

Interview



FIDM Museum's *Art of Motion Picture Costume Design Exhibition* **Meghan Grossman Hansen**

The FIDM Museum & Galleries' Registrar talks about her role in presenting the annual 'Art of Motion Picture Costume Design' exhibition.

The FIDM Museum & Galleries is home to an annual exhibition of film costumes from current movie releases, including the costumes by the designers nominated for the Academy Award in Best Costume Design. On February 10, 2015, the exhibition will open to the public yet again—giving visitors from around the world a chance to see, up-close-and-personal, costumes currently featured in movies at their local movie theater.

The Virtual Costumer recently sat down with the FIDM Museum Registrar, Meghan Grossman Hansen, to discuss this noteworthy exhibition.

What exactly is a Museum Registrar?

When I tell people I am a Museum Registrar at a fashion museum, I am usually met with kindly nods or blank stares. And

the next question, "So you design clothes?" Or perhaps more closely to the truth, "You're a curator?" While I'm fortunate to work at an institution that gives me such opportunities (and I have curated a few small installations in our Perfume Gallery), that's actually not part of my job description. As Registrar, I do the "boring" paperwork -- loan forms, inventory, insurance, accessioning and de-accessioning collections, and so forth. But there is a whole world of excitement and variety to this job, that isn't immediately apparent from my job description.

As Registrar, are you involved in planning the Annual Art of Motion Picture Costume Design exhibition?

Yes, in a very hands-on way. Let's imagine we're on a movie set: who is in charge? The director, you say? The director is certainly the creative boss of a movie production, but the real bosses are the producers. They choose the script, find the funding, make the budget, hire the director and other creative "above-the-line" types, and run the day-to-day operations of the filming. The producers may never put their hands on a camera or give notes to an actor,



Gallery view of the 22nd Annual Art of Motion Picture Costume Design exhibition. Photo: Alex Berliner.

but they are responsible for getting the film shot, edited, and distributed.

In the same way, the Registrar (along with numerous other museum staff) works behind the scenes to turn an idea into reality. While the curator is planning the objects to be included-- in this case, our museum coordinator Michael Black-- the Registrar handles logistics like loan agreements, shipping, and insurance. This Registrar is very fortunate that Mr. Black makes most of these arrangements for this particular exhibition, since he maintains close contacts with costume designers, studios, archives, and rental houses.



As costumes are received, museum staff mark the garment bags, boxes, or other containers so that each piece is returned to the lender exactly as received.



For the first time ever, we used technology to record the exhibition loans; however, it's always important to keep a hard copy.

This exhibition is planned through the course of the year, but much of the final decisions and receiving of costumes takes place in the month leading up to the exhibition opening.

What do you do in preparation, if you don't know what costumes will be exhibited?

Other planning takes place while loan arrangements are made -- condition report templates are prepared for the iPad we use for checking in costumes; supplies are purchased; and the all-important exhibition binder is prepared to hold the condition reports, inventories, reference images, and other relevant documents pertaining to the loaned costumes to be displayed.

Meanwhile, I meet with my colleagues to determine staffing needs for exhibition installation. With two exhibitions being installed concurrently (the other exhibition of historic fashion is organized and installed by our curators in the Helen Larson

Gallery), our curatorial staff of five is stretched thin. When budget allows, we hire contract museum preparators to assist with the four-week installation process. We also solicit volunteers who are eager to help and experience the museum behind-the-scenes.

Once the number of workers is established, I devise a workflow to economize on limited staff, space, time, and materials. I work with the Gallery Director and Museum Coordinator to determine the gallery layout, which has some fluidity due to the last-minute nature of receiving the costumes. And I oversee selection of mannequins based on measurements taken during condition reporting.

Is it challenging to receive the costumes in such a last-minute manner?

It does present a logistical challenge for everyone involved in the exhibition planning and execution. As a result, we have begun to use technology for condition reporting, in what used to be a pencil-and-paper game. The tablet allows the note-taker to quickly type inventory and condition information, as well as take photos within the same app. The photos can even be drawn on with a color-coded "marker" to indicate areas with condition issues.



Digital condition report with inserted reference image and markings to indicate condition issues on an iPad.

If you have such limited time, why bother with these reports?

While it would be faster to skip the step of conditioning the objects, it is an essential part of our stewardship of the museum. These documents will be indispensable should there be a disagreement with a lender or an insurance claim. While we hope nothing of that sort happens, these are the things I must think about as the Museum Registrar. Be thankful you do not have to!

How do you choose mannequins for the costumes?

Measurements are essential for selecting a mannequin. We take measurements with mannequin-dressing in mind, which means that we don't need every single measurement you might take, for example, to create a custom invisible mount. But we often need more than chest, waist, and hip.

The most important measurements for women include those three, but also the hem length (along with its intended position, such as knee-length or floor-length). For men, I require the distance between shoulder seams, inseam, and out-seam, in addition to a chest and waist measurement.

I always measure the costume elements that are the most restrictive to the body: so for a man's suit, I would base the shoulder measurement on the jacket instead of shirt, and the waist measurement on the pants instead of jacket.

Do you choose mannequins that look like the actor who wore the costume?

It's a bit of a gamble to choose a mannequin for a costume worn by an actor. The FIDM Museum has a healthy supply of mannequins, but the process of dressing a garment on a mannequin for museum exhibition is challenging, to say the least. I choose each mannequin for exhibition with a whole variety of factors in mind.

Read the Museum's [blog](#), and follow them on Twitter ([@fidmmuseum](#)) and Facebook ([FIDMMuseum](#)).

First and foremost, the garment must fit the mannequin or be slightly larger than the mannequin. Museum practice dictates that museum objects must not be harmed or altered in mounting them for exhibition. Loaned objects to the FIDM Museum are treated in the same manner as objects accessioned into the Museum's collections.

As a result, the installer must alter the mannequin to fit the costume. This includes adding padding, prop petticoats or bustle pads, and even sometimes cutting off portions of the mannequin. We have been



Suggested measurements for mannequin selection, as shown on the costume worn by Carey Mulligan as "Daisy Buchanan" in *The Great Gatsby*. Loan courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures.



Initial mannequin selections for *American Hustle*; adjustments were made after the costumes were received, measured, and test-dressed.

known to surgically remove feet, portions of the torso, or even heads!

Secondary considerations for mannequin choice include height, body type, pose, facial features, and hairstyle, if molded hair is present. These distinctions tend to be curatorial-type decisions, so if I'm not sure how to proceed, I will ask Mike Black.

Finally, due to the number of mannequins needed for this momentous installation, I will try to assign mannequins for the most important characters in each film first, to ensure that we don't run out of mannequins of the correct type before those costumes are dressed.

Once the mannequins are selected, what is your role in the installation? Do you dress mannequins?

I rarely have time to dress mannequins anymore! My job is to keep the installation running smoothly and on time. I monitor the

number of mannequins that need to be dressed each day, making sure they are selected, painted, dried, and prepped for dressing; prioritize films which require designer approval; and communicate questions about the costumes to the Museum Coordinator, visiting designers, and archivists. Usually all of this is going on while we are still receiving costumes.



American Hustle platform during installation. Loans courtesy of Sony Pictures, Michael Wilkinson, Gucci and Halston.

The mannequins are dressed according to reference images provided by the costume designer, studio, or production office; we also make proficient use of the [Internet Movie Database](#) (IMDB) and other internet sources. As Museum Registrar, I keep all of these resources organized according to the needs of the installation team.

Last year we had three tablets loaded with all available reference images and condition reports, so that anyone dressing a mannequin could refer back to this vital

information. Since, as a rule, we are interpreting the costumes as they were seen in the film, we do not allow ourselves very much creative license. As each ensemble is dressed, I review the reference images and condition reports to finalize the styling and be sure that costume elements were not forgotten.

Is there one question that most visitors ask when they come to see the Annual Art of Motion Picture Costumes Design exhibition?

Everyone asks some variation of, "Is [insert name of famous actor] really that short/tall/thin/large?" Our visitors are always fascinated by costumes because of their close relationship to the body, since clothing is something we can all relate to. It's part of our everyday existence. By seeing the costumes worn by an actor for his role in a film, the actor becomes a little more real to the visitor.



The final *American Hustle* costumes are at the center of this gallery view. Photo by Alex Berliner.

It is important to keep in mind that the costume is made for the character, first and foremost, to the specifications needed by the actor. So, yes, in most cases the actor is that short/tall/thin/large. In a small number of cases, the mannequin that will fit a costume in all other measurements may be, in fact, a few inches too tall—a common problem with the fashion mannequins in our stock.

How do you decide the gallery layout?

The gallery design and mannequin placement is a collaborative process with the Gallery Director, Museum Coordinator, and curatorial staff. There is a long list of variables we have to consider for placement – including traffic flow, visibility, character and plot, as well as visual harmony. In the most recent exhibition, the gallery was divided into two themes for the two rooms – Sci-Fi/Fantasy and Period films. Based on this general layout, we placed mannequins on the platforms in their estimated locations.

Some were moved and rearranged, for instance the costumes for *42*, designed by Caroline Harris. Since the film title is based on the number on Jackie Robinson's baseball jersey, we wanted the "42" to appear prominently in the gallery. However, it was strange to have the mannequin's back to the audience. We discussed and experimented with arrangements until one clicked—the Dodger's uniform worn by actor Chadwick Boseman was placed at the end of a platform extension, allowing it to be seen from front, back, and side.



Costumes from *42*, designed by Caroline Harris. Loan courtesy of Legendary Films. Photo by Alex Berliner.

What's next once the gallery is done?

After the installation is complete, I do the necessary insurance paperwork and organize my binder to be put aside until we begin de-install. We all attend the opening gala, which is a great reward for the hard work and long hours that are necessary to



The 2014 Academy Award Winner in Best Costume Design, Katherine Martin for *The Great Gatsby*, will be asked to return for the *23rd Annual Art of Motion Picture Costume Design* exhibition. Loan courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures. Photo by Alex Berliner.

make the exhibition a reality. After the crowds go home and we return to our desks, the Museum Coordinator, Michael Black, begins planning next year's exhibition!

Meghan Grossman Hansen is Registrar for the FIDM Museum at the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising in Los Angeles. She has been with the FIDM Museum for over seven years. Meghan received her Master of Arts from the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York in Fashion & Textiles: History, Theory, Museum Practice. Meghan serves on the board of the Costume Society of America, Western Region. Her interests include fashion history, film costume design, and museum studies.

Mark your Calendar!

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MUSEUM
& GALLERIES**

Visit the [FIDM Museum](#) in Los Angeles California starting February 10, 2015 to see the *23rd*

Annual Art of Motion Picture Costume Design exhibition. Opening at the same time is *Opulent Art: 18th-Century Dress from the Helen Larson Historic Fashion Collection*. Admission to both is free.

Help the FIDM Museum acquire the Helen Larson Collection by making a [donation](#) to "adopt" an object from the collection. A credit line of your choosing will be noted when the object is exhibited or published. FIDM Museum & Library, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation.