

ART MUSEUMS of Colonial Williamsburg

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EXTRAORDINARY 18TH-CENTURY HISTORIC DRESS COLLECTION TO BE EXHIBITED AT THE DEWITT WALLACE DECORATIVE ARTS MUSEUM IN WINTER 2024



Williamsburg, Va. (Jan. 30, 2024) — More than 150 objects from one of the greatest private collections of early textiles, accessories and historic dress assembled in the United States will go on view over the next several years at the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum, one of the Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg. *Elegance, Taste, and Style: The Mary D. Doering Fashion Collection* will take visitors through 50 years of this collector’s passion and feature gowns, jackets, waistcoats, shoes, textile documents and more dating between 1700-1840. Due to light sensitivity, the objects will be shown in three parts. The first installment, which will open Feb. 22, 2024, will display approximately 40 objects and is the inaugural exhibition to be shown in the Mary Turner Gilliland and Clinton R. Gilliland Gallery, the Art Museums’ first dedicated gallery to historic costume. The dates for the second and third rotation of objects on view are still to be determined.

“Examples of historic dress are among the most human of artifacts from the past, providing windows into the lives and tastes of our forebearers,” said Ronald L. Hurst, the Foundation’s Carlisle H. Humelsine chief curator and senior vice president. “Mary Doering’s superb collection is particularly rich in such opportunities, and it is highly fitting that the Doering Collection constitutes the first exhibition in the new Gilliland Gallery for historic dress.”

When Mary D. Doering (b. 1952), a lifelong curator, educator and researcher, was sixteen years old, she received a trunk filled with early 20th-century clothing as a bequest from her great aunt. This small gift was the impetus for what became a lifelong passion for historic dress. Throughout her career, Doering used her collection, which ultimately grew to thousands of pieces (there are approximately 800 pieces dating before 1840 alone), to educate hundreds of students and researchers about changing fashions, taste, design and style. From the early collecting days when she went picking at local flea markets and antiques stores, to her first trip to the United Kingdom and her eventual meeting with the legendary antiques dealer Cora Ginsburg, who became Doering's mentor, she thoughtfully and carefully selected every object in her collection. Over the nearly 50 years that she built the collection, Doering gained expertise to create a truly comprehensive assemblage ranging from underwear to the finishing accessories.

“It has been an absolute pleasure working with Mary's collection, especially using objects so near and dear to her heart, to tell her lifelong story of collecting historic dress,” said Neal Hurst, Colonial Williamsburg's curator of historic dress and textiles. “Every object that Mary acquired was carefully hand-selected based on her research and what she saw in other museums. Visitors to the new historic dress gallery will love seeing the range of clothing from the fine and fancy to the plain and every day.”

Among the highlights of *Elegance, Taste, and Style* is one of the first waistcoats Doering purchased of what was to become more than 100 examples dating between 1700 and 1840. This stunning blue silk waistcoat was probably embroidered in China in the 1760s for the Western market. Chinese embroidery is distinctive in that it uses twisted threads rather than single stranded floss. The object, the first of several Doering purchased at Christie's in South Kensington, London, on June 11, 1974, was bought with money she saved to travel to Europe. Doering remembered the auctioneer saying, “Sold to the enthusiastic young woman on the aisle.”

Another featured object in the exhibition is an ivory, silk satin round gown in nearly perfect condition. Believed to be a wedding gown worn in the West Country of England, the style was popular in the mid-18th century; it integrates the petticoat into the structure of the skirt rather than it being a separate garment. Doering purchased this round gown along with two other gowns from Cora Ginsburg in honor of her mother who died in January 1978. Doering used the small sum of money her mother left to her to fund the gowns.

Although the Doering Collection is strong in American and English objects and focused heavily on women's dress from the 18th and early 19th centuries, it also includes important pieces from Europe, such as the 1780s Dutch jacket that is another star piece in the exhibition. Jackets of this era, such as this one, were very low cut, even under the bust, with a large handkerchief worn over the top. Dutch women often dressed with many different prints and patterns, which varied greatly depending on the region. This example is unusual in

that it uses two different block-printed cotton fabrics with black or dark blue backgrounds in the lower skirts and under the sleeves. It is important to note the careful use of textiles here with two different but very similar textiles used in obvious places; textiles were more expensive than the labor to construct the jacket, so this indicates a level of frugality.

The Doering Collection features numerous accessories, including shoes, buttons, work bags, hats, caps and buckles. One example among the shoe collection is another highlight of *Elegance, Taste, and Style*. Although James B. Patterson's identity is lost to history, he saw value in this pair of ivory, silk satin slippers with a small Italian-style heel popular in the 1780s. He affixed a paper label to the bottom that reads: "Shoes worn in 1782" along with his name. This pair shows very little wear on the soles and heels perhaps indicating that they were worn as wedding slippers.

Mary Doering also collected many textile documents to use in her class on design, manufacturing techniques and the change in taste over time, which she taught at The Smithsonian Institution's Master's Program in the History of Decorative Arts in 2001. One such rare example to be seen in the exhibition is an early 19th-century cylinder print that shows the new style and taste desired across England and Europe. With the discovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum in the 1730s and Napoleon's Egyptian Campaign at the turn of the century, ancient relics and symbols quickly became popular. Designed by Jean-Baptist Huet between 1800 and 1805, this print includes amphora, Apollo's lyre and the mythical beast known as a Harpee, or half woman-half bird, enclosed within different medallions. The print, known as a furniture, was primarily used for bed hangings, window curtains and slip covers. It is especially rare in that the designer, the printer, the date and the place of production are all known.

Also included in the exhibition will be a larger-than-life video panel that will be sure to delight visitors and highlight a practice we share with our 18th-century ancestors. It will show people of all races and classes, from Native Americans to soldiers, enslaved Africans to members of the top echelons of colonial society, tradesmen and women, getting dressed.

Elegance, Taste, and Style: The Mary D. Doering Fashion Collection is generously funded by the Thomas L. and Nancy S. Baker Museum Exhibitions Support Fund. The exhibition's video component, men's accessories, and other essential aspects of the exhibition are funded by Charles and Ellan Spring.

In celebration of *Elegance, Taste & Style*, a symposium on historic dress, "Collections, Collectors and Collaborations," will be held at The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation from Nov. 14-16, 2024. The symposium will not only celebrate the opening of the Mary Turner Gilliland and Clinton R. Gilliland Gallery at the Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg but also 90 years of historical dress and costumed

interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg (since 1934), 70 years of the Margaret Hunter Shop, which was the first curated exhibition of clothing and accessories at Colonial Williamsburg (in 1954), and 40 years of mantua making in the Colonial Williamsburg's department of historic trades (begun in 1984). Registration for the conference will launch in Spring 2024.

For fashion and historic dress aficionados, anyone fascinated by the history of design, and textiles mavens, *Elegance, Taste, and Style* is sure to be a must-see exhibition and delight visitors to the Art Museums.

Additional information about the Art Museums and Colonial Williamsburg as well as tickets are available online at colonialwilliamsburg.org, by calling (855) 296-6627 and by following Colonial Williamsburg on [Facebook](#) and [@colonialwmsburg](#) on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

About the Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg

The Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg include the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum and the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum, both of which are housed in their newly expanded building that offers an additional 65,000-square-feet of space, 25-percent more gallery space and numerous enhancements to the visitor experience. The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum is home to the nation's premier collection of American folk art, with more than 7,000 folk art objects made up to the present day. The DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum exhibits the best in British and American fine and decorative arts from 1670–1840. The Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg are located at 301 South Nassau Street in Williamsburg, Va. Open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

About The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation preserves, restores and operates Virginia's 18th-century capital of Williamsburg. Innovative and interactive experiences highlight the relevance of the American Revolution to contemporary life and the importance of an informed, active citizenry. The Colonial Williamsburg experience includes more than 600 restored or reconstructed original buildings, renowned museums of decorative arts and folk art, extensive educational outreach programs for students and teachers and 18th-century inspired culinary options from historic taverns situated along historic Duke of Gloucester Street. Colonial Williamsburg Resorts complement the experience, offering guests five unique hotel properties including the iconic Forbes Travel Guide Five-Star, AAA Five Diamond Williamsburg Inn, the Williamsburg Lodge-Autograph Collection, the Williamsburg Woodlands Hotel and Suites, the Griffin Hotel, and authentic 18th-century Colonial Houses. The resort offers a range of events and amenities including three historic taverns, 15 food and beverage outlets providing exquisite culinary experiences from casual to elegant dining, the Golden Horseshoe Golf Club featuring 36 holes designed by Robert Trent Jones Sr. and his son Rees Jones, a world-class full-service spa and fitness center, pools, meeting and flexible event spaces, and scenic gardens providing the perfect venue for weddings and special events. Merchants Square, built alongside the Historic Area in 1935 as one of the first planned shopping districts in the United States, features more than 40 specialty boutiques with products ranging from

apparel to fine jewelry, art, specialty foods and gifts. Philanthropic support and revenue from admissions, products and hospitality operations sustain Colonial Williamsburg's educational programs and preservation initiatives.

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Images: Waistcoat (woven and embroidered in China), England, ca. 1760, silk, wool, linen, and wood, T097-2017, 342, On loan from Mary D. Doering; Round Gown (reproduction stomacher), England, ca. 1760, silk and linen, T097-2017, 422, On loan from Mary D. Doering; Jacket (reproduction petticoat), Probably Netherlands, 1790-1800, cotton, linen, silk, and brass, T103-2016, 3, On loan from Mary D. Doering; Slippers, England or America, 1782, silk, leather, linen, wood, and paper, T097-2017, 560, On loan from Mary D. Doering; Copperplate-Printed Cotton Textile, Christophe-Philippe Oberkampf and Jean-Baptist Huet, Jouy-en-Josas, France, 1800-1805, Cotton, T097-2017, 437, On loan from Mary D. Doering.