

Understanding the Past Provides Inspiration for the Future. **By Kathlyn Swantko**

The University of Rhode Island Showcases A Historic Textile and Costume Collection

Every textile and apparel item in use today has the potential to become a historical textile or costume 50 to 100 years from now. Today's textiles and clothing can provide insight into early 21st century culture, lifestyle, and may also provide creative inspiration for future textile and apparel designers for decades to come.

The University of Rhode Island (URI) Historic Textile and Costume Collection (HTCC) started in 1951. At that time, Mary Whitlock, then head of the Textiles, Fashion Merchandising and Design Department, donated her collection of costumes and textiles to the

school. She also secured sizable donations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artifacts from several Rhode Island families.

"Today, URI's HTCC has grown to incorporate over 30,000 items," notes Margaret Ordoñez, collections director of the HTCC. "The items in the collection reflect Rhode Island's history and fashions of the state's residents throughout the 19th and 20th centuries."

During the 1980s and 1990s, URI recognized that the collection offered an excellent medium for addressing social history, gender, race, diversity, postmodernism, and pop culture. With technological advances in computers, digital



Graduate students Meredith Wilcox (left) and Emily Kelly (center), and collection manager Megan Martinelli (right), testing the fit of a 1925 gown designed by Lanvin.

White Dress,' will feature wedding fashions from 1749 to 1975."

Objects in the collection include costumes and textiles from all over the world. The earliest holdings date back to the late eighteenth century.

Historical Collection Research Conducted at URI

Both graduate and undergraduate students have conducted research projects utilizing the collection. Ordoñez highlights a few thesis projects that provide support for classroom instruction. Some of these projects are ongoing and will potentially fulfill the long-term goals for the HTCC.

- A thesis to establish a HTCC website with an online catalog to highlight the collection holdings. This study involved research from 67 university costume and textile collections to determine the most beneficial approach for URI.
- A thesis assessing ways the Textiles, Fashion Merchandising and Design Department and the HTCC can collaborate with other small cultural institutions in the state of Rhode Island.
- Use of the collection to study the repair of Leavers laces (the highest quality machine-made laces) and nineteenth century bags and purses from the Perrin family, a long-time, well-established Rhode Island.
- Undergraduate students selected objects from the collection to research and prepare wiki pages of their findings. ●

imaging, and the Internet, opportunities have spurred education beyond the classroom.

According to Ordoñez, the collection has supported the education of URI students in a range of ways, including:

1. Teaching the history of western dress, twentieth-century apparel, ethnic dress, historic textiles, and apparel design.
2. Undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and outside scholars using collection objects as they analyze textiles, research thesis topics, and conduct studies to be presented and published.
3. Faculty members using objects such as nineteenth-century underwear, hats, dusters, samplers, and quilts to illustrate talks presented to organizations throughout the region.

Another mission of URI's HTCC is to hold exhibitions. Since 1999, the Textile Gallery on the Kingston campus has showcased the holdings of the collection with two to three exhibitions a year.

Ordoñez says, "Significant collections that the gallery has highlighted include lace, embroideries, coverlets, nineteenth and twentieth century women's apparel, dyed and printed fabrics, Chinese textiles, Indian apparel, aprons, objects from five early Rhode Island families, and textiles from a Providence dressmakers' shop (1915 - 1947). An upcoming exhibition, entitled "The Other

Kathlyn Swantko, president of the FabricLink Network, created TheTechnicalCenter.com for industry networking and marketing of specialty textiles, and FabricLink.com for consumer education about everything fabric.

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