Hi, I'm Valerie Steele, director and chief curator of The Museum at FIT, the most fashionable museum in New York City. Welcome to our Fashion Culture podcast series, featuring lectures and conversations about fashion. If you like what you hear, please share your thoughts on social media using the hashtag fashion culture.

Hi, I'm Valerie Steele. I'm here with Patricia Mears and Colleen Hill and we're going to be talking about our new exhibition Exhibitionism: 50 Years of The Museum at FIT. I'm sure most people don't know that The Museum at FIT is 50 years old. It was founded in 1969 by the Fashion Institute of Technology and at that point it was called the Design Laboratory. There wasn't even a building yet. The building was built in the 1970s. But there was a director, Robert Riley. Patricia, you knew Robert, why don't you tell us a bit about him.

[Patricia Mears]

I didn't know him well but he was already a legend when I was starting my career out in the early 1990s and Bob was a very interesting person. Like a lot of people he had a rather circuitous route to become a curator. He did have an academic background, went to both Harvard and Yale so I was told and came out of the theatre design program. Eventually became the head of window display at Lord & Taylor and then found his way to the Brooklyn Museum in the 1950s. He did innovative shows. One of the first in America to do one on Charles Frederick Worth. He was building the collection at the Brooklyn Museum before coming to FIT. But they already had an idea that they wanted to do, if you will, an offshoot of the Design Lab in Manhattan. But this was a very different time and so being both from the theatre and being in window display they were a little bit looser about what the role of clothing meant and he was not afraid to allow people to try things on to really get an essence of what the clothes were like. But he was groundbreaking. He also was one of the first to really do some innovative shows, most important of which were done here at FIT.

[Valerie Steele]

Well when he came here, he became the first director in 69 but even by 68 he was busily collecting things for the permanent collection of the Design Laboratory at FIT. He reached out to a lot of people. He went over to France and started to look up people's mothers, people who had been clients of Paul Poiret for example. And in 1970 he went over to Paris for summer vacation and met Denise Poiret and he came back all thrilled telling everyone let's do a show about Paul Poiret. And they said, who's that because he was completely forgotten at that point. So
when Robert did Paul Poiret, King of Fashion in 1976, it was the first big international exhibition about Poiret and it made everyone remember that this was the man who was famous for abolishing the corset and putting women into jupe culottes and doing all kinds of radical things.

In 1971 I guess Robert did a retrospective of Gilbert Adrian's work. But at that point there was no building for the museum and so it wasn't an exhibition, it was a live fashion show. And he talked it up, talked about Adrian as both a fashion designer and a famous Hollywood costume designer. This came to the attention of people at MGM and they said oh would you like all these old costumes that Adrian did for Garbo and stars like that. So right away Robert collected those for The Museum at FIT. So within the first few years he was getting Poiret's and Adrian's. He was talking with Lauren Bacall and got hundreds of her looks for the museum's collection. He's kind of been forgotten now but he was a very important figure in the world of fashion exhibitions and museums and was our first director.

[Patricia Mears] Comes sort of a contemporary which was nice to Diana Vreeland so it was an alternative voice to what was going on at The Met uptown. Valerie, the next big name was Richard Martin whom you knew quite well.

[Valerie Steele] Well of course Richard Martin is synonymous with The Museum at FIT. He was here for so many years with Laura Sindelbrand and with Harold Koda. But very often Richard was the one who came up with ideas for the shows. Things like Fashion and Surrealism which was a really groundbreaking show. The first show I think that really looked at the relationship between art and fashion which has been so copied and as Richard said you know surrealism is all about the body and ideas about body parts and sexuality and the unconscious. So he put together this exhibition which was amazing with you know hats that were shoes and shoes that were feet and dresses that had eyes on them and all kinds of disembodied body parts to tell the story of sexuality and the body and the unconscious.

[Patricia Mears]

He did so many groundbreaking shows. I know that both Jocks and Nerds and the Halston show really the first major monograph on a designer like that shortly after Halston's death were very influential to me. We're carrying this over. One of the things that I think is so important and having worked in other museums is the fact that any great institution needs great leadership and one of the things that we've been very lucky about is having somebody like Bob Riley and then later Richard Martin and now Valerie Steele continue to up the level and the quality of what we've been doing. I mean Valerie you really are the world's best known fashion historian. But I think the thing that's been really exciting here is that your leadership has also been
about team building. We've gotten new departments. We have an education department. We have a social media platform that we've never had before. But also you built what I think are a team of curators and I really don't see that anywhere else in the world. There are other institutions where there are multiple fashion curators but they don't work as a team. And I think this is what has really helped us jump to the next level.

You know in a meeting with Tamsen Young, she made mention of the fact also that our exhibitions have become increasingly dynamic and interactive. And I think something like Gothic: Dark Glamour was really groundbreaking. Not only for the scholarship but it felt very much like an immersive experience. And I think because we are now working with multiple departments to reach out further, not just publications and exhibitions, but public programming and our social media platform. We've really changed the direction of that. I'm wondering Val if you can talk to that about how you have been transferred and given us opportunities and then also ones that you've given to Colleen and the youngest group of curators.

[Valerie Steele]

Well Gothic was a pivotal turning point for me personally. I'd seen the subculture show at the V&A From Sidewalk to Catwalk which included sections about punks and goths and hippies. I lectured to students in the graduate school of FIT about goth style. But when I had this epiphany to try and do a show which looked at gothic style not in terms of high-end designers copying goth kids but both the goth kids and the subculture and designers like McQueen and Rick Owens who were all of them inspired by the same kind of literature and cinema and art of the gothic sort of sublime terror.

When I was working on it, I saw the show that was done Malign Muses, Judith Clarke show which later went to the V&A as Spectres and that totally I remember I came home and I said to the whole staff we have a paradigm shift. We have to really make the setting be as important and as much apart of the story as the objects because that will help tell the story. And bringing in someone like Simon Costin who had worked with Alexander McQueen and being able to talk to him and say you know I want this set to look like a psychology in stone. A kind of insane paranoid gothic mindset but done architecturally and so he did not only things like a crumbling castle, a gothic castle, but a laboratory where monsters were created but also a kind of castles that were large and asymmetrical and apart from each that gave a sense of disorientation and paranoia.

So I thought that was really a great turning point for us and subsequently we've been able to make more and more out of the mise-en-scène so that Colleen's fairytale show which was literally a magical show that really benefited also from the idea that she would take
these tropes of the Little Red Riding Hood or the glass slipper or the Little Mermaid and then build these sets around them so you could get the story come to life. And I remember Colleen when you came to me with the idea for this show and I was just blown away because it was so creative. It never in a million years would have occurred to me to do a show about fairy tale fashion but it was totally perfect.

[Colleen Hill]

Thank you and what I love to tell people about the story of kind of how Fairy Tale Fashion came to be was there had been a couple of collections that had fairy tale looking objects by Comme des Garçons, Rodarte for example and I had this vague idea of doing something called Fairy Tale Fashion for quite sometime and I think I was meeting with you Valerie about another exhibition I was doing and you said if you have any ideas for the special exhibitions gallery let me know and I said well I do. It's called Fairy Tale Fashion and you loved it and then I realized I actually have no idea how I'm going to do this show.

[Laughter]

[Colleen Hill]

So I think a lot of what I love about working here is that there is this level of trust. That you give us some space and you give us some time to work out ideas and of course we come to Valerie and Patricia as younger curators. We check-in with the both of you to make sure we're on the right track and to make sure that we're putting out things that are both scholarly and educational but also exciting and right for our audiences. But to have this space and the trust to workout these fun and imaginative ideas is really special.

[Valerie Steele]

Well I think that there's no one right way to do an exhibition. There's lots of different ways to do it and different ideas for exhibitions which can be really fabulous. So it's especially good to be able to bring in different kinds of intelligences to create very different kinds of shows and I think you see that here that among the three us for example, there are real differences in the kind of things that we come up with. And Patricia you'll have very much a kind of pure aesthetic almost a connoisseur's approach to fashion.

[Patricia Mears]

Yeah it's the one thing that has always driven me. I couldn't understand coming out of art history why we don't look at garments with the same level of criteria that an art historian would look at a painting or a decorative arts specialist would look at a piece of silver. If you're given a dress and it doesn't have a label, how can
you determine what makes it great? What are the criteria for that? And I think I was very grateful to Valerie and again it shows this sort of generational approach. I had done my masters thesis on Madame Grès and Valerie was my thesis advisor and that 15 years later turned into an exhibition and a book. This is one of the processes and I think again what Colleen talked about the support and the wide range. But the thing that I love because I tend to work a little bit quietly is the fact that Valerie you always have your finger on the pulse of what's going on. It doesn't matter how well thought through an idea is intellectually, you still are of the moment. As well as the younger curators and this is where I've really been impressed by somebody like Colleen. One of your first shows was Eco-Fashion and it was incredibly popular, one of our most popular, and I just wanted to ask you and Valerie about that a little bit because appeasing an audience shouldn't be the single driving force behind a show. I think that's why some of the shows that I've seen, fashion exhibitions, are not successful. We do it better, I think, and we also do it more in-depth. But talk a little bit about having your finger on the pulse and attracting an audience for ideas, for example, I never would've thought of.

[Colleen Hill]

Sure, well I think that it just always helps to be looking at what's happening on the runway and also for something like Eco-Fashion I was thinking a lot about how I personally consume fashion and so really from the time I was a teenager to now I've consistently bought second-hand clothing. It's of course gotten to be a bit nicer second-hand clothing as I've gotten older.

[Laughter]

[Colleen Hill]

But thinking about the fashion system and the fashion process and of course being here in New York City where there is still a lot of exciting fashion designers and fashion culture. When we organized Eco-Fashion which I believe was in 2010, we were actually looking first at the contemporary sustainable fashion industry and seeing what designers were doing, how they were dyeing fabrics, for example, or how they were looking at the use of fur or labor involved in creating clothing and seeing how that could then be applied to historic fashion. That wasn't something that I would have probably ever thought of if it weren't for the parameters of the history gallery in which we usually try to show fashion from the 18th century to the present and obviously that goes by theme and because I was exclusively working in the history gallery at that point in my career it was always about what do we have from our permanent collection because it's all permanent collection objects in that space and also what kinds of themes can we tell over this span of time. I think it was actually
very fun to see how we could apply what's happening currently to what is going on in the past because for our students especially it's really important for them to see that these ideas carry forward and it is in fact very important for them to learn fashion history and be familiar with it.

[Valerie Steele]

Well it's true that's probably one of the only exhibitions on eco-fashion that took a real long term historical view. The fact that we take so many different intellectual approaches I think really is crucial because people have such different interests. I know in my work I've always been interested in issues of sex and gender and identity and so when Fred Dennis said oh let's do a show on gays and fashion, I thought that immediately was something was so important. And then we did A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk looking at the history of LGBTQ influence on fashion both as individual trendsetters and designers but also in terms of creating subcultural styles. I think that was quite an innovative step forward.

[Patricia Mears]

Valerie maybe we should take just a minute and talk about the role of somebody like Fred Dennis, who's been involved in well over 100 exhibitions. He's worked with multiple directors. He was very close to Richard Martin and with you because the role of sometimes behind the scenes people is really important. Their knowledge of the collection or even how to make us think as curators, how to lay an exhibition out to it's best advantage because we come in with a mindset of something that I want to make this point but how can we do it in the most visually beautiful way.

[Valerie Steele]

Well when you do an exhibition, it's not like doing a book where you really can do the research yourself alone in a library. It's more like making a film. You need a whole team of people with different kinds of expertise and in a way there's been this kind of super valorization of the curators genius. And in fact curators work with all kinds of other museum professionals, conservators, and educators, and media specialists, and exhibition design specialists, and all kinds of people who bring important components to it, telling you, you can't show it that way or what about doing this and will make it completely intelligible and more compelling to a wider audience. I think that Fred's role and his historic knowledge of the collection is amazing but then I also think well it's so important if you have someone like Tanya who is in charge of education, who is always kind of reminding people we need to think about diversity also and all kinds of different kinds of diversity because we want to appeal to different audiences and people like seeing some element of themselves. Just like
being trained as a historian, I know that history bores many people. But it can appeal to them if you take the h word and tie it in with something contemporary. Then suddenly it's really interesting. Wow, why did women wear corsets for 400 years. What made them stop? You link it to something now and then it becomes much more interesting. I always get excited when I see new audiences coming in.

[Patricia Mears]

Also, I think that gets to the crux of what it is we do here because we spend a lot of time and energy taking care of collections. The object itself is really the epicenter of what a curator has to think about. I think for all of these big ideas for the beautiful mise-en-scène it really comes down to the object and I'm wondering as curators if we can just talk a minute about what the object means to you.

[Valerie Steele]

Well you want to build the collection because you could have this just be a Kunsthalle where you're just putting together exhibitions but then you borrow things from all over and you have much less in-depth knowledge of the objects and it's also harder to get and it's more expensive. To build a collection is really to build something that you can work with for years and decades to come. So it's something that might not occur to you would mean something when you collect it, would mean something very very different for a younger curator decades later. So when Robert Riley collected some of those early Poiret's it was kind of oh well I'm reviving an unknown designer and then for somebody later it could be oh here's somebody who really liberated women's bodies. And then someone else might be oh yes but let's think of this in terms of his relationship to the Ballets Russes and to dance. Depending on the topic you take the same dress or the same outfit and interpret it in many different ways.

There's some people I think who really want to investigate everything the object can tell them about itself. Other people who while they don't use the object just to illustrate a theme nevertheless are also testing interpretations from theory against the empirical evidence from objects and it tacks back and forth. It's a kind of material culture interpretation and I think that, that's what a lot of us are doing. Sort of the new generation is doing, it's not so much just here is this beautiful object, qua object in and of itself but we're asking it to tell us about social and cultural issues about women and gays and people's bodies and people's attitudes. We're trying to force the clothes to talk to us about different aspects of themselves.

I used to teach in the graduate school here and Patricia was my best student and then Colleen was a student here too later on and one of the things that the museum has been doing has been collaborating closely with the School of Graduate Studies especially with the
Fashion and Textiles program which trains curators and conservators and other museum professionals who work in fashion and textiles. We work with them to put on an exhibition and Colleen you've done that. Can you explain a little bit what that involves?

[Colleen Hill]

Absolutely, the graduate students are each given tasks that are akin to a museum professional role. We select curators and registrars and exhibition designers and the group works collectively to come up with a thesis, to select objects. For the past few years, the students themselves have proposed exhibition ideas that they then show to the museum and we select one of about three different topics and that's been really lovely because then the students take a lot of ownership of that rather than us handing them a topic. They come up with something they think will work and have to work within pretty strict parameters. I think it's a really brilliant project in that everyone gets a real life experience. They understand that this is hugely collaboratively and also hugely frustrating in it's own way. But in the end I think it's a very rewarding thing and in fact it was really FIT who started this kind of project within these fashion studies based MA programs and since then a couple of other programs have mimicked that idea of the exhibition but ours tends to be the most real life, the most expansive. We get real press in really great outlets. The students themselves give interviews. It really is a very dynamic and real life kind of achievement.

[Valerie Steele]

Well the grad students, their professor works with one of our curators very closely and they've done amazing shows, dozens of them. I think in Exhibitionism we're going to feature just one, the one on Lucile. But there have been dozens of others, things on the black dress, on Vivienne Westwood, on Christian Louboutin. This year Colleen has started working with a new Masters program, an MFA in fashion design and we're just gonna be doing our first exhibition with them where again those graduate students look in our archive in our permanent collection and then are inspired to create collections based on or drawing from past fashions.

[Colleen Hill]

Yes, this year the MFA students looked at designs by Balenciaga, Chanel, Dior, and Givenchy and they selected one couture garment from each of those designers and in small groups made copies of those, which is a huge challenge in and of itself, and then each of the students took what they call some of the DNA of each brand and came up with their own spin. Essentially if they were the creative director of this house today, how would they look at the brand’s history and create something that both speaks to that history but also really
embody their own aesthetic and ideas. I think it's going to be really exciting. Very cool project.

[Valerie Steele]

But it makes it clear too how much continuity there's been in 50 years also. Since we began as the Design Laboratory. We're still functioning to educate both creative students, designers of the future, and scholarly students, the curators and conservators and registrars of the future, and at the same we're expanding how we educate. The fact that in the past you couldn't be reaching people all around the world with live streaming symposia just indicates that education and inspiration take so many more forms nowadays.

[Colleen Hill]

I think it's very exciting too just getting back to that idea of how essential fashion history is. I think it's wonderful to see that MFA students are not just looking through fashion history books or taking a sort of fashion history 101 course but actually looking at the material objects and learning from those directly for inspiration. I think you know it's another way to sort of validate how essential these objects are within museums.

[Valerie Steele]

And also it shows how our scope is larger because I think in the past you'd bring the precious object into classrooms hundreds of times a year and let the students and teachers look at it. Now we go woah we're protecting these clothes for future generations. We can't do that. We're building a special study collection that the students and teachers can handle and ultimately destroy because it will fall apart. But the most important pieces will only be very carefully studied by scholars and will be put on display where students and members of the public can see them, sketch, and get inspiration and ideas. So that was a bit of a challenge I think in the first few years for a professor's to get used to the fact that no they couldn't handle that 18th century dress for 300 classes.

[Colleen Hill]

Exactly. As I mentioned, the MFA students are making those copies of the couture pieces in our collection and those will actually be given to the museum after the exhibition which will be hugely helpful because now students can learn from these line for line copies and not from the originals. It's actually very useful for everyone.

We're so lucky here to have an absolutely amazing collection and a large collection of about 50,000 pieces and I think for curators it's actually really useful just to go into the collection and look around
and see what we have because I think that in and of itself can really inspire exhibition topics and occasionally I'll have something in mind that I think will be a great idea and then I go into the collection and start to look at the objects that I think about when I'm preparing an idea and then evolves and shifts and becomes a final product really based on what we've got. I think it's again where starting out in my career working only in the history gallery was really helpful because it had to be permanent collection objects so it wasn't this idea of where can I borrow things from and what can I get to sort of round out this story. It was really based on what we've got and all these stories as Valerie mentioned all of these different stories that a single object can tell.

[Patricia Mears]

And it's interesting because so many of the object collecting practices from Bob to Richard to Valerie have been uniformly applauded I think by a lot of our colleagues. That's why so many people come to FIT to borrow from our collection for their exhibitions as well. We get many, many exhibition and loan requests that we sometimes can't process and support even though we would like to. I think that's really kudos to that kind of leadership. You know, Colleen you hit on a point about going into the collections and looking at the objects and I think that's what's really so important. But I also want to say that I think one of the reasons we are ahead of the curve is we will come up with an idea and then we will see the rest of the field follow us. I want to go back to the idea a little bit of certain topics like looking at designers. I know that I was very inspired and originally by Richard Martin. He had done a great show on Halston, quite soon after Halston had died and both my American Beauty show and a subsequent show on Halston and Yves Saint Laurent juxtaposing those two designers in the 1970s proved prescient I think. Again way ahead of curve and even looking at menswear.

Valerie, you had done a very early show juxtaposing men and womens wear when you were at the Smithsonian and again Richard had done Jocks and Nerds which again just the title I think is very provocative and for me would draw me in just based on that. It was a serious look at menswear but one that also had kind of a if you will somewhat of comical fun and challenging tone to it. But the subsequent look at our menswear shows like Ivy Style then we saw very shortly after its opening a whole series of them, Rhode Island School of Design, LACMA, other museums suddenly did their versions of the menswear shows too. One of the things I think you've done Val that I've really been impressed with because it was so beautifully done and much easier than we anticipated was one of our blockbuster shows with Daphne Guinness and I was just wondering if you could talk about that because it was such an unusual show the way it came together. We weren't surprised that it would be successful but I think it had more depth than maybe some of us would've thought initially.
Well there've been a few shows about famous women of style. Richard and Harold did the show on Tina Chow for example. I really thought that Daphne was the most incredible fashion icon of our day. I asked her if she would be willing to do an exhibition here and at first being very modest, she declined. And then I was giving her a tour of your American Beauty show and she said were you serious about doing a show? And I said of course. I said look around. There are 80 dresses. I said you've got 80 dress, don't you sweetie?

[Laughter]

And then she laughed and said yes she did. And then it was really a very exciting year of working very closely, collaborating with her to try and choose the clothes. She styled everything. We tried to figure out what would be the best subcategories, you know the way she would use clothing as armor to protect herself emotionally or the kind of dandified emasculine look that she would pick up or a more exotic look that she got from some of McQueen's clothes. And then experimenting doing that Pepper's Ghost looks like a hologram, there was a moving hologram quote unquote of Daphne putting on her jewelry wearing a McQueen silver jumpsuit. Silver catsuit I should say. That was a really fantastic experience, a really fantastic experience. And I think the more that you can experiment with working with other people, the more you can learn from that. For example, when Fred and I did A Queer History of Fashion, we set up a think tank of all kinds of scholars in gay history and to give us a sense that we were on the right path. That we were not making mistakes and I know that Emma did that for her Body exhibition. I think that the more connections you can make between the museum world and between other scholars, the better that is. The more likely you'll have a show which really makes a contribution to knowledge about fashion which is really one of our key goals. So when we do a show it's, it's based on a lot of real original research and it's supported by symposia, which bring in scholars, curators, and designers from around the world and other lectures inn fashion culture. And websites that elaborate on it further so that A Queer History had a really very, very strong website which gave all kinds of further information that Tamsen and her team have kept adding to subsequently so it's a living object.

I think one of the most exciting projects we did was actually a collaboration with the Palais Galliera in Paris. You brought that incredible collection belonging to the Countess Greffulhe. But I think Valerie the thing that made it so spectacular. Not only was the show
beautiful and of course the objects were spectacular is the symposium was so wonderful because it really brought a new group of scholars. And I think we were all surprised at how popular it was. Standing room only. People standing outside the auditorium, almost trying to barge in like it was a rock concert. And Valerie, I was wondering if you could talk to us a little bit about the phenomenon of working with a venerated Parisian museum, the impact it had on our audiences, and subsequently also the scholarship that went around this particular show.

[Valerie Steele]

Well in Paris at the fashion shows, they tend to put all of the museum curators and directors together. So I was sitting next to Olivier Saillard at a Dior show and I asked him what he was working on and he said an Alaia show and a Lanvin show and a show about the wardrobe of the Countess Greffulhe and I said oh tell me about that one. He said, you've heard of her? And I said, I'm a big Proust fan. From the minute he mentioned it, I knew that I was going to try and do everything to bring over that show or part of that show to the US. And people were so struck, even when I wondered around the gallery, I'd sometimes hear people say, who is this Proust character anyway? I mean, they didn't know but the clothes and then once they read about the Countess and her personality was so extraordinary, I think that it was a really compelling and beautiful exhibition. And it's something that I want to do more of, working with the Galleria, working with the Museum of Fashion in Bath. We already have a very active lending program where we lend and borrow to museums around the world. But I think the more collaboration we can do, like Colleen now we're going to be collaborating much more with London College of Fashion now that you're going to be going to get your PhD there. So that's going to be another exciting thing for us.

[Colleen Hill]

Absolutely. That was one of the things I loved most about starting this program at the London College of Fashion was that there's such a rich fashion culture in other cities and I feel lucky already that there's so many fashion historians here in New York and there's a lot of MA programs for example that are focusing on fashion studies. But it is really interesting and fun to make connections internationally as well because they have different perspectives, of course they have different collections, and so hopefully that's something we can continue to build.

[Valerie Steele]

Well in conjunction with the Exhibitionism show, we're bringing in curators of course from around the world to talk about aspects of exhibiting fashion and dress in different cultures at different time
periods, new paradigms for exhibition display. I think it's going to be one of our best symposia ever. Now thanks to Tamsen, we're able to live stream this and send it around the world which in and of itself is really exciting because not everyone can come to see the shows. So when we did Black Fashion Designers, we had the symposium for that, we live streamed it and we had an audience of people as far away as Cape Town who were watching the live stream of the symposium.

[Patricia Mears]

That's right. That was really incredible. Valerie, what do you see for the future with all of these programmings and what would be the goal that I think we all have collectively as we go forward?

[Valerie Steele]

Our mission as a museum is to educate and inspire diverse audiences with innovative exhibitions and programs that advance knowledge of fashion. And I think that as we move ahead increasingly we're going to see ourselves as more than a fashion museum. Even though that's wonderful, the most fashionable museum in New York or as Michael Kors says, "the fashion insider's fashion museum." But even more than that, I think we're going to be a center for fashion studies, for doing research in fashion studies that hopefully will be able to really get more and more scholars from around the world who will be doing research here, who will be collaborating with us on a variety of international projects and exhibitions. I think there are lots of things we can do that we've just barely started to do.

[Valerie Steele]

Thank you for listening and we'll see you soon at the exhibition.