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Fashion in the Museum: The Opening of The Fashion History Museum

 Ingrid  Aug 15, 2013  8 Comments

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Fashion History Museum Cambridge, Ontario
Installation Shot Photo by Ingrid Mida 2013

Although the [Fashion History Museum](#) was founded in 2004 and has had touring exhibitions circle the globe, it did not have a permanent home until recently. After signing a lease in the spring, founders Kenn Norman and Jonathan Walford and several volunteers worked long days to get the site up and running in less than two months. Located in unit 161 of the Southworks site (originally a foundry dating back to 1870) in Cambridge, Ontario, the museum is now open seven days a week. Admission is free, with donations welcomed to support the rotating exhibitions in the three galleries.

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Fashion History Museum Founders Jonathan Walford
and Kenn Norman
Photo by Ingrid Mida 2013

Curatorial Director Jonathan Walford has worked in museums since 1977 and is a former curator of the Bata Shoe Museum. He is also the author of several books on fashion including “1950s American Fashion”, “Seductive Shoes: Four Centuries of Fashion Footwear”, and the upcoming release of “Sixties Fashion: From Less is More to Youthquake”. CEO and Museum Director Kenn Norman has a background in finance, project management and design. The two share a passion for dress and have worked together producing travelling fashion exhibitions for over a decade.

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Punk Style by Worn Through founder, Monica Sklar, PhD. Find it at : Amazon.com, Powell's Books, or a bookseller near you.



On a recent visit to the [Fashion History Museum](#), I was astonished at how much had been accomplished in such a short span of time. Clever low-cost leasehold improvements, like canvas backdrops, mask what was once a clothing store. The three exhibition galleries are airy, with indirect natural light and the warmth of aged brick adding an element of nostalgic charm. For the opening presentation, the main gallery features a thematic display called *Paisley and Plaid* with garments from the collection that span from the 1810s to the 1990s. The adjacent gallery showcases: *Collecting for the Future: Fashion acquisitions for the new millennium* and includes works from designers like Jason Wu, Alexander McQueen and Project Runway Canada's Jessica Biffi. A smaller gallery towards the back features: *It's in the Bag*, an anthology of purse styles and materials.

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Paisley and Plaid Maternity Ensemble Fashion History Museum
Photo by Ingrid Mida 2013

My interview with curator Jonathan Walford has been condensed and edited.

Ingrid: Jonathan, can you give some background as to the origins of Fashion History Museum as well as your interest in collecting fashion?

Jonathan: I began collecting vintage and antique clothing in 1977 soon after I started working at a living history site called Heritage Village in Burnaby, British Columbia. I was required to wear a costume, and I started combing the vintage clothing stores to find better examples.

By the end of that year, I was spending most of my money buying antique clothing. My first dress purchase was a black net dress from the mid 1890s. I used the garments in lectures and fashion shows in the 80s and 90s, and in 2001 started producing travelling exhibitions for museums. My personal collection became the foundation of the museum with Kenn's help.



Curator Jonathan Walford holding up a recent acquisition in the museum offices
Photo by Ingrid Mida 2013

Ingrid: Opening a museum is a monumental undertaking. What were some of the challenges along the way?

Jonathan: *Our biggest challenge has been*

convincing those outside the field that dress is a topic worthy of appreciation and study. The next challenge has been to find a permanent venue that would encompass both storage and gallery and work spaces. Our new location is not perfect since it is short of storage space and lacks environmental controls, but we fell in love with the architecture of 19th century industrial building and we can work towards improving the deficiencies. We have taken a leap of faith and hope to build support for the FHM.



Fashion History Museum Installation Shot
Photo by Ingrid Mida 2013

Ingrid: What is unique about this collection?
How many artifacts are there? What span of time does it cover?

Jonathan: *The Fashion History Museum collection consists of about 8,000 artifacts that represent an uninterrupted timeline of Western garments and accessories from the 1760s to the present. We also have a 'History in the Making' collection that includes examples of contemporary Canadian dress we add to every*

year. We have many significant pieces of couture ranging from Worth and 'robes de style' by Lanvin to 1940s Christian Dior pieces all the way up to Alexander McQueen's last collection from 2010. There is also a very good American designer collection with many examples from leading designers like Adrian, Norell, Halston and Kamali. I also have a fascination with sportswear and that is reflected in the museum's collection, with interesting examples of riding habits, swimwear, and various active sportswear and activity clothes. Some of the more interesting headline-grabbing oddities in our collection include what may be the oldest European fashion item worn in North America – a shoe that was possibly worn in New Amsterdam (New York) in the 1660s, and the occasional celebrity item including a suit that was made for Evita Peron, and shoes from the wardrobe of Imelda Marcos.

Ingrid: Do you have a favourite period in fashion history?

Jonathan: I can honestly say I do not have a favourite fashion era, but I suppose I am more partial to fashion from periods of change, like the late 1780s /early 1790s, both World War periods from the 20th century, and the 1960s. My next book, due to be released in October, is about the 1960s. I lived through most of the decade and can remember as a child how much fashion mattered at the time, and how quickly and dramatically it al changed.

Ingrid: What are some of your plans for the upcoming year?

Jonathan: *Our opening exhibitions ‘Paisley and Plaid’ will be morphed into a timeline of fashion history, from 1760 to 2010, starting this October. I feel a timeline is important in a fashion museum, because fashion is a series of evolutions and revolutions from the previous styles and you have to see what came before to understand how fashion changed and why. This will help ensure that there is always something that interests every visitor. While the timeline will remain a permanent feature of the museum, the garments within the timeline will be constantly changed, keeping the exhibition fresh, and help preserve the collection. For the other two galleries, we will feature a variety of different approaches to looking at fashion and using the collection. In late September we will feature “Open Drawers” which will showcase recent donations to the museum, ranging from Chanel couture to ancient Roman torques. We will feature the 1960s in an exhibition in December, and in January we are installing “To Meet the Queen”, showcasing examples of presentation gowns and other garments worn to meet royalty. We will be borrowing some pieces from other collections for this exhibition and Alexandra Kim, the former keeper of Royal costumes at Kensington Palace in London has agreed to give us a public lecture on the topic. Next fall we are already planning ‘It Came From Hollywood’ with garments from American designers who started as film costumers including: Adrian, Irene, Howard Greer, Helen Rose, and others. We will also be including artists and photographers who use fashion in their work as part of our schedule.*

We are also working on a membership campaign to launch this fall, and one of our board members is pulling together a 5 day package for out of town visitors to come to see our museum and the other fashion and textile museums of the Toronto area next spring. We are also already talking about a fundraiser cocktail party next June with a Mad men 1960s theme.



Fashion History Museum Gallery 2 Installation Shot
Photo by Ingrid Mida 2013

Ingrid: What do you see as the biggest challenge ahead?

Jonathan: Funding — unless we can find the government grants and get the support from the region and our visitors, we can't maintain the museum for the long run. Currently, we are operating with minimal staffing and we simply cannot manage the museum on so few people – I love what I do, but I still need a day off once in a while. What we are finding is that most

government grants are geared for well-established museums and are project based and don't offer operational funding. Plus many of the old grants that were designed for helping to modernize museums and adapt new technologies are now defunct. Fortunately, we have already received a very positive reception from the city and region, and attendance has been meeting or surpassing our expectations.

Ingrid: If there was a fire or flood, what would be the first thing from the collection that you would grab?

Jonathan: That is an unfair question! However, I would be practical rather than sentimental. I would try to save the most important garments in terms of rarity and value. I would maybe start with the Lanvin robe de style from 1921, then the Yves St. Laurent for Dior couture dress from autumn 1958; the woman's hiking outfit from 1868; the 1763 wedding dress; the 1660 shoe; the 1798 morning gown; the 1948 Dior; the 1897 Worth....

Ingrid: If you had an unlimited acquisition budget, what would be the item that you would like to add to the collection?

Jonathan: We don't have a Delphos Fortuny and they still show up in auctions, so that would be fixable with a bit of cash. A Charles James ball gown is also a Holy grail (and almost as rare). Otherwise, like most fashion museums, I would love to acquire more 18th century clothes and 20th century Parisian couture!

Ingrid: What is on your wish list for the Museum?

Jonathan: I would love for the museum to become a destination attraction, and one of those 'gems' (not too hidden) that people tell their friends you have to go see. I know we have a good collection and I know we can do some really great exhibitions.



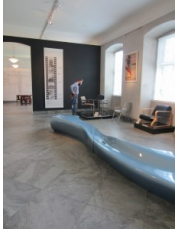
Paisley and Plaid Gallery Installation Shot Fashion History Museum
Photo by Ingrid Mida 2013

The [Fashion History Museum](#) is located at 64 Grand Avenue South, Cambridge, unit 161.

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Jonathan Walford

 August 15, 2013 06.05 am

Thank-you Ingrid for the great coverage and accurate quoting! The only problem is that I always think I look thinner and more ironed than I really am... Jonathan



Claire Shaeffer

 August 15, 2013 06.52 am

What an exciting project! I wished I lived nearer.



ian drummond

🕒 August 15, 2013 07.03 am

Great interview Ingrid!

Best question- what would you save?

I hope this museum space is the catalyst for a permanent space.



Hazel

🕒 August 15, 2013 07.44 am

This sounds wonderful. The new catch phrase will have to be “The Fashion History Museum – It’s worth the drive to Cambridge!” I have the Douglas Coupland Test Pattern tunic although I never have the nerve to wear it in public. There’s that “mutton dressed as lamb” problem that I have. [http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-XgNn0Eusupg/UXahLqK3tnI/AAAAAAAAEFw/BbMtHUq7tt8/s1600/ivy+window.JPG)

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Barbara Troeller

🕒 August 15, 2013 03.02 pm

This is an astounding achievement. I cannot wait to make the journey and tour this wonderful place which is devoted only to fashion history. It

is a place where fashion and clothing are regarded so highly, and respected for the important contributions and effects they have made to civilization and society. Plus you have made it all look so enticing, so well balanced and well displayed. And fun! If they gave a Nobel Prize for fashion, you should be nominated. Of course, I am very much wanting to see all of your hats and millinery! Thank you so very much for sharing your astounding collections with the world. I wish you great success.



Becky Lorberfeld

 August 15, 2013 06.11 pm

Excellent article and photos. Congratulations on a wonderful-looking installation!



Edwina Sutherland

 August 15, 2013 06.50 pm

Great article! I must get to the museum soon!



Nicola Featherstone

 August 16, 2013 10.36 am

I love the story of working at the Heritage Village in Burnaby, I often visited there as a child. I can't

wait to make the journey from Montreal to check out this wonderful addition to Canadian museums.

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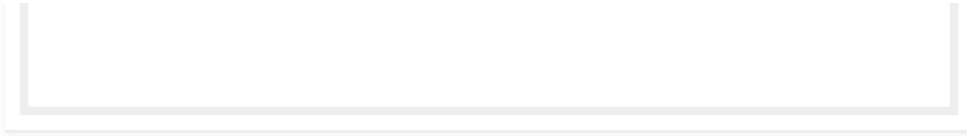
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