

## The Museum at FIT FASHION CULTURE Podcast

### Objects of Wonder for Person Place Thing

Colleen Hill and Randy Cohen

Event held on March 4, 2025 and edited for this podcast in March 2025.

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**[RANDY COHEN]**

But, you're not a medical doctor.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

No, PhD.

*[COLLEEN CHUCKLES]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Ah, so... Well, so that I shouldn't—during the Q&A, then, they can't ask you personal health questions.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

They can, but the responses will be very strange.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Ah, okay.

*[COLLEEN CHUCKLES AND 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]**

If you like what you hear, please share your thoughts on social media using the hashtag, #FashionCulture.

*[MUSIC CONTINUES FADES OUT]*

**[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]**

Welcome to the Museum at FIT's Fashion Culture Series. My name is Tanya Melendez-Escalante and I am Senior Curator of Education and Public Programs. It is my honor to introduce Randy Cohen and Dr. Colleen Hill in conversation about her exhibition, *Fashioning Wonder: A Cabinet of Curiosities*.

Randy Cohen's podcast, *Person Place Thing*, is an interview show based on the idea that people are most captivating when they talk not directly about themselves, but about something they care about. Dr. Hill is MFIT senior curator of costume, and she will discuss three particularly meaningful objects featured in the exhibition and how they piqued her curiosity. They will be accompanied by Zoe Guigueno and Eleonore Weill, who will perform during the event.

If you have questions for our speakers, we ask that you please write them down and we will walk around to collect them towards the end of the program. And Randy will ask them to Colleen. Please join me in welcoming Randy Cohen and Dr. Colleen Hill.

*[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS AND AN INSTRUMENTAL NOTE PLAYS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

So what's your first thing?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

My first thing is a dress by Rei Kawakubo for her label, Comme des Garçons, from her spring 2018 collection. And I started with this because it's the toughest to describe, Comme des Garçons pieces are notoriously difficult to explain.

This is an oversize dress. It has a very large full skirt, wide from the front, kind of flat from the sides. So it has this kind of canvas quality and a short sleeve bodice. And the bodice in particular is printed with the image of Giuseppe Achimboldo's *Vertumnus*, a painting from 1591.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

That's easy to describe.

*[COLLEEN LAUGHS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

You've described it with utter clarity!

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

I did think about it for a bit.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Is this some sort of thing you could get at, I guess just an old Navy, right?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Of course. Yeah. Everyone should be wearing one of these.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

So, how did this object come to be?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Well, this was a gift to The Museum from Nordstrom, and it was part of a number of pieces from the spring 2018 collection that were printed with artworks. Because it's really large, it doesn't live in our collection storage in a regular kind of bay. It actually has its own rack that it's on.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

I hear it's a hundred feet tall.

**[COLLEEN HILL, LAUGHING]**

It's pretty tall. Yeah, yeah.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Or it could fit on the statue of Liberty.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Wouldn't that be something?

*[COLLEEN LAUGHS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

It would look a lot better, right?

**[COLLEEN HILL, LAUGHING]**

The vision. I love that.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Yeah, yeah.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah, so it's something that, going through our collection storage definitely stands out, for obvious reasons. But I also became really interested in this dress because of who is represented as Vertumnus, and that is Emperor Rudolph the Second.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

The Holy Roman Emperor, 1576 to 1612. That guy?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

That guy. That's the one.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Yeah. Did you know that he was... He was nuts, right?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Well, yes. And I'll say...

**[RANDY COHEN]**

I don't want to use a lot of scholarly terms, but that would be the correct....

*[COLLEEN CHUCKLES]*

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Well, I'm glad you mentioned that, because the reason that I was immediately interested in learning this was Emperor Rudolph the Second is because he was a major collector and had a very significant cabinet of curiosities, which was the subject of my PhD research and the subsequent exhibition, and to learn that this was a composite, an allegorical portrait of him, was really fascinating.

And also thinking about him as a collector, because he did have kind of a wild and scattered collection that I think might say a lot about his personality.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Well, can you explain, to the uninitiated by which I mean the ignorant, by which I mean me? What is a cabinet of curiosity?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Sure. The easiest way to describe a cabinet of curiosities is a precursor to the modern museum. So they were large collections of scientific specimens, human made artifacts. They were meant to be a kind of microcosm of knowledge. And they were collected primarily from the 16th through the 18th centuries in Europe by affluent men. So nobility, some well known scientists, royalty, that kind of thing.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

By cabinet, we mean room, yes?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

We mean a lot of things. The cabinet could be...

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Do we mean shoe?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Well, the shoe could be in the cabinet.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Ah!

*[COLLEEN LAUGHS]*

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

It could be a freestanding...

**[RANDY COHEN]**

But it's not, it doesn't mean the cabinet in the sense of a chest of drawers.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Oh it does.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

It does?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

It means all the things.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Ah I have to change everything.

*[COLLEEN LAUGHS]*

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

It could be a freestanding piece of furniture. So there's a really famous example that's still intact, in Uppsala, Sweden, that it's a huge piece of furniture, but it has nearly all of its original 1000 objects which literally live inside this cabinet.

It could be a room. So you'd walk in and there would be all these amazing objects, or if you were very wealthy or a very significant collector, it could be a series of rooms. And all of those things were referred to as cabinets.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Who got to see the objects in this collection?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Oh, I love that question. Not very many people. Members of the court. If you were talking about someone like Rudolf the second, if you had social or scholarly credentials, you could contact the owner. But usually there was a curator, a sort of keeper of the collection and access that way. And there were some exceptions. There is a very famous collector, from London named John Tradescant, who famously allowed people to see his massive, impressive collection for a small fee so basically anybody could access it.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

And would it be fair to say that these—the cabinet of curiosities vanished as a cultural thing as the department store emerged?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Ooh that's—

**[RANDY COHEN]**

That's my theory, yeah.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

That's a great question!

**[RANDY COHEN]**

The department store became a kind of museum for everybody.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

There's definitely a connection there. It starts to happen a little sooner than the departments are, but... But, you know, a lot of people. So I did a lot of research with other volunteers asking, what do you think a cabinet of curiosities is? When do you think they existed? And a lot of people think 19th century.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Oh good.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

So a lot of people make that leap from the cabinets to the department store era. Really a lot of the cabinets that I studied, those earlier 16 to 18th century examples started to become public museums. So they became the founding collections during the 18th century and into the 19th.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

A couple of things about the Holy Roman Emperor, he was a very ineffectual ruler, as you know, and as much as anybody, he gets credit for the 30 Years War. That began with something we learned about in high school, the Defenestration of Prague.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Mmm..

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Which is one of my favorite world events, because I like that it's the Defenestration of Prague to distinguish it from all the other people we were throwing out of windows at the time. Well, I guess it's come back as a popular thing for Putin.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Oof, yeah.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

But he studied astronomy and astrology and was a patron for Tycho Brahe and Kepler. That's pretty cool.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah. I mean...

**[RANDY COHEN]**

He seemed to have what we would call crackpot ideas, which is easy to feel superior to the past and actually supported real science.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

That's exactly it. And he was a significant patron of the arts as well as we can see from the subject.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

So, how do we go? Oh, one other thing. He was very tolerant of the Jews.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Oh!

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Which I always think is a plus.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yes, absolutely.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Speaking, as a Jew, had that, how do we go from this painting to this dress?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

You know, we don't know. It's a mystery. Because the really intriguing thing about Rei Kawakubo's work is that she doesn't speak about it. So... [LAUGHS] we kind of have to make guesses.

One of my favorite moments in her long history as a designer was that she, created a collection in 1997 that's kind of colloquially known as the Lumps and Bumps Collection. So it had this sort of pillow-like protrusions in places that you would not expect or perhaps want these protrusions to be. And it got a lot of attention, negative and positive. But very shortly after the release of that collection, VISIONAIRE did a special edition magazine on Kawakubo's work, and they advertised it as having an interview with Rei Kawakubo. So we have this in the museum collection from '97. And I thought, oh, finally I get to see or hear or read what Kawakubo was thinking. And I open the magazine and there are a series of questions and her responses are images.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Damn.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

[LAUGHING] So... so we don't really know why she was interested in Archimboldo's work. I will say that from this spring 2018 collection, there were 15 pieces, 15 designs, and three of them featured Archimboldo. Who knows why.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Who knows why, you're supposed to know why.

*[COLLEEN LAUGHS]*

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

No, no I can't. It's a no. Nothing.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

It's unknowable, you think?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Well, she's still alive, right?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

She is.

**[RANDY COHEN]**



She is in her 80s. You could... should we call?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

We can certainly try. What time is it in Japan?

*[COLLEEN LAUGHS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Oh, it's in Japan. Oh you're right, she's in Tokyo. Hey, is this dress unique or did she make fifty of them and you could go to Comme des Garçons and buy one?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

You can't go into the store and buy one. It's not the only one of its kind. But I think what's so brilliant about Kawakubo's work—well, there are many things—is that if you walk into a Comme des Garçons store, the pieces you can buy are very cool. They're conceptual. They look like Comme des Garçons, but they're still very separate from what we see on the runway, which is truly artwork. And so I think of Kawakubo's work as an artwork in itself, and then the fact that she's using someone else's artwork, that kind of layering is very interesting to me.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

So how many of them, how many of them do we have? Is it closer to five than to one hundred?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah, yeah, closer to five.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Do we know where they are? Like, does someone have them?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

I don't know, we could see if other museum collections have them. They're not typically things that people have in their personal collections. But, you know, if you're Rihanna, maybe.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Maybe, yeah.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah, yeah. So, Yeah, but it's hard to say.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

So... Oh, another thing about Rudolph the second. So when he loses power, what happened to all the stuff that he collected?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Well, a lot of it in general took the trajectory that a lot of these cabinets of curiosities collections did, which is that they were dispersed among other people. So some of it ended up in a royal collection that remained in Austria for some time in Vienna. And this painting ended up in Sweden. I can't figure out why.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Oh! I know why!

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Oh, you do know why?

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Yeah, because the Swedes did very well in the 30 Years War.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Oh, well, there we go!

**[RANDY COHEN]**

I believe the term we could use here is loot. Yeah.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Oh, fascinating!

**[RANDY COHEN]**

They came into Prague and they just looted the joint.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

They just took it, amazing. Okay, well, that answers my own question.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

You don't think of Swedes as looters, do you?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

I guess that was my block there. [LAUGHS]

**[RANDY COHEN]**

I know, so it's a hard leap to make.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

But mostly things just get dispersed to....

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah, yeah. And so, you know, there are some really great examples of collections that are more or less intact. I mentioned John Tradescant earlier, who's one of my favorite collectors, just because he was great and had lots of amazing things.

And, a man named Elias Ashmole actually bought that collection and used it to found the Ashmolean in Oxford, which still exists and still has a lot of these founding collection objects that are actually in their own special gallery. So it's very interesting to see.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Oh, so in that sense, a cabinet of curiosities really is the forerunner not just to museums in the abstract, but to particular museums.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Absolutely, yes.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Cool. That would make Emperor Rudolf the Second very happy.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

I hope so, yeah.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

I think we should take a moment and we'll be right back.

*[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]*

*[MUSICIANS BEGIN TO PLAY A SONG ON A BOWED STRING INSTRUMENT AND WIND INSTRUMENT]*

*[THE BASS CONTINUES AS MUSICIANS BEGIN TO SING A FRENCH SONG]*

*[SONG FINISHES AND AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Lovely. So what's your second thing?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Okay, my second thing is a bag made from a large oyster shell. It's by Elsa Peretti from about 1971. And it's backed in brown leather and has a sterling silver frame.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Is it... It's a beautiful object. Can we think of it as if it were jewelry?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yes, absolutely. And it certainly works within Peretti's history of that. This would have been really early in her career, starting to make jewelry and accessories for Halston. And then a couple of years later for Tiffany's.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Oh, right. She herself was a jeweler. Yeah, I forgot about that.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

How did you get it?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

We got it from Lauren Bacall.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Get out.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah. The Museum at FIT has an amazing collection of Bacall's wardrobe. She donated many times, beginning in 1968, which was really early in our history. All the way through 1986. And she donated more than 700 objects from her wardrobe, including this bag.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

So would she have regarded the bag as jewelry?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Quite possibly.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Or at least as art.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah, absolutely. It shows very little sign of wear. But of course, if you have enough in your wardrobe that you donate 700 pieces... *[LAUGHS]*

I don't know how often you're wearing anything. It's definitely meant to be something that is more of a work of art, something to catch the eye than truly functional. You know, clearly we're

not wearing or using these objects, but it's not something that's easy to access, even a credit card. But it's a beautiful object in its own right.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Well, does utility come into it at all? Does function come into it at all? When you look at that bag, what made it interesting to you? Did you consider, well, could I get my wallet in there?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Absolutely not. No, no.

*[COLLEEN LAUGHS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Is it a vulgar question to ask?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

That is a completely valid question. You know what drew me to it? I... when I started working at The Museum, which was nearly twenty years ago, I was really overseeing the accessories collection. And obviously the bag was part of that. And I literally walked through our collection storage and opened every drawer and just looked to see what was there. You know, our database is from twenty years ago, so our database is very different. To really get a sense of what was in the collection, I had to look at things and that bag stood out from the moment I looked at it, because it's just unlike anything else.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

So we're not just talking about, say, a historic relic, and we're not just talking about an anthropologist, whether it is whether to tell us about the people at that place in time, you see it also, as... we should regard it as art.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Absolutely. And, you know, we're preserving it as such. This will never be worn again. We always wear gloves when we handle it.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

What if you had a really like, you had to go like when you were picking up your PhD, did you think about borrowing?

*[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]*

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

No, it's horrifying to me to think of that. People ask me that all the time and I'm like, I would never, I mean, museum people... we actually, I'm like blushing! I can't even think of that.

*[COLLEEN LAUGHS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

I don't mean to be vulgar again.

*[COLLEEN LAUGHS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

But to fashion, it is art. But it's not just art. And that at some point it occupies this art realm where utility is a question.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Absolutely. And what I love about this piece is that it definitely straddles those two concepts, but it also, really straddles the idea of nature and artifice. It's like.. it reminded me there's so many layers to a lot of the objects I selected for my *Fashioning Wonder* exhibition. And to me, this reminded me of something like the Nautilus Cup, which was something that was collected within some of the more prestigious cabinets. It was literally a nautilus shell that you would then turn into a chalice. I don't know if anyone actually drank from these chalices, but they were beautiful decorative objects and you would basically add gold or silver and these kind of little allegorical figures. And you it was a way of man kind of improving upon nature by adding his own artistic idea to a shell.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

There's so few handbags in the ocean.

*[COLLEEN AND AUDIENCE LAUGH]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

That I think this is a really big improvement. Elsa Peretti had a really interesting life, didn't she? She was around Kawakubo's age, too. Yeah, the same generation?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah, absolutely. And she did have a really fascinating life. And people very rightly associate her closely with Halston, first as a model and later collaborating with him to make accessories and jewelry. Obviously, her career at Tiffany's was really important, but I think sometimes the way that she worked in the things she was interested in could be overshadowed by her sort of Studio 54 persona.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Well, but that didn't that wasn't imposed on her. That was something she deliberately created.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

She did. But the other side of her, which I love, is that she loved to spend time alone and travel alone and spend lots of times—a time on beaches alone. And I can just envision her, you know, kind of switching, kind of going 180 from this Studio 54 party life to spending time on a beach alone and potentially finding this beautiful shell.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

It's complicated because her—the crowd at Studio 54 at that time with her. So it's Andy Warhol...

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Mhmm.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

It's Cher, who apparently is ageless.

*[COLLEEN AND AUDIENCE LAUGH]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

That's a satanic bargain. It's like it's working great. Well, but it's also Donald Trump.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Mmm, yes. I was reminded of that a couple of days ago.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Oh yeah, why?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Well I came up in some article.

*[RANDY SCOFFS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Wow. SO, I think of art as one of its functions as offering a critique of the culture in some way or a fresh way to see the culture. And I think of Studio 54 as being anti-art in that it's a complete celebration of the status quo.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Mhmm.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Is there a tension there, or is it just me being a prig?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Haha! No, I think there is a tension there, but I think maybe what Peretti was doing was embracing that tension and showing that there were many sides to her and probably many sides to a lot of that crowd. But there's also a draw for people to be part of that very hip, lively, fashionable...

**[RANDY COHEN]**

I don't think of those people as hip.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Well I—

**[RANDY COHEN]**

I'm very old!

*[COLLEEN LAUGHS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

I'm almost Elsa Peretti's age and I thought of that crowd at the time as being kind of revolting...

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Oh, interesting.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

... and celebrating everything that was awful about New York life, it seemed.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah. So you were not waiting in line to get in, not crawling into a duct?

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Well, it's not like anyone was inviting me, to be fair.

*[EVERYONE LAUGHS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

You know I'm sure I wouldn't have gotten it. But yeah, I always thought it was a very creepy scene. And remember, at the same time, there were other kinds of art in New York at the time. Punk was emerging.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Sure, yeah.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Which is as far from Studio 54, as you could get.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Right.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

I didn't see Elsa Peretti around.



**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Right, right.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

No, no knock on Elsa.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah!

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Well, it's a little knock but who am I to judge? You know, she's no longer living. Right?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Correct.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

So we can say mean things and she can't sue us.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

I will only say nice things about her.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Yeah?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah, I love her. [CHUCKLES]

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Yeah. What about her relationship with Helmut Newton?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Oh, well, he famously photographed her in that Playboy bunny costume. They dated for a bit.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Dated.. That's so funny to think of them as, you know—

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Dating? Yeah!

**[RANDY COHEN]**

If you think that dinner and a movie, you think that's they...

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

It's quite possible. I mean, if she was hanging out on the beach by herself, she probably had a very different private life than we may not be familiar with.

*[COLLEEN LAUGHS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

To get away with Helmut Newton, is that what you're saying?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Maybe that, yeah.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

He was very demanding, I can only imagine.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

And do you see all this? Some.. does this make sense? Are you able to connect the artist to the art?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Oh yeah!

**[RANDY COHEN]**

That's all that we know about—Elsa Peretti had quite a life!

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah!

**[RANDY COHEN]**

You know, she's in Studio 54 with Donald Trump. Ew!

*[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

And then, you know, she's on the beach by herself, "Oh this shell is so beautiful!" And then she designs this handbag. Does that all make sense to you?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah, it absolutely does! I mean, I think as a creative person, she was constantly—I mean, she found beauty in everything. She herself was a collector. So oftentimes, when her work was photographed, it would be photographed among these sort of specimens and shells and little

things that she would collect, which, of course, is very appealing to me. But I think, you know, being part of that crowd was also a career move. I mean, it was a way to meet people and to get people wearing what you were designing.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Shock me, man. She was working the room? She wasn't just having fun sniffing cocaine in the bathroom with Donald Trump?

*[COLLEEN LAUGHS]*

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Again, why not both? *[LAUGHS]*

But I think there's, you know, there's a way that she worked and there's a way that she lived in New York City in particular. And they were quite separate. And she talks about that often in interviews.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Oh, so in that way she is quite the opposite from at least Kawakubo's, demeanor in the world. One was very forthcoming about her work and her life, and one was a total enigma.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Absolutely.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

And yet you've brought them together.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah. I find them both very fascinating.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Yeah? Were there other handbags that you considered when you were putting on this show?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Well, I chose this specifically because it is in a section that I call "Specimens," and it works in a few ways within the exhibition. It's either clothing that has been inspired by some kind of specimen—one of my favorites is a Tom Ford dress. It's meant to look like a zebra with a sort of horse hair mane down the center back. There are things like this object that are literally made from something, probably found on the beach. And then I've also displayed things in a way that references specimens but it's not necessarily actually meant to be viewed as such. So this handbag was a really great way to bring in the idea of shells, which are wildly popular within cabinets of curiosities.

And rather than represent them through an illustration, a print, I thought, why not bring the real thing? So it's one of very few handbags. And it's definitely my favorite, which is why I'm talking about it.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Yeah. The recurrence of shells in these cabinets of curiosities. Was it shells as an object found in nature or was it shells as a material for art?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

It was both, actually. That's a very great question. They—shells were certainly of scientific interest. And of course, there's so many varieties. So you could collect them kind of endlessly, but they also become one of the types of objects collected that is made into these beautiful kind of symmetrical displays. And oftentimes the way that the collectors were showing them was very based on the visual as much as it was on scientific learning.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Because that is... there's a split in museums. It's what I like about your Cabinets of Curiosity is two different, very completely distinct kinds of museums. Now we have the Museum of Natural History over here, and we have the Museum of Modern Art over here. That an art museum is not a natural history museum, but to Emperor Rudolph, it wasn't it?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Absolutely. Yeah. Everything was combined. And that's a great point because as we mentioned briefly earlier, when we get into the 19th century and the idea of the public museum really comes to fruition, that's when things start to split. That's when these collections are kind of categorized and put into separate ideas of museums, or at least sections within museums.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Do you feel bad that we've lost it? There was something sort of charming about it all jumbled together.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

There was, which is exactly what drew me to these. I think they're so fascinating and the bits of visual references we have to them, which is, of course, in the form of engravings, are really, really interesting. And somehow, despite the fact that they're just these engravings, you kind of feel very immersed in these spaces, even now.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Wow. You've given us such a nice moment of conclusion. So let's take a moment. We'll be right back.

*[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS WHILE A MUSICIAN BEGIN TO PLAY A SOMBER TUNE]*

*[VOCALIST BEGINS TO SING, ACCOMPANIED BY AN ACCORDION]*

*[SONG CONCLUDES AND AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

So, what's thing number three?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Thing number three is a table covered in feathers by the Bill Cunningham. It's likely 18th century, at least 18th century style table with curved legs, covered in pheasant feathers and taxidermied pheasant heads at the corners.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Where'd you get that?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

This is something that was donated to us about ten years ago by a man named Frederick Eberstadt. And his wife was Isabel Eberstadt, who was an author, a journalist, and a socialite. She was the daughter of Ogden Nash.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Cool.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah. And she was a real 60s it girl: an intellectual, 60s it girl, who had an incredible wardrobe. So the story behind the table, I was actually part of the early portion of the story. In 2007, I received a phone call on my line at work from a man who said, "Oh, my wife just passed away. I have some of her clothes, would you be interested?"

And I said, "Oh, do you have any designer names?" And he just started rattling them off. I mean, it was Andre Courreges, Madame Gray, Yves Saint Laurent... And I was like, "Whoa, whoa, oh, wow. Okay!"

So we ended up acquiring about 200 pieces from Isabel Eberstadt's wardrobe. And when some of my colleagues went to pick up the clothes from Frederick's apartment, they saw this table, and they admired it. And he said, "Oh, Bill Cunningham made that for my wife."

And of course, they thought that was amazing. And about seven years later, he contacted us and said, "Do you want the table?"

And to be honest, there was a debate about it because we don't collect tables. We have 50,000 garments and accessories. We do not have tables. So this is...

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Did you tell him, “Keep your damn table, we don't collect tables!” You didn't say that to him?

*[COLLEEN CHUCKLES]*

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

No, no! We all obsessed over the table and “We're taking the table!”

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Why did you take this table? You know my understanding of all... Why is this table different than all others?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Of course. Well, partly because it was made by Bill Cunningham. And people know Bill's work or history, I should say, better now than they did in 2014. But he began his career in fashion as a milliner. So there really is an interesting connection...

**[RANDY COHEN]**

He was designing hats in middle school.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yes.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Like, who does that?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

The greats. *[LAUGHS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

The greats! Well, I—as I think it's become apparently clearer, I'm extremely unsophisticated about fashion, but I loved his work, and I think Bill Cunningham was a kind of genius...

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Absolutely.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

That could make the most fascinating ideas about clothing accessible, even to people like me.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Absolutely. And that was exactly the reasoning behind taking this thing. It's one of a kind. I have seen at least a mirror that he covered the frame in feathers, and we have some of his hats in our collection. It's worth noting for anyone who is unfamiliar with Bill Cunningham's millinery

career, he designed under the name William J. because his family was ashamed of the work he was doing. So, he says, which is very sad, but clearly he came out on top.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Wow. It's like, "Oh, our son, I have terrible news. Our son is designing hats. Oh, the shame!!"

*[COLLEEN AND AUDIENCE LAUGH]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

"The shame of it all! If only it had been shoes!" You know.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yes! Exactly! Or anything but hats.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

I mean, there's some of this that it just seemed to feed and "Oh, he might be gay."

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Absolutely.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

It's fear of homosexuality.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Absolutely. And just of.. being different...

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Or fear of hats.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

*[CHUCKLES]* Or maybe hats. You know, he did—

**[RANDY COHEN]**

You must encounter that a lot in your work, you know.

*[COLLEEN LAUGHS]*

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Well he did also transition, from being a milliner into his journalism career and then later to the career as a photographer for The Times.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Right, The On The Street page, which was just everybody knows that, right? It was wonderful.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

And after hours and—oh, my other favorite thing about Bill Cunningham is he traveled around New York on his bicycle, and he photographed people on the street, and he had more than at least officially 30 bicycles stolen.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

*[LAUGHS]* Oh, I didn't realize that!

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Might be a record.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Oh, that poor man.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

And it was because he'd see something and he'd go, "This is great!" And he'd lean his bike on em *[LAUGHS]* because he didn't want to miss the shot.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

He'd come back and the bike was gone!

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Worth it every time, I bet. *[LAUGHS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Oh, worth it every time. And he just took it in stride. It was amazing.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Amazing, yeah, yeah. He was a truly incredible person. And to be honest, I had my eye on this table for a good decade. I was like, "I am not going to retire before I use this table."

So now I can retire. *[LAUGHS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

No, don't retire. No! I'm having fun. So, once you look, the table has context, within someone who is a fashion figure and that makes sense. It's kind of an extension of his other work. Is that how you justify it?



**[COLLEEN HILL]**

It is. And also because the table was made by Bill Cunningham for Isabel Eberstadt, and we have so much of her wardrobe, which includes things like this really audacious feathered headdress by Adolfo. We actually have some other feathered objects, a cape and a hat, that Bill Cunningham made for Isabel. So it does work into this idea of Isabel's fashionable life, if you will. And in this *Fashioning Wonder* exhibition, I put the table in a section called "The Aviary," which is, of course, devoted to birds.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Oh. So again, it gets back to the natural... your natural history theme that runs through the cabinets of curiosity.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

It does, yeah! And the difference, the bit of distinction that I make between "The Aviary" section of the exhibition and the "Specimens," which I mentioned earlier, is that a lot of times, live birds, not taxidermic, but live birds were part of these cabinets. And to have to bring them from whatever part of the world they were from to Europe was expensive. It required a lot of oversight and then to maintain the birds living also did. So it was a prestigious thing to collect. And it also gives a sense—I mentioned the idea of the collections becoming public museums, but cabinets also evolved into zoos and circuses.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Oh!

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

So you can see the direct link between things like these aviaries and the, later zoos, the public zoos.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Well, I wouldn't have made that connection, but that's why you earn the big money.

*[COLLEEN CHUCKLES]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Oh, in Bill Cunningham's time... So there was something that ties back to our Lauren Bacall. And I've jotted this one line down. It wasn't simply that he was nostalgic for another time. Back when famous women like Lauren Bacall and Brooke Astaire actually dressed themselves.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Mmm, yeah.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

So did that make the Lauren Bacall have an expression of her sensibility more than other people's wardrobes?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yes. And it's interesting you mention that because she did have a number of favorite designers. Yves Saint Laurent is one that comes to mind, and she had very friendly relationships with these designers, Halston as well as we saw earlier. And she definitely had a panache and of course, was buying couture. But she had a sort of refined simplicity to her style, always, somehow, even when she was wearing these like wild, heavy, beaded Saint Laurent things, there was like a bit of minimalist quality to it always, so you can really see how she understood her own body type, her kind of signature look, and worked with couturiers to really buy what suited her.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Do you think less of, of the wealthy and glamorous who don't have a sensibility and who rely too much like, like hiring a decorator to do their apartment? Do you think lots of them...

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

You mean today?

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Yeah, right now, at this very moment.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Is it terrible to say I don't pay that much attention to contemporary? *[LAUGHS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Well, I mean, I wasn't going to name any names, but if you'd like to.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Oh, no, no. I don't.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

But she seems—or at least Bill Cunningham or the person who wrote this obit seemed to see her as particularly admirable in that way and different from everyone else.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah, yeah, I agree, and I think that that idea of these style icons, like Bacall, who had this really signature esthetic and, and certainly worked with designers but made it their own, I don't think in general we see much of that today.

I mean, there is a little bit more societal pressure and of course, everything's everywhere all over the internet. So there's many more factors at play to why people are wearing what they wear, I think.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Do you think she regarded her... was her closet a collection?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Oh, yeah. She talked about collecting clothes. Yeah. And I love how she spoke about fashion because in her history, when she started first as a model and then moved into her movie career, she talked about how she couldn't afford much clothing, so she had to be very particular about what it was she purchased.

And then she made some kind of hilarious statement that I will be paraphrasing, but it basically said, like, "The minute I got money, I shopped."

And I was like, "Yeah, we can tell because we have a lot of your stuff."

*[RANDY CHUCKLES]*

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

But she definitely was constantly thinking about fashion, and she would always also do things like, you know, she would find a pair of Pucci trousers that really suited her and she would buy them in like eight colors. And we know because we have them. So, you know, she really did understand what she liked and she went for it.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

You mentioned, when Frederick Eberstadth called to tell you, you know, well about his late wife, "My wife just passed away," and, I believe then you said, "Can we have her clothes?"

*[COLLEEN LAUGHS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

No, he... but he called to donate.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Absolutely. Yes.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

But you don't like, do you have your eyes on certain people now? And you think when she dies...

*[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]*

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Oh, I don't, it's too much. It's too much. No, no.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Yeah?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

You know, we love adding to the collection, but, no, I try to—I try to keep morbid thoughts far away.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Really? Oh, that's your limit.

*[COLLEEN LAUGHS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

You know, but you must have a list. There must be people you've admired over the years. They're getting on. How could you not think of it?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah. And, you know, sometimes things come to us that we don't expect. We just got a collection of clothing from a woman named Joy Bianchi that's absolutely fantastic and it was from her estate. In fact, the Tom Ford dress that I mentioned earlier that looks—it's very intricately beaded and sequin to look like zebra skin and then it has this mane down the back, that was from her wardrobe. And we didn't expect that. We just, you know, again got a call and it was an absolutely amazing piece of clothing.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

So you're not working funerals.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Not yet.

*[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Agh... Not yet! I like that! I like that you keep your options open.

*[COLLEEN LAUGHS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

When... oh, Frederick Eberstadt. We should say a word or two about him because he had a pretty interesting life too, right?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah, he did, he was a photographer. Also a psychoanalyst. Is that what...

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Well, that's what struck me. He started out in this banking family, and he thinks "Banking isn't for me."

And he goes and is able to, somehow works for Avedon, right?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Mhmm, mhmm. And that is one of the things I didn't know him at all, obviously nor his wife, but I think one of the things that really struck me about them as a couple is that they did have this really interesting background and sort of pedigree and were part of this particular social set, but they were also creatures of the 60s, so they were doing really interesting things.

And Isabel, for example, did a Warhol screen test. You know, they were part of a really interesting crowd. Tom Wolfe writes briefly about Isabel. So they were creative, interesting, moneyed people.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

And then, as you said, quite late in life, he makes this other switch and transitions as a psychotherapist.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Right?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

And he's seeing...he was seeing patients into his 90s.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yeah. He's a really incredible guy.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

I'd want my money back, you know? I'd be in there, I don't like my therapist to be a lot older than me. Oh, just to tie them together, Bill Cunningham photographed them, right?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yes, yes. And he loved Isabel. He talked about how beautiful she was. Obviously they were friends, but when he started to write journalistic writing in the 60s, he wrote about her several times.

He attended parties at her home and would write about them. So they were certainly friends. And he really admired her as a person and a fashion icon.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

When you talked about the Eberstadt, I now think of it as this, like, important moment in fashion, just with the Eberstadt call, where were you? What were you wearing? Oh, I've completely lost thread. Oh, you mentioned you perked up when you said you asked him, "Are there any designer names?"

But I thought Bill Cunningham... one of the things I liked about him is he wasn't limited to just designer names who were certain... he liked eccentrics. Is that right?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Sure, yeah.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

And do you also have the wardrobe of eccentrics? Maybe not designer names in the collection here?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

I think that depends on how you look at it. I mean, again, coming back to Isabel, there is an Adolfo headdress that I've also included in the exhibition that is this wild, feathered concoction. It's very large. It's not a mainstream look. So I think she was able to do both, even within the realm of high fashion. I think, particularly in the 60s, that was something you could do. So I don't think they necessarily have to be separate. But we're certainly looking within the realm of high fashion, which is really what we collect for things that are fashion forward. So, again, thinking of Isabel, one of the things that really struck me was that she owned a suit from Andre Courreges' very first season.

So he had initially worked for the couturier, Cristobal Balenciaga. It looks kind of like a Balenciaga suit, but the fact that Isabel was forward thinking enough to buy from this young couturier, and so now we have literally something from his first collection. I mean, that in itself, in the realm of fashion history is kind of forward thinking and avant garde, if you will.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

What I like about what you're doing, I hadn't thought about it this way before is, unlike the art world where what a museum remembers is the artist, but not the person who owned the painting. I mean, I got a little mention if they donated it, but, you see, the person who buys and wears the clothes, it was very much a part of what makes this interesting.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

It can be. Yeah. And it doesn't have to be. Some of the content that I included in the exhibition is focused particularly on female women. Bacall and Eberstadt, you know, these women that I've mentioned previously, but I also brought in one woman about whom we know very little, but she

donated really interesting things. So in the exhibition, I've included an early 19th century silk sampler that probably some young girl or woman made, with a map of England and part of Scotland. And, it's quite precise. And, it's a really beautiful thing. And this woman donated quite a number of interesting, 18th century accessories, older textiles. I just don't know anything about her. So the point is, you know, yes, it's really interesting to think about these women of fashion or these important fashion figures, but to make a whole museum collection, whole meaning, you know, a robust one, it takes a little bit of everything. So they don't all have to be famous fashion icons.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

We'll take a few questions, yes? So one of the questions I have before we do, join me again in thanking Eleonore Weill, Zoe Guigueno, and especially Colleen Hill!

*[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

All right. Okay. Here we go. When the designers created these objects and, and clothing, were they influenced by assemblage, or is it your interpretation of these as assemblage?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

It's certainly—well, that's a good question because it's a bit of both. The exhibition in general is my interpretation of the cabinet of curiosities. That's an excellent question. One of the things I love about the *Comme des Garçons* with the Archimboldo print is that the portrait of Emperor Rudolph the Second is a composite painting. So it's him as fruits and vegetables and flowers. *[CHUCKLES]* So there's, like, a pear for his nose and cherry tomatoes for his lips, etc.. And that idea of the assemblage of this produce, essentially, making this image was very cabinet like in that it was an assemblage of objects. And that's what makes the cabinets so interesting. The objects alone, of course, were meant to be important, otherwise you wouldn't collect them. But it's really the whole of it that makes the collection so fascinating.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Interesting. Can you recommend a reading for students visiting the *Fashioning Wonder* exhibition?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Oh, sure. I don't have a book of my own about the exhibition, but if you're interested in cabinets of curiosities more generally, I always recommend a book that is by Patrick Mauries. And I think it's just called *Cabinet of Curiosities*. And, he has also written quite a number of books on fashion, sort of an art and fashion historian. And the book is really visually stimulating and gives a really great sense of what these cabinets were all about. And hopefully when you look at more images and ideas of what was collected within the cabinets, you'll get a better sense of the connections I was making between the cabinets and the fashion objects in the show.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Neat! Would you consider Sir John Salas? Am I saying that right?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Oh, Sir John Soane's. Yes!

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Ah, Soanes! Oh, I'm sorry, my apologies.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

My favorite.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Home in London, cabinet of curiosities.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Yes. Yeah. I love that place. And in fact, I visited... so I did my PhD in London at London College of Fashion. So, particularly pre-COVID, I was able to visit a number of times and went to a lot of places, including Sir John Soane's to get inspiration for things like visual display and again, kind of what these people were collecting. So absolutely.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Cool. I think, well, that's all I've got here. So...

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Okay.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Maybe our work here is done. Oh, if people want to see the exhibition, they can't just walk over there now.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Not right now, no I'm sorry. *[LAUGHS]*

**[RANDY COHEN]**

What if we busted the door and we would—

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

I think I would get fired.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Oh, I don't want that.



**[COLLEEN HILL]**

*[SIGHS]* Yeah. Our hours are Wednesday through Friday, noon to 8 and Saturday and Sunday, 10 to 5.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

For how long?

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

The exhibition is open through April 20th.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Oh, okay. I'll be there.

**[COLLEEN HILL]**

Great.

**[RANDY COHEN]**

Thank you so much! Join me again. And thank you, Dr. Colleen Hill!

*[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]*

*[MUSICIAN BEGINS TO PLAY A STRING INSTRUMENT AND VOCALIST BEGINS TO SING]*

*[SONG FINISHES]*