

The Past and the Present of Cleveland Fashion at the Western Reserve Historical Society
Abigail Adams, 2025 Otto Thieme Memorial Internship Recipient

This summer, I had the privilege of serving as the Costume Collection Intern at the Western Reserve Historical Society (WRHS) in Cleveland, Ohio. Dedicated to “[inspiring] people to discover the American experience by exploring the tangible history of Northeast Ohio,” WRHS has been a significant presence throughout my life as a Cleveland native. From attending its exhibitions as a child, to understanding its scholarly and archival importance as an undergraduate student at nearby Case Western Reserve University, to now working intimately with its collections as a Fashion and Textile History graduate student, this museum has continuously supported my passions for art and fashion history. Under the supervision and mentorship of Patricia (Patty) Edmonson, the Museum Advisory Council Curator of Costumes & Textiles, I gained firsthand knowledge as to how WRHS uses its expansive holdings to educate visitors on diverse histories, while also actively playing a role in Cleveland’s contemporary fashion scene.

Following my first year in the Fashion Institute of Technology’s Fashion and Textile Studies: History, Theory, and Museum Practice MA program (curatorial track), I sought an internship that would allow me to observe the day-to-day work of a fashion curator while hands-on object experience—an aspiration completely exceeded this summer at WRHS. A few weeks before my arrival, WRHS was announced as the partner institution and host venue for the fifth annual *Fashion Talks: The Runway* fashion show, a showcase of local and international designers that has quickly become a mainstay in the Cleveland fashion scene. Having previously been a part of the show as a model, this was my first year experiencing it from the institutional perspective. In addition to assisting with the event, I worked closely with Patty and the museum’s registrar Katherine Applegate to receive and mount ensembles from past *Runways* on soft mannequins, whose machine-sewn covers are made in a wide array of skin tones to reflect the diverse audiences who visit WRHS. This was my first in-depth experience with costume mounting, and it was very informative to see how the soft mannequins are padded, pinned, and draped to best display the garments they’re supporting. Complementing *The Runway* also was the project “Behind The Archives,” a multi-part video series featuring Patty and Fashion Talks Foundation founder Aimon Ali as they explored and discussed the treasures of the WRHS’s costume collection while connecting garments from *The Runway* to the timelines of fashion history. Witnessing this partnership between the Historical Society and a community partner highlighted how institutions can reach and engage their communities in innovative ways, while enlivening their own collections and inviting wider audiences in.

In addition to learning how WRHS plays a part in contemporary fashion, I also was able to be a part of its reawakening of the past. One major project was assisting Patty with research and installation preparation for her upcoming exhibition *American Dream: Immigrants and the Business of Fashion* (opening October 2026). *American Dream* explores the work of four Jewish immigrant designers and businesswomen—Hattie Carnegie, Nettie Rosenstein, Irene Zerner Gothé, and Pauline Trigère—who not only revolutionized American fashion but also had notable connections to Cleveland. I helped

mount garments from the 1930s through the 1980s, accessorizing them with headwear and costume jewelry from the collection, and conducting primary source research in contemporaneous issues of *Vogue* for inclusion in the exhibition. Working on this upcoming exhibition provided first-hand insight into engaging museum audiences on themes surrounding diversity, immigration, and fashion innovation— topics that are, and will continue to be, necessary to interrogate.

My final and most personally rewarding project this summer was curating, researching, and writing didactic text for a miniature exhibition in the Bingham-Hanna Mansion, an early 20th century historic home on the WRHS campus. I was given free rein to select objects, and while styling the *American Dream* mannequins, I was struck by all the beautifully made Gilded-Age era headpieces that used exotic bird feathers and, in some cases, full taxidermy birds. While visually stunning and fascinatingly made, these pieces, which ranged in date from the 1870s to the 1910s, revealed a deeper history of the international feather trade, environmental exploitation and conservation, and ultimately the Migratory Bird Act of 1918. As true symbols of America's Gilded Age, the hats and bonnets that I curated and installed with Patty's supervision communicated both the opulence and wealth of Cleveland's past as well as the troubling costs of the era's fashion. With Patty's generosity and guidance, this became my first curatorial project in a museum setting—an opportunity I continue to be incredibly grateful for.

In addition to my work within the Historical Society, another key aspect of my Otto Thieme Memorial Internship was my bi-weekly fashion curatorial methodology sessions with Darnell-Jamal Lisby, Associate Curator of Fashion at the neighboring Cleveland Museum of Art, where I also held an additional internship this summer. To supplement my hands-on work at the WRHS, he mentored me through the primary stages of developing my Master's Qualifying Paper, offering thoughtful feedback on my research directions and advice on how to traverse the fashion and museum fields. This invaluable initial guidance has set me up to begin the second and final year of my graduate program with a grounded, viable scholarly topic that I look forward to pursuing soon. I feel particularly lucky fortunate to have worked with not one, but two curators of fashion and costume with support from CSA.

Summer 2025 at the Western Reserve Historical Society has bolstered my relationship to Northeast Ohio's fashion history, Cleveland's growing fashion scene, and the world of museums and curatorial work. While gaining new skills and practical experience, this position also reaffirmed my belief that fashion and museums bring people together and strengthen communities that invest their resources into them.

There are a number of individuals and organizations I would like to thank for making this experience possible: the Midwestern Regional Council of the Costume Society of America, Jeanine Head Miller of CSA and The Henry Ford, Patty Edmonson, Darnell-Jamal Lisby, and finally Dr. Hilary Davidson of the Fashion Institute of Technology and Dr. Erin Benay of Case Western Reserve University for their support of my application. Thanks to the support, guidance, and generosity of these individuals, I

had the opportunity to grow as an emerging scholar while also serving my surrounding Cleveland community.



The *Fashion Talks: The Runway* exhibition in the entrance to the Western Reserve Historical Society.



One of two cases in the Bingham-Hanna Mansion dining room displaying my independent curatorial project on Gilded Age bird and feather hats.



Two close-up detail shots of the installation of my independent curatorial project.



Patty and I sitting front row at the fifth annual *Fashion Talks: The Runway* show, held in the Crawford Auto and Aviation Museum at WRHS!