**A Fashionable Obsession at the Fashion History Museum - Ontario, Canada**

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As children we all had ideas of what we would be when we grow up – like many others, I at one point hoped to become a veterinarian. For Jonathan Walford, the Curatorial Director and Co-Founder of the [Fashion History Museum](http://www.fashionhistorymuseum.com/index.html) (FHM) in Ontario, Canada, his childhood ambitions have closely aligned with reality. By the age of ten, he was so interested in fashion history that he would watch period films and look for historically incorrect costuming.

The FHM grew out of this interest, beginning in 1977 when Walford was given a “period” collarless shirt to wear while working at Heritage Village, now known as Burnaby Village, in Burnaby, British Columbia. He knew that the shirt was not right, so he combed local vintage stores for starched collars, knitted ties, and straw boaters. By the end of the year friends and family were giving him their vintage clothing, and most of his paycheck went to growing his collection. Eventually this passion turned into a career working in museums. He was the founding curator of the Bata Shoe Museum, working there from 1987 to 1999, while simultaneously using his personal collection to give illustrated lectures and to create exhibitions for smaller museums. He created the hugely popular exhibit Ready To Tear, about 1960s paper dresses, which travelled to 13 venues across Canada and spawned the definitive book on paper clothing, [Ready To Tear: Paper Fashions of the 60s](http://www.fashionhistorymuseum.com/index-6.html). Since then he has authored many books and curated countless exhibits that have travelled as far away as Hong Kong.

In 2004 Walford’s partner, Kenn Norman, was taking a leadership course in California and used the idea of a fashion history museum as his project; within a year they founded the museum and by 2008 it was granted federal non-profit corporation status. After nearly getting a permanent space in 2008 in Toronto, they finally secured a location in Cambridge, Ontario in 2013 in a historic mill renovated to a boutique shopping center. While close to the big city, the town was increasingly becoming a tourist destination in its own right; Cambridge’s extensive history of textile and clothing manufacturing further connected it to the mission of the FHM. The museum had over 7,000 visitors in its first five months (a feat for any smaller museum), largely because of its strong exhibitions, from its inaugural Paisley and Plaid: Recurring Patterns in Fashion to its most recent MODe: Fashion in the 1960s. Unfortunately, a variety of external factors have forced the museum to close its space at the end of December and find a new location.

Fashion in the 1960s

As they say, a rolling stone gathers no moss, and the FHM will continue on. The museum is working on an exhibition, Street Style, which will open at the end of May 2014 at the Waterloo Region Museum, and Walford still actively contributes to his blog (I particularly like the “[Fashion Hall of Obscurity](http://kickshawproductions.com/blog/?cat=698)” series, which examines the many lesser known designers of the past). The FHM also still has an incredible collection that will draw in crowds wherever it is on display. Whether it’s an rare women’s ensemble from 1765-1770, an elegant 1943 dress by couturier Jeanne Lanvin, or a Universal Studios paper dress from 1968, the museum holds thousands of beautiful pieces that span the 1700s up to the present day. As one of the only museums in Canada devoted to fashion, it is uniquely situated to collect Canadian-designed and/or manufactured pieces, which often reflect “part of a mosaic in the Canadian fashion story,” as Walford says; “there is no singular style or culture that stretches across the over 9,000 kilometer width of Canada.” They are even developing a touring exhibition for 2017, the sesquicentennial of Canada, which will explore the many elements that make up Canadian fashion.

Highlights from the FHM collection: Women’s Ensemble ca. 1765-1770, dress by Jeanne Lanvin from 1943, Universal Studios paper dress from 1968 (back detail).

Walford and Norman hope to have a new, better space in the near future and will continue to exhibit in other museums. They continue to receive funding from donations, book sales and other avenues, all of which contribute to the growth of the museum. One day they hope to have enough revenue to pay for more staff, ideally development and education officers, and to put more money towards marketing and fundraising. Until then they operate with the help of a handful of dedicated volunteers, who devote significant time to the project. Since Walford bought his first piece for his collection, a black net ensemble from the mid 1890s, he has been hooked, and he views the museum’s challenges as just a bump on an otherwise positive trajectory. Despite this optimism, there is something about the present Walford doesn’t like: when asked if he has any favorite pieces from the collection he remarks, “I find it very difficult to pick favorites because I honestly enjoy every period of fashion (except the one I am usually living in!)”

You can follow Jonathan Walford and the Fashion History Museum on his blog [here](http://kickshawproductions.com/blog/).

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Hi Christian;

Sorry for the delayed response – having a museum that is open 7 days a week tends to take up a lot of my time!

How did you start collecting historic fashion?

I think my fascination with historic fashion was born within me. My mother was very fashion conscious even though we never had the kind of money that allowed her to be frivolous, and my father worked as a fashion buyer for the Hudson Bay Company in the late 1950s and early 1960s. I grew up in the 1960s with an interest in historically set films like Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, and Thoroughly Modern Millie, sorting out what was correct and incorrect costuming for the period of the film even then! I began collecting vintage and antique clothing soon after I started working at a living history site called Heritage Village in Burnaby, B.C. in the summer of 1977. It began when I was given a collarless shirt to wear as my costume and I knew I could do better than that. I began combing the vintage clothing stores of Gastown (the old heritage district of Vancouver) for starched collars, knitted ties, and straw boaters. By the end of the year I was receiving gifts from friends and family members and putting most of my paycheque into buying the oldest pieces of antique clothing I could find. My first dress purchase was a black net dress from the mid 1890s.

What inspired you to turn your personal collection into one that can be viewed by the public?

I chose a museum career and eventually became the curator of the Bata Shoe Museum in 1987. Despite the low pay, I remained at Bata until 1999, supplementing my income by using my personal collection for illustrated lectures and fashion shows. In the late 1990s I began creating exhibitions for smaller museums using my collection, and in 2001 created my first travelling exhibition of 1960s paper dresses called Ready to Tear. The show ultimately travelled to thirteen venues across Canada. Other exhibitions followed including WARdrobe, a history of fashion during World War II. This show was also very popular and was rented out to 8 different venues. The R.O.M. even copied my show, calling their version WARfashion. I was more amused than angry by the whole thing - after all, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

I have been aware since that time that there is a keen interest in fashion history from the museum-going public, but a lack of venues with relevant exhibitions. In 2004 my partner Kenn was taking a leadership course in California and used the idea of creating a fashion museum as a project for his course. By the end of the year, we had founded the Fashion History Museum.

Could you describe some of the ups and downs you've experienced in trying to start the FHM?

There have been many… We were in discussion of partnering with an existing attraction in Toronto when the economy soured in 2008. Mayor Ford’s agenda ended the possibility a couple of years later. We then looked outside the city and dismissed most locations for various reasons. Cambridge rose to the top of our list for several reasons. The region was known as the Manchester of Canada in the late 19th century because of the textile and clothing manufacturing that took place around here. We like the proximity to Toronto, and yet the small town atmosphere. The south end of Cambridge, which was the former town of Galt is becoming a destination town, with a vital arts community, great shopping and dining, and it’s a pretty and historic town. We began looking for a venue and even moved here in the meantime. We were fortunate to find philanthropic support this past spring to pay for the museum to set up in Southworks, an historic mill complex that has been restored as a boutique shopping mall. However, our next challenge is to find sustaining support as our start up funding winds down.

Could you talk about how your museum is serving the community? (via public programming and educational activities perhaps)

This is in the works… As we have been open only since July, we haven’t had a chance to implement our programs or educational activities yet. Some of our plans include a fashion camp next summer, working with the boards of education to create tours relevant to the school curriculum, as well as launching our ‘bluestocking club’ lecture series this winter.

Could you talk about some of your favorite pieces in the collection?

I find it very difficult to pick favourites because I honestly enjoy every period of fashion (except the one I am usually living in!) The pieces that come into the collection are chosen for different reasons and sometimes it’s the story behind the dress that is the most interesting, sometimes it’s the design or quality of the material and construction. One of my favourites is an apricot and cerulean blue Jeanne Lanvin dress from 1922; another is a one-shouldered evening dress that won a German fashion student design competition in 1947; then there is a linen golf dress from 1904 that is green so that grass stains don’t show; a dress with trousers from the 1860s worn by a lady mountaineer; a dress worn to a dinner for the visiting King and Queen of England in Montreal in 1939; a suit designed for Evita Peron; a pretty 18th century floral and trellis patterned silk taffeta dress with matching petticoat; paper dresses with Pop art prints; a Worth afternoon dress; my mother’s wedding dress from 1952… the list is endless

Could you talk about some of the pieces that are important for understanding Canadian history?

The museum actively collects Canadian designed and/or manufactured pieces. Canadian clothing often reflects some aspect of our culture, and especially climate. Sometimes the nationalistic reference is obvious, like when a Canadian designer styles a jacket after an RCMP tunic or chooses a maple leaf print to make a blouse. Other times there are regional styles that become a part of a mosaic in the Canadian fashion story: hippy-dippy boutique clothes from 1970s Vancouver, couture evening gowns from 1950s Montreal, or off-the-rack LBD’s from 1960s Spadina street manufacturers in Toronto. Then there are the unifying brands like the Eatonia girdle or the Hudson Bay Company winter jacket, or ubiquitous styles, like the red buffalo plaid ‘Saskatoon dinner jacket’, that became a part of our national identity. Unlike a folk costume or traditional garment that survives centuries with little change and becomes an identifier of a people from a specific region, there is no singular style or culture that stretches across the over 9,000 kilometer width of Canada. This is a theme I would like to explore for an exhibition that would travel across Canada during 2017, the sesquicentennial of Canada.

How would more funding help the FHM?

Beyond securing core funding to pay the rent and some part time staff, every additional dollar raised would be used to grow the museum. As it is, we operate with two full time staff that are paid part time wages, and a handful of dedicated volunteers who spend endless hours of their time to maintain the museum. If we could hire development and education officers, we could exploit every exhibition to its full potential and have long-term marketing and fundraising strategies in place for future growth. We have a good collection and a popular topic – working off of the publicity of a few local newspaper articles when we opened, some social networking, and word of mouth, we attracted over 4,000 visitors in our first two months. That is phenomenal for a small museum – especially with our limited resources and absent advertising budget.