

STATE OF THE FIELD IN CONVERSATION

Liz Randolph & Dr. Ellen Sampson

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Abstract

The archivists and collection managers who work in fashion collections may stay quietly behind the scenes, and yet their dedication to preservation and access is crucial for the public and for scholars and artists seeking knowledge and inspiration. This interview explores the rich collaboration that occurred from 2018 to 2019 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art between Ellen Sampson, a visual artist and material culture scholar, and Elizabeth Randolph, at the time the collections manager of the Costume Institute. The two conservators approached Sampson's practice-based fellowship project, "The Afterlives of Clothes," with different aims; Sampson was an artist and scholar intrigued by the often disregarded, stained, and dirty objects in a collection renowned for its pristine couture, while Randolph, with her near photographic memory, knowledge of the collection, and efficient organizational skills, facilitated access to even the smallest handkerchief. And yet, through this busy process of finding, selecting, pulling, examining, photographing, and putting away objects, moments of poignancy and loss invaded their daily work, reminding both Randolph and Sampson of the power of clothes and the memories they invoke. Their conversation reflects on this creative process in one of the world's preeminent fashion collections.



FIGURE 1 STILLS FROM 16MM FILM "PERIPHERIES OF THE ARCHIVE" (SAMPSON, 2020) SHOT AT THE COSTUME INSTITUTE IN 2019. VIMEO LINK.

Objects from top row, left to right: Gloves, early 18th century, probably American, C.I.50.8.6a, b (Gift of Mrs. William Martine Weaver, 1950); Gloves, Bon Marché (French, founded ca. 1852), ca. 1900, French, 1975.259.3a, b (Gift of Etienne Lawrence Sturhahn, 1975); Pocket, 1790–1810, American, 2009.300.5574 (Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of the Brooklyn Museum, 2009; H. Randolph Lever Fund, 1967); Stockings, nineteenth century, European, C.I.44.8.11a, b (Gift of Mr. Lee Simonson, 1944).

Objects from bottom row, left to right: Stockings, 19th century, European, C.I.44.8.11a, b (gift of Mr. Lee Simonson, 1944); Socks, 1820s, American or European, 2008.330a, b (Purchase, Harold Koda Gift, 2008); Pocket, 1820, British, 2009.300.3472 (Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of the Brooklyn Museum, 2009; Gift of Mrs. Peyton R. H. Washburn, 1942); Pocket, 18th century, probably American, 1979.346.107 (Gift of The New York Historical Society, 1979).

Fashion archives are central to our understanding of fashion history: they are one of the spaces where what is and will be understood as fashionable dress is defined. These spaces act as both custodians and gatekeepers, preserving objects but equally the parameters by which fashion can be understood through research of extant objects and historical records. These spaces present objects outside of their place of origin which creates a current way of seeing an object which may have never been considered during the object's original life. The history and politics of museum fashion collections is a central concern in fashion studies (see recent work by Bass-Krueger¹, Pecorari², De la Haye³, and Square⁴): interrogating the histories, principles, and boundaries of these complex and contested spaces. More broadly this contemporary interest in the power and poetics of clothing archives is made evident in creative works such as Claire Wilcox's (Senior Curator of fashion at the Victoria and Albert Museum) autobiographical book *Patchwork*⁵ and Judith Clarke and Adam Philip's intervention, "A Concise Dictionary of Dress"⁶ at the V&A's Clothworkers Centre. These spaces team with histories and stories (albeit often of a privileged few): material traces of bodies and lives. Yet, the majority of garments in museum collections are never exhibited, both due to the volume of objects collected but also the material fragility, or relative mundanity of many of these garments.

These garments, admitted into the museum but rarely viewed, are the focus of much of Ellen Sampson's research. In 2018–2019 Sampson was awarded a fellowship at The Costume Institute of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, to undertake primary research for her practice-based project "The Afterlives of Clothes." Working closely with Elizabeth Randolph, Collections Manager at the time, and Sarah Scaturro, head Conservator at the time, along with the broader Collections, Conservation, and Curatorial teams, the project builds upon work by Evans⁷, Davidson⁸, Bide⁹, De la Haye¹⁰ to explore the power, and potential uses of imperfect garments¹¹ in museums archives: those which due to their condition are often considered too unappealing or fragile to display. In the context of current debates about displaying fashion as art, a mode of display which often requires perfect, unworn, or heavily restored garments, the project set out to ask questions about the concept of "museum quality" when it comes to fashion

¹ Bass-Krueger, 2018.

² Pecorari, 2021.

³ De la Haye.

⁴ Square, 2020.

⁵ Wilcox, 2020.

⁶ Victoria and Albert Museum, 2010.

⁷ Evans, 2014.

⁸ Davidson, 2016.

⁹ Bide, 2017.

¹⁰ De la Haye, 2005.

¹¹ Those which bear traces of use such as stains, creases, crumples, mends, and tears.

and dress — something that is simultaneously both bodily and highly ephemeral. Through auto-ethnographic writing, image, and filmmaking it asks how, in fields (both fashion and museums) where absent bodies and narratives are problematic, reconsidering these traces as valuable, records of lived experience might reframe and make visible objects which would otherwise be excluded from view.

As the project evolved, Sampson's focus shifted from the materiality of the objects she researched to the embodied experience of archival research and labour: its sensory and emotional affects. Asking how both the materiality of the objects we wear, and the spaces that hold them shapes our understandings and care of these bodily and body like things. In doing so it takes a psychoanalytic and phenomenological approach to clothing archives to explore the often-overlooked acts of care, containment, and conservation that take place within fashion archives. Thinking about drives of attention, projection and incorporation shape our understanding of these spaces and things and how this "ghost labor"¹² functions in parallel to more viable practices such as curation and exhibition design. This conversation explores these embodied experiences of and emotional responses to working in and with clothing archives: reflecting upon Sampson and Randolph's experience of working together at The Costume Institute exploring their differing yet intersecting approaches to and experience of the power and poignancy of old clothes.

¹² Scaturro, 2017.

**LIZ**

It is a natural part of the study of clothing to want to envision who the original owner was and how the garment may have looked on the body, and even to a lesser extent to imagine yourself in the clothing and how it may have felt to move in them. That doesn't often come with the acknowledgement that we do have snippets of this information in the imprints the human body has left on extant objects. What led you to this type of research that was directly focused on this intersection of the body and clothing?

**ELLEN**

I think that I've always been interested in the stories objects tell, as well as the stories we tell about objects — the idea of garments as material records. My undergraduate degree was in anthropology with a focus on material culture studies. Later my doctoral research and book *Worn: Footwear, Attachment, and the Affects of Wear*¹³ (Bloomsbury, 2020) explored our bodily and emotional relationships with our clothes (and specifically shoes). It examined how, through the embodied experience of wearing, we become both materially and emotionally entangled with the things we wear. In it I write that “As the garment and body meet, the garment is incorporated into the wearer’s psychic and emotional self, and simultaneously the wearer’s experiences are embedded in its material form — meeting and transferring matter through touch and wear.¹⁴ In doing so my work takes a phenomenological and psychoanalytic approach to fashion studies, foregrounding the sensory and psychic experience of dress. In particular I draw upon the Donald Winnicott’s¹⁵ theory of transitional phenomena — objects that mediate internal experience and external realities as a way to think about the mediating nature of dress. In turn, this project explored the ways that garments retain traces of these mediations, how the marks of use and wear become powerful records of our lived and bodily experience of the world.

Through this work on the embodied experience of dress and the power of wornness, I became interested in the second or afterlife that some garments have when they become part of museum collections. How these traces of experience are understood in museum collections, and how might their meanings change through processes of accession, conservation, storage, and display? Initially, *The Afterlives of Clothes* (the book and body of practice I was developing at The Costume Institute) was going to explore

¹³ Sampson, 2020.

¹⁴ Ibid, 211.

¹⁵ Winnicott, 1953.

imperfect garments in fashion exhibitions — a direct follow up to *Worn* — but in working with you and the collections team, as well as Sarah Scaturro and the conservation team, the questions I was asking, and the research changed.

That the project is now much more about fashion archives themselves — the lives or afterlives of the thousands of objects which museums collect and care for but are rarely if ever displayed. In the end, the project is really about the work that fashion archives do and how we work in and with them: the experiences of archival labor and research. In doing so it draws on many of the theoretical approaches which informed *Worn*: Merleau Ponty¹⁶ and Schilder¹⁷'s theorisation of the body schema, Winnicott's¹⁸ transitional objects. However, it also uses Freudian ideas of memory work, cathexis and decathexis to think about both the embodied experience of archival reach but also the “work” that fashion archives do — the process of containment and drives of attention which are fundamental to the curation and custodianship of these objects.

In many ways it was watching you and the collections team work with the collection that shifted and shaped the scope of this research — I wondered if you could speak a little about your relationship to the clothes you care for and the stories that they tell? And more broadly what led you here How did you end up working with historical garments?

LIZ

It is so nice to hear that seeing my former colleagues and I working with the collection helped develop your research. On a personal level, I began connecting with historic fashion early on in my life when I would go to auctions and estate sales with my mother. She had an antique store and also collected, so I have always been around old things that held great mystery and beauty for me. I even had a steamer trunk full of treasures that I collected, which ranged from turn-of-the century drawers to a quilted red gingham 1950s knee-length skirt with built-in shorts. This connection led me down the path towards wanting to design costumes when I was in undergrad and then switching paths to fashion history for graduate school.

One of the major draws for me to go to New York University for graduate school was the relationship they had at the time with The Costume Institute and the proximity it would get me to that collection. When

¹⁶ Merleau Ponty, 1969.

¹⁷ Schilder, 1935.

¹⁸ Winnicott, 1953.

I was in high school, I had actually seen a program where they went inside Costume Institute storage. I have no recollection what the program was about, but they were examining some objects in front of the cream-coloured storage cabinets with metal blinds and formica drawers that had been installed in 1971. I remember thinking at the time how amazing it was and really had no idea that I would later work in those exact storerooms and be a part of the inevitable storage upgrade that took the collection away from the metal blinds and into a modern compacting storage system.

After I finished graduate school at NYU in 2005, I returned home to my family in Ohio while my father was terminally ill. Sadly, he passed in 2006, and it became time for me to consider my



FIGURE 2 & 3 COSTUME INSTITUTE STORAGE CABINETRY FROM 1971 AFTER RELOCATION TO A TEMPORARY STORAGE SPACE DURING THE COSTUME INSTITUTE RENOVATION, WHICH STARTED IN 2010 (ON THE LEFT), TO THE PRESENT STOREROOMS OF THE ANNA WINTOUR COSTUME CENTER, COMPLETED IN 2014 (ON THE RIGHT). THE 1971 STORAGE WAS DESIGNED WITH METAL BLINDS TO LIMIT DUST AND LIGHT, WHILE THE CABINETRY FROM THE 2014 RENOVATION COMPACTS TO PREVENT EXPOSURE COMPLETELY. IMAGES BY ELIZABETH RANDOLPH, 2011, 2021.

career. Following that, in late 2007, I decided to apply for a position with the Brooklyn Museum Costume Documentation Project, which would mean a return to NYC. To my great joy, I interviewed with the Curator, Jan Reeder, and was hired within a matter of weeks. Overall, the goal of the project was for a team of eleven to catalog, photograph, research, and document the nearly 24,000 object collection over the span of three years. I had the great honor of joining the team in its final year. Each of the Research Assistants would rotate the work they were doing so I was able to get experience doing a little bit of everything from data entry, object handling, storage packing, updating object identification, photography, research, and writing label texts. I went in with an interest of working in curatorial or as a fashion history professor but came out with a full appreciation and love for direct collections care.

After an agreement was made between the Brooklyn Museum and The Costume Institute, that collection became the Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2009. This was during the recession and although I was out of work for a time, I didn't give up hope of getting to work with the merged collections. That hope led to reality in 2010 when I took a position as a documentation photographer on The Costume Institute collections team. My time with The Costume Institute grew my love for the collection and dedication to its care through the many different preventive maintenance lenses including object storage packing, departmental exhibition work, object location tracking in the database, ongoing collection assessment, collections moves (many, many collections moves), and facilitating viewings for outside and inside researchers.

One of my favorite parts about working with that collection, and any collection really, is learning about or discovering the story of the object, whether that is through finding out more about a donor whose history may have been unknown, or by discovering an object in an extant image and being able to place it more clearly in fashion history. The richness you can discover when focusing on objects is extraordinarily satisfying and it doesn't stop at the research level, but rather extends to the objects themselves. Interacting with an object is very powerful and sometimes hold clues about its story; for example, there was a nineteenth century waistcoat in the Brooklyn Museum collection which had a gold-filled tooth and train ticket on the West Jersey Rail Road line from Gloucester to Philadelphia in its pocket. I would still love to know the full story about this object, but am content with being one of the few people to know this sort of discovery can still happen in a collection.

When your project was first presented to me, I initially balked at the number and types of objects you were interested in studying because it was beyond the normal scope of a research request. Do you remember having that first meeting about how best to focus your search? Were you disappointed when I veered you away from some of your initial object selections? And, are there any objects you wish we had kept on the list from that initial planning phase?

ELLEN

I do sometimes laugh at the fact that given access to a collection that contains some of the most beautiful garments I have ever seen, I spent a year looking at rips, tears, and stains. However, I think that's precisely what interests me — that beyond the apparent perfection of many clothing collections lie all these traces of bodies, all this evidence of lives lived, and labour performed.

I think that initial meeting was really interesting — although I was aware that The Costume Institute's collecting focus is on "Fashion as Art" and that the sorts of objects I wanted to look at were quite different from the objects you are often asked for by researchers, I probably hadn't thought about the implications of asking to see imperfect objects in the collection — how that might be read as an implicit criticism or challenge to the collection quality or scope. The CI certainly wasn't the only collection that was a little apprehensive about the type of objects I wanted to look at: about showing their dirty laundry, so to speak! I think as we started talking about the objects I was interested in; it became more apparent that it wasn't about identifying problems with those objects but instead about there being something important and powerful about them. That the project was about highlighting traces of the bodies that had worn and cared for them and making visible objects that might otherwise not end up on display.

However, that meeting did highlight the challenges I would face in identifying appropriate garments to work with. My initial list included both things that I couldn't access and a few objects that had already been deaccessioned (due to my own incompetence with the database). At times during the research, it was quite hard to identify garments showing traces of wear through the database alone: both because although the metadata included the garment's condition, the type of damage (fabric degrading over time such as silk shattering versus marks of use, such as stains) often wasn't and for certain objects, the condition reports were relatively sparse. That said, reading condition reports was often fascinating — it gave such an insight into the lives of these garments once they entered the collection.



FIGURE 4 POLAROIDS OF STAINS (SAMPSON, 2019). HANDKERCHIEF, 1896, AMERICAN, 2009.300.4690 (BROOKLYN MUSEUM COSTUME COLLECTION AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, GIFT OF THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM, 2009; ANONYMOUS GIFT, 1953).

In the end, I was often dependent on the collection team's knowledge and memory of the collection to identify objects, and that created a really interesting and, for me, unexpected dynamic in the research. I remember both you and Marci (Morimoto, the Associate Collections Manager) mentioning that you could remember certain qualities of a garment without necessarily remembering exactly which garment it was. But that by retracing your steps (that it was something you worked with during a particular project), you would find them. How do you think memory shapes your relationship to the collection? And what was it like to focus on these very small and often rather unglamorous things, rather than some of the more spectacular parts of the collection?

LIZ

Memory shapes a lot of how I think of any collection I work with and automatically plays into how I interact with the objects on a daily basis. Over the years my mind has collected snippets of information and images from the objects and the experiences I've had. Most of those collected images are where and when I saw an object either in storage, working with the object one-on-one, or seeing one of the team members giving an object some preventive maintenance love. When someone asks something specific about the collection or the objects in it, this is the memory bank that I draw from first. It can be faulty from time to time, but there is always a trace of the memory that is pinging in my mind. This skill deepens my own understanding of a collection, particularly with that instant recollection of its contents which is invaluable when working with my colleagues.

As for the unglamorous things, I actually don't think of any object in that way. All of them hold a specific place or role in the broader scope of their collection as a whole. Whether they are the showstopper masterworks or a simple nineteenth-century chemise, they each have a story to tell. This is why when we approached your project, it was very refreshing to be spending time with objects that don't get requested often. Even ordinary objects hold valuable information into what a life might have been like for the owner. What was it like to regularly darn your stockings and socks rather than purchase new as can be common practice today? What did it feel like when putting on those soft and smooth kidskin gloves that were purchased in Paris for the owner's wedding trousseau? In general, due to the great volume of The Costume Institute collection, only a small portion of the collection is considered for exhibition or requested for research, so bringing these lesser seen objects to light is always significant and can actually be a very revelatory part of collections care. Hands-on experience with the art cannot be replicated by any other means and there is so much to learn from the inner parts and construction of a garment that you can't always see in images or descriptions.



FIGURE 5 IMAGE OF GLOVES IN COSTUME INSTITUTE STORAGE

LEFT TO RIGHT: GLOVES, CA. 1867, FRENCH, C.I.62.35.14A, B; GLOVES, ALEXANDRE, CA. 1867, FRENCH, C.I.62.35.15A, B; GLOVES, ALEXANDRINE, CA. 1867, FRENCH, C.I.62.35.12A, B. ALL THREE PAIRS ARE A GIFT OF MISS ELIZABETH R. HOOKER, 1962. DIGITAL IMAGE, RANDOLPH, 2021.



FIGURE 6 GLOVES, CA. 1867, FRENCH, C.I.62.35.14A, B (GIFT OF MISS ELIZABETH R. HOOKER, 1962). (POLAROID, SAMPSON, 2019).

As part of the exhibition process, objects are treated by Conservators to prevent additional damage from being on display. That may sometimes mean removing the traces of the body that are integral to your study. Historically, those treatments may have taken place with no documentation, while today that process is tracked throughout. With your interest in the pre-treatment state of the garment, how do you feel about whether that information and process should be considered a living part of that object's online presence?

ELLEN

I'm aware that at times there seems to be inherent tension between my interest in (and possible romanticization) of these damaged objects and the museums' duty of care towards them. The qualities I am interested in are often the very things that put these objects at risk of further material degradation — and possible deaccession. I often think about that in the context of the pair of embroidered stockings from an 1880's accessory set you showed me — prior to entering the collection, they'd been repaired so many times — with different threads and in different ways- the toes are a mesh of stitches¹⁹. And that evidence, both of repeated wearing but also of these processes of care and repair is really important; it is to borrow from Appadurai,²⁰ evidence of the social life of things.

¹⁹ Accessory Set, 1887, British, [C.I.37.44.16a-d](#) (Gift of Miss Irene Lewisohn, 1937).

²⁰ Appadurai.

However, I wouldn't place my interest in opposition to the need to care for and conserve them. I think that valuing these traces of use means we should attend to them — and document them — but accept that sometimes objects are past saving. I'm currently writing a chapter which explores deaccession in relation to Freud's ideas of decathexis — thinking about how an object loses its value or potency within a collection — and the layers of loss which are inherent in that. I also think there could be an amazing photographic or film project in documenting the deaccession process and then the next steps for those objects. I am just starting work on a data visualization project with a colleague (Andrew Richardson) at Northumbria which explores ways of mapping the absences in museum clothing collections. It explores both the absent of bodies of wearers which much of my earlier work address, but also objects which have been misplaced, deaccessioned, or otherwise removed, and gaps in collections created through previous (or current collecting policies) — the things we fail to collect. You are right though; do I think that conservation interventions should be made more visible or accessible to the public — both because conservation processes are such an important part of the afterlives of clothes, and equally because these marks- however ugly they are an important aspect of a garment's history and retaining a record of them preserves that history. A really good example of this is "Inherent Vice" by Sarah Scaturro and Glenn Petersen, from The Costume Institute's *Charles James: Beyond Fashion*, exhibition catalogue. I would love it if detailed conservation interventions were accessible through online museum catalogues. I think it would both highlight the importance of conservation work but also perhaps dispel the myth that objects in museum collections are in stasis, when at times they are living very active afterlives!



FIGURE 7 ACCESSORY SET, 1887, BRITISH, C.I.37.44.16A-D (GIFT OF MISS IRENE LEWISOHN, 1937).



FIGURE 8 ACCESSORY SET, 1887, BRITISH, C.I.37.44.16A-D (GIFT OF MISS IRENE LEWISOHN, 1937).

Clearly you work with these garments in a very different context. Do you think there's a middle ground between these two interests: these marks and holes as records of experience and the need to preserve or maintain them as historical objects?

LIZ

This is such an interesting question to me! It can be very challenging and discouraging to care for an object that is disintegrating from inherent vice such as body contact by the original wearer or by production methods such as weighted silks, incompatible materials, or unstable plastics. When an object gets to a state where it can no longer be preserved due to intense degradation, collections stewards often have to make a very practical but sometimes difficult decision to remove it from the collection through deaccessioning. It is an important part of collections care to continually be assessing the contents of the collection and collaborating with the curatorial and conservation teams to consider what objects should be taking up valuable resources in space and staff time for their care. These assessments also follow a standard museum-wide protocol of considering redundancy within the collection or institution, appropriateness for the collection's mission, quality, and aesthetic merit or historical importance.

Objects that are deaccessioned and removed from a collection do sometimes reduce the scope of what is available for researchers to access and for future generations to study, although the collection began as a selective picture of fashion history from its origin. Extant objects offer a narrow view of fashion because they automatically beg the question, why did this piece survive while others didn't? As well as, who does this object represent? There is no institution in the world that is able to develop a collection that offers a complete equitable picture of all of the world's peoples from every socio-economic level. I find it important to remember that when I do think of the limitations of the collection. It was never meant to represent everything and, in fact, when the focus becomes more broad, the time and energy that can be given to every aspect of the collection becomes even more improbable.

That being said, I absolutely do think there is a middle ground for objects which have marks and holes as records of experience. Some objects aren't deaccessioned when they hit an extreme level of degradation because of the importance they hold in fashion history or the collection. In these cases, resources will be dedicated to their care, but with the understanding that they will likely never again be exhibited and can rarely be shown to researchers for fear of exacerbating their condition. In my opinion, preserving these for the long-term can allow opportunities in the future for them to be researched, recorded, and possibly presented to the public by digital means.

To me, it is all about very thoughtful consideration when assessing objects for removal from a collection. There are many factors to consider beyond just the health of the object such as do they meet the collection's mission? If not, is there another collection whose mission would benefit from these objects, and would it be prudent to consider transferring these objects to enhance both collections? I'd like to think so.

In your own words, you see the collection and your work through a sometimes romanticized light. Why is that and what has been your emotional attachment to the research?

ELLEN

I think my obsession with and possible romanticization of imperfect clothes comes from my interest in their emotional valency — the ways that used garments become vessels of both material matter and of feelings, still visibly entangled with the bodies which once used and cared for them. I often refer to clothing as emotional objects and I'm particularly interested in psychoanalytic interpretations of our attachment to clothing, the ways that garments can act as a form of transitional phenomena mediating internal experience and external reality. I've written about the idea of the garment as "cleaved" to its wearer:²¹ continually joining with them and pulling away both physically and psychically.

In the context of this project my interest in the emotional valency of clothing in museums, has two interlinked but distinct strands. Firstly, how do the traces of bodies in archives — the stains, creases and crumples which litter many old clothes, but are rarely visible when they are on display, act upon us — how do they make us feel? Why are the traces of bodies that are no longer there so poignant? How might their power be used in alternative approaches to displaying clothes? This topic was something I

²¹ Sampson, 2018.

explored in my artist residency and small exhibition *Emotional Objects* at the Bard Graduate center the year my Costume Institute fellowship ended. But I'm also interested in the embodied and emotional experience of working in clothing archives. How our sensory and emotional experience of archives informs the ways we work in them. That interest is particularly informed by my research methods — as a practice-based researcher my work often involves recording my own sensory and emotional responses to my research subject and thinking about my own bodily experience of the clothes I work with. That said, I think archival research is always a very bodily and sensory experience no matter what research methods you use.



FIGURE 9 EMOTIONAL OBJECTS (CYANOTYPE, SAMPSON 2019).

LEFT TO RIGHT: GLOVES, LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, ITALIAN, 26.56.93, 26.56.94 (ROGERS FUND, 1926); GLOVES, BON MARCHÉ (FRENCH, FOUNDED CA. 1852), CA. 1900, FRENCH, 1975.259.3A, B (GIFT OF ETIENNE LAWRENCE STURHAHN, 1975); GLOVES, EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, PROBABLY AMERICAN, C.I.50.8.6A, B (GIFT OF MRS. WILLIAM MARTINE WEAVER, 1950).

As someone who (up until the pandemic) spent most days in an archive, how do you feel your emotional and embodied experience of this space and the objects it contains shapes your work and relationship with it? Do you ever reflect upon your sensory experience of the spaces? Do particular experiences or interactions stay with you?

LIZ

Oh yes, constantly. There is honestly no feeling I can think of which compares to walking into a collection and knowing you have been entrusted with its care. Part of that feeling is drawn directly from the sheer amount of history surrounding you while another part is drawn from knowing that these objects are placed in the museum as part of the public's trust in the Institution as a means of preserving their history. I am just in much awe of the collection itself as I am of the trust that has been placed in my hands.

When working in The Costume Institute, visitors would often come into the office workspace and storerooms and see them as sterile. That initial intuition elicits an immediate understanding of the professionalism of the work that is performed there. Everyday preventive maintenance is the core of collections care, and it is the essence of collections roles within a museum, much like an annual physical with a doctor is key to preventive healthcare. This sort of clinical care is the way I experience a collection. I ask myself if I am doing everything I can to preserve this object that is within my means and the time I have. When the answer is no, I have to consider how to plan for attaining the means to better care for the object and developing a project that will allot dedicated time to its care.

When I'm doing preventive maintenance with an object, such as packing the object for storage, the memories that stick with me are all sensory-based, like what an object feels like, its weight, or the texture of its material. Some objects even have a distinct sound from the tinkling of small paillettes or the rustle of a crisp cotton or silk. And the most delightful of all, is the smell. There are certain aisles in The Costume Institute collection which house early 19th century garments that smell distinctly earthy with fireplace smoke and something sticky and sweet like molasses, giving away their prolonged exposure to pre-Industrial heat and lifestyles. These first-hand memories are sometimes very unexpected, but actually are some of the things I like most about working with a collection that can't be gleaned from an exhibition or image. These sense memories don't change how I directly work with the collection, but they do bring a certain level of joy and excitement that can't be gotten by any other means.

ELLEN

That sensory experience of smelling old clothes really reminds me of the passage in *Worn Worlds*²² where Peter Stallybrass describes putting on Allon's Jacket: "If I wore the jacket, Allon wore me. He was there in the wrinkles of the elbows, wrinkles that in the technical jargon of sewing are called 'memory'; he was there in the stains of the very bottom of the jacket; he was there in the smell of the armpits. Above all he was there in the smell."²³

²² Stallybrass, 1993.

²³ Ibid, 1993, p. 28.



FIGURE 10 COSTUME INSTITUTE COMPACTING HANGING STORAGE SHOWING 1820S–1860S WOMENSWEAR. (DIGITAL IMAGE, RANDOLPH, 2021).

LIZ

What a beautiful passage and reminder of how precious those sorts of memories are. Thank you for sharing.

What has been your most exciting find in The Costume Institute collection? How about throughout your archival research in other institutions? Do you have a favorite image you've taken that you would consider your best legacy so far?

ELLEN

Several of my favourite garments are ones which you “found” — the ones you directed me towards. In particular, the Valentina handkerchief smeared in bright pink lipstick, which remains one of my favourite objects in the collection). It was something I never would have found without you and yet it's so dramatic and raises so many questions: why is it covered in lipstick? Why wasn't it cleaned? Why did it remain with the rest of the outfit? It feels almost like a polaroid itself, a moment of time preserved on a square of silk. The body of the wearer is so present on it — you can literally see the creases of the wearer's lips. Whilst I think I've now gone some way to unpacking the story of that outfit and a possible reason for the lipstick stain, (I am pretty sure the outfit was worn by actress Margaret Leighton in the play “The Chinese Prime Minister,”. One of the ensemble's donors, Roger L Stevens, produced the play and it had costumes designed by Valentina, although I don't know if removing the lipstick was part of the performance or just something that happened) the initial experience of meeting those marks, their affects, was so strong.

²⁴ Ensemble, Valentina (American, born Russia, 1899–1989), fall/winter 1963–64, American, C.I.64.16.3a–g (Gift of Mr. Roger L. Stevens and Valentina Schlee, 1964).

Beyond that, the repaired stockings are pretty amazing, as are a pair of long gloves from Le Bon Marche²⁵ that I had identified as possible objects before even starting the fellowship. There's also a pocket with a handwritten note²⁶ attached tracing its province that I love — I'm really interested in annotation and taxonomies. Perhaps what unites all those objects for me was their intimacy — the way they convey a kind of connection or relationship with the user. There's a Jeffery Feldman²⁷ article I love called [Contact Points: Museums and the Lost Body Problem](#), which thinks about the power of objects that have been held and used. Feldman writes that they are a “general category of object that results from physical contact with the body, and then subsequent removal or destruction of the body” (2006: 246). In terms of the images I made, I think the ones of the gloves are pretty strong: their form makes the absent body so present. There's also a series of photos of collars from West Point,²⁸ which look like sculptures or pots. And I have an out of focus polaroid of some fishnets,²⁹ whose ghostly quality I love.



FIGURE 11 COLLAR, 1880–84, AMERICAN, C.I.47.76.5 (GIFT OF MISS ALICE BALDWIN BEER, 1947); COLLAR, 1880–84, AMERICAN, C.I.47.76.6 (GIFT OF MISS ALICE BALDWIN BEER, 1947).

²⁵ Gloves, Bon Marché (French, founded ca. 1852), ca. 1900, French, 1975.259.3a, b (Gift of Etienne Lawrence Sturhahn, 1975).

²⁶ Pocket, 1820, British, 2009.300.3472 (Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of the Brooklyn Museum, 2009).

²⁷ Feldman, 2006.

²⁸ Collar, 1880–84, American, C.I.47.76.5 (Gift of Miss Alice Baldwin Beer, 1947); Collar, 1880–84, American, C.I.47.76.6 (Gift of Miss Alice Baldwin Beer, 1947).

²⁹ Stockings, 1920s–1930s, American or European, 1989.340a, b (Gift of Mrs. Dorothea Y. Wittmer, 1989).

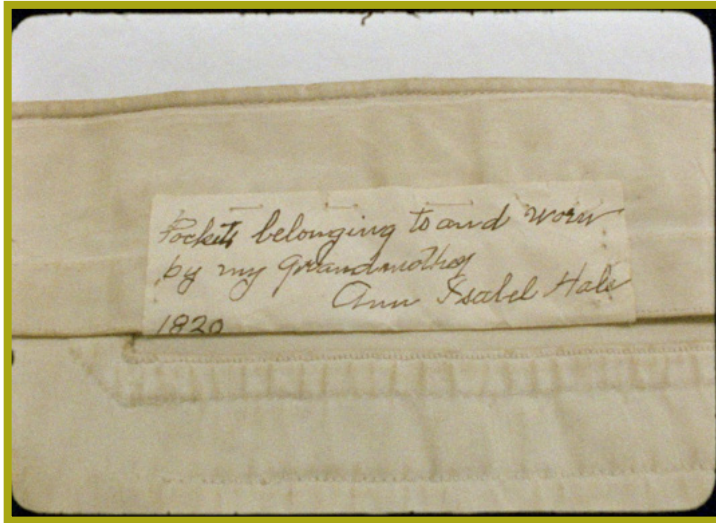


FIGURE 12 POCKET, 1820, BRITISH, 2009.300.3472 (BROOKLYN MUSEUM COSTUME COLLECTION AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, GIFT OF THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM, 2009).

FIGURE 13 STOCKINGS, 1920S–1930S, AMERICAN OR EUROPEAN, 1989.340A, B (GIFT OF MRS. DOROTHEA Y. WITTMER, 1989).



FIGURE 14 LIPSTICK STAIN ON HANDKERCHIEF PART OF ENSEMBLE, VALENTINA (AMERICAN, BORN RUSSIA, 1899–1989), FALL/WINTER 1963-64, AMERICAN, C.I.64.16.3A–G (GIFT OF MR. ROGER L. STEVENS AND VALENTINA SCHLEE, 1964).



ELLEN

I wondered how you feel about objects which Feldman might term contact points- ones which show traces of contact with the body. How do you feel they can be used or worked with in museums and archives? And more broadly What are your favourite objects in the collection; has that changed over time?

LIZ

On the surface, I don't have a strong reaction to working with objects that have remaining contact points left by the body, except in how those traces make the object difficult to exhibit or store. On an emotional level, the moments when you are handling an object with major condition issues, either from lingering body presence or material composition, can be extremely discouraging when you are tasked with the health of a collection. To have something disintegrate as you handle it, is downright heartbreaking even when you know you are doing everything you can to preserve it. Although, I know I should be more sympathetic to what the original wearer has left behind, either in garment misshapeness or mending, I honestly don't often dwell on anything more than what I can do for that garment in the present.

My favorite objects in any collection are the ones that are directly tied to the periods I found fascinating when I grew up spending time with my mom and her antiquing, which was the 1880s through the 1900s. There is something still remarkable to me about the changing silhouette of fashion through those thirty years, which I will never be able to let go. There is something romantic about them to me, maybe drawn from nostalgia, but I think it will remain with me forever.

I was, and still am, completely fascinated by your use of older types of filming and photography which lend an additional air of nostalgia to the objects. With all the contemporary technological means to capture objects in natural vivid color, detail, and even 3D, what inspired you to use older equipment to capture the objects for your book? Remind me, what were those cameras again? Is there a risk the film you need for your technology will become unattainable? And, if so, will it affect the direction you go to capture future projects?

ELLEN

I work predominantly with analogue film (16- and 8-mm cine film, polaroid, and medium format slides) in part because I love the aesthetic qualities these mediums produce — the tones and qualities of images. As an artist and researcher whose work is about the materiality of garments, I want

the images I make to have a certain material presence. My aim is to use the materiality of film to highlight the materiality of these objects: their bodily and intimate nature. In doing so I draw upon Didi-Huberman's³⁰ framing of both analogue images and stains as indexical imprints, so that I'm trying to make images which emphasize the bodily materiality of these objects and equally the bodily nature of my attention to them.

Although there's been a resurgence in film photography, analogue films still go out of production. One of my favorite cameras, a 1970 polaroid that was used for forensic photography, uses FP-100 peel-apart film, which creates really beautiful and vibrant images with a lot of detail. I used it for many of the images in my book *Worn*. That film was discontinued in 2016 — I still have about twelve boxes, but I'm sorely aware that each box I open takes me closer to never using it again.

For me, one of the striking things about making images at the CI was that I didn't have object handling privileges. Which means that I have a very particular set of sensory memories about working with these objects. Because my photographs are often close up and of interiors, they required that we work together to create them. The process felt very collaborative. Previously when I've worked in archives it's been a very singular process — me working with an object alone. The collaboration with the collections team really changed that. The images feel collaborative, and even though (mostly) no bodies are visible in the photos and film I think the images feel quite bodily and intimate. Although obviously most researchers coming into the CI want to take photos for their records, I've often wondered what it was like having an artist researcher in the archive. You were all incredibly accommodating — and as I've said the images were very much produced in collaboration with you and the team. Was this the first time you'd had someone making this kind of work in the archive and how did that feel?



FIGURE 15 IMAGE OF SHELLY'S HANDS HOLDING GLOVE OPEN.

³⁰ Didi Huberman, 1984.

LIZ

We had reopened The Costume Institute collection in 2018 for research appointments and I can honestly say that this was the first time for a request like yours. In general, there are guidelines in place that limit who is able to request in-person object viewings, as well as which and how many objects that can be shown in one viewing. This is mostly due to the overall fragility of textile which benefits from being handled minimally, although it is also affected by how much time goes into hosting an object viewing. Each object that is requested has to be pulled from storage, checked for possibly malignant plastics (the hidden bane of many of our early to mid-twentieth century objects), have their accession labels checked to confirm they are up-to-date, have condition checks done by the conservation team to make the most out of the objects removal from storage, and then be re-packed after the viewing before being returned to storage which sometimes includes updating their archival tissue as needed. This process, coupled with all of the normal daily exhibition and direct collections care work, can be time consuming which limits how many object viewings can be feasibly hosted in any given month.

This leads me to your request, which initially was a surprise to consider how best to accommodate considering the normal process but was actually very exciting because it was a type of documentation that I hadn't even considered. That experience was invaluable and has helped me to see and appreciate the objects on an entirely different level when spending time making sure the objects will be viewed to their best, whether that is by adjusting their silhouette on the table or updating their tags, so the modern tracking system doesn't become a distraction from their historical context. It was overall, a nice experience and opportunity to use skills that I don't use on a day-to-day basis when the safety of the collection is more important than how it looks in storage.

I love how you developed the images from this project in a blue tone. Can you speak more to that? Why did you choose this look for the project?

ELLEN

The other process I used a lot whilst at the CI was cyanotype (an early form of photographic reproduction in which contact prints are made from negatives or objects using paper coated in a solution of ferric ammonium citrate and potassium ferricyanide). I was first drawn to making cyanotypes

after reading a book by Carol Mavor (who was my PhD examiner) entitled *Blue Mythologies*,³¹ which talks about blue in artworks and emotion and includes cyanotypes by early photographer Anna Aitkin alongside contemporary photographers Esther Teichmann and Annabel Dover. I love the way Carol writes and I think I want to tease out some of that potency in my own work.

Cyanotypes are often contact prints where objects are placed on the treated paper to create an image, but with the images from the CI I worked from digital negatives. The decision to use this process was for a combination of practicality — I didn't have a studio whilst I was in New York so had to work in a relatively contained way (I did a lot of that printing in the bath tub of my tiny apartment — although I also worked with brilliant photographer Molly Rapp at Penumbra Foundation on some of the larger prints). The fact that the blue tones seemed so evocative and perhaps changed these images from something quite everyday (stains and holes on pale coloured garments) to something more powerful. I continued using cyanotypes in my development of the CI images for my exhibition and residency at Bard Graduate Center Emotional Objects, which focused on gloves and handkerchiefs as vessels of emotion.

In an ideal world, how would you like to see the objects in the collection, particularly those which are rarely displayed, represented — what images and information would you like to be included about them. How might you allow people to emerge with fragile objects in different ways?



FIGURE 16 ELIZABETH RANDOLPH PRESENTING TO THE FRIENDS OF THE COSTUME INSTITUTE IN 2019. ENSEMBLE, GIANNI VERSACE, SPRING/SUMMER 1992, ITALIAN, 2018.608.7A–D (GIFT OF HANS, KAZUKO, AND SIV NILSSON, 2018). (IMAGE COURTESY OF REBECCA SCHEAR 2019).

³¹ Mavor, 2013.

LIZ

In an ideal world, I would want to give each and every object an opportunity to shine with in-depth research, detailed photography, and a thoughtful consideration of where it fits in history so that information can be shared publicly. If every object had a fully fleshed-out online presence we would be doing the best we can to fulfill the wishes of the original owners, collectors, and donors, as these objects were entrusted to the Museum as artifacts of a person, their lived experience, artists, and the world around them. It is the job of a collections steward to honor that trust by making the art accessible, which sometimes means interacting with the art minimally, and expanding on what is known and shared publicly.

The reality is, when you have a 30,000 object collection there just isn't enough time or resources to go into such detail with every object in the collection, which makes it all the more important to share these objects when possible, whether if that is with researchers, details in social media, or bringing their importance forward during a collection assessment. All museum professionals share a passion for their collections, its history, its depth, its importance, and its stories. We are all stewards of its legacy and, in my case, I am honored to fill that role and share my experiences in whatever I can.

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Ellen Sampson is an artist and material culture researcher who uses film, photography, and writing to explore the relationships between bodies, memory and garments, both in museums and archives, and in everyday life.

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