

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF HISTORIC DRESS AND TEXTILES

A Proposal

Background

The idea for a Center for the Study of Historic Dress and Textiles at Smith was spurred by the offer of the remarkable Historic Northampton clothing collection to the college. We quickly realized that this primary resource would open up new pedagogical and research opportunities for students and faculty. With support from Smith and a series of Five College Digital Humanities Mellon grants, we have accomplished the following since our initial proposal 6 years ago:

- Assessed the historic clothing collections at Smith and at Historic Northampton, with funding for professional consultants provided by the Provost.
- Introduced the project to the Five College community through a Kahn Institute seminar and a liberal arts luncheon presentation.
- Conducted a series of workshops with faculty and museum directors to develop ideas for curriculum centered on dress and material culture.
- Developed concepts and built prototypes for an online learning center for the history of dress with advice from Five College faculty, librarians, technical staff, and students.
- Produced an overbooked conference, *Narratives of Women's Dress*, attended by over 400 alumnae, students and professionals.
- Gave talks to Smith Clubs in Greenwich, New York, Washington D.C., Boston
- Celebrated the 40th year of the collection with 200 students, faculty, alumnae and guests.

A growing community of Smith and Five College faculty and staff are actively engaged in teaching, learning and research activities involving material culture objects. The study of dress and textiles is interdisciplinary and global, with connections to all the parts of the curriculum, including: anthropology, gender studies, economics as well as science, engineering, math, computer science. This proposal incorporates ideas generated by collaborative discussion within that community.

Vision

The Center is envisioned as a nexus for teaching, learning, and research about historic dress and textiles, in a dedicated space convenient to students and faculty members and overseen by a director. Students and faculty will experience the Center in three ways: (1) direct study of physical artifacts, (2) access to online resources, and (3) connect via an array of intellectual activities.

Connecting to the College's plan, this center could strengthen student access to research experiences for experiential and applied opportunities, develop new digital resources for historical artifact study as an emerging field, and strengthen investment in unique teaching resources for face-to-face education.

1. Collection of Historic Dress artifacts and research archives (physical objects)

Opens the Smith College Collection of Historic Clothing as an archive for research and use in classes. The collections will include integrated spaces for exhibition, teaching, and working with the artifacts and archives. Features include:

- Open access to five-college faculty, students and visiting scholars.
- Collection stewardship provided by a professional curator, including a database that forms the hub of the online learning center.
- Student engagement opportunities for assisting with research, cataloguing, and display.
- Enhanced research experience with connections to Smith primary resources, such as the Art Museum, the Sophia Smith collection and College Archives, and the Rare Book Room

- Possibly offer an opportunity to combine with the renowned collection at Historic Northampton

2. Historic Dress Online (virtual learning center)

A database prototype and concept model for Historic Dress online is being created in the context of the Five College Mellon grant at www.historicdress.org. The ultimate online center will include a catalogue of dress and textiles, scholar research materials and the Center's collections. An infrastructure would provide media management, curating tools, and most important, broad user access and participation with the content. It will be designed to link easily with other online data and to integrate with user-friendly learning tools suitable for online and blended learning.

- A collection of interpretive essays, and a workspace where research materials can be collected, saved, sorted, and shared.
- Interactive tools, including a visual thesaurus of garment types, features and terms and a "Dating Algorithm" for dating unidentified garments and images by answering a series of multiple-choice questions linked to the thesaurus and the collections database.
- Personal workspaces where users can collect, arrange and compare multiple images of similar garments or accessories from the Historic Dress collections and archives or from elsewhere on the web.
- Community workspaces for sharing research and collaborative exhibitions and illustrated essays, with forums where users can share questions and expertise.
- A pedagogical resource that integrates an online learning environment, such as Moodle or Open EdX, with the Historic Dress database and scholarly workspace to support a wide variety of interactive educational experiences.

3. Center for the Study of Historic Dress and Textiles (intellectual hub)

The intellectual hub and community face of the Center will connect the physical collections and online resources with pedagogical and research activities. Oversight of the above will be provided by a Faculty Director and administrative assistant. An Advisory board made up of Five College faculty, library and technology staff, supportive alumnae, global scholars, and students will provide insight and build community.

The primary mission of the Center is to build scholarship in the field, support and develop connections with other departments across the curriculum here at Smith, and help other institutions recognize the value of their collections and the importance of caring for them. The Center will strive to articulate compelling stories that surviving garments and material culture artifacts and images can tell by:

- Developing on-campus and online classes related to historic dress and textiles.
- Sponsoring collaborations, conferences and colloquia.
- Connecting with other colleges, universities, libraries, museums and historical societies with collections related to historic dress and textiles.
- Collaborating with other institutions around the nation and the world to link collections and share methodologies (for example, with the Digital Public Library of America).

Importance

The Center will give Smith a leadership role as the only undergraduate program with a stellar study collection open to all students coupled with an intellectually wide-ranging curriculum supported by digital learning tools designed to build basic proficiency in the field. It will likely attract prospective students (Smith and UMass Amherst courses recently taught in this field have been oversubscribed, and over 400 people attended our symposium).

Our integrated approach will help students build essential skills while providing both physical and digital access to extensive primary resources. Building digital infrastructure for the study of dress at Smith will support emerging online and blended learning efforts. In addition, innovative tools developed for Historic Dress Online will contribute to a national dialogue about historic dress and textiles.

SPACE NEEDS FOR HISTORIC CLOTHING COLLECTION

This Center should be located near other classroom buildings and libraries where it would be the most accessible and visible for research and class purposes.

1. Storage

Like the other archival and special collections, the clothing and accessories need a storage room that can be dark, locked, dry, clean, stable in temperature and humidity and free of insects and rodents.

The storage area should accommodate the current collection at Smith with at least two times that amount for expansion. Too many collections quickly outgrow their spaces. I anticipate many donations from private collections eager to put their collections in an archive like ours from more Smith alumnae and from individuals from round the country.

With compact storage units, the storage room should be at least 4,000 square feet with ceiling heights of ten to twelve feet tall. If this height were not available, then the total square footage for storage should be at least 5,000 sq. ft.

At least half of the collection—stable garments—can hang on racks enclosed in compact storage to protect them from dust and light. Often there is room for wide drawers beneath these racks for items requiring flat storage. Some items such as 1920's beaded dresses need their own shallow shelf. Accessories such as hats and shoes could be stored on mounts on shelf units.

The room should have fire suppression systems.

The room should be adjacent to the support spaces such as the classroom and with easy access to building exits, possibly including a loading dock, to facilitate moving pieces to exhibit spaces outside the building. 5,000 sq. ft.

2. Support Spaces

- **Classroom:** A classroom needs to be near enough to storage to facilitate the transfer of objects to the classroom and large enough to accommodate up to 25 students. It would include worktables as well as shelves and built in cases for secure display of garments. 800-1000 sq. ft.
- **Main Workroom:** The main workroom would be used by faculty, staff and students for conservation/collection maintenance, the analysis and processing of new donations, general cataloging and record keeping, and individual study of objects.

In addition to worktables, the workroom should have shelving to temporarily store collection items, computers for the collection database, and a chest freezer to freeze all incoming garments for insect control. (The chest freezer could also be housed in the secondary workroom.) 1200 sq. ft.

- **Secondary Workroom:** A second workroom is needed to store conservation materials, dressing forms and mannequins for exhibits and photography. Ideally, it would be large enough to maintain a photography studio. 400 sq. ft.
- **Reference and research room:** The holdings of the Center should include a library/archives of dress reference materials such as books, period magazines, and research of scholars in the field, and, of course computers. Several alumnae and friends have promised their book collections and research for this. These items would need to be housed in an area furnished with adequate shelving, study tables, and drawers for files. 800 sq. ft

- **Administration Office:** The office would be used for the director and an administrative assistant, equipped with desks, shelving, computers, etc.

3. Exhibit Spaces

The location of any space dedicated to exhibitions would depend on the layout and location of the Center. I recommend that exhibitions be located for maximum public exposure, not necessarily just in the Center itself. Hopefully, there would be exhibits with other college collections so that the clothing is shown in a context of art or photographs or archival resources.

Most student exhibitions would likely be small, showing 2 to 5 garments at most, so there might be various campus locations for temporary exhibits with controlled lighting.

4. Support materials needed

New hangers, hat mounts, materials to store accessories including fans, gloves, belts, purses, shoes, parasols, hoops and bustles.

May, 2019

STAFFING FOR THE HISTORIC CLOTHING COLLECTION

\$3.5 Million

The Director of the Center would be a full-time staff member and an Adjunct lecturer in the American Studies department. The director would help build scholarship in the field offering courses and advising student projects, develop connections with other departments across the curriculum, sponsor collaborations, conferences and colloquia, connecting with other colleges, universities, libraries, museums and historical societies with collections related to historic dress and textiles.

More specifically this director would oversee the collection, teach the *"Reading" Dress: Archival Studies of Clothing* and one other course each year, arrange for faculty members and students to use the collection, advise student curators or curate several small exhibits per year and maintain and develop a virtual learning center. As an administrator, this director would manage the budget and funding opportunities, review offers of gifts and donations, and supervise the cataloging and storage.

2. There will be at least a half-time administrative assistant.
3. Students will be hired to help with the administration and research as work-study and interns.