

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Llewellyn Negrin, an adjunct senior researcher in the School of Creative and Performing Arts at the University of Tasmania, to discuss fashion as an embodied art form. So first, can you tell us, what does that mean?

LN: Unlike traditional art forms like painting and sculpture, I think the key thing about fashion is that it's designed to be worn. And while that might seem a pretty obvious thing to say, when fashion gets displayed in the context of an art museum, what tends to happen is that its connection with the body is lost and viewers are encouraged to look at it in the way that they would any other art form, that is as a purely visual form, disconnected from the body. And so I think that essential connection is lost in the process.

AT: So one of the previous conversations that I've had with Simeran Maxwell, who is a curator at the National Gallery of Australia specializing in textiles, we were talking about the collection of designers Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson. And because this collection that was largely acquired by the NGA, so they didn't get everything, but they got a sizable chunk of their collection. And Simeran was saying that one of the really fascinating things about these pieces is that these were often Jenny and Linda's actual clothes, like they designed them to wear themselves. And so there's stories attached to it where it's like, oh yeah, there's a small wine stain from this party that one of them went to. And it adds this whole layer of texture, so to speak, to these clothing items because they were actually part of someone's lives. They weren't, like you said, just sitting on a shelf or hanging on a wall.

LN: That's right. And I think that this is such a crucial element that's lost when fashion is displayed as a purely visual art form. That sense of it as it's part of our lived experience and the way in which I think clothes are integrally related to the body, both in that they shape and influence the way we move through space. So, for example, if you wear a short miniskirt or high heels, that influences the way you walk or the way you bend. And conversely, clothing as well as shaping the way we move, it itself bears the imprint of the body. So things like stains, a torn hem or perspiration marks, all these elements. And they're usually removed when the items are displayed. So you don't get a sense that they were ever worn or of that life that they had outside of the museum context.

[Listen to Simeran Maxwell on Linda Jackson, Jenny Kee and Sonia Delaunay](#) or [read the transcript](#).

AT: Well, and like you were saying, it loses that element of not just how the person changed the clothing, but how the clothing shaped the person. So as you were saying that I was thinking of how many constraining fashions have been imposed upon women, shall we say. And I don't just mean corsets, because my understanding of fashion history is that the tightness of corsets and everything and the uncomfortableness of corsets has been largely overblown by later media. And that's not something I know enough about to comment on it, really. I'm thinking of bustles and hoop dresses, like the kind of clothing where you are literally a danger to anything that might get knocked off a table.

LN: Mm, mm. That's right. And it's interesting that the addition of these sorts of armatures, you might call them, focused on women's bodies. There are examples where men wore corsets and so on. But by far, the large majority of these movement-inhibiting devices have been applied to women's bodies. And so I think that's an interesting, significant. It's not by accident, I think. It's to do with, I think, that a lot of the time that women served a sort of ornamental function. And they, particularly the women of the upper classes, during the time when these sorts of fashions were particularly prevalent, women were not encouraged to be physically active. And really, their function was more decorative rather than physically engaging with the world around them.

AT: And I love when people act like fashion that limits a woman's functionality is a thing of the past, because I have to assume that those people have never seen stiletto heels.

NL: Mm, yes, that's right. So we haven't left those days behind us. And I think also an interesting, more contemporary development is that while there mightn't be so many body-restricting garments, although, as you say there, it still are the stiletto heels and so on. But things like dieting is another form of corsetry, but it's applied directly to the body. But it's another form of control of a woman's body. So I think the idea that clothing is less restricted than it used to be, has to be tempered with a realization that there are other forms in which the body is now disciplined, not just through the clothes we wear, but other mechanisms like dieting and so on. [Listen to Dr Céline Leboeuf on the tyranny of thinness](#) or [read the transcript](#).

AT: And I actually do have another episode with Céline Leboeuf, where we talk all about the dangers of skinny culture. But to what extent do you think, from a historical standpoint, I would assume that there was more focus on making the clothes fit the woman rather than this idea that there was one body type that everyone should conform to? Or am I just idealizing the past when people actually had clothes tailored for them if they could afford it?

LN: It's hard to assess that. I think that that's probably true, that in the past, at least for the well-to-do, that the clothing was made to measure, as it were. So presumably it was taking more account of the body for which it was designed. But then on the other hand, there are all these devices where the body was being forced into all these shapes in order to accommodate the fashion of the time. So the thing is that it wasn't really the natural body as such that was the basis on which the clothing was designed. The body that the clothing was made for had already been constrained by all these different devices that were applied to it. So I think even in the so-called made-to-measure era, I think the degree to which clothing took into account the natural contours of the woman's body was really minimal.

AT: I think I may also be imposing what I think of as style upon fashion. And so in my mind, this is obviously not an academic definition or anything, but in my mind, fashion is what is trendy, what everyone is wearing, what the society is telling you you should be wearing. Whereas style is more timeless. It's often individual. I'm loathe to bring up Coco Chanel because she was a Nazi, but the little black dress being that timeless elegance. And because it's vague enough, what is a little black dress can be whatever suits your body type individually. So in my mind, style is both broader and more specific, if that makes sense, compared to fashion, which is always changing. I wouldn't necessarily say evolving. Sometimes it does seem like it's devolving. (laughter)

LN: Yeah, this idea of style as less ephemeral, maybe transcending a particular time, I sort of understand what you're getting at there. And I think that perhaps in the work of more recent designers, there's much more a sense of taking the body into account and not imposing a particular fashionable or trendy shape on the body. And certainly that was the case in the costume art exhibition that I was involved with at the Met, where one of the emphases of that exhibition was about acknowledging different body shapes and sizes. And so the designers that were selected, the work that was selected was very much about acknowledging rather than denying the diversity of different body shapes. So I thought that's interesting that although the fashion industry is still very much governed by this very narrowly defined, standardized image of what the beauty ideal is, there are trends within it that are challenging that idea. And there are designers who are emerging who are now starting to embrace bodily diversity much more.

AT: One of the things that's particularly interesting to me about the Met when it comes to fashion and costumes specifically is that a lot of people don't realize that the reason that the Met Gala is hosted each year is that the Costume Institute is not actually funded through the museum's budget. And so the Met Gala is actually a fundraiser that has just been really elevated by women like Anna Wintour and, before her, Diana Vreeland, really making it a huge event. And this speaks to something else that came up in actually a different conversation with Simeran, where we were talking about historical textiles, so specifically quilts, and how

basically anything that actually serves a practical function has often been considered craft and therefore less prestigious than art. So like you referred to at the very beginning of the conversation, traditional art forms like painting and sculpture and the fact that the costume art exhibition that you were talking about, it's not assumed that costumes are inherently art. Like even though we are now putting it in a museum and acknowledging it, there's still that feeling on some level for a lot of people that this is not on the same level. And apart from the fact that when we're talking about historical or vintage outfits, there is that element of, this has been worn. There's a good chance that from a condition standpoint, it's not in great shape depending on what has been done to it. But this also has always felt gendered to me because textiles and other practical items have often traditionally been women's work. And so my episode about Annie Albers, we talked about how the reason that she worked in textiles was because Bauhaus wouldn't let women work in the other areas. She was kind of forced into textiles. And then once she was there, she revolutionized it. So, good for her, but that still sucks.

[Listen to Simeran Maxwell and quilts at the NGA](#) or [read the transcript](#).

[Listen to Imogen Dixon-Smith on Anni Albers](#) or [read the transcript](#).

LN: Yes, absolutely. Yes. I think that's very true that one of the reasons why fashion hasn't been regarded with the same status as so-called traditional arts of painting and sculpture has been in its association with women. And it's seen as a predominantly feminine pursuit or interest and therefore lesser because of that. And also because of its practical function, that's another reason that it's been relegated to an inferior status. And it was interesting when I was working with Andrew Bolton on this exhibition. And he was saying how, particularly when he first joined the staff at the Met, fashion was considered right down the bottom of the pecking order, because they see themselves primarily as an art museum. And fashion was seen as a decorative art, which was not at the same stature as the other arts. So part of his aim during his tenure there has been to raise the profile of fashion. And I think he's done that pretty successfully. I welcome the increasing acceptance of fashion as being on a par with these other painting and sculpture and so on. But at the same time, I think that it has come at a bit of a cost. And that is, it's only through its denial with its connection to the body that it's gained acceptance within the art world. So I think that there's still further work to be done for fashion to be able to claim a place for itself alongside these other art forms. And I think also it's connected with the privileging that we give to mind over body too. That's another element in why fashion has been relegated to a lesser status, because in Western culture, we consider mind superior to body. And that's also associated with gender hierarchy. So mind, male, body, female. So they become mutually reinforcing, these different hierarchies. And so for all these reasons, I think fashion has struggled to be given the same sort of serious consideration as painting and sculpture.

AT: Well, kind of seems like you want it both ways. You want it respected enough to be in a museum, but you also think that, from what I understand, it belongs on bodies, not mannequins. And there's really no, unless you want to pay some human mannequins, which I have to point out, if anybody doesn't know this, mannequin used to be women. Like, it used to be actual people who modeled clothing for prospective buyers. And I always find that fascinating. It's like how computers used to be women. Like, there's so many words. But the Met has done something really interesting where they are displaying fashion garments alongside paintings and other artworks from across the museum to illustrate that relationship between clothing and the body. But you really can't resolve that conflict, can you? Between the idea that clothes are meant to be worn by people, but also you want them to be appreciated in this way. Is there actually any way to resolve that?

LN: Some strategies that have been used in this exhibition to reorient the viewer towards this different way of thinking about fashion, even when it's on display in an art museum. And a couple of devices is, first of all, the mannequins, usually the mannequins that are used to display fashion garments in art exhibitions conform to a sort of standardized, idealized typology. And they're designed in such a way that they become almost invisible.

It's a bit like a frame around a painting. You're meant to focus on the painting, not the frame around it. And a bit the same with the mannequins. So they're all meant to look pretty much the same so that you don't take much notice of them and just focus on the garment on display. But in this particular exhibition, some of the mannequins were actually custom made based on the bodies of actual people. And particularly in the section on the corpulent body and the disabled body, they had actual mannequins whose bodies radically depart from the sort of standardized form. So the result is that you can't help but notice the body that's wearing the garment. And that's the intention that your attention is drawn, not just to the garment, but to the way it's worn on that particular body. Another device that's used in the exhibition is giving the dressed mannequins prominent place. So a number of them are displayed on very high pedestals, six-foot-high pedestals. So when you go in there and that's what you've noticed first as these very imposing looking mannequins on these high pedestals. And then the artwork with which they're paired is embedded within the pedestal. So after looking at the dressed mannequin, your gaze moves down to the artwork. So the idea is that you're viewing the artwork through the lens of the dressed body rather than the other way around. So there are all these sort of devices that have been used as a way of trying to get viewers to relate in a different way to fashion as art.

AT: This is admittedly more thought than I've ever put into mannequins. But as you've been talking, I've been thinking about the ways that mannequins are often deliberately dehumanized. So like their faces often are not well defined, their feet don't have toes. There's all these aspects of mannequins that deliberately dehumanize them. And so it's interesting to think about mannequins that have been not mass produced and not designed in a way that makes them less human, but rather emphasizes humanity that is supposed to go with these items.

LN: Yeah, that's a very good point. And that reminds me too, another aspect of the mannequins is that they have reflective surfaces instead of faces. The idea there is that when you're looking at them, you see your own reflection. And so you imagine yourself inhabiting the garments that are on display. So that's another way, if you like, of personalizing the encounter with the dressed body. You're almost vicariously placing yourself in the position of the mannequin through this device of the reflective surface. I think in all these different ways, it's moving away from that idea of the depersonalized mannequin.

AT: So a common frustration that I feel when we consider art across any art form is how often men are the creators and women are the typically passive model. And in big name fashion houses, I wouldn't be surprised if women are also the ones actually doing a lot of the physical construction work, even if men are the ones designing it, or if they have sub designers, I don't know what the official term is there, but if they've got a team of designers, but it's just the guy at the top whose name goes on everything, regardless of where that design actually came from. But I feel like this is particularly the case where men are the subject and women are the object in fashion, where certainly not all, but a majority of those big name designers seem to be men. Women are the targeted consumers, they are typically the models, but it is very rare for them, at least in the contemporary fashion space, as far as I know, this is not my area. But my impression is very much that while there have been plenty of women who did make a success as designers, it is very much male-dominated, even as women are the main audience.

LN: Yeah, it seems quite a paradox that, on the one hand, fashion is associated with the feminine, and women are the ones who are seen to have the greatest interest in fashion, and yet, as you point out, most of the big names in fashion continue to be male. In terms of recent fashion designers, I was trying to think of who are the female fashion designers that immediately come to mind, and mainly it was Vivienne Westwood and Rei Kawakubo, and then you start to struggle, and you go back, there's Coco Chanel and Schiaparelli, and then you start to think, well, gosh, where are all the rest of them? And I think that's still very much the case, that there's many more well-known male designers dominating the field. I was thinking about that again in relation to the Costume Art Institute exhibition, and there's quite a large proportion of lesser-known early career

designers whose work is included in the exhibition, and there's a greater representation of women amongst those. And when I focused on what they were doing in their work, it tends to be challenging stereotypical presentations of the female body. So they figure particularly in the sections where, there's one section on the pregnant body where there's a number of young female designers whose garments, instead of seeking to minimise the baby bump, which was the idea underlying traditional maternity, where they embrace the pregnant body and celebrate it rather than disguise it, or it was almost seen as something to be shameful of, you wouldn't go out in public if you were pregnant sort of idea. And similarly with the corpulent body, there's some young designers like Michaela Stark, who's actually an Australian, whose designs flaunt rather than seek to minimise the fleshliness of the corpulent female bodies. So I think that maybe there's a glimmer of hope in the future that there seems to be more young up and coming female designers and they're breaking new ground in the way in which they're seeking to remodel or re-present the female body.

AT: I also feel like we need to acknowledge that there is a difference between what is considered high fashion and, I don't know if it's called low fashion, but whatever the opposite of that is. I've just been thinking about like names that I recognise in fashion spaces that aren't considered high fashion. So like Gloria Vanderbilt, I believe was best known for her jeans, like she did other things, she made scarves that were based on her own painting and other types of artwork. But what I really knew her for was jeans that actually fit what I consider normal female bodies well, meaning not whatever the model of the day was meant to be. I think of Vera Bradley, which is a hugely successful company founded by two women. Lane Bryant, which isn't a designer, but it's a company. But again, that was targeting "plus size" women. And so I don't know to what extent the idea of designing clothes for the everyday, more common body types compared to high fashion often, to me at least seems like it is designed to not be functional, in ways that we've talked about before, a lot of the time. But I've heard, and I don't know if this is a joke or not, but the reason models are so skinny is because it's as close as you can get to a hanger. And so I'm curious if, from your perspective, do you think women are more likely to make more accessible clothing, I suppose?

LN: That's the feeling I'm getting, when I look at the work of recent female fashion designers that even in the realm of high fashion where, as you say, they're less likely to be focused on producing functional garments and so on. But I think even at that level now, those considerations about how the garment relates to the body in ways that don't reinforce dominant notions of femininity, it has really been taken on board, even the sort of realm of high fashion. It'll be interesting to see what impact, because at the moment these designers are not widely recognised, they'd still be seen as relatively marginalised in the industry. So it will be interesting to see in the future to what extent things change within the realms of high fashion. It's interesting that relationship between high and low fashion, because we often assume that high fashion sets the trends and then things trickle down. But there's a case to be made that often it happens the other way around, where things happen in sort of popular culture that then get taken up by fashion designers. So it can work in reverse as well.

AT: I'm curious where you stand on vintage clothing being worn, because one of the subjects that came up when I was chatting with Simeran was the Kim Kardashian Marilyn Monroe dress situation, which for anyone who's not aware, Kim Kardashian was loaned a very famous Marilyn Monroe dress that did not fit her. That any idiot could have seen was not going to fit her, and damaged, I believe irreparably, this dress. There were photos of how the fabric had been stretched and there's beading that's now messed up. And apart from this dress wasn't gonna fit you, which objectively, I don't know that I've talked to anybody who said that, I believe it was Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum that loaned this to her, which as far as I know, they're not a particularly prestigious or respected institution to begin with. But they rightfully caught a lot of flack for this one as "you cannot be trusted with the items in your collection if this is how you're going to allow them to be treated." But even if you do have a garment that fits the body that is going to be wearing it, I would imagine there's all sorts of other factors involving how delicate material either was in the first place or has become over time, the risk of

just normal wear and tear damage, like we've mentioned potentially getting a stain on it and that sort of thing. So I'm just curious where you stand on the question of vintage garments being worn, especially by people who have not demonstrated they can be trusted with them, shall we say?

LN: I don't think that recognizing that fashion is an embodied art form necessarily means that the best way of experiencing it in the museum would be to allow people to wear the garment. So I would balk at that. So I don't think literally that would be the best way forward. I think there are other ways one can evoke the sense of how a garment relates to the body without people actually literally trying them on or wearing them. In some cases, you might allow people to touch the fabric or have a sample similar to it that people could touch to get a sense of the tactility of it or so on. But yeah, my initial response would be I'd try and find other ways of conveying that experience without actually allowing the garments to be worn if they're considered valuable pieces that you want to keep for posterity.

AT: I generally fall on the side of assuming humans can't be trusted with nice things. (laughter) Because you mentioned dress-up, I have actually been to an event before, I think multiple events, where you could try on theatrical costumes, which, again, isn't the same as fashion, but is its own, I would say it's actually a more respected art form, costume design, because it falls in realms like theater, film, television, where many different aspects of the productions are being recognized. And so things like scenic design, for example, or cinematography and these sort of lesser-known jobs that different kinds of artists can have do get recognized at the Oscars, the Emmys, the Tonys, etc. The flip side of that is that I feel like costumes themselves, because there are so many different levels of, you've got community theater, you've got school theater, you've got obviously professional theaters, but even then there's tiers of the off-off-off-off Broadway, which I assume is in New Jersey, versus the big Broadway shows. And so there's all these different tiers to what costume design can be. And I love trying on costumes. I would imagine most people do, but I could be projecting. Just this feeling that you can step outside of who you are temporarily and become something else just because of the clothes you're wearing is a fascinating feeling.

LN: Mm hmm. Yes. I think there's certainly a place for, if you could find maybe less precious versions of historical garments or whatever. It reminds me, I remember visiting Sovereign Hill in Ballarat, Gold Town, and you can dress up and have your photograph taken and dress up in historical outfits. So I guess that's an example of how you can get a sense of how it would have felt to wear those garments. And it is an interesting sort of experiment to be able to physically engage. So I think there are contexts where that probably is a valid, because as you say, how you dress can really impact how you feel about yourself. And you don't realize that until you actually physically inhabit this different garment. And especially when it's very different from what you'd normally wear in your everyday life. And it's a way of, making the experience, well, literally more embodied than just viewing it as an outside observer.

AT: And there's a difference, obviously, between re-creation clothing. So like you might find at a medieval style Ren Faire. It could be accurate, it could not be, there's a whole spectrum there. And then something like, when we're talking about vintage garments that are delicate, like the NGA, I believe has a whole collection of Ballet Russe costumes, many of which were designed by prominent artists of the day. So again, when we're talking about that difference between art and craft, and is fashion a lesser art form? Okay, well, if the same artist whose painting you just bought for a million dollars also designed the costumes for this ballet, why are you saying that his or her artwork is more valuable in one form than another? It doesn't make sense.

LN: Mm-hmm. Well, Diaghilev commissioned well-known artists at the time to design some of the costumes, and why should they be considered any lesser because they take the form of costumes rather than paintings? And yet there were, I'm thinking, some of the Russian constructivists, some of the women, like Goncharova, a

lot of her output was in costume design for theater. Those works don't have the same recognition as her paintings, so they are very deeply ingrained prejudices, I think.

AT: And dance costumes are particularly interesting in this concept of the embodied art form, because the designers can't just make something that looks beautiful on someone standing still. They have to make sure that not only the dancer can move, but that whatever they are designing is going to work with the choreography. The costumes are an active part of the choreography along with the dancers.

LN: That's right, yes. And I think that's an important aspect to consider when you're viewing fashion as an art form, that it is always designed with the body in mind. And even the most sculptural, if you like, non-functional forms of fashion, always there's a body that's imagined to be inhabiting that form. So you can't consider one without the other. And I think that the best designers are the ones that do have that in the forefront of their minds. I'm thinking someone like Issey Miyake, for example, his works have often been described as almost like kinetic sculptures, because they really look like nothing. Some of them look like just sort of shapeless sacks when they're not on the body, and they really only come to life once they're on a body. And they really depend on the insertion of the body to complete the garment, as it were. It's really only half the experience if you see the garment just on a hanger or something separated from the body. He had this idea of how the garment is constantly reconfiguring itself depending on the nature of the body that's wearing it and how that body moves and so on in space.

AT: I know I've seen videos, again when we're specifically talking about performance costumes, where there will often be footage of the performance so that you can see these items in action. But what you're just describing also makes me kind of want to see a robot, like a robot mannequin who can actually move so you can see all these differences. But again, I'm sure the older ones are probably too delicate for that.

LN: Well, there was actually one of the exhibits in the Costume Art exhibition, which was taken from a performance, a shroud on which was imprinted a body of an old woman. And in the exhibition, you did just see the shroud. I think it was on a mannequin. But in the original, it was a performance piece and the artist inhabited the shroud and you could actually see her body sort of transforming from a much younger person into this older person as she donned the shroud and then moved with it. And yes, it did, it added a whole new dimension to the experience of the piece to see it in motion.

AT: So the concept of "clothes are meant to be worn" seems pretty straightforward. What is it about this topic that made you want to spend your time really digging into this as an idea and I guess teasing out other implications from what most people would say, "yeah, clothes are meant to be worn. And?"

LN: Well, I suppose I started off by being primarily interested in clothing as an image, if you like, or how the body was represented in art and in advertising. From there, I got interested in how that impacts the way we see our own bodies as works of art in a sense and how we fashion our bodies. And that's where my interest in fashion came from, how we fashion our bodies in accordance with these images that we've been bombarded with. So at first, my main focus was on fashion as a visual phenomenon and also what it symbolized, what are the meanings that it communicates. After that, I realized that that's an important element of the way we experience fashion, but also there are other ways in which it impacts us besides the image that it presents of us to the world.

Going back to my early remarks about how it can enhance or impede movement, how it can make you feel about yourself. And that's not just about its look. It's about, literally about its feel. It's the tactile feel on the body, whether it feels tight or loose. And these are all bodily experiences that, sort of subconsciously usually, operate on us. But when you delve into really can have a significant influence on how confident you are in the way you

present or whatever. More and more, this aspect of fashion has been the focus and interest. And it's interesting, I think it's not just in the realm of fashion. Even in our experience of art, people are now beginning to think what we understand in the traditional terms as art, saying, well, our engagement with art shouldn't just be limited to a visual experience. And so artists themselves are starting to think about more immersive forms of art engagement, which involve the whole body. So I think it's part of a general growing of interest in looking more broadly at how we interact with the world beyond just the purely visual.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.