority of objects had never been on display. I think it was something like 85 percent. And one of my favorite finds was a quite famous style by Hubert de Givenchy known as the "Bettina" blouse, and it was named after the couturier's favorite model and muse, Bettina Graziani. It's made from a simple white cotton fabric but it has huge, trumpet sleeves fashioned from tiers of embroidered lace. The style was a huge hit in 1952. It was part of Givenchy's first collection, and it's been copied pretty widely ever since. The museum's example was donated in 1970 but had never been shown, and although it was in good condition, it still needed work. Callie, can you tell us how you prepared this object for display?

[CALLIE O'CONNOR]

The "Bettina" blouse was a fun project for us in conservation, both to treat and to mount. When I first examined the blouse it was obvious that the once bright, white, starched cotton was significantly yellowed and it was very wrinkled. As cotton fibers degrade over

time their chemical structure changes and this degraded structure absorbs more visible light which is why the cotton appears yellow to our eyes rather than white. The commercial starches that were also used to stiffen the blouse when it was still being worn and laundered further degrade and yellow the cotton, so in garments like this, we often wash them to remove some of this degrading yellowing effect.

[COLLEEN HILL]

And how do you eliminate that yellowing in a way that adheres to conservation standards?

[CALLIE O'CONNOR]

I cleaned the blouse in a series of carefully controlled baths using water free of impurities and conservation-tested detergents that attract and lift dirt and the unwanted yellowing off the cotton fabric. In this process, I carefully controlled the temperature of the water, the pH of the water, and the time the blouse was submerged to ensure that the degraded cotton fibers were not adversely harmed in the process.

The first few baths of the blouse are by far the most satisfying because you can actually see the yellow color coming out of the fabric making the water itself yellow. But the water from the cleaning process also has the added benefit of returning moisture and suppleness to the dry fabric and remove wrinkles. This allows the blouse to return to a better condition and appearance over all.

[COLLEEN HILL]

Even after the blouse was cleaned and ready to be shown, we were left with a challenge that curators and conservators often face. And that's that the blouse is a single object, rather than a full ensemble, which leads to questions about how it should be shown. What was our solution in this case?

[CALLIE O'CONNOR]

Luckily this version of the "Bettina" blouse was featured in a 1952 advertisement in *l'Officiel* worn with a full, pleated, yellow and gray striped silk skirt. This gave us a really good idea of what the desired silhouette and color palette was when the blouse was first designed. For exhibitions, singular objects like the blouse are oftentimes dressed with prop garments made or chosen to complete the ensemble as the object would have been worn. Our Associate Conservator Alison Castaneda took the *l'Officiel* advertisement and she constructed a similar skirt made to the dimensions of the mannequin that the ensemble was going to be dressed on.

In contrast to the reconstruction sash made for the Pauline Trigère dress, which replaced a missing part of the object itself, the goal of the prop skirt was to support the interpretation or understanding of the blouse by mimicking the appropriate silhouette. But because the skirt isn't itself an object, Alison decided to use black silk taffeta making it a less visually engaging fabric than the skirt featured in the advertisement. And this ensured that the blouse and its sleeves could be the focus of the viewer's eyes rather than the skirt.

[COLLEEN HILL]

The skirt is another element of the conservators' work that I always point out when I'm giving tours of the exhibition. And despite the fact that it is a prop, it looks so accurate that it's still hard to tell. The conservators' work is often so seamless that museum visitors don't realize there's an entire team behind it, and that it's highly specialized and scientific work that enhances the curator's vision. Thank you so much, Callie, for giving us a peek into what it takes to make a fashion exhibition look its best.

[CALLIE O'CONNOR]

Thank you.

[CALM SYNTH MUSIC FADES OUT]