

The Little Things: Uncovering Identity on Campus through Dress and Adornment *(Case Study of a Class Exhibition Project)*

by Carrie Hertz



As the Curator of Folk Arts at the Castellani Art Museum (CAM) of Niagara University, I developed and taught undergraduate classes as part of the new Art History with Museum Studies Program. The 2013-2014 period marked the program's inaugural school year. For Spring 2014, I introduced "Exhibiting Cultures," a course exploring the methodological, ethical, and theoretical implications of representing people, their lives and creations, in museum contexts with a special emphasis on anthropological and folkloristic approaches. During the first half of the semester, students learned about the history of representation in museums and how it has changed in relationship to broader shifts in social and cultural understandings about such factors as gender, race, ethnicity, and class differences. Much of the seminar-style discussions focused on issues of objectivity and subjectivity, the classification of material culture, curatorial authority, and the increasing emphasis on collaboration with source communities. During this time, students chose three exhibitions from local museums to visit and review. The second half of the semester was dedicated to working as a group (in this instance, six students) to design and implement an exhibition project from conception to installation in CAM's Education Gallery.

By the fifth week, the class determined a topic and research plan for their exhibition. To serve the educational goals of "Exhibiting Cultures," they were required to develop a project working directly with people from the community—a hallmark of the Folk Arts Program that I directed at CAM. In addition to practical concerns (like bearing in mind the limitations of their timeline, budget, and square footage), I encouraged students to consider the museum's mission: "Art is for everyone." I could not imagine a more fitting topic than the one they settled on: dress and adornment. How people choose to decorate their bodies is the most universal of arts. Every day we creatively communicate both our individual tastes and our social affiliations through the way we style ourselves.

The class chose to tackle this topic by focusing on NU's student body, a constituency that the museum has struggled to engage over the years. Inspired by readings that explore the complex relationships that people form with objects, they wanted to ask their fellow students about what items of dress and adornment best encapsulate their identity. After a crash course in interview techniques and fieldwork ethics, each student set out to record conversations on this issue with at least five students by the next class. Each week they returned to the group with reports of their progress in recording new interviews and to ask for help in perfecting the process. We wanted to ensure that our sample was representative of the diversity on campus, a reasonable task with an enrollment of around 3,000.

An early concern was the reluctance of men to participate. Did men really care less about their appearance, we asked, or did gender expectations discourage them from speaking openly about their relationship to dress? Students experienced greater success when they revealed that other men had already identified important items of adornment like sneakers, necklaces, and tattoos. Students couldn't help but ask themselves how they would answer the questions they put forth to others, and sharing their own examples also deepened their conversations with interviewees. By the end of the research phase, the class had collectively spoken with dozens of fellow students, all of whom gave permission for their recorded conversations to be archived in the museum.

For the next phase, I guided students in collaboratively developing an interpretative plan using the data they had collected. In early discussions, students had an impulse to claim everything that people did as "unique." Was this really true, I asked, pointing to parallels that appeared throughout the collected narratives. Does our data actually support this interpretation? It was pivotal to help them see how idiosyncratic details did not negate the importance of recognizing cultural patterns, balancing empirical specificity with useful generalizations.

I wrote each interviewee's name and one word identifying his or her item of adornment on individual Post-it notes and stuck them on a wall. I invited students to take turns suggesting different ways of organizing the notes into groups. We discussed the impact of form. How do various forms serve as cultural markers of identity associated with particular groups of people, lifestyles, or interests? How does the permanence of tattoos or the temporary application of lipstick affect the way we think about these types of adornment? We discussed the way that

Exhibition Timeline

Weeks 1-4 Introduce students to the exhibition project and ask them to consider possible (and practical) topics. Each student brings three topic suggestions for Week 5 discussion.

Week 5 Share student suggestions, asking the class to consider each in relationship to the following rubric: 1) What is a research question that we could answer by exploring this topic in an exhibition format? 2) Could we answer this question satisfactorily using the time, budget, and space we have available? 3) Does this topic/question serve the museum's mission? 4) Who will care? Once the research question is determined, outline a basic research plan with weekly goals. Establish what research materials (fieldnotes, recordings, signed release forms, etc.) will be due for discussion in Week 11 and turned in by Week 13.

Weeks 6-10 Share weekly progress reports in class and discuss the implications, refining the research process. Stay mindful of the ways that research findings could be translated into an exhibition.

Week 11 Share all research materials and determine a plan for interpretation, including what will be displayed and how will it be presented, both materially and intellectually. Establish exhibition themes and basic layout, division of labor, and installation timeline. Choose a working title.

Week 12 Write first drafts of exhibition text for in-class workshop. Prepare and finalize all research and additional exhibition materials to turn in by Week 13. Finalize title.

Weeks 13-14 Workshop exhibition labels, both as a class and in breakout groups. Finalize all decisions concerning exhibition design.

Week 15 Final drafts of all exhibition text are due.

Week 16 Opening Reception. Personal Reflection assignment is due.

accessories as objects could be gifted and re-circulated, becoming powerful links between people by giving physical substance to emotional connections. We asked what interviewees were communicating through their choices and whether those communications were intended to persuade others or to confirm a personal sense of self. In many cases, the examples pointed to seemingly ubiquitous and mundane items that had been transmuted by wearers into personal symbols of important relationships, transformative events, or future goals—qualities that could not be visually detected. In this manner, we outlined the communicative potential of dress and adornment as seen through our collected examples.

I asked students to think about what our exhibition could contribute to visitors' understanding (see *Exhibition Timeline*). What were we uniquely positioned to illustrate through our fieldwork? Quickly, the class realized that their conclusions were limited by the uniformity of their research sample. They could not present the phenomenon of dress and adornment comprehensively, but they had much to say about how it revealed shared experiences of being a college student. As we turned our attention to student life, the large thematic categories for the exhibition began to take shape.

Several class members expressed dissatisfaction with how college students are depicted in mass media as destructive, irresponsible, and over-privileged. Some of their collected examples uncovered deeply moving stories. One man highlighted a necklace he always wore, a final gift from a terminally ill woman he had cared for through a church program. Another young man talked about his favorite pair of sneakers, the first expensive possession he had ever purchased with money he had earned. For him, they represented his potential for self-determination and independence. One Muslim woman described her approach to wearing *hijab* both as a visual commitment to her faith and as an artistic pursuit, daily matching scarves to her outfit and mood. The class wanted the exhibition to articulate these examples of dedication to others and struggles for adulthood. College is a time of transition and change when students often negotiate conflicting feelings of nostalgia for their childhoods and longing for future self-reliance.

Following this line of thinking, the class determined three sections for the exhibition based on recurring themes they discovered in the narratives: Origins, Transformations, and Constants. For some interviewees, the stories they told were about where they came from, while for others they were about what they hope to become—a transformation into independent adults. Some stories, however, revealed the ways that items of adornment could serve as constant guides over a lifetime, if not across generations, passed between family members.

Once these themes were established, students had to consider how they would actually convey this information in a compelling museum display. When they considered the examples of dress and adornment first as objects, they saw drawbacks for exhibition. Many items were not visually interesting. Tattoos or things worn on a daily basis could not be borrowed. I asked, is this show really about necklaces, sneakers, and hijabs? Or is it about the way individuals instill these objects with meaning? In response, they deemed the personal stories to be the real source of interest, easily presented as label text. (The exhibit title emerged from this conversation about the power of ordinary “little things” to uncover important truths and experiences.) The stories, however, needed a visual representation to appeal to visitors and to invite them to connect with the narrators. We devised a schedule to photograph interviewees, visually and dynamically evoking their relationship with the key item of dress. At this point, we had to determine how many photographs could fit in the gallery space, as well as how much space would be devoted to each section or any other exhibit components. As a group, the class selected the best examples for each section, with some impassioned advocacy for their own interviews. The final choices were resolved by majority vote.

Sample Labels that Accompany Portraits

*Example 1: Written by Jonah Pope
Nato Makier
Sophomore
tattoo*

The individual students represented in the exhibit collaborated directly with their original interviewers throughout the whole process. Over the next week, they were escorted to the museum to have their portraits taken. To ensure some stylistic and quality consistency, I took the photographs with creative input from both the interviewer and the interviewee. Later, class members wrote labels for the students they worked with, taking drafts to them for further discussion. Those who had fewer individual labels to write were tasked with creating drafts of the section labels. Everyone wrote a version of a main label. The section labels and main label were workshopped in class, the final drafts representing a sort of composite.

Because they knew the featured students would visit the resulting exhibit, see their portraits, and read the labels, class members expressed both anxiety and exhilaration as planning progressed. They felt great responsibility to capture each student's voice and perspective. One young woman confessed that on a similar project in another class, when she was asked to write label copy for an exhibition of landscape paintings, she had not spent much time or effort on it. She had trouble connecting to the subject matter and wondered whether anyone would actually read it (and if they did, would they even realize whether the details were accurate?). This time, the project felt "more personal and real" and she agonized over making her contributions "fair" and "really, really good." Her ultimate goal, she said, was to move readers to tears.



Nato is from Lake Worth, Florida. He chose to talk about the tattoo on his left shoulder. The tattoo consists of a wolf's face surrounded by a paw print. When asked why he chose this placement, he said that it was easy to show to others when he wanted, but it was also very easy to hide. The tattoo represents courage and never backing down from any challenge. Wolves are known for always staying with their pack. During the interview Nato said, "Wolves will do anything to protect their family, which is kind of like me. I would do anything and be anything for my family: being a leader, or someone who helps out on the side whenever needed."

Nato drew the design last year during his freshman year. He wanted a visual and permanent representation of his connection to his family. He said, "This is what I was thinking about when I was deciding what to draw for my tattoo; I think it best represents me, being a family-oriented person." When asked what he wanted the viewers to know, he said that he wants to make his family proud and be the best person he can be.

Once all the portraits were taken, I put together a slideshow with multiple versions of each subject to choose from. Students were very sensitive to how they imagined their classmates would want to be seen. One student had posed throughout the portrait session with a pronounced model-pout. I was pleased when I finally caught her in a more natural smile. The class, however, unanimously rejected the image in favor of one that looked magazine-cover ready, arguing that the posture better illustrated the student's story of confidence through fashionable dress and better reflected the intentional, performative nature of self-presentation. Who were we, they asked, to decide what is more "true" to her personality? Molly Harrison echoed this sentiment in a self-reflection assignment at the end of the semester, "I think what makes a good exhibition is if the museum captured the view of the people they are representing or trying to show."

At the end of the semester, the majority of students described collaborating with others—both classmates and exhibition subjects—to be the most stressful, yet also the most rewarding part of the project. Tensions occasionally arose when people felt their ideas were too quickly rejected by the group and my role often revolved around encouraging everyone both to listen with grace and take the time to articulate clearly the logic underpinning opinions. Every decision—from which stories to include, to what color to paint the walls—had to be judged against the "thesis" of the show, the mission of the museum, and the principles of respectful representation that we discussed all semester.

Students struggled to find the best way to represent individual stories concisely, incorporating the subject's words, while also making the text comprehensible and relatable to a general audience. Nick Berdzik identified "getting the label right"

*Example 2: Written by Elizabeth Gatto
Liz Raby
Freshman
clothing*



Liz Raby is from Lewiston, New York. She is an accounting major with a minor in Spanish. Liz felt that her camouflage best portrays who she is to the world. She said, "It's a personal reflection on my hobbies, my interests, what I believe in, and the country aspect of society." Liz takes great pride in being a country girl and in her love for the outdoors. Much of this pride is a result of where she comes from, having grown up on a farm surrounded by nature. Her clothes help her portray this pride. She wants to show through her dress that she has a very down-to-earth personality.

Whenever she wears camouflage, Liz feels connected to her brother who is in the army. For this reason, her clothes have a special significance that people wouldn't know when just glancing at her. The durability of her clothes is also very important to her. The camouflage allows her to hunt and enjoy the outdoor activities she loves without the restrictions that some clothing has.

*Example 3: Written by Brianna Buczek
Shannon Cooper
Junior
tattoo*



Shannon's tattoo, located on her left shoulder, holds incredible meaning for her. A testament to her journey so far, the tattoo is a quote by William Shakespeare: "And though she be but little, she is fierce." The tattoo was inked on her body in January of 2013, right before she enlisted in ROTC. It is a constant reminder to her that even though she is a small woman, she has the same abilities as men. Shannon had the quote placed on her left shoulder as an addition to the tattoo of roses already trailing down her ribcage. The roses represent the women in her family. While the tattoo is not always visible, she believes it is something that defines her struggles and helps her to continue to face adversity in the world.

as the most challenging aspect. "Trying to get their voice to come out in the label," he admitted, "is hard to do. You need to have a good interview in order for this to be completed." Like Nick, many students in retrospect wished they had conducted more interviews and asked more questions during the interviews they recorded. Elizabeth Gatto concluded, "The more questions you ask the better understanding you gain of the person you're interviewing."

To encourage visitors to draw personal parallels with the students' narratives, the class designed an interactive component for the exhibit. One wall included a bulletin board with a nearby table and chairs holding colored pencils and sheets of paper. The sheets had a plain outline drawing of a humanoid figure that Elizabeth Gatto created. A prompt on the wall read: "How do YOU express yourself through dress and adornment? Draw a picture to share!"

On the last day of class, we held an opening reception to honor the participants. Nearly 60 students attended, more than I had seen in my three years as curator gather in the museum without a class requirement. Many participants (both the student-curators and the 15 featured students) brought their parents. During the reception, one professor commented to me that she was surprised at how "typical" the examples in the show were—no purple hair, no outrageous body art. I asked her how many students on campus she knew who actually fit that description. Campus style at the small, private Catholic university is conservative. By cleaving to common experience rather than looking for outliers in the community, the exhibit captured the diversity of expression and demographics on campus without exaggerating it. Too often, both popular and scholarly treatments of dress and adornment neglect the average for the extreme, lessening our ability to

contemplate the meaningful in the everyday. Projects like this one are important for revealing the pivotal roles that dress and adornment play as forms of creativity and nonverbal communication in our daily lives. In her self-assessment, Elizabeth Gatto summarized what the class had taught her: "This project changed how I view dress and adornment because I found even though most people are not obvious about it there is an underlying story to be told and reasoning behind the way they choose to present themselves. I now see that dress and adornment is not an unconscious decision. It is a complex method of self expression that people put a lot of thought into."



Seena Salleh, a student featured in the exhibition, poses with her mother.

Another student, responding more personally to the same sentiment, apologized for her appearance in class throughout the semester and declared, "I will no longer be dressing in sweats anymore :)." As I smiled and appreciated the shared joke in this assessment, a compelling story about student learning emerges. This student not only recognized the communicative potential of her clothes, she also realized that her choices may be interpreted in ways that she had not intended based on viewers' perspectives and expectations. Her conclusion satisfied one of the project's primary pedagogical goals: to demonstrate that effective communication, in a museum exhibition and in social life, requires seeing the potential for dialogue.

Carrie Hertz is the Curator of Textiles and Costume at the Museum of International Folk Art. From 2011 to 2014, she served as Curator of Folk Arts at the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University. She earned her PhD in Folklore from Indiana University. Hertz has published on topics of dress and adornment in *Museum Anthropology Review*, *Midwestern Folklore*, and *Voices: The Journal of the New York Folklore Society*.

