

# Fashion Exhibitions: The Power of Communication

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## Abstract

Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, describes curatorial strategies for communicating visually within the context of the fashion exhibition. Focusing on her exhibition, *Gothic: Dark Glamour*, she explains how she used objects and sets to convey an atmosphere and tell a story. She then interviews three other curators. Patricia Mears, deputy director of MFIT, describes her process (“I typically start an exhibition by asking two questions: how and why?”) curating exhibitions, such as *Madame Grès*, *Ivy Style*, *Expedition*, and *Ballerina: Fashion’s Modern Muse*. Colleen Hill, curator of costume and accessories, describes her innovative exhibition, *Fairy Tale Fashion*: “Sleeping Beauty was the tale that started me on my research journey... She was asleep for 100 years and when the prince wakes her up he thinks, ‘She’s so beautiful, but her clothing is like something my grandmother would have worn’.” Finally, Emma McClendon, former associate curator of costume, emphasizes relevance and real-world issues: “With my exhibition, *The Body: Fashion and Physique*, I really had a message: that fashion has always had a problematic relationship with the female body.”

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In 1997, after writing four books on the history of fashion, I was appointed chief curator of The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology. Although I immediately realized that curating an exhibition is very different than writing a book, it took me years to grasp how best to communicate effectively in visual terms. Obviously, museum exhibitions feature both visual and verbal modes of communication: Words play an essential role in exhibition titles, wall text, and object labels. However, many visitors ignore written texts, and simply look at the objects on display. For a writer, this can be traumatic!

Fortunately, curators, exhibition designers, and other museum professionals have developed a variety of ways to communicate visually with objects and environments. After deciding on the narrative, the first issue for a curator is the choice of objects with which to tell the story. Then the objects must be organized within the gallery space. If you are displaying items of dress, will these be shown on mannequins (and if so, which kind?), on dress forms, or in some other way? Will you divide space with walls, platforms, cases,...? At the most basic level, dressed mannequins can be positioned in such a way that they seem to “talk” to each other, which leads museum visitors to *compare* the mannequins’ dress.

To communicate, you need to get visitors to look at certain things and then think about them. In this essay, I will explore how several curators have developed their ideas for exhibitions and how they tried to communicate these ideas through the medium of the fashion exhibition. I will begin with my own experiences, and go on to interview three of my colleagues: Patricia Mears, Colleen Hill, and Emma McClendon.

Looking back, I think that my first fully successful exhibition was *Gothic: Dark Glamour* (2009). Earlier exhibitions, such as *London Fashion* (2001) and *The Corset: Fashioning the Body* (2000), had been intelligent and even beautiful, but I had not truly understood how to marshal an array of visual effects to convey the ideas that I wanted to communicate. *Gothic* was influenced, of course, by *Streetstyle: From Sidewalk to Catwalk*, the pioneering exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum, which addressed the influences that flowed from subcultural or street styles to high fashion. Even more influential, however, was Judith Clark’s *Malign Muses: When Fashion Turns Back*. For whereas the visual structure of *Streetstyle* was fairly simple, like most fashion exhibitions, *Malign Muses* employed architecture and metaphor to convey ideas about how fashion makes time’s leaps into the past.

When I returned from the exhibition opening in Antwerp, I called a full-staff meeting to announce a new exhibition paradigm: Henceforth, the *mise-en-scène* would play a much more important role. As it happened, my next scheduled exhibition was *Gothic: Dark Glamour*, which set out to explore a darkly romantic approach to both high fashion and subcultural style. Since goth style is nothing if not theatrical, it seemed like a promising subject for a new approach. I began doing research as I always do, looking at the cultural history of the idea and the word “gothic.”

Like “decadence,” “gothic” is an epithet with a strange history, evoking images of death, destruction, and decay. The term “gothic” is sometimes merely description: Gothic Cathedrals, for example, appeared in Northern Europe in the late Middle Ages and had a distinctive architectural style that was quite different from the classicizing architecture of Italy. But the term usually carried negative connotations, implying that something was dark, barbarous, and macabre. There were studies of the gothic in literature, art, and cinema, but relatively little had been written at that time on gothic fashion.

As a subcultural style, goth developed out of punk, and was popularly associated with black-clad teenagers who listened to bands like Bauhaus and the Sisters of Mercy. But there were also a number of high fashion designers who gravitated toward the melancholy and macabre. Although *Streetstyle* had strongly implied that fashion designers merely appropriated subcultural styles, I doubted whether designers like Alexander McQueen, Rick Owens, Olivier Theyskens, and Yohji Yamamoto were copying goth kids. We did, however, include a vignette of a goth club (like the Batcave) filled with a variety of subgenres of goth style from its classic gothic punk version through cybergoth to gothic Lolita.

As I did research into the idea of the gothic, its history and iconography came into focus. For example, the Gothic architecture of the Middle Ages became associated with the so-called Dark Ages. Eighteenth-century enthusiasts like Horace Walpole created faux Gothic ruins. For the exhibition, I came up with the idea of using the silhouette of Gothic building in ruins which framed a gown inspired by witchcraft

by Alexander McQueen and another gown by John Galiano for Christian Dior haute couture embellished with the image of the Marquis de Sade that evoked both the Terror (during the French Revolution) and the literature of terror.

The exhibition design became more like storytelling. A mannequin wearing a vampirish dress by Thierry Mugler stepped out from a vertical coffin — an image that I stole from a window display by Simon Doonan — while nearby a blood red dress by Eiko Ishioka from *Bram Stoker's Dracula* emphasized the literary and cinematic imagery that informed gothic style. My idea here was to counter the assumption that fashion designers simply rip off subcultural styles. While this certainly can be true, in the case of gothic fashion, I saw similarities between the sources referenced by goth kids and those beloved by fashion professionals. These included stories of vampires and other revenants, horror films, the black of darkness and night, the uncanny imagery of dreams and nightmares. On one wall of the exhibition we projected the vision of a full moon disappearing behind moving clouds.

I wanted to work with the art director Simon Costin, who had collaborated on many of McQueen's fashion shows, and who had a longstanding fascination with witchcraft. I asked him to design an architectural set inspired by the idea of madness and paranoia as in "The Fall of the House of Usher." He created a set with towering walls and sharp angles, isolating and dwarfing the individual mannequins. Another iconic gothic setting is the laboratory within which monsters are created. Drawing on the iconography of horror films, Costin created a suitably creepy laboratory with rubber walls. The fashion monsters on display included techno-creations made of metal with glass vials, as well as a leather corset by McQueen in the shape of a female torso mutilated with Frankenstein stitches.

The connections between fashion and death were evoked in several sections of the exhibition. There was a vignette featuring a coffin framed by mannequins in High Victorian mourning gowns — one of which was loaned by a goth girl who liked to wear it to graveyards on Halloween. Another vignette focused on the many shades of black used in fashion with the mannequins in front of a hand-painted theater backdrop to emphasize the deliberate artificiality of gothic style. Leopardi's dialogue between Fashion and Death was the inspiration for a section devoted to uncanny styles that evoked the undead nature of fashion.

Subsequent exhibitions built on the discoveries we made with *Gothic: Dark Glamour*. My obsession with Japanese fashion, for example, took on a geographic form with the exhibition, *Japan Fashion Now*, divided into spaces corresponding to specific Tokyo neighborhoods. (Harajuku is only the best-known of Tokyo's many fashion neighborhoods.) Photographs we took in Tokyo were greatly enlarged and then drained of color to evoke a *Bladerunner*-inspired city of the future.

For another exhibition, *Daphne Guinness*, we created a life-size moving "hologram" of Daphne wearing a glittering McQueen catsuit, putting on her diamond jewelry. Of course it was not literally a hologram, since we did not point two lasers at Daphne, but rather two cameras, making what is called in the theater "Pepper's Ghost." Its production took an entire day, but, hanging above the exhibition, it provided an incredible centerpiece. Meanwhile, on the platforms below the hologram, Daphne personally styled every ensemble and decorated each one with her jewelry — although I had to insist on "No real diamonds!"

My fellow curators also developed a variety of different ways to communicate through the medium of the fashion exhibition. Patricia Mears, deputy director of The Museum at FIT, has organized many exhibitions, at the Brooklyn Museum, The Museum at FIT, and elsewhere, but here she chose to analyze four that she organized at MFIT: *Madame Grès, Sphinx of Fashion; Ivy Style; Expedition: Fashion from the Extremes*; and *Ballerina: Fashion's Modern Muse*.

"My exhibitions start with very simple questions," says Patricia Mears. "The first big exhibition that I did at MFIT was *Madame Grès: Sphinx of Fashion*, which grew out of my master's thesis. I remember asking: 'Why do people keep labeling Madame Grès a classicist?' as though her clothes never changed. So, my next question was: How did her work evolve? Her classical dresses from the 1930s were different from those of the 1950s and different from those of the 1960s and 1970s. Developments in her classical style were one thread. But there was a quantum leap in her work after she won a Ford Foundation grant



Figure 1: Installation view of *Gothic: Dark Glamour*, The Museum at FIT, 2008. Credit: Copyright The Museum at FIT



Figure 2: Installation view of *Gothic: Dark Glamour*, The Museum at FIT, 2008. Credit: Copyright The Museum at FIT

and went to India in the late 1950s. There, she studied the sari, and non-western garments began to inspire her. That was a second stylistic development to explore.

*Ivy Style* was not the first menswear show. Richard Martin [former Director of what was then called the Design Laboratory and Galleries at FIT] curated *Jocks and Nerds* in the late 1980s. That was a very important show. But, *Ivy* came before *Artist, Rebel, Dandy* at the Rhode Island School of Design and *Reigning Men* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It's not that I spearheaded the craze for exhibitions of men's clothing. I think it was feeling in the air.

But I really give Richard Martin credit because he was collecting menswear seriously and we have fabulous early 20th century Brooks Brothers, much better than the company's own archives. We also have wonderful things by J Press and companies like Chipp, including that spectacular, bright madras jacket. I haven't seen too many things like that in other collections. So, I had a very good platform on which to build the show.

"All I wanted was to look at something authentic, the idea of a style created by a community that was not interested in 'fashion,' per se. What inspired me actually was the fashion boom and its fallout. In the 1980s and 1990s, I had such an intense personal interest in fashion, I wanted to see every collection by the designers I admired. Then, things started to change. The death of Alexander McQueen, that really got to me when he committed suicide. He was so creative. That and John Galliano imploding. Fashion was too big for itself. And I think this is where my interest in chasing fashion waned.

"I found myself asking: What is style? Craft? I'll give you an example. In Tokyo there is a tailor, Mr. Yamamoto. His company is called Caid. (I never did figure out why.) But he has a little shop in Aoyama, not far from the Noh theater. It's a replica of something you would find circa 1960 in America. You walk up the stairs, and there are two men listening to jazz records on an old record player. One was in his 20s. He's literally could have been wearing a Chipp jacket, circa 1963. And an older man who was wearing a perfect replica of a Brooks Brothers suit, circa 1950.

Caid produces copies of vintage Brooks Brothers. He searches for deadstock cotton, and certain types of wools. He makes these lines for line copies of old Brooks Brothers stuff, including the ties! The only thing he wasn't able to do was reproduce the shoes. It was wild. That excited me because these are equivalent to me of haute couture and counterculture styles. The people who wear these clothes want to step out of the mainstream world of fashion.

Young men used to develop their styles in a somewhat isolated way on campuses. Princeton in the 1920s, for example, had fads like raccoon coats. But also classic styles like wearing a tweed jacket with white tennis pants, mixing and matching active wear with proper men's clothing. I found this fascinating. Leading menswear magazines came to the football games between Harvard and Yale to cover what the young guys were wearing. During the 1930s, Ivy style accounted for more than 50% of sales. Young men in college were very important consumers.

I didn't go to an Ivy League school. For me, this is a fantasy. Again, I began asking how and why did Ivy style start? Unlike my other shows on couture and construction, *Ivy* had to show what a young man wore in his dorm, what he wore when he was crossing the quad to go to class. I learned that every campus had its own university shop. So, I said, I'll create a mini college campus. We created a quad, we created a chemistry lab. And I will say that I was partly inspired by the Japanese publication *Take Ivy*, which was started by Mr. Ishizu, who was called the Ralph Lauren of Japan.

One of the things I learned was that sports were very important in collegiate life. The closest ivy league school was Princeton. I took Tommy Synnamon [a colleague] with me to one of their football games and he took wonderful photographs. And we blew them up, placing them all over the Special Exhibition Gallery. We also looked at vintage photographs and we created our version of a sporting room where everything from football to tennis clothing was put on view.

"This Ivy mise en scène with vintage Ivy clothes gave me a platform to bring in contemporary designers. I could continue to ask questions. How did Ralph Lauren build an empire based on this? And how did



Figure 3: Installation view of *Ivy Style*, The Museum at FIT, 2012. Credit: Copyright The Museum at FIT

somebody like Thom Browne, who's so hip and cool, invert and use this basic material and turn it into high fashion material?

“The concept for *Expedition: Fashion at the Extremes* originated when we were attending one of Joseph Altuzarra's fashion shows, the one which featured his revival of the Korean War era fishtail parka. It looked very chic, but it didn't immediately trigger any ideas in my mind. It was a slow process. But eventually I began to ask, how and why did parkas wind up in our wardrobes? Arctic and Himalayan dress cultures were among the last to be incorporated into fashion.

“That's where *Expedition* came from, when I realized that there were different types of expedition environments: the arctic, mountains, deep sea, and outer space. The Museum of Natural History got a huge grant to preserve the few surviving funerary costumes from Russian Arctic peoples, and they generously loaned one, which was a star of the show. I juxtaposed it with fur and leather pieces by Yohji Yamamoto and Madame Grès. I wanted to create an Arctic backdrop for them. Our team at FIT was fabulous: they created icebergs and our great lighting designer, Eric Steding, did an Aurora Borealis.

“But the puffer is really related to mountain climbing, not the arctic. So, we created a faux mountain for early down jackets by Eddie Bauer, that were inspired by his Russian immigrant family members who talked of wearing down-filled duvets under their coats to keep them warm. Bauer's version was next to Charles James's famous 1930s down-filled jacket from the V&A.

“What was interesting was not only the interplay between expedition clothes and high fashion, but the fact that everything looked a little eerie. When you go to the North Pole, you're in the dark and you have the Aurora Borealis, when you go into outer space, you are literally not connected to anything if something goes wrong. Our exhibition designer, Kim Akert, created a rocket ship. It was just one example of the amazing ways we're able to interpret fashion in so many unique ways.

“I typically start an exhibition by asking two questions: how and why? For example, how and why did fashions like the ballerina-style ballgown and the ballerina slipper wind up in our wardrobes? I remember when I was a curator at the Brooklyn Museum, I would walk through a storage room filled



Figure 4: Installation view of *Expedition: Fashion from the Extreme*, The Museum at FIT, 2017. Credit: Copyright The Museum at FIT

with 1950s ballgowns, and every other gown was like a ballerina's Romantic-era costume with a jewel-encrusted fitted bodice and a full skirt in chiffon or tulle. I was aware of the connection to dance costume, but I was not processing what I was seeing. But that was the genesis of my exhibition, *Ballerina: Fashion's Modern Muse*.

"A lot of the inspiration for *Ballerina* began when I looked at specific dresses alongside illustrations and photographs in vintage issues of *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar*. I'd see an illustration by Christian Berard and then a beautiful Chanel dress apparently inspired by his ballet costumes. In the same issue, there would be photographs by George Platt Lynes of beautiful dancers in high fashion — it was the first time we started to see ballerinas being used as fashion models.

"I looked at our Pierre Balmain's pink corseted evening dress with a tulle skirt covered in white feathers, and thought that's like another Balmain covered with feathers in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Coincidence? Was he inspired by *Swan Lake*? No! It was Pavlova's *Dying Swan*! Keith Money's monograph on Pavlova devoted two chapters to her role as a fashion icon. So in *Ballerina*, I placed Pavlova's *Dying Swan* costume next to Balmain's feathered ballgown.

"I wanted to make similar connection between Romantic era ballet costume and the revival of Romanticism in the 1930s. We see signs of this emerging in the 1920s, for example, with Lanvin's *La Camargo* dress. I think she was looking at the Ballets Russes. She also designed a dress called *Columbine* that may have been based on one of the important ballets by Mikhail Fokine called *Carnival*. One of the key characters in it is named *Columbine*, and she wears a white ruffled dress with pink with red cherries on it. Lanvin's version is more sophisticated. It's a white taffeta dress with black trim, but it has red velvet balls or circles embroidered on it that look like abstracted cherries. I don't think it was accidental that she named it *Columbine*.

"Ballet was in the air. There was a lovely Chanel gown in the show, made of tulle with embroidered stars on it, which was similar to the ballet costumes in *Cotillion*. I can't say for sure that Chanel was looking





Figure 5: Installation view of *Ballerina: Fashion's Modern Muse*, The Museum at FIT, 2020. Credit: Copyright The Museum at FIT

at that ballet, but she was close friends with Christian Berard who designed the costumes. Another example is Margot Fonteyn's pink *Sleeping Beauty* costume which was designed by Oliver Messel. It looks remarkably similar to a dress with a pink satin bodice decorated with silver embroidery and a big tulle skirt that Balenciaga created one year after Fonteyn's international debut in the role."

Next, I interviewed Colleen Hill, Curator of Costume and Accessories, who described her process creating the magical exhibition, *Fairy Tale Fashion*. In fairy tales, clothing often represents transformation (as with Cinderella) or power (because you can do things with magical clothes like the seven league boots). From the moment that she described her idea for this exhibition, I was enchanted.

"Sleeping Beauty was the tale that started me on my research journey," recalled Colleen Hill. "When I pitched the idea of a fairy tale fashion exhibition to you, it was still a vague concept. I went to the library and checked out a book of fairy tales written by Charles Perrault, which is the earliest written version of many of these tales. You will recall that Sleeping Beauty has been asleep for 100 years, and when the prince wakes her up, he thinks to himself, 'Oh, she's so beautiful, but her clothing is so out of date, like something my grandmother would wear.' I thought that was hysterically funny, that the prince was focused on the fact that Sleeping Beauty looks out of fashion. That was what really set me on this journey, looking for dress and fashion references in fairy tales.

"I looked at other early versions of well-known fairy tales and identified motifs, like blonde hair, red roses, and descriptions of dress, such as Cinderella's famous glass slippers or the Snow Queen's white fur. Then I went looked for actual garments that matched those descriptions. This was not the most straightforward way to organize a fashion exhibition! I felt that I had to stick to the European versions of the tales, but a story like Cinderella is very likely Chinese in origin. If I could do another version of the exhibition, I would take a more global look at fairy tales.

"*Fairy Tale Fashion* illustrated fifteen fairy tales using high fashion objects that dated from the 18th century to the present. I had to communicate which story I was referencing and even which version

of the story. Additionally, every single object had its own label, and the label text my approach was quite different from what we normally do, because this wasn't a show that was about the history of fashion, it was a more intuitive and creative approach to selecting objects. It was important to clarify why I'd selected each garment, and I always did that by referencing what part of the tale it was illustrating. To make the exhibition visually compelling, I included many photographs, especially fashion editorials inspired by fairy tales, and illustrations. The heyday of fairy tale illustration was the beginning of the 20th century, and there are many really beautiful illustrations depicting clothing. Most of these images were in the introductory gallery.

"The main gallery space organized the fairy tales into archetypal settings: The forest for Red Riding Hood; the castle for Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty; the snowy forest for the Snow Queen; the Emerald City for the Wizard of Oz; and the sea for The Little Mermaid.



Figure 6: Installation view of *Fairy Tale Fashion*, The Museum at FIT, 2016. Credit: Copyright The Museum at FIT

"Entering the exhibition, visitors first encountered the section on Red Riding Hood, featuring a video of a Chanel advertisement, in which a woman wearing a red cape is being stalked by a wolf. The earliest garment was an eighteenth-century hooded red cloak. The style had just come into fashion then, so a real-life, fashionable garment influenced how we think about Red Riding Hood's appearance even today. Twentieth-century fashions included an ensemble by Dolce and Gabbana, from a fairy tale-themed collection that helped inspire the exhibition. It had a red, fur-trimmed hood and a great dress fabric with a woodland motif. The section concluded with a new acquisition, that conveniently went down the runway as I was planning the exhibition. It was a Comme des Garçons look with an enormous red patent leather hood. Fashion editors referred to it as the big red riding hood, and that's exactly what it was. Because it shields the face and casts shadows, it's quite an ominous design.

"I remember writing to Diane von Furstenberg, because she had a really beautiful fur coat that was made from little bits of different colored fur that I wanted to use for the fairy tale called Donkey Skin or Furry Pelts. It's a strange story about a princess who tries to deflect her father's desire to marry her. She tells him she'll do so if he can meet some seemingly impossible demands, which are all related to clothing.

She says she wants a dress made from the sun, one from the moon, and another from the stars. She also asks for a coat made from the fur of every animal in the kingdom. Her father manages to deliver these things, so she runs away, taking the cloak to disguise herself. I wanted to include something like this coat of many furs, and von Furstenberg's was perfect—but I had to write to her PR and explain the story alongside my request.

“One of the most interesting sections for me was Cinderella, because of how Disney-fied everything has become. Cinderella's blue gown dates from the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Disney cartoon, which has nothing to do with what Cinderella wore in an early version of the story by Charles Perrault. In that version, Cinderella attends two balls—wearing first silver and then gold. That detail conveys the luxury of the tale's royal and aristocratic readers. Cinderella's original attire has nothing to do with the color blue or little birds dressing her—it's meant to be the most extravagant, courtly fashion. I found some great early references to court dress that used gold and silver thread, which were perhaps even the inspiration for what was written.

“Then there is the debate over Cinderella's shoes—whether they were made from glass (*verre*) or fur (*ver*), depending on how the story was translated. Most historians are now fairly certain that the shoes were meant to be made of glass. One of the biggest indicators of that was written into the story. The stepsisters want to wear the shoes, and one cuts off part of her heel to fit into them. It's the blood that's visible within the shoe that gives her away. Glass was very fragile and valuable, and it would have had a strange and magical quality.

“What I loved most about working on the show was the ability to engage with a completely different field of study. I always refer to one scholar, Jack Zipes, as the Valerie Steele of fairy tales. He's written many of the best books on the history and meaning of fairy tales, and I read a lot of his work, in addition to authors like Maria Warner and Bruno Bettelheim. It was a lot of work—it was essentially like trying to learn fashion history in less than a year. I had to read a lot and apply what I learned to fashion theory and history, looking at overlapping ideas like power or transformation.

“With Cinderella, I organized the clothing on the platform in a particular order, beginning with tattered garments. Giorgio di Sant'Angelo directly referenced Cinderella in a collection from the early 1970s. We have a dress from that collection with a skirt in shredded chiffon and a bodice in suede that looks hastily pieced together. I loved referencing not only Cinderella's ballgown, but also her ragged, charred fashions from when she worked by the hearth. A Giles Deacon looked as though it had been burned, and a Shelley Fox ensemble had actually been burned with a blowtorch. Then I featured her transformation, to her ball gown.

“Another tale was less straightforward. In its original version, The Little Mermaid was gruesome and tragic. She dies, loses her soul, and dissolves into seafoam. That was an interesting idea for me to grapple with, because I did want to convey this dissolution. I ended up finding a dress by Jean-Louis Sabaji that looked like a wave that was dissolving into foam.

“I think the appeal of the exhibition was both the newness and the familiarity of it. The term ‘fairy tale’ has often been used to describe fashion that is extravagant or fantastical. But no one had actually related the idea of fashion to what was actually happening in these well-known stories. I wanted all the visitors — children and adults — to be able to walk through the exhibition and enjoy it, even if they didn't read anything. I was hoping they could guess, for example: ‘Oh! that must be Sleeping Beauty in the glass coffin with the little apple-shaped Judith Leiber bag.’ I think it was fun for people to explore and engage with the exhibition in different ways.

“For the exhibition design, I was particularly inspired by the illustrations by Arthur Rackham, who was one of the most amazing fairy tale illustrators. I was most attracted to his silhouettes, because they said so much with so little; they are literally black silhouettes of, say, Cinderella's carriage on a white background. That's what I took to our exhibition designer, who was also working with a graphic designer. One of the things we were very aware of was that the clothing in the show had a lot of sparkle, a lot of color. So we wanted to make sure that the exhibition design was a bit scaled back so that people could focus on the clothes. At the same time, the exhibition design needed to be evocative. That's when we

ended up turning towards silhouettes of trees, or a silhouette of a castle wall, or a really simple kind of ‘under the water’ look. It allowed visitors to understand what kind of setting they were standing in, without overwhelming them with too much set design.

“The silhouettes were printed on to semi-transparent scrims, and the screens were then held in place within a framework. They were relatively fragile—we had a great team of guards who kept them from being damaged. We also had these sorts of passageways creating by hanging some of the scrim material overhead, so that you really felt like you were in a kind of portal and going from one world to another. The scrims were very tall, because the gallery has 22-foot ceilings, allowing for a large presence without being overly designed.

“Rapunzel was part of the forest section, technically. We had a really beautiful printed fabric that was already in the collection—an oversized photographic print of blond hair that cascades down the fabric and then pools at the bottom. We hung one of those panels from the ceiling, and paired it with a really beautiful McQueen dress in our collection with a motif of blonde hair rendered in beadwork. We kept that story very simple, but the panel alone was effective at telling the tale.

“In the future I’d like to do an exhibition on fashion and the supernatural. There is a lot of crossover between the supernatural and fairy tales, with motifs like hair and witches. There’s also some overlap between the supernatural and cabinets of curiosities. So all of this is sort of within my wheelhouse.”

Finally, I interviewed Emma McClendon, former Associate Curator of Costume at The Museum at FIT, and now a professor of Fashion Studies. Patricia Mears, Colleen Hill, and I all described exhibitions that we had organized in the Special Exhibitions Gallery, which included both an introductory space and a large room with a 22-foot ceiling. By contrast, Emma McClendon created several important exhibitions in the smaller Fashion History Gallery, an L-shaped room with platforms along both walls. When I interviewed Emma, she focused on a single exhibition, *The Body: Fashion and Physique*.

As Emma McClendon put it: “With my exhibition, *The Body: Fashion and Physique*, I really had a message: that fashion has always had a problematic relationship with the female body. I wanted visitors to understand that the fashionable body has always been a construct, but that people of varying sizes have always existed — even when they are not visible in fashion imagery. So mannequins were an issue, and we decided *not* to use standard fashion mannequins. Instead, we took dress forms and the conservation team padded them out and adapted them, so there was a form especially made for each dress in the size and shape of the original wearer. Only in this way could we show the diversity of historical bodies. It also made the garment seem to float, without the heads and limbs and poses that you would see with a mannequin.”

She discussed the importance of juxtaposing objects: “We had two dress from the 1890s. One had an extremely small 19-inch waist, and next to it, we placed another dress with a similar, corseted silhouette, but with a waistline that measured 31 inches. And just by seeing them, side by side, visitors could understand that fashionability at that time involved proportions and silhouettes more than just measurements. We modified the dress forms, so they were customized to the proportions of every garment.”

“Another key part of the display featured an early example of what we now call ‘plus-sized fashion.’ Back when it was manufactured in the 1920s, it would have been called ‘stout wear.’ The fashion industry then had recognized that there was a market for this type of garment. Yet this piece had never been put on view at the museum, presumably because it was considered peripheral to the history of fashion. Museums tend not to collect this type of material.”

“It is interesting that that it was called stout wear,” I remarked to Emma, “because I remember my step grandfather complaining once that he bought a sports jacket in Bermuda and when he looked at the label later, he was annoyed to see that it was labeled ‘stout’.” Emma replied: “This has been a problem throughout the history of standardized sizing. With classification and judgement come euphemisms: stout wear, plus size, now curve.”

“The exhibition included a dress by the American fashion designer Christian Siriano, and the story behind the dress made it quite famous. The actress Leslie Jones had a film premiere and she tweeted out



Figure 7: Installation view of *The Body: Fashion and Physique*, The Museum at FIT, 2017. Credit: Copyright The Museum at FIT

that none of the major fashion houses wanted to dress her, implying this was because of her size. They said they didn't have anything for her. Christian Siriano replied publicly that he would be honored to dress her. He gave her a long, red, off-the-shoulder dress that echoed the dress Julia Roberts wore in *Pretty Woman*, where it was a sign of her character's transformation and glamor. The whole episode became a flashpoint on the way the fashion industry judges even celebrities by size."

"Siriano is a standout in the industry, because of his commitment to creating all of his clothing in sizes from 0 to 24. He is also a proponent of having models of all sizes and races on his runway and in his advertising. There has definitely been a change in attitudes, particularly in the United States, where the retailer Old Navy recently announced that it was going to create every single product in sizes from zero to 24. But there is still a long way to go for the vast majority of high fashion labels.

Brands make excuses about the difficulties involved in scaling up a sample size, but ultimately they are reluctant to have their products associated with larger bodies."

"Ultimately, an exhibition is a three-dimensional environment, where you have to set a tone for visitors. *The Body* was a dark space, even for a fashion exhibition, which has to have low lighting to protect the textiles. But the darkness here also had another purpose, so when you walked in, you immediately knew that this was serious. Technology can also be used to your advantage. With *The Body*, I made a 5-minute video that played brief interviews with Siriano and other designers, activists, scholars, and models, where they talked about the issues that the exhibition explores.

"Working on this exhibition, I realized how little research has been done on concepts like standardized sizes, how sizing started, or even how it works; these subjects are seldom mentioned in textbooks; there has been little critical thinking or historical research, and I want to fill that gap. I want to look into this and think about sizing as a historically-situated technology that was created within a particular social glue of the nineteenth century, alongside everything that was going on in terms of science, and the desire to classify and categorize the entire world, to find the underlying principles of life and the body. I want

to think about the way in which sizing took over the industry beginning in the late nineteenth century. The way in which sizing has become naturalized for all of us as consumers has reached the point where we don't really buy any other type of clothing. The average woman might have, say, their wedding dress made to fit their individual body. Or a man might sometimes purchase a made-to-measure suit. But otherwise, you spend your entire life purchasing clothing that is entirely ready-made such that your identity becomes your size.

"The fact that your size becomes so much a part of your identity can be incredibly fraught, no matter where you fall on the sizing spectrum; it becomes something embedded in your sense of self, the root of anxieties, insecurities. I've been researching the history of sizing within many contexts. It seems that many people in different countries were working on this simultaneously. A lot of different charts and methods and procedures are established and integrated into the industry in the early twentieth century. It was a strategy, or a tool that entered the industry at different phases in different countries and evolved at different rates across countries and brands. A brand uses a particular technology; they use a particular pattern maker, and a particular factory.

"One thing that was not in *The Body* exhibition, but I've seen since, both in my research and in fashion education, is that the issue of sizing is incredibly embedded in conversations about sustainability. Not, not that you can't talk about them in isolation. When it comes to the question of customization, smaller runs of clothing and made-to-order lines, you also want to think about what you're wasting. The two issues come together and sit really closely in a way that I'm still parsing. I think that questions of getting a correct fit, of customization, of how we can fit a larger range of bodies, and questions of how do we have less waste, how do we change the system so that we buy less or keep things for longer are really connected.

"And I will say one last thing that I find incredibly fascinating that had never even occurred to me until talking to my Gen Z students is the way in which this issue is also dovetailing with virtual clothing. With the notion that you can buy a garment that is purely virtual, that exists as a filter on your images to share as your virtual self. It's a future world where your wardrobe and your fashionable self is a virtual self, and that this segmenting of the fashionable into the virtual becomes a way to be more sustainable, and to fit more bodies. Essentially, we would have a uniform in 'real life' so that in the material, physical world we would produce less and be more sustainably and more inclusive in sizing. I'm not sure that this will ever happen. But the conversations around it are fascinating. There's sort of overlapping technology, inclusive sizing sustainability, because they're all come down to some fundamental issues: How do we make clothes? How many clothes do we own? And what are the ramifications and the implications of all of these things?"

"Something that's been really important for me is that the ideas and the objects that I show exist in the everyday real world," she concluded, "that they are not the kind of fashion objects that we call art, but the objects deeply embedded in how people live."

Emma McClendon's focus on social history and fashion's relevance in daily life contrasts dramatically with Patricia Mears' focus on the aesthetic aspects of high fashion, often haute couture, but also specialized types of dress whether Ivy League style or expedition gear. Patricia told me: "When I was a student, I had to find my place between old-fashioned connoisseurship and contemporary fashion studies. For museum curators, it comes down to the objects." We all analyze the objects, of course, but Patricia, perhaps, focuses on them most intently. Colleen Hill is drawn to the magical and fantastic in fashion, while I have gravitated to edgy, often erotically-charged fashions and subcultural styles. It is possible that she and I are most interested in placing objects within their cultural context. Certainly, our varying interests and affinities inevitably influence our exhibition designs and communication strategies.

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She is director and chief curator of The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, where she has organized over two dozen exhibitions since 1997. She is also the author or editor of more than 25 books, some of which have been translated into Chinese, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. In addition, she is founder and editor in chief of *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, the first peer-reviewed journal in Fashion Studies. Dr. Steele has been instrumental in creating the modern field of fashion studies and raising awareness of fashion's cultural significance.