This is Not a Costume: (Re)centering Community Interpretations of Dress in Museum Collections

Carrie Hertz
Museum of International Folk Art
706 Camino Lejo
Santa Fe, NM, 87505
United States
carrie.hertz@state.nm.us

Abstract
This reflective essay describes the research design for Dressing with Purpose: Belonging and Resistance in Scandinavia, an exhibition and publication for the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico. This essay outlines the theoretical, conceptual, and collaborative foundations supporting the project and explores their implications for the future of collecting, categorizing, and representing dress in museum contexts.

Keywords
classification; clothing; museology | Norway; Sápmi; Scandinavia; Sweden | Sámi.

Competing Interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

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Abstract: This reflective essay describes the research design for *Dressing with Purpose: Belonging and Resistance in Scandinavia*, an exhibition and publication for the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico. This essay outlines the theoretical, conceptual, and collaborative foundations supporting the project and explores their implications for the future of collecting, categorizing, and representing dress in museum contexts.

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In December 2021, the Museum of International Folk Art (MOIFA) opened the exhibition *Dressing with Purpose: Belonging and Resistance in Scandinavia* and released a companion publication, an edited volume produced by Indiana University Press (Hertz 2021). These products were the culmination of years of research, writing, and collaboration that I developed as the museum’s Curator of Textiles and Dress, and they sprung from my longstanding interest in the expressive role of dress in mediating individual and collective identities, ideologies, and memory in the public sphere. The results examine the living legacies of romantic nationalism, settler colonialism, and Indigenous activism through the lens of contemporary dress traditions often reduced to stereotypes as folk, national, or ethnic minority costumes. Through ethnographic case studies of Swedish *folkräkt*, Norwegian *bunad*, and Sámi *gákti*, the project focuses on how individuals and communities understand, remodel, and make use of these traditions to critique, to claim belonging, and to negotiate cultural differences within shared space (Figure 1).

At a deeper level, *Dressing with Purpose* traces the conceptual development of “traditional dress” (particularly in the semantic guise of folk, national, or ethnic costume) as a foil to the presumably more sophisticated category of “fashion” in mainstream Western thought and cultural institutions. This normalized taxonomy of dress, structured by elite concepts of “modernity” and “authenticity,” remains deeply entrenched in the collecting and display practices of many museums in North America and Europe today. I wished to challenge this framework by highlighting the abuses and healing uses of dress traditions in everyday discourses, social performances, and heritage-making, and by underscoring how classifications of clothing serve the continual reconfiguration of inclusions and exclusions in modern multicultural societies.

Garments possess no more “artifactual autonomy” than other examples of decontextualized material culture detached from living practice for the purposes of museum
Figure 1. Lobby poster created by Monica Meehan and featuring photo of Jenni Laiti by Carl-Johan Utsi. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.
display (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 17). Their meanings, effects, and categorical boundaries should be understood as equally expansive, fluid, and contested in museum spaces as they are in reality. Unfortunately, museums often prioritize their own disciplinary logics and epistemological assumptions, failing to adequately respect the authority, values, and knowledge systems of the makers and users whose traditions are represented within their collections.

How can museums re-center source and descendant community agency, aesthetics, objectives, and worldviews in relation to cultural dress practices? This fundamental question increasingly drives my work. In this essay, I outline the theoretical, philosophical underpinnings that informed the project design for *Dressing with Purpose* and explore some of the implications for the future of collecting and representing dress in museum contexts. I begin with a consideration of MOIFA’s unique positionality and the potential challenges for achieving shared authority with communities. I conclude with an illustrated walkthrough of the completed exhibit.

### Challenges to Shared Authority

MOIFA was founded in 1953 by the Chicago philanthropist Florence Dibell Bartlett who honored the creativity of craftspeople and their artistic traditions as emblematic of our shared humanity, linking the local with the universal as a foundation for empathy. Her aim was essentially diplomatic in nature. She believed a deeper understanding of, and appreciation for, folk arts could help repair international relations after two world wars (Seth and Mobley 2003) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. An example of man’s Leksandsdräkt displayed in *Costumes of the World on Parade*, the first exhibition at the Museum of International Folk Art in 1953. Bartlett Library and Archives Collection, Museum of International Folk Art. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.
Today, MOIFA remains committed to Bartlett’s hope for cross-cultural respect and collaboration with a mission to “connect communities through stories of dynamic cultural traditions, human creativity, and resilience.” We envision ourselves as custodians of varied tangible and intangible cultural knowledges, beholden to many culturally affiliated and internally diverse groups who retain ultimate authority to name and define themselves, their community histories, and cultural practices. At minimum, such an institutional mindset requires significant and ongoing investments in consultation. As experts in museum-community collaborations have noted, longitudinal relationships and sustained commitment are crucial for developing reciprocal projects serving community priorities and preferences for heritage-making. Even with the best intentions, inclusive practices entail challenges.

Among the challenges for sustaining long-term relationships in an international museum like MOIFA are both the lack of physical proximity to the majority of communities we work with and the expectation to represent a sprawling global scope in terms of geographies, cultures, and artistic media. Other challenges emerge from the more internal and subtle dynamics created by institutional conventions and historical patterns for collecting and exhibiting a subject matter nebulously defined as “folk art” (Figure 3).

MOIFA’s first director Boaz Long (1948–1956) defined folk art, as many still do, by the marginal social position of their creators in contrast to “those specifically engaged in producing fine arts” (1952, 1). Over the years, the museum’s purview has incorporated other emergent categories like ethnic, subcultural, tourist, self-taught, outsider, and visionary art, each one similarly situated beyond the margins of an imagined elite center.

Only a few years after MOIFA’s founding, Associate Director Edwin Ferdon toured museums across Scandinavia to better understand their treatment of folk art and produced a report titled “Approaches to the Solution of Certain Problems.” “The principal problem that has plagued the Museum of International Folk Art from its inception,” he wrote in the report, “is the lack of a clear definition of the Museum’s field” (1957, 1). Ferdon argued that MOIFA, due to its cross-cultural mission, struggled more than its Scandinavian counterparts with their limited regional scopes. “People throughout the world do not have the same values when it comes to the point of determining what is, and is not, good art,” he reasoned. “If we are to concern ourselves only with what we consider the best of folk art from the various cultures of the world, we run the danger of ending with a collection whose primary significance may well be in exhibiting to the world what a group of people at the Museum of International Folk Art, during a given period in the history of the United States, thought was good folk art.” He admitted that prioritizing community-centered preferences might “jar the sensitive tastes of contemporary American artists, but it will be a far more truthful collection and have far more comparative value than if subjectively chosen on the basis of our own sense of the artistic” (1957, 3).

More than half a century later, we approach not just aesthetic taste but art itself as an inconstant cultural construct. From a disciplinary standpoint, MOIFA sits at the intersection of art history, ethnographic, and ethnological museums, embracing a folkloristic concern for individual expressions of cultural creativity, whether tangible or intangible, understood within their social, historical, and community contexts. As an institution, we have never, and likely never will, set a policy definition for folk art.
Figure 3. Sven Roos in Gagnefsdräkt and Lars-Erik Backman in Leksandsdräkt protecting their fiddles from the rain at Midsommar celebrations in Tibble, Leksand parish, Dalarna county, Sweden. Photograph by Carrie Hertz, 2015. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.
Despite our widening appreciation for more diverse ontologies of art, we have not always heeded Ferdon’s warning. At various points in MOIFA’s collecting history, acquisitions have nevertheless been limited by the imposition of narrow sets of criteria for taste and authenticity—criteria not necessarily shared by a given artifact’s source community. If established styles of dress diverge from idealized forms, if they are worn for new purposes than they were in the past, if they are produced primarily for commercial reasons, and on and on, do they still belong in a collection of *folk art*?

If the precise borderlines between “folk/traditional” and “fine/contemporary” for portraiture or pottery seem vague, articulating similar distinctions within the medium of dress is even less clear, in part, because the inclusion of apparel as a category of artifact on par with painting and sculpture in Western elite art museums is relatively recent (if having reached this stature of parity at all). Regardless, as curator Julia Petrov has argued, this trajectory has relied on reclassifying what early museums more commonly named “costume” as “fashion.” Petrov defines *fashion* as “the garments made within the fashion system of goods exchange and in accordance with its aesthetic and value systems,” and clarifies that “it is the periodicity and ephemerality of fashion that distinguishes that term from its erstwhile synonyms” (2019, 3, 35). Working transculturally as I do, it is difficult to imagine any cultural modes of dressing that exist completely outside a given society’s economic systems or regimes of value. It is even more difficult imagining dress practices that never change in form and meaning over time.

Petrov argues rightly that museums are “hegemonic institutions closely associated with the processes by which ideas come to be signified in objects,” and therefore exhibitions can often blindly “perpetuate accepted ideologies” (2019, 88). In her analysis of more than a century of museum fashion exhibitions in the US, Western Europe, and Australia, she makes insightful critiques about representational biases related to gender, religion, nationality, and class but has far less to say about ethnicity or race, in part, because so few of her dozens of examples include any non-White people. Remaining largely unacknowledged, this absence is telling. Why does fashion, when produced as a museum category, reflect so little human diversity?

As a concept, fashion has taken many incarnations and commonly goes insufficiently defined in scholarly works about it. Popular articulations, however, often contain an implicit understanding that fashion is an invention of “Western modernity,” dependent on the social, economic, technological, and political structures that developed in Europe, setting up a contrast built from stereotypes about the dress of Others, past and present.

The locus of interpretation for fashion is usually situated within “the fashion system,” a concept that on the surface resonates with tenets of material culture studies analyzing the social production of objects and their intangible values as they circulate through intersecting contexts of production, consumption, and exchange. In practice, however, *the* fashion system (as a monolith rarely presented as multiple, coexisting *systems*) places interpretive authority squarely with a consumer capitalist industry of multinational corporations and their related institutions of gatekeeping—a capitalist empire, we might call it. Semantically, the fashion system does much the same intellectual work as “the art world,” demarcating insiders and outsiders within a cultural
hierarchy of value. For those thought to be operating on the periphery, their creative traditions will often be framed as fatally fragile, unable to adapt without being labeled inferior simulacra. After all, how can a cultural practice categorized as fixed, ahistorical, or insulated from influence ever modernize without, by definition, becoming something else (Figure 4)?

Categories, as Valdimar Tr. Hafstein has argued, are instruments with performative power and cognitive impact. Reclassifying things can change the way we think about them, relate to them, and use them, thus reshaping cultural practices into the image of their new intellectual containers. Categories are not just conceptual; they are literally transformational, opening up or locking out creative possibilities (Stefano with Hafstein 2018).

In my experience as a dress scholar, one of the greatest barriers to achieving shared authority within legacy museums in the West stems from the uninterrogated assumptions built into standardized typologies, terms, and disciplinary divisions (Turner 2020). Without interacting openly and directly with diverse source and descendant communities, these assumptions can go unnoticed, let alone challenged. As MOIFA’s interim director Kate Macuen has lamented, “Outside of specific laws, museums are not generally required to consult with culturally affiliated groups, which in many ways has allowed for the continuation of colonial interpretations” (2020, 456). As an ethnographer, I benefit greatly from working in partnership with artists and community experts who, when approached with humility, are often eager for someone to listen.
Naming the Thing

In relation to my department at MOIFA, Textiles and Dress, I approach dress as defined by Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher as “modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body” (1995, 4). In their formulation, the human body becomes the clay and canvas for fashioning social identity. As an attempt to find a cross-culturally inclusive concept, dress describes a universal creative phenomenon shared by humanity, one that can nevertheless contain a seemingly endless catalogue of manifestations and meanings fashioned by any (specific or type of) person or people from any place or historical period. To move from this broad framework for the collection as a whole toward the recontextualization of specific objects through exhibition, I start by establishing relationships first with people.

I began work on Dressing with Purpose in 2015. These efforts included three major field trips to Scandinavia; numerous public and private collection visits; extensive photographic documentation; hours of recorded audio and video footage; and dozens of in-depth interviews with makers, wearers, and experts on two continents. Through this process, I forged crucial professional, personal, and community networks built on collaborative relationships. Colleagues and community members assisted with making personal introductions; arranging access to private collections and archives; facilitating audio-visual documentation; making, sourcing, loaning, or donating new collections; and providing language translation, cultural insights, key resources, and feedback on drafts of text, edited videos, and object lists. This project could never have moved forward without their efforts, expertise, and input (Figures 5–6).

Figure 5. Filming an interview with Inga Lajla Aira Balto and Eva Aira in their kitchen in Kárášjohka/Karasjok, Norway. Photograph by Thomas Grant Richardson, 2017. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.
Figure 6. Eva Aira and Inga Lajla Aira Balto dressed for the Jokkmokk Winter Market in gávtit from Jåhkåmåhkke and Kárásjohka. Photograph by Carrie Hertz, 2017. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.
I began this project without a clear thesis, only a broad interest in the intersections of dress, identity, politics, artistry, and daily performance in Scandinavia. It was through open-ended conversations with diverse interlocutors centered on their personal narratives, local memories, and salient issues of concern that the project’s full scope eventually came into focus, organizing those microlevel collaborations into an encompassing interpretive framework that remained accountable to a wide range of community priorities and perspectives.

This framework crystallized, in part, around points of potential miscommunication. Some of the groups represented in this project—namely the descendants of peasant farming families and Indigenous Sámi—have extensive experience with outside researchers, collectors, and cultural enthusiasts that sometimes stretch back centuries and that encompass a spectrum of positive and negative engagements. Most individuals anticipate, if not welcome, the interest of museum professionals, but many also remain apprehensive that a narrow or romantic vision of their communities based on biased histories and negative stereotypes will be perpetuated.

When I first conceptualized this project, I struggled to find appropriate and respectful terminology to best frame the sartorial subject matter. When speaking with individuals about their specific traditions, it was easy enough to adopt local naming practices, for example, asking someone in Leksand, Sweden about their Leksandsdräkt (typically translated into English as ‘Leksand costume’ or after ‘Leksand dress’), but this method could not fully resolve the need to navigate emic and etic vocabularies and concepts across multiple languages, communities, and cultural contexts.

During an early conversation with an advisor, I got an inkling of how fraught it would be to conceptually group and categorize localized dress traditions across the region. Barbro Klein, the late Swedish folklorist and ethnologist, had been an essential partner in an international collaboration that produced Swedish Folk Art: All Tradition is Change, a publication (co-edited with Mats Widbom) and a traveling exhibition that opened at MOIFA in 1994 (Klein and Widbom 1994). I wished to reengage many of those who had partnered on that earlier project, which preceded my own tenure at MOIFA, and I am deeply grateful for Klein’s enthusiastic guidance before her passing in 2018.

Sitting at a Stockholm café during our first meeting in the summer of 2015, we discussed how many dress traditions in the region have become entangled in various nationalistic imaginaries and notions of sovereignty, illustrating fluctuating ideas around social and political identities, centers and peripheries, and the implications for minority groups whose civic and sartorial participation may be welcomed or delegitimized. When curating All Tradition is Change, for example, Klein insisted on including a Roma woman’s outfit made by Sonja Schwartz who worked as a seamstress supplying many of the characteristic and highly-visible velvet skirts worn within the Roma community in Stockholm. Klein has written extensively about the omission of ethnic and religious minorities in Swedish cultural heritage movements and nationalistic portrayals in collecting institutions, perpetuating an inaccurately homogenous view of Swedish history, culture, and national identity (2000a, 2000b, 2006, 2008). Therefore, despite the potential utility of bringing a national framework to our analysis, Klein warned that if the term “national dress” appeared in the project title, a concept more recently coopted by far-right anti-immigrant and neo-Nazi groups promoting White ethnonationalism, she could not feel comfortable associating her name with it.
Many interlocutors felt similarly compelled to preemptively qualify expected, but in their estimation, unacceptable nomenclature. In the following sections, let me describe two more encounters to deepen our discussion of this pattern.

This is Not a Costume

In the spring of 2015, anticipating my first fieldtrip to Scandinavia, I visited the home of Elisabeth Werner Alley in Santa Fe. Alley is celebrated at MOIFA for her decades-long service as a docent and for her invaluable role assisting with programming and fundraising for All Tradition is Change. She grew up in Sörmland (Södermanland) county, Sweden before immigrating to the United States, and during that first afternoon together, she was excited to show me the Vingåkersdräkt she had sewn for herself in the 1980s (Figures 7–8).

This ensemble type from Alley’s natal home is particularly interesting, owing the consistency of its general appearance to a well-documented parish meeting held in Vingåker in 1674 when local leaders elected to standardize the clothes worn to church, while forbidding significant changes in style. They feared that local distinction and modesty would be destabilized if the peasant class spent their growing wealth on fashionable luxuries in nearby Stockholm (Nylén 1947). Across Scandinavia, parish rules and meeting minutes written between the 17th and 19th centuries reveal escalating anxieties about the effects of modernizations on social order (Anderssen 2014, 27; Granlund 2017 [1910], 23). Like many longstanding local
Despite this conscious emphasis on traditional continuity, the Vingåkersdräkt did change as material details and functional use remained dynamically responsive to variable circumstances, personal preferences, and fashionable ideas. And by the turn of the 20th century, as new political models and national borders replaced what once had been sprawling and shifting multiethnic empires, preindustrial dress traditions, like the Vingåkersdräkt, from rural farming communities (the common “folk”), were being widely recontextualized by romantic-minded scholars, museum founders, collectors, artists, and political agitators as ‘folk costumes’ (*folkdräkter* in Swedish, *folkedrakter* in Norwegian).

Now linked with an admiration for simple beauty, handcraft, and conservative tight-knit communities, folk costumes became emblematic of distinctive national cultural inheritances, fast disappearing in the wake of creeping modernization and destined to be superseded by homogenizing industrialized fashion. Local tradition and cosmopolitan modernity were increasingly seen as incompatible states of being, the rise of the latter foretelling the demise of the former. Nonetheless, rural regional clothes were more popular than ever, embraced by city-dwellers from the middle classes, particularly student radicals, as a new fashion, worn as party outfits or to pose in studio portraits (Eldvik 2010, 101).

Bernhard Salin, the director of Nordiska museet at the time, wrote in a foreword to the 1907 *Svenska folkdräkter* by Per Gustaf Wistrand, that he hoped the young people at universities who were then donning folk costume would do so as “an expression of the deep and warm feelings for our heritage, which is the soil from which true patriotism springs.” Educated urban youth across Scandinavia were encouraged to dress up like the peasant class to instill nationalistic feelings and mobilize democratic sentiments. Throughout the 20th century, hundreds of community groups across Sweden revived, reconstructed, or designed new *folkdräkter* to represent their areas. Many of them relied on parish records, like those from Vingåker, as well as national museum collections amassed mostly during the 19th century. While many of these have since fallen out of use, others continue as important elements of community life (Figures 9–10).

In Norway, similar dress innovations and recontextualizations were underway. During a long struggle for national independence that succeeded in 1905, revolutionaries adopted clothes inspired by the festive dress of provincial folk to support their demands for a new government of the people. Political activists promoted these outfits as *bunader*, an archaic word for “clothes” in a dialect of Old Norse and thus presumably uncorrupted by the Danish language, but the term is most commonly translated as ‘national costumes.’ Since its inception, the bunad movement has continued to grow and evolve with contemporary trends. Bunader are now worn by at least seventy percent of women and a growing percentage of men in Norway.

While the interests and interventions of social and political reformers certainly influenced the course of community dress traditions in Scandinavia, they did not necessarily supplant the manifold functions and localized meanings associated with them, nor freeze them from ongoing transformation and reevaluation within living practice. Though some activists, guided by their faith in a universal history of linear progress in...
Figure 9. Sara Ramsay and her sons dressed in Leskandsdräkter for Midsommar celebrations in the village of Tibble, Dalarna county, Sweden. Photograph by Carrie Hertz, 2015. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.
Figure 10. The Skalk family dressed for the baptism of baby Eivin at the Leksand Church. Photograph by Carrie Hertz, 2015. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.
modernity, saw themselves as saving endangered traditions from certain extinction, they underestimated the capacity for cultural resilience and reinvention. Periods of heritagization, when cultural forms are consciously and perhaps anxiously preserved, can be followed by periods of “renormalization” when a successfully revitalized practice is experienced as a regular fact of life (Jackson, Müske, and Zhang 2020, 123–24). Heritage-making of this sort is not necessarily unidirectional.

As we talked about the details of her Vingåkersdräkt and what it means to her, Alley bristled at the idea of it being called a “folk costume.” “This is not a costume,” she insisted. “This is a living dress. I’ve eaten in it, danced in it. I live my culture through it.”

When I first accepted my position as the Curator of Textiles and Costume at MOIFA in 2014, I successfully petitioned for a title change, replacing the term “costume” with “dress,” in part, because I had already encountered similar reactions as Alley’s. People do not appreciate the label’s connotations for the most valued garments in their wardrobe, worn to express crucial aspects of their identity and externalize deeply felt emotions. The term can be alienating, whether used colloquially to designate the dress of role play, fantasy, or theatre performance, or in museology to delineate collections of historic or ethnographic clothing and adornment. As a category, costume may imply inauthenticity, exoticism, or non-modernity.

Alley further rejected the stereotypes that often accompany portrayals of folk costume, owing to its popularization during Europe’s period of romantic nationalism, as something static, rustic, depersonalized, unfashionable, and obsolete, resuscitated occasionally and inauthentically for idyllic heritage displays, national pomp, and tourism. Ironically, folk costume is often described as “non-Western” (even when referring to practices cultivated by ethnic majorities in Europe), because presumably “it develops outside the realm of the Western European fashion system” (Welters 1999, 3), thereby discounting the participation of European peasants and rural farming communities in European fashion history. Maintaining this conceptual division similarly disregards the ways current localized dress traditions intersect with complexly networked cultural and economic systems now.

For many living in Scandinavia today, whether directly descended from peasant families or not, these types of garments can be deeply embedded in community dress codes, economics, and commercial enterprises, constituting an integral part of their contemporary, functional wardrobes, no more unusual than choosing special clothes to wear for church, funerals, weddings, or the workplace (Figure 11). In Norway, annual bunad sales represent a multimillion-dollar industry (Schmiesing 2003, 33). While some are made privately in domestic spaces or as part of face-to-face interactions in small businesses and artist workshops, in other cases, their production may rely on outsourced foreign labor with embroidery completed in China or Southeast Asia. In Oslo and elsewhere, regional styles of bunader from across the country can be custom-ordered made-to-measure in high-end department stores, a cultural practice comparable to acquiring wedding dresses in the United States (Figure 12).

When making her own ensemble, Alley ordered patterns and materials from Hemslöjdsföreningen Sörmland, a handicraft association supporting local arts in Sörmland county established during the hemslöjd movement in Sweden. The hemslöjd movement (literally ‘homecraft’ but more commonly translated as ‘handicraft’) launched local associations and craft shops (hemslöjdsbutiker) throughout the country (Ågren
Figure 11. Men’s suits in the foreground; men’s suits in the background. Photograph by Carrie Hertz, 2018. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.

Figure 12. Bunader for sale at Heimen Husflid in Oslo. Photograph by Carrie Hertz, 2018. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.
Many of these shops serve as community resources, offering hands-on training and patterns, sharing research, representing local artisans, and selling supplies and finished goods. (A complementary movement, husflid in Norwegian, also developed in Norway.) For those without family members to teach them or those living far afield, the local hemslöjdsbutik has remained (especially with the advantages of the internet) an invaluable resource.

In Alley’s estimation, wearing Vingåkersdräkt for special occasions is a testament to something living, adaptive, sensuous and embodied; it gives shape to her cultural experiences, personal relationship to the past, and cosmopolitan sense of self. Though Alley, who lives in diaspora, does connect her regional dress to a broader identification with national Swedish culture, I have also met plenty of Scandinavians who disavow a nationalistic interpretation, explicitly wearing their dress in resistance to the state, seeing it as more reflective of a localized community culture and set of values that stand in opposition to their understanding of national norms and prerogatives.

We Are Not a Museum Culture

Fast forward three years later. During my third fieldtrip to Scandinavia in the spring of 2018, I visited the studio of Sámi artist Anders Sunna in Jåhkåmåhkke (Jokkmokk) on the Swedish side of Sápmi (Sámi ancestral homelands that extend across the modern borders of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia) (Figure 13). Sunna’s multimedia 2-D work, and graffiti performance art is explicitly political, targeting Swedish institutions, politicians, assimilationist policies, and colonial histories of racism and displacement. His work also commonly features the gákti from his home region Čohkkiras (Jukkasjärvi).

In North Sámi (the most widely spoken of nine linguistic subgroups), the term gákti (plural: gávttit) refers to a characteristic tunic or dress, as well as typical outfits fashioned around this main garment. As with folkdräkter and bunader, gávttit constitutes a dynamic tradition, long incorporating widely circulated, cosmopolitan products—such as commercially produced wool and calico print fabrics, ribbons, lace, and accessories—into a diverse array of regional styles, including garments made of fur and skin and adorned with embroidery or appliqué. The specific cut and length of the tunic, combinations of colors, decorative elements, and the use of distinctive headwear, outerwear, and accessories, communicate gender, personal taste, wealth, details of social status, kinship, and territory.

Historically, Sámi dress has been framed by outsiders as a problem needing eradication or a romantic example of disappearing primitive art unfit for modernity but desirable for museums (Figure 14). Within the logic of settler colonialism, Sámi dress was stigmatized, suppressed, and collected. Christian missionaries and church leaders discouraged or prohibited Sámi dress as a sign of paganism. Later, as part of aggressive assimilation policies in the early 20th century, some Sámi children were forcibly removed from their families and isolated in residential boarding schools where students were indoctrinated with racist theories of Sámi subordination. Their traditional clothing was either banned (to compel assimilation) or required (to inflict social segregation). Since the second half of the 20th century, however, the revitalization of Sámi dress traditions has gained momentum with the emergence of an internationally networked Indigenous rights movement. Today, the gákti has been redefined as a contemporary symbol of Sámi cultural visibility, resistance, and reclamation.
Figure 14. **Problem . . . Solved**, “propaganda poster” by anonymous Sámi “artistivist” collective Suohpanterror. Museum of International Folk Art (P.2018.1.1). The group Suohpanterror (meaning “lasso terror” in North Sámi) formed in 2012 as an anonymous collective of artists and activists with members from across Sápmi. They are best known for “propaganda posters” that circulate as traveling exhibitions, guerilla pop-up displays, and internet memes shared on social media sites. Propaganda posters reinterpret commonly shared visual media through Sámi points-of-view and experiences. Mimicking the style of public warning signs, **Problem . . . Solved** refers to the intended consequences of assimilation policies that targeted Sámi people as a nonconforming Other within national populations. The poster critiques this history, illustrating how the marked difference of Sámi identity, made visible here through the gákti, was used as the justification for exclusion. Photograph by Addison Doty. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.

Part of my conversation with Sunna during our first meeting focused on a recently completed artwork that I later purchased for the museum collection, a mixed-media collage on plywood board. **These Colors Are Not Running Away** depicts a reindeer skeleton flanked by two human skeletons, all dressed in Čohkkiras gávttit (Figure 15). Family photos and images of nature are hidden in the fabric of the clothes, endowing them with notions of continuity and kinship. The bottom edge of the board is hand carved in a traditional **duodji** pattern that might appear on the antler sheath of a knife, a type of art Sunna also practices. The imagery holds many layers of meaning for Sunna, particularly in relation to the continued influence of ancestors, the twinned fates of reindeer and Sámi cultural identity, and the trauma of a multigenerational struggle against forced relocations, state-directed reindeer-herding regulations, and cultural erasure. Sunna’s family is one of hundreds of herding families that were forcibly removed from the Čohkkiras and Gárasavvon (Karesuando) areas in Sweden. Many relocated to the region around Jåhkåmåhkke, but continued wearing the clothes that proclaim an ongoing connection to these homelands as a form of “hidden activism,” in Sunna’s words.

Today, Jåhkåmåhkke, as a forested and ore-rich area, has become a target for aggressive timber, hydroelectric, and mining projects, transforming the landscape and
waterways, reducing grazing habitats, and contributing to pollution and climate change in an ecologically fragile region. Escalating Arctic development and resource extraction portend enduring conflicts with the Swedish state.

Skeletons, a common motif in Sunna’s work, manifest a prediction made by his grandfather, who told him, “If you as a Sámi people are going to get rights against the government, you have to live for two hundred years. And if you live for two hundred years, you’ll look like that, probably. Your problems will haunt you forever and even your relatives. It will go on all the time. You’ll never get rid of it, so you have to stand up and fight.” Resistance is something each generation owes to those who came before and those who will come after. Though seemingly stripped of cultural distinction as skeletons, the three figures in *These Colors Are Not Running Away* still brandish the symbols of Sámi identity in the form of colorful gávttit. They are dressed for eternal struggle.

Gávttit-clad skeletons are also meant to conjure up the specters of pseudoscientific race biology and eugenics research that was conducted on Sámi individuals and other minorities, including the collection of human remains in museums and universities, phrenology or craniology (Kyllingstad 2012), and forced sterilizations (Borberg and Roll-Hansen 2005; Spektorowski and Mizrachi 2004).

For centuries, artistic, ethnographic, scientific, and amateur representations of Sámi people demonstrated a fascination with their perceived “exotic” appearance—physiological and sartorial. Aesthetic judgments about bodies and dress have long been paired for the purposes of categorizing human beings, but the development of systems of ethnoracial classification coincided with, and supported, the rise of romantic ethnonationalism and colonial expansion, making appearance a concern of geopolitics and state policy. Much of this intellectual work was situated within, or in cooperation with, museums that were established explicitly to shape public perceptions of
national identities and power, resulting in a long history of damaging interactions between museums and Sámi communities.

Ethnoracial classifications, being responsive to shifting state priorities and elite self-interests, remain subjective and unstable (Mattsson 2014). In The History of White People, Nell Irvin Painter outlines how confounding the Sámi people were for those theorizing hierarchical classifications of human difference. Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus, father of modern taxonomy, laid the foundation for a scientific classification of organisms that included mankind in the animal kingdom. He proposed that the human species could be grouped into several “varieties” determined by their geographic origins and an assessment of their physical, behavioral, and cultural attributes, including their “manner of clothing.” Unsure where to place the Sámi, he included them in a sort of grab bag of the lowest order of human oddities Homo monstrosus (Painter 2010, 25, 116).²⁰

Linnéaus’s student, the German anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, while refining his system of racialization, first included the Sámi as Europeans, admitting they appeared “white in colour,” but later excluded them, ranking them insufficiently beautiful for his newly formulated category “Caucasian,” a label still used in US law to indicate White people of European descent (Painter 2010, 79–80). European scientists continually reclassified the Sámi, feeling instinctively they did not belong with other Europeans like themselves, even in the absence of any logical scientific evidence. Painter writes, “they obviously live in Europe, but they do not look the way anthropologists wanted Europeans to look” (Painter 2010, 220). Nor did they share acceptable traditions, habits, or worldviews, disqualifying them from inclusion in the emerging idealization of modern nation-states containing ethnically homogenous populations.

Ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities living in developing European nation-states, such as Sámi people, presented identities and practices in competition with the national ideal and its structures of power. Ethnoracial classification schemes could make sense of these interior groups and transform them into conceptual devices for strengthening state sovereignty over land and resources, both domestically and in far off colonies.

Not unlike the way European peasant dress could be understood as “non-Western,” Sámi people have often been regarded as “non-European Europeans” (Nordin and Ojala 2018). Peasants, however, eventually became redefined as national ancestors to mourn and revere, whereas the Sámi were marginalized as a presumably inferior minority that would be either assimilated, or, as Sven Nilsson, former director of Naturhistoriska Riksmuseet (Royal Museum of Natural History) in Sweden, grusomely predicted, “extirpated” (1868, 1).²⁰ Later, social Darwinists presented a slightly less violent forecast, theorizing that less evolved groups like rural farmers and the Sámi would eventually modernize, ascending their predestined paths toward civilization (then epitomized by European-style modernity), or else go extinct. Either way, their respective categories would become meaningless as the cultural traits used to define them disappeared.

The evolve-or-perish model of social Darwinism presents a conundrum for understanding dress traditions conceptualized as folk or ethnic minority costumes. If they are fated for obsolescence in modernity, “modern” people can wear them nostalgically but not authentically, repositioning them closer to Elisabeth Alley’s appraisal of “costume” as a category of fantasy role play than the vibrant, contemporary cultural prac-
tice she believes her Vingåkersdräkt to embody. And if contemporary groups, minoritized within national imaginaries and stigmatized as primitive through scientific racism, innovate their traditional dress, they may be perceived as losing their cultural identity. Essentially, they cannot authentically modernize. Though social Darwinism is now considered déclassé in most mainstream scientific circles, its conceptual conceits reemerge in dress classifications and declarations of authenticity, reinforcing binary dividing lines between tradition and modernity, costume and fashion.

Sunna’s use of living skeletons, especially the human and reindeer skulls poking out of gávtit collars, is a provocative reminder of the dubious racial stereotyping that continues, often unwittingly, in majority depictions of Sámi people. It further satirizes the notion that an authentic Sámi culture only exists fossilized in the past. Sunna describes his art as a “weapon” against subjugation and his choice to wear traditional clothes as silent protest against exoticizing and historicizing representations. “In media,” he explained, “you’re usually not seeing Sámi with a gákti painting with a spray can. Our culture isn’t a museum culture. It’s important to show you’re still alive, that you’re not in a museum (Figure 16).”
Purposeful dressing has simply been one of many creative tools in a long artistic tradition for fashioning belonging and resistance, one that offers individuals and groups the chance to assert agency and assign meaning to their own acts of self-representation. People’s dress has historically been used to identify and categorize them, but it can also be harnessed by those individuals for more emancipatory purposes to proclaim nonconforming descent and dissent in contexts of hegemony. Positive acts of self-definition can promote healing and further amplify demands for self-determination (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Displaying dual national pride in gákti with both Norwegian and Sámi flags during the children’s parade in Oslo for Søttende mai. Photograph by Carrie Hertz, 2018. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.
These are just a few examples among many in my experience in which individuals reject the ways their clothing, bodies, and cultures have been historically collected, classified, and interpreted within mainstream museums in the West. They do not recognize themselves in many museum representations, instead seeing a distorted, frozen construction—an objectified “museum culture”—that legitimizes and perpetuates hierarchical systems of colonialism, nationalism, white supremacy, and class inequality. By listening closely to my interlocuters, their voices underscore the need to question nomenclature and dismantle normalized typologies of dress still promoted within many Western museum-settings by confronting the historical and scholarly trajectories that developed them.

**Classifications of Bodies and Dress**

Museums, in their mission to produce, organize, and communicate knowledge, may fail to recognize their epistemic reliance on prevailing ideologies, even as terminology changes and competing ideas surface. Systems and power structures, once established, have a way of protecting and reproducing themselves. We so often feel compelled to work around the legacies we inherit, rehabilitating old terms like “folk art” and “fashion” with new or expanded meanings, because they are now so deeply embedded in our professional institutions and disciplines of study, perhaps even defining their existence. The words themselves are not so much the problem, of course, as are the ghosts of old analytical models and intellectual theories hiding under their surfaces, still influencing perceptions, deterring new questions, and conveying ideas we may not wish to perpetuate. As Dorothy Noyes argues, whether or not we deem these “spoiled concepts,” “their meaning cannot be separated from their history,” so we must ask, knowing all categories to be contrastive by nature, who are the implicit Others these categories create (2016, 327–28)?

Many existing museums grew out of European projects of nation-building and colonialism, establishing their foundational collections during an historical moment when many thinkers in the West were obsessed with rationalizing human difference. As a consequence, their systems for classifying the world’s dress often rely on identifying and typing the bodies wearing it.

World chronologies of dress, written by Western scholars and situated in European historiography, have generally mirrored the same linear, universal development presumed by modernist theories of human social evolution and scientific racism, imagining that historical or disappearing cultures of “traditional” people wear costumes while “advanced” civilizations of modern individuals produce fashion. We see these presumed oppositional binaries between costume and fashion, tradition and modernity, stable normativity and disruptive innovation, marginality and centrality further propagated through disciplinary presentational styles and structural divisions in museum settings, housing costume and fashion as discrete analytical categories in separate departments or in different institutions altogether. Dress associated with non-Western, Indigenous, “minority” or lower-class communities is overwhelmingly represented in museums of ethnography, ethnology, and history, juxtaposed against, as reporter Vanessa Friedman (2020) described it in the *New York Times*, “the incredible whiteness” of elite fashion collections more commonly located in museums of fine art and design and interpreted through a lens that confers individual intentionality and inventiveness typically denied to others.
Museological modes of abstraction make it possible to sort the world and its people into conceptually bounded and named objects for comparison, but, as Eric R. Wolf argues, it also “creates false models of reality” (2010 [1982], 6). He explains that “the ability to bestow meanings—to ‘name’ things, acts, and ideas—is a source of power. Control of communication allows the managers of ideology to lay down the categories through which reality is to be perceived” (2010 [1982], 388). Wolf concludes that “only by understanding these names as bundles of relationships, and by placing them back into the field from which they were abstracted, can we hope to avoid misleading inferences and increase our share of understanding” (2010 [1982], 3).

My goal for Dressing with Purpose has been to return commonly accepted conceptual categories of dress (most explicitly folk, national, and ethnic costume) back to the field and to untangle their “bundles of relationships”—the interwoven material, sociocultural, economic, political, historical, and ideological forces—that mediate their meanings, forms, and functions. I wanted to illustrate how classification systems create logics of comparison, and in some cases, arbitrary ranking, and question their real-world relevance. MOIFA, straddling disciplines and museum types as it does, provides an ideal platform for conversations exploring the ways tradition and fashion, as concepts, intersect with issues of power and the policing of boundaries. In many respects, MOIFA’s subject scope historically catalogs an eclectic mix of everything rejected as unfit and rendered invisible by the narrow focus of most elite art institutions.

As calls for the decolonization of museums escalate, the field will need to more deeply question and unsettle the historical and theoretical foundations on which their collections and institutional structures have been built. As curators, we must confront the ongoing erasure of indigenous typologies and conceptual frameworks by following the council of Anand Prahlad and ask ourselves if these institutionally imposed categories are actually “unnecessary, colonially inspired, or forms of cultural violence” (2021, 261). More critical attention should be directed specifically toward disrupting the perpetuation of Eurocentric universalist and modernist classifications of dress. Change will be hard won, in part, because the dichotomous understandings of tradition and modernity that often inform analyses of dress radiates through other deep-seated beliefs about cultural difference, including aspects of appearance and biology that cannot be easily altered with a change of clothes, like skin color. Current disparities and inadequacies in museum representations are unlikely to improve without also considering new institutional systems, new practices, and new ways of thinking.

One of the best means for disrupting the externally-imposed, subjective, classist, and hierarchical categorizations of people’s clothes still employed in many museum classification systems entails greater engagement with, respect for, and promotion of culturally-specific systems of knowledge, naming, and heritage-making. Many museum-community collaborations demonstrate how crucial existing museum collections can be to a multitude of community-driven revitalization efforts. For many Sámi individuals, for example, this entails not only strategic demands for repatriation, reclaiming physical possession of sacred artifacts and ancestral bodies. It may also require acts of “rematiation,” as defined by my collaborators Eeva-Kristiina Nylander (née Harlin) and Outi Pieski as the recovery of more intangible elements that objects embody—the lost social structures, practices, and meanings silenced by the imposition of patriarchal Western hierarchies of value (Harlin and Pieski 2020).

For years, Nylander and Pieski have focused their attention on researching, reconstructing, and reviving the significance and use of the ládjoagahpir (‘horn hat’ or ‘hat...
of pride’) (Figure 18). This headdress, once widely worn by Sámi women in a variety of regional styles, was specifically targeted by Christian authorities as a sign of primitivism in need of eradication. Many were abandoned or burned, and few still exist in museum collections. But for many Sámi, the ládjogahpir was considered, among other meanings, a positive sign of women’s gendered power and authority within their communities, perhaps a major reason why male church leaders, demanding submission to religious patriarchy, vilified it.
Nylander and Pieski embarked on this journey after discovering that the sole ládjogahpir in the Finnish National Museum’s collection had belonged to Pieski’s ancestor Golle-Gáddjá from Dálvadas on the Finnish side of Sápmi. They write, “The museum’s claim to ownership prevents the real and rightful heirs of this heritage to possess their own history.” They argue, however, museums can renegotiate their colonial legacies in the interest of societal healing by granting descendant communities full access to these collections and conceding “discursive autonomy” (2020, 11). Museums and source communities can work together toward mutual care and understanding.

For *Dressing with Purpose*, Nylander and Pieski contributed a chapter to the publication titled “The Legacy of Ládjogahpir: Rematriating Sápmi with Foremother’s Hat of Pride,” detailing their revitalization efforts to reconnect community histories to existing museum collections, reclaim cultural authority over them, and stimulate living practice (Harlin and Pieski 2021). Pieski also made a ládjogahpir, similar to the one she herself wears based on Golle-Gáddjá’s, for both display in the exhibition and inclusion in MOIFA’s permanent collection where its documentation will prioritize Sámi terminology, contexts, intentions, and perspectives, past and present. In this case, and hopefully for the foreseeable future at MOIFA, community interpretations of dress will be centered.

Dress, as an expressive medium of material culture, is intimately bound to understandings of personal and collective identities, both self-fashioned and ascribed. It is a form of usable artistry for navigating complex and overlapping social, material, temporal, spatial, and conceptual boundaries, “performing tasks on a rhetorical level” for its makers, wearers, and beholders (DuBois 2018, 164). Dress, in its many semantic and semiotic guises, has been harnessed as a metaphor for progress and stability, the exotic and the utopian, oppression and freedom, belonging and resistance. It has been enthralled at one time or another to every imaginable ideology. Dress defies any stable systems of classification.

**An Illustrated Walkthrough**

Based on my conversations, collaborative relationships, and research (historical, ethnographic, and collections-based), it became clear that Scandinavia offers an ideal context for a project exploring the theoretical ideas outlined in the preceding sections. In this concluding section, I provide a brief overview with an illustrated walkthrough (Figure 19).

*Dressing with Purpose: Belonging and Resistance in Scandinavia* is concerned with the materiality and artistry of clothes and clothes-making, but it is even more interested in the relationships people form with and through dress. Local dress traditions have played pivotal roles in catalyzing community life, national politics, and a myriad of reform and revitalization movements in Scandinavia. As the title implies, the project focuses most explicitly on the act of dressing and being dressed in public as intentional, aesthetic, and persuasive performances that contribute to the social creation and negotiation of meaning around specific sartorial traditions, identities, social values, and historical narratives. Because such an approach requires space for individual case studies and extensive contextualization illustrating diverse viewpoints, positionalities, and personalizations, I limited the scope to three broad categories of dress typically simplified as ciphers of folk, national, and ethnic minority costumes to serve various ideologies (Figure 20).

Figure 20. Exhibition photograph from Dressing with Purpose: Belonging and Resistance in Scandinavia as presented at the Museum of International Folk Art. Photograph by Addison Doty, 2022. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.
Swedish folkdräkt, Norwegian bunad, and Sámi gákti, like their conceptual containers, have taken shape within comparative and relational processes, subtly shifting against and in concert with each other. Yet, books and museum exhibits about them rarely bring them together in conversation outside of generalized surveys, as in U.S. museums dedicated to pan-Scandinavian or Nordic diasporic communities, where they typically reinforce nationalistic subdivisions (Figure 21). In circumscribing the scope for Dressing with Purpose, I took inspiration from contemporary material culture studies that place more emphasis on “the dynamics surrounding objects, rather than their more static moments of definition and secure classifications” (Myers 2001, 8). These contemporary dress traditions, each containing hundreds of localized and regional varieties, showcase the dynamic construction, interaction, and negotiation of elite and vernacular dress typologies in Scandinavia over an extended period. Unpacking these constructions, past and present, provided the framework that could be fleshed out with the stories, values, material artistry, and embodied realities of many individual partners.

Working with lead 3D designer Trilby Nelson and 2D graphic designer Monica Meehan, we organized the gallery space into a radial pattern with a central introductory section surrounded by areas dedicated to each broad category, offering an in-depth look at their histories and contemporary practices (Figures 22–23). This organization best served the overall narrative structure, but I also wanted to disrupt a basic (ethno) national framework with stories of movement and interconnection. Each section, for example, highlights examples of immigration/emigration/migration and moments of hybridization. Laurann Gilbertson, Chief Curator at the Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum, contributed a chapter for the book titled “The Transnational and Personalized Bunad of the Twenty-First Century” and an article for El Palacio: The


The Sámi, particularly, have been able to strengthen their political agendas through global Indigenous activism. One of the best recent illustrations of this with significance for local audiences was the participation of Sámi activists in opposing construction of the Dakota Access oil pipeline (DAPL) upstream from the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, including the Sámi parliament’s successful lobbying to persuade the Norwegian government to divest pension funds from companies responsible for DAPL (Fixsen 2017). In the exhibit, the section label introducing Sámi Gákti includes an iPad with videos filmed by climate activist Mavis Mantilla (Ojibwe/Finnish) in North Dakota during DAPL protests (Figure 24). Mavis, working with members of the Sámi American community including Tim Frandy and Linsey and Jeff Schad, organized a delegation of Sámi representatives to Standing Rock in September 2016. The delegation of Sofia Jannok, Inger Biret Kvernmo Gaup, and Sara Marielle Gaup Beaska presented formal gifts to the “water protectors” and expressed their solidarity through joiking (a Sámi vocal tradition). Their self-presentation included explanations of what they consider key symbols and values of Sámi identity.

In counterpoint to examples of cross-cultural communion, we have also incorporated varied examples of social conflict. The main sections are punctuated with “Dress Police” stations exploring recent public controversies (Figure 25). These controversies raise questions related to identity, politics, innovations in form, cultural appropriation, and representation. One station, for example, includes a guessing game next to a case of merchandise inspired by the local dress in Leksand, Sweden. From the label: “Developing new commercial products based on ‘folk’ designs has always been part of...
the hemslöjd movement, but sometimes the communities where the design originated reject certain products as inappropriate. One of the Leksands Hemslöjd products here sparked a community-wide controversy. Can you guess which one? Lift the doors to learn the answer” (Figure 26).

Another Dress Police station, considers the limits of who may claim authority within the contemporary bunad tradition in Norway. It centers on a “bunad-hijab” custom-designed by bunad-maker Marianne Lambersøy for Sahfana Muburak Ali, a practicing Muslim and naturalized citizen from Sri Lanka (Figure 27). Lambersøy and Muburak Ali settled on a silk version and later donated the wool prototype to MOIFA for exhibit. Camilla Rossing, Director of the Norwegian Institute for Bunad and Folk Costume (a research and advisory organization under the Ministry of Culture), wrote a chapter for the exhibit catalogue titled “Headdress and Hijab: Bunad in Multicultural Norway” analyzing the nation-wide debate sparked by Muburak Ali’s innovation (Rossing 2021). While many Muslim women wear bunader with hijab without incident, hybridizing these traditions with a hijab featuring matching bunad embroidery provoked some Norwegian’s xenophobic fears of Islamic influence on national culture (Figure 28). From the label:

Norwegians today disagree about who has authority to wear and innovate bunader. They also disagree about immigration, the increasing presence of racial and religious minorities, and who ultimately counts as Norwegian. Public debates like these show that some people still imagine national identity as a single ethnic majority.
Is the bunad an example of national costume or ethnic dress? Is nationality a matter of citizenship or exclusive ancestry?

Design concepts for the gallery’s built environment were inspired by field photos of artists’ workshops and home interiors, as well as features of Scandinavia’s architectural and natural landscapes, such as the repeated use of brightly colored, powder-coated metal common to Scandinavian modern furniture design and slat screen dividers to reference forests of slim birch trees.
Figure 27. Sahfana Mubarak Ali being fitted with a customized bunad-hijab by Marianne Lambersøy of Embla Bunader. Photograph by Jonas Haarr Friestad, 2016. Courtesy of Stavanger Aftenblad.

Figure 28. The Oslobunad worn with hijab. Photograph by Carrie Hertz, 2018. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.
For an area dedicated to Leksand parish in Sweden, we took inspiration from two main sources. One is the local handicraft shop, the Leksands Hemslöjd, which has played a significant role in supporting and celebrating local dress traditions. We also evoke traditional storage practices maintained on some farms where a special room called a klädkammare (‘clothes closet’) houses the family’s collection of local dress together, spanning generations (Figure 29). We modeled ours after the klädkammare on Knis Farm in the village of Tibble with the help of the Jobs-Björklöf family who have occupied this farmstead since the 16th century. In one of several videos we created with family members from multiple generations, Kersti Jobs-Björklöf, the family’s matriarch, gives a tour of the klädkammare, discussing its contents and history (Figure 30). Lizette Gradén, who had previously assisted with All Tradition is Change, contributed a chapter to the exhibit publication exploring Kersti Jobs-Björklöf’s caretaking of the Knis collections titled “They Are at Peace Here, like Old Friends in Their Caskets: Traditional Dress Collections as Heritage-Making” (2021).

The exhibition presents historic and new ensembles, jewelry, and accessories, as well as 2D and 3D artistic representations of dress. This assemblage is anchored by two major collections from MOIFA’s permanent holdings. Many of the older Swedish and Norwegian items dating primarily from the 19th and early 20th centuries come from Florence Dibell Bartlett’s founding gift. Bartlett was particularly enamored with Sweden, traveling throughout the country on multiple occasions and collecting a variety of complete ensembles (Figure 31). These collections were further strengthened in the 1990s in relation to Swedish Folk Art: All Tradition in Change, including new acquisitions from Sámi artists from the Swedish side of Sápmi.
Figure 30. Kersti Jobs-Björklöf in the klädkanmare at Knis Farm. Photograph by Chloe Accardi, 2018. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.

Figure 31. Exhibition photograph from Dressing with Purpose: Belonging and Resistance in Scandinavia as presented at the Museum of International Folk Art. Photograph by Addison Doty, 2022. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.
The second major collection that grounds the exhibit is a well-documented field collection of mid-20th century Sámi duodji funded by the International Folk Art Foundation (IFAF) and assembled from Sweden, Norway, and Finland during the 1960s by William S. Coperthwaite, author of *A Handmade Life: In Search of Simplicity*. Coperthwaite’s collection formed the basis of a traveling exhibition *The Reindeer Followers: Folk Artists of Lapland* (1966–1967). Interestingly, while Coperthwaite took great pains to document the names of makers, the garments from his collection did not include identifications. The reason why is unclear for these specific cases, but an anonymization of women’s *dipmad-duodji* (the “soft” arts of clothing and textiles not exclusively, but often presumably, made by women) is consistent with larger collecting patterns (Figure 32).

Figure 32. Exhibition photograph from Dressing with Purpose: Belonging and Resistance in Scandinavia as presented at the Museum of International Folk Art. Photograph by Addison Doty, 2022. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.
Sámi scholar Gunvor Guttorm has written, “Research on the history of clothing has not assigned equal importance to determining and highlighting the name of the maker” (2022, 179). Even when such information was readily available at the time, collectors simply neglected it as irrelevant. She argues that this practice for the field of duodji reflects Sámi women’s double devaluation as gendered and ethnoracial inferiors in the eyes of Western patriarchal institutions. Some types of duodji, like men’s náhpit (milking bowls carved from wood) could be recontextualized as sculptural works primarily for aesthetic viewing and out-group commercial exchange more in line with Western perceptions of “art.” Clothing, on the other hand, especially garments made by women for wear by ethnic Others, “became mere objects in the eyes of the museums and anthropologists” without the artistic merit bestowed by unique authorship (Guttorm 2022, 183).

The invisibility of makers (typically women) of traditional dress in museums is a result of power structures, not an observable lack of individual creativity and innovation in cultural artifacts. While working in community, knowledgeable Sámi artists, for example, were able to identify some of the anonymized makers in Coperthwaite’s collection, recognizing their stylistic trademarks and characteristic approaches to design. This reclaimed information now improves their documentation and display at MOIFA (Figure 33).

Figure 33. Woman’s daddnidum slihpá (collar with pewter embroidery) made by Maj-Doris Rimpí (b. 1943), 1960s. Jåhkåmåhkke (Jokkmokk), Swedish side of Sápmi, Collected by William S. Coperthwaite for IFAF Collection, Museum of International Folk Art (FA.1966.21.85). Photograph by Addison Doty. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.
We supplemented MOIFA’s collections with materials borrowed from other public institutions, including the Arctic University Museum in Tromsø, Bata Shoe Museum, Milwaukee Public Museum, American Swedish Institute, National Nordic Museum, and Vesterheim Norwegian American Museum. While I visited public collections across Scandinavia, we borrowed primarily from institutions located in North America, in part, out of necessity. Overseas art-shipping can get prohibitively expensive when weighed against other exhibit priorities. In North American museums dedicated to histories of ethnic immigration, I also found historic examples with solid provenance. Many relatives donated their own treasured heirlooms to these public sites with the explicit intent to preserve family legacies. They prevented their ancestors’ clothes from being anonymized.

In addition to public collections, we borrowed privately held works from families and purchased or commissioned new artworks reflecting contemporary practices, aesthetics, and assessments. *Dressing with Purpose* does include commercially manufactured clothing and accessories, such as the products sold through specialized boutiques or the popular designs produced by brands like Dale of Norway and Stoorstålka (Figure 34). Most examples from the relevant traditions, however, cannot be bought readymade.

By commissioning ensembles from both professional and family-centered makers, I have been able to learn a great deal about the nuanced choices and expert advice people are presented with during the process of acquiring customized local dress. By working with living artists and practitioners, we can make selections together and collaborate on how those artifacts will be interpreted and contextualized through supplemental materials. Using current technology, I was able to consult
with individuals throughout the mannequin preparation and installation process, insuring garments were dressed and styled according to personal and current community standards. For example, knowing I was failing to correctly tie the belt for a woman’s gákti from Jåhkåmåhkke (Jokkmokk, Sweden), I Facebook Messaged Eva Aira, the ensemble’s maker. Within minutes, she responded with a video shot on her phone showing her daughter Inga Lajla Aira Balto demonstrating the technique for me.

An integral feature of the gallery design is a variety of multimedia, including in-set photographs on label panels, photo murals, and largescale video slideshows, as well as, thirty-six short documentary films created by or in collaboration with community partners (Figure 35). Videos allow for much of the exhibit’s interpretation to be communicated directly through their voices and self-representations, while also visualizing a diversity of contemporary people, places, ideas, and living contexts. Incorporating speech in English, Swedish, Norwegian, and Sámi, the videos are closed captioned in English and Spanish. These have also been uploaded to MOIFA’s YouTube channel and will be shared periodically through social media.

Media helps enliven the otherwise static mannequins, reinforcing individual personhoods and presenting outfits in motion and in situ (Figure 36). It was important to me that anyone entering the space would, without reading a word
of text, immediately recognize the exhibit’s focus on contemporary living people and the vibrancy of their dynamic traditions. The plethora of visual examples showcasing living contexts, including a variety of private family occasions, youth events, and community-wide celebrations of different scale, prioritize the diverse reality of sartorial practices over idealized or normative depictions (Figure 37). Furthermore, the constant juxtapositions—natural and industrial materials, older and newer manifestations, passé and current interpretations, and the ever shifting (re)configurations of identities—reiterate an exhibit theme of co-presence: past and present coexisting and continually recontextualized in Scandinavian environments and sartorial performances (Figure 38).

My approach to curation is not unique, incorporating techniques common to “folklore-informed” exhibits as outlined by Betty Belanus (2021), but neither is it the industry standard. After visiting Dressing with Purpose, a professor of Art History at UCLA observed with surprise the number of people featured in the exhibit through their own direct participation. This design facet is indicative of our philosophical orientation, embracing an inclusive and balanced ethos over an exclusive, hierarchical one. My goal is to honor different types of expertise, including modes of specialized knowledge, skill, or connoisseurship rarely recognized and celebrated outside of specific families or community groups. While some participants in Dressing with Purpose do enjoy acclaim within the context of an international art world, like Anders Sunna, who is a featured artist representing Sápmi at the 2022 Venice Biennale, many more may be little known outside their social networks (Figure 39).
Figure 37. Norwegian family celebrating Søttende mai (National Day) in Oslo, featured in large video slideshow visible in Figure 36. Photograph by Chloe Accardi, 2018. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.

Figure 38. Exhibition photograph from Dressing with Purpose: Belonging and Resistance in Scandinavia as presented at the Museum of International Folk Art. Photograph by Addison Doty, 2022. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.
Figure 39. Grethe Rudi Bråten in her custom-bunad studio where she specializes in styles from the Valdres area, including a newly reconstructed variety called the Brindedukdrakt. As one of the few professionals knowledgeable in how to make it, she created one for MOIFA’s collection. Photograph by Chloe Accardi, 2018. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.
We included a tucked-away area where visitors could sit and contribute to an in-gallery comment book. Flipping through the pages, many visitors resonate with the show's themes, responding with personal stories and empathetic reflections written in English, Spanish, Norwegian, Swedish, Mandarin, Korean, and Arabic. Some remark on the exhibit itself as a communicative form:

I’m so glad to see this important expansion of what a museum means. Clothes as a form of rebellion. Bravo! Sallie Santa Fe

Thank you for this illuminating exhibition. Please host more examples of traditional clothing to foster more understanding of diverse cultures. KB - Santa Fe

December 11, 2021 What an amazing show. I’ve never seen anything like it . . . Thank you for this jolting experience! K.D.

Many respondents, not surprisingly, identify with Nordic or Sámi ancestry. They reminisce about personal experiences and express appreciation for being recognized by the museum. Others discuss their pride in or struggles with comparable ethnic and nationalized dress traditions. Or they reflect more generally on broader connections between clothes, racism, colonialism, and community.

I was very inspired by Jenni [Laiti] the Sami artist and the way they combine their art and activism. I aspire to do something like that in my city to represent my Mexican culture. Very grateful to be here at this exhibit in Santa Fe. Much love, Carolina C. From El Paso, Texas

As a mixed-race person, finding an outfit to express the wholeness of my identity can often seem impossible. Being made from a colonizer and a person who was colonized, I don’t know how to express myself in a way that feels right. As a white-passing person, I am also aware that many might see me as appropriating even though it’s my culture too.

I think clothing is an amazing way to express individuality as well as embrace one’s cultural heritage. It’s something I find is often overlooked within white communities. White supremacy is about assimilation, so the key to dismantling it is the embracing of unique culture identities.

But many more expound on their relationships with identity, personal style, and belonging through clothes, of all kinds, sometimes in confessional terms.

I like to wear clothes that highlight my fat body rather than trying to hide it. I like tank tops that show my tattoos and to tuck my shirts in so the silhouette of my belly shows. I used to buy clothes that would disguise my form and I felt terrible about myself. Now I’m thankful for this body, for being Queer + Fat + Disabled + Strong + Weak + so many other things. ♡ – KL, SFNM 4/8/22

A surprising number of commenters sign off with hearts and various expressions of love directed at imagined readers. And visitors are reading each other’s contributions, adding notes of compassion, encouragement, or drawings. I believe this open and supportive dialogue grows out of the exhibit’s inclusivity, making space for the coexis-
tence of contradictory views from many people from many walks of life. Perhaps even more importantly, these ideas are communicated primarily through videos featuring individuals’ first-person narratives filmed in their own living spaces. Through social media like YouTube or TikTok, a growing proportion of audiences anticipate and welcome a certain level of para-social intimacy with strangers, whether watching their stylized self-representations or interacting through asynchronous message boards. Regardless, the quickly filled comment books suggest a faction of visitors have connected emotionally and intellectually with the exhibition content. Most importantly, for the intentions of this curator and the mission of MOIFA, they recognize and convey a sense of shared humanity with the people behind the clothes, understanding these traditions not as emblems of distant Others but as the creative expressions of individuals like themselves acting with purpose in a messy, interconnected world.26

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Notes

1. This paper appears as part of a collection in honor of Daniel C. Swan, whose many accomplishments in the realm of museum curation, extended fieldwork, and community collaboration have served as models of inspiration for my work. As a curator of dress, Wedding Clothes and The Osage Community: A Giving Heritage (Swan and Cooley 2019), which resulted in a traveling exhibition, publication, and community-driven documentation of permanent collections, is of special interest. Multiyear, multipronged projects like this one are vital for reprioritizing the community histories, perspectives, and preferences that are too often overshadowed by hegemonic epistemologies and practices in museum contexts.
2. For discussion of this point, see especially Swan and Jordan (2015) and Dewhurst and MacDowell (2015). The community-driven models for sartorial autobiography and self-presentation developed by Diana Baird N’Diaye for The Will to Adorn project are particularly relevant to this discussion of community dress and curation (N’Diaye 2016, 2017).
3. Although royal raiment, historic and regional dress, and garments demonstrating craft techniques or technological progress have been publicly displayed in Europe since at least the 18th century, Petrov dates the first “fashion exhibition” curated from a permanent public collection as 1911 and argues that major museums in Europe and North America did not begin explicitly and systematically collecting and classifying clothing as high “art” until the second half of the 20th century (2019, 13–25). See also the discussion in Riegels Melchoir (2014).
4. See for example, Entwistle (2000, 43–44).
5. See discussion of this dynamic in Swan and Jordan (2015) in relation to their partnerships with Kiowa communities in the US.
6. Many traditional styles of local dress in Sweden grew out of religious practices in the Lutheran State Church, visually allying those from dispersed villages who worshipped together at the same parish church. *Sockendräkt* (‘parish costume’), as an alternative term for *folkdräkt*, highlights this historical background. For specific traditions of this type, the parish identity is preserved in standard naming practices, as with the Vingåkersdräkt (i.e., the dress for Vingåker parish).


9. For a theoretical, phenomenological, and ethnographic examination of the conceptual category of “costume,” see Shukla (2015). In her approach, she rejects a singular characterization for the category based on a subjective evaluation of formal properties, instead applying a folkloristic performance studies lens and arguing that the meaning ascribed to dress, much like the social construction of identity itself, is positional and contingent on messages sent and received in context. She prioritizes the creative ambitions of wearers who carefully choose clothes that will effectively communicate “a self-conscious definition of the self” in strategic moments (4). My understanding of dress and perspectives on its study are indebted to Shukla’s scholarship. I, nevertheless, avoid “costume” when referring to many types of traditional dress to prevent potential miscommunication in public discourse owing to the term’s most popular connotations and its history of use in museology.

10. For a historiography of “folk costume” as a conceptual category, see Yoder (1972). See also Bendix and Noyes (1998, 109–11) for uses of dress to serve nationalistic public discourses, as well as the construction of costume as a rhetorical foil to fashion.


12. For discussion of bridal shopping as a cultural practice in the US, see Hertz (2013).


14. For a discussion of “internalized colonization” and post-traumatic stress symptoms now recognized within Indigenous populations, including Sámi ones, see Bastañ, et al. (2003).

15. For relevant discussions, see Todal (1998) and Kuokkanen (2003).

16. Typically translated as “traditional art” or “handicraft,” *duodji* reflects an aesthetic philosophy for living beautifully in which daily activities and objects of everyday utility serve as important outlets for artistry. For a more thorough discussion of the *duodji* concept situated within Sámi systems of knowledge, see Guttorm (2015; 2017) and Gaski and Guttorm (2022).

17. For relevant discussions of patterns of representation in media and collections, see Dokka (2015), Baglo, Nyyssönen, and Ragazzi (2019), and Lehtola (2018). Notably, Lehtola found in historic photograph collections that the Sámi identity of pictured individuals was often overlooked if the subjects were engaged in “modern” activities or not wearing “traditional clothes.”

18. Take, for instance, the common use of regional dress to visually map culturally distinct peoples and places in early European cartography and “costume books.” See Moseley-Christian (2013), Olian (1977), and Ilg (2004). This phenomenon was also central to the relations between empires and minoritized peoples in the Southeast Asian massif, where colleagues and I have undertaken parallel work in Yunnan, Guangxi, and Guizhou China (Jackson forthcoming).

19. See also discussion in Mattsson (2014), especially pages 331–34, 342.
21. For an example of a recent controversy in which Swedish state lawyers were accused of employing a “rhetoric of race biology” in their legal arguments, see Crouch (2016).
22. For relevant discussions of this discourse, see Baizerman, Eicher, and Cerny (1996) and Jansen and Craik (2016, 1–15). For a fairly recent illustration that equates fashion with Western civilization and characterizes it as a universalizing “turning point in the history of human societies,” see Belfanti (2009).
23. To read more about their museum collections-based work, see Harlin (2017, 2019).
24. The exhibition was accompanied by a small booklet, see Robertson and Dickerson (1966).
25. I had the excellent fortune to bring colleagues with me to assist with audio-visual documentation during two of my three fieldtrips: Thomas Grant Richardson in 2017 and Chloe Accardi in 2018. Accardi, a skilled photographer and videographer, was responsible for the majority of footage and produced the final edits for almost all of the exhibit's videos and slideshows.
26. This essay presents the intellectual work and collaborative practice that informed the design of Dressing with Purpose. It also presents the project as a success for MOIFA and its community partners. This does not mean the results are above criticism. At the time of writing, neither the exhibition nor publication have been formally reviewed, but informal comments from museum visitors (made directly to me or my colleagues, most commonly museum guards) are important to consider. The majority of complaints so far relate to the desire for more comprehensive representation, particularly from visitors of Nordic descent who do not see their specific communities explicitly included (e.g., Denmark or Skåne in Sweden). We anticipated this disappointment and tried to partially address it with a small companion exhibition Fashioning Identity on view in Lloyd’s Treasure Chest, a less formal rotating gallery connected to the Cotsen Gallery where Dressing with Purpose is installed. Fashioning Identity includes more examples from the permanent collection of regional ensembles and accessories from Northern and Western Europe and the Baltic states, as well as non-dress related genres of Sámi duodji.

Another criticism related to content and object selection came from a man who believes some examples of Sámi duodji included in the exhibition are not of the highest available quality. This is a valid assessment even by contemporary standards in Sámi consensus, especially in light of a growing duodji fine art market targeting museums and out-group consumers. Many of our examples were collected in the mid-twentieth century during an initial period of duodji revival from makers early in their careers, some of whom went on to become leaders in the field. In this way, they are historically significant and, as with many of the garments in the show, realistically represent a range of skilled execution in living practice. In retrospect, I do worry I may have over-relied on our collection without sufficiently framing it historically. I added some of this contextual background to the “walkaround guides” for Fashioning Identity. Unlike the expensively produced labels in Dressing with Purpose, walkaround guides are printed in-house as needed from our office copy machine.

Finally, I recently had a fascinating phone conversation related to display techniques with a woman after she visited. Recognizing a disparity, she wanted to know why only some of the “female” mannequins had legs, while all the “male” mannequins had them. Representing the human body in display is always fraught with interpretative implications, but curatorial choices for embodying clothes can be severely limited by pragmatic concerns and available resources. In this case, forgoing modular legs (representing an additional expense) helped balance the installation budget and lessened the time needed to dress skirted ensembles for
which we lacked appropriate stockings or shoes in the collection. In contrast, legs were deemed necessary to achieve an appropriate appearance for men’s bifurcated lower garments, particularly for knee-breeches. A robust literature exists to interrogate the myriad issues with representing dressed bodies in museum displays. See Sandberg (2003); Hjemdahl (2014); Petrov (2019), particularly chapter 6 “The Body in the Gallery.”

In terms of inclusivity, I wish the exhibition and publication better reflected current conversations about gender non-conformity and “queering” traditional dress now taking place in Scandinavia and Sápmi. Extending and deepening our new relationships remain important goals, so I hope future spin-off projects may incorporate these and other relevant developments. One project now underway is a community-curated exhibition led by contributing Sámi artist Jenni Laiti. She has assembled an international team of Indigenous artists and climate activists to address the topic of global climate change with a focus on creative and community-oriented solutions derived from Indigenous knowledges.

References Cited


Carrie Hertz is Curator of Textiles and Dress at the Museum of International Folk Art. She is editor of *Dressing with Purpose: Belonging and Resistance in Scandinavia* (Indiana University Press, 2021) and author of many works on folklore, museums, and dress, including the chapter “Public Folklore Curatorship: Collaborating with Emerging Refugee Communities” in *Folklife and Museums: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017). Previously she directed a community-based public folk arts program and taught classes as the Curator of Folk Arts at the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University in western New York.