

Classroom Application: Writing a Sartorial Autobiography

The Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage developed a set of questions to inspire people to write sartorial autobiographies. Have students choose questions below to help write a life story about themselves or someone they interview about dress and culture. They may illustrate with photos and sketches.

Definition: *Sartorial Autobiography looks at the clothes we wear to help shape the story of who we were when we wore them. Looking at photos and physical examples of our own clothing through different times provides insight in to our own story—our wardrobe reflects social history, culture, family traditions, and personal beliefs.*

Guiding Questions for a Sartorial Autobiography

How did family and friends talk about dress?

Were there any family sayings or words of wisdom passed on to you about dressing well?

How did you learn--through direct instruction, by implication, or example--what not to wear? Why?

Were there any special words that you used to describe the different styles of dress or particular items of dress?

When did you become aware of dress as a personal statement?

How has the way you dress (or style your hair) changed through the years? Why?

How many communities of style do you identify with? Describe them and the associated dress.

What are the “codes of dress” of your cultural communities, including your age group, family, or occupation?

What are your thoughts on the way that you dress in relation to the aesthetics (ideas and values of beauty) relating to dress of the communities with which you identify or those of the people that you respect and admire?

Have you ever been treated differently, embraced, or rejected in a way that you would attribute to the way you dress or dressed? Describe the context and the experience?

Are there articles of dress or personal adornment that hold special meaning for you and for those in your family and/or communities?