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**Historical authenticity, narrative interpretation and the mnemonic experience: measuring the impact of costume-based artwork in dress handling sessions within the museum environment.**

A submission in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Derby for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## **Preface**

I hereby submit this thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the College of Arts, Humanities and Education at the University of Derby. I have been supervised by Professor Huw Davies, Colin Thompson and Dr Kate Wells.

This thesis with its appendices is my intellectual property and original work, except for other authors' citations, which have been appropriately referenced in the text, captions and in the bibliography at the end of the thesis. The original work has never been published or submitted in any form elsewhere. Any re-use of any portion or section of this thesis should be referenced citing the author, title, university and pagination.

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## Abstract

This study has been developed from the perspectives of both an artist and an educator so as to create an immersive, memorable and instructive experience for audiences through the creation of interactive replica dress pieces.

The research explores how its practical outcome - a multisensory, narrative, dress-based artwork: *A Conversation with Mary's Dress* - could be used in a museum education context, alongside or even replacing the study of original items of dress in order to research and experience fashion as social history, while protecting fragile originals.

This artwork allows viewers to investigate the dynamic interaction between dress and disease as revealed by deep investigation of a surviving Eighteenth Century gown worn by Mary Graham during her final illness and just before her death from tuberculosis in 1792.

The replica dress that constitutes the artwork allows viewers to handle, touch and explore interactively a dress that essentially reproduces the original. This process engages, educates and inspires the viewer in ways that are simply not possible when only the original is available for examination.



In addition to and like the dress, a fabric based pocketbook and heart and lungs contain embedded sound-spots that allow viewers to experience and follow the full story of the making of the replica artwork, Mary Graham's treatments and her subsequent death from tuberculosis. The entire work, then, rewards curious hands and minds through sharing its rich history by way of a multisensory experience.

This project has developed from and builds upon the researcher's past work in this field as a costume designer making items for a wide range of productions, including costumes for museums and heritage sites based on the study of collected originals from across the world. This is to complement current and past practice within the field of dress in the context of history, art and the museum.

The enhanced sensory experience for audiences created by this interactive replication of original fashion, was tested and evaluated, as demonstrated here in the audience survey responses. The approach has facilitated highly positive experiences and, at the same time, passed on to audience's new information in innovative ways. That has also created a tool, which has the potential to shape future dress handling educational programs.

## **Introduction**

This thesis is the written part of what is predominantly a practical PhD project. It begins by acknowledging an item of dress and the attached narrative that is the principal focus of the work. It is followed by a description of the scope of the work, and of the study's objective by way of a series of specific research questions. After that is a summary of the contents of each thesis chapter, establishing both the theoretical and practice-based elements of the study as well as the fundamental relationship between the two. It culminates in an investigation into the impact of that analysis on the practical outcome through audience testing. The conclusion of this thesis considers the contribution to knowledge achieved through the study in relation to the artist's role within museum education, with a focus on the history of dress.

At the heart of this investigation is an original object: a dress chosen for its outstanding provenance. The original was worn by the Honourable Mary Graham towards the end of her life and just before her death from tuberculosis. Her husband kept the dress, alongside a 1775 portrait of his wife by the celebrated artist, Thomas Gainsborough.

The dress remains in the family to this day and has been exhibited publicly just once, ten years ago<sup>1</sup>. Although the dress has not been made accessible to the public, the family agreed that it be made available for the purposes of this research project. That permission has enabled a full study of the original garment, and in turn has allowed the completion of a full replica garment using historical practices. This has been further developed into an artwork through research and replication and the addition of elements designed to facilitate an immersive experience, leading to the final narrative-based textile artwork.

As a result, the final work is based completely on the original piece, as well as the use of relaxed embodied performative approaches. In short an experience of an item of artwork-dress led by the participant / audience and encouraging them to relate to this through their own bodies<sup>2</sup>. The objective of this is to create an inviting and memorable way of sharing the experience of handling and learning about history through dress. The aim is to reach a broader audience and to develop an approach that may be used more widely to interpret and share stories of dress within museum environments.

The first stage in this process involved the replication of the original dress. In the context of this study, the term “replica” covers the concept of remaking an item with the aim of replicating the original process in order to learn more

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<sup>1</sup> *Gainsborough's Beautiful Mrs. Graham* at The National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, in 2003. This exhibition was built around the Gainsborough painting.

<sup>2</sup> Which is defined in Chapter Two.

about it. This embodied process of making, remaking and reflecting provides a unique and useful insight into the original. It is augmented by an investigation into the means by which a found narrative might be embedded, in order to engage and excite viewers, encouraging further investigation. This involves further embellishment, including or excluding differing elements of text, and textiles technology. This experimental approach continued until the right balance emerged, creating a piece which encourages and rewards audiences with a unique experience; a sensory story activated by touch.

In order to investigate this practice-based research approach fully, and to establish the role that costume-based narrative artworks play within an educational heritage context, the following research questions were proposed:

- How can costume-based artworks support first-hand study of historic costumes in museums?
- Can costume-based artwork make the handling experience more memorable?
- Can handling multi-sensory costume-based artwork offer audiences something more than an original garment in the same context?
- Can either a best artistic practice framework or guidelines be developed to better support future work in this field?

The thesis comprises four chapters that reflect in detail the interrelated research processes employed. Chapter One surveys the key theories relevant to the fields in which the research sits, principally: dress and memory; dress in

museums; handling historic dress; studying, making and remaking dress as academic practice; place and placement of dress-based artwork, historic dress made accessible through technology and/ or online; and the different approaches to the practice of replica within historic dress which have been accelerated by or built around “vintage” or “retro” clothing. Historical recreations of dress, for example, are now being shared step-by-step via social media. **Artisanal Movements** such as “slow stitch”<sup>3</sup> and “visible mending”<sup>4</sup> are being driven by the need for more sustainable and authentic experiences. These and other movements, in turn, engage the practices of textiles artists who use dress as a medium. In addition, through the case studies, the broader aim is to develop templates and guidelines that might be used for future work and by other practitioners. **In relation to this study the mnemonic relates to handling dress to aid retention or revival of information, remembering through dress, based on our ability to remember events through clothing worn when they happened, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter One.**

Chapter Two outlines the practice-based methodology employed in the study, with the first stage of that process being recreation through replication. The knowledge gained is then built into the next stage where the replica transforms into an artwork. This involved the addition of elements and the use

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<sup>3</sup> A mindful stitching process, that focuses on intention and the happiness brought from creating, rather than the final piece itself. See: <https://theslowstitchingmovement.wordpress.com/2015/02/01/a-prescriptionfor-how-to-begin-slow-stitching/>

<sup>4</sup> Mending designed to showcase the care and skill rather than hide it, see Appendix XI.

of processes not found in the original dress, such as adding pockets and pocket contents and incorporating sound-spots<sup>5</sup>. This approach allowed for the addition of a performance context that enabled audiences to discover and explore the artwork. **When I use the term performance, or performative in relation to my artwork for this study I am referring to the informal self-directed experience of “A Conversation with Mary’s Dress” either first-hand or through a screen. The solo performer in this case is the participant is also the audience.**

The introduction of COVID19 restrictions necessitated changing the audience testing protocols from an individual or small group “seen live” approach to a mediated mediatised experience. This involved changing focus to ensure that audiences might still investigate the replica dress as fully as possible, even in the physical absence of a facilitator. It allowed the final research stage to proceed, testing the replica dress by way of simulated handling sessions with real audiences, **self-directed in their own homes by following a simple guide.** The final testing helped to produce findings in relation to the original research questions. This in turn, helped to determine whether or not this approach can offer audiences a memorable or life enhancing experience, and museums a new, low risk and effective educational approach to collections access.

Chapter Three details the provenance of the Graham dress, and the rich primary source records that substantiate the history of this unique piece and

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<sup>5</sup> A touch activated fabric spot which when used with a sound pen, plays a linked piece of audio.

how that offers a rare insight into its original owner and her family's life, recollections and experiences. It is followed by a written record of the reflective investigation produced by this research study. This describes the results of the replica dress being tested in three different ways during COVID19 lockdown: in-person in participants own homes, via video call from the researchers home, and through viewing a short film online.

The thesis concludes with an assessment of how the results of the study have produced new knowledge and the implications for students of fashion, costume and history as well as for museum visitors in general, including potential new users, such as those with disabilities such as sight loss.

## Chapter One

### A review of literature and practice

This chapter is a survey of existing writing and practice, covering the overlapping fields of dress as an object, of memory, and in museums. This is followed by the benefits and challenges of handling historic dress within a museum context, which leads to studying, making, and remaking dress as an academic practice and situating artwork within a heritage context. This first chapter concludes with a focus on dress as a medium concerning new technology and dresses online. These subjects, which have informed this work, are the foundation of the contribution of this study to these fields.

To aid the links between the different fields and stages discussed I have created two diagrams to show how they connect in relation to my process and the final piece. Diagram 1 shows the life cycle of a dress, and shows the stages covered during the practical study of the original piece at the centre of this work, this is explored in more detail in chapter three.



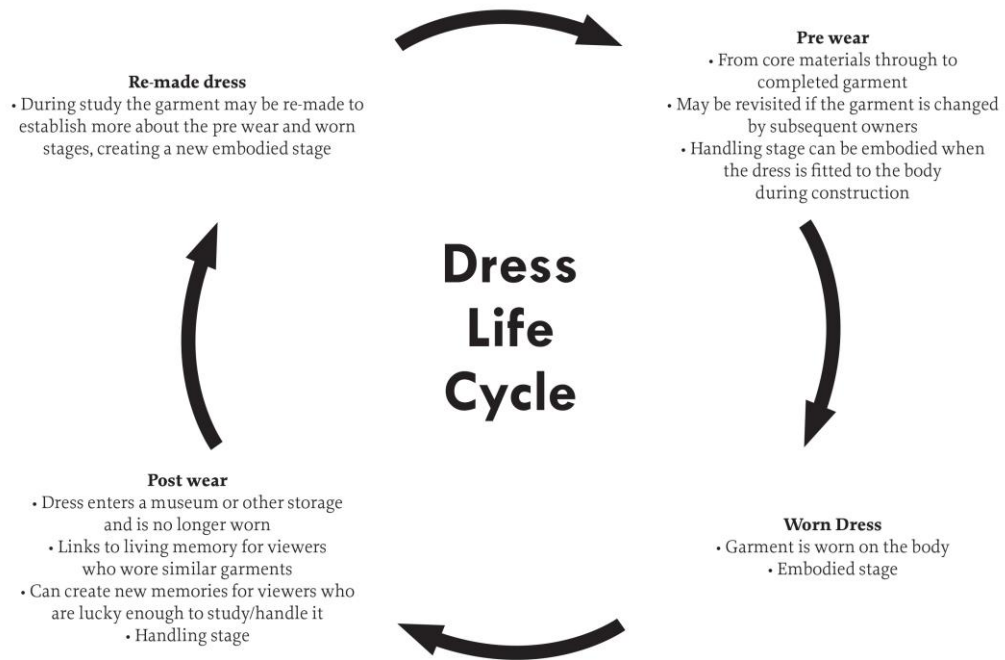


Diagram 1: Dress Life Cycle

Diagram 2 shows an overview of the subjects covered in this study and is explored in more detail below.

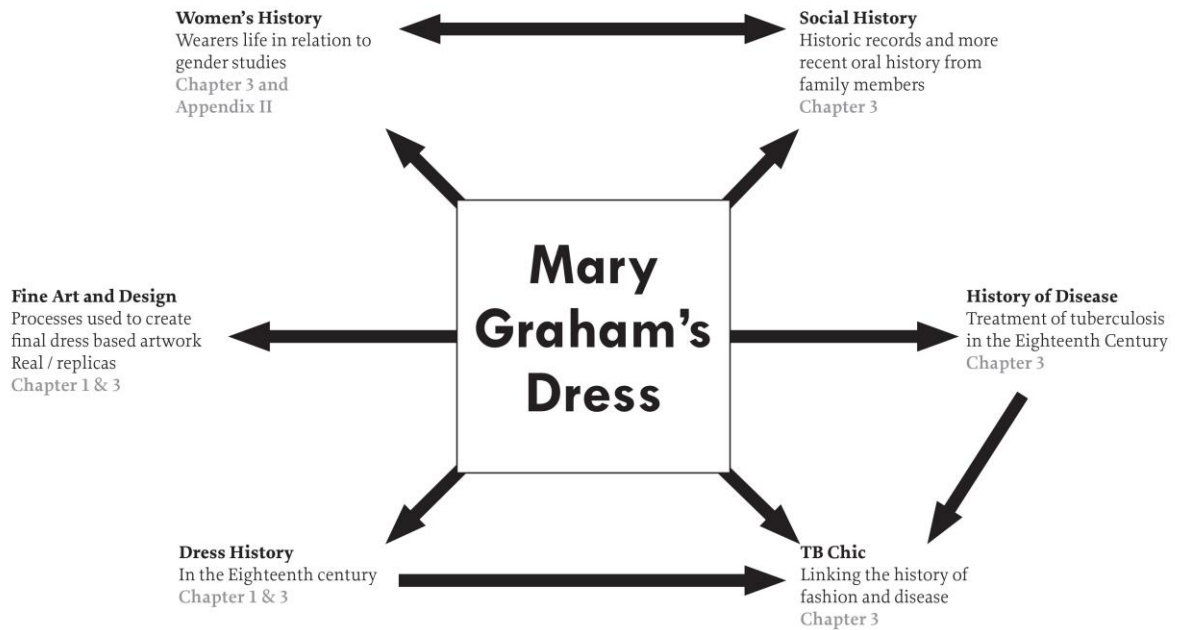


Diagram 2: Mary Graham's Dress

## 1.1 Dress and Memory

Sophie Woodward's work (2007, 2011, 2015) interviewed women about the contents of their wardrobes as they related to memory through worn dress. It viewed personal collections as material assemblages and as the locus of memories as well as everyday consumption practices. Woodward & Greasley (2015) explored the porosity of dress as entirely separate from us, but so much a part of our lives that it externalises for us memories, former selves, and relationships. They also frequently analyse clothing no longer worn, but which are kept because of the memories they now hold. Collections of dress, saved and then forgotten as generations pass, are the pillar of standard museum dress collections. Sadly, memories inspired by the originals and

cherished have often been lost. Sometimes these endless “milestone” wedding or christening dresses can be traced back to a name, but rarely with a photograph. As Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell States in *Worn On This Day*:

Clothes rarely survive for the reasons curators want or hope them to; that is museum pieces are not often representative (Chrisman-Campbell, 2019, p.ix)

The items that are purposely saved are often the same, person-to-person ~~to person~~, household-to-household, or as Sadie von Scrumptious writes in a blog post on when to donate your clothing to a museum:

Museums are often glutted with traditional antique garments. ~~Today, items such as these will only be accepted if they are of exceptional importance or have a detailed and reliance provenance.~~ (Scrumptious, 2019)

Heike Jenss’s work in *Fashioning Memory* (2017) focuses on fashion as collective memory and addresses both collecting and wearing historic (vintage) clothing practices outside of the museum. Jenss considers the increased numbers of people searching out, collecting, and wearing vintage clothing in terms of both personal memory and a wider cultural memory, occasionally leading to fashion nostalgia. In this way Jenss’s work mirrors Woodward’s:

In their proximity to the body clothes are in a prominent position to ‘Fashion Memory,’ on a very personal level, where clothing becomes part of a person’s material or sartorial biography.

(Jenss, 2017, p.8)

It is this aspect, the natural ability of dress to connect us to past events, that is used here in this research, allowing the tactile or worn connection to link to another place and time through dress. Often that occurs literally, such as walking in Fanny Brawne's shoes through her home and garden, [Keats House in Hampstead](#), in the exhibition of my artwork, *The needle is always at hand exhibition*. (2012)

Daniel Miller's work addresses fashion as part of a wider focus on our relationship with objects. Miller explores the roles they play in our everyday lives, be it providing a link to the past, evoking emotion, or providing comfort and provoking thought. (Miller, 2011) Touch is a key aspect of Miller's, Jenss's, and Woodard's work, with handling or even wearing items being key to the remembering process. This aspect of dress is also often lost when an item enters a museum collection.

The work and practice here returns consistently to the themes of dress, identity, and memory. In this research, memory is framed as a living history narrative concerning memories of dress, which can be used as the narrative in costume-based artwork. Memory also informs the intention to create a powerful mnemonic experience for viewers of such artwork. This is because textiles are an everyday constant for us throughout our lives, as [Sarah Quinton](#) states in her book on contemporary textiles intimacy & popular culture:

Textiles are around us, all the time. We are intimately connected to cloth; a dress, a costume, a first sewing project, a bed sheet. Textile practices are typically labor intensive, fastidious, and repetitive; the intimate nature of such handwork creates a deep connection between the artwork and its maker-and ultimately the viewer. Textiles can be the medium through which I can get closer you. (Quinton, 2008, p.10)

Textile artists use their medium to connect with their audience. The very nature of dress makes it deeply personal. Leanne Prain states in her book *Strange Material*:

In their close proximity to the body clothes are in a prominent position to “fashion memory” on a very personal level, where clothing becomes part of a person’s material or sartorial biography. (Prain & Ow, 2014, p.8)

A dress is so much more than just a dress; it is a witness to our lives, and many people remember events and people through clothes. Ilene Beckerman’s illustrated book, *Love, Loss and What I Wore* (2005) tells her life stories through memories of the clothes she wore for key events. Through her method, short stories, and drawings of herself in these outfits, this work was widely relatable. That made it highly popular, going on to become a successful west-end show, with a changing cast of women who adapted the format to their memories. The audience in turn could relate their stories and

experiences to the actor's lives, life events and wardrobes, the audience in turn relating this to their own experiences.

Justine Picardie's book *My Mothers Wedding Dress: the Life and Afterlife of Clothes* (2008) is also a memoir through dress. She remembers the people she has known through the clothes they wore, and in some cases that she also wore, lamenting the loss of some items as she describes the history those items had witnessed. More recently, costume designer, Tracey Tyman published her autobiography *Wear and Tear* (2018) which is structured through clothes. The format is a popular one that appeals to readers for the same reason that people attend the show of Beckerman's book - they can apply it to their own lives (or their parents' lives) and wardrobes.

In his essay "Autobiography as a Proposed Approach to a Fashion Exhibition" in the book *Fashion and Museums* (2014) Jeffrey Horsley asks if a fashion autobiography approach might prove a viable method in the construction of a fashion exhibition. By this, he means a work in which an individual relates their life history through clothing-associated narratives. This is aside from the following two contexts in which this approach is currently used, in supporting exhibitions related to a social or historical narrative, and those focused on the life and style of a famous person. Both are now on the increase, as designer Olivier Theyskens states in an interview for *Forbes* on the growing popularity of fashion exhibitions:

I always hear the curators saying to me that 15 to 20 years ago designers wouldn't want to have their work shown in a museum

because they would consider it something that is done only when the designer is no more, it's historic, it's old, but today people see exhibitions as more modern, more dynamic, more exciting and more useful for their communication, for their marketing and for also telling the story of brands. (Pinnock, 2019)

Autobiographic materials are now commonly used to support exhibitions related to fashion such as photos, letters, diaries, scrapbooks, notes, and oral history, recorded or transcribed. After his autobiographical fashion exhibition, as part of his practice-led research, Horsley concludes:

That autobiographic narrative can tap directly into those personal experiences that dress historians indicate as invaluable in our understanding of fashion and provide a first-hand account of the relationship between garment and wearer. (Horsley, 2014, p.18)

Horsley's research shows the power that autobiographical narratives have to address larger social and cultural issues through a personal perspective. As he states:

It enriches the visitors' experience of garments on display through its power to relate first-hand narratives that articulate emotional response, sensory phenomena, and stories relating to provenance, wear and consumption. (Horsley, 2014, p.194)

Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell's book, *Worn On This Day*, takes a different approach to the same subject, with events for every day of the year witnessed by an item of dress, some surviving as physical objects and some only surviving in image or description. The stories are often told in just a few words with some of them being breathtakingly powerful, and memorable, as Campbell herself states:

These iconic clothes...instantly transport us back in time, with a you-are-there quality that elicits powerful emotions and memories...clothes take us to the moment when history was made, in an instantly relatable and tangible way that no mere headline can match. (Chrisman-Campbell, 2019, p.ix)

One is particularly drawn, for example, to the simple linen camisole worn by newlywed Margaret Gwyers on the RMS Lusitania on the 7th of May 1915, when it was attacked by a German U-boat:

As the Lusitania capsized, Margaret was thrown into the icy water and lost consciousness. She was sucked into a funnel where she came too. Almost immediately, there was a massive explosion as the ships boilers **exploded**, shooting Margaret out of the funnel. (Chrisman-Campbell, 2019, p.105)

Margaret survived and was pulled into a lifeboat, having had most of her clothes blown away and been covered in soot and oil. She kept her oil-stained, lace-trimmed camisole as a reminder of that day. Margaret and her



camisole were in the thick of history as it happened. Her camisole, stains and all, are as unremarkable as her story is remarkable.

However large or small our role in history, our clothes continue to witness and retain life events, as Shahidha Bari observes in her book *Dressed*:

When a sweater snags on a door handle or a button dangles from a dangerously loosened thread, our clothes pointedly remind us that they are there. They are always there, these wordless witnesses to our lives” (Bari, 2019, p.8)

## 1.2 Dress In Museums

Drawing on theory relating to fashion in museums, a landmark text in the field is Judith Clark’s and Amy De La Hay’s, *Exhibiting Fashion: Before and After 1971* (2014) which explored the evolution of the theory and practice of fashion exhibitions. This traced a turning point in the history of dress in museums, from dressing up box to exhibitable object, changing the way dress was seen in museums. It carved a path for dress as an object worthy of serious academic study, aided by its crowd-drawing potential. **As a result curators started to use dress as part of wider historical stories, rather than just to show what people wore.**

Both Clark and De La Hay have created innovative and challenging fashion exhibitions that question the nature of fashion and add to our understanding of its complex role in our lives. Their work has had an immense influence on the practice methods employed here in this research.

Clark's exhibitions have challenged traditional notions of fashion in museums. *Spectres: when Fashion Turns Back* (Clark, 2004) addressed the nature of fashion and the related role of the art and design museum. This exhibition worked on many levels, fashions framed in a range of structures reminiscent of her training in architecture. It makes the viewer question whether dress looks back or forward. Is it yet to be stitched together, or worn to pieces? Are they original or a reflection through a replica? The way in which this exhibition was designed continually made the audience question what they were seeing.

*The Concise Dictionary of Dress* (Clark & Philips, 2010) was a site-specific exhibition across a vast archive building, which questioned the relationship between fashion and language, text, and textile. Clark's work is about collaborations and the relationship between clothes and others. Language is a frequently revisited topic:

Clothes, another of our languages, another of our codes, another of the forms our histories take, keep changing, like words, but faster; and like words everybody uses them, and, whether they are conscious of it or not, everyone has their style, just as everyone has their vocabulary (Clark & Philips, 2010, p.19)

The crossover of text and textiles is a key aspect of this study. How do you make textile pieces that audiences cannot fail to read? Shahidha Bari, in *Dressed*, when discussing the question "Do clothes speak?" expresses both

sides of the debate, stating, “Dress in its fullest range, intimates something of the diversity and delicacy of the lived experience” (Bari, 2019, p.12)

Bari suggests that our clothes solicit language, and gives the example of how a colour can be brought to mind instantly as an item of dress that defines that colour for its wearer. Bari could be speaking of Clark and Philips's playful and systematic approach in *The Concise Dictionary of Dress*, when saying that at times dress seems to be waiting for articulation.

Clark’s exhibition, *The Vulgar, Fashion Redefined* (2016) focused on the word “vulgar” and its past and present use concerning fashion. It addressed the “inherently challenging but utterly compelling territory of taste”. This exhibition explored the application of the word in reaction to past and present fashions where the concept of “taste” is probed historically, personally and globally.

The book and exhibition on the Messel family’s dress collection, from 1865 to the present day, (De La Haye, Thompson & Taylor, 2006) wove together family history and fashion, using personal histories as a window on the past. This was based on a unique collection of dress worn by six generations of women from one creative British family. In part, these garments were studied as the holders of deeply personal memory. The project raised awareness of the cultural significance of worn clothing and developed existing theory within fashion, social history, and museology.

Despite being a relative newcomer to serious museum collections, fashion exhibitions are more popular than ever, and more exhibitions are focused on or include dress and are being staged globally:

Last month, the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) in London opened the largest exhibition ever staged in the UK on the house of Dior. Before even opening its doors, the exhibition had sold 37,000 tickets and just three weeks into its initial six-month run, all pre-bookable tickets were sold out. The museum has now extended it by seven weeks. (Pinnock, 2019)

Fashion exhibitions have advanced greatly from their origins. In 1985, **Elizabeth** Wilson described a trip to the V&A as follows:

There is something eerie about a museum of costume. A dusty silence holds still the old gowns in glass cabinets. In aquatic half light...the deserted gallery seems haunted. The living observer moves, with a sense of mounting panic through a world of the dead (Wilson, 1985, p.1)

Wilson goes on to explore the idea that clothes hold congealed memories of the daily lives of people from the past (Wilson, 1985), and more than ever people want to explore this for themselves.

### **1.3 Handling Historic Dress**

Fashion museums that offer the opportunity to book handling sessions are also experiencing an increase in demand. Larger, well-known collections are often booked up months in advance. In the last decade the rules for handling dress have become more strict and limiting. In the V&A's new study centre, only staff can touch or handle items. Visitors must ask for the item to be turned or moved, **which negates the 'handling' experience for the visitor**. Many

fabrics and fashions in collections were not designed to last as long as they have. Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim in *The Dress Detectives* state, “Historic dress can often be incredibly fragile, and even careful handling can cause additional irreparable damage.” (Mida & Kim, 2015, p.42) Karen DePauw in *The Care and Display of Historic Clothing (2017)* has a similar message concerning handling and mounting dress, “Historic costumes can be quite fragile. The fabric needs support at every possible point.” (DePauw, 2017,p.34) The museum has a dual role, on opposing sides. It has a duty to provide access, but equally a duty to safeguard collections for future generations. This is evidenced in the Museum Association’s Code of Ethics, which states, concerning the stewardship of collections:

Maintain and develop collections for current and future generations. Preserve collections as a tangible link between the past, present and future. Balance the museum’s role in safeguarding items for the benefit of future audiences with its obligation to optimize access for present audiences. (Museums Association, 2015)

The life stages of an item of dress life are defined by Elizabeth V. Spelman, in her book, *The Impulse to Restore in a Fragile World* (2002, P124) as follows:

1. Preservation
2. Restoration
3. Conservation/ consolidation

4. Reconstruction

5. Adaption/reuse

6. Reconstruction

7. Replication

Curators of museum dress collections are generally focused on the challenges of points one through to three and sometimes four. Dress collections are only getting more fragile. Items such as 1920s beaded dresses, were not designed to be long lasting, but to last just one fashion season **and** now need almost constant conservation and are often unable to support their own weight. To display them on mannequins could cause enormous damage, yet these garments were designed to be seen on the body and work best in motion. What happens when an item can no longer be safely studied, or displayed without causing damage? The Museums Association's Code of Ethics states:

Access should only be limited when this is essential to safeguard particular items for the future. In such cases museums must provide access to reproductions or facsimiles of original items and information about them. (Museums Association, 2015)

However, this is becoming more common in dress collections - as dresses age, interest in those periods of fashion increases. Even changes such as stopping visitors from handling items, while still allowing them to see them,

presents several challenges. This relates both to engaging new audiences, compromised when the power to touch something is removed, and providing access to those with sight loss, for example. This is frustrating even for the most experienced of scholars and could be one barrier too many for harder-to-reach audiences. Additionally, handling sessions are normally limited to a set time, during which a participant may need to look at more than one item.

That might be the only opportunity, one has, as a participant, to study these items and one may not be sure what information one needs. It is tempting to take out a camera (if you are allowed) and to use the time you have to take as many pictures as possible. However, to connect with an object requires time, to look, draw, look again, and to reflect. As Mida & Kim state, “It is relatively easy to look at a garment quickly...but much more difficult to stop and take the time to really look.” (Mida & Kim, 2017, p.152)

To do this well takes practice. The work and practice approach employed here **has** been designed to showcase the rewards that object-based study can yield, in a more instinctive way and through a replica that mirrors the original well enough to give a comparable experience. The first-hand study of the original object is at the core of the practice and reflected in the methods employed here.

Learning through objects is nothing new. The Victorian Museum<sup>6</sup> was always filled with trays of themed educational objects. The ‘object lesson’ developed by educationalist Johann Heninrich Pestalozzi towards the end of the

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<sup>6</sup> Here I refer to Wisbech and Fenland Museum, The first museum I worked in.

Eighteenth Century was established as a popular approach to teaching by the early Nineteenth Century. An 'object lesson' is a teaching method which uses an object as a starting point for a session. Pestalozzi's methodology of empirical sensory learning involved observation and handling of "real" objects and allowed students to have a direct experience of form, material, and process, within a complete and carefully curated tray setting. Anthropologist, Nicholas Thomas stated that, "Objects are not what they were made to be, but what they have become." (Thomas, 1991, p.91)

Touch was at the centre of this approach with all lessons and exercises including drawing, writing, adding, subtracting, multiplying, dividing, and reading, retaining from handling the objects. Handling objects still form the base of the traditional museum education programmes and gallery-based activities, which include "dress-up" costumes.

Museums are being expected to do more with less and are working harder than ever at engaging and retaining visitors' attention, and focusing more on what we can do to engage hard-to-reach groups. Visitors now expect museums to be lively and fun, with objects brought to life for them. Quinton, states "The best museums are living, breathing places where exhibitions and programmes bring important things to life." (Quinton, 2007, p.9) The expectation now is that the museum experience will be continually reviewed, developed, and improved. Quinton further explains that, "however good museums may be today, they must go on making improvements" (2007, p.9) In line with this, there is a move towards developing partnerships between artists and museums to support access to and interpretation of collections,



and creating a toolkit on collaborations so that working with artists can be as Claire Moloney, who created the working with Artists Toolkit for Museums and Galleries month in 2008, states:

A valuable way to enrich historical collections that regular audiences and museum staff may have begun to take for granted. An artist brings a fresh perspective and draws out many surprising connections between collections, the building in which they are housed, local traditions and customs. Through their research and investigation. Artists can excavate previously hidden narratives and histories. (Moloney, 2019, p.7)

There has also proved to be a strong link between both engaging in arts activities and participants' wellbeing. In one Government survey, (Artshealthandwellbeing.org.uk, 2017) eighty-two percent of people said they enjoyed greater wellbeing after taking part in arts activities:

The importance of having autonomy and independence to make meaning of objects is further underlined by wellbeing research which suggests that good functioning includes having some control over ones life. (Artshealthandwellbeing.org.uk, 2017)

A student from a handling project at Newark Museums and Art gallery summed up the feeling that many visitors echo when given the opportunity to handle museum objects:

It's like your touching part of the past. You think maybe an Egyptian touched that at some point. (Dodd & Jones, 2014,

p.26)

The experience can light a touchpaper in the visitor's brain, providing a powerful multi-sensory mnemonic experience. Linda Thomson & Helen Chatterjee's study (2009) found that object handling triggered two main responses - people talked about themselves and their ideas, or they wanted to learn about the objects. This interaction helped to promote positive feelings of wellbeing in most people.

My first experience predated any role in a museum. It was a handling session and occurred at The Museum of London dress store, as a part of a Textile Society study day that enabled the handling of an Elizabethan stomacher, a highly decorative triangular panel that covers the front of a women bodice. Its age alone was enough to make this moment memorable.

A recent report on wellbeing in museums stated that health and wellbeing are increasingly understood as being tied in with, and not separate from learning, creativity, and connectedness (Chatterjee, 2018). Keeping both bodies and minds engaged through lifelong learning is one route to positive wellbeing:

Collections are at the core of museums' work on health and wellbeing. They are what give museums their unique role and contribution to health and wellbeing (Dodd & Jones, 2014, p.26)

A meaningful study of museum objects was at the core of Barbara Burman and Ariene Fennetaux's book, *The Pocket, A Hidden History of Women's Lives, 1660-1900*. (2019). Which was an object-centred study of nearly 390 extant pockets in museum collections. These surviving garments demonstrate

how “individual women retained choice and control over their everyday habits and practices” and, more broadly, “a social and cultural history of women’s lives in the long eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain through the examination of this small object.” (Fennetaux, 2019, p.10)

This book found “new and arresting ways of looking at women’s lives in the past”, with the examples reflecting on the experiences of women from all levels of society, showing both contrasts and commonalities. In addition, it often reflects experiences that women today can connect with such well-worn and loved garments being objects of sentimental value. For example, Margaret Deas embroidered her pocket with the motto “forgot me not” in prison in Glasgow in 1851, using human hair. (Fennetaux, 2019, p. 152)

#### **1.4 Studying, Making and Remaking**

**As a prisoner**, Margaret Deas worked with what she had, as many sewers before and since have done. Sewing can encourage a peaceful time for creativity and reflection without fear of getting it wrong. As Prain & Ow (2014) point out, “there is no wrong way to tell a story on cloth. The tactile, even comforting, nature of textiles can conjure memories and inspire people to share them” (p.16).

Sewing does not require much in the way of skill or tools for the work to begin. As a result, in this way, sewing is a great equalizer. As Clare Hunter in *Threads of Life: A History of the World through the Eye of a Needle* (2019) states, a history of the world through the eye of a needle states that it is

“accessible, cheap, requires limited space and basic tools” (Hunter, 2019, p.30)

The slow sewing movement, for example, is a mindful needlework process that disregards time and focuses on the joy of the process of creating, rather than on achieving the final result as swiftly as possible. Carl Honore’s described it in his book, *In Praise of Slow*:

The slow movement is not about doing everything at a snails pace. Nor is it a Luddite attempt to drag the whole plant back to some pre-industrial utopia... The slow philosophy can be summed up in a single word: balance...seek to live at what musicians call the *tempo giusto* – the right speed. (Honore, 2004, p.10)

In her *Slow Stitch: Mindful and Contemplative Textile Art*, Claire Wellesley-Smith discusses the positive impact the connection to materials and the time for reflection has on adults experiencing mental health distress. She sees the process as enriching because:

When you understand how things are made, and why, you have a greater connection with them. The process of making by hand means the maker has a relationship with the object being made because he or she physically engages with it. (Wellesley-Smith, 2015, p.5)

Slow looking is a movement in itself, much of which focuses on applying the slow technique in museums and galleries where there is a lot to look at in even the simplest item of dress. Mida & Kim (2015) observe that:

Dress artifacts are partially challenging since minute details can easily be missed, especially if there are time constraints. Making a mental shift to slow down, work methodically and carefully, and taking the time to make close observations are the keys for success. (Mida & Kim, 2015, p.29)

Mida & Kim, also refer to “the slow approach to seeing” and suggest reflection is a key stage in looking to explore your personal reactions to a garment.

“Why examine this garment, comparing bodies with the wearer, how would it feel on, does the style appeal to you? Doing this could help you acknowledge your personal reaction to ensure you can set it aside and work in an unbiased way when needed.” (Mida & Kim, 2015, p.30)

They also suggest that studying the supporting materials is an important stage. This includes items such as provenance records, photographs, documents, information, labels, and possibly packaging. In this study, these aspects are incorporated ~~some of these~~ into the actual garment in order to develop a powerful mnemonic sensory experience into the work. Sight and sound are perhaps the ways of learning we rely on the most, as Howes (2014) points out:

Visual and auditory senses depend upon relations to external objects and their properties; sound and smells are public; tastes

are private, yet external to the skin and membranes in that they require stimulation; feelings of hot or cold or warmth are partly internal and partly dependent on contact with external forms.

(Howes, 2014, p.60)

Prain & Ow refer to the sensual nature of handling an original item of cloth as “non-verbal experiences”. Naturally, as clothes do not speak, the only sound would come when handling an item:

Cloth is sensual, offering a non-verbal experience that invokes a range of senses, including sight, sound, smell and touch. By being aware of the full range of possible sensory reactions that may be taking place on a subconscious level, the dress detective acknowledges the implicit judgments in play during the course of examining an artefact.” (Prain & Ow, 2014, p.62)

Here, however, technology is used to make the research pieces “speak” as another key sense in reaction to dress. Sound has been employed in costumed performance that preceded this present work, but not spoken words. The earlier emphasis was on the sound a dress makes in movement, the rustle of silks, the sound of leather soles, and of a silk dress moving along long wooden floored corridors. This is mostly lost when an item becomes part of a museum collection. Just as meanings are shared, so are sensory experiences (Howes, 2014, p.4). Familiar smells have also been used to create an emotional impact in costumed museum performances, such as recreating the smell of hospitals with disinfectant.

The supervisor for this thesis described the practice as “forensic costume” a term that I found helpful in describing the working process that is informed by a meticulous study of and research into originals, to draw out actual narratives. This scientific approach considers the physical evidence of the body on dress and its interpretation. This is essential in this study, with the impact of the artistic work more measurable if the initial approach is objective, deductive, and methodical.

Hilary Davidson opens her article on, *The Embodied Turn: Making and Remaking Dress* with:

I contend that we are now experiencing the “embodied turn”: a development that recognizes the process of doing, making and remaking, and reconstructing as a fruitful methodology with quantifiable, academically valid results. (Davidson, 2019, p.1)

Davidson’s approach of making before applying in studying the history of dress has been adopted here. This may not be the standard route but remaking has always had a role in the museum, as Davidson confirms, stating that, “Dress curators have always added to or substituted fragile or missing objects with replicas for display.” (2019, p.26).

In doing so, they complete the picture for museum audiences. It is not just centuries-old items being replicated and used to offer a more holistic experience. The Rolling Stones *Exhibitionism* exhibition at The Saatchi Gallery in 2016, in addition to making replicas of lost stage costumes, also

recreated, from surviving photographs, a full-scale version of the first apartment the band shared that visitors could walk through.

The pioneer of remaking as an academic practice is Janet Arnold, who studied original items of dress and published her drawings and patterns alongside key details of cut and construction. One of Arnold's publications, *The Handbook of Costume* (1973) was an early field guide to studying dress, predating the *Dress Detective* by over forty years and is still relevant and used today. It includes a detailed guide to the main primary and secondary sources available for studying dress groups, starting with surviving garments. Hilary Davidson describes two main approaches to clothing reconstruction.

The work of Arnold started, has been continued by Norah Waugh, and more recently Jenny Tiramani, a costume and stage designer who has completed and extended Arnold's unfinished *Patterns of Fashion* series.

The second context Davidson outlines is focused on garments that no longer exist and for which the evidence is found in secondary works: paintings, drawings patterns, and descriptions. This covers work focusing on earlier periods such as the work of *The Tudor Tailor*<sup>7</sup> that accesses several publications covering clothes made across the full range of Tudor life. The BBC's series *A Stitch in Time* (2018) remade outfits from well-known paintings of key figures in history covering art, fashion, and biography. The creators showing the processes used to recreate these garments, concluding with and having the presenter wearing the finished outfit and describing what it was like

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<sup>7</sup> A team of researchers and makers, a shop and a range of books, see: <https://www.tudortailor.com/>



to wear. One of the additional benefits of remaking dress is that it can be worn, so audiences can handle them, but also try on items, experiencing what it was they would have been like to live in.

The groups who perhaps most engage with both approaches and regularly wear what they make are re-enactors. Although it does overlap with much of what has already been discussed, re-enactment relates to the practice employed here through its base in research and making. The aim of re-enactors is to bring the past to life. In fact, for many of them, the past isn't the past, so much as a constant remaking in the present. Rebecca Schneider in *Performing Remains, Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* quotes one reenactor saying that "The Civil War isn't over" because they are constantly engaging with the past, interacting with "remains" original or replica. (Schneider, 2011, p.33) These modern bodies are interacting with trace acts of history by wearing the clothes, using the tools, and giving a voice to the past in the now present. In developing the objects, they invest in retrievable time and can play out these moments from history over and over again.

Similarly, the practice ~~and research~~ here also aims to bring the past to life but is not aiming at re-enactment, rather at more of a relaxed performance where viewers take on the dual roles of protagonist and audience. The overlap happens in the archives, wherein lies the source of this "embodied documentation" a term coined by conceptual and performance artist, Maria Abramovic which is used to define performance recreations based on documentation.

In her book *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Culture Memory in the Americas* (2003), Diana Taylor refers to museums as theatres of colonialism, whose cultural practice turns a place into space:

Museums have long taken the cultural Other out of context and isolated it, reduced the live to a dead object behind glass.

Museums enact the knower-known relationship by separating the transient visitor from the fixed object of display. Like discovers, the visitors come and go, they see, they know, they only the deracinated, adorned and empty “object” stay in place (Taylor, 2003, p. 66)

This work cannot be undone. Stories cannot be retrieved once those who held them have been lost.<sup>8</sup> However, museums today strive to do better, to have better relationships with the community they represent, and to give a more honest representation of how their objects came to be, often a long way from where they started.

### **1.5 Place and Placement**

For an artist working with a museum or heritage site, place and placement are both the source material and the final display setting. The site and the artist’s relationship with and access to it are central to any project’s success.

In 2014, an article in the American newspaper *The Boston Globe* captured a heated debate among museum professionals and focused on “the sleepest

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<sup>8</sup> Which reinforces the need to record them alongside the relevant objects in museum collections.

corner of the museum world” (Vagnone, Ryan & Cothren, 2015, p.11), namely the Historic House Museum. It concerned the rising number of historic houses and a shrinking audience for the traditional historic house experience in the USA. The conversation that followed and the suggestions for what needed to be done to improve the experience and attract new visitors relates directly to this present research. The call to action in New York City’s Historic House Trust’s Annual Report of 2012 poses the following challenge to its staff:

Do not assume that you can’t reach a new audience. Do not assume that you have to keep people at bay when they are on your site. Do not assume that the story of our house ended a hundred years ago. Create. Cooperate. Communicate.

(Vagnone, Ryan & Cothren, 2015, p.37)

If visitors are engaged emotionally with personal comparisons through those domestic tasks, they are more likely to leave with a deeper understanding which is likely to be more memorable than a simple instructive experience. As Vagone, Ryan and Cothren comment:

We seldom acknowledge the memories they (visitors) carry like baggage, or attempt to draw parallels between their lives and earlier inhabitants of our HHT’s (**Historical House Trust**). Yet our guests can only have their frame of reference, and they cannot disassociate from it or shed it at the door. (Vagnone, Ryan & Cothren, 2015, p.102)

One of the ways in which Vagone, Ryan and Cothren suggest that this can be achieved is by allowing people to touch and engage with items and objects, as the original occupants would have done:

Obviously, guests cannot be allowed to manhandle a priceless object, but usable artefacts could be placed in each room that could be sat on, opened, and engaged. (Vagnone, Ryan & Cothren, 2015, p.115)

More important than the object itself is the chance to interact with something within a museum setting. As Wood and Latham (2014) comment, “The more that a person actively connects to and thinks about his or her encounter with an object, the more he or she becomes aware of the experience.” (p.27) The research here and the practice that informs it, for example, has developed from establishing strong bonds with specific sites with whom I have had professional relationships; discussions with staff and visitors, time spent in the venue, access to the collections, and collaborations with other practitioners working in the same space.

## **1.6 High-Tech Dress and Dress Online**

It would be remiss to finish this chapter, so focused on first-hand tactile experience, without addressing the fact it has been written during a pandemic in which museums have been frequently closed as part of a UK countrywide lockdown. Despite the challenges of limited funds due to loss of income and with many staff on furlough or facing redundancy, museums have continued to look for ways to reach audiences in their own homes online. This study has

faced the same challenge, as a result, this chapter concludes by looking at online substitute for a tactile textile experiences and new technology that has informed and directed my work safely during numerous lockdowns.

A vast amount of dress collections are now online, displayed through photos and basic details about construction and date. This information is usually kept at a simple level so that an in-person visit is still required for in-depth studies. The use of apps, can also offer more information alongside other interactive options. The Israel Museum, for example, has a fashion app which is bringing century-old clothing back to life and allows users to virtually try on items featured in the gallery (2018). Virtual Reality (VR) is becoming more common and can allow visitors to tour museums and exhibits or create and tour their own museum featuring their favourite works. Augmented Reality (AR), “the ability to see (or hear) contextually relevant information superimposed on your view of the world” (Mannion, 2010) is also being more frequently used in museums. Experiments at the British Museum have used it for outdoor guides and exploration, interpretive mediation, new media art and sculpture and virtual exhibitions.

Fashion exhibitions are becoming ever more high tech. Charles James was best known for his formal gowns and a highly structured, architectural aesthetic, breath-taking to see but complex to understand from a construction perspective. **It is too early to say if this will continue post-pandemic.**

The MET’s 2014 exhibition had fifteen theatrically lit, classic James gowns from the late 1940s and early 1950s, each of which was accompanied by

analytical animations, text, x-rays, and vintage images to tell the story of each gown's intricate construction and history. The animations are now accessible on the website<sup>9</sup> and break down the construction of each dress. The ability to access this from home, making it more accessible, at any time and long after the exhibition itself has finished not only attracts viewers from around the world, but also allows audiences with disabilities to access its content when they might otherwise be unable to attend.

In 2018, *The Fashion for Good* experience in Amsterdam was pitched as an interactive museum using the latest tech through the use of RFID wristbands. RFID Wristbands use radio-frequency identification technology, a tiny chip that holds unique ticket information or information about the wearer, and is worn on the wrist much like other high-tech fitness wearables. Wearable hightech fashion naturally, extends beyond the wrist. The Boston Museum of Fine Arts *#techstyle* exhibition in 2016, showcased a wide range of high-tech fashion innovations including 3D printed ready to wear dresses, sound reactive garments, and dresses that move, not with the motion of the body but as if they have a mind of their own, giving the dress a sense of the presence it had when worn. This offers wearers more ways to express themselves, but perhaps changes the way tomorrow's actions will reflect the wearer, for example this could change the patterns of wear historical garments, show linked to how the wearer moved and what they did while wearing them. Fashion designer Ying Geos, whose high-tech fashion work includes

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2014/charles-james-beyondfashion/animations>

garments embed with a fingerprint recognition system, thinks fashion and Technology are natural bedfellows:

I often say fashion is a sort of “encounter with time.” The future belongs to those who use the technologies of their time. But both technology and fashion embody the most fragile and ephemeral aspects of our culture, insofar as that what is cutting-edge today will be old tomorrow (Geos, 2017)

Another artist whose work is defined by new technology is Anna Dumirțiu. Dumirțiu’s pieces often start as historical objects and textiles, which she alters. Her work explores making through medical focused, scientific processes. In 2014 her work explored the history of tuberculosis in the exhibition *The Romantic Disease* in which she made multiple miniature lungs, made from wool and mixed with household dust and dead mycobacterium tuberculosis. Another piece started as a simple dress, which she dyed with natural historic treatments/dyes. Both of these unimposing pieces come to life when the process and its link to tuberculosis are highlighted.

A more recent work *The Hypersymbiont Dress (2017)* uses genome sequencing and synthetic biology technologies’ which result in a film projection, onto a dress, showing the artist’s blood fighting bovine TB. In both works featuring dress, little is known about **their** history or how and why it was chosen for each piece. The overlap between fashion and tuberculosis is mentioned, but not explored with deeper analysis. The science led process and its link the history of medicine are where the audience’s focus is drawn.

Much of what is being showcased in museums now has been developed behind the scenes in the museum stores. Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, a fashion historian based in Los Angeles, reflects on how technology has changed her role:

Thanks to modern technology and the efforts of specialist textile scientists, curators can now appreciate historical garments in ways their original beholders and wearers could not. Polarizing microscopes and high-resolution digital images reveal textures, weaves, and threads invisible to the naked eye. Cutting-edge conservation treatments reinflate sleeves crushed by centuries of careless storage or restore shattered silk linings. X-rays reveal the complex interior boning of a Balenciaga evening gown, and military-grade chemical inhibitors remove aluminum corrosion on Neil Armstrong's space suit. (Chrisman-Campbell, 2017)

However, when speaking about what tech cannot capture, - the magic of working in the stores, she says:

But no amount of scientific analysis can capture the feel, sound, and smell of historic clothing—and that's where costume curators and conservators (who are responsible for the technical examination and treatment of textiles) have a privileged perspective. We get to touch it. We enjoy intimate proximity with other people's clothes, laid out on lab tables under lights and



magnifying glasses like surgical patients, not in dimly illuminated public galleries where the objects are kept out of reach behind glass or velvet ropes. We find the hidden pockets; the discreet padding; the lingering whiff of perfume or tobacco. By the time they go on public display, we know them as well as the clothes on our own backs. (Chrisman-Campell, 2017)

It is the essence of this experience that is being recreated and shared herein this thesis research. Without audiences physically present, then this research has produced a key contribution to knowledge in the field.

The work of this chapter is explained in appendix II through case studies of artistic practice, which are developed into guidelines for artists working in similar contexts.

## Chapter Two

### Methodology

This chapter outlines the research and analytical methods used in the study, linking the research questions, the rationale and related theory, while pointing out any limitations and benefits that need to be considered. This is then followed by the proposal for the final artwork and outcomes, and plans for sharing, testing, and evaluation.

#### 3.1 Practice-based Research

The first stage of my practical work involved researching and selecting an item of dress to be studied, then conducting that study through a final artwork based on this enquiry. These stages follow a practice-based research approach, to incorporate the best use of creative practice methods and output.

~~Practitioners in the field of dress are generally led,~~ I have always found the tactile experience of making immersive. Touch is how we first come to know the world, as Barrett and Bolt (2007) state: “We come to know the world theoretically only after we have come to understand it through handling” (Barrett & Bolt, 2007, p.30)

For artists, this continues to be central to who they are, how they work, and how they understand the world:

Practical knowledge involves a reflective knowing that imbricates and follows on from handling (Barrett & Bolt, 2007, p.34)

Makers understand this process as a specific type of knowledge where “knowing” arises from handling materials in practice. Carter (2004) called this “material thinking”, meaning that it was a way of considering what takes place during the process of making. It involves seeing materials not just as passive objects but as possessing intelligence that is ignited when handled, reacting with and inspiring the artists own thoughts, thus linking the full sensory circle, joining hand, eye, and mind. Smith and Dean state that, “The unique combination of creative practice and research can sometimes result in distinctive methodological approaches, as well as exhilarating findings” (Smith & Dean, 2009 p.12). Just as creative practice can benefit academic research, traditional academic research can have a positive impact on creative practice. Smith and Dean (2009) describe this practice-led research and research-led process as being “interwoven in an iterative cycle web” (p.12)

Similarly, Haseman (2006) argued that artwork can embody research findings that are expressed symbolically, rather than through figures or words. He goes on to say; “Performative researchers progress their studies by employing variations of; reflective practices, participants observation... biographical/ autobiographical/ narrative enquiry” (Haseman, 2006, p.104).

For Haseman, both final artwork and surrounding practice are research. In that context the processes listed above (and many more) are all a key part of my practice and the findings or knowledge it produces. Smith & Dean (2009) remind us of the central postmodernist view, that knowledge itself is often: “unstable, ambiguous and multi-dimensional, can be emotionally or affectively charged, and cannot necessarily be conveyed with the precision of mathematical proof” (Smith & Dean, 2009, p.7). Given this school of thought, it follows that research, rather than being considered as one-monolith chunk, is better regarded as a fluid activity that can occur in several ways, with the results shared through a range of methods. This mirrors the research and analysis approach very much based on and inspired by research as knowledge and practice as a way of sharing this materially through interaction with the work. This project has arrived **at** this point because of how **my** practice ~~of this researcher’s has~~ developed **her approach** as an artist / practitioner. Each project brings a new leap of understanding, often unexpected but always welcome and now planned, as Barrett & Bolt state: “We see knowledge through its reflection on those shocking realisations that occur in practice” (Barrett & Bolt, 2007, p.42).

### **3.2 Reflective Practice**

In creative disciplines, reflective practice is an integral and progressive approach to learning. Throughout this study reflective journals have been kept as an account of work in progress and to reflect on each stage of the project.

Early journals focused on study trips to museums and archives and the significance of findings within collections. While remaking the **Mary** Graham dress, this approach was used to establish how the original was made, recording findings, mistakes and corrections.

Reflective practice generates new knowledge that is specific to an individual, so keeping **these** journals allows for timely analyses and changes in practice, **in addition to being an established approach in creative methodology**. This is critical in striving for the attainment of deep knowledge about the original on which the work was based on, the direction to be taken by the artwork and maintaining an on-going awareness of the project within wider scope of the related fields of work. Examples of reflective journals are shown in appendices IX(A), IX(B) and IX(C).

### **3.3 Relaxed Embodied Performance**

The first stage of this practice-based research involved remaking a version of the original dress, like for like, to establish the order and techniques applied to the original. Every stage of the process needed to be recorded. That formed the base on which to make the final artwork. Importantly, developing this process was as much about the body that once inhabited the garment as it is about the garment itself. Approaching this making and remaking as academic practice, and viewing the remake as a form of relaxed embodied performance, enabled an experience of the physicality of what it would have been like to make that piece in its original form. In addition, there was the experience of

what the dress would have been like to wear. In experiencing those sensations, the researcher is better placed to approach an understanding of how other participants might react.

A relaxed performance is a term more commonly used in a theatrical context, involving something being adapted to suit audiences who might require a more relaxed (less loud, less busy, less bright.) environment. Embodied practice, on the other hand, uses the distinctive sensations of the body to help develop physical awareness, find balance, feel connected, and feel at one with who we are, becoming empowered by it all. In this study, that approach is used to relate to the style of dress participants are likely to have worn, by reflecting on how it would feel to wear.

The term “relaxed embodied performance”, has emerged from the fusion of these ideas; defined as follows;

- The audience chooses the level of interaction they want, with no minimum or maximum limits
- Some aspects of the dress will only reveal themselves if the audience gets closer and touches the item
- If participants are unable or unwilling to try it, every effort will be made to give an impression of what it would have been like to wear and to encourage them to think through their own bodies, comparing it to their own clothing. **A form of imagined participatory performance.**

- The context will support the story of the garment - this is often site-specific, with garments frequently requiring resetting after each interaction
- The narrative is always about more than just the item itself – it also links to maker and/or wearer and place., ~~and time whenever research allows~~

While I ~~the researcher~~ cannot share my own tacit experience and private knowing of the original dress, because by nature it is individualised and historic. It is possible to design an object, which rewards touch. The intention was to create the right space in which audiences may find their own tacit knowledge and private knowing. It did not need to be the same as mine; it simply needs to be pleasurable and ideally educational.

### 3.4 Embodied Practice and Dress

Chapter One delineated the key works within the fields that this research project covers and how this relates to the practice. That included the history of and current thoughts on the benefit of the first-hand study of historic costumes in museums, and examples of how handling dress can be a memorable experience. ~~The of~~ Chapter One and the related case studies in Appendix II, focused on the relevant practice, and put these processes alongside relevant theory. These case studies also cover what handling multisensory costume-based artwork offered audiences, and how this research sits alongside permanent accessioned collections. From this, a list was developed to form the base of a best practice framework against which to test the research questions and to identify key aspects to be taken forward in developing best artistic practice.

In 2019 Hilary Davidson wrote *The Embodied Turn*, a paper highlighting the recent rise of making and remaking dress as an academic practice. Two examples of this have informed the approach taken here.

The first is Davidson's work on recreating the British regency-period author of *Jane Austen's Silk Pelisse*. This is a project I was asked to consider when commissioned by Whitchurch Silk Mill who made the fabric for Austen's pelisse, in partnership with the Burberry archives, to recreate a WW1 greatcoat lined with commemorative silk. This was based on the original silk coat linings of those coats, and created for the centenary of World War One. Davidson's work remaking Austen's pelisse has many layers of narrative. Austen is a well-known and well-loved figure for whom very few confirmed portraits let alone garments survive. However, her surviving letters and novels are full of fashion and dress-based details. As Davidson says: "It is an unexceptional garment with an exceptional province" (2015, p.1).

Davidson's work is meticulous, every detail covered, all angles explored, from the physical qualities of the garment itself to its historical context. The resulting paper covers each detail of the process, showing the many steps earlier scholars such as Arnold<sup>10</sup> would have taken in their research but did not share in their final published works. It provides a complete stage-by-stage template for an in-depth, practice-based study of one simple garment.

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<sup>10</sup> Janet Arnold was a dress historian, teacher, textile conservator, costume designer and author. See bibliography for selected publications.



The second study is also based on another surviving garment worn by a female literary great. Eleanor Houghton's study *Unravelling the Mystery: Charlotte Bronte's 1850 'Thackeray dress'*, is also an in-depth study of one dress, but pivots around just one moment, the 12th of June 1850 when Charlotte was invited to dinner at the home of novelist William Makepeace Thackeray. Houghton's study focuses on trying to establish, by way of written accounts and studying the dress itself, if this dress was the one Charlotte wore to that dinner. It is interesting how much a dress of that period can tell us about when it would have been worn and for what purpose. These two works, together alongside Kim and Mida's (2015) *The Dress Detectives*, defined my route of enquiry for potential garments involved in my study.

Finding items with such a rich provenance is rare, so I prepared to make up to three items with fewer provenances if one more outstanding item could not be found.

### **3.5 Testing and Teaching**

Once the final artwork was completed it was tested it with audiences, adopting a people-centred, object-based learning approach to facilitate deep learning. It was originally intended to test the findings in an informal educational museum setting where the audience could handle the finished pieces alongside other relevant physical artefacts, and so have a measure of control over how they interacted with the works by picking them up, turning them over or even trying them on. However as previously stated this had to be adapted due to the

impact of COVID 19 and its restrictions on audiences making physical visits to museums and heritage sites.

The success of this study hinged on appropriate structuring of the experience for the audience **by** introducing new information to the audience within a museum's education setting, This may be referred to as 'learning', specifically life-long learning, as it is not part of a formal qualification or course and is open to any age group from thirteen years up.

~~The researcher is a fully qualified teacher with a PGCE in HE/ FE and over two decades of experience working with learners of all ages and abilities within schools, colleges, and university settings as well as in museums. That included previously management of the family learning, adult informal learning (life-long learning), and neighbour learning in deprived communities in Peterborough. Experience also involved managing a wide range of education museum projects, both heritage and arts funded. An MA project was developed into a successful Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) application for a project based on local memories of dress. Several educational projects won awards and working life experience including attendance and presentation at conferences and Continued Professional Development CPD workshops.~~

The definition of 'learning' employed here is as outlined by The Arts Council England's (ACE) "Inspiring Learning for All" framework, which is a broad and

inclusive definition of learning, adapted from the Campaign for Learning<sup>11</sup> and reflective of the broad and inclusive group of learners targeted [here](#). It is defined as:

- Learning is a process of active engagement with experience
- It is what people do when they want to make sense of the world
- It may involve the development or deepening of skills, knowledge, understanding, values, ideas and feelings
- Effective learning leads to change, development and the desire to learn more (ACE, 2008)

Learning outcomes are broadly defined as:

- Knowledge and understanding
- Skills
- Attitudes and values
- Enjoyment, inspiration and creativity
- Action, behaviour and progression (ACE, 2008)

The focus here, on testing, mirrors the current themes within museum education.<sup>12</sup> That is participatory practice, object-based and people-focused

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<sup>11</sup> See: <https://www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk/our-approach>

<sup>12</sup> As defined by the Arts Council England and outlined above and The Museums Association via The Museums Association's Power to the People self-assessment framework

learning. The aim is to provide a memorable, by which we mean life-enhancing, learning experience. That work could touch on many of these outcomes:

- Knowledge and understanding – audiences will be introduced to new facts, making links between different aspects of the garment's story, (wearer's life, garment's story, historical context) which will hopefully deepen their understanding
- Develop skills - such as garment construction skills
- Attitude and values - the approach taken will stir feelings, help participants see things from a different perspective, and potentially elicit empathy
- Enjoyment, inspiration, and creativity - the experience should be enjoyable, but also surprising and inspired
- The work may not have a strong impact on participants' actions, behaviour and progression - but this always depends on several factors, in this case, the combination of the garment, the context, and the individual participant

To create a life-enhancing learning experience, it must be engaging, memorable, and inspiring. It should stay with participants long after they have left the context of the workshop setting and be a memory that **stimulates and can be reflecting upon**. Part of this involves the strength of the narratives the objects themselves have to share. Another aspect that supports this is

participation, making the experience people-centred and participant-led. The Museums

Association's Power to the People self-assessment framework for participatory practice states that participation in museums can have a positive effect on the health and wellbeing of all involved (Museums Association, 2018).

To evaluate that learning experience I developed a questionnaire collected a small amount of quantitative data, such as age and educational level, and then rated the experience on a simple numerical scale from excellent to very poor. A larger number of qualitative questions were included such as how the experience could be improved and why participants rated the experience as they did. This was based on my experience of testing ~~how the researcher has tested~~ past work and ~~has been based on~~ the success of those methods.

Permission forms ~~are~~ were completed before workshops ~~and at this stage~~ participants ~~are~~ were also briefed on the size of the questionnaire and the type of information it was seeking. The questionnaire was completed straight after the experience. Participants were made aware they could have additional support to complete the questionnaire if needed, and a suitable amount of time was allowed within the total given session time for participants to complete the questionnaire.

### 3.6 COVID 19

During the making and final planning stages of this study, the UK went into its first lockdown in response to COVID 19. As a result it became clear that the work could not be tested in the format as originally planned ~~to~~, namely in small groups within a museum or heritage setting. Redesigning the process to share and test the work also required reconsideration of the nature of the work itself, based on how it would be disseminated ~~in the new formats~~: in-person at home, guided tours by video call, and a short film of the experience.

These formats were chosen as the most appropriate course of action rather than being based on ~~my~~ existing skillset or experience. However, as the pandemic has, clearly changed the museum experience of the future, this also has presented new opportunities to be at the forefront of generating new ways of doing things and creating new contributions to knowledge.

The resulting sample size was small, limited by a number of COVID related factors. There were sixty participants across the three different experiences in total. The demographics of the group were limited by ~~lockdown restrictions. distance from the where the art piece was based in between testing for~~ ~~The in-person testing had to take place within a two-mile radius of the dress location~~. The aim was to test the impact of the dress with both individuals and in formal education groups. The demographics of the small test group showed that predominantly older, white, well-educated women were reached. Although they were not necessarily considered to be “hard-to-reach”, during lockdown, many participants were keen to take part as they were shielding

and looking for ways to engage with the outside world without risking their health. The data findings are shown in appendices IX(A), IX(B) and IX(C).

### 3.7 The Questionnaire

Questionnaires or surveys are a standard part of museum practice as the focus has changed from collection and display to tailoring their provision to suit particular audiences. Visitor surveys are now a key part of establishing visitors needs. In their paper on the expectations of museums visitors, Sheng and Chen (2015) state that, “Visitors studies use a systematic approach inducing knowledge related to on-site and potential visitors, which is used to assist museums with planning” (p.1).

In addition, ~~simple to establishing~~ some simple quantitative data was also gathered to allow for a wider perspective on the audience’s experience. In her book, *The Handbook of Arts-based Research*, Leavy (2017) states that: “qualitative methodologies have become increasingly experimental in the last decade, a process that’s has facilitated multiple ways of expressing knowledge construction” (p.168)

Leavy’s approach to interviewing protocol mirrors that adopted here, including use of a digital recorder and a hand written survey. Both methods were used when studying original garments and when, interviewing participants.<sup>13</sup> The following participants journey was established for this study:

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<sup>13</sup> When circumstances allowed for this

- Call for participants goes out
- Participants respond
- Participant is contacted with time and date for appointment, with a description of process and permission form and the questionnaire
- Participant returns permission form and researcher follows up on any additional support needs
- Interview takes place (which could be the dress arriving at the participants house, the video call taking place or the participant watching the film)
- After the video calls, the researcher records their reflections, **in text**
- The participant returns the questionnaire within a week of participation
- The researcher contacts the participant to thank them for taking part and to answer/follow up any queries relating the experience or questionnaire

In developing the questionnaire the aim was to create **a** something that would allow participants to reflect on their experience of the artwork and feed back to **me** in a way that gave an understanding about the full encounter. This was particularly important owing to the fact that **I** was not able to be physically present during the participant encounters;

Qualitative research is to a large degree an art. The question of its validity does not depend on replicable outcomes... The result of the analysis is, in fact a representation in the same sense that an artist can, with a few stroke of a pen, create an image of a



face that we would all recognise if we saw the original in a crowd. (Tesch, 1990, p.304)

The questionnaire aimed to have a balance of questions, to give a fair impression of the participants background, previous experience and interests in addition to their thoughts on the final artwork experience. This was done by using a mix of open-ended questions to record their honest views with space for additional information. Closed-ended questions allowed categorisation of some responses and the identification of patterns in the data. Scale questions also ~~te~~ allowed participants to express their attitudes while still collecting measureable responses.

The questionnaire (as shown in Appendix III), was developed with feedback from research supervisors and based on methods which had been successful in past projects. This was weighed against the desired research objectives and the participants anticipated willingness to complete questions. The balance between gathering enough data but not asking too many questions, clarifying meaning in the wording of questions, and determining what numerical scales mean, were all important considerations. Participants were observed when possible, with notes taken concerning their reactions, interactions, and comments. At suitable points any questions participants had **raised** were answered. Data protection guidelines and regulations were followed at all times in relation to the design of all forms and any personal data. The full extent of this is outlined in the permission form, which is shown in Appendix III.

As the quantitative data was limited to the participants' background information and an overall rating of the experience, the process of extracting information ~~from this~~ was relatively straightforward. The results give a view of who took part and how they rated it, which helps to quantify the findings of the qualitative data. Aspects of ~~how~~ the practice employed ~~here~~ the results of the testing are contained in the next chapter.

## Chapter Three

### Record of Practice

This chapter begins by exploring the following themes: death and fashion; the impact disease makes on the body as seen through dress; and how fashionable dress physically moulds the body. Analysing these led to the discovery of a gap in the current knowledge of fashion history, and this in turn led to the formulation of a new approach to hands-on fashion-based education sessions. Specifically, this prompted the creation of an interactive artwork using the remaking of an original dress as a means to enhance museum-based audience participation in experiencing historic dress.

My work to date had mainly been themed around women, art and science. Working with Keats House from 2010 onwards prompted an increasingly interest in medical history, with a focus on tuberculosis. Following the success of *The needle is always at hand* exhibition, a follow-up exhibition that explored Keats' life and his experiences with tuberculosis was posited. That covered a period from his mother's death through his training as a doctor, nursing his brother until his death, and then discovering that he himself had tuberculosis, which led to his death. The original proposal for this project was to achieve the telling of this story through replica clothing for each stage of his life, based on descriptions of items he owned. It was to be called *The Fashion of Keats' Life and Death*. Although this project eventually did not go ahead, it was a significant part of ongoing work investigating the theme of fashion and death, which became central to the final section of this study.

## 4.1 Fashion and Death

*Dialogue Between Fashion and Death* is an eccentric poem that still resonates today. Written by the Italian writer and philosopher (Leopardi 1824), it deals with the powerful relationship between dress and mortality.

In the poem, 'Fashion' is a character in conversation with 'Death'. Fashion says she is Death's sister and responsible for much self-destructive and death-hastening behaviour. It has been adopted into the discourse on dress as a powerful rendering of fashion's capacity to engage with our transience. It is a piece returned to again and again.

This overlap between fashion and death is the focus of much fiction as well as a fact of dress history. In John Tenniel's illustration<sup>14</sup> of the haunted lady or the ghost in the looking glass, we return to the poor seamstress, discussed in the case studies in appendix II, whom we see reflected in the looking glass, in sharp contrast to her work and her customer. The print was based on the true story of Mary Ann Walkley, a twenty-year-old seamstress who worked for the court dressmaker and died after sewing for twenty-six and a half hours straight. The cause of death was listed as "overwork". Sadly, her story was one of many (Matthews-David, 2015, p.8) and looking past the beauty of a dress to see the darker side of fashion is a theme Bari touches upon in her book, *Dressed*:

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<sup>14</sup> Published in the July 4, 1863 issue of the satire magazine, *Punch*, to highlight the cause of the overworked and unpaid seamstresses, which was generating increasing public interest at this time.

Beautiful dresses dazzle us, but if we were able to see our clothes more clearly, we might be compelled to recognise the unhappiness in them, the idea that there could be in them something inimical to the well-being of women themselves (Bari, 2019, p.48)

In Charles Skinner's short story, *Lady Eleanor's Mantle*, first published in 1838, death comes in the guise of a dress. In the story, Lady Eleanor is known not only for her immense pride but also her magnificently embroidered mantle, rumoured to have been made by a dying girl and believed to possess the magical power to give new beauty to its wearer each time it was worn. After moving to Boston<sup>15</sup>, Lady Eleanor has a ball arranged in her honour, during which she wears the mantle. Shortly after, the city has an outbreak of small-pox, the assumption is that the mantle spread the pox from its dying maker to its proud wearer and so to the curious throng of admiring ball attendees. The story ends with the deadly mantle burned and Lady Eleanor, a disfigured creature wandering the shadows, unloved, avoided, and alone.

Examples of actual garments with a proven provenance to these stories of garments and those who wore them are rare, though many surviving garments, when studied, can suggest the suffering of its wearer. Much of this however, is conjecture.

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<sup>15</sup> In the United States of America.

Even so, death is ever-present in fiction, and not just in the galleries of a museum, as suggested by Elizabeth Wilson in her book *Adorned in Dreams*:

These clothes are congealed memories of the daily life of times past. Once they inhabited the noisy streets, the crowded theatres, the glittering soirees of the social scene. Now, like souls in limbo, they wait poignantly for the music to begin again. Or perhaps there is a silence **patient** with vengefulness towards the living. (Wilson, 1985,p.1)

Death is also present in the archive. Dusty, dark, and unseen, it can feel very much like a grave with visitors becoming the gravediggers, a theme **Rebecca** Schneider, a Professor of Theatre Arts and Performance Studies, picks up on when discussing what is lost in the archives in her book *Performing Remains*:

In the archive, flesh is given to be, that which slips away. According to archives logic, the flesh can house no memory of bone. In the archive, only bone speaks memory of flesh. **Flesh** is the blind spot. (Schneider, 2011, p.132)

Here, the 'flesh' is the knowledge that dissipates and disappears once an item enters the archive, as well as the substance to which researchers try to return to, as in the example above, through performance. Death, then, is an everpresent theme within fashion, as in Bari's reflections on dress and death and our relationship with both:

In the end, we are all of us returned to the fragility of our human form for which our clothes provide only the thinnest projection.

(Bari, 2019, p.11)

Unlike us, dress can outwit death which helps explain the reason for our continued fascination with dress beyond its basic function and the pleasure we take in clothes, perhaps because they seem to deny death. On entering the museum, dress may have 'denied death', but many have also been witness to it and in doing so become themed as much as by its wearer's death as by their life.

In Vladimir Nabokov's story *Look at the Harlequins!*, the protagonist, Vadim, feels the need to banish his wife's belongings after her death:

A curious form of self-preservation moves us to rid, instantly, irrevocably, of all that belonged to the loved one we lost. Otherwise, the things she touched every day and kept in their proper context by the act of handling them start to become bloated with an awful mad life of their own. Her dresses now wear their selves, her books leaf through their pages. We suffocate in the tightening circle of those monsters that are misplaced and misshapen because she is not there to tend them. And even the bravest among us cannot meet the gaze of her mirror. (Nabokov, 1974, p.61)

In her husband's eyes, her dresses now begin to wear themselves, typical of Nabokov, who gives the dresses the power to make the memories of their wearer horrific, linking back to Wilson's description of vengeful museum dresses. However, in Nabokov's world, museums come to life and toy with

their visitors before chucking them out in their most feared place, as in his short story, *A Visit To The Museum*. (1995)

What is true here, then, is that the garment at the centre of this study, Mary Graham's dress, survives because of her "heartbroken" husband, Thomas Graham. Examples of men keeping the clothes of the dead as mementos are rarer than women, or perhaps just less well documented. But Graham was not the only one to do so. In 1805, not two decades after Thomas choose to keep Mary's dress, William Cantell's material shrine to his dead wife comes to light through its theft, records showing he had, "Kept it, (all her clothing) packed in two boxes and drawers, locked in a private room where his wife had died" (Burman & Fennetaux, 2019, p.212)

When someone we love dies, their clothing offers a way of remembering and re-evoking intimacy with the dead. We instinctively use the sensory properties of clothing in an attempt to re-establish contact with those who have died. As Bari (2019) points out, "the clothes of those we love tell us how little we have known them, how failed we all are by the brute fact of our mortality and how insufficiently love shields us from this" (p.25).

Whether he chose to keep Mary's dress to remember her life, or commemorate her death, in doing so Thomas Graham and his subsequent family have provided us with a uniquely personal insight into both over two hundred years ~~on~~.

The link between fashion and death is reflected through fictional stories, many of which are based on aspects of real stories or traditional folk tales, **which** in



turn reflects the project's narrative focus. This draws together a number of aspects addressed in Chapter One, including dress, memory and emotion. The themes of fashion and death are also central to *Consumptive Chic*.

At the 2014 "Fashionable Diseases: Medicine, Literature and Culture, 1660-1832" conference, one of the organisers was Professor Clark Lawlor. Lawlor's work focuses on both tuberculosis and Keats, and his book, *Consumption and Literature* (2009) explores how this terrible disease came to be considered a glamorous and artistic romantic malady. It was that view that led to the common misconception that Keats was thrilled to discover he had consumption.<sup>16</sup> The truth could not be further from this. As a doctor, Keats knew that his death would be horrible.

Dr. Carolyn Day also presented at that conference. Her book, *Consumptive Chic, A History of Beauty, Fashion and Disease*, published in 2017, explores the connections between tuberculosis and fashion. In 2014 Day was looking for physical evidence for the "tubercular moment", which she describes by explaining that, "perceptions of the consumptive disease became inextricably tied to contemporary concepts of beauty, playing out in the clothing fashions of the day" (Day, 2017).

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<sup>16</sup> Frequently referenced (verbally, in conversation with me while I worked in the house, other staff told me this was common) by visitors to Keats House, personally observed and reference by numerous Keats House staff.

## 4.2 Consumptive Chic

TB Chic was an aesthetic, within which the ideals of beauty were mirrored by the physical effects of tuberculosis, that arose in the wake of an epidemic of the disease.

Several factors influenced this cultural rise. Tuberculosis was not immediately disfiguring, unlike other diseases of the period such as smallpox or cholera.

Indeed, the initial symptoms, wasting and pallor, could even appear to enhance the looks of the sufferer and reflect early Victorian beauty ideals. Influenced by sentimentalism<sup>17</sup>, allowing the idea that a young woman might just be too good, beautiful and delicate to live. This aesthetic became not just acceptable but desirably fashionable. The TB Chic “look” required a white complexion with visible veins, a narrow torso, including the waist and chest. Surviving examples of TB Chic dresses exhibit reflect their waist and chest measurements. Constricting the chest pushed the shoulders forward so the figure became stooped. Hairstyles that produced ringlets at the front of the head further exaggerated the stoop. The fashion ended when its impact on poor communities was brought to the public’s attention through the press, poverty tainting its fashionable ideals for the rich.

TB Chic reached its height in the 1840s. Drawing on my dress history background, Day and I made many trips to museum dress collections to hunt for examples of consumptive chic. This is a gap in the current knowledge of

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<sup>17</sup> Victorian art and literature with focus on sentimentality, meaning as exaggerated and self-indulgent tenderness, sadness, or nostalgia.

fashion history, with the period and all its underlying aspects ~~are not being~~ covered in most of the popular fashion books.

Specifically, no fashion-focused publications to date have covered TB Chic. This therefore became the focus in the search for garments as starting points for this work, covering the late Eighteenth Century through to the 1850s. A sample of work finding and defining TB Chic is shown in Appendix IV.

One example ~~was an immediately outstanding contender early on~~ was a dress worn by The Hon Mary Graham at the time of her death from **Tuberculosis**.

However, this was in a private collection and only one **photograph** of it existed, showing only the front. Although, as evidenced in study books, several other items were considered as the possible focus for the study, it was the Graham dress that stood out. Unexpectedly in early 2019, permission was granted by the current owners to study the original dress, on the condition that its location and their identity was kept private. That made the dress the centrepiece of this study, allowing this project to do its rich history full justice.

### **4.3 Mary Graham**

Visitors to the National Galleries of Scotland (~~even those there only to pass time before catching a train at the nearby Edinburgh Waverley train station~~) will likely have encountered the most famous remnant of Mary's life, her staggering portrait by Thomas Gainsborough.

Born in 1757, Mary Cathcart was a woman of accomplishment, intelligence, and striking beauty. She lived right at the heart of the political, military, and social life of her age. From the records we can establish that in a troubled era,

she was a figure of calm, a devoted, supportive, and affectionate wife, sister, and friend. Her husband, Thomas Graham, was as devoted to her as she was to him, and was heartbroken when she, like her mother, father, sister and brother before her, died from tuberculosis at the age of thirty-three in 1792.

#### **4.4 Images of Mary**

Because she was born into a family of privilege and wealth, several verifiable **paintings** images of Mary exist, as well as a more controversial one **are still extant**. A short description of the four oil paintings, one watercolour, and one sketch now follows.

David Allan's sketch of the family of Charles, 9th Baron Cathcart, 1765, shows the Cathcart children at home in an informal setting, Mary was eight and would have been either the girl on the left or right of the oldest female child. She and her sister Louisa are hard to tell apart, as all the girls wear aprons and mop caps over what look like fitted bodices. As shown in Figure 1.

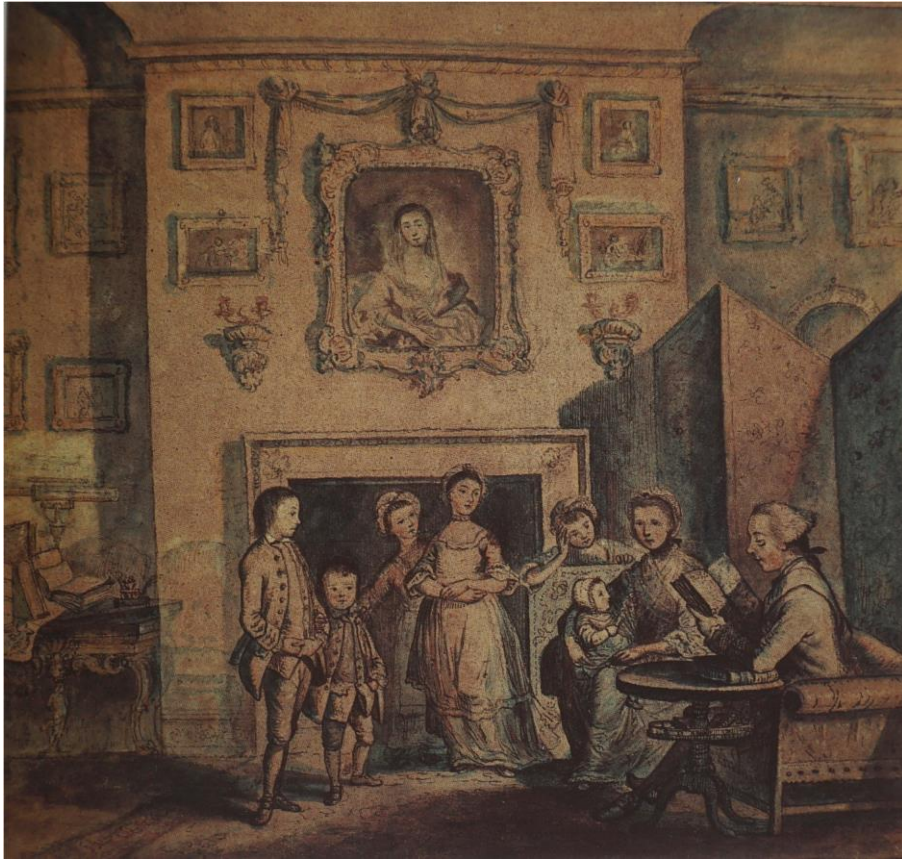


Figure 1 The family of Charles, 9th Baron Cathcart, David Allan, Sketch, 1765

David Allan's oil painting, *The Hon. Mary Cathcart, 1773*, shows Mary as a child. Its date suggests it was painted when she was 15, but she appears younger. Mary's dress is pink with sheer overlay which has a small sprig print.

She has a wide pink sash or bow; the sleeves show rich lace and trimmings; she has a feather in her hair; and is playing with a lamb in an idealised Rousseau-like setting, although her bodice is fitted and she is likely wearing stays as can be seen in Figure 2.



Figure 2 The Hon. Mary Cathcart, David Allan, oil painting, 1773

The watercolour by a member of the British school, *The Family of Charles Cathcart*, 9th Baron Cathcart, c1775, shows the Cathcart children, mostly grown, at the time of Mary and Jane's marriage, as they had a joint wedding. Mary is in the centre of the picture and shown full-face but averting her eyes from the viewer. Little can be seen of her dress, however, her older sister Jane, who stands next to her, has a polonaise style skirt scooped up over a gold petticoat. Her sleeves, like Louisa's (seated at the piano), are loose then

fitted at the elbow. They both have lace *engageante*<sup>18</sup> cuffs. Shown in figure Figure 3.



Figure 3 The family of Charles Cathcart, 9<sup>th</sup> Barin Cathcart, British school, watercolour, c1775

Thomas Gainsborough's oil painting, *The Hon. Mary Graham*, probably 1775, is one the artist himself considered to be among his most complete pictures and is shown in figure 4. It was probably produced shortly after Mary's marriage to Thomas Graham, the future Lord Lynedoch, on 26 December 1774. The dress was likely a costume owned by the painter. It is very similar in style to that of the one that appears in another of his paintings, that of the Hon Frances Duncombe, painted around the same time and clearly more an historical costume than contemporary fashion. The costume is a "Van Dyck"

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<sup>18</sup> Decorative frilled hanging cuffs, on elbow length fitted sleeves.

romantic interpretation of the Seventeenth-Century style, and was worn as fancy dress for masquerades. It is unlikely Mary wore the dress for the painting. It is more likely that the painter added it later, from an original he owned, changing colours and details to suit the sitter's colouring.

The underskirt shown in the portrait is much like one her sister Jane wore at the Queen's birthday celebrations as described in a letter from January 1780: *"My dress was pink sattin, the petticoat puckered all over with Crape"* (Maxtone, p. 174). The outfit is very rich and shows a huge amount of detail, including pearls, jewels and trims, and bows, even her silver shoes are beaded. While shopping in France in 1780, For example, Mary and Charlotte bought several pairs of shoes including two pairs of satin ones embroidered with gold foils, and two pairs embroidered in silks. That mention of foils suggests they both bought shoes with a fashionable sparkle, not unlike those shown in her portrait five years before.





Figure 4 The Hon. Mary Graham, Thomas Gainsborough, oil painting, c1775

Thomas Gainsborough's *Hon. Mary Graham*, probably 1775, is another smaller portrait painted around the same time as the full length one. Mary's position is similar that in to the larger painting, her dress is similar and less fitted, she holds a shawl which is wrapped around her, the neckline and cuffs

are trimmed, but there is less detail in the clothing of this painting. Seen in Figure 5.



Figure 6 The Housemaid, Thomas Gainsborough, sketch, c1782-6

Thomas Gainsborough's "The housemaid, 1786", is the controversial **painting**. A story, passed down through the family, links this portrait with another that looks very much like Mary found in Gainsborough's studio after his death.

Maxtone-Graham tells the story:

Family tradition says that a friend of Gainsborough commented on the beauty of Mary as she appears in the large pictures, added that the rich and delicate colouring and texture of the clothes she wore contributed to a great part of the beauty. Gainsborough dissented from this opinion and said he would undertake to make a picture of her, in which she would appear equally beautiful, in the dress of a housemaid, but as a dairymaid, surrounded by all the implements of a Scottish dairy. He proved the truth of his assertion, for her grace and distinction in the simple dress fully equals that of the more elaborate picture. The Grahams never had possession of this portrait. It remained in the artist's studio till his death. (Maxtone, 1927, p.53)

Today the family still thinks this painting is of Mary. According to the family The Tate Gallery disagrees saying, there is no solid supporting evidence for the claim. There is also a family suggestion that Thomas kept the dress because it was the one portrayed in this picture. The dress shown does resemble Mary's surviving dress. It has the basic shape and colours, but shows none of the sleeve and bodice design details. The dress is pinned up in the polonaise style.

Mary herself liked to draw, and we have her sketchbooks in addition to other documents, letters and journals of hers created by her, her husband and her

family. Many of these were collected together in Margaret Ethel MaxtoneGraham's book, *The Beautiful Mrs. Graham and the Cathcart Circle*, published in 1927.

#### 4.5 Studying The Dress

The Graham dress is over two hundred and thirty years old, privately owned, and has remained in the same family since Mary died. It is the only surviving garment known to have been worn by Mary Graham, and its rich and unbroken provenance makes it rare.

The dress was first brought to my attention by Dr. Carolyn Day who opens her book, *Consumptive Chic, A History of Beauty, Fashion and Disease* (2017) with this account of Mary's long-standing poor health and her husband's devotion and endless attempts to improve her failing health, up to her death:

Thomas Graham never recovered from Mary's death, and could not bear to look upon her countenance – packing up the Gainsborough Portrait and placing it in storage. He did, however, keep mementos of Mary including his wedding ring, which he wore throughout his fifty-five year widowhood and a more tangible reminder of her final days - a dress worn during her last illness. (Day, 2017,p.2)

In addition to its value to dress history and social history, there is also a strong medical connection because it was worn at the end of a life battling with consumption. As Day puts it, "This gown illustrates the wreckage consumption wrought on its emaciated victim" (Day, 2017, p.2).

Full access to the dress in its current location was gained, and the family generously discussed what happened to the dress after Mary died. That study of the dress was captured on a digital recorder and later transcribed. Every dress angle was measured and noted, and all possible pieces were traced. Pictures were taken of both the dresses and the measurements. Key aspects of the dress were drawn and notes of the measurements were listed on the drawing. All **necessary** measurements were checked off. Any stains or patterns of wear, as well as construction details, were recorded. Selected images from the study of the original Graham dress appear in Appendix V.

#### **4.6 Dress Style**

The Graham dress is simple but striking daywear. The main design details are on the bodice, a zone front style with two layers. The over-bodice curves up and appears cut away, revealing the lower bodice which is in a contrasting fabric and cut long, curving down and squared off across the bottom centre front. The over-bodice tabs form a belt around the waist. This zone front style was popular in the later eighteenth century, from the mid-1780s through to the 1790s.

The sleeves are also double-layered. The top sleeves are short, fitted with a trim around the cuff. The undersleeves match the contrasting fabric of the underbodice, elbow length, and **again** fitted. This double sleeve was not common to other studied dresses of this period. However, the sleeves shown in Adolf-Ulrik Wertmuller's 1785 portrait of Marie Antoinette and her children, show both simpler sleeves and a similar bodice and colour. Slim-fitting

sleeves were fashionable from the later-1780s into the 1790s, as demonstrated in figure 6.



Figure 6 Marie Antoinette and her children, Adolf-Ulrik Wertmüller, oil painting, 1785

The two centre back-bodice panels were cut in one with the back skirt panel, a common feature of gowns with fitted bodices (often called a *robe a l'anglaise*).

Several dresses from the mid-1780s I have studied carry the same pattern with double pleats in the centre, a V shape bodice and four back panels. The skirt has two splits in the back, too far back to be useful for pockets. They might have served to create a robe *retroussee dans les poches* style where the skirt was drawn up into the pocket slits to create a *polonaise* style.

*Polonaise* styles were popular from the 1770s up to around 1780. However, a wax stain on the back suggests the skirt was worn up in this style. Skirts were more commonly worn down over petticoats in the 1780s and 1790s. But having the option to loop up a long skirt when travelling would have been practical. Mary travelled frequently for her health, and was travelling when she died. Considering all these factors, the Graham dress likely dates from the early 1790s, just before she died.

Of all of Mary's acquaintances, her sister, Louisa, gives the best descriptions of the dress. As the wife of the British Ambassador in Paris, this close interest was perhaps necessary for her role as she would have needed to follow social protocol and rules strictly. Even so, her letters suggest her interest was both keen and genuine, and she often described what people were wearing, as in a letter to her sister Jane, 17 March 1776, in which she writes "She had a pink polonaise trimmed with gauze and flowers, which become her very much".

She goes on to say:

Polonaises are more the fashion than ever, everybody had them that night, (ball hosted by lady St. Germain) and a good many intended to go to Almacks (a social club in London) in them last night (Maxtone, p.77)

Louisa mentioned polonaises frequently. The style, believed to have been based on Polish women's traditional clothing, consisted of a fitted bodice and attached skirt, open in the front and looped up at the back to show the petticoat beneath. The Graham dress is in a similar style.

Mary's letters provide us with a tantalizing glimpse into her wardrobe and her relationship with dress. Mary was very fond of horse riding, and so it is not a surprise to find Louisa tasked with ordering her a riding habit. However, her hesitation at choosing one made in the then-current fashion suggests perhaps that Mary was more practical than fashion-forward in her tastes. Louisa writes in May 1776:

I sent to desire Knox to make you a stone colour riding habit lined with green and a green waistcoat, as it is quite the fashion now to have them lined with different colours. (Maxtone, p.94)

Concerning her purchase of this riding habit dress for Mary, Louisa comments:

I hope you do not mind its being of two colours, for I thought the best way was to make it of the most fashionable material imaginable so that the upper part is Cheveux de la Reine (hair of the queen, a style in which fabrics were coloured to match the queen's hair) which is a sort of light brown and the underpart is pink. (Maxtone, p.94)

Later, in the same letter, much of which is focused on dress, Louisa wrote:



~~I have sent you a hat, don't be frightened at its size, it's the most fashionable sort and made of as light a material as possible... You must not be frightened at the size of the caps for they are all moderate, I assure you (Maxtone, p.94-95)~~

~~The use of the word "frightened" is interesting, and indicates that Louisa expects Mary to react negatively to being presented with the current and impractical fashion for oversized hats and caps.~~

~~Louisa often took the lead in making suggestions on what Mary should pack for her trips. In October 1776 Louisa wrote:~~

~~I am trying to recollect your gowns. I think you have very pretty spring silk, which was in a Court dress and a trimming, which would make a very handsome sacque. We shall not, you know, wear colours till the winter is near over. Bring your French embroidery. I don't think the brown one would do so well; however, write to me about all these things (Maxtone, p.121)~~

~~She gave much advice but never asked Mary for her opinion or advice. Rather, she sought knowledge of what Mary owned, and Mary was not forthcoming. This led to a more forceful repeat of the request, in November:~~

~~I order you to send to me by very next letter, a list of all your gowns, that I may tell you are to bring, and what you are to buy in London (Maxtone, p.125)~~

~~Mary sometimes uses dress, or its unavailability, as a way of avoiding attending events. While away from her husband on one occasion, she shared her plans with him in a letter of August 1872:~~

~~I am determined to resist all fine parties, assembly's, etc. which we both of us wish to keep quite clear of, and intend to makes it impossible by not carrying cloathes so that you need not be afraid of any turns for me (Maxtone, p.174)~~

~~In contrast to her sister Louisa, this is one of the few references to the nature of her dress to be found in Mary's letters and journals. Other references are mostly practical, lists of needed items, costings for items brought, and notes on how much fabric was needed for different items. It was normal at that time for women to buy fabric and have it made up into needed items separately. Just one reference has been found where Mary describes what she wore, noting that she was "obliged to put on a veil and black petticoat to walk about in the streets" (MS.3628, p.27).~~

#### **4.7 Fabrics and textiles**

The main part of the dress is made from amber colour silk, which looks more orange in daylight or brown by candlelight. A contrast fabric of ivory silk is used for the underbodice and sleeves. Neither fabric is patterned and both are of a plain close weave. Both the bodice and sleeves are lined in white linen, and a linen tape forms a drawstring around the neckline of the bodice, another is tied to the top eyelet of the underbodice to lace it shut. It has ivory-fringed silk and ribbon decorative trims on the sleeves, and two silk-covered buttons

close the front. Originally it would have been worn with a visible petticoat, which may have matched the contrasting ivory fabric.

The bodice is boned with baleen, or whalebone as it is more commonly known. Baleen hangs from the top jaw of some types of whale and appears like long thin teeth. This was the best quality and most expensive stiffening material used at this time and it softened with the heat of the body, helping create a better and more comfortable fit and reflecting the wearer's shape.

The main fabric has a crisp paper-like feel, likely linked to its colour which is consistent with a madder-based dye. *Rublia tinctorum*, or common madder, is an herbaceous plant with concentrated red colorants in its roots and is one of the oldest known plant dyes. Madder is a complex dye that can create a wide range of colours from orange through brown to red. It is a non-substantive dye: if used alone the dye will not fix. It must be used with a mordant (such as iron) if it is to bond with textile fibres. Several factors can influence the final colour. Silks, wools, linens, and cottons all take the dye differently. Using ground or broken roots can influence the final result, as can the mordant used and when specific matters are added during the dyeing process. Silk is easy to dye with madder and the effects are long-lasting. The Graham dress is still a rich colour and shows no fading.

Plants commonly used to produce natural dyes have also traditionally been used as medicines. This practice was so widespread, in fact, that it may be the case that those dyes themselves were actually the by-product of natural remedies. Significantly, Madder root, one of the oldest dyes, was also an

ancient treatments for tuberculosis, and is still used frequently today in natural treatments for a range of ailments.

#### 4.8 Remaking the Dress

After completing the study of The Graham dress, all the collected information was compiled into a 'costume bible', as this type of document is called within a costume design context. That gathers together all the photos, drawings, and measurements together ordered by part of the dress and in order of study.

Providing a constant reference point throughout the remaking process.

Selected pages from this book can be found in Appendix VI.

At the time the original Graham dress was made, all clothing was hand-stitched and many items, particularly simple garments such as chemises or shirts, were homemade by family members, servants, or hired seamstresses. The tools the maker would have had were basic and would all fit in a pocket. Those tools have changed very little in the last 230 years: needles, skeins of thread and a thread winder to hold it, a thimble, scissors, small snips for threads and larger shears for cutting fabric, pins, a pincushion, and needle case, a yard measure and a heavy cast iron for pressing. The hand sewing performance that the original maker followed, and was reproduced in [this](#) research study [here](#), involved similar structural aspects of this embodied process.

It is impossible to make an entirely accurate replica of a historical dress, if only because the materials now available [now](#) are so different from the originals. The aim [ed](#) here was to use materials as close as possible to those

fabrics. The Graham dress fabric was narrow width silk, not unlike raw silk, made paper-like in texture by the madder dye. The original colour was matched using both modern synthetic dyes and natural dye processes, but with crisper silk to reflect the originals' distinctive feel and sound. However, this fabric was almost twice as wide as the original, so additional finishing was needed where selvages would have originally been.

Considerable time was spent trying to recreate the colour of the Graham dress, firstly with modern dyes. Modern synthetic dyes were developed in 1868, before then all dyes were natural. The colour of Mary's dress is one of the simpler colours to achieve from madder, from which a wide range of colours and tones can be made. For this recreation, I chopped and powdered madder root ~~was first used~~, in small batches in my kitchen to try and match the colour. Once that had been achieved ~~that~~, the project was moved to a larger kitchen and industrial sized pans to dye larger pieces. Although the process is quite simple, the results are sensitive to the smallest differences, which can dramatically change the results, a record of which is shown both in the accompanying sketchbooks and in the pocket of Mary's final dress.

A full record of the fabrics and notions used to make Mary's dress can be found in Appendix VI. A selection of pages showing the record of testing, dyes, seams and trims, can be found in Appendix V.

When establishing an eighteenth-century lay plan for cutting out garments, the cutter's main focus was to make the best use of the fabric, the cost of which was then much more expensive than the labour. The aim was to make the

pattern fit, but with as little waste (or cabbage as it was then known) as possible. Patching and mismatching patterns were also common, and the fabric was often reused or garments unpicked and updated.

The lay plan ~~for this replica~~ focused on matching the cut of each original panel and working around the window of our modern fabric, which is generally much wider than period ones. Starting with the centre back panel, which is cut in one with the back skirt panel, the smaller items then fit in the space left beside the centre back bodice panel. As shown in Appendix VII.

Mary's records include several references to the amounts of fabric needed for different garments - on one page, Mary writes a "memorandum of the quality of different materials needed for an Italian high gown" (MS.3637, loose page)

The English term "an Italian gown", called a *robe a l'anglaise* in France, referred to the fitted back gowns which followed the pleated ~~back~~ fashions popular before this new styles arose in the 1770s. The classic cut common to this style shares more features with the Graham dress as the American Duchess<sup>19</sup> describes when defining the style on her website:

There are several variants of the Italian gown - what we modernly call a "zone" front or cutaway front, a chemise front,

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<sup>19</sup> The American Duchess is a company which makes replica shoes from different historical eras and has published ~~a~~ two books on creating eighteenth century clothes, hair and make up owned Lauren Stowell, who started blogging about historical costuming in 2008.

various sleeve lengths including long sleeves, trimmed, untrimmed, etc. The defining factor is the back seams.

(American Duchess, 2013)

The Graham dress has fitted back seams and a cutaway front bodice, so we can assume the notes Mary made relate to a similar style in her surviving dress.

The note goes on to say:

12 yards of Sattin 1/2 Yard wide

9 for the petticoat (MS.3637, loose page)

A yard is 42.72cm, meaning this fabric was about 21cm wide - the original fabric of Mary's dress is 57.7cm. To make the original dress you would need 4.5 metres, about 5 yards. Nearly three widths of this fabric would fit into one yard of the Graham dress fabric, meaning the comparable yardage would be 4 yards. They are similar enough that the petticoat yardage has been used for those made for this project.

#### **4.9 Construction**

The order of construction ~~for the replica~~ was developed first by studying period construction instructions, such as *The Art of the Dressmaker* (unknown) and *The Ladies Dressmaker (1804)*<sup>20</sup>. This allowed study of the

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<sup>20</sup> Both referenced in Janet Arnolds, patterns of fashion 1, 1972, see bibliography for full details.

construction of the original garment and established a likely sewing order. When a draft sewing instruction list had been created, this could be tested and adjusted while making early toiles.

The initial step was to make a pattern: first, a scaled-down version on graph paper, and then a full-size flat pattern. Then the bodice was made up in paper, taped it together, and checked against the original measurements to ensure that matched the original. The first toile made by machine, in cotton, used a similar weight to the original fabric in order to check how the pattern worked in fabric.

Next, I made a toile in the same fabrics as the final dress. This was made by hand up to the point where its full construction was understood ~~its construction~~ in full. It, too, remained unfinished. ~~For this garment,~~ Each stage was recorded as it was stitched. This was checked against the draft sewing order, and changed to make a final sewing order, which can be found in Appendix VI.

The whole dress was made by hand using simple running, back, and overcast stitches. The replica was made by hand, matching the original stitches in both style and size. Cream linen thread has been used. In place of baleen, I used synthetic plastic whalebone ~~was~~. Wherever possible, the fabric and other notions were matched to the original.

We do not know who made the Graham dress. Makers' labels were not used until the middle of the next century when Charles Worth first introduced them. All we have is the dress and the stitches. We also have Mary's letters and



diaries and their references to the words of makers and suggested yardages, but we don't know if they relate to our maker. We do not know where it was made. We can see it was not to be adjusted and we can work out the order in which the dress was made.

The most interesting aspect of the **original** maker's work to **me** is the stitching, which at the start is very small and neat but then in the final elements is very rushed and scant. For example, the eyelets are very messy and unfinished. This could suggest the dress was made quickly, or requested for delivery sooner than originally agreed.

It may also suggest the maker thought she could get away with this as Mary would not notice or care. Although we do know the seams **that be** under the most stress, the boned back seams, were very well stitched. Testing indicates that if those seams **were** made too small they would have given under pressure so perhaps the maker knew where she could and could not cut corners and made accordingly.

The main element that makes **Mary's** dress **that makes it** different from the sewing of today involves the back bodice being cut in one with the skirt. That makes the hand sewing cumbersome and bulky from the first stitch, so the English seams used when making the bodice allow for stitching the outer and linings all together at once. This process is comparably quicker and stronger than the modern equivalent when done by hand making the two bodices separately then lining all together, right sides together, around the edges, leaving a gap to turn the right side out.

#### 4.10 The Garment and The Body

During the Eighteenth Century, body measurements were taken by using strips of paper, and that which was also commonly used for taking measurements and patterns from existing garments. The proportions of this replica were determined by measuring and tracing off from the original dress, then working backwards from those, establishing a pattern that allowed Mary's measurements to be established.

This dress is not whole by itself, it would have been worn over a chemise, employed stays, visible under at least one petticoat, a *fichu*<sup>21</sup> around the neck, and heeled shoes. Some of these items have been reimagined and made to complete the dress and allow audiences to see the whole look. At that time there were no "ready to wear" garments, new clothes were made to fit the wearer meaning they reflected exact measurements. This gives us a rare opportunity to see the impact pulmonary tuberculosis had on Mary's upper body.

A set of stays was reproduced, based on the measurements taken from the bodice and in a style that matches the period of the dress. Stays at that time were not designed for tight lacing, although people like Mary's friend Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, did lace tight. This practice would have been limited by the style of ladder lacing where you work bottom to top,

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• <sup>21</sup> A large triangular shawl, worn round a woman's shoulders and neck, under the dress.

working one lace through right to left. Hand-stitched eyelets also limited how tight stays could be laced before the thread and fabric gave way.

Stays were made around two inches smaller than the wearer's actual measurements, and laced in to provide support and the period's fashionable inverted cone shape. This worked well on fleshy wearers, but less so on very thin wearers. Experience suggests that heavily boned corsets on very slim women could make the wearer the same size or even a little larger than their pre-corset measurements due to the layers of fabric and boning.

In the Eighteenth Century, women often started wearing stays as children so that as they grew, their chests reflected the shape of the stays. All of this information impacts our understanding and estimations of Mary's body at the time of wearing this dress. The dress itself would have been worn over stays. We know this from the shape of the bodice and from Mary's accounts which reference stays in the "needed items" list and notes of spending. This is backed up by her appearance in her portraits, which suggests she wore them from a young age. A petticoat which would have been seen under the dress was also made, but no surviving record indicates what dress this was worn with, so a simple period style has been chosen to resemble the complete look.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Graham dress is indeed what it tells us about her body. Based on that dress, some of Mary's measurements over stays, have been calculated. However, because Mary was so emaciated, it has proven difficult to find a modern adult who might model ~~it, the dress-~~

based artwork,<sup>22</sup> especially with the restrictions of the COVID-19 lockdowns and quarantine considerations. Mary's bust was thirty-two inches but her waist over stays was just twenty and a half inches. Her upper arms were also very thin. Even a wearer whose body fits a modern UK size 6 found that their shoulders, the top of the arms and waist would be too large to fit the dress.

It is hard to estimate Mary's height from the dress because we do not know if the skirt was cut to train on the floor, though the back is curved to suggest this. If she planned to wear it as a polonaise (less fashionable by the time she died but very convenient for travelling), then the skirt splits suggest this could have been possible. When the dress was exhibited in 2010, the National Gallery of Scotland, suggested she was about five feet and seven inches, but this would have meant she was very tall. At that time the average height for a woman was five foot two, with the tallest woman found in the late Eighteenth century at five foot five (Davidson, 2019). There is no reference to Mary or her siblings being very tall, and they all appear to be the same height in the group portrait. Perhaps the best measure for her height, aside from exhuming her body and measuring her bones, is the walking stick which survived with the dress. Aside from the dress, this is the only other physical evidence left by Mary. It is a fashionable walking stick from the same era as the dress.

Walking sticks were then widely carried as a fashion accessory, used more for posing than for support. Many fashion plates from the era of the Graham dress, which reflect the style of her dress, are also shown with fashionable walking sticks. Looking at fashion plates from this era similar to Mary's

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<sup>22</sup> Not necessarily impossible, but heavily impacted by lockdown.

surviving dress and stick, these were typically taller than the waist height, more to under bust **height**. Her stick is 94.3cm which would suggest she was more likely to be about five foot two, which would mean her skirt would train by twenty centimetres.

#### 4.11 Real and Replica

*A Conversation with Mary's Dress* is not just a dress. This **dress-based artwork** at its core is a replica of an original, but also part of **an** art context that in turn forms part of a larger piece. This work touches indirectly on a much broader debate concerning what is original and what is replica **and what is reproduction** in the world of art and fashion. In that debate, museums are usually considered to be the custodians of "real things". As collector and historian Martin Seligman states:

The first duty of the museum is to give us the material necessary for the avoidance of errors, the exhibition of choice and characteristic examples of indisputable authenticity (Seligman, 1922, p.75)

Arguably, however, replicating a garment, as is done here, establishes new knowledge regarding how the original was made and, so, becomes a genuine contribution to knowledge. Therefore, if an artist in this field uses elements of historic garments in the creation of a work, those elements become the artist's new materials and part of a new artwork. When an artist studies **and creates a piece based on** an original garment, then, the original itself remains as the

source of inspiration. This can be seen as a very different process to those that apply in other arts fields. At first sight, for example, a painting by, say, Jackson Pollock is either an original or a fake. In simple terms, an original is almost priceless and a fake almost worthless.

However, there are many multi-layered complexities to this debate on real and **reproduction** in relation to art. Conservation can be taken as a case in point, how much of it is done, how often, and how clearly impacts on its authenticity. The West's valuing of "the real thing" is further complicated when fashionable dress is considered alongside art. So, the museum visitor expecting to see an original Pollock painting when visiting a gallery could well be carrying a fake Louis Vuitton handbag produced by an industry where the 2017 losses suffered due to global online counterfeiting amounted to \$US 323 billion, (Adegeest, 2018). Yet fashion students are encouraged to create original designs, using aspects of historic dress and current garments as inspiration.

~~In other areas of dress the originals can be hard to define. Costume design provides an example. The dress seen on screen may be one of ten made for different contexts, such as before and after the character was splashed by mud or splattered by blood and worn by different people: the actor, the standin, the stunt person. Where is "the real thing" in this context? Is it the dress shown on screen, one of the originals used in filming, the dress in the viewer's memory or, perhaps, one of the many Cosplay versions made?~~

~~Some costumes have been endlessly in demand for display after filming ends. *Gone With the Wind* costumes, for example, were on display (where) until 1983 when they were replaced by replicas that themselves had to be replaced in 2010. Dress historian Brooks states, “The first duty of the museum is to give us the materials necessary for the avoidance of errors” (Brooks, 2014, p.5). However, that *Gone With the Wind* example is far from being a one-off. At the Rolling Stones exhibition at The Saatchi Gallery in 2016, for example, some of the “original” costumes were, in fact, replicas that replaced actual key stage costumes that had not survived. Those replicas were displayed side by side with and presented as, originals.~~

Perhaps, then, the definition of “original” is best considered from the perspective of the artist. *The Authenticity and Replication, The ‘Real Thing’* conference on the arts and conservation held at The University of Glasgow in 2012 heard artist Ross Sinclair discuss authenticity in relation to his artwork. His work is frequently installation-based, often changed to match the venue in which it is displayed, and uses everyday objects as part of the artwork with elements that often have to be redone. He **is** also sometimes appears in his own **installations**, adding a performative element. Of this choice he states, “I think this idea of authenticity is always in the moment of the show and in the engagement with an audience” (Ross, 2014, p.111). He went on to talk about the practicalities of such works and how, rather than storing them, he has often destroyed larger **installation** artworks, later remaking them, upon demand.

Although the dress at the core of *A Conversation with Mary's Dress* is not an everyday object, and if, needed, for example, after repeated handling it became damaged, it could be remade and replaced, to better reflect the original. The likeness of the dress to the original on which it is based is a key part of the experience. Unlike the original Graham dress, being part of a larger experience, it is **reproducible**. The purpose of *A Conversation with Mary's Dress* is to facilitate a taste of experiencing something irreplaceably precious rather than to become so itself.

#### **4.12 Reproduction into Artwork**

Once everything possible has been established from both studying the original and remaking it, the next stage began. What could be added or changed to make the dress “speak” to an audience and share its rich story?

As the process of developing the final artwork began, it became clear that because of pandemic conditions, the dress could not be tested as originally intended, in person, in a museum setting, facilitated by the researcher. The artwork would need to be developed differently. Therefore, elements that were originally planned such as hidden embroidered quotes, designed to be discovered and viewed were set aside for more impactful interventions, both in-person and mediated. At the same time, the **reproduction** of the dress remained unchanged<sup>23</sup> and as close to the original as possible. Thus, the

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<sup>23</sup> Meaning as full a replica of the original dress as possible.



artwork dress **produced through** this study is a **dress-based artwork** of Marys dress with interpretive artwork elements **emanating** from the following devices:

**Sound pens / sound spots:** **These were** originally developed as accessible tools to support blind and partially sighted people. This was both in their own homes through spoken labels, and in museums offering audio descriptions of objects and artworks. Pre-recorded audio is loaded onto the pen and matching soundspots, which are then attached to the relevant items, normally in a raised circle, which are easy to find through touch. When the pen is touched on the spot, the audio plays. The pens are light and easy to use and the audio can be listened to out-loud or through headphones. In museums and galleries they are **normally** used on tactile images of items that can't be touched, such as paintings. The sound-spots **are** used in three different places on the dress in order to tell the story from different angles. They were the only non-authentic additions to the **reproduction** dress that differentiate it from the original. The initial work involved exploring how long the voice-over/commentary could be, and where the sound spots should be located. The most suitable means for participants to assess the audio was also a consideration. A script for each one was then written and actors sourced for providing voice. **My own research into the field has shown** this is a new way of adding text to textiles in **this** field of study. Sound-spots have only been used in the past to provide tactile illustrations of clothing in painting or in a domestic environment added to the washing labels of clothes for identification purposes, to assist blind or partially-sighted users in their everyday lives. The

company **used**, Mantra Lingua,<sup>24</sup> was engaged to develop a format which did not detract from the dress while still being easy for the viewer to locate. Part of this process-involved developing the flexible sound trail which led users to the next sound spot, while also giving them a degree of choice in what to listen to and when. Three scripts were developed, covering Mary's background and life, the dress itself and its construction and Mary's tuberculosis - **The full scripts can be found** in Appendix VIII.

**The additional garments:** These were designed to complete the dress, giving the viewer a wider understanding of what would have been worn with the dress. Each item was based on what is known about what Mary wore, what was fashionable at that time, what was known about Mary's body and what would work with the dress.

**The pocket contents:** these show the deconstructed seams, stitched "step-by-step" in neon thread, and deconstructed seams originally intended to be used in the dress **the dress**. In addition, there is a replica of one of Mary's pocket books, made from fabric and holding a trail sound-spot, along side key portraits relating to specific points in her life.

**The heart and lungs:** Part of the final piece is a full-scale textile **interpretation** of a **human** heart and lungs. These are based on first hand observation and period illustrations of dissections of tubercular lungs, and are made from scratch using pure wool and silk and felted, to reflect one healthy

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<sup>24</sup> Mantra Lingua specialises in language based, accessible technology

lung and one tubercular lung. Their soft nature allows the viewer to comprehend how stays would have contracted them, **because they are soft they move in a similar way to real organs**. The sound-spots trail was stitched through the heart and lungs to reflect how TB entered the body. The stitching is actually sutures, stitched in silk using a suture needle. Under the tutelage of a surgeon, I developed this technique first **by-use** on a pig's liver, before further work on fabric. The heart and lungs are in stark contrast to the other elements of the piece, and confront viewers with the grim reality of life with TB in the late Eighteenth Century, reinforcing the links between fashion and death.

The context in which the viewer encounters the dress is designed to replicate "discovering" the Graham dress. These are a part of the final artwork, opening the box, unwrapping and removing of the layers of tissue, either in person or by way of on-screen direction.

This was part of the whole performative experience and a direct tactile connection to the "real" archive experience.

The dress **is shown** together with its related garments, accessories, and **an interpretation of** Mary's internal organs form the final piece. The experience is part rummage through a costume archive, and part medical slab dissection. Together, this allows participants to explore Mary's life, death, and dress and the links between dress and disease.

This approach addresses an identified gap in the knowledge of fashion history

– particularly in connection to TB Chic, when the physical effects of tuberculosis became the ideals of beauty for fashionable women. And the approach does so in an innovative and engaging way which mirrors that of making a discovery in the archives. An approach, which was designed to work in museum-based, multi-sensory, participant-led interpretation experience, then, was tested during the COVID19 pandemic, when museums where closed and the means of reaching audiences switched from drawing people into museums, to recreating the experience in peoples homes.

## Chapter Four

### Testing and Findings

The original plan for testing the *dress-based artwork: A Conversation with Mary's Dress*, involved working with two types of small groups in a workshop setting within a museum environment. The first group was to have been university or college students with related subject interests such as fashion, theatre or history. The second group would have been lifelong learners working with existing informal learning groups, or recruited directly through the museums network. These workshops were to ~~be~~ have been personally facilitated along with other individualised experiences for the same participants to introduce the concepts then allowing participants to explore the *artifacts* for themselves before returning to the group experience and review. However, the point at which that testing was about to commence also coincided with the start of the COVID19 lockdown. This necessitated a change in approach. In part this was to allow testing to proceed within the set time frame, but was also because the onset of COVID19 immediately changed the ways in which people might experience museums. This change is likely to be ongoing, so it became an opportunity to contribute to the knowledge of how we might reopen and share heritage *and its interpretation* during and directly after the pandemic. In summary, the pandemic ~~p~~resented a major opportunity to alter the ways in which we experience heritage and Mary's dress became a means to test that new circumstance.

The original testing framework was revisited to consider what was now possible, and what might appeal to potential participants. The work was redesigned to align with the worst-case possible scenario, testing in full lockdown, with the flexibility to adapt those plans as new information became available. This resulted in **the dress-based artwork** being experienced in three different formats: an “in-person” experience, a video call experience, and a short film viewed online.

### **5.1 Overview of Participants**

The “in-person” participant group of ten people were all Caucasian, predominantly female, reasonably well educated, but not currently in formal education. Half of the group were aged sixty **to** seventy-nine years old. Although all were generally aware of having seen historic dress within a museum context, **but** only a small number had actually handled such items.

The video call group involved eighteen people who were more widespread geographically than the first group, but were similarly mostly female, Caucasian and not in formal education. However, they did have higher-level qualifications – and over half the participants had at least level seven or eight postgraduate qualifications. There were no participants under twenty years old, just one aged between twenty and twenty-nine, with the largest numbers being in the thirty to thirty-nine (37%) age bracket.

The film experience group involved the largest number of people, thirty-one in total. The age range was again broad but with more participants aged between thirty and forty-nine. In common with the other groups they were

largely female and Caucasian. They were mostly educated to undergraduate or postgraduate level, with eleven (35%) currently studying in formal education. Graphs showing the full participants data for all three testing groups are shown in Appendices IX(A), IX(B) and IX(C).

## **5.2 Limitations**

Several aspects of this study must be considered when assessing the results. As noted, for example, the sample size is very small. It is also difficult within such a small sample to meaningfully break down any demographic specifics. Some participants encountered difficulty in completing the questionnaires. One question did confuse some participants, as a number asked for clarification on what was being asked by “having seen dress in a museum”. The study did engage lifelong learners, but engaged few university students.

Analysis of all the data<sup>25</sup> has further revealed that a high number of respondents have ongoing disabilities and/or conditions that have in turn been aggravated by COVID-19 conditions. In future, it is suggested that detailed attention be paid to this aspect when planning similar experiences. Ideally, then, in future the Mary’s dress experience might reach more people from far more diverse backgrounds.

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<sup>25</sup> Including informally collected data, for example in response to the question, passed by email do you have any additional support needs and in dissections before and during testing.

### 5.3 The In-person Experience

The recruitment process for the "in person" experience was necessarily an informal one, reflecting the difficult contextual circumstances under which it was delivered. People who had previously expressed an interest<sup>26</sup> during the **video call** stage and who now lived within a short distance of where the dress was based were approached, and they in turn suggested it to and approached others, utilising the "snowball" effect. A timetable was developed, people booked into a slot, this was then updated where necessary.

The significant quarantine and cleaning time slots were kept at the required length: three full days in quarantine for the dress, and another day allowed for cleaning, repacking and delivery. As the participants were now required to work everything out for themselves (using the provided detailed information, and with a supportive telephone discussion if necessary), a test run was completed before the **artifact** was sent out to allow further fine tuning of the experience where necessary.

The actual experience commenced when the piece **was** delivered to the participant in a large white cardboard box, similar to those in which historic garments are stored. The sleeve on the outside of the box **gave** the user instructions, **a** permission form and **a** questionnaire. Inside the box was another sleeve to hold the completed forms. The sound-pen was on top of the

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<sup>26</sup> In the video call stage, which took place first.



first layer of tissue paper which, when removed, revealed the **artifact**. Another layer of tissue paper covered **its** petticoat. This continued until the unpacker reached the heart and lungs at the bottom of the box.

The user instructions detailed where the sound-spots could be found and how to use the sound pen. Once finished, all items were **to be** returned to the box. It was then collected, quarantined, cleaned and repacked before going to the next participant. The user instructions can be found in Appendix X, permission forms and questionnaires in Appendix III.

In relation to participant interests in the subjects represented, with the in-person group they fall mostly within the medium range, showing either disinterested or some interest with few showing strong interest or disinterest in the subject areas represented. As anticipated, most interest (five people) was with dress history. There was a notable disinterest in relation to medical history (six people), and two participants were very disinterested in social history. Of all the groups, answers to the “in person” questions were the shortest, and the group returned the highest number of unanswered questions. However, every participant wanted to be kept informed of the project’s progress. Graphs showing the full participants data for all three testing groups including a selection of the verbal responses to the open questions in the questionnaires collected can be found in Appendices IX(A), IX(B) and IV(C).

All but one of the participants had seen dress within a museum setting before, but for most this experience was largely infrequently. Three participants had

handled historic dress before within three settings: museums, vintage shops, and a private collection. None had made a study appointment to study dress in a museum. Only two responded to the dress handling questions, with their answers focused on the positives in terms of both physical access and as a personal experience:

Yes – it's interesting to know and feel more about clothes in the past. I probably think an original is more exciting or fascinating.

<sup>27</sup>

(p.12)

Yes, actually handling an object/ garment adds to the experience as opposed to just looking through glass. (p.12)

In contrast, on the negative side, the risks of damaging originals was stated as a concern:

Probably not I would be afraid of damaging it. (p.12)

A well made, detailed replica would be the same, if not better – due to not worrying about the preciousness of the item as much.

(p.12)

When rating *A Conversation with Mary's Dress*, six rated it excellent and four rated it very good. Half of the participants felt it could work in a video call or in

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<sup>27</sup> Quotes can all be found in Appendices IX(A) IX(B) and IX(C)

a film, **with** most reservations reflecting the loss of sensory experience that the in person experience uniquely offers:

Think it could work, but it's far better to be able to touch the garment and feel the weight and quality of the fabric **(p.13)**

Not as well as in person because you don't get the feel or as much from seeing **(p.13)**

No, as would lose the handling experience and the appreciation of the work that goes into the dress. **(p.13)**

Half the participants made suggestions as to how the experience might be made more effective. These included the inclusion of a photo of the dress on a model, a film introduction to the dress, more sound-spots and scripted conversations in the sound-spots. In response to the question "what do you think was the most effective part of the experience?", main themes emerged. The first focusing on the ability to touch and see the dress and to experience its construction up close:

The stitching and work involved in making this dress. **(p.12)**

I found it amazing to see how much hand sewing it took to make such a dress like this. **(p.13)**

The holistic nature of the experience brought about by the sound-spots, was highly regarded:

Seeing, feeling and hearing at the same time. **(p.12)**

The sound spots, being able to touch the dress and hear its history is a brilliant way of bringing the history to life. (p.12)

And there was an overlay between these two themes:

This experience gave much more information about the dress, how it was made its life and the life of its wearer. Also useful to handle/ feel the fabric which you cannot usually do in a museum. Understanding of dress much greater. (p.12)

There was little mention of the medical aspects of the experience – Overall, the group was generally less interested in this than in dress history, aside from the following comment:

Looking at the affect [sic] of illness on the body through the dress was both informative and interesting, seeing the healthy and diseased lungs in a non gory way was unusual and very interesting. (p.12)

With regard to what they wanted from the experience, a common suggestion was to have a photograph of the dress fully assembled:

I thought the dress was beautifully made but found it a little confusing to start with until I laid it out in its layers, quite hard to see how the bodice looks without a person inside! (p.13)

Seven participants said they would like to see the original dress, two of whom noted that this was inspired by their experience with Mary's dress:

Yes you have aroused my interest. (p.14)

Yes – now I've got more info. (p.14)

One wanted to be able to compare the two dresses, and two cited its age/  
having seen the replica sparking an interest in the original:

Yes - because it is still together after so many years. (p.14)

Yes, because it's a real link to history. (p.14)

Two participants said they were unsure, with one noting:

No, the replica is a rich enough experience. (p.14)

There was initial concern about how the experience would work in  
participants' homes without guided assistance immediately to hand. However  
no participant rang for help, and participants all managed to navigate the  
process ~~and enjoyed doing so~~.

Informal feedback suggests that the unwrapping of the box, tissue and layers  
created a performance aspect that people enjoyed, ~~which was shared verbally~~  
~~afterwards~~. Some reported that they felt more like detectives than museum  
curators. Another positive was that everyone who wanted to take part within  
the timeframe and distance stated, was able to do so. One negative came  
from the curatorial/organiser perspective. Because this experience was  
conducted remotely, I was unable to observe at first hand the reactions and  
responses of the participants, as would normally be so.

## 5.4 The Video-call Experience

Before formal testing took place, four days of trial testing via video call were conducted. A call out for participants was shared with relevant groups on social media sites. (See Appendix III). There were no restrictions on who could take part. People were booked into slots on a first come first served basis, with an hour being allowed for each appointment. Meetings were hosted via Zoom.

I coordinated this and set out the piece as it would have been worn, and padded it with tissue to give it some shape so as to reflect the body. It lay on a table which was a just a little larger than the dress and covered in black silk. Related materials were available, including elements that could not go in the box for the in-person version (like glass bottles of dye stuffs). The sketchbooks were at hand in order to demonstrate the research approach when introducing each section or answering questions.

I held the calls, with the materials displayed under natural daylight when available, or otherwise by way of a rotalight hooked up to the mobile phone. I used the sound pen in a way that allowed the sound spots could be heard directly through the phone microphone. Using the phone both as a hand-held camera and on a tripod allowed the artifact to be shown with the details up close. This allowed direct interaction with the dress in relation to the sound-spots. When participants observed how the colour changed when the light hit it, for example, the fabric could be moved to change the view. Similarly, when

participants referenced sound, I could screw up the fabric then smooth it out to change the sensation.

Several tests and one full dummy run were conducted in advance of the actual survey calls. Then, at the start of each formal survey call sound and light checks were conducted, and participants told again what they might expect. All participants had completed the permission form and questionnaire in advance<sup>28</sup>. The participants could direct their own interaction with the dress, with me acting as their hands, touching and turning the dress as instructed. Time for questions was allowed at the end but questions also arose and were dealt with during the process. I would sometimes demonstrate how things like pockets were worn. Calls were not recorded but notes were taken of each session.

Unlike the in-person testing, the video calls were not limited to any particular geographical location, so participants came from the UK, North America, Australia, New Zealand, France and Japan. There were eighteen participants in total, of nineteen appointments, only one person failing to attend. A significant number of participants expressed deep interest in dress and social history, and interest in medical history. None expressed deep or substantial disinterest in any subjects. All but two participants said they had seen dress in a museum setting, eight had done so frequently, eight infrequently and one once. Eleven said they had handled historic dress, again mostly within a museum setting, but the second highest setting was within a private

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<sup>28</sup> This was sent out in advance, but completed and returned after participation.

collection. Five of the participants had made an appointment to study items of dress within a museum collection, three of whom had been able to touch the items.

Responses to the handling questions fell into two main groups: handling gave a better understanding of construction and how it would have looked and felt on the body; and the excitement of handling the real thing with tangible links to history:

I was able to handle the garments, which meant I could view all sides of them and most particularly see the inside and construction methods. (p.14)

There is a thrill about seeing or handling original dress that you maybe don't necessarily get with replicas. However they absolutely have a positive and necessary place. (p.14)

Participants also mirrored the "in person" responses in relation to the worry over risk of damage when handling delicate textiles:

I think it would be a different way of connecting with the past but I would feel anxious about causing damage / deterioration.  
(p.14)

One response captured all of the positive and negative aspects of handling original and replica dress, handling, history and risk:

Positive – more opportunity for handling and to see the construction of these items. Able to try on and be in closer



contact with the fabrics. Can often bring historical stories and situations to life more if you're able to use all of your senses. Also helps to save the original pieces from deterioration due to over handling or damage from sunlight. Negative – not the real thing! Nothing quite like handling an original piece. (p.15)

Participants who had not handled original dress but would like to, mirrored the “in person” responses, but with more detail:

Yes, I would like to. I imagine the feel and sound of the dress would give me even more information, and to be able to look at the stitching closely would give me even more of an idea of how the dress was made. I also think that a hand-dyed material might feel different to the materials I am used to touching in 2020. (p.14)

Absolutely! I think the experience up close and feeling the materials and details would be incredible. (p.15)

All but one had experienced replica dress, with the highest responses being from experiencing replicas at museums/ historical sites, festivals and re-enactments. Four participants had worn or owned replica costumes, one had experienced costumes in a theatre setting. Overall, fourteen participants rated the experience as excellent and four as very good:

Would have loved to have been there in person to experience the item face to face but Lindsey did a brilliant job of guiding me around the dress and letting me take my own journey. (p.16)

Six participants had thoughts on how to make it more effective. These suggestions ranged from the provision of sensory extras, such as sounds, to the use of other formats including an interactive app, a podcast and full display in a museum. The most common suggestion was to have the dress displayed on a model or a stand:

Some music from the period would have been a nice touch to help set the scene further. A bit gruesome but what does a consumptive sound like? Would have been interesting to hear what the cough was like. (p.16)

I'd like to see how the dress hangs when 'worn'- so a vertical mannequin would help to 'flesh' it out more? (p.18)

The only thing to make it more effective is to see it in person which you can't do at the moment however one day post covid I do hope it's on display somewhere so we can see and touch it. (p.17)

Participants liked being able to direct their own path through the sound-spots, and being able to ask questions:

I really loved some of the supplementary information provided during the tour of the dress. For example, original methods used for dyeing the fabrics, drawing on the impact of wearing corsets on rib cage, the small pocketbook to help illustrate Mary's story. All very tactile and sensory even though it was done over video call. (p.17)

I was amazed at the amount of information that you have gleaned from just handling the dress: The interpretation of the stains which tell much about where Mary had been and the lifestyle. The sizing and effect on the rib cage, the labour that went into making the dress – all fascinating. I thought the hearts and lungs were particularly interesting. (p.19)

A total of thirteen participants felt the process could work in-person or as a film. Two expressed a desire to handle the dress in person in anticipation of that being a positive experience:

Yes, this would definitely work well in person. I really wanted the touch the dress myself and feel the fabrics! (p.19)

Responses to the question, would this work as a film, were mixed, but the fact that it worked by video call perhaps made people more convinced it could work as a film:

I suppose the intention of the project is that people should be able to experience the dress for its tactile properties which is difficult in a film but – I got a tremendous amount of info from the video call without touching it so both would work. (p.20)

All but one participant said they would like to experience the dress in person, and the exception still asked to be advised when the dress might be located near their residence, ~~contradicting their answer:~~

I would have loved the opportunity to touch the dress myself, however, given the pandemic, I felt this was a fantastic and immersive way to replicate the tactile experience of personally handling the dress. The presentation was interactive and detailed, and it was great to be able to ask questions, which, in a museum setting without a host, I might not have been possible to do. (p.14)

A total of sixteen participants said they would like to see the original dress, one was unsure and one said no. Participants also stated they would like to see the two together to compare, or to understand the original better by exploring the replica. Other reasons for seeing the original included the excitement of seeing the real thing, to build on this survey experience, and to investigate the technology used.

The full hour was used for nearly every session. Each day it needed to be fully set up, reset between sessions and then packed down. During sessions I had to move the phone/light over dress while also activating the sound spot and keeping the sound pen near the microphone then moving the artifact at the same time. This took practice and stamina to ensure the experience was professional.

The setting created was an all-important part of the whole piece and helped create the relaxed performance, in which the participant is the performer interacting with the artifacts. The components of this included: rearranging a lounge; moving background clutter; making a suitable table; providing the right

fabric as a backdrop; making sure all garments were pressed; ensuring that the light was right throughout the day; that all the elements looked clear when the phone was on the stand.

I was both facilitator and participant, taking the physical place of the viewer and trying to balance these dual roles. That central role came across to the participants:

I particularly liked the way the dress was laid out as though it was waiting for me. I liked asking Lindsey to hold her camera a little closer to some parts, or to turn the volume up so that I could hear the material. (p.19)

More than one person become emotional as we explored, through the soundspots and my introductions to each section, some of the sadder facts of Mary's life:

I am so honoured to have been part of this and it was such a joy to see the recreation of Mary's dress. I felt like I got to know her a little bit, I really felt for her and her husband. The amount of work that went in to the recreation of her dress is incredible.

(p.18)

The initial design for this work aimed at providing the audience an experience of what it was like to be living in the middle of a pandemic for which there was no cure. Testing this during the height of a new lung disease pandemic made the question all the more apparent and relevant:

This would have been a very interesting experience in a nonpandemic era. But to hear about the description of tuberculosis (and its' spread) in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic was priceless. So fascinating. (p.17)

One participant, completing the lung sound-spots, said she wished that the post office worker she had encountered that morning and who had refused to wear a mask could have shared the experience.

One aspect that could be determined and directed was the order in which participants chose to listen to the sound spots. Of the six combinations of the three sound-spot trails, only three were chosen. The most popular, chosen by **fifteen** participants, was Mary's life. Then followed Mary's dress and Mary's tuberculosis. The two other orders chosen by two participants each were, Mary's life, Mary's tuberculosis then Mary's Life and Mary's dress. Naturally, as Mary's life details her background and Mary's tuberculosis her death, you would expect the former to always be chosen before the latter, because it spans both. The piece reflects Mary both in life and in death, because she wore it in what was really a transition between the two states. Thus this is the natural chronological order. Participants expressed two main reasons for their preferences in order of viewing: that which makes most sense (that is, life before death), or the aspect in which they were most interested or excited by as in, "I *have* to see the dress first, that interests me the most" or "I am really interested in tuberculosis, so I want to save the lungs till last"

Of the three formats, video calls were the most significant for the researcher because of the direct involvement that helped give the greatest insight into the impact of the **dress-based artwork, *A Conversation with Mary's Dress***. A great deal was learned from interacting with each participant. Being able to share the moment with participants and their emotions, reflections and questions was a great privilege and allowed for additional insight.

One participant asked if there was any blood on the dress. That reflected both one of the darkest and most visible effects of tuberculosis, but also linked to its evolution into a romantic disease. Somehow, the prospect of “the hectic unhealthy beauty of a consumptive”, as Angela Carter describes it<sup>29</sup>, is defined by drops of blood. It is an aspect of tuberculosis that is frequently romanticised, the red flush which gives the sufferers cheeks and lips.

## 5.5 The Film Experience

Link to the film: <https://vimeo.com/490462392/8244799a78>

The short film, under 4-minutes in length, was made in between lockdowns, under COVID19 safety restrictions, and shot in a studio over a couple of hours one evening. A small local production company assisted **me** in this regard, and there were just three people on set. Given those limitations, the film was never intended to replace the in-person or video call experiences.

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<sup>29</sup> In her short story *The Lady of the House of Love* based on the fairy tale Sleeping Beauty

Rather, the aim was to test how demonstrating the dress might work in the context of film as this was a way of reaching a wider audience during lockdown. The film was shot before both the in-person and video call appointments, but only shared after those had occurred. This was undertaken with a new audience recruited online through a callout on social media sites. It included people unable to participate in the video calls because they didn't have time, or didn't see the call until after it had passed. Participants were emailed a link to the film, the permission form and the questionnaire.

The film provided the first occasion where Mary's dress appears draped on an especially made mannequin. Part of the film also displays the work on a real person, in motion, as well as flat on a table. A black background for the dress worked well in the video calls with the dress shown both under modern theatrical lights and with the lights adjusted to reflect period candlelight. The sound pen is shown being used on sound-spots on both the dress and the pocketbook. The lungs and heart only feature very briefly, as do the stays, and the other contents of the pocketbook are not shown. Due to the limited time available to film, the focus had to be on the dress. The tissue paper, a main feature of the "in person" experience and used to pad out the bodice in the video calls, was not used for the film. The audio was an amended version of the sound-spots recorded especially for the film, and using the same voice artists as the sound-spots.

Participants' interests were distributed more broadly across the fields, ranging from-very interested to very disinterested, with more participants neutral or disinterested in dress than very interested. Two participants were very



disinterested. A significant number of participants were very interested~~d~~/interested in social history and interested in medical history. Over half of the participants had seen dress within a museum context and half said they had handled historic dress within a museum setting, only three of which had made a study appointment to do so. All three said they were able to touch items and two said this gave them a better understanding of the items.

These responses reflected those of the other groups but in some cases provided more detail and a greater level of insight. When asked about the benefits of handling dress, including memory:

It made the object real and memorable. ~~(p.15)~~

There was also its link to history:

Ballet tutus and costume dress from the Kirov Ballet. While we were not allowed touch them it was an amazing experience and to wonder what life the tutus and dresses led along with those who were them. ~~(p.15)~~

Yes. It would enable me to become part of the history of that garment just by touching it, which is really exciting. ~~(p.15)~~

Yes – touching something historical feels like you are making a connection with the past. ~~(p.16)~~

The additional information a multi-sensory experience can offer was also mentioned:

It is key to understanding the relationship between the garment's purpose and the body, the senses. (p.16)

But there was also the privilege and responsibility which comes with such an opportunity:

Humble, to have the opportunity of handling an important historic artefact and be responsible for that handling. Sometimes nervous, where the item being handled is known to be fragile and/or in a poor state of conservation. (p.16)

Participants who had not previously handled historic dress also understood this was a special opportunity:

I have not been lucky enough to handle the originals. (p.15)

A total of sixteen (76%) said they had handled reproduction dress, with the most popular settings being museums eleven (31%), re-enactments eight (23%) and then festivals seven participants (20%). Within this larger group, a larger number of settings were listed including costumes for theatre and film productions, storytellers and those owned and worn by participants. They showed a good understanding of the positives and negatives of reproductions:

As it was replica, didn't have to worry about handling with care or worry about preservation. Allowed visitors to fully experience the clothes by trying on... However, don't get the same sense of handling something 'real' and historic as would be with originals.

(p.17)

Replicas are always safer to handle, as they are less fragile so there is less nervousness in handling them. Replicas made with modern techniques are not quite the same as replicas made using traditional methods (e.g. no sewing machine, handstitched and so on) and therefore can't always tell the story of how the objects were made in the past. (p.18)

Replicas are usually made for a distinct purpose such as dressup for visitors or costumes for members of front of house staff so they usually have details or modern additions (zippers, Velcro etc.) that original garments don't have. That said replicas made by re-enactors or for museum display are often done very accurate construction methods and are sometimes very high quality copies of extant garments. Replicas fall in to several different categories depending on their use so there is a huge scale of what types of replica garments exist these days. (p.19)

Overall, the film participants' rating was more critical than that from the other groups with eleven (41%) rating it as excellent, nine (33%) rating it as very good, four (15%) neutral and three (11%) rating it as poor. None rated it very poor. A total of twenty-two (76%) of participants made suggestions about how to make it more effective. Many focused on requests for more information: footage of the original dress; the portraits of Mary; how it was put on and worn; what it was worn with; the information from the sound-spots; Mary's background and her figure; and more of the replica on a real person in motion. Another request was for more clarity on the context of the film before

watching, while a couple of viewers were unsure which dress they were looking at.

That suggests participants might best be directed to re-read the information provided in the call just before watching the film, or to make contemporary and period aspects more obvious in the film, perhaps through using on-screen text. Ninety one percent of participants said they thought Mary's dress would work well in-person or via video call:

Yes – particularly in person and interacting directly with the object (p.23)

I think it would work best in person, say if the researcher were to wear the dress at an event or talk, with the public able to interact and ask questions. Post covid crisis of course. (p.23)

I think in person would have much greater impact – I liked the idea virtually and it made me want to experience it first hand. Especially if you can then ask questions. (p.23)

On the one hand an in-person or video call would allow more flexibility (i.e. opportunity for questions etc) but the film format was probably the most immersive with the music and visuals. In person would have the obvious advantage of trying out the sound-spots? (p.23)

A total of twenty-eight (93%) of participants said they would like to experience **the artifact** Mary's dress in person, try the sound-spots and heighten the experience:

In person or via video call would feel very special - increasing the sense of interactivity. (p.23)

Yes - if it was in a relevant location e.g. Mary's house, or exhibition on her, even an exhibition on TB. (p.26)

A total of twenty-nine (90%) of participants said they would like to see the original dress. Reasons for that included experiencing the real thing and its link to history, being able to touch it, being able to compare the two dresses, and for the experience generally:

To touch the fabric. To see the stitching. To pay my respects to her. (p.27)

Yes to see it and then be able to touch the replica would enhance the experience. (p.26)

Yes, I would like to see it, and the replica you have created, side by side. It would be nice to see how well you have managed to copy each detail in stitching, fabrics, etc. (p.27)

Yes, having the two dresses side by side would make for a special event and opportunity to discuss ideas and impressions around originality, re-creation/replica, interpretation, also conservation, ownership and so on. (p.27)

If I got in intrigued by Mary's story ... it might be interesting to see it. But not essential. In fact, main reason for seeing it might become simply to check out just how 'good' the replica is (having been sold the idea that the replica is very authentic...!)

(p.27)

Following the film testing, in-person participants were also asked to watch and review it: nine (75%) rated the film as excellent and three (25%) said very good; seven (58%) of participants suggested changes and five (42%) did not.

On reflection, the film worked more as a trailer for the experience than a short version of it. However, it did fulfil one common request from both the "in person" and video call participants - the wish to see the **artifact** worn either on a stand or on a model. Some detailed suggestions were made for how the film might have better reflected the project. However, many of those suggestions would have necessarily become film-focused projects in their own right.

The following example creates some vivid visual images of the dress fully embodied and returned to life:

The film suggests the dress is beautifully put together and hints at the sophistication and level of research and critical engagement that have led to the making of this dress. So the filming of the dress should be more expressive of this. Without being able to handle or see the dress in person, I would want a film that might include clips of its making, close-ups, the sound of the fabric, as well as giving a good overall image of the

garment. The original dress would presumably have been seen worn by its late owner in a sitting and/or reclining position (given the illness), and maybe standing and walking too. I would have therefore found it interesting to see the replica dress worn by a model, or its maker, in these various positions. To see the dress performed. That the replica dress should have been chosen to be displayed in the film as a historic dress might be accessed in a museum collection (on a mannequin or on a study table) is of course interesting at a historiographic and interpretative level. And this may well have been the explicit intention. Still, given the immense value of the dress, of the original, and of its replica, of the process of research and that of making the replica dress, I feel there is great scope for a different kind of film to be made. One where the layering of interpretation, of voice-overs for example, is less central. One where the dress, its making, its materiality and its performance, might take up all the space and content of the film. ~~(p-21)~~

However, the film did capture the imagination of some participants who felt it might provide a new approach to experiencing dress in a museum setting:

This was a fascinating insight to life 200yrs ago. I would love to spend time in a museum full of this type of interaction with similar historical clothing & hear the spoken stories from the time it would have been worn. ~~(p-22)~~

Its a great way of getting people to not only take an interest in historical dress, but also link it to people who actually lived in the past and wore similar garments. (p.23)

It would make a wonderful attraction, particularly the interactive elements. (p.23)

Think it's a wonderful idea. Really brought the dress to life. You look at costumes in a museum and admire the design or fabric but don't always consider the person that wore it. (p.24)

It was noted at the start of this chapter that COVID19 has made museums and their visitors alike adapt. In that spirit, the objective here was to share the excitement of discovery, an opportunity normally limited to the few and in such a way that no existing knowledge was needed. In so doing, it was discovered that all three of the approaches employed in some way facilitated that broader participation. The in-person experience I brought into people's homes, and in that context the unwrapping was as much a part of it as the actual handling. However, people had to invest time into interpreting it to get the best results. In addition, because the visual image of the artifact on a body was not present, participants could not easily relate it to their own bodies. The video call participants enjoyed being able to direct their own personal tour of the artifact, but some missed being able to actually touch it. The film, too, had potential because it shows Mary in life and in motion, but viewers wanted so much more information.

The ultimate aim was at some point to bring all three elements together and allow people to experience the piece as originally intended. The original



reflection, that the experience is part rummage through a costume archive, and part medical ~~slab~~ dissection, still stands. The feedback suggests participants found the experience interesting and/or fascinating<sup>30</sup>. All of the in person and participant responses demonstrated that it had helped to explore Mary's life, death, and dress. Although some film participants were a little confused by its purpose, many found it informative and the most requested suggestion was for, longer, more detailed, visuals and facts, which show the potential for a film focused project.

This chapter has addressed what have been identified as gaps in the specific field. TB Chic was a moment that at its height had fashion reflecting its symptoms through fashionable dress, hair and make-up. The Graham dress sits at the start of a trend that mirrored the tuberculosis pandemic as it swept through Europe reaching its height in the 1840s. The Graham dress reflects tuberculosis's impact on the body rather than its impact on fashion.

As a result of that investigation, new and innovative ways of bringing dress to life through the use of a whole mediatised approach ~~that~~ has been developed. It is hoped that will have several beneficial applications in a future museum-based, multi-sensory, participant-led, interpretation experience.

## **5.6 Findings**

Although the collected demographics show the participants to be similar in many ways, they do reflect "hard-to-reach" audience involvement. Information

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<sup>30</sup> The most common answer to the question asking participants to sum up the experience in one word, see Appendix IXC.

informally collected, (via the questionnaire which asked participants if they need any additional support to participate, and through discussions before and during the experiences itself), suggested that many participants had disabilities and/or mental health challenges which had either been made worse by lockdown or, in the case of mental health, surfaced for the first time during lockdown. This trend is supported by the World Health

Organizations findings:

The pandemic is increasing demand for mental health services.

Bereavement, isolation, loss of income and fear are triggering mental health conditions or exacerbating existing ones. (WHO, 2020)

This has been aggravated by disrupted or halted critical mental health services in 93% of countries worldwide. In addition, many of the informal activities people use to balance their wellbeing have been inaccessible.

Then, with all museums and collections closed for all or most of 2020, everyone was in the same position. Whether they had frequently visited or had never visited museums before lockdown, they all now had no other access available to this sort of experience when they took part in *A Conversation with Mary's Dress*. Those who frequently visited museums and collections before verbally expressed how much they missed this **this** during the video calls.

Testing took place in a unique and strange cultural landscape. Many of the participants were isolated and/or alone and had been so for months. Learning

about Mary's then-incurable tuberculosis, that meant she was living with the Eighteenth Century equivalent of a chronic health issue, resonated with participants and elicited extra insight about Mary's life based on their own experiences. Participants had been encouraged to think about Mary's dress in relations to their own bodies, but testing during another lung disease pandemic heightened the degree to which her suffering resonated with participants.

Responses suggested the whole experience of *A Conversation with Mary's Dress* captured the participants' imagination. All the in-person and video call participants rated it highly, giving detailed suggestions of how it could be expanded or repeated. Responses to the film were not as positive, but did include many useful suggestions for how it could be extended both in terms of length and content.

The collected data showed that participants who had experienced historic dress and those who had not all found the experience equally positive. This suggests no prior knowledge was needed, and those who had previously handled original historic dress also **found it to be an enriching experience**. The majority of participants who were not able to handle the actual dress wanted to do so and were also keen to see the original, whether or not they had handled historic dress before.

Finally, **in the** one-word response answers, **were requested** where participants were asked to sum up in one word the experience of handling historic dress, if

they had done so here, and their experience of *A Conversation with Marys Dress*. Words which suggested the negative side of handling original dress such as “nervous” or “worried”, were not used to describe *A Conversation with Mary’s Dress*. The following words were all used to describe both experiences: *amazed/amazing, connected, engaging, fascination/fascinating, sensorial/senses*. All suggest the participants found the experience beneficial. The most popular words for *A Conversation with Mary’s Dress* across all three groups were: *interesting, fascinating and immersive/immersed*.

As we hopefully move towards a post COVID19 world, knowing that restrictions are likely to continue and hands-on access may be limited for some time to come, the museum sector still strives to explore ways of unlocking collections, as the following description of a current call for papers suggests:

How can we give access to the vast number of objects in storage? How are institutions showing the hidden histories of their collections? How can similar objects in different collections be brought together? What new tools are emerging for recording and sharing cultural heritage? How are researchers engaging with and making innovative use of collections? (Unlocking Collections, IOHR, March 2021)<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See: <https://www.history.ac.uk/events/unlocking-collections-0> for more details

Despite its limited scope, the approach demonstrated in this study suggests this could support access to delicate objects for a much wider audience both within museums and in people's own homes, physically and virtually.

## **Conclusion**

This PhD project explored historical authenticity, narrative interpretation and the mnemonic experience by measuring the impact on audiences of costume-based artwork in dress-handling sessions within the museum context. In doing so establishing an original contribution, which is outlined below.

### **6.1 Supporting the study of historic dress**

Building on the theory and practice of dress-based artwork outlined in the first chapter and Appendix II, this study has demonstrated that costume-based artwork can support the hands-on study of costumes in museums.

Significantly, this has enabled a wider audience to experience what is normally reserved for curators. In so doing, audiences can learn more about dress, its history and how to handle it. This in turn creates a new audience sector that values dress holdings in archives, ensuring future generations merit items, which previously they have been unable to touch or even see. At the same time, this allows for the better preserving of existing items and limiting wherever possible unnecessary or high-risk handling.

Replicas will never replace the magic of originals. That sentiment emerged strongly from the commentaries returned by the sample group. However, when approached creatively, replicas can and do offer experiences not produced in more traditional settings. This is especially so in the case of items that have a strong provenance or with impressive historical links. Replicas can create a learning experience for handling historic pieces, as in the case of

items in private collections, which are rarely if ever displayed, such as the Graham dress at the centre of this study. Replicas can offer the ability to generate experiences impossible in more traditional settings, such as listening to the **item's** story through sound-spots while handling it and being able to try the garment on.

## **6.2 Creating memorable experiences for audiences**

In Chapter Two, “memorable” was defined as a life-enhancing, learning experience in line with Arts Council England’s *Inspiring Learning for All* framework. With **the artifact**, all the participants in the group that physically handled **it** rated the experience as “memorable” as in either “very good” or “excellent”. Significantly, a similar return came from the group that experienced the dress via the “virtual handling” avenue. All participants again rated that experience as “very good” or “excellent”. The main difference in responses between the groups was that the “virtual” participants consistently repeated the desire to actually handle the dress.

This study underlines strongly the importance of a personal, holistic and multisensory experience in audience interaction with historic dress. This is especially important because at least in the near future, direct handling of objects will continue to be complicated by the effects of the ongoing pandemic. The simple act of passing an object around in a handling session or of trying on items in a dressing up activity are likely to be complicated by additional cleaning and in some cases just not be possible. However, this

study has suggested that some elements of a hands-on experience can be created online as part of a wider facilitated, relaxed embodied performance.

That occurs by using a combination of “mediatised” approaches, mediated experience and the consideration of elements such as the audience choosing their own level of interaction and encouraging them to understand through their own bodies or even their own clothes.

Mary’s dress was the ideal original through which to explore what handling multi-sensory costume-based artwork offers audiences, because it has such a strong provenance. The dress carries with it a huge amount of visual and written information, offering an experience that extends well beyond any normal handling exercise.

Inserting the sound-spots into the **reproduction** allowed for the inclusion of much more information than is normally possible. It utilised a flexible format which placed the participant in control of what they listen to, and when. The soundspots, as a result, lead the user **around** the **artifact**, while learning about the history of its construction. It allowed for the creation of additional design learning experiences that would not have been possible with the original dress. For example, in this way it was possible to include in Mary’s pocket visual images of Mary herself, her family and friends. This approach allowed for a demonstration of precisely how the dress was made. It also enabled the viewer to see how tuberculosis changed Mary internally, by showing the impact on her lungs, just as the dress reflected the changes externally.



All of these elements worked together to create a detailed and powerful story for those who participated in the testing – the most common one-word descriptions of the experience was as “interesting” and “fantastic”.

This study has proved that a replica can offer experiential aspects not normally possible through interaction with an original, in a relaxed and safe/risk free environment.

### **6.3 Developing a framework for practice**

The case studies in appendix II developed a set of learning points. During the process of developing **as an artefact and reproduction of** Mary’s dress, these considerations have highlighted recurring themes and become an important framework of developmental principles, shown In Appendix II. For example, consider learning point five; *the audience contract*. This was key when working across three different approaches, in-person, video calls and film, two of which were not facilitated. Some helped in choosing elements of the final piece, such as learning point four; **objects in life. These are all aspects I want to incorporate and come across to audiences**. This led to the focus on the scripted sound-spots, when the testing environment changed. Also learning point two; *telling stories with care*. The records for the project reflect participant’s reflections on their own experiences of health and wellbeing during lockdown. Suggesting in addition to being well told it had a positive impact on participant’s general wellbeing. (see appendix II for the full learning points)

#### 6.4 Gaps in the knowledge and next steps

The COVID 19 Pandemic which started in the middle of this study presented a challenge, but also a unique opportunity. It enabled me to push my artwork beyond its first-hand, workshop settling and using technology to reach a much wider audience. Being based on a pandemic, it also becomes relevant and relatable to participants without exception. The story at the heart of my study, mirrored experiences of women coming to terms with Covid 19 today. The artwork made visual not just the affects and impact of Tuberculosis, but also Covid 19.

Although the story at the heart of this artwork is that of Mary Grahams, my autoethnographic approach to the research and creation of the final artwork means it is also about my personal experiences, reflections, selection and re-articulation of key moments and quotes. As the communicator of Mary's story, the final artwork, is as much my autobiographical story through a dress, as Mary's.

Focusing on the larger implications of this work and the impact it will have, two key elements have exposed gaps in the knowledge of the field.

With the aspect of TB Chic, the physical evidence of the dynamic interaction between dress and disease demonstrated here shows the clear impact that tuberculosis had on the body. The Graham Dress and later garments show how early Victorian fashions shaped the body to create the fashionable tubercular look. Building on the work of Day (2017) this study identifies how garments of the time physically shaped the body, and creating a modern

reproduction has allowed this to be seen on a contemporary body. Draped on a stand, the Graham dress shows the impact long-term on the body.

There are a number of potential future directions for this research to take. The first can be in a publication discussing 1840s fashion in depth, showing original garments, up close and from all angles on stands. That will help address the gap in knowledge of published dress history concerning the impact of tuberculosis impact. Second, a biography through dress of Mary Graham will detail the wide range of information collected but not used for this study. This could be a book or an audio or audio-visual project. Third, the approach taken to creating the final piece covers the various elements involved, including replication as investigative process, the relaxed embodied approach, and the use of scripted sound-spots in textile artwork. Used together these create a narrative sensory dress-based artwork that can work in a number of contexts, including in-person and virtually. An exhibition would be an excellent starting place for TB Chic through the use of existing dress, further work on Mary's dress and other subjects using the same approach. This would allow for incorporation of all of the elements discussed above.

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