Grant Proposal: History of Women’s Fashion in the U.S. in the Twentieth Century

Executive Summary

The Schlesinger Library is exhibiting pieces from their collections on the history of women’s fashion in the United States; vintage and modern fashion magazines, as well as select clothing items and accessories will be displayed. The exhibit will focus on the twentieth century and be arranged by decade, to illustrate how fashion influenced and responded to the social and economic conditions of the time, through today. The recent donation of magazines and fashion accessories from the estate of Lily Price prompted the creation of the exhibit.

The library is asking for $17,700 to fund an accompanying speaker series. The staff plans to work overtime, free of pay, to make this possible. The total estimated cost of the librarians’ time and speaker series combined is $21,250. The exhibit and speaker series provide an excellent opportunity for the library to promote its collections, engage the local community with a popular interest exhibit, provide an historical understanding of the fashion industry to the academic community, and create a space to discuss current issues related to women’s bodies.

Background

Community: The Schlesinger Library is a part of Harvard University, located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the greater Boston area. Cambridge has a central public library and six local branches. According to Cambridge: Just the Facts, the city’s population is about two-thirds white; the majority of residents are between age 25 and 44; one-third are foreign-born; seventy-percent of those over age 25 have a bachelor’s degree or higher (2009). The city describes itself
as a place where “counter-culture lives, classic culture thrives, and multi-culture is a way of life” (Cambridge Office for Tourism, n.d.).

**Library:** The Schlesinger Library hosts one of the greatest collections of archives of women’s history in the United States. The collection began in 1943, when suffragist leader Maud Wood Park dedicated her extensive collection of memorabilia from the suffrage movement. The library blossomed in the 1960s and 1970s under the feminist movement and continues to grow. It offers a variety of exhibits, seminars, and movie nights to promote women’s history throughout the year. This exhibit will be unique in that the speaker series will be free to the public.

**Patrons:** The library serves two major groups of patrons: an academic community of researchers and local residents who are interested in the library’s collections and events. The academic community is generally aware of additions to the collection since the library publishes a bi-annual newsletter to promote its activities. However, more outreach is needed to bring in the broader community. Many local patrons are educated intellectuals interested in life-long learning. Given the success of our discussion/movie nights, we are confident that people would be more interested to attend our exhibits if they were also given an opportunity to talk with one another and a specialist about the exhibit and issues it raises.

**Staff:** The library has just over forty staff members. The Director, Nancy Cott, has been providing oversight and leadership to the Schlesinger library for over 25 years. Manuscript Catalogers responsible for the History of Fashion collections developed the idea for the exhibit and worked closely with several Library Assistants to plan it out. Under the leadership of the Curator of Book and Printed Materials Librarian, Marylène Altieri, these staff members will be involved with preparing and overseeing all details of the exhibit and the speaker series.
Statement of Need

Local, non-academic use of the library has been low this year while the public libraries have been experiencing a high volume of local patrons. The Schleslinger library wants to engage the local community in its research and has developed this History of Fashion exhibit to appeal to popular interest. Many men and women are interested in current and vintage fashion. But beyond interest in designers and clothing, many people are interested in how the female body has been appropriated by the fashion industry, body image, and what clothing says about a culture’s view of women. We want to raise awareness of current issues that women face regarding their bodies, and root the discussion in women’s history: their struggle for equality and fight against sexual objectification. According to Crane (2000), the gold standard in fashion history, there is disagreement whether fashion today is a sign of women’s sexual empowerment or a visual representation of their passivity (p. 230). There are a myriad of opinions on the subject.

“Diverse images in fashion magazines associated with clothing styles for women can be seen as an indication of the struggle to define women’s identities in the late twentieth century,” (Crane, 2000, p. 18). Women today struggle with a host of body issues; the media’s representations and idealizations of the feminine have had a negative impact on self-esteem in teenage girls. “For all its glamour and frivolity, fashion happens to be a relevant and powerful force in our lives. [P]eople care greatly about the way they look, which affects both their self-esteem and the way other people interact with them,” (Agins, 2006, p. 423). Although fashion allows one to express oneself, it also indicates social status, which can hinder self-expression.

The library believes that a topic of popular interest will draw community members to the library and introduce them to the relevance of the collections. In 2009, Duke University, the British Library, University of California – Davis, Florida State, and the University of
Pennsylvania, hosted exhibits related to the topic of fashion and experienced above average use of the library (Kent, 2009, p. 45). We propose to take our exhibit a step further; the speaker series will raise relevant and important issues that our attendees relate to. We believe it is important for people to have a space for discourse about topics which affect their lives. Unlike most seminars and events, which require registration and a registration fee, this speaker series will be free of charge. We believe that charging patrons a fee would disincline them to attend.

The Stanton Library, in Sidney, Australia, hosted a successful workshop with Jenny Kee, fashion designer, in October 2006, free of charge (Schiavone, 2006).

The Schlesinger library also wants to promote itself to the academic community. The subject of fashion is not generally viewed as having much historical import and has often been looked down upon as a trivial subject not worthy of academic pursuit (English, 2007, p. 1). This exhibit seeks to validate the historical importance of women’s fashion in the past 100 years in the United States and to promote fashion itself as a subject worthy of study (Crane, 2000, p. 67).

Fashion offers valuable insight into the historical context and culture in which it existed (Damhorst, 2006, p. 411). The limitations and functions of women’s clothing and accessories speak volumes about their daily activities and status within a society.

One of the goals of the library is to advance the study of women’s history – by providing comprehensive documentation and providing a safe space to discuss our findings and related issues. Body image is a sensitive and important topic among women; we want to validate their individual experiences and create a supportive and educational setting for them to share their experiences. This exhibit offers a superior opportunity to draw members of the communities to the Schlesinger library to support its collection and purpose. In order to secure top professors and leaders in the field as our speakers, we need outside funding to keep the speaker series free.
**Proposed Program/Service/Initiative**

The goal of this project is twofold: first, to promote the Schlesinger library by bringing local and academic community members to this exhibit and accompanying speaker series, and second, to engage the attendees in a discourse about the historical significance of fashion to today’s world and the current issues surrounding women’s bodies in today’s culture.

The exhibit will be open February 15, 2010 through July 15, 2010. Our library staff prepares several exhibits each year and is well prepared for one of this nature. The speaker series will be held the week of March 8, 2010 to correspond with National Women’s History week; it will span two evenings. We intend to line up three speakers: a renowned professor in the field, a fashion designer, and a specialist in body image. In addition to speaker fees, we need to fund hotel rooms and accommodations, including transportation and meals, for our speakers.

The following individuals have tentatively agreed to participate as speakers:

- **Susan Michelman, Ph.D., Professor, School of Human Environmental Sciences, University of Kentucky.** Dr. Michelman teaches courses in 20th Century Fashion, Fashion Theory, and Merchandizing. Her current research involves body image and dress of girls ages 10-16.
  - *Proposed topic: Fashion as an indicator of the changing status, role, and view of women in Twentieth-Century America*
- **Anna Sui, Chinese-American fashion designer,** recently partnered with Target to produce a cheap-chic line of clothes inspired by the hit TV show *Gossip Girl.*
  - *Proposed topic: Nothing new is new – historical inspiration for today’s fashion*
Proposed topic: Fashion, gender, body image, and the construction of the self

We have already started marketing the exhibit to the academic community through flyers, our bi-annual newsletter, and posters around campus. We plan to work with the History, Art, and Women’s Studies departments to promote the event among students. In order to reach the broader local community, we are requesting funding for the cost of postcards (printing and postage) advertising the speaker series. All the materials for the exhibit exist in our collection, and we have space to accommodate 100 guests.

Since one of our objectives is simply to draw community members to the library, the success of this event will be measured by the number of guests in attendance both nights for the series and the volume of patrons the library experiences while the exhibit is open. Attendees to the speaker series will be counted, and the library tracks the number of people who access their collections daily. We would like at least fifty people to attend each speaker’s presentation and would like to see a 10% increase in library use for the five months the exhibit is open.

Our second goal, to encourage dialogue among attendees of the speaker series, will be evaluated through a questionnaire and observation. Those in attendance at the speaker series will be asked to complete a short, anonymous questionnaire (attached) about their perceived value of the series and their impression of the library through their experience with the exhibit and speaker series; the questionnaire will be distributed after the presentation during Q&A. Library staff will compile, review, and summarize the answers for publication in the newsletter. Our goal is that respondents will rank the series as very valuable, educational, and engaging. With the assistance of several Harvard professors, library staff will observe the speakers series and record their impression of the quality of the discourse sparked by the speaker series. Heavy participation and insightful comments during Q&A will indicate a successful presentation.
### Proposed Budget

**Speakers**
- Fees (3 @ $5,000) $15,000
- Flights (3 roundtrips estimated @ $200/each) $600
- Airport transportation (6 cab fares @ $30/ride) $180
- Hotel (3 @ $150/night x 2 nights) $900
- Food Stipend (2 lunches and 2 dinners/person, @ $20/meal) $240

**Publicity**
- Printing postcards (in-house, .50/card for 1000 cards) $500
- Postage (.28/stamp for 1000 households) $280

**Library contributions**
- Staff hours (volunteered)
  - ($10/hour, 3 Assistants, 50 hours) $1500
  - ($30/hour, 1 Curator/Librarian, 50 hours) $1500
- Refreshments at speakers series $500
- Printing questionnaires (200 total) $50

**Total cost of exhibit and speaker series** $21,250

(Minus Library Contributions) ($3550)

**Total unmet need** $17,700

### Conclusion

The staff at the Schlesinger library is excited to showcase the new additions to their History of Fashion collections in this upcoming exhibit. Since this exhibit offers a popular culture interest, they are very eager to use this opportunity to bring the community together at the library. This collection of fashion magazines and accessories is a powerful demonstration of how history relates to people in their daily lives today and promises to spark lively conversation among attendees. Please consider donating the fund of $17,700 to enhance the exhibit with the proposed speaker series.
References


Appendices

- CV of Marylène Altieri (Exhibit manager)
- Proposed questionnaire
- Schlesinger’s most recent newsletter promoting the collection

¹ This is my only fictional source.