

**Postgraduate Studentship for PhD Research:  
AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Awards Scheme**

**“Displaying Dress: New Models for Historic Collections”**

**Centre for Museology, University of Manchester  
and Manchester City Galleries**

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

Applications are invited for a three-year full-time Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded PhD studentship for research on the display and interpretation of historic dress collections, to begin in October 2008. The studentship is funded under the AHRC’s Collaborative Doctoral Awards Scheme which promotes partnerships and research collaboration between universities and non-academic institutions. The project is jointly run by the Centre for Museology, University of Manchester and the Gallery of Costume at Platt Hall, part of Manchester City Galleries.

**Research Aims and Objectives**

The overarching aim of the project is to research, test and extend theoretical models for the display and interpretation of historic dress collections, so as to inform and stimulate the development of curatorial practice at the Gallery of Costume and elsewhere. The Gallery of Costume currently has a core audience of users (including academic and professional researchers) and general visitors, but is now seeking to develop its engagement with audience and stakeholders, particularly in relation to the HE sector and the creative industries in Manchester. The Gallery of Costume was founded in 1947 as the first dedicated costume museum in Britain, and its first Keeper (Anne Buck) established both an innovative and practical methodology for the classification of dress collections (which became an international standard via ICOM (International Council of Museums)). Now those methodologies and practices are ripe for review in light of:

- the practical and theoretical implications of reflexive museology (or ‘new museology’) on the display and interpretation of dress collections;
- models of experimental and innovative practice in fashion exhibitions in the UK and overseas;
- changed institutional contexts in Manchester City Galleries, and associated new objectives for audience development and engagement;
- the interests and requirements of target stakeholders (particularly HE and the creative industries);
- the decline in audiences for traditional costume museums (even leading to the closure of some collections, such as in Nottingham) in contrast to the popular

success of many recent temporary exhibitions (eg Vivienne Westwood, Ossie Clark and Kylie, all produced by the V&A.)

The Gallery of Costume at Platt Hall is particularly appropriate for this study because of the depth and range of its collections, which include an unusual emphasis on everyday dress (in contrast to the Fashion Museum, Bath and the V&A, both of which concentrate on designer and couture production) as well as élite production ranging from 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century brocaded and embroidered dress to contemporary couture designs. The diversity of the collection, and its potential to narrate multiple stories, offers the potential to explore a range of display strategies, drawing on approaches in dress studies, material culture theory and museology (for example, an exploration of dress as a museum 'contact zone' (Clifford 1997)).

Although innovation in dress curation has been the subject of a number of academic studies (Taylor, 2002; Steele, 2004) and has been evident in a number of recent exhibitions and institutions, museums like the Gallery of Costume still face the challenge of achieving sustainable renewal, based the development of new paradigms of display and interpretation. It is not the objective of this PhD to resolve those challenges *per se*, but rather to research and develop experimental models, drawing on a comparative study of institutional practice. This evidence- and research-based approach to Gallery redevelopment is a new departure for Manchester City Galleries and will be innovative within the UK museum field. In turn, the issues facing historic dress collections such as this have not been subject to museological analysis, and this PhD has the potential to make a significant contribution to the fields of both museum and dress studies. Collaboration is central to the project objectives and design, as it includes a strong practice-as-research element which, in turn, is informed by the history and resources of the Gallery of Costume and the academic perspective of the Centre for Museology.

### **Intellectual Issues to be Addressed/Problems to be Solved**

1. The failure of dress collections/museums both to retain existing audiences and to attract new audiences can be attributed to lack of investment but to the outmoded display and interpretation of dress, eg. tableau style or period room settings. This style of display is in marked contrast to innovative, recent temporary exhibitions of both historic and contemporary fashion (eg. (*Dangerous Liaisons: Fashion and Furniture*, the Metropolitan Museum of Art New York (2006) and *Spectres: When Fashion Turns Back*, MoMu, Antwerp and the V&A (2005)). This project will identify and analyse innovative practice in a group of UK and international institutions (using both collections and exhibitions), which will then inform the development and evaluation of two experimental displays using the historic collections of the Gallery of Costume. The potential of such displays to engage audiences of researchers, designers, students and non-specialist visitors will also be assessed, using the evaluative resources and expertise of Manchester City Galleries.

2. As with many fields of museum practice, there is frequently a practical and intellectual distance between academic research and theorisation in dress studies and the display and interpretation of dress collections. While this project does not

seek to erase this divide, it will explore the nature of this relationship and make proposals for developing reciprocal exchange between the academy and the museum.

### **Supervision arrangements**

The project will be jointly supervised by Dr Miles Lambert at the Gallery of Costume and by Dr Helen Rees Leahy, Centre for Museology at the University of Manchester. While providing the doctoral student with the broad outlines of the research, we recognize that the student should have scope to formulate and shape the final detail. Training will be provided in accordance with School of Arts Histories and Cultures and Faculty of Humanities requirements, which follow the AHRC Research Training Framework. In addition, Dr Lambert will ensure that the student has strong support from Manchester City Galleries, and will mentor and train the student in aspects of MCG's work and ethos that are relevant to the project.

### **Methodology**

The student will undertake a comparative study of curatorial practice at a small number of UK and international institutions. The final selection of case studies will be agreed by the student and their supervisors, but at this stage, candidate sites include MoMu, Antwerp and the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York (both linked to institutes of higher education), as well as the Fashion Museum, Bath and the V&A. The analysis of these case studies, as well as a literature review and research into past and present practice at the Gallery of Costume, will inform proposals for two experimental temporary displays at the Gallery, mounted in Year 2 and at the start of Year 3. Visitors' and stakeholders' responses to these displays will be evaluated by Manchester City Galleries.

The successful applicant will draw upon the professional expertise of curatorial staff at Manchester City Galleries and in the Centre for Museology. He or she will benefit from the established networks of expertise with other research institutions and dress collections, in the UK and overseas. Supervision will be provided by Dr Helen Rees Leahy at the Centre for Museology, and by Dr Miles Lambert at the Gallery of Costume.

### **Funding**

The studentship will cover tuition fees and will provide a maintenance grant (as a guide, the basic maintenance grant for 2007-8 is £12,940.00).

### **How to Apply**

For further information on the AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Awards Scheme, see: [http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/university\\_staff/postgrad/collaborative\\_doctoral\\_awards.asp](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/university_staff/postgrad/collaborative_doctoral_awards.asp).

Successful applicants must meet the residency and academic eligibility criteria and are subject to the same regulations, terms and conditions as any standard research student funded by the AHRC. Details of these are available on the AHRC website.

For further information about this project and to register an expression of interest, contact Dr Helen Rees Leahy by email: [helen.rees.leahy@btinternet.com](mailto:helen.rees.leahy@btinternet.com).

Expressions of interest must be received by **Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2008**.

Completed applications should then be submitted to University of Manchester on the standard PhD application form by **Monday 2nd June 2008**.

For details of how to apply and the online application form see:  
<http://www.arts.manchester.ac.uk/postgraduatestudy/apply/>

Interviews will be held in Manchester on **Friday 27<sup>th</sup> June 2008**.

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