

Curating Long Distance: A Series of Exhibitions at the Western Reserve Historical Society

Colleen R. Callahan

Co-Owner, The Costume & Textile Specialists; Curator Emerita of Costume and Textiles for the Valentine Museum, Richmond, Virginia, USA

Between 2012 and 2015, the Western Reserve Historical Society (WRHS) in Cleveland produced three costume exhibitions with a contracted curatorial, conservation, and installation team, whose members were not based in Cleveland. The exhibition themes were 150 years of Cleveland weddings, twentieth-century designer fashions worn by Clevelanders, and high-style clothing worn during Cleveland's heyday from the 1870s to 1930. This presentation details the pluses and minuses for the contract curators and the museum in producing these exhibitions from multiple locations remote from the museum and with limited onsite visits. Challenges included choosing themes and tying these themes to Cleveland history and costume history; selecting objects from the collection using WRHS's online database and week-long onsite visits; researching using the WRHS library, online, and printed resources; performing needed conservation; writing exhibition labels and producing an exhibition brochure; designing the exhibition layouts; and working with WRHS staff and volunteers to install the exhibitions.

As anyone who works on exhibitions knows, each exhibition has its own unique challenges, issues and rewards. And even small costume exhibitions seem to have more of these features than any other exhibitions. This presentation is about the pluses and minuses for contract curators and the museum in producing three costume exhibitions at the Western Reserve Historical Society, the WRHS, in Cleveland, Ohio.



Figure 1: Exhibit Banners & Brochure Graphic

exhibit, etc., etc., etc. Susan and I were wearing both curatorial and installation hats and we had the additional scheduling and budget considerations of being outside contractors living many miles from Cleveland—me in Richmond, VA and Susan in Chicago, Illinois.

Why a stellar collection like the WRHS's was without a specialist curator on staff making it necessary for the museum to hire contract exhibition curators is a long story and too long to go into here. However, I am pleased to inform you that early in 2016, the WRHS hired Patty Edmonson as the Museum Advisory Council Curator of Costume and Textiles. But when our association with them began in the late summer of 2011, there had not been a curator for several years. At that time, the then director, Gainor Davis, took the advice of our colleague Jean Druessedow and contacted the Costume & Textile Specialists, the business I share with Newbold (Newbie) Richardson, about doing an assessment of the collection.

Because of our awareness of the large size and scope of the collection, Newbie and I knew that we would need to visit to the museum to see the collection and how it was stored before we could do even a proposal for an assessment. In mid-October of 2011, we spent two and a half days at the WRHS touring the collection and meeting with staff and came to the conclusion that rather than a collection assessment, as the collection was well housed and fairly well documented, the museum should spend its money on moving forward with interpreting the collection again through exhibitions.

Gainor and the collections staff of 2—the registrar, Danielle Peck, and senior curator, Dean Zimmerman—agreed. Together we began a process of thinking about exhibition themes that would meet museum's goals of showcasing the collection while linking the featured clothing to Cleveland history. This slide lists the museum's goals that remained in place for all three exhibitions, which had a signature garment at their entrances along with the intro labels.



Figure 3: Entrance of Each Exhibit

- To identify appealing exhibition themes that would engage a wide segment of the public
- To highlight the depth and breadth of the collection,
- To connect the collection in tangible ways to the history of the Western Reserve, which by the way, is a region of northeast Ohio on Lake Erie that was retained by Connecticut after other western claims were ceded to the US Congress in 1786. Much of the area was given or sold to immigrants from Connecticut and in 1800 the remainder of the

territory was ceded to Ohio. The city of Cleveland is part what was the Western Reserve territory from which the museum takes its name.

- To utilize the Chisholm Halle Costume Wing gallery to good advantage. Here you see the introduction section of each exhibit in the gallery, which is a 45 foot by 17 foot glass case. And which I will be referring to as the “glass case.”
- To display the clothing in a safe and effective manner utilizing WRHS’s inventory of forms—luckily the museum had a large stock of Manex display forms, which we would use both with or without heads
- To conserve items featured in the exhibition

As a contract curator who was unfamiliar with the collection and Cleveland history, in choosing the initial exhibit theme, I had to weigh fulfilling my client’s (that is the museum’s) goals against themes for which it would be relatively easy to make the preliminary selection of clothing for the exhibition using online access of the museum’s collection database. I also had to explore ways to get a crash course in Cleveland history, plus deal with staffing issues (or lack there of) for the installation. As contract curator for *Dior & More* and *In Grand Style*, Susan Neill would have to deal with these same issues from somewhat different perspectives that I will briefly discuss later in this talk.



Figure 4: Tying the Knot Entrance: Wedding Dress of Alice Wade Everett, 1879

Now back to our initial exhibit. After numerous emails back and forth with the WRHS staff, we decided that a wedding themed exhibit covering the period from 1830 to 1980 would be the best option for the exhibition, in part because wedding-related items are well-identified on the database. Also, since weddings are events that everyone has had some connection to over the course their lives, this theme would fulfill the museum's goal of *identifying an appealing exhibition theme that would engage a wide segment of the public*. It would be up to me as the curator to oversee the other goals.

The exhibition theme was decide upon and in December 2011, I submitted the initial exhibition proposal, schedule, and budget for the Costume & Textile Specialists to curate, design, and install the *Tying the Knot* exhibition. There was a catch however—funding did not come through until the end of January, 2012, and with other delays, we weren't officially contracted to work on the exhibition until the end of February, 2012 for a June 21st, 2012 opening, giving us just over four months to do the exhibition. This type of funding delay is not an uncommon feature of contract work and usually results in adjustments in the scope of work and/or necessitates staff changes.

In this case, we negotiated adding an additional person to the curatorial team so that we could produce essentially the same exhibition I had proposed for a six month preparation period in about four and a half months. In January 2012, Susan Neill became available and Newbie and I contacted her to see if she would be interested in joining us on the project. Luckily she said yes and the museum was able to work with us to adjust the contract so Susan could be added to our team. Newbie served as an assistant curator on *Tying the Knot* but did not work onsite in Cleveland on the other two exhibitions though she did do contract conservation for them.



Figure 5: *Tying the Knot* Trousseau and Accessories Collage

In addition to the sixteen wedding gowns on forms I planned for *Tying the Knot*, I wanted to include six trousseau outfits on forms and nearly ninety additional objects, including trousseau nightgowns and underwear, wedding-related accessories, and photographs. Especially for this initial exhibit I felt it was important to show a sizable number of artifacts to emphasize the collection's scope and range. Here you see some of these items both in the glass case and in separate vitrine cases—the trousseau dresses were on headless forms to distinguish them from the wedding dresses, which were on forms with heads for their veils or hats. If Susan had not joined us to work on the exhibition, no doubt many of these additional pieces would have been cut, lessening the impact.

The work our three person curatorial team did for *Tying the Knot* in the seventeen weeks from the end of February to June 21st became the guide for the work needed to curate and install a contract costume exhibition at WRHS. Adjustments were made for the other two exhibitions which had longer lead times but several elements were common to each exhibition. Of course a great deal of work was done from our home offices using the Internet to access the museum's collection database and communicate via email among ourselves and with the WRHS staff.



Figure 6: Initial Try-ons and Pre-dressing Collage

For each exhibition, we scheduled 2 to 3 onsite visits, usually a week in length, in the months preceding the approximately 10 to 14 day final installation period. During these preliminary

visits, the main focus was to check out potential the outfits that the curator had identified from the database and to do the initial try-on of the garments, assess their condition, select accessories, and to do documentary photos that we could work with when we were again in our home studios. Because the workroom was on another floor from the collection storage, often the garments were tried on at the front part of the area where they were stored, as you can see in some of these photographs. And as you can see in other photos, during these sessions, we got glimpses of the types of dressing issues we might face.



Figure 7: Professional Photos and PR Pieces Collage

Several garments also would be selected to be fully dressed so that they could be photographed for publicity pictures, the exhibition brochures and so that we would have some completed pieces when we started the final installation.



Figure 8: *Tying the Knot* Workshop Collage

During our on second site visit for *Tying the Knot* at the end of March 2012, Newbie and I also organized a day-long dressing workshop on the Saturday of our stay. We were hoping to acquire some local volunteers and students at area colleges, as well as train two part-time curatorial assistants who would be helping with installation. We had a good turnout for the workshop, including WRHS Director Gainor Davis who attend part of it and was overheard to remark that she had had no idea that dressing the forms was so complicated.

Newbie and I did a demo of dressing an elaborate gray-green 1876 wedding dress for the group—in hindsight we probably should have chosen something simpler but it was also Gainor Davis' favorite dress in the exhibit and she wanted it used in the publicity—and as a contractor, one is always conscious of pleasing the client. After our demo, the group was divided to work in teams headed by Newbie, Susan, and me and we got several dresses started that day. Here you see two smiling young women making arms for the forms out of knee high stockings. This workshop gave potential volunteers and WRHS staff attendees a much better appreciation for the amount and type of work a costume exhibition requires—always a good lesson. By the time we left in the middle of the next week we had six outfits dressed that could be used for publicity photos.



At Right: Anna Stambaugh
 Tod's 1898 touseaux dress
 Above Left: Research
 report on the Tods

At Right: Wedding photo
 Of Mabel Adams Van
 Sweringen 1897
 Below: Her wedding shoes

Figure 9: *Tying the Knot* Collage

The WRHS has an excellent research library, which combined with the accessibility of online research, generated historical information on a number of the artifacts that was unknown or incorrect at the start of the exhibitions. Many pieces in the WRHS clothing collection, like those in so many other collections, lack specific information as to the wearer or important details about when a garment was worn. What we found was that combining the museum's object files and donor records with genealogical research can turn up surprising information. For *Tying the Knot*, I wanted all of the items used to be linked to a specific wearer and we were able to do that. For the wedding and touseaux dresses I also wanted to use only ones for which we could find the couples' wedding date. Each label also tied the couple's lives to changes in Cleveland Society during that decade, as well as featuring information about how this specific wedding dress fit into the fashion choices that were available to the bride.



Figure 10: *Dior & More* Collage

Susan used the research library in somewhat different ways. For *Dior & More* she researched the women who wore the dresses and their positions in Cleveland society, plus she did considerable on-line research into the designers of the garments, uncovering some interesting connections to their Cleveland clients, like that Lucile, Lady Duff Gordon, traveled to Cleveland to meet with the client whose dress was featured in the exhibition.



Figure 11: *In Grand Style* Collage

For *In Grand Style*, which focuses on the period of Cleveland's heyday from the 1870s to about 1930, part of the exhibit design was scrims with the images of the types of houses the wearers lived in on Euclid Ave, AKA Millionaires Row, and later in the University Circle neighborhood. Again, more information surfaced on the individual garments and their wearers as we linked them to their status as part of Cleveland's elite.



Figure 12: Three Exhibits Collage

There is much more I could talk about but suffice to say we had a great time working at WRHS, the exhibits were all successful as far as the museum was concerned given the attendance numbers and visitor response, and we felt gratified that we helped to fill in gaps in documenting the garments, their makers, their place in fashion history, and their context in Cleveland history.

Website for the Western Reserved Historical Society, Cleveland, US
<http://www.wrhs.org/>

Costume and Textile Specialists
<http://www.costumeandtextile.net/Conservation.html>