

An Interview with Petra Slinkard

Nancy B. Putnam Curator
of Fashion and Textiles at the
Peabody Essex Museum in
Salem, Massachusetts

By Marley Healy

Abstract

This article contains an interview with Petra Slinkard, the Nancy B. Putnam Curator of Fashion and Textiles at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. Ms. Slinkard is the first to hold this position at the museum and has held it since February 2018. Prior to this, Ms. Slinkard was the Curator of Costume at the Chicago History Museum. She has a Bachelor of Science in Fashion Merchandising, a Bachelor of Arts in Art History, and a Master of Science in Fashion/Textile History. Over the course of almost ten years, leadership at the museum endeavored to create

a plan that would mobilize its fashion and textile collection and reinvigorate its active collecting of fashion objects. This year, the museum opened a new wing that has allocated a specific venue for showcasing exhibitions dedicated to the exploration of its fashion collection.

What follows are excerpts from a conversation between the author and the curator. Topics include the Fashion and Textile Collection at the Peabody Essex Museum, the new Fashion and Design Gallery, and the accessibility of the institution's collection.

KEYWORDS:

fashion collection

fashion exhibition

historic dress

social media

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INTRODUCTION



Figure 1. © Peabody Essex Museum. Photography by Aislinn Weidele of Ennead Architects.

I love surprises. Especially when they're hidden gems of the wide museum world. One such gem is the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. Salem is, of course, probably most known for its checkered, witch-related history and contemporary spooky seasonal offerings, but it boasts something much more exciting: The Peabody Essex Museum, or PEM as it is referred to by locals, is a bastion of art and culture, comfortably embedded in the center of this small town whose history and cultural offerings span far beyond witches.

As an undergraduate living in Boston, Salem was always a seasonal destination to visit with friends and soak in the merriment around Halloween, but for a history major, Salem was one-stop shopping when it came to a seemingly endless supply of museums, historical societies, and experiences that explored a vast collection of both local and art history. The PEM is one such museum. Artworks and materials from Asian, European, and Native American cul-

tures have contributed to the museum's diverse and far-reaching collection. It is no surprise that its holdings in maritime materials are expansive given the museum's early roots and development from the East India Marine Society in 1799 and the Essex Historical Society founded in 1821, each with their extensive developmental history. Amongst the many treasured and well-travelled trade articles and glamorous foreign objects that would have caused quite a stir at home in the relatively sleepy town of Salem, textiles and accessories from overseas found their way into people's lives and subsequently into the collections of these institutions. This, of course, means fashion, in the truest sense of the word.

PEM has a substantial fashion and textile-based collection that includes strong holdings of sub-genres like Colonial American dress, South Asian, and, particularly, Korean dress, among others. Over its history, the PEM has hosted several fashion-based exhibitions, but the most notable ones

have occurred in the last ten years, including *Rare Bird of Fashion: The Irreverent Iris Apfel*, an exhibition curated at The Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York, which PEM later hosted in 2009. This proved to be a popular exhibition for the museum and the beginning of a long-term relationship with Apfel that will ultimately lead to a full bequest of her personal collection to the PEM when she passes. At the time of this exhibition, serious conversations began around the planning for a permanent gallery space in the museum that would be devoted to telling stories with objects of fashion and design from the PEM's collections. This space finally came into fruition in September of 2019 when the Fashion and Design Gallery was opened to the public.

The new wing containing the Fashion and Design Gallery boasts 120,000 square feet, or approximately 11,100 square metres, and is currently displaying an installation that asks visitors to engage with the objects through thoughtful interpretation and prompts that compel them to write or draw answers that convey their own experiences. Fashion as a concept can appear, at face value, unapproachable and many people tend to see high fashion garments or historic dress objects as being detached from their own lives. However, if they are given a context in which visitors can appreciate the design inspiration that created them or understand how to make comparisons between old and new, then they can foster reasonable connections that

will resonate amongst a large demographic. The gallery is not the only new addition to the PEM. A brand new, state of the art storage facility is currently rehousing the fashion and textile collection, an amazing opportunity for every piece in this collection to receive the attention that it needs; everything from condition reporting to updating catalog information to rediscovering hidden gems is being undertaken.

Public accessibility of collections is such an essential element to clothing's interpretations, for both researchers and the institutions who house them. There were several times as an undergraduate that I thought of the PEM whilst working on various bits of research (historical and fashion-related, of course) because I had heard about wonderful eighteenth-century pieces in the collection. Unfortunately, however, there was not always someone available at the museum who had the particular knowledge base or bandwidth to devote that kind of time to a student researcher interested in historic dress. Thankfully, under PEM's new fashion initiative, there is tremendous desire to create opportunities for all kinds of study and attention to be paid to the Fashion and Textile collection. This refocus begins with the appointment of a curator to guide the active collecting of new acquisitions, of course, but also who will be responsible for identifying and telling the most significant, inclusive, and electrifying stories possible from the permanent collection.

Another element to accessibility that begs consideration is the PEM's use of social media and how vehicles like Instagram can be positive tools in sharing their collections with a wider audience. Fashion is so entrenched in mainstream media — with many popular, contemporary designers already well-established on platforms like Instagram and Twitter — that it is a natural and effective method for disseminating current collections and sharing news about what is coming next. Of course, almost every other industry has bent social media outlets to their own promotional or educational agendas, and this, thankfully, includes museums. Since geography (and often the cost of admission) creates barriers to museum visits, Instagram, for example, is an astonishingly effective method to communicate and share with millions of people who otherwise might not have access to the museum. How the PEM will evolve its social media

presence based on programming around the new Fashion and Design Gallery is an exciting prospect considering its, until recently, somewhat quiet voice. The PEM can be found on Twitter and Instagram @peabodyessex.

With a fashion collection, especially of this magnitude and breadth, having not only *a* fashion curator, but *the right* curator, to oversee it is absolutely crucial. After years of internal development, in 2018 the PEM hired Petra Slinkard as its Nancy B. Putnam Curator of Fashion and Textiles. Ms. Slinkard chatted with me about the opening of PEM's new Fashion and Design Gallery, the collection, and her plans for opening it up to make it more accessible. Ms. Slinkard can be found on Twitter @pslinksp and on Instagram @pslinks.

INTRODUCTION AND BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM

PS: The quick history of PEM (which I could go on about for some time) is that it was formed in 1992 by merging two separate museums, the Peabody Museum of Salem and the Essex Institute. The Essex Institute was founded in 1848 as a historical society to house the history of Essex County, of which Salem is the county seat. That is essentially where the foundation for PEM's Western fashion collection was laid. And simultaneously out of the East India Marine Society (founded in Salem in 1799), the Peabody Museum evolved to focus on the collecting of objects and material culture representing countries and cultures with whom the sea captains of the East India Marine Society (EIMA) had primarily engaged with [for example] Asia, South Asia, Oceanic Islands, etc. . . In 1992 when the institutions consolidated into one was when it became the Peabody Essex Museum. The manner in which [the then Director] envisioned bringing the Peabody Essex Museum into the twenty-first century was to focus on an active exhibition schedule, so the museum began to emerge as this new institution by creating innovative, out of the box exhibitions from its own collection or through collaborations and by hosting travelling exhibitions.

ON PEM'S FASHION INITIATIVE & THE FASHION AND TEXTILE COLLECTION

PS: In 2008 my colleague Paula Richter mounted a fabulous, beautiful exhibition called *Wedded Bliss* that focused on wedding traditions with apparel from around the world. Then she did an exhibition on embroidery called *Painted with Thread* which was another beautiful exhibition that also drew primarily from our own collection. Then in 2009 the museum had the opportunity to host the *Rare Bird of Fashion*[: *The Irreverent Iris Apfel*] exhibition which had debuted at The Met.

The exhibition came in as a tip from one of our trustees who is an acquaintance of Iris Apfel and saw a version of the show in West Palm Beach. She called PEM's director and said "Listen, I think this might be up your alley." Lynda Hartigan, who at the time was our Chief Curator and is now our Deputy Director, went down and looked at it. Then the Director, Dan Monroe, went down and looked at it and they thought "Oh you know, what the hell?" This sounds like a great idea!" and so they asked to host the exhibition here. PEM ended up being the last stop on a tour, which Iris oversaw herself because The Met was not travelling [with] the exhibition. [Iris] was really quite taken with the museum's perspective and the way that they mounted the exhibition, which was very theatrical and very whimsical, and it really just resonated with her. Lynda, who came from the Smithsonian and came onboard in 2003 as Chief Curator,



Figure 2. #NewPEM Asian Export Art. © Peabody Essex Museum. Photography by Kathy Tarantola.

has an active interest in fashion personally and professionally and she started to have a conversation with Iris about wanting to kick start a fashion initiative. Iris then made the decision to bequest the *Rare Bird of Fashion* collection to PEM and it became one of the catalysts for creating our new Fashion and Design Gallery. When [the exhibition] happened, it was quite successful and [they] discovered there was hunger for fashion in this area. That's sort of when a string of collaborations and exhibitions from institutions such as the V&A, the Kyoto Costume Institute, and the World of Wearable Art [happened]. Funding was then secured for an endowed position to really solidify the fashion initiative and that's when the search began for a curator. After about a year, it became official that I was selected as the curator. I've been here for a year and a

half. When I arrived, it was like “Welcome! You have to open this gallery in a year and half so you better hop to!” So, all of these plans were sort of in the works for a really long time, almost ten years now. But like anything, it grows and grows and grows and no one really notices until all of a sudden it blossoms!

MH: Are people generally surprised that there is a, frankly, really good, fashion-based collection in Salem? I remember telling some friends of mine that I was going to see the shoes exhibition (*Shoes: Pleasure and Pain*, November 19, 2016 to March 12, 2017) in Salem, and they were like “What...? Why is that *there*?” Is that an attitude that the institution has already seen and is trying to combat?

PS: I think people are surprised that it exists at all and to the quality it does. I certainly didn’t know and I’m working in the field. I think part of it is the challenge of accessibility, because Salem is a destination, and it is a worthwhile destination, but you have to want to come here. And on top of that, we didn’t have much of a digital presence and that’s something that we’re definitely working towards under our new director. I think people who have been active in the dress, textile, social-historical, art-historical fields are aware,

particularly those who are interested in Colonial American history, of PEM’s holdings and the importance of those holdings. But in the last twenty years we weren’t doing a lot of active collecting with a focus on the mid-twentieth century and forward, so one of my charges is to focus on collecting contemporary fashion with an eye to global fashion. Again, redefining how we look at our fashion collection, not just looking at it from the American or Euro-centric perspective. We have one of the largest and best Korean textile collections outside of Korea. People in Korea know that, people who study Korean art history know that, but the general public doesn’t know it. I didn’t know when I arrived here. I think the collection as a whole has been kind of a sleeping giant for a long time, so I feel really privileged and really excited to get to be one of the people that gets to help share it with the rest of the world. We have a lot of work to do and it’s going to take some time, but it’s very exciting and I definitely think that the more people learn, the more intrigued they are because it is something that they aren’t expecting. The museum’s overarching focus is on art and culture, and fashion collections at large, particularly those that are of an international scope like ours is, are a perfect fit for an institution like PEM.

ON THE NEW FASHION AND DESIGN GALLERY



Figure 3. #NewPEM Fashion and Design. © Peabody Essex Museum. Photography by Bob Packert.

MH: I know the Fashion and Design Gallery is sort of an amalgamation of different cultures and finding commonality across mediums and genres, so how do all of these things speak together when they have such fundamentally different backgrounds?

PS: It's a good question and one of the ones that we've had to grapple with as we formed the Fashion and Design Gallery. In traditional art museums, these genres tend to be marginalized and compartmentalized and certainly that was something we did not want to do. We also had to devise a plan in an effort to do it thoughtfully so that not any

one culture or an object from any one culture was tokenized. Also, the idea that we as an institution would dictate to people what good design is was something that we immediately rejected and instead we adopted a construct for the design of the gallery that we would invite people to explore all of the different ways in which design and fashion surround us. In that way it provides us with an opportunity to talk about how design exists in our lives and that we as human beings have an impulse to create objects for use and pleasure, and that we build upon and evolve our designs based on expe-

riences and gained knowledge. But this isn't new. It has been going on across multiple cultures and time periods so it's really more about the opportunity to respectfully juxtapose objects from various cultures together to tell a story about humans and design. I'll give you an example from the gallery. One of the areas in which we're talking about is how fashion design can intimidate or empower. In this section we group four disparate objects; a military uniform worn by an individual who lived in Salem during the War of 1812 — it's very jaunty, a dress designed in 2010 in camouflage by Junya Watanabe, a sculpture that is a mostly accurate, but still whimsical reproduction of a samurai warrior's costume, and a Nick Cave sound suit. Here are four very different manners in which an artist is borrowing from the visual vocabulary of military dress or the notion of war, in an effort to define or redefine empowerment and intimidation. The question we then pose to our audience is "What's your armour?" Is it your business suit or your traditional dress that you put on when you are celebrating an aspect of your heritage or your religion? There are multiple ways we can think about "dressing as empowerment or as intimidation" This is how I envisioned the kind of conversations we wanted people to have in the gallery. I see these kinds of juxtapositions as a means for fostering an evolving discussion.

MH: It's very exciting how the PEM's Fashion and Design Gallery is going to proceed and what your hopes are for its programming which seems to be very much interconnected with other aspects of life, including art and culture. *How does fashion inspire other subjects? What sources does fashion draw inspiration from? And how can individuals interpret and connect this with relevance to their own lives?* A lot of people tend to see high fashion garments or historic dress objects on display as being very removed from their own lives and experiences. Unless it's given a context that people can appreciate the design inspiration that created it or get a feel for how to make comparisons between things like an 1812 sailor suit and a modern camouflage dress.

ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND FASHION COLLECTIONS IN MUSEUMS

MH: Visitors are responding to the gallery's question, "What is your armour?" and the responses that you're posting on the PEM's Instagram have been really interesting and fun to see. I wanted to ask you about social media because fashion objects are so uniquely suited to "sharing" in a way that other objects aren't as well. I mean, they are, but fashion is so entrenched in mainstream media like Instagram and Twitter and all these things, so it's a very easy connection to make for museums to use social media. Is the desire to continue to do more interactive auxiliary things like this in the Fashion and Design Gallery and around the fashion collection in general?



Figure 4. #NewPEM Fashion and Design. © Peabody Essex Museum. Photography by Bob Packert.

PS: Yeah, and I think it's interesting because social media is such a special tool. But what I have found, and I don't know if it's because there are all of these enthusiasts and scholars littered across the country, across the globe really, that are intrigued by this topic, but it seems like we now all have this outlet for connection. Personally, I've really been able

to use it as a compelling tool to connect with other scholars, and to connect with others who wouldn't refer to themselves as scholars but who I would say are equally as knowledgeable in the subject. I think the exchange of information that takes place among dealers and buyers is also really interesting. The sheer amount of ephemera and material culture that is being shared I have found to accelerate scholarship in a rather exciting way. Last, I think that because fashion tends to be one of the genres that is more difficult to access because objects are fragile, storage is cumbersome and there's all these other restrictions put on them, being able to share behind the scenes shots, up close, detailed interior shots, etc. is really exciting for people. Particularly for those who know what it is that they're looking at. It provides a sense of freedom and connectedness that we've not had before and I find it to be really inspiring. But I agree that I think fashion, when its flat on a table or dressed on a mannequin, can elicit different responses and some of it really is eye candy and some if it is "I don't care how bad the image is, just give me more!" And I find that to be really fascinating because, personally I don't have that same visceral reaction to a painting.

MH: Well there's also something to be said about the scale of something like a painting or a sculptural piece whereas a lot of what is so intriguing about something like a dress or another fashion object is a small detail. And you can really get up close for a detail that will fit perfectly in a small box on Instagram and it's so easily shareable. You can pick objects and share these small details, either a bit of embroidery or a button or

something, and the people who are interested in that sort of thing will like it. People always want to "see how the sausage is made" so any opportunity to give them a close up or more intimate view is appreciated.

I like that very much as something that museums can do to share their collections with the public, but it seems like an institution's social media presence and bandwidth sort of dictates whether they pursue it or not. And also, at the end of the day, does that kind of social media activity actually pull more people into the museum? Because that's what you want it to do, ultimately.

PS: I can say that when I was in Chicago, and now more so than ever because it's grown over the last six or seven years, I will find myself at PEM events and people will approach me and say "You don't know me, but I follow you on Instagram." To me, it's an honor when someone seeks me out. I love that because it shows that they want to be more involved and it's someone we can embrace and bring them into our museum family. But also, that they're paying attention and that they care and are excited. For me, as a curator, I would love nothing more than to be on the floor every day engaging with the public in an installation or an exhibition that I've worked on, but that's just not possible. So, I found Instagram to be an immensely helpful tool to engage people retroactively who either enjoyed or maybe didn't enjoy and experience or just to simply usher a "thank you". I have had many a fruitful conversation offline that initiated from an exchange on social media. I think it has broken down a barrier between curators and the public.

ON THE COLLECTION'S ACCESSIBILITY

MH: It was very exciting for me when I learned that there was finally going to be a curator specifically for the Fashion and Textiles department at the PEM and that there was, presumably, going to be more accessibility. When there isn't a designated curator for a department/collection, it can be a real challenge for researchers, like myself, who are interested in fashion and historic dress objects and want to conduct hands-on, primary research. Even if there is someone within the institution who has the appropriate knowledge base, the next issue that you often face is their bandwidth, whether they have the time and resources to devote to spending pulling objects and answering questions for a visiting researcher. While I was a student in Boston — several years prior to your appointment as curator — that was always a source of frustration for me with the PEM because I knew that there were [fashion] objects in the collection, really good things that I would have been very interested to learn about and explore their application to my own research.

PS: Since you asked about the PEM's fashion initiative, one of the components I'm really keen on is opening up our collection by making it more accessible. I want to provide points of access for students, scholars, and professors as well as the public people who want to have more of a cursory understanding of a certain decade or era or designer or really focus in on a particular technique. I do not believe in hoarding material and locking it away. But, another consideration is the pace at which this institution has grown has been so accelerated, we are now at this pivotal a point where we have a new state of the art, 120,000 sq. foot facility and we are in the process of slowly, piece by piece migrating all of our collections from our outdated facility to this new facility. With that, it's providing us the opportunity to do the proper inventory, proper cataloging, all of the things that I think are big challenges for institutions that have been around for a long time because collecting happens in spurts and you never really have enough people, time, or resources to do it the way you want.

ON THE PEM'S UPCOMING MADE IT EXHIBITION & THE CHALLENGES OF GENDER-FOCUSED THEMES

MH: It's always exciting to see exhibits that focus on women designers in their own right and the stories of their journeys. For example, women who started out as seamstresses and then gained popularity and notoriety through their work. I was always fascinated by the stories of these individual women who did incredible things within the confines of their time periods. In that respect, it's really exciting that *Made It: The Women Who Revolutionized Fashion*, the exhibition coming up in May of 2020, will showcase designers like Madeleine Vionnet, Elsa Schiaparelli, and maybe some lesser-known names and tell stories about these amazing women who forged career paths for themselves and contributed to the fashion industry in a variety of ways. For this exhibition, the PEM is partnering with Gemeentemuseum Den Haag (GMDH) to put it altogether. Are they lending objects?

PS: This is an interesting tie back to your Instagram question. The mission of the Chicago History Museum (where I was before) is different than PEM's mission. The Chicago History Museum's mission is to share Chicago stories, so even though CHM has one of the best fashion collections in the country, someone in that position is not likely going to tell a general fashion story, but rather a fashion story that has a Chicago tie to it. One of the things that we were exploring there was a pitch that I had proposed to do an exhibition on female fashion designers in honor of the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 2020. There are institutions all around the country that I think are going to engage in this in some way. I was really excited

about it because CHM's collection is so rich and there are so many wonderful examples, but I then left and came here. Then, as I was sort of scrolling through Instagram one day I noticed that Madelief Hohé, who is the fashion curator at the Kunstmuseum Den Haag, posted a stack of books and some kind of comment to the effect of "coming through the pipeline" or "up next: women in fashion." So I wrote her, "tell me more!" and she said "Oh, we're doing this exhibition called *Femme Fatales* and I felt very strongly after the women's march and when Maria Chiuri took over the house of Dior that this was a moment to focus on female fashion designers." And I thought that is fantastic! Because I had had an idea to focus on female fashion designers and I didn't think that I'd be able to see that through because of my change in institutions. And I began to wonder if maybe we could work together. The KMDH's collection is very rich in early European works with fantastic examples by Vionnet and Chanel — pieces that we don't have in our collection. So, we have teamed up to do a version of her *Femme Fatales* show, titled *Made It: The Women Who Revolutionized Fashion* opening here in Spring 2020. KMDH is loaning PEM 60 examples from their collection and in an effort to round out the discussion of American fashion history, we are augmenting with our own collection, a few strategic acquisitions, and loans from private collectors. We're looking at about one hundred different garments representing the work of about one hundred different designers, covering the span of about two hundred and fifty years of fashion history.

I'll be the first to say that I sort of tossed and turned about doing an exhibition that is so binary specific and questioned what that means. Yes,

it is absolutely an exhibition about women and celebrating women and I don't think there's anything wrong with celebrating women, but I also see this exhibition as an opportunity to share stories about individuals who have had a lasting impact on the industry and whose stories may have been overlooked or forgotten.

MH: I think that's right, absolutely. I agree that there's always sort of trepidation around any subject that is too binary which, in and of itself, is also very exciting that we now consider things like that and people are generally very receptive to them. On the one hand that's really great, but on the other to consider doing a show that's just about women as being "restricting" is so weird because women have been marginalized for so long.

PS: That's the philosophical debate that I've been having! Because we want to focus on marginalized individuals and a relatively marginalized segment of our population, which is the majority of our population, and yet in order to do that you're further marginalizing them. And sort of compartmentalizing them as a group. So, it's kind of a conundrum mixed up in a vicious cycle...

MH: There are certainly ways of making those connections and sharing those stories, and it's really exciting, but it feels so daunting. How do you make a decision in regard to a show that is the most inclusive of everyone being represented and everyone who is going to come see it, and what are they going to glean from it? But that's one of the exciting things about curating and I'm excited to see this show!

PS: Thank you! We will be excited to have you out.



MARLEY HEALY is a Consulting Curator based in Boston, Massachusetts with expertise in fashion history and dress-based exhibition making. She has a Bachelor of Arts from Harvard University Extension School where she studied History and Anthropology, and a Master of Arts in Fashion Curation from the London College of Fashion at University of the Arts London. Marley reviews fashion-based exhibitions and catalogs, including *Iris van Herpen: Transforming Fashion* and *Reigning Men: Fashion in Menswear, 1715–2015*. She has curated multiple exhibitions including *Reveal* at the Rambert ballet company on London’s South Bank, *Threaded, Traveled, Treasured* at the Japanese Friendship Garden in Balboa Park, and *Beauty or Torture?* at the Women’s Museum of California. Her special areas of interest include late nineteenth- to early twentieth- century women’s active sportswear, fashion illustration of the early 20th century, and cross-disciplinary approaches to exhibition making. Follow @marleyannelise on Twitter and Instagram, or you can email her at marleyhealy@gmail.com.

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PETRA SLINKARD is the Nancy B. Putnam Curator of Fashion and Textiles at the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM). Petra joined PEM in 2018, following her role as Curator of Costume at the Chicago History Museum (CHM), where she worked with a collection of more than 50,000 examples of fashion and textiles. Petra conceived and curated the exhibitions *Chicago Styled: Fashioning The Magnificent Mile® and Making Mainbocher | The First American Couturier*, for which she authored catalogues of the same titles. Prior to CHM she worked at Newfields (Indianapolis Museum of Art), where she helped expand the museum's fashion exhibition offerings and collection, as well as key public programs and its Fashion Arts Society.

At PEM, Slinkard's focus is to foster the growth and innovative, inclusive spirit of the museum's celebrated fashion initiative and to develop a vibrant array of exhibitions, installations, and programming that celebrate the global impact and reach of fashion. She aims to strategically enhance the museum's collection of fashion, costumes and textiles from around the world — spanning the 17th-century through today, and work with the museum's new Fashion Visiting Committee. Follow @pslinks on Instagram and @pslinksp on Twitter.