



DISPLAY OF PLUMAGE: A brooch containing feathers from the now-extinct Carolina parakeet, shown on a dress made in 1886

Style & Substance

Cornell's Fashion + Textile Collection houses thousands of items of apparel, from ball gowns to firefighting gear

BY ALEXANDRA BOND '12

What do a velvet flapper dress from the Roaring Twenties, a T-shirt from a Taylor Swift concert, and a swatch of fabric from an astronaut's spacesuit have in common? They're just a few of the more than 10,000 items in Cornell's Fashion + Textile Collection, an assemblage of clothing, tapestries, purses, jewelry, quilts, shoes, and more dating from the late 1700s to the present day. "When you walk into the collection it's overwhelming," says apparel design alumna Sian Brown, MA '20. "You can almost feel the history of all the items."

The collection's holdings fall into three main categories: Western clothing, textiles, and accessories; ethnographic garments and accessories from around the world; and functional apparel. The first group—by far the largest—includes a wide array of gowns from the 1800s to the present day, a rhinestone-studded Elvis impersonator costume, examples of children's wear across many decades, dozens of blue jeans and denim jackets, even a soft pink Juicy Couture tracksuit from 2006. The ethnographic items include African prints, embroidered Turkish fabrics, and Japanese painted kimonos, to name a few. Functional apparel, the smallest category, encompasses such items as early Kevlar, firefighters' uniforms, and athletic wear.

While some pieces stand out for their historical significance—such as one of Eleanor Roosevelt's inaugural ball gowns and a judicial collar worn by Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg '54—the majority are typical examples of their time

and place. "People tend to want to conserve things that hold the most value, like their wedding dress," says Samantha Stern '17, who majored in fashion design and management and worked in the collection all four years of undergrad. "In terms of historical significance, though, sometimes work clothing or what people wore on a day-to-day basis are actually the most important things to preserve and understand."

Many courses and activities have incorporated the collection's offerings over the years—from the aspiring designers who tapped its garments for inspiration for Cornell's annual fashion show to the plant science students studying natural dyes in early clothing. Future architects have parsed the structural form of garments,

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while anthropology students explore the fabrics and tools used by different civilizations. "These items tell important stories that might not be recorded in words," says Denise Green '07, director of the collection and an associate professor in the Department of Fiber Science and Apparel Design (FSAD). "You can tell a lot about the way people lived by looking at their clothes."

The current collection grew out of a small selection of garments used as teaching tools by Beulah Blackmore, Cornell's first faculty member in the field of clothing and textiles. Hired in >



CLOTHES ENCOUNTERS:
A silk pleated gown with silver beadwork designed by Patricia Lester in the Eighties, inspired by the backless evening gowns of the Thirties. Opposite page, top: Green at the opening reception of the *Fashion & Feathers* exhibition in October 2019. Bottom: The collection's newly renovated storage space.



1915, Blackmore helped develop the Department of Textiles and Clothing (now FSAD) during her tenure. In 1936, she cashed out her life insurance policy and—with a small contribution from the Department of Home Economics—took a sabbatical to travel the world and collect indigenous apparel and fabrics, adding them to the nineteenth-century clothing she'd already begun curating. "Back then, students didn't travel like they do today," says Green, "so she was determined to bring the garments to them." The outfits, accessories, and textiles she acquired from Asia, the Middle East, Northern Africa, Europe, and elsewhere remain part of the collection, which is now housed in the Human Ecology building.

In late summer 2019, a renovation of its nearly 1,500 square feet of space was completed; climate- and humidity-controlled, it offers additional storage capacity, shelves with glass doors for better visibility, and an area where garments can be displayed for study. This spring, the facility—which for decades had been called the Costume and Textile Collection—was rebranded to its

current name. "People were confused, and rightfully so, about the term 'costume,'" explains Green. "In the early twentieth century, it was used to describe clothing of non-Western people or of a different time, but it has a different meaning today." A ribbon-cutting ceremony and cocktail party to unveil the new space and name, originally scheduled for last March, has been indefinitely postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The collection typically mounts several exhibitions each academic year, with some twelve to twenty pieces displayed in hallway vitrines in Human Ecology. In fall 2019, *Fashion & Feathers*—a collaboration with the Lab of Ornithology and the Cornell Museum of Vertebrates—highlighted garments and accessories that incorporate both representations and actual specimens of bird species. *Women Empowered*, which ran in 2018–19, presented fashion worn by female activists, athletes, legislators, soldiers, performing artists, and more. The most recent exhibition—*Black Excellence*, which Brown curated last winter—showcased items made by influential African American designers.

Currently, most visitors are prohibited from campus due to COVID safety rules. But under normal circumstances, the collection is open by appointment to anyone with research interest, and private tours can be organized for school field trips, senior citizen groups, and others. "I think its greatest strength is the fact that it's a study collection, not a museum collection," says Lynda Xepoleas, a PhD student in FSAD who collaborated on the *Women Empowered* exhibition. "The community is meant to engage with it." And despite the pandemic restrictions, the collection remains a valuable resource for current students and faculty. Student employees are working to expand its online database and make past exhibitions available for viewing on the University Library website, and faculty members are invited to record lectures in the renovated space for use in their classes. "There's such an expansive range in the collection, from historical to more contemporary and across many different cultures," says Brown. "If you're interested in fashion history, there's really something for everyone." >





1. China Poblana ensemble from Mexico. 2. Leather gloves from the early Thirties. 3. World War II WAVES uniform worn by Adelaide Briggs '37, BFA '38. 4. Cloche hat from the 1920s. 5. Football protective equipment. 6. Young boy's frock coat from the late nineteenth century. 7. Formal Japanese kimono, part of a wedding outfit.



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1. Dress made from a home sewing pattern, 1968. 2. Outfit, circa 1915, worn by a Cornell botanist on research excursions. 3. Two-piece gown, from the mid-1880s, featuring intricate patterning, lace detailing, and embroidered pansies. 4. Elvis impersonator costume, based on one Presley wore in the 1973 TV special "Aloha from Hawaii." 5. Oscar de la Renta high heels, 1983. 6. Arnold Scaasi evening gown, 1986. 7. Woven straw hat with bow, 1951. 8. Child's vest from Yugoslavia, circa the Thirties.



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1. Swimming costume, circa 1900. 2. Twentieth-century woven hat. 3. Jumpsuit with harem pants and empire waistline, designed by Emilio Pucci in the late Sixties. 4. Strap-on ice skate from the early 1900s. 5. Men's trousers designed by Willi Smith for his WilliWear label in the early Eighties. ■



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