



Engaging Communities, Empowering Students Fostering Cross-Cultural Connections Through Dress, 1936-1958

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Exhibition Narrative: *Engaging Communities, Empowering Students: Fostering Cross-Cultural Connections through Dress, 1936-1958* was a fashion exhibition curated by two graduate students and installed on Cornell's campus in October 2021. In this exhibition, we explored the different ways international students fostered cross-cultural understandings of dress on Cornell's campus in the mid-twentieth century from their involvement in the dissemination and animation of international fashion in static and live fashion showcases to their own self-fashioning practices. This exhibition is the second iteration of our curatorial research on university dress collections. In December 2020, we curated an exhibition that explored the collecting practices of two women who donated dress- and textile-related collections to Cornell in the mid- to late-twentieth century: Professor Beulah Blackmore and Mrs. Ruth Sharp (Xepoleas & Hayflick, 2022).¹ Reflecting back on the scope of that exhibition, we realized that our focus on the lives and work of two white, educated women effectively silenced the contributions of other individuals who helped to develop and disseminate their collections across Cornell's campus. Our goal for this exhibition therefore was to reinterpret the development and circulation of Cornell's Fashion + Textile Collection (CF+TC) through a justice-oriented lens.

After reviewing archival materials housed within Cornell Libraries' Rare and Manuscript Collections (RMC), we uncovered the stories of numerous international students who helped to diversify and disseminate the international fashions Professor Blackmore collected abroad in 1936. In total, we found visual and written evidence that suggests more than twelve international students were involved in the collection, dissemination, and animation of the CF+TC from 1936 to 1958. For this exhibition, we selected six of those students who collaborated directly with Blackmore to internationalize fashion curricula. We also reviewed the work of two graduate students who were involved in representing the fashions of their home countries in public lectures and static exhibitions following Blackmore's retirement in 1951. By centering the stories and perspectives of international students, this exhibition revealed how university dress collections are not just a resource, but a reflection of the institutions that house them and the individuals that care for them. Therefore, it is imperative that institutions and scholars consider and share fashion histories that are forward-thinking, equitable and just. In this presentation, we will discuss our curatorial process, research methods, and designed outcomes that allowed us to recover forgotten and obscured fashion histories on Cornell's campus.

Curating Fashion & Social Justice: For this exhibition, we drew from curatorial projects that interpreted fashion histories through a social justice lens (Brown & Green, 2020; Ellington & Lam, 2016-17; Green et al., 2018-19; Matthews & Reddy-Best, 2020; Reddy-Best, et al., 2018; Reddy-Best et al., 2021-22). Engaging with social justice during curation often

¹ The initial exhibition is available online through Cornell Library's Spotlight Platform: <https://exhibits.library.cornell.edu/in-search-of-costumes-from-many-lands>



concerns addressing structural discrimination and exclusion as well as human rights and equity through exhibition design, installation and programming. Pursuing this curatorial approach thus invites visitors to critically reflect on broader issues within society as well as the very collecting and display practices that have contributed to the perpetuation of structural oppression in museums (Huhn & Anderson, 2021).

In recent years, fashion scholars and critics have begun to discuss and address the biases and prejudices that specifically inform fashion museum collecting and display practices (Chapin et al., 2019; Downing Peters, 2019; Ellington & Lim, 2017; Friedman, 2020; Green et al., 2021; Theodosi, 2020). They critique public and private institutions that center the dress practices of white, thin, non-disabled, and affluent women. By drawing attention to these practices, several scholars have begun to use fashion curation as means of documenting more inclusive fashion histories. At Iowa State, for instance, Dr. Kelly Reddy-Best and her students confronted the initial biases embedded within museum practices by centering and uplifting marginalized voices represented within their university's dress collection (Reddy-Best et al., 2021-22). This exhibition demonstrated the importance for fashion scholars and curators to think critically about the contents of their collections and the frameworks they use for storytelling.

In addition to reassessing the content of museum fashion collections through social justice frameworks, fashion scholars have looked to other museum collections and communities to recover marginalized histories of dress. Dr. Tameka Ellington, Dr. Reddy-Best, and Dr. Denise Green are three scholars who have curated fashion exhibitions that prioritize the dress practices of historically marginalized communities. In 2016, Dr. Ellington and Dr. Stacey Lim curated *(Dis)Abled Beauty*, which challenged normative beauty assumptions by interpreting assistive or adaptive devices and apparel as aesthetic and highly designed items (2016-17). According to the catalog, most of the objects featured in this exhibition were either on loan from collections like The Kenneth Berger Hearing Aid Museum and Archives or those individuals who designed or wore assistive or adaptive devices (Ellington & Lim, 2016-17). Another curatorial approach Dr. Reddy-Best and her students have utilized is wardrobe ethnography (Reddy-Best et al., 2018; Matthews & Reddy-Best, 2020). This research method led both curatorial teams to work directly with community members to articulate the entanglements involved in donning and doffing lesbian and black fashions in the Midwest. By establishing community partnerships, both exhibitions documented regional styles worn by communities not represented in Iowa State's Clothing and Textile Museum.

Lastly, Dr. Green and her colleagues Chloe Chapin and Sam Neuberg (2019) have raised concern for the display practices used to exhibit dress artifacts. In a recent article, Dr. Green and her colleagues addressed the implications involved in using white, thin, heteronormative, non-disabled, mannequins to display the fashions of diverse people, places, cultures, and subjectivities as well as the associated challenges curators face when disrupting this display practice (2019). Despite the financial barriers smaller institutions and universities face, several fashion scholars have developed alternative methods and approaches to displaying diverse fashions on the body. This includes covering or painting white mannequins and dress forms with black fabric or paint (Matthews & Reddy-Best, 2020). Drawing from these curatorial projects and their respective approaches, we chose to combine more traditional object-based research methods with reverse ethnography and oral histories, which we discuss in the following section.



Research Methods: The initial stage of our curatorial process consisted of conducting archival research in the RMC during which we engaged in what Abenaki anthropologist Margaret Bruchac referred to as “reverse ethnography” (2018, p. 19). According to Bruchac, “cataloging erasures” are produced because of the way archives record and circulate information (2018, p. 177). For instance, Bruchac found that the contributions of Indigenous informants were housed in several different institutions and filed under the names of the anthropologists that supervised them (2018). By working backwards from archival documentation, she was able to locate Indigenous commentary on early anthropological encounters that proved the integral role Indigenous intellectuals had on the development of the field. We chose to undertake a similar approach by reviewing object, donor, and student files among other published materials in the RMC. After looking through two decades worth of archival material, we realized that these students not only donated objects to the collection from their personal wardrobes but also informed how certain fashions were represented within live and static fashion showcases. Engaging in “reverse ethnography” also led us to reach out to the descendants of two Indigenous students who contributed to the CF+TC in the 1930s.² According to Dr. Denise N. Green, bringing archival materials into contact with community members allows for different meanings, interpretations, and discourses to emerge that are not necessarily reflected within the archival record (2017). Engaging in oral history interviews thus allowed us to acquire additional information and materials that revealed the wide-ranging experiences of Indigenous students who contributed to the CF+TC in the mid-twentieth century (2019). All object labels and exhibition text were then reviewed and approved by descendants before publication.

Curatorial Selection & Iterative Revisions: By engaging in reverse ethnography and conducting oral history interviews, we came across a plethora of written and visual material from photographs and postcards to correspondence and news articles that revealed how international students helped to diversify and disseminate international fashions on Cornell’s campus. While this material indicated how international students worked with the collection from the 1930s to the 1950s, only two objects housed in the CF+TC were owned and donated by the students themselves. Due to the limited number of extant objects, we had to be creative about how we conveyed the stories of these students in a physical exhibition. We therefore heavily relied on written and visual evidence housed in the RMC to guide our reconstruction of the different ensembles these students helped to disseminate in live and static fashion showcases, as well as how they fashioned themselves on Cornell’s campus. For some of the looks, we relied on the objects Blackmore collected abroad along with articles written by the students themselves in the *Cornell Daily Sun*. For instance, we paired a block-printed sari Blackmore collected abroad with a cable-knit sweater and a pair of winter boots to recreate the ensemble Anjani Jivraj Mehta ‘48 is shown wearing in a photograph of her on campus in 1948 (Fig. 1). We also used objects donated by other faculty or alumni that were made or worn during that same time period. In order to recreate the ensemble Aurora Eusebio Fronda Simplicano ‘58 wore at Farm and Home Week in 1958, we chose to display Bernice F. Turk’s *terno* that was custom-made for her in 1955 and is similar to the shape and cut of Simplicano’s *terno* (Fig. 2). In this regard,

² While we attempted to reach out to the descendants of all eight international students featured in this exhibition, we were only able to connect with the family members of Henrietta Hoag Guilfoyle (Seneca, Beaver Clan) and Virginia Beatrice Kauhanenuihonokawailani Dominis Koch (Native Hawaiian).



photographic evidence was essential in recreating the ensembles these students helped to disseminate across Cornell’s campus either within fashion showcases or on their own bodies.

Designed Outcome & Conservation: The limited number of extant objects housed in the CF+TC challenged us to think about how we would convey such stories within each of the five display cases. We chose to print eight large scale backdrops of photographs that document international students working directly with the collection. The backdrops were then paired with those objects the students were shown handling or wearing in the photographs. In doing so, a majority of our budget—that is, \$4,000 out of the \$5,000 we secured from the Department of Human Centered Design, CF+TC, and Cornell Council for the Arts—was spent on printing large-scale backdrops for each of the cases.³

In addition to printing large scale backdrops, we chose an alternative approach to installing extant objects. We did not want to showcase garments either made or worn by people of color on white, thin, heteronormative mannequins. However, our budget did not allow for us to purchase additional forms of varying skin tones. Therefore, we chose to use dress forms as a means of displaying dress- and textile-related artifacts and made covers out of black jersey knit to avoid displaying the garments on white mannequins with European facial features and hairstyles (Fig. 3). Once the covers were made and installed, we evaluated the condition of the garments. Those that were in good condition were displayed in cases with large glass doors that have deadbolt locks and shatter-proof UV filtering glass.

For additional archival materials such as correspondence, postcards, news articles, and press releases, we chose to print facsimiles rather than display original copies. This decision was informed by our conversations with the conservation department of Cornell’s University Library. As a result, we worked with Charles V. Beach Jr. of Cornell’s Human Centered Design Workshop to make custom-made mounts out of plexiglass to display facsimiles in addition to purchasing acrylic display easels from Gaylord Archival Supplies (Fig. 3).

Case Organization & Installation: The exhibition was arranged thematically. We identified four different themes that revolved around the collection, dissemination, animation, and donning of international fashion on Cornell’s campus. This decision was partially informed by the layout of the cases used to install the exhibit. The exhibition space for the CF+TC consists of display cases that line the hallways of the terrace level (“Level T”) of the Human Ecology Building (HEB) on Cornell’s campus (Fig. 4). “Level T” includes four display cases of varying sizes that can cumulatively hold a maximum of 18 mannequins, and one flat case that is used for flat textiles and ephemera. The display cases are located in the hallway of a highly trafficked area of HEB that is home to the Department of Human Centered Design. The “Long Case” is in the hallway that connects HEB to Martha Van Rensselaer Hall (MVR), an older building that was the original home to Cornell’s College of Home Economics, now known as the College of Human Ecology.

³ The CF+TC has an annual budget of \$40,000 and is maintained by the Department of Human Centered Design within the College of Human Ecology at Cornell University. Facilities management and space are provided and allocated by the college. The budget for this exhibition was \$5,000, which included \$500 from the Department of Human Centered Design; \$2,000 from the CF+TC; and \$2,500 from the Cornell Council for the Arts.



Visitors coming from MVR began the exhibition with “Collecting Dress on and off Campus.” This case explored the different ways international fashion was circulated during Farm and Home Week from 1936 to 1958. It featured garments donated to the collection by Professor Blackmore, Cornell’s first professor of clothing and textiles, missionaries on furlough who attended Cornell’s School for Missionaries, and international students enrolled in the College of Home Economics.⁴ This case contextualized four garments with documents and ephemera from the RMC that illustrate how these objects were circulated on Cornell’s campus (Fig. 5).

For visitors entering from the main entrance of HEB, they began with “Animating Dress Across Campus.” This case explored the different kinds of garments international students wore from their own closets for live fashion showcases and presentations, as well as those garments they helped dress other students in from the collection (Fig. 6). The next case, which connects both entry points, “Disseminating Dress within and outside of the Classroom,” discussed the ways in which international students helped to diversify the representation of international fashion in fashion curricula and static exhibitions on Cornell’s campus. This case is dissected by a pillar, upon which we mounted a digital screen in portrait orientation that looped a promotional video made by the NY State College of Home Economics in 1961.⁵ While this promotional video was made just after 1958, it demonstrates how the CF+TC was used by Cornell students, faculty, and staff following Blackmore’s retirement in 1951. The right side of this case featured garments that were used as sources of inspiration in courses on draping and patternmaking and addressed issues related to cultural appropriation and insensitivity (Fig. 7). The left side of the case featured objects that were dressed by international students for static fashion exhibitions at Cornell.

The final case, “Self-fashioning on Campus and Beyond” discussed the ways in which international students dressed themselves on Cornell’s campus (Fig. 8). This ranged from donning Western fashion to adapting the clothes they brought from home to the colder climate of Ithaca, NY. The exhibition also made use of a flat case that featured biographies of the eight international students who contributed to the collection, dissemination, and animation of international fashion on Cornell’s campus in the mid-twentieth century (Fig. 9).

Accessibility, Retrievability & Outreach: The physical exhibition was visited by Cornell students, alumni, and faculty along with visiting scholars and the surrounding community. Overall, the exhibition was well received by the public. Prior to the opening reception, we had already received several requests for guided tours. We also received a request from the Director of Cornell’s Public History Initiative, Stephen Vider, to feature the exhibition on the initiative’s recently launched website. We could not track the number of visitors because the exhibit was located in a building that is open to the public and serves many other needs beyond museum display. However, public interest was clear. In total, we gave eight guided tours to students, local groups, visiting scholars, and alumni, whose ages and educational level range from middle school to retirees and tenured faculty.

⁴ We included Native American and Native Hawaiian students in our definition of “international” as a way of acknowledging Indigenous sovereignty. We also chose to highlight the work of first-generation students whose parents were immigrants.

⁵ The video is also available online through Cornell University Library: https://media.library.cornell.edu/media/Home+Economics+in+the+Modern+University/1_mg9wrfki.



In order to make the exhibit more accessible and retrievable, a digital version was published on Cornell's Spotlight Platform.⁶ Creating this resource allowed us to reach wider audiences. The online platform is organized in a parallel manner to the physical exhibition with pages for each of the four themes, as well as one for student biographies. The platform includes catalog images of ensembles, ephemera, and other archival and promotional materials as well as installation shots and object labels (Fig. 10). In the digital version, we were able to share additional photographs provided by the descendants of both Henrietta Hoag Guilfoyle and Virginia Beatrice Kauhaneuiohonokawailani Dominis Koch as well as quotes taken from the students' writing, to share their personal articulations of style and fashion with the audience.

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⁶ The exhibition is available online through Cornell Library's Spotlight Platform: <https://exhibits.library.cornell.edu/engaging-communities-empowering-students>



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