Contemporary Art to Wear at Racine Art Museum



Contemporary Art to Wear at RAM

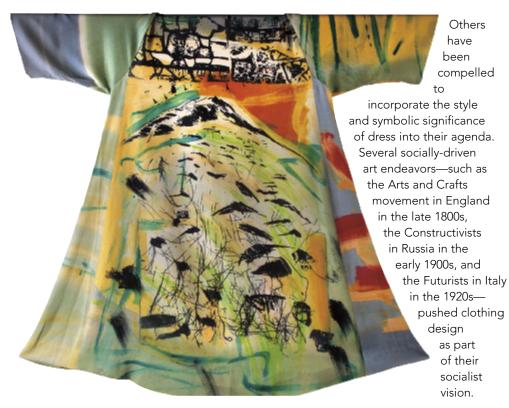
"Art to wear"—wearable clothing that is produced in unique or limited editions—is primarily handmade and reflects a particular style. The genesis of art to wear in the 1960s and 1970s and its trajectory to the present day reflects the dynamics of contemporary society and culture, personal choices of the makers (and patrons), and complex notions regarding aesthetics, the production of works for wear, and the body as form.

Artists associated with this type of work have come from a variety of backgrounds including painting, sculpture, fiber, and even, chemistry. This is telling as it reflects the diverse approaches they bring to making garments and accessories including dyeing, painting, appliqué, embroidery, weaving, and knitting. Many speak about a love for the materials they use, incorporating explorations of media and technique into their process.

Since 2005, Racine Art Museum has strengthened its holdings in this category—adding examples of jackets, vests, shawls, and other wearable pieces by well-known makers such as Karren Brito, Jean Williams Cacicedo, Deborah Cross, Randall Darwall, Tim Harding, Ana Lisa Hedstrom, Julia Hill, Sally Jones, Kiss of the Wolf (Lori and Marshall Bacigalupi), Linda Mendelson, and Carol Motty. RAM is committed to collecting this type of work that is not given much attention by other institutions despite its significance within the field of contemporary craft.

While art to wear, as discussed here, is most directly linked to garments and accessories produced in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, the impetus to "activate" art through wearables has not been limited to time or place.

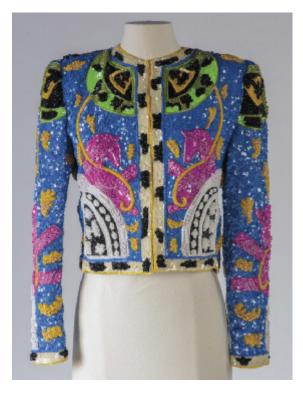
For example, working in Western Europe in the early twentieth century, **Sonja Delaunay** (1885-1979) combined an aesthetic of colorful and geometric abstraction with paintings, interior design, stage set design, theatrical costumes, and clothing. While she approached fashion houses about producing clothing for them, she primarily made it for friends and private clients. While similar to those who came later in her desire to work through an aesthetic vision across dimensions, including clothing, Delaunay was not involved in the same kind of marketplace as those making later in the twentieth century.





the body and the self and the individual and the world at large. Paralleling the pursuits of artists working in other media, many of those associated with art to wear in these years used fiber techniques that were identified as "women's work." Responding to the cultural climate, they regarded their use of these processes—combined with their personal vision—as subversive and a challenge to expectations. By combining marginalized or "low" art forms—weaving, quilting, knitting, etc.—with "high" art forms such as painting, they could subvert perceived values. The art to wear "movement" was shaped in part by the desire for personal freedom and expression, an anti-establishment ethos, and the influence of non-Western cultures.

One direct example of this is the prevalence of the kimono as design inspiration. Japanese in origin, the kimono has a rich traditional and contemporary history. T-shaped and floor-length, the garment can appear voluminous when worn but structured if it is hung flat on a wall. The use of a kimono reflects a connection to a global sense of fashion and aesthetic appreciation as well as a non-conformist approach to dress. When hung, the shape offers a large "canvas" suitable for



exploring artistic concerns yet when worn the fabric can drape and sway in a way that could flatter many body types. Additionally, when considered in the context of garment construction, a kimono is relatively easy to make and it does not have to be customized or tailored in the way that other types of garments do. For those interested in communicating with—and selling to—a broad audience and for those coming to the idea of wearables without having backgrounds in clothing construction, the kimono has been a smart and flexible choice. While not the only garment form employed by those creating art to wear historically or presently—there is an abundance of shawls, coats, and scarves—the kimono represents key facets of interest for many art to wear practitioners, not the least of which is that it is both an aesthetic and functional object.

Jeannette Kastenberg

The Abstract (Jacket), 1992
Silk chiffon, synthetic fiber, sequins, caviar beads, and bugle beads
Racine Art Museum,
Gift of Barbara Tober

(far left) Carole Waller

Priory (Coat and Scarf), 1997
Screenprinted and handpainted silk
Racine Art Museum,
Gift of Drs. Judith and Martin Bloomfield



(above)

Randall Darwall

Float Weave Kimono,1979

Natural and dyed silk

Racine Art Museum,

Gift of Pat Garrett

(below)

Karren Brito

Opera Shawl, ca. 2005

Dyed silk

Racine Art Museum,

Gift of Laurie Waters

Recognizing that individual artists offer varying approaches and perspectives, it seems fair to say that those who have created art to wear relish material explorationexpressing a keen desire to play with pattern, color, texture, movement, and shape as well as technique. A non-exhaustive list of techniques employed include dyeing, weaving, piecing, appliqué, felting, knitting, needlepoint, crochet, embroidery, quilting, and sewing. Some, such as Janet Kaneko, would recycle cast-off kimonos, disassembling a garment and then fashioning a new piece with the segmented panels. Regarding the studio as a lab for working out ideas, Ana Lisa Hedstrom has utilized patterning, piercing, Shibori dyeing,

overdyeing, airbrushing, and painting to create vibrant silk coats. Tim Harding plays with surface and structure—and creating the illusion of depth and dimension—by employing a technique of reverse appliqué that he developed. Because this is, in essence, art that is portable, there has been a long-standing need for venues that could and would sell art to wear garments. Early on, galleries such as Julie: Artisan's Gallery in New York City—which closed in 2013 after 30 years in business—provided an outlet as well as a gathering point for artists, collectors, and the broader public. In recent decades as the art to wear-focused galleries have closed, large craft shows such as those organized by the American Craft Council, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, museum stores, specialty galleries such as Bellagio in Asheville, North Carolina, and, now, the internet have become the primary modes of disseminating this type of work.

As a subset of contemporary craft, it is worthwhile to consider how art to wear connects to other dimensions of the broader craft field. The most obvious comparison would be with art jewelry. Theoretically both areas keep the body in mind as a construct. Art to wear is not body-conscious in the same way as adornment—note the above statements about loose shape and an interest in non-tailored fits—but it is still addressing the shape and form of the body. While for different reasons, some art jewelers and some art to wear garment makers consider their work off the body as well—what does it say or mean in a resting state? Can the piece say something different when it is not being worn?

While RAM is one of the few institutions to carry this work in depth—holdings in 2016 number over 100 pieces—art to wear can be found in other museum collections including Fuller Craft Museum, Massachusetts; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Art and Design, NYC; and Renwick Gallery at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.

The following quotes from artists in RAM's collection—some who were major figures early on—reflect their artistic interests and reveal the ways in which their investigations have expanded:

Deborah Cross

I am drawn to the interplay of fabric and the body. I question ideas about where beauty and comfort are found... The force behind my clothing collection is the manipulation of color and texture. Inspired by this unique dynamic of texture and color, each collection is one element of an extended process of examining and rethinking my previous design decisions. I strive for an architectural feminine, modern feel that transcends seasonal trends and has universal appeal.¹

Randall Darwall

I am a studio clothmaker, trying to weave the best fabric I can for the marketplace, working with methods and dye







Ana Lisa Hedstrom

I really want to understand the process [Shibori—a fabric dyeing technique developed in Japan] and then run with it. I'm not interested in replicating traditional approaches, yet because I teach, I feel I want to understand it well enough to educate a new generation...The original artisans worked with what they had around them, so if I use something contemporary, I feel that it is totally within the spirit...The Shibori tradition was always inventive, adaptable, and exploratory. I think that characterizes my work. I'm very inquisitive. To me that's the nature of Shibori, the true nature.⁴

Linda Mendelson

Many Modern Art "isms" have influenced the content of the pieces -Constructivism, Tonalism, Minimalism, Abstract Expressionism,

and the list goes on. Color progression and incorporation of words into these garments are hallmarks of my work. I live as an artist. My living room, with knitting machines, pressing equipment, hundreds of cones of yarn, thousands of buttons (I love buttons), is the "studio." The kitchen, with measuring equipment and sewing machines is the "cutting and sewing room." The bedroom with a computer, printer, and photo equipment is the "office." Books, as inspiration, are everywhere. The entire apartment is "World Headquarters."5

Lena Vigna

Curator of Exhibitions

(above left) Tim Harding and Kathleen Harding Jacket, ca. 2000 Dved dupioni silk Racine Art Museum, Gift of Dale and Doug Anderson

Kiss of the Wolf (Lori and Marshall Bacigalupi) Three-Quarter Length Vest, ca. 1990 Hand-dyed silk Racine Art Museum, Gift of Drs. Judith and Martin Bloomfield

> (above right) **Deborah Cross** Jacket, ca. 1990 Dyed silk and plastic buttons Racine Art Museum, Gift of Lucy G. Feller

Jean Williams Cacicedo California Dreaming (Coat), ca. 1980 Dyed wool, mohair, cotton, and beads Racine Art Museum, Gift of the Estate of Leslie Gould



Endnotes

1.

http://www.deborahcross.com/profile.html (accessed 21 June 2016).

2.

http://www.randalldarwall.com/artists%20statement.htm (accessed 21 June 2016).

3.

http://www.timharding.com/th/about.html (accessed 21 June 2016).

4.

"Ana Lisa Hedstrom, Interviewed by Lyssa C. Stapleton, December 18, 2014" in *The Box Project: Works from the Lloyd Cotsen Collection*. Los Angeles: The Cotsen Occasional Press, Los Angeles, 2016, p.68-69.

5.

http://www.tafalist.com/profile/linda-j-mendelson/ (accessed 21 June 2016).





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Contemporary Art to Wear at Racine Art Museum is published on the occasion of the exhibition RAM Collects: Contemporary Art to Wear, organized by the Racine Art Museum, Racine, WI and on view at RAM from September 23 through December 30, 2016

Exhibition curated by Lena Vigna, RAM Curator of Exhibitions Proofreaders: Sue Buhler-Maki, Lisa Englander, and Laura Grayson Designer: Jessica Zalewski Schafer, RAM Marketing and Publications Manager All photography by Jon Bolton, Racine

(front cover)
Tim Harding
Oaks Greatcoat
from the Landscape Series, 1988
Dyed cotton
Racine Art Museum,
Promised Gift of Sara and David Lieberman

Racine Art Museum

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ramart.org

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