

# DRESS AND TEXTILE COLLECTIONS AMIDST COVID-19

DRESS AND TEXTILE SPECIALISTS



Face mask by Tina Crawford © Tobyboo.

**DATS**  
Dress and Textile Specialists

@DATSNETWORK

DRESSANDTEXTILESPECIALISTS.ORG.UK

# ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This resource combines survey responses and case studies that reflect changes to the way collections staff and researchers work with dress and textile collections, during COVID-19.

It is our hope that this document will celebrate colleagues who have worked innovatively with collections and those who have continued to engage audiences, regardless of the challenging global situation we find ourselves in. Some case studies, we hope, may be used and replicated in other services.

The main reason for conducting a survey was to identify whether there were major collections management concerns staff faced and whether highlighting these potential worries may, in fact, help us plan better for future lockdowns or similar disasters. It was also a chance for individuals to divulge ways they were able to continue engaging with audiences when physical visits were not possible. The survey comprised of 14 questions and all respondents remain anonymous.

The call for stories, or case studies, was circulated at the same time as the survey. Individuals were asked to contribute a short piece on collections management, engagement, plans to acquire textile related COVID-19 objects or they could discuss the effects of furloughed staff on collections. It became apparent slightly later in the year that the reduced accessibility to collections would affect researchers and students, so case studies also represent this important and crucial voice.

DATS recognises that this is an unprecedented time. As we enter into the new year, with another lockdown implemented, many have been placed on furlough perhaps for the third time. Individuals therefore may not have been in a position to participate in the survey or to contribute to a case study. This will no doubt have an impact on the collection they work with but it may also sway the results of the survey. In more severe cases, colleagues have been made redundant as a direct result of COVID-19. As the only subject specialist network dedicated to the study, research and care of dress and textiles in the UK, we hope that as a community we will be able to support those who find themselves in challenging situations.

# SURVEY OVERVIEW

**33**

We had 33 respondents in total.

**17**

Respondents came from 17 different organisations.

**2**

Two respondents were from outside the UK, located in America and Romania.

**89%**

The majority of participants were collections based staff.

# COLLECTIONS

38%

This amount of participants were able to access all of their collections during lockdown.

The main concern for dress and textile collections staff was possible fluctuations in temperature, light levels and relative humidity. Just over 40% of participants were worried about the possible effects these changes may have on the collection. Only 7% were concerned about specific fugitive or damaged objects.

15%

A small proportion were worried about objects that were not stored correctly.

*'...the stores will miss out on collections staff checks and so things could get missed.'*

18

The majority of respondents were able to check on at least some of their collection.

2

Only a small number of participants were unable to check on their collection.

56%

Over half of survey participants were concerned about the safety of collections.

# ENGAGEMENT

## 100%

All respondents said their organisation was working on at least one or more digital engagement activities.

*'Education staff [are] doing more tours of collections, though this doesn't include costume or textile collections'.*

## 18

Over half of participants utilised social media platforms and websites more than they did before COVID-19.

## 8

Just under a quarter of respondents wrote social media content.

*'I am on extended furlough so unable to contribute. Audience development teams are dealing with social media [...] very rare to see dress or textile content'.*

## 12%

A small proportion of respondents worked on digitising exhibitions.

*'We are using this time to try and improve records in prep for a publicly available collections online system.'*

## 22%

22% of participants noted they were writing blog posts.

# COLLECTING COVID

*'...I think it would be interesting to collect garments that have been made during Covid. So perhaps scrubs that have been made locally. [...] And textile artworks that have been made, to highlight mental health and well-being through picking up a needle and thread.'*

## 16

The majority of survey participants were not in a position to collect COVID-related objects.

*'We are collecting face coverings produced by the fashion industry for menswear and PPE/gowns made by British fashion brands. We aim to do interviews to investigate the change in fashion production by these firms.'*

*'We are currently collecting our Brand's response to the pandemic. At the moment this means collecting documentation, photographs, audio & video from various internal stakeholders who are leading the relief efforts.'*

## 1/5

One fifth of respondents were hoping to acquire objects relating to COVID-19.

*'Still in planning mode at the moment. [...] it would be part of a continued oral history project led by young ambassadors and volunteers. All museum visitors would be asked, both on site and virtually. There has been a series of oral histories taken over the years which this would be added to'.*

# CASE STUDIES

## 10

We received 10 case studies. They highlight how those who work with dress and textile collections have been resourceful and innovative during this challenging time.



Mariano Fortuny dress being professionally photographed prior to display in the La Belle Époque exhibition at the Ulster Museum.  
© Eliza McKee

## 5

An additional 5 stories highlight ways individuals have utilised digital solutions to engage with audiences.

## 3

3 case studies identify different ways individuals have worked with collections.

## 2

The final case studies are written by researchers. They speak about the implications of limited access to collections.

# **ONLINE ENGAGEMENT**

# VIRTUAL TOURS

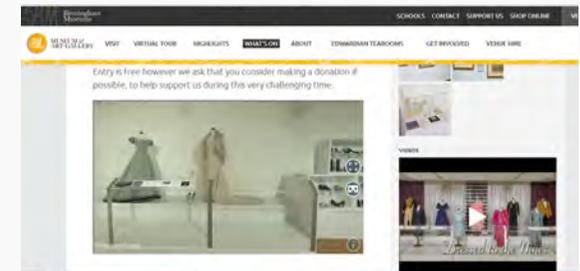
## REBECCA UNSWORTH, BIRMINGHAM MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (BMAG) closed its doors to the public in March 2020, and did not reopen until October, before shutting again with the second lockdown in November. During this period, both public and curatorial access to Birmingham Museum Trust's (BMT) dress and textile collection has been very limited.

One way in which BMAG sought to bring the museum to the public during lockdown was by creating a virtual tour of the museum. But whilst visitors can digitally wander through the history and art galleries at BMAG, as there are currently no permanent galleries dedicated to dress and textiles at BMAG, these collections do not feature as part of the tour.

A small temporary exhibition about dressing up and going out from around 1850 to the present day, Dressed to the Nines, is currently on display at BMAG. During lockdown, images of some of the objects in the exhibition were available online, as was a short introductory video, but a full digital edition of the exhibition was not created .

Another way in which BMT sought to engage its audiences during lockdown was through its image library. BMT does not have an online catalogue, but it has been making increasing numbers of images of objects in its collection available online, all open access.



View of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery website featuring a digitised view of the Dressed to the Nines exhibition.

There are very few available images of objects in the dress and textile collection though. This is partly because not many objects in that collection have been properly photographed, particularly if they have not featured in exhibitions in the past. There is rather a backlog of photography and cataloguing in relation to the dress and textile collection at BMT which needs to be done, and which is currently preventing this collection from being more readily available for use by other departments, such as the digital team.

During its closure, BMT placed as many staff as possible, including most of the curatorial team, on furlough. I myself was on furlough from the start of April until mid-September, and have now returned to furlough in November with the second lockdown. This means I have been unable to work on cataloguing the dress and textile collection during this time, and with my return to work there have been both other priorities on my time and limited access to the stores as BMT tries to prevent cross-site working as much as possible. During furlough I have also been unable to help with digital engagement, such as online talks or videos. Although, a video of the embroidery collection filmed long before lockdown was placed online during the museum's closure.

The example of BMT shows that for digital engagement strategies to fully represent all aspects of a museum's collection, there needs to be an investment of time and resources in collections management work to ensure that images and information about objects are on hand and ready to be made available to the public.



Rebecca Unsworth giving a tour of the embroidery collection, available to view on YouTube.

Rebecca Unsworth is the research assistant for the Decorative Art collection at Birmingham Museums Trust. She has a PhD from Queen Mary University of London and the Victoria and Albert Museum on the circulation of news about men's fashion in early modern Europe.

# FASHION EXHIBITION ONLINE

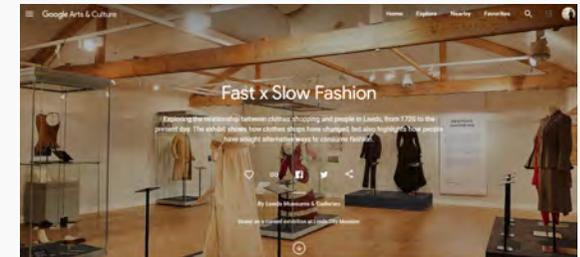
## VANESSA JONES, LEEDS MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

The exhibition Fast x Slow Fashion: Shopping for Clothes in Leeds 1720 – 2020, at Leeds City Museum, opened on 14 February and was due to close on the 20 June. COVID-19 halted the exhibition over summer and, thankfully, it was extended until 29 November. Due to the second lockdown the last day visitors could visit the physical exhibition was 30 October.

When the first lockdown was announced there was huge incentive to ensure our exhibitions were still accessible. With a fantastic team of digitally minded engagement staff, Fast x Slow Fashion is now featured on the Leeds Museums and Galleries (LMG) website, LMG's YouTube channel and on Google Arts & Culture (GA&C).

From a curatorial perspective, most of the work had already been done - the exhibition interpretation written and the objects selected. I created spreadsheets with appropriate information alongside a thumbnail image of the object. The actual process of transforming a rather simple spreadsheet into a GA&C feature is something I know absolutely nothing about. Thomas Bullen, Digital Solutions Officer at LMG, explains the process:

*'Featuring 'Fast x Slow Fashion' on GA&C required collecting and uploading images we wanted to feature, along with accompanying text based narrative formed from existing interpretation from the physical exhibition. Content was uploaded through Google's Cultural Institute partner platform by our audience development team, then reviewed by the GA&C editorial team before being approved for publication.'*



View of Fast x Slow Fashion as featured on Google Arts and Culture.

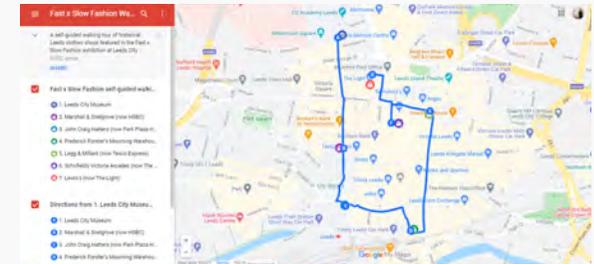
The LMG exhibition page was created by Sara Hallam, Audience Development Officer, and includes an interactive map. Originally, the exhibition had a physical walking tour of the city, which highlighted key shops found in the exhibition. Sara transformed the walking tour leaflet into a virtual walking tour, utilising a function on Google Maps. Sara notes:

*'We pulled highlights from the exhibition initially and built up a larger collection of images and information once the page was live to refresh the content and enhance SEO. This also provided us with an opportunity to include more interactive ideas including tutorial videos and a physical walking tour of Leeds via Google Maps. This exhibition was the first to go live on our website and has received over 5,000 views.'*

LMG received a number of enquiries from universities who, under normal circumstances, would have visited the exhibition with students. When the first lockdown restrictions were lifted, Megan Jones, Digital Engagement Officer, recorded a 10-minute guided tour of the exhibition. As Megan recounts:

*'We filmed a tour around the gallery highlighting key pieces on display. Audience expectations of video quality are increasingly leaning towards 'homemade' content, so we recorded this in one take using a mobile phone and a gimbal, editing afterwards on Adobe Premiere Pro CC and adding Youtube subtitles for accessibility. So far, the video has been viewed 1,175 times.'*

Due to the impeccable work of LMG's audience development team, individuals interested in the consumption of fashion are now able to view the exhibition digitally. It has set a precedence for future exhibitions and I hope digital engagement will now be embedded in curatorial practice at LMG.



The exhibition on Leeds Museums and Galleries website, showcasing the virtual walking tour.

Vanessa Jones is assistant curator of dress and textiles at Leeds Museums and Galleries. She is lead curator of the Fast x Slow Fashion exhibition, which explored the consumption of clothes in Leeds from 1720 to 2020. Vanessa is the conference organiser for DATS as well as being a freelance historic dress and textile consultant.

# ENGAGING AUDIENCES

JENNA ROSE, ABERDEEN ART GALLERY & MUSEUM

As we grapple with the coronavirus outbreak in these unprecedented times, Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums (AAGM) have taken to social media to virtually share events that have been cancelled, exhibitions that can no longer be seen in person and projects that can no longer come to fruition.

Shane Strachan's The Bill Gibb Line exhibition is a collaboration between the Look Again Festival, Gray's School of Art and AAGM. With visitors unable to physically visit, Shane took to AAGM's social media pages for a weeklong, previously unscheduled takeover.

The takeover showed performance poetry inspired by the work of internationally acclaimed fashion designer Bill Gibb. It also showcased new garments by Gray's School of Art Fashion and Textile Design students and key objects from AAGM's collection. The takeover reached thousands of people virtually who may otherwise have missed out.

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, Curator Jenna and collections volunteer Ainize were based at Aberdeen Treasure Hub working on an extensive project reviewing 180 wedding dresses and associated bridal accessories.

When asked to work from home elements of the project had to be temporarily stopped and other areas have developed and flourished. Together they developed a successful social media takeover shared with audiences on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.



*Brown velvet wedding dress, 1898.*

Photo ref MS023863a. ©Aberdeen City Council (Art Gallery & Museums Collections).

New methods were used to broaden and expand our online visitor numbers. We used video to showcase the large amount of collection photography we have, which in turn highlighted the breadth of the wedding dress collection. Stringing the photography into a video allowed us to share more images than we have previously been capable of.

Another first for the team was sharing a collections podcast on social media. The takeover finished with another first for the service, an online 'ask the curator' session, which encouraged engagement with staff and the collection, and this proved popular with followers.

We use the blogging platform Tumblr on a regular basis and posted four wedding themed blogs during the takeover, ensuring our routine digital service is kept up to date. Collection volunteer, Ainize, contributed to the blog offer as we look for alternative ways of her actively contributing to the project. Social media statistics revealed the days with blogs were most popular.

The series of wedding posts saw engagement from Aberdonians reminiscing about department store Watt & Grant, a popular stop for brides-to-be. Apparently, the stores Daffodil Tea Room was a popular stop for punks who frequented The Other Record Shop nearby. We're told the café sold excellent coffee and cake! We were able to establish links and network with other museums as a result of the wedding week takeover. The Curator of European Costume and Textiles at Glasgow Life tweeted to let us know of the wedding theme documentation project she is undertaking while she works from home.



*Satin wedding dress and belt, 1940.*  
Photo ref MS071731. ©Aberdeen City Council  
(Art Gallery & Museums Collections).



Crisis brings functionality in fashion, The Aberdonian, Evening Express, April 8, 2020.

Our statistics show that reach and engagement to posts was higher on Facebook rather than on Twitter and Instagram. The top engagement location is the UK and 70% of our followers on Facebook are female. Our wedding wear collection only represents women; therefore, it was difficult to represent males and minority audiences through this wedding themed social media campaign. Thought should be given in the future to representing a diverse range of people and attracting other types of users and non-users.

We continue to contribute articles to Aberdeen Journal's weekly. Our article Crisis Brings Functionality in Fashion was published in the Aberdonian supplement of the Evening Express. With the end of lockdown approaching, and as we enter the early phases of 'new normal', we will continue to prioritise our audiences, generating engaging and relevant information for our dress and textile followers.

Jenna Rose is a Curator at Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums. She shares responsibility for the care and development of the decorative art collections, which include textiles, costume, furniture, jewellery, metalwork, glass, ceramics and contemporary craft. She helps to ensure that the 18,000 items within her remit are stored and handled safely, interpreted for display and developed effectively so that they remain useful and accessible to our audiences, now and in the future.

# TEXTILES ON TWITTER, FABRICS ON FACEBOOK

## ISABELLA ROSNER, WITNEY ANTIQUES

In the middle of the COVID-19 outbreak, I became the social media manager for Witney Antiques, Britain's leading dealer of antique needlework. This came about because the owner of Witney Antiques, Rebecca Scott, does not have time to dedicate to creating social media content for her business, and I, as someone very active on social media, saw the need for the business to expand to global audiences. Rebecca and I are collaborating on another project, so I asked if she would be interested in a stronger social media presence for the business and she agreed. The timing of this was ideal, as, because of COVID-19, I have been increasing my social media presence by posting more on my Twitter (@IsabellaRosner) and my Instagram (@historicembroidery), as well as starting a podcast about historic needlework that relies heavily on the posting of content across social media platforms. I felt that, because I was using my social media presence in new ways - endeavouring to share beautiful things to provide joy in a stressful, uncertain time - I was ready and eager to run social media for a business.

Rebecca already ran Witney's Instagram page, featuring a mixture of images of needlework in her shop and horses, her other passion. I started a Twitter and Facebook page for the business, as well as taking over the Instagram. I began posting three times a day to drum up interest in the accounts and then shifted to twice a day. I post once in the morning and once in the evening UK time in order to ensure that audiences in different time zones can engage with our content.



Whitney Antiques Twitter page.

I receive images of needlework currently for sale and already sold from Rebecca and post a combination of those images with images taken from the Witney Antiques website. I ensure that I post a mixture of samplers, embroidered pictures, furniture, and snapshots from the shop itself. As samplers make up the bulk of Witney Antiques' stocks, I do post those most often but endeavour to share examples from a variety of time periods and locations.

As Witney Antiques is an antiques dealership rather than a museum or other public institution, I am the only volunteer. The joy and difficulty of being the sole volunteer in a one-person business is fielding questions about object availability and cost. I do not always know the prices of objects or even if they have already been sold, so I must rely on effective communication with the shop owner. Communicating in a timely manner in the midst of unexpected pandemic-related circumstances has been a constructive learning experience.

I am very much a proponent of online engagement in order to reach individuals who would not have access to Witney's materials otherwise, especially because Witney's website features a very small portion of the business's available objects. Since starting the business's Facebook and Twitter pages and revamping its Instagram, we have gained hundreds of followers who did not know about the business previously. As several individuals have told us, our posts have introduced them to art they had no idea existed. In these strange, frustrating times, being able to showcase the beautiful pieces of needlework at Witney Antiques has been a bright spot, especially as someone who is passionate about making historic costume and textiles accessible to all.

Isabella Rosner is a second year PhD student at King's College London, where she researches and writes about Quaker women's decorative arts before 1800. Her project focuses specifically on seventeenth-century English needlework and eighteenth-century Philadelphia wax and shellwork. She received her BA from Columbia University and her MPhil from Cambridge University and has been lucky enough to work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, LACMA, Colonial Williamsburg, and Fitzwilliam Museum. Isabella specialises in the study of schoolgirl samplers and early modern women's needlework in addition to hosting the 'Sew What?' podcast about historic needlework and those who stitched it.

# INTERACTIVE ZOOM SESSION

## CHARLOTTE MCREYNOLDS, ULSTER MUSEUM

This case study will give a synopsis of a live online event conceived by Charlotte McReynolds, curator of art at the Ulster Museum, and organised by Stephen Millar, project coordinator, for the HLF project Reimagine, Remake, Replay. The project aims to engage young people, aged 16 to 25, with museum collections using a mix of creative media and digital technologies.

The Stay IN Style workshop was hosted on Zoom. The workshop had two main sources of inspiration. The first was Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim's 2015 publication *The Dress Detective*. The second was the Fashion Revolution Week, which campaigns to make people more aware of who makes our clothes and the social, environmental, economic impacts of the fashion industry. Participants were encouraged to dress up in their favourite outfits for the session, so that they could later share stories about what these outfits meant to them. The hope was that participants would think about clothes they loved and this would spark curiosity about where they come from.

Stephen Millar promoted the event using Twitter and Instagram. He did this by reaching out to National Museums Northern Ireland staff and asked them to provide images and a few lines of text about their own favourite outfit, to encourage engagement. This was adapted into threads and stories that reached high levels of engagement.

For the Stay IN Style session, the curator prepared a PowerPoint presentation split into two halves. The first half explained the role of the curator and the concept of Fashion Revolution Week. The curator also shared images and stories of garments from the museum's collection that told particularly meaningful stories.



Participants on Zoom for the Stay IN Style workshop.

At this point participants were invited to share their own meaningful stories - 'fashion love stories'. Several participants explained the outfit they had chosen to wear embodied happy memories, some talked about body positivity, comfort and safety, whilst others discussed that they had handmade or adapted the clothing they wore to express their own interests and passions.

The second half of the PowerPoint shared results of an exercise the curator conducted the previous week. This brought together ideas of globalisation and personal reflections of an ordinary garment in the curator's own wardrobe - a fleece dressing gown. It involved thinking about the physical properties of polyester fabrics and discussing the garment industry in Bangladesh. The aim of this section was to encourage participants to recognise how much even seemingly ordinary, sometimes deemed non-museum-worthy, garments can reveal about us - as individuals and as a society. The exercise allowed the curator to touch on environmental and social impacts of the fast fashion industry, and led to a conversation with participants about the ethics of how museums collect modern fashion.

If not for lockdown, the curator would probably never have attempted an event like this. Following positive feedback, it seems feasible that this sort of live online engagement could become a more regular part of what we do at Ulster Museum.

Charlotte McReynolds is a curator of art at the Ulster Museum, Belfast (National Museums NI). She has particular responsibility for the museum's collection of fashion and textiles. Fashion exhibitions curated by Charlotte at the Ulster Museum include: Fashion & Feminism (2018-2019) and Vice Versa (2019-2020). Research interests include the 1976 Malone House Fire, which destroyed the Ulster Museum's original costume and textile collection, and examples of eighteenth century fashion found in the museum's rebuilt collection.

# **WORKING WITH COLLECTIONS**

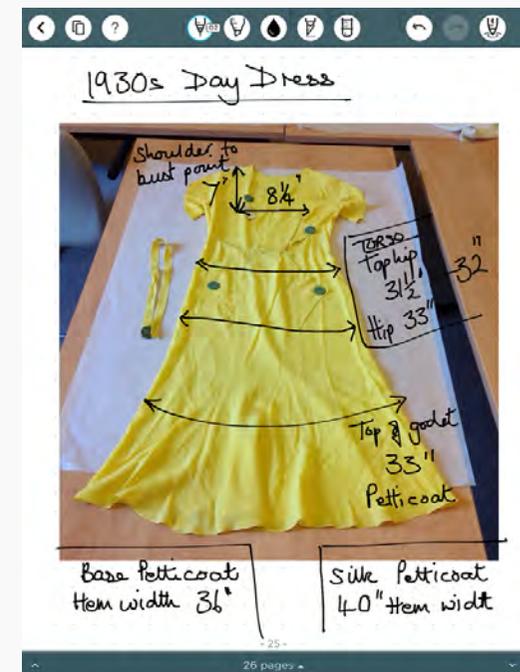
# PREPARING MANNEQUINS REMOTELY

JANET WOOD, FREELANCE CONSERVATOR AND DISPLAY SPECIALIST

From fashion designer to textile conservator, the importance of accurate measurements has been a guiding principle of my work. Working freelance, preparing mannequins remotely for dress to be displayed in a new fashion and textiles gallery post lockdown, really highlighted the importance of this practice.

Historic dress is fragile and trying it on a mannequin is challenging and can be detrimental. This has encouraged a working goal of only trying garments on a display form three or four times. The key to achieving this is working with a good set of accurate measurements taken from the garments.

The absolute necessity of this practice was highlighted when working remotely preparing mannequins in my London studio for garments in the new Costume Collection galleries at Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle. When the project was initiated this was not the way things were planned but, with reduced staff on-site, social distancing and shorter opening hours, working remotely was the only way to complete the work. The project was large and generously supported by funding from the Cumbria Local Enterprise Partnership and the Northern Powerhouse, the DCMS/Wolfson Museums and Galleries Improvement Fund and the Garfield Weston Foundation. When lockdown restrictions were lifted finishing the work quickly and safely was essential.



Rough iPad notes made onsite to use when designing underpinnings for the 1930 dress.  
© Janet Wood.

*Ada Ashbridge-Tomlinson's yellow silk dress, 1930s. The Costume Collection, Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery.*

The garments remained in the museum and I visited them four times to gather relevant information, make notes, take photographs, and prepare quick toiles of areas difficult to fit. The garments were all twentieth century and the mannequins fell into 3 basic sizes. I was given a sample of each size to work with in my studio, which was essential when making underpinnings as it allowed size and lengths to be more accurately estimated.

The most important tool when working on site was an iPad with the Penultimate™ App. Although only a very early version with an extremely basic stylus, it was possible to photograph the garment and annotate the photographs with measurements and highlight difficult fitting issues. Having an immediate visual reference was crucial to the success of the project.

Overall, the work went well. The main problems occurred when the original time estimated on-site was insufficient, due to COVID-19 restrictions slowing down normal working methods. This resulted in some measurements being overlooked at the initial assessment because of time pressures. Working under the new rules the actual hours needed to complete the work were increased by at least 25% -30%. Nothing can replace working alongside extant garments when preparing mannequins but in the 'new normal' this method achieved a good result.

My thanks must go to Melanie Gardner, curator and all the staff working on the project at the museum for being so supportive and creative in addressing issues on-site during my visits.

Following a fashion and textiles degree from the Gloucestershire College of Art and Design, Janet Wood FRSA worked as design assistant to Thea Porter, and then for the fashion company Monsoon, employed as their first trained designer to work with factories in India, Afghanistan and Romania. She also designed and marketed her own cocktail and evening wear range made both in India and the UK. In 1994 she re-trained as a textile conservator with Historic Royal Palaces working for 18 years as part of their Conservation and Collection Care team before leaving to follow her passion for costume. Janet is now a freelance consultant, specialising in conservation and display of historic and contemporary fashion.

# CURATING DURING COVID

CHARLOTTE MCREYNOLDS, ULSTER MUSEUM

I decided to curate an exhibition on the theme of La Belle Époque in early 2019 as an opportunity to showcase the historic side of the Ulster Museum's fashion collection, and to display two significant recent donations dating from the Belle Époque period. These pieces are an 1896 wedding dress and a 1911 court presentation and train, both once belonging to textile heiress Elizabeth Balfour Clark, of 'Coats and Clark' cotton thread.

This exhibition was originally due to open in September 2020, but because of the pandemic its preparations were interrupted and the deadline for opening was pushed back to the end of November 2020. As work started on La Belle Époque in late 2019, most of the objects selected for display had already been frozen or quarantined and were transported from our off-site stores to the Ulster Museum by January 2020. This turned out to be very fortunate as retrieving objects for the exhibition during pandemic restrictions would have been difficult due to our off-site collections stores remaining off-limits to most staff until well into September this year.

From the middle of March until the end of August, I could not work with the objects either in our stores or in the museum, but I was able to use this time to research the exhibition in depth, with the positive result that when I was able to return to working with the objects, I felt very clear about the stories I wanted to tell with them.



*Court dress and train, 1911.*

Made by Madame Leonie Duboc and worn by Elizabeth Clark. BELUM.T2019.13.1&2, © Ulster Museum, National Museums NI

However, the most time consuming part of exhibition preparation was always going to be the costume mounting, which could not be done from home. NI government regulations stipulated that work that could not be done from home could be done in a workplace, so at the end of August when it was confirmed that the exhibition would be opening at the end of November, curatorial intern Eliza McKee and I were able to begin working with the objects in the museum.

Due to COVID-19, the Ulster Museum's hot-desk space was out of bounds for normal staff use, which unexpectedly worked in our favour. Once the computers and desks were cleared, we were able to use the hot-desking space as an extra-large costume mounting studio, big enough to ensure social distancing whilst mounting the garments. Hand sanitiser stations were installed outside the entrance to the space, masks were worn inside the space, and staff passcards were updated to ensure that only the two of us now had access to this area.

During the three months we spent costume mounting, NI went into further semi-lockdown and then a circuit breaker hard lockdown. We remained responsive to new regulations and knew that updated regulations might mean exhibition preparation and costume mounting had to be put on hold. In the end, we were able to continue the mounting work in the studio space throughout the restricted periods.

Overall, I found that curating during COVID-19 meant accepting that three things would need to be reconsidered. Time, to prepare and deal with the unexpected: space, to work safely with others, and: self-kindness, to reduce any extra stress,

# CURATING, COVID AND CONTINGENCIES

## ELIZA MCKEE, ULSTER MUSEUM

I am currently working with the Fashion Curator, Charlotte McReynolds, at the Ulster Museum, as the Curatorial Intern. When I started the six-month internship, our main task was to mount garments for display in the La Belle Époque exhibition. The exhibition explores the changes in silhouettes in women's clothing from 1870-1910. Therefore, it was very important for us to create mounts that recreated accurate underpinnings and the correct silhouette, to both embody the garments and to properly support the clothing. DATS resources and Lara Flecker's *A Practical Guide to Costume Mounting* (2007) were vital resources. Learning about the costume mounting process was incredibly educational. We found hidden maker's marks, concealed pockets, identified fabrics and learnt a lot about historic silhouettes and bodies.

To mount the garments safely during COVID-19, we worked in a large studio space with masks while working on separate mounts to ensure social distancing. Charlotte and I also created a contingency plan for a virtual placement with agreed digital objectives if regulations resulted in the cessation of in-person work.



Social media posts on Eliza's instagram account, [@IrishDressHistorian](#). The posts document the costume mounting process and the history of the clothing in the La Belle Époque exhibition.

To engage audiences digitally with the exhibition and the collection during lockdowns we have increased social media content on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and blog posts via the official Ulster Museum accounts and website. Each week a different exhibition ensemble has been showcased. The posts have had strong public engagement and have been consistently among the most 'liked' posts on the museum's accounts. I have also started a dress history Instagram account (@IrishDressHistorian) to contribute to social media engagement and to document the internship. The posts focus on the costume mounting process, before and after mounting photographs and the history of the garments. We used the various social media posts to share some of the behind the scenes work that goes into a fashion exhibition and to educate our audiences on how and why historic clothing is prepared for display.

At a time when the museum has been opening and closing intermittently, we have created digital exhibitions to engage the public virtually. We recently de-installed the fashion exhibition, Vice Versa. The garments exhibited were professionally photographed prior to going into the cases. These photographs were used alongside written content to create an online exhibition (<http://www.nmni.com/story/vice-versa-story>). When preparing for the installation of the La Belle Époque exhibition we had all the garments professionally photographed and these photographs will be used to produce another online exhibition and for social media content. It was important to build extra time in to the exhibition schedule for photography as the museum photographer and the handling team were on partial furlough and bringing them off furlough had to be arranged in advance. The opening of the physical exhibition on 27 November 2020 was delayed owing to another lockdown. In addition to expanding our audience and generating interest in the exhibition for when the museum reopens, we hope the online exhibitions and social media content will increase knowledge of the significance of the Ulster Museum's fashion collection, both in Northern Ireland and further afield.

Eliza McKee is a dress historian and AHRC-funded Ph.D candidate at Queen's University, Belfast (QUB). Her Ph.D thesis examines non-elite clothing acquisition in post-Famine Ireland. She is currently a curatorial intern working with the Fashion Curator at the Ulster Museum. Eliza holds a B.A. in Modern History and an M.A. in Irish History from QUB. She also holds an M.A. in Archives and Records Management from the University of Liverpool. Her research interests include non-elite clothing traditions and the clothing of the poor. She has published in the *The Journal of Dress History and Archives and Records*.

**RESEARCHERS**

# LACE RESEARCH

## KAYLA BISHOP, INDEPENDENT HISTORIAN

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has unearthed innumerable issues and frustrations across many facets of life; especially regarding employment in sectors where paid positions are becoming increasingly competitive. I have a long background in handicrafts and an interest in history, which led me to pursue a career in curation and collections management with a focus on textiles, and spent my time at various institutions in paid or unpaid positions hoping to work my way up the ladder. I also completed my Master's degree in museum studies from Johns Hopkins University in 2017. However, I briefly chose to leave the museum field to focus on other areas of my life.

At the end of 2019, I was unaffiliated with any academic or historic institution. In fact for a number of reasons I was not working at all, and was looking to apply my museum studies and textile background to any sort of employment, potentially even re-entering the museum sector. I decided to start researching lace textiles because that had long been an area of interest and I wanted to improve my understanding of different techniques' origins. At the start I was undecided whether or not to publish the results of my work; I was simply curious.

Being unaffiliated with any institutions, I do not have immediate access to the usual library resources available to students. I was fortunate to have amassed a small lace book library over the past several years and have occasionally purchased an article or pamphlet when I felt it would be a good resource, but for the most part my research has been self-funded.

By roughly February of 2020 it was becoming clear both from the nature of the textile I was studying and the paucity of the literature available to me I needed access to extant samples in museum collections, if not in person then at least remotely. However this was happening against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, further complicated by the fact that I am located in the United States and was trying to communicate with museums in the United Kingdom, Belgium, and Italy. By spring of 2020 many museums were closed due to the pandemic and staff furloughed, meaning that few collections staff were left to respond to my queries about items.

While I am still continuing to conduct my research independently and hope to eventually publish my findings, I do not think I will be able to fully and satisfactorily research the origins of modern lace without the return of furloughed heritage workers to their sectors and access to scholarly journals. In the meantime I study what I can when I can, and look for opportunities to apply for funding.

Kayla Bishop is an independent dress and textile historian, with nearly a decade of experience working with museums on the east coast of the United States. She graduated with a Master's degree in museum studies from Johns Hopkins University in 2017 and has provided historic consult for independent film.

# RE-FOCUSING RESEARCH

KATE DEBONO, UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON

I started as a PhD candidate at the University of Brighton in October 2019 after being awarded Techne funding for my research project looking at the collecting of non-elite fashion by museums in the twentieth century. My original research plan set out my intention to conduct research at three dress collections: Worthing Museum and Art Gallery (WMAG), the Fashion Museum Bath and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

I have an existing relationship with Worthing Museum and Art Gallery and they have been integral to and supportive of my research from the start of my application for doctoral study. Worthing was, therefore, confirmed as one of the institutions where I intended to conduct research. I was hoping to be able to conduct research at two other major institutions: I had identified the V&A and Fashion Museum, Bath as my preferred options, but had not yet contacted either institution.

I was six months into my research project and getting ready to apply for ethics clearance when the pandemic was declared and lockdown happened. Due to my personal situation, having young children and the death of a close relative, I had very little time to work on my research during the first lockdown. This has meant my project has slowed to a snail's pace.

While the majority of methods of contacting the V&A were not possible, due to the staff being furloughed, I did manage to contact the V&A via an active blog. I asked if COVID-19 would delay the store move project and whether it would put back the closure of the clothworkers centre. I received an honest and helpful response that the project was likely to maintain the same, original timeline. My chances of being able to access the V&A collection were minimal. I really appreciated that the person running the blog found out the answer to my question and contacted me with a personal email, even if the answer was not exactly what I wanted to hear.

Due to the pandemic and the uncertainty it has caused, I decided that I needed travel less for my research and therefore have not contacted the Fashion Museum about using their collection. Instead I have re-focused my research plan to make WMAG my main and central case study.

The staff at WMAG were also furloughed throughout the first lockdown making it difficult to contact them. However, once lockdown was lifted staff were taken off furlough and a rota was put on place on Saturdays. The museum's collaborative doctoral award student and I were able to share access to the dress collection on these Saturdays. This access has been invaluable and has kept my research project alive.

I have had access to the museum's history files and have been researching the history, staffing structure and curatorial practices of the museum. In order to save money, the licence for the museums database, CALM, has been suspended. Given where I am within my project and the nature of my research, not having access to the database has meant I have not been able to progress with my research.

The second lockdown has now started and all access to the collection has been stopped, with no idea of when access will be possible again. Once I, hopefully, have access to the collection again, if the licence for the database is not reinstated, I will have to consider whether I conduct my research using the paper copies of the collections data and ask if the museum is happy for me to use these backups as a resource. This will have a huge impact on the time required to collect data, the amount of information I can use for my project and will limit the scope of my enquiry. I am concerned that my research will be lacking a connection to the garments held within the collection, which was a core facet of my original research intentions.

I feel very privileged that WMAG trusts me enough to allow access to the collection unsupervised. They have done everything they can to provide access to the collection in, what are, extremely challenging times. The uncertainty, not being able to contact museum staff and lack of access to the museums database, even when I have had access to the collection, have been difficult.

Kate Debono is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Brighton, funded by Techne. Kate was awarded a Techne work placement as a curatorial assistant with the Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection in February 2020, which has been put on hold due to COVID-19. Kate is also a casual museum learning assistant at Worthing Museum and Art Gallery.