

Proposal for a Smith College Costume Studies Program

The study of costume history has exploded in the last decade. Every major field in the liberal arts has produced academic studies on the subject during this time, and the literature has easily quadrupled. Meanwhile, student interest in the history of dress and the theory of fashion is higher than ever. So far, however, colleges have failed to respond with programming, and the field remains marginalized. Traditional classes in costume history are taught, as at Smith, in theater departments, where the design component keeps many students away, and where instruction in design and construction necessarily use up much class time. Courses in the history of dress may also occasionally be found in fashion design and marketing programs, where their scope may be limited. Otherwise, the subject is only taught in specialized graduate programs, such as the MA program at the Courtauld Institute in London.

Costume Studies is a field whose time has come, and Smith is extremely well situated to support a visionary new program in it. Such a program would be unique not only among the five colleges, but in the country, including Smith's peer schools. It would also address many of Smith's recently formulated strategic goals.

- **Interdisciplinary Study:** Dress is an inherently interdisciplinary subject. It has potential relevance to the fields of history, art history, classics, medieval and Renaissance studies, American studies, literature, post-colonial studies, the history of science, anthropology, archaeology, chemistry and even engineering. This means that a program in Costume Studies would support other departments by giving their students powerful, new tools to bring back to these fields. It would also foster dialogue between departments. Both the Theater Department and the American Studies Department have expressed their interest in this program.
- **Skill Strengthening:** In addition to research skills, critical thinking and historical and visual literacy, Costume Studies provides backdoor access to quantitative skills (used in the study of textile production and the industrial revolution), scientific knowledge (the chemistry of dyes and the composition of fibers), moral and ethical reasoning (labor issues and the morality or amorality of fashion), and even engineering (everything from the Spinning Jenny to the construction of the soles of running shoes is a product of human engineering).
- **Internships and Community Involvement:** This program would be rich in research and internship opportunities at local museums such as Historic Deerfield and Historic Northampton, whose extensive costume collection is one of Northampton's best kept secrets.
- **Use and Development of Existing Smith Resources:** The digital image base at Smith, the Sophia Smith and Smith College Archives, and the Smith College Historic Costume Collection would all enrich a Costume Studies program, as well as being further developed themselves. New images, of use to both art history and the theater department would be added to the digital image base, research projects could be based in the college archives, and exhibitions could be staged using the Historic Costume Collection, which would be a draw for the community and for alumnae. (Costume exhibits have drawn huge crowds at the major museums in recent years.)

- **Alumnae-Student Relations:** The program would include an ongoing Alumnae Dress History Project, which would involve students collecting, photographs and clothing from interested alumnae, as well as the stories that go with them.
- **Multicultural Content:** Courses in the custom and clothing of a range of non-European cultures, as well as lectures by guest speakers in this area would foster multicultural understanding among students. The subject would provide a new approach as well as potentially attracting students who might not otherwise seek out a multicultural perspective.
- **Support of Future Careers:** A program in Costume Studies would provide a substantial advantage to future curators, archaeologists, anthropologists and historians at Smith. There is no other program that gives undergraduates this kind of specific training. A feeder-school relationship could be established with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Bard Center for Graduate Research and the Courtauld Institute, as well as other programs.
- **Sustainability:** Costume and textile production has all too frequently toxified rivers, degraded soil and air quality, and debased human life. This program could be a site for discussion, analysis and visionary thinking concerning the role of the clothing industry in the natural environment. Much like the Slow Foods Movement in Europe, a Slow Clothes Movement could be fostered through design and construction workshops on campus, knitting and sewing clubs, and establishing relationships with “fair trade” clothing producers.

A Costume Studies Program such as the one outlined above would require:

- The development of program guidelines and curriculum, in communication with other departments and with potential feeder programs.
- Recruitment of a professor in the area of Costume Studies.
- Part-time administrative support.
- Funding for student internships.

Respectfully Submitted,

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