

Dr. Sylvia S. Riskin Project in the Politics of Fashion

—
"With Bustle" by Richard Martin

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COSTUME is an engaged art, embracing the body, articulating appearance and identity, and negotiating social exchanges. In its vitality and co-dependence to the body, clothing is at times an anomalous presence in the modern museum, that bourgeois institution of so many richness, so much sumptuary and consumption awe. Of course, couture fashion and some other fashion from court styles of the past to the most expensive garments of our time fit readily into the museum as modern mirror and locus of aspiration. But these are not my consideration nor are they ever my portfolio as a curator or my preoccupation as an historian. Inevitably, perhaps, the perception has been that costume collections are the repository of prized garments of nobility, social elites, or merely the most rich. In fact, many curatorial enterprises have seemed to reinforce this conceit, offering only the most extravagant and sumptuous display of apparel, thinking little of downstairs when upstairs is so enchanting, establishing little in terms of criteria of historical or aesthetic judgment, and posing few ideas about the garments on display. In this characterization, I am perhaps faulting museums in general – those art museums who have taken the auction-house and popular success of Impressionism as a guide to special exhibitions, for instance – as much as I might be describing the practices of costume collections subsumed within historical societies and art museums.

In 1938, Irene Lewisohn, one of the founders of the Museum of Costume Art, gave the collection four worn dresses [plate 1] identified as twentieth century and Carolinas Mountains provenance. Lewisohn's unsaid command in this donation to her own museum can only be: let us now praise famous women. One of the founders of one of our most soigné institutions tendered documents of The Great Depression in American rural life as if she were one of those Farm Security Administration photographers documenting American life in the thrall of economic Depression. Four dresses can



1. Carolina Mountains dresses, The Costume Institute. (Photograph 1998)

hardly stand against the 270,000 photographs taken between 1935 and 1943 by the Farm Security Administration, yet the presence of these garments in a costume museum in New York in 1938 can only be taken to be a cognate phenomenon. For the most part, clothing entering costume collections has been elite and in good condition. The original cataloging of these dresses in 1938 notes that their condition as worn. They are patched and threadbare today as they were sixty years ago. Is it possible that Lewisohn was prompted by the sentiment of social documentation and social transfiguration that was the core enterprise of FSA photography and of the New Deal? They are political, social, and even menacing in their indictment of inequity today as they were sixty years ago. These dresses have not, I would propose, lost one iota of their ability to identify. Their pathos, their social declaration has not been diminished by time. Lincoln Kirstein, writing on FSA photographer Walker Evans, noted: "The most characteristic single feature of Evans's work is its purity, or even its puritanism. . . . Every object is regarded head-on with the unsparing frankness of a Russian ikon or a Flemish portrait. . . . It is also the naked, difficult, solitary attitude of a member revolting from his own class, who knows best what in it must be uncovered, cauterized, and why. The view is clinical." So it must have been for Lewisohn; her donation was clinical and yet it possesses no less the faculty of apparel to be poignant and powerful, even unforgettable.

On a recent day, these touchingly modest dresses from rural women's wardrobes cohabited a photographic studio in The Costume Institute of The Metropolitan Museum of Art with an extravagant Balmain and a florid *dix-huitième* Dior from the 1950s huddled like a Cinderella foursome intimidated by extravagant and extroverted sisters. But, I would argue, they are not silent. On the contrary, these baleful dresses speak of costume study and its purview as readily and eloquently as any court gown. So urgently that

I dedicate this publication to them; they are my subject, my devotion.

Today the Museum of Costume Art that Irene Lewisohn founded is safely ensconced within The Metropolitan Museum of Art as a result of an absorption agreement executed in 1946. The Metropolitan Museum of Art is often identified with pride as a true museum of the masterpiece in being a highly selective, but universal, institution. Those Carolinas dresses continue to reside in what may be the finest collection of costume anywhere in the world.

The Museum of Costume Art was further engaged in another enterprise that would be hard to reconcile with much museum practice today. The Museum of Costume Art created an exhibition entitled "An Exhibition of Authentic Costumes from Museum's own and other collections together with interpretations by Distinguished American Designers" at La Maison Francaise from 23 May to 6 June 1938. Indubitably, such an exhibition must be viewed as an element in the innovative campaign to exalt American designers and to encourage their independence from the model of Paris. As Sarah Tomerlin Lee recalled in *American Fashion* (1975), "The American fashion community, before World War II, was a colony of France as truly as America was England's before the Revolution."

In this campaign, Dorothy Shaver and Virginia Pope, of Lord & Taylor and the *New York Times*, respectively, were prime movers; Elizabeth Hawes was a leading polemicist, especially with the appearance of her best-selling book *Fashion is Spinach* in 1938. Among the design juxtapositions of the 1938 exhibition were a fur-trimmed coat [2] designed by Mark Mooring for Bergdorf Goodman (the dynamic and legendary Ethel Frankau of Bergdorf Goodman was sister to the Museum of Costume Art's Aline Bernstein and friend of Irene Lewisohn) based on a fishskin coat from the Tungus tribe of Northeast Siberia in the collection of the American Museum of Natural History and a Jessie Franklin Turner dress [3]



2. Fishskin coat, Tungus tribe, Siberia, and Mark Mooring coat, The Museum of Costume Art. (Photograph 1938)

sourced from an Ainu robe from Japan and lent by the American Museum of Natural History and another Turner hooded ensemble [4] inspired by an American Museum of Natural History Koryak cloak from Siberia. Norman Norell created a bridal gown inspired by a woman's Mexican fiesta costume from the Museum of Costume Art. Clare Potter of Charles Nudelman offered an evening ensemble taken from a Javanese dance costume in the Museum of Costume Art and a pants ensemble based on an 1830 woman's dress in the Museum.

Such works indicated that ample inspiration was available outside of the usual dependency and conduit from Paris. This is exactly what the Americans were trying to prove. More than prove a native genius equivalent to the long patrimony of French taste and style, they could establish a visual vocabulary and then simply demonstrate an Emersonian autonomy in the claim that they held a distinct history of their own and thereby the roots of new invention. In 1938, Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer-prize-winning play *Our Town* exemplified an American theatre ennobling American small-town values.

Again, in 1940, the Museum of Costume Art presented an exhibition of cumbersome title, but simple inference. "A Designers' Exhibition of Costumes and Millinery derived from Museum Documents" was presented at the International Building in Rockefeller Center from 14 October to 9 November 1940. Among the designers represented in this exhibition were Tom Brigance of Lord & Taylor, Clare Potter of Charles W. Nudelman, Inc., Helen Cookman, Jo Copeland of Patullo Modes, Inc., Emmet Joyce for Saks Fifth Avenue, and again Jessie Franklin Turner. One must remember, of course, that this exhibition occurred at a particular moment in history. While in 1938, one could speculate on the autonomy of American fashion and the exploration for new ideas, by June 1940, Hitler had throttled Paris, war was imminent even for Amer-



3. Ainu robe and Jessie Franklin Turner dress,
The Museum of Costume Art. (Photograph 1938)



4. Koryak cloak and Jessie Franklin Turner hooded ensemble,
The Museum of Costume Art. (Photograph 1938)

ica, trans-Atlantic crossing was all but impossible, and America was unequivocally cut off from its usual fashion addiction to Paris. The five to ten years of decrying European influence and asserting American values and initiative was to be put to the test in fall 1940. Fashion analyst Tobé reported, "1940 will go down in history as the year in which the whole structure of the fashion business [in America] had to be rebuilt. For with the collapse of France . . . went the foundation of the fashion world as we have known it. . . . We must begin immediately to build up *authority* for American designers as the creators of fashion for America."

Amidst this frenzy and charged international situation, the Museum of Costume Art's 1940 exhibition was a manifesto of a kind for an activist museum, eliciting excitement for the resources of an American tradition. For the 1940 exhibition, a poignant and important juxtaposition was presented. Janet Hollander for S. Shapiro designed a white synthetic crepe afternoon dress inspired by an American linen duster in the Museum of Costume Art [5]. The Hollander dress takes its hood and scalloped collar and pockets directly from elements of the duster. To be sure, Hollander also makes her version especially patriotic in a way that we might want to excuse for 1940: flags on buttons and stars on the hood in red, white, and blue only suggest the spirit of 1940 and of a nation at war. Fervor is to be expected; research is perhaps the surprise of this garment. Hollander developed her dress from study of the linen duster and hood in the Museum of Costume Art.

This practical duster had entered the museum's collection just a year earlier and was already being put to use as an American example for a new American creation. As the crepe dress answered to the Emersonian yearning for American design to be free of European impress and to respond to an indigenous American ethos and aesthetic, it was, of course, of the sportswear that America had invented in the 1930s and was refining in the 1940s. Red, white,

and blue it was, but it also spoke the plain, uninflected American vernacular of utility and the lives of American women.

Hollander, in concert with the Museum of Costume Art, established a beachhead for American design history and initiative in the first season since the fall of Paris. This is a seminal dress: it re-directs American enterprise to things American through the specific and deliberate role of a museum. Ironically, these two garments, crepe dress and linen duster, were last seen together in 1940; they were never shown again or reunited until the "American Ingenuity" exhibition (April–August 1998) at The Costume Institute. As we saw these two garments together in 1998, we must be mindful that they belong together and constitute a moment in fashion history only because of the express stance of the Museum of Costume Art to engage its time. This was not an aloof museum; this was neither a mortuary nor a dumpster for the dresses of the rich and famous. This was a committed design propagator and instigator, an institution that was ready to serve, in peace and war, to involve designers in ideas of the past.

For most curators today, especially in institutions pertaining to fashion, these values are either anathema or absent. Yet, had the Museum of Costume Art chosen to hide its head in the sand in 1940, would American sportswear and American fashion independence have developed with the confidence and alacrity that it showed? Without negating the considerable influences of certain retailers, designers, journalists, and others, one must acknowledge that the Museum of Costume Art played a prodigious role in American fashion at the most critical moment in its twentieth-century history.

For American designer sportswear was founded in a confluence of powerful individuals and institutions. Dorothy Shaver began her vehement campaign to recognize American ready-to-wear designers in 1932. Virginia Pope at the *New York Times* had begun to iden-



5. Janet Hollander dress, 1940, and American linen duster, The Museum of Costume Art. (Photograph 1940)

tify American designers in the 1930s and insisted that fashion was not merely commerce and copies. By the 1940s, Eleanor Lambert began to establish such institutions of American design as the American Fashion Critics' Awards (launched at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1942) and the Council of Fashion Designers of America that could speak for the American designer and provide honor to the designing profession. Retailing, journalism, and special events were, because of these charismatic individuals, rallying to the cause of American design. Lambert and Shaver were closely involved with the Museum of Costume Art; Shaver was a member of the Board of Trustees of The Metropolitan Museum from 1954 to 1959. Together they were the two most important founders of the Party of the Year to provide financial support for what the Museum of Costume Art had become in 1946, The Costume Institute, beginning in 1948.

The spring 1944 collection of Emily Wilkens represents a similar synergy between the museum and the contemporary designer. Wilkens based her collections on children's dresses of the latter part of the nineteenth century in the Museum of Costume Art, promoting (through her publicist Eleanor Lambert) it as adapted from museum objects, once again American artifacts. Wilkens selected children's dresses out of a Louisa May Alcott world, but rendered them as suitable party dresses for teenagers in the 1940s. When Wilkens received the American Fashion Critics' Award for 1944 (along with Adrian and Tina Leser; presented February 1945), her citation read:

Emily Wilkens is a young American designer of taste and originality who recognized an age group of the feminine public which deserved style consideration – and gave it to them. This faction is the teen-age girls to whom Emily Wilkens devotes all her talents. The result has been clothes which not only please the youngster, but are acceptable to her mother. Dur-



6. Emily Wilkens cotton girl's dress, 1944. (Photograph 1944)



7. Emily Wilkens evening dress, 1944. (Photograph 1944)

ing the past year, the pre-eminence of Emily Wilkens has put the spotlight on teen-age fashion.

The designers of 1944 were working in a war-weary circumstance for fashion, one that necessarily had wholly liberated the American designer from the earlier enstrangement of the Paris umbilical. The ready-to-wear was being acclaimed in such award winners as Claire McCardell in 1943 and by the time of Wilkens's 1944 award even a category of ready-to-wear clothing that might previously have seemed insignificant. The award citation speaks as much of marketing as it does of design invention. Wilkens's blue cotton [6] and yellow cotton dresses of 1944 respond to childrenswear that Wilkens examined in the collection. A rust-cotton dress, CI 41.2.1, of ca. 1888 yielded smocking to substantiate the shoulders which Wilkens uses as a gathering of the yellow cotton dress at the shoulders and criss-crossing of the chest. A plaid silk child's dress of ca. 1900 provided a white lace trim interlaced by a black velvet ribbon as used in the yellow dress and a motif that become a favorite for Wilkens. Thus, there was not only a immediate derivation from the collection, but Wilkens had discovered an abiding motif for her work. While these garments were never part of an exhibition per se, the Museum of Costume Art cooperated with the designer. In proffering the new classification of the teenager as a clothing consumer, Wilkens mitigated that novelty by providing a solid attachment to the American past, one that in a country struggling to end fierce wars in Europe and the Pacific must have seemed like the strains of a *Ragtime* yesterday, familiar and nationalistic, public-spirited and benevolent.

If Wilkens projected a more peaceful Americana, a suite of family values *avant la lettre*, she indubitably did so in her red-and-white striped cotton long party dress [7] of 1944. Worthy of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (1943), which was enjoying its Broadway run at this time, an evening gown of easy care and bright

stripes was almost pure Americana in its easy-care optimism, its accessible and abiding fabric, and its simplicity, almost as if it were a home-made dress. But even this dress, in its ingenuous 1940s optimism, has strong roots in historical appropriation and acuity. In the first showing of this dress since it entered the Museum of Costume Art in 1945, it was juxtaposed [8] in "American Ingenuity" (April–August 1998) with an 1880s American seersucker dress with bustle. The import was clear: a washable American dress of 1944 is related to another washable American dress of the 1880s, both striped, both related in bodice, both with ruffled bottoms, and both with like silhouettes. If there are such compelling and consistent points of analogy, is there not the likelihood that this dress, though not the overt copy of the past that other Wilkens's pieces had been, also a 1940s garment inspired by the past?

That likelihood is even reinforced by the original press copy attached on a folded sheet of paper to the original publicity photograph of the Wilkens's dress. The copy, prepared by Eleanor Lambert, refers to the "bustle-type bow" in the back of the dress, barely discernible in the photograph as shot more or less frontally. Even if the bow is largely hidden, Lambert insists that we understand its historical referencing and establishes and authorizes our intimidation of the 1870s and 1880s about this dress. In fact, one might even wonder if a patently historicist citation would have seemed advantageous in 1944, given the waxing prospects for America after the War. But it is clear from Lambert's assertion of the "bustle-type bow" that the paradigm of American history still prevails for fashion in 1944 and thus constitutes an integral part of the "selling" and promotion of this dress. Some lingering sense of a Golden-Age America continued to hold powerful sway even as World War II continued to isolate the country from European (and Asian) sources and instilled pride in endemic American origins.

The paradigm of American sportswear that was founded by pio-



8. "American Ingenuity" installation. (Photograph 1988)

neering women designers in the 1930s and 1940s would emerge from the War challenged by a resurgence of Paris and the renaissance of high style after years of deprivations, but would ultimately win not the battle of the fifties but the fashion war of the second half of the twentieth century. Designers made garments; retailers developed an ethos of American style; public relations established institutions and organizations; journalists as influential as Sally Kirkland of *Life* and Bernadine Morris of the *New York Times* reported on the birth of American style. We would expect all these active, real-world agents to be involved and that their story is complicated and fascinating, involving many of the most charismatic women in the history of fashion. But we must also not forget another energetic partner in the exhilaration of American designer sportswear and autonomous fashion at its inception: the museum.

In these accessions and interventions of 1938 through 1944, the Museum of Costume Art assumed an extraordinary role as an active agency of American fashion. The Museum of Costume Art not only granted pedigree to American fashion, but even strove to justify the new in American design. Are we to accept these simply as the extreme circumstances of War, the vital necessity of living in such perilous times, or should we seek to extrapolate from these examples and seek to re-establish the museum as a place of dynamic negotiation between fashion as a real world and the museum as a preserving and interpreting environment?

Fashion poses this question with some force. We know that the history of modern American art has been significantly influenced by the collections and policies of the Museum of Modern Art. Yet, we would also recognize that fashion, even more than art, answers to impulses ordinary and extraordinary, within institutions and deliberately standing away from the establishment. Once upon a time, the Museum of Costume Art was a passionate, engaged institution capable of changing the course of American fashion.

Let's remember that example and honor it, not in passive scholarly approbation, but in doing likewise, in urging the costume museum to be active, aggressive, and ambitious. Long ago, a trio of bleak vernacular dresses came to dwell where visitors are more likely then and today to expect exclusive and glamorous gowns. Perhaps they, more than any couture creation, serve to remind us forever that fashion is our immense art and our most touching art.

Moreover, the interval of 1938 to 1944 was a time when the Museum of Costume Art was itself innocent and independent. It did not have to answer to an umbrella art museum or even to an entrenched board of trustees, but instead spoke among its own founders. The inventors of the Museum of Costume Art were an enlightened and generous cohort. One might argue that their judgment and perspicacity were exceptionally refined. One might also argue that their willingness to engage in the fray of the moment, whether in the active sociology of understanding one's own time or of providing collections materials to be used for the express purpose of influencing contemporary fashion, would be a rare trait among museum founders or funders in our time who would more generally offer timidity and aridity rather than decision and the speculative aspect of being involved, of being dynamic. But, conversely, does the Museum of Costume Art become a place of indiscretion by dint of this public and active role? Maybe it is presumptuous for an institution such as an art museum to intercede in the ways of the world. If the museum enjoys the privileged position of being a sanctuary, is such sanctuary vitiated by acts of indulgence in the public and unentitled sphere? The fine arts, taking place on a pedestal or in the sanctuary of a frame on the wall, might imply some reserve and might further insinuate a preserve that may refer to the world, but never quite mingle with real people. Clothing, of course, is something very different. It is real and honest to the body and body politic whose shape it retains forever. In that intractable

frankness, in that impress of the social in a form that we may identify at once with both aesthetics and the social contract, perhaps we have a model that demands that we take on the real world as an alloy, as a mirror, as an arena for all that we do. Let the painting and sculpture curators and historians retreat into the privileged worlds they seek; let the fashion historians interact and elect to have an impact in that world that is not fashion's other or sinister shadow, but fashion's constant partner.

But I must speak for a moment of an art museum, one that I know well, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in offering a last insight into the War years. In 1942, The Metropolitan Museum of Art presented "Renaissance in Fashion, 1942" in the Great Hall of the institution. The June 1, 1942 issue of *Vogue* reported with enthusiasm on the 28 contemporary dresses inspired by the Renaissance: "They are a radical and revolutionary departure for the Museum. Never before in its history have new clothes been shown in its halls. Planned a year ago, the exhibit shows the way ancient arts can be used as a basis for modern technique. Among the designers, under the chairmanship of Ethel Frankau, were Sophie Gimbel, Omar Kiam, Leslie Morris, Mark Mooring, Juana de Garson, Wilson Folmar, Jessie Franklin Turner. . . . The exhibit showed that dress-making is undoubtedly one of the nation's active minor arts. . . . And it also proved that the Metropolitan Museum, a cautious custodian of the past, can also be a clever showman of the present." *Vogue's* enthusiasm may be a trifle naive. After all, the only reason costume came to the core of The Metropolitan Museum of Art was because all the "significant" art of the Museum had been shipped out of New York for the duration of the war for fear of enemy attack. These dresses were allowed in some measure in art's default. Fashion snuck into The Great Hall only in emulation of art, a lesser commodity to take its place only in the absence of the "authentic" art. It is, however, interesting to note that Ethel Frankau, sister of

Aline Bernstein, one of the founders of the Museum of Costume Art, was the prime mover for this exhibition.

Museum history is, of course, an enterprise of many interests and inevitably of many conflicts. The 1970 book by Calvin Tomkins, *Merchants and Masterpieces: The Story of The Metropolitan Museum of Art* was a semi-authorized and sanctimonious account of the Museum's history. Of the Museum of Costume Art and The Costume Institute, scant attention is paid. The brief notice given resonates with the priorities of the Hoving-era of the late 1960s and early 1970s at the Museum. Citing the Museum of Costume Art as "absorbed" into The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1946, Tomkins writes,

This organization had been founded ten years before by Irene Lewisohn, Aline Bernstein, Lee Simonson, and others interested in costume history and design, and its merger with the Metropolitan was welcomed by everyone except the staff of the Egyptian Department, which had to give up some of its gallery space as a result. The Costume Institute, as it was called after the marriage, came with a sizable dowry and has supported itself ever since on the proceeds of its annual 'Party of the Year,' an October ball held at the Metropolitan and attended, at \$100 a ticket, by all the notables of the garment industry. With more than sixteen thousand costumes dating from 1690 to the present, plus a library of books on costumes and costume design, it is widely used by professional designers of all kinds and is today the only department of the museum that specifically carries out that section of the 1870 charter providing for 'the application of arts to manufacture and practical life.' (p. 292)

Tomkins is an informed and informative journalist, although some updating and emendations must be made to his remarks. Without digressing too much, the famous "Party of the Year" to

provide an annual supplement to the endowment of The Costume Institute, was launched with a midnight-supper party at the Rainbow Room at Rockefeller Center on 18 November 1948, costing \$50 a plate; in 1960, the Party took place for the first time in The Great Hall of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (as to be expected, controversy followed; the 21 November 1961 *New York Times* headline read: "New Dance has Brief but Stormy Night at Museum; Twist Danced at Metropolitan As Director Watches in Dismay"); today the Party continues at \$2,000 a plate each December.

More importantly, Tomkins invokes the 1870 charter in the same manner as Thomas Hoving did as Director, especially in the justification of the controversial "Harlem on My Mind" exhibition. Every history is ultimately a subjective history, telling of its own time as a measure on the past. The Hoving-Tomkins moment sought one purpose and extracted The Costume Institute from what was otherwise oblivion to serve that purpose. In the manner of museum policy as local politics and as ruthless *Realpolitik*, it should also be noted that the annexation of the Museum of Costume Art was a rare success for The Metropolitan Museum of Art as it celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in 1945-46; a planned campaign to raise \$7.5 million failed and was abandoned at roughly \$1 million; in some ways, a museum in a desperate financial tailspin at the end of World War II took the Museum of Costume Art as its rich wife, seized her dowry, and then requested that she go to work one night a year to raise additional funds. In any case, fashion real and rich, married an eminent, even haughty, institution.

I consider another official photograph [9] of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, this of the fifth gallery of the exhibition "Wordrobe" presented in September–November 1997. You can perhaps observe that in this final gallery the glass access panel is open and was open throughout this exhibition, allowing mannequins to step on a platform more or less level with and contiguous with the spec-



9. "Wordrobe" installation. (Photograph 1997)

tator. This last dozen or so mannequins are both climax and justification of the exhibition, demonstrating the premise that words, letters, numbers, and cognate symbols inhabit clothing with a particular force, especially in the twentieth century. The reminder to be given, even by an august museum, was that we are witness on a daily basis to the presence of letters and symbols on apparel. I insisted that mannequins break the case as it were and move into the real space of the visitor as the exhibition took much of its significance from its observation of real life. Somewhat unorthodox label copy read,

American, highly lettered and logoed sportswear ensembles, 1997; mixed media; Courtesy Gap, Tommy Hilfiger, Donna Karan, Calvin Klein, Nautica, Nike, Phat Farm; Mark- and language-filled clothing floods our daily life in the 1990s. Whereas "Wordrobe" may have seemed initially a conceptual, rarefied approach to clothing, it proves to be a way of living more than a mere hypothesis in 1990s attire. A surge of contemporary sportswear covered in letters, words, and numbers escapes the confines of a museum to enter the real world.

I must report that the security system of the vitrines was not breached and that the loan agreements for these sportswear loans were not our standard agreements, but were construed as photo-shoot loans, specific in stating that these garments would, in some instances, be within reach of the public. Yet, all I did was to open the door of the glass wall symbolically and literally. An animated cohort in sportswear, I would argue, would have broken through the case even without my opening of one door; I was only answering to the art itself, releasing fashion from a museum artifice to be what fashion always is and must be: free and lively. It is our responsibility to keep fashion free, to set it free, and not to imprison it or place it in a cage of our own making. Why all this bustle? Because fashion matters.

But it would be vainglorious for me to end having just cast myself in the role of the Great Emancipator. After all, I have put a lot more mannequins back into locked vitrines since the "Wordrobe" exhibition. I am looking here only for a metaphor in the midst of our meditation and our museums. Each year, the Council of Fashion Designers of America holds its annual gala, an extraordinary and extravagant evening in which fashion is rendered glamorous and radiant. Given, fashion exudes joy and well-being. It can convey confidence and it can bestow confidence. Now, I simply want to remember in no less exhilaration that fashion supposes freedom, the wondrous self-expression and the mutual responsibility that exist in being a whole human being.

RICHARD MARTIN

I have known of the extraordinary role of The Vera List Center for Art and Politics as a forum for open analysis of relevant issues in art-related decision-making, chiefly through friendship and admiration for Maurice Berger, for some time, but was startled to be approached in 1997 by its director Sondra Farganis, along with Marshall Blonsky, to participate in an April 1998 evening panel or "event" on "Fashioning Beauty at Century's End," under the auspices of the Dr. Sylvia S. Riskin Project in the Politics of Fashion. That "event" was the genesis of this paper nearly two years later as immediately the idea of the Riskin Project struck me as exciting.

It represents a keen personal satisfaction to me in two regards. One is the involving personal friendship and association with a charming and stimulating benefactor. I am very grateful for the generous and open support of Sylvia Riskin. I have also gained a new friend in Sondra Farganis and will prize such friendships with Sylvia and Sondra as founded in innate social and political bond, topped off with similar cultural curiosities. The thoughts of these pages are passionately mine, but the freedom and not only the ink of the Riskin Project and List Center have enabled me to speak. These two women are wondrous champions of free speech in fora where it is challenged more by freedom from intellectual conformity and convention than by regulation and restriction.

As these ideas have been effective in my professional practice as well as my thinking about fashion over the past two years, variations on or portions of this paper have appeared in other presentations, including three important occasions. I was privileged to consider some related themes at a symposium "Dress on Display" at the Victoria & Albert Museum co-sponsored by the Museum and the Courtauld Institute History of Dress Association, University of London, in July 1998. I was able to go back to the same material again for a better try in October 1998 for the keynote address to the Costume Society of America Region III annual meeting at The Ohio

State University, Columbus. More recently, I was able to involve some of these examples in my keynote address for the Parsons and Cooper-Hewitt Master's Program March 1999 Annual Symposium in the Decorative Arts. Along that way, and for most wonderful support, I thank Maria Ann Conelli, Patricia Cunningham, Marie Essex, Tim Gunn, Valerie Mendes, Rebecca Merry, Aileen Ribeiro, and Gillian Skellenger-Carrara.

This essay comes down to being little more than a journal, one strand of my life of the past two years. I present it no less emphatically because it is so subjective. On the contrary, its subjectivity is its fervor. When Sondra Farganis timorously suggested a publication, I brashly knew the topic: not quite a harangue, but no prim précis of another pretty book on fashion. I knew, too, the designer, Marvin Hoshino.

Seldom do so many perfect things happen in accord. Funding, institution, interests, individuals, timing, etc. You have all given me a generous gift and I am most grateful for being part of this blessing.

R. M.

THE Vera List Center for Art and Politics, founded in 1992 with the generous support of philanthropist Vera List, is the New School's vehicle for debate, discussion, research, and reflection concerning the complex and vital relationship between politics and the arts. Committed to insuring the future of democratic culture, the Center serves as a forum for those seeking an open analysis of relevant issues in order to fully inform all aspects of art-related decision-making (e.g., federal and local policy making, art education curricula, museum practices, arts-related media coverage).

Embodying the legacy of the New School's historic involvement with the arts – one that began more than eighty years ago when a group of dissident intellectuals decided to launch an alternative to the conformist atmosphere of most American universities – the Vera List Center has been created in the spirit of intellectual freedom and exploration. It is the site of reasoned discourse, for learning about urgent political, social, and cultural issues from all perspectives, a place for honest conversation about controversial topics.

We initiated this series of occasional papers in order to provide a forum for ideas that are complex, nuanced, and controversial, and which deal with issues that occupy the space between art, culture, and politics. Each of the writers to whom we turn has been invited to challenge ideas they find troublesome. The Center will honor its mission to the degree that these papers raise issues and pose problems that encourage debate and challenge us to defend or reassess even deeply held beliefs about our civil culture. We seek a true exchange of ideas and welcome your contribution to the discussion generated by these papers. We will have achieved our goal if we can set in motion a series of papers that, added to the Center's programs, provide a mechanism for discourses on democracy.

SONDRA FARGANIS

Occasional Papers

1

David Rieff: "Therapy or Democracy?
The Culture Wars, Thirty Years On"

2

Richard Martin: "With Bustle"

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