



After a *fashion*

Fashion historians eager to move extensive collection into a new home

By Barbara Aggerholm

FASHION HISTORIAN Jonathan Walford could hardly believe his good fortune when bidders barely blinked at the white wool suit with blue stripes presented at an English auction.

The suit had been made in 1952 by a Parisian couturier for Eva Peron, First Lady of Argentina. Peron died of cancer on July 26, 1952, at age 33, before she was able to wear the suit she'd ordered.

"What I love about the suit most is that it is made in the colours of the Argentinian flag," Walford says.

At the auction house, Walford held his breath when the bidding started.

"It sailed through. I bought it around the time when the movie (*Evita* starring Madonna) came out in the mid-'90s. I paid

more on shipping," he says.

It was a satisfying moment for a man who has written six books about fashion history, including *The Seductive Shoes: Four Centuries of Fashion Footwear*; *Ready to Tear: Paper Fashions of the 60s*; and *Forties Fashion: From Siren Suits to the New Look*.

Walford is curatorial director of the Fashion History Museum – a collection of about 10,000 items of historic fashion, outfits and footwear, dating from the mid-17th century to the present. He founded the museum with his partner Kenn Norman, the museum's chief executive officer, in 2004.

Walford and Norman are working toward the goal of finding a permanent home for the collection in Cambridge. The museum now functions as travelling exhibits – an

underwear exhibit, a politics of dressing exhibit, a fashion in Canada's West exhibit, and more.

The Fashion History Museum, which has a board of directors and advisory committee, became a federal non-profit corporation in 2008 and was granted charitable status in 2009.

Its first gallery space, a temporary location, was in Cambridge's Southworks outlet mall, a restored foundry, for six months last year. About 8,000 visitors came through the doors over 4½ months, but Walford and Norman had to close it early when funding fell through and there were concerns that the space wasn't museum quality.

Walford, 53, has curated exhibits as far away as Hong Kong and is consulted >>



Upper left: Kenn Norman (left) and Jonathan Walford display two outfits from their collection — a 1921 taffeta “robe de style” dress by Jeanne Lanvin of Paris and a floral-print silk satin evening dress by Elsa Schiaparelli, Paris, circa 1935.
On this page: American silk jersey dress with straw and silk hat, circa 1916.
Photography • Peter Lee

>>by museums, researchers and even TV shows. He was founding curator of the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto and has held curatorial positions with several other institutions.

Norman, 51, is the financial wizard who loves history, architecture and travel. Last year, he was in Bahrain where he helped set up a new military museum. He's also a certified professional life coach and mentor.

Walford and Norman are known for being generous about sharing their knowledge and collection. They're known for their sense of humour and optimism, and for their determination.

"Jonathan and Kenn are very knowledgeable and passionate collectors of historic dress," says dress historian Ingrid Mida, acting curator of the Ryerson Fashion Research Collection in Toronto.

"This is a relatively obscure area of collecting, and they have amassed a very large and valuable collection of garments over time, using their considerable knowledge and expertise to select items of importance and quality," Mida says in an email from Paris, France, where she is doing research.

"They're very positive," says Tom Reitz, manager/curator of Waterloo Region Museum in Kitchener.

When the museum location at Southworks closed earlier than the pair had hoped, "they were bouncing right back," Reitz says. "They'd put a lot of time and effort in creating that space.

"They have a real positive outlook about the future."

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On a day in late winter, Walford and Norman were busy preparing for a *Street Style* exhibition at Waterloo Region Museum scheduled to open at the end of May.

The exhibition will look at the links between fashion and architecture — the relationships between building foundations and corsets; between cladding and lace and gingerbread.

It fits into a program of exhibits that will raise the profile of local architecture and design planned by Rick Haldenby, former director of the University of Waterloo's



School of Architecture.

"For *Street Style*, they've used some of our collection and most of theirs," Reitz says.

Recently, Walford and Norman returned from Toronto where they had loaned extra-small mannequins to an exhibit of outfits from *Downton Abbey*, the popular British period TV drama series. The show's iconic costumes were on display at Spadina House, a Toronto museum. Mannequins with a tiny ribcage were needed for outfits worn by Michelle Dockery, who plays Lady Mary.

Walford is rather lukewarm about the "soapy" series, but he does appreciate it when the fashion is spot on.

"I have to say in the last episode, the clothing was fantastic," he says. A young woman was presented at court and her clothes were beautiful, he says.

"We have two presentation gowns from the '20s and '30s. Having seen the real ones, you understand that they got it right."

Nothing escapes a fashion historian who is able to dissect a scene's costume choices faster than you can say "corset."

"I'm no fun to watch a historical film with, trust me," Walford says. "Trust me," Norman



Upper left: This dress and coat set was worn by a woman who shook the hand of then-president John F. Kennedy as he left the Texas Hotel in Fort Worth on Nov. 22, 1963, to catch a plane for Dallas.

Above: This cotton summer evening dress from about 1905 was worn in Toronto.

Below: This is possibly the oldest extant European shoe worn in North America. Family provenance suggested it was worn in New Amsterdam (New York) in the 1660s. Photography • Jonathan Walford



says, laughing.

Titanic, for example, was a wash, fashion-wise. In the 1997 James Cameron film, a young girl wore black when she should have been wearing pastels. She looked like a prostitute, not a socialite, Walford says. There was inappropriately dyed henna red hair and age-inappropriate evening gowns, he says.

Walford didn't mince words about the film in his fascinating blog, *A Fashion History Perspective*. The criticism about *Titanic* stirred up lively debate on the blogosphere.

It all goes to show that fashion is an endlessly interesting topic. We admire it, criticize it. Even people who don't know the difference between an empire waist and the Empire State Building don't ignore it.

"Fashion is a conversation starter," Walford says. "You can't always talk about sex, politics and money. You can always talk about fashion.

"It's a touchstone for everything else. If you look at a dress, you can tell an awful lot about a person."

A moment last year at the Southworks location says it best, Norman says. Two older women in wheelchairs and two people assisting them were clearly enjoying the historical fashions.

"To see them light up, it brought back to me the joy of it," Norman says. "It touched me to see how it has an impact on them. We really make that connection to someone through fashion."

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On this day, in the red-brick home that Walford and Norman share near the Grand River in Galt, the mannequins win hands-down for being the most nattily dressed.

One wears a scarlet red skating outfit with rubber buttons from the early 1890s.

Another looks fetching in a blue satin silk evening gown made in 1935 by noted Italian fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli.

In the small dining room, a dozen more unclothed mannequins – 1960s store mannequins, antique Victorian dress forms with wire cages and mannequin escapees from film – lean against a bookshelf, heads cocked as though listening to the conversation.

A black fedora is perched jauntily on >>

>> a male mannequin's head. Another mannequin appears to be looking at the late 18th-century dressing table that was once owned by the Liberty family, owner of a luxury department store in London.

The outfits make up the tiniest fraction of historical costumes amassed by Walford and Norman while they've been preparing for the Fashion History Museum. The other outfits are in environmentally controlled storage.

"We have four storage units filled," Norman says.

Walford and Norman have shared a love of fashion since they met in 1984 at a garage sale that Walford was holding in North Vancouver.

Walford was financing his degree in Canadian history and museum studies at Simon Fraser University by being a "picker" – a person who searches through thrift stores and garage sales for good vintage items and then flips them to antique dealers for a profit. He was also a part-time curator at a small local museum. It was before eBay became big, and "there was great stuff" out there, he says.

Norman, born in Toronto, was studying business administration and German at Simon Fraser. He worked part time in accounting and bookkeeping and helped his father in a painting and decorating business.

Fashion was part of Walford's life from the beginning. "My mother was a bit of a fashion plate in my youth," he says. "She changed clothes several times a day," depending on the occasion, he says.

His father was a buyer of hats, wedding dresses, coats and suits for the "mirror room," an exclusive salon of the Hudson's Bay Company store in Vancouver.

Walford's fascination with historic fashion grew with his interest in television and film – *Around the World in 80 Days*; *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* were among his favourites. He was 10 when he argued to stay up late to watch the BBC production about the six wives of Henry VIII.

He began collecting period clothing in high school. His first job as a costumed guide at Heritage Village, now Burnaby Village Museum, made him see the importance of historical accuracy. He was given

a collarless shirt to wear and decided, "I can do better than this."

He scoured vintage stores for starched collars, hats and jackets. He was also inspired to buy an 1890s-era black net dress and put it on a mannequin. His paycheque helped him add to his collection.

Norman was intrigued by this fashion-conscious university student who "lived a Bohemian kind of lifestyle" when he met Walford.

"I came from a conservative background, born in Toronto from British parents," Norman says. "My mom liked fashion, but she was more conservative." His father worked in corporate management.

Norman wore a suit and carried a briefcase to his high school classes, "not a popular thing to do." He studied business, economics, English and history, and loved writing, theatre, architecture and design.

"I knew the history of architecture in the Toronto area," he says. "That love of history was there."

When Norman moved to Vancouver at age 15, he started acting and playwriting. He visited thrift stores to find costumes. Work with his dad made him appreciate interior design "in a hands-on way."

Within a year of meeting, Walford and Norman left Vancouver for Toronto where, in 1988, Walford became curator of Bata Shoe Museum. He stayed until 1999.

Norman, who had worked at a heritage museum site, got the idea for their company Kickshaw Productions when he managed to boost the gift shop's income from \$100 to \$10,000 a year.

"It got me into thinking of ways for smaller museums to be self-sufficient," Norman says. He also worked as director of finance and operations with Orchestras Canada for six years until 1999.

Then "kaboom," Walford says. "In the late '90s, we had a huge change in arts funding," Norman explains. Working as a consultant, he helped the arts community seek ways to maintain services without government money.

"It gave me insight on how to run an arts organization as a business."

The pair ran Kickshaw Productions together

while Walford travelled as a museum consultant, historian and lecturer. He used his collection for travelling exhibits and wrote books. The pair upgraded the collection, buying and selling on eBay.

Meanwhile, Norman took a leadership course in California where he chose the Fashion History Museum idea as a project. He decided it was a dream that could happen.

Today, Walford believes they have the "third or fourth most important fashion collection in Canada." Royal Ontario Museum's collection is No. 1, he says.

They moved to Galt in 2007, attracted to its arts community, textile and clothing manufacturing history, its potential for tourism and the area's post-secondary schools.

"It looked like a little town in France, and it has the potential for being the next Niagara-on-the-Lake," Walford says. "And fashion tourism is a growing industry."

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Funding fashion exhibitions is not for the faint-of-heart, even though fashion is a big draw in museums, Ryerson's Mida says.

"Their goal of opening the Fashion History Museum is very noble, but admittedly a very difficult challenge," she says. "Finding funding for such a museum is extremely difficult, especially in this economy, and I face the same type of challenge in managing the Ryerson collection.

"In spite of such obstacles, Jonathan and Kenn seem to muster up the enthusiasm to continue and to share their love of costume history with all that cross their paths."

When a German museum begged to buy a 1920s dress in their collection designed by Jeanne Lanvin, a leading couturier of the 20th century, Walford and Norman might have been tempted to sell to "help out" with finances.

But they held on to it. In the end, "we felt it was an integral part of our collection," Norman says.

And that collection – which is getting better and better – will have a home, they say. It's just a matter of time.

"It's not an egotistical thing," Norman says. "It's a destiny thing. I feel it has to happen.

"It really is a calling." 