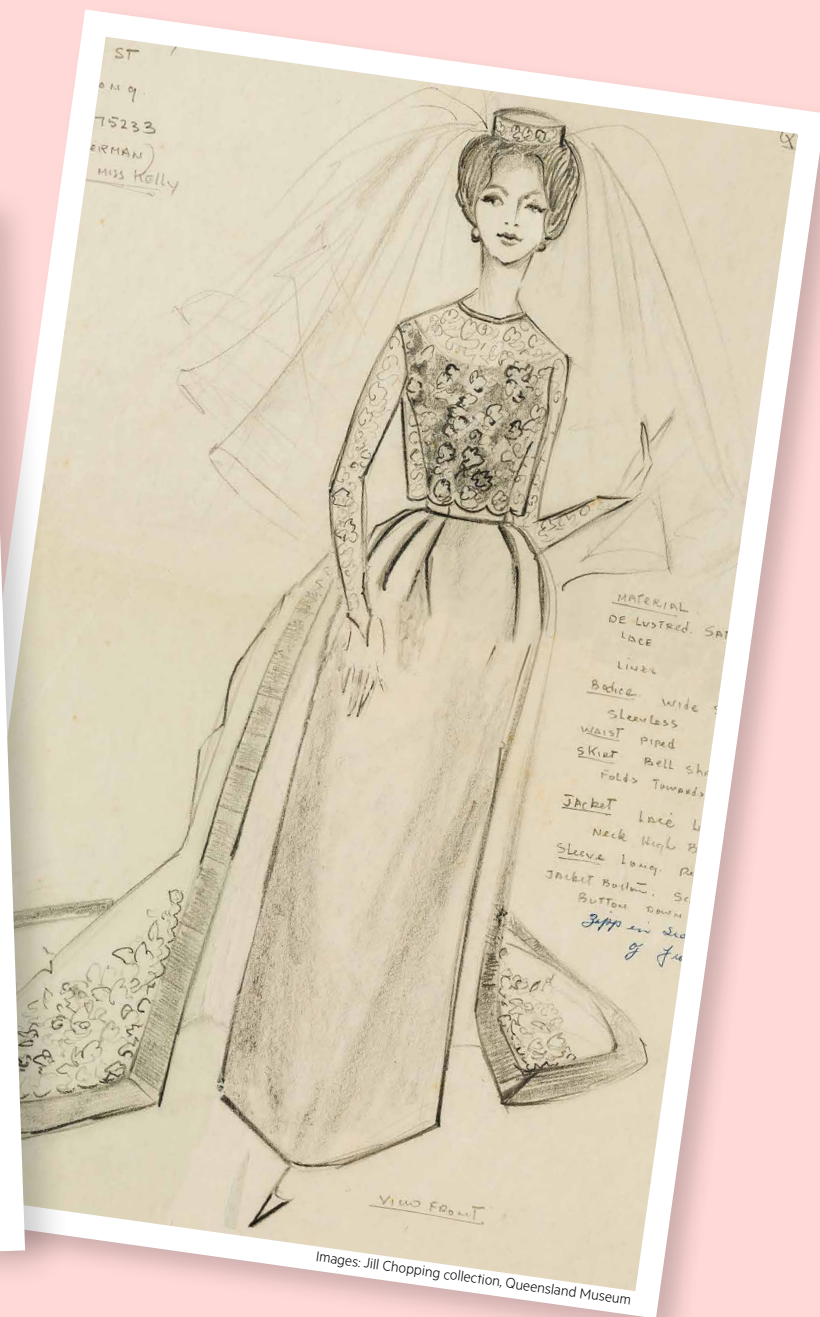


wedding stories from Queensland

18 Sept 2020 to 21 Feb 2021



Images: Jill Chopping collection, Queensland Museum

Behind the Scenes

Museum exhibitions involve extensive teamwork. In this behind-the-scenes interview, two members of the exhibition team share their backgrounds, professional pathways and passions, explain some of the scientific and historical skills required for museum work, and discuss how this exhibition was developed.

What is your name and what is your role at Queensland Museum? How long have you worked here?

Solitaire: My name is Solitaire Osei. I am the Senior Conservator, Textiles and I have been working at Queensland Museum for four years.

Judith: My name is Judith Hickson and I'm Curator of Social History. I've worked at Queensland Museum for almost five years.



Luke Sullivan (donor), Craig Burns, (donor), Judith Hickson (Curator, Social History), Chris Salter (Acting Exhibitions Project Manager), Solitaire Osei (Senior Conservator, Textiles), Leanne Zimmermann (outfit on loan), Carmen Burton (Assistant Curator)

What is your background career or education? How did you end up working in a museum?

Solitaire: I have a Bachelor of Applied Science in the Conservation of Cultural Materials, specialising in Textiles. I also have studied garment construction and theatrical costume design. I have worked as a textile conservator in several museums, galleries and historic palaces over the world.

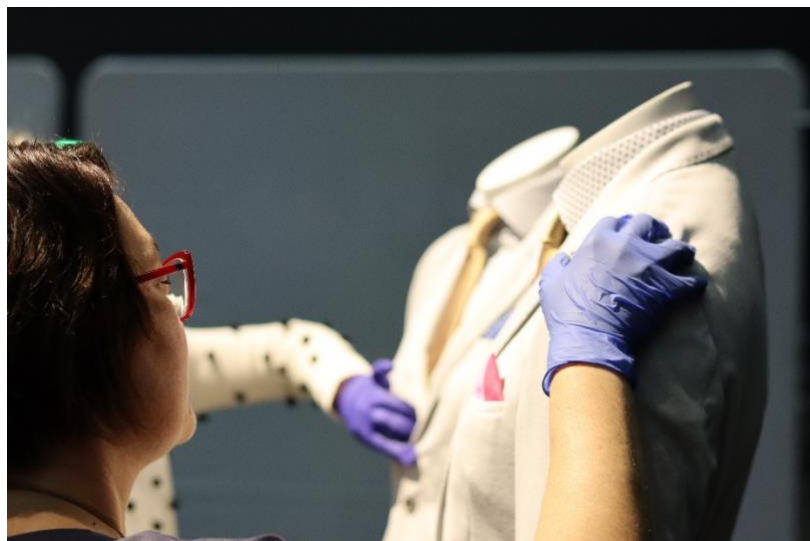
Judith: I have a first class honours degree in anthropology, and an arts degree majoring in anthropology and international relations. I also have an educational background in political science, history and women's studies. I worked in a number of different areas before being employed on a short contract as a curator by the National Museum of Australia in 2009. A two-month contract turned into 6 years with the NMA before I returned to Queensland to be closer to my family.

What does a “typical day” look like when you go to work?

Solitaire: My work days vary quite dramatically. One day I could be at the computer typing up reports and then the next day I could be up a ladder cleaning exhibits. But, more often than not, I am carrying out treatments on fabulous textiles from Queensland Museum’s collection. This would include: completing a condition report, taking detailed images and carrying out conservation treatments, such as, cleaning, crease removal, adhesive linings and stitch repairs.

Judith: A ‘typical’ day is very difficult to describe. In the lead up to this exhibition, there has been an extraordinary amount of email, Skype and telephone correspondence between all the different teams working on the exhibition as well as with donors and lenders. Normally, much of this would be face to face interaction, but with the current pandemic restrictions in place and most of us working from home, our communication workload has increased exponentially. A good part of my day is also taken up with research and writing. Each detail of every story has to be carefully researched and complex ideas have to be contained within a minimum of words so label writing is an extraordinarily difficult task.

In between, I also answer multiple inquiries and assess donation offers, record, catalogue and photograph objects, contact potential story sources, write social media posts, blog posts and research articles and attend umpteen online meetings.



Where did the idea for this exhibition come from? How did you select the objects for this museum? Did you have to apply a process of elimination, and if so, how?

Judith: There is an established process for submitting exhibition proposals and weddings was just one of many ideas that we submitted for consideration. Yes, we went through a very extensive elimination process. Queensland Museum has a very large collection of wonderful wedding dresses but many were not suitable for exhibition because of their age, condition, fragility and because of the cost involved in conserving them to a stage where they could be put on public display.

Queensland’s humid hot climate is not kind to clothing, especially some of the types of fabrics that were popular in the nineteenth century, such as the pineapple fibre and iron-weighted satin fabrics that some of our earlier wedding dresses were made from. Many dresses had very little information attached to them so in some instances we were able to find only very few details about their former owners which made it difficult to understand the historical context and personal circumstances in which they were worn.

We also had to consider the physical limitations of the gallery space, the overall cost of the exhibition, the availability of staff to take on all the work behind the scenes and so on.



Where and how are the collections stored when they are not on display? Who is responsible for this?

Judith: When objects aren't on display they are housed in our collection stores. There are two main stores in the cultures and histories program – the social history store and the anthropology store. The exhibition will feature objects from both stores. All objects that come in to the museum are first given a condition report by our conservation team who will then carry out any conservation treatment that's required to make sure that they have the best chance of long-term preservation. The objects are then carefully packed into specially made boxes or other containers, or in the case of garments, in specially made garment bags. In the meantime, they are photographed, measured and catalogued in our collection database and given an identification number for tracking. They are then housed in the collection store which is managed by a collection manager who is responsible for locating the objects and recording their location on the database so they can be

found easily when required. All collection work is generally shared between the conservation, curatorial and collection management teams.

What steps have to occur between retrieving the objects from storage and installing them into the exhibition?

Solitaire: From a conservation point of view, these are the steps I would follow:

- Condition assessment for display and treatment recommendation.
- Detailed condition report, including photography and material analysis.
- Carry out required conservation treatment to enable the garment to be safely displayed.
- Take after-treatment photos and write treatment report.
- Mannequin trials to determine the appropriate mannequin for fit and silhouette and what adaptations may be required.
- Construct the required undergarment, such as a cage bustle for a late 19th century bustle dress. This provides the garment with the correct foundation for the silhouette, while also providing support to the fragile garment.
- Dress the mannequin for display on the allocated mannequin, padded out to fit (if required) with the appropriate undergarments.
- Install the dressed mannequin onto the plinth or into a showcase following the exhibition design layout.
- Add any accessories and give a final tweak to skirts, bows, trains etc.

Judith: As Solitaire has pointed out, much of this work is carried out by a conservator. A curator's main job is to select the most appropriate objects and to determine just what stories they will tell. Exhibition work is collaborative, meaning it involves a number of different people with different skills all working cooperatively and supportively together. We all try to help each other in whatever way we

can so no one person is shouldering more than they can cope with, but sometimes only one person, like Solitaire, will have the necessary skills for a particular task, and she is happy to leave the research and writing tasks to the curatorial team. The collection manager is also a very important member of the team as he or she is responsible for keeping track of all the objects, knowing where they are at all times, and ensuring that they are all returned in good condition at the end of exhibition. Collection managers also do much of the loan paperwork and management.

How do you handle, treat and display fragile or deteriorating objects?

Solitaire: Fragile or deteriorating objects need to be handled with care. Silk fabric in particular can become very brittle over time and break apart or tear very easily. If this happens it may not be the fault of the handler, but damage and loss can be minimised with correct handling.

It is always important to wear gloves or use clean hands when handling objects. This reduces the risk of passing any oils from your skin onto the object and can sometimes provide a better grip. It is essential to completely support an object while moving it – clean, flat trays, boards and trolleys can be used and you always use both hands. You never carry or pick up an object by its obvious handle or strap. Over time, these heavily-used components can become weak and may give way the one time you handle it. Instead you use both



hands, separate any parts and lift the item from the base cupping it in both hands. Garments which are long are best moved on a board or trolley and may require two people to move them safely.

When treating these fragile objects, the same care is taken as when moving them. However, there is not one way to conserve something for display. A thorough assessment is completed and an appropriate treatment is determined based on what is required of the object. For example, if a garment is to be displayed flat in a showcase, the treatment would be minimal as there are no stresses placed on it, but if it were to be displayed on a mannequin, the manipulation required to dress it on the mannequin would mean a more robust approach would be required.

Did any particular collection items create challenges during conservation, repair or installation?

Solitaire: While working on the 1950's wedding dress by Marsha Mayne, the extent of the damage to the net underskirt was only made apparent during treatment. While removing the creases in the net underskirt, it was realised that the net was very brittle and had large areas of loss. To leave it as is would likely cause more loss, as the coarse net would abrade the weak edges, so to avoid this the areas of loss were patched. A matching net was found and hours of stitching ensued to anchor the net patches in place. As with most conservation treatments, all the work is hidden underneath and can't be seen while on display!



Treatment of 1950s wedding dress by Marsha Mayne

Historic garments in particular are often missing their most important components - the undergarments. Due to the often-overused nature and proximity to the body, these garments unfortunately often don't survive. Without them, the garment is ill fitted and the silhouette is incorrectly portrayed. As a mannequin cannot be manipulated like a body was with corsets, it is essential to have mannequins with the body types of the respective eras. A display underskirt (also known as "underpinning") is also essential to accurately depict the silhouette and to suitably support the fragile garment while on display. For the five 19th century dresses in *I Do! Wedding Stories from Queensland*, Kyoto Costume Institute historical mannequins were used and an appropriate underpinning was made. This requires the specialist knowledge of taking accurate measurements from fragile garments and the materials and skills needed to construct the underpinning.



Before



Underpinning



After

How might displaying a garment in a museum exhibition be different to displaying it in a retail setting?

Solitaire: When displaying garments in a museum setting, there are many aspects that need to be considered. The first and foremost is the safety of the garment. Can it be safely supported and displayed on a mannequin? Is there adequate room for its fullness and distance or barrier between the visitor and garment? Will placing it on display cause irreversible damage? Environmental factors can greatly affect a garment on display. Over-exposure to high light levels and UV can fade and yellow fabrics. Dust can become embedded in the woven material, soil the fabric and can be an attractant to insects that not only eat the dust, but the material as well. Rapid fluctuations in temperature and humidity can be detrimental to historic fabrics that are already brittle and weak. Fabrics and fibres are very absorbent and take on moisture from the air. If this suddenly changes, it will cause the fibres to expand and/or contract which can cause applied elements to become loose or tears to generate. And, as we know in Queensland, high temperatures and high humidity are a perfect environment for mould to grow. All these factors are taken into account when we display any item, but in particular textile items and garments. It is our job to ensure that all items in our care are treated respectfully, handled with care and are safe-guarded to allow accessibility for present and future generations.

Do you have a favourite object in, or story from, the exhibition? Why?

Judith: It's very difficult to say which object is my favourite as every object I work with, no matter how humble, can be completely engrossing and amazing and each has their own unique story to tell. What I soon discovered after coming to work at a museum is that it is like being in a treasure house of stories, where every single object has the power to reveal extraordinary histories and complex ideas - it all depends how long and how deeply you are prepared to look at them. The most ordinary everyday objects are often the most fascinating. It often involves quite a lot of detective work to remove the layers that hide the stories but it is incredibly rewarding and really a lot of fun too.

What did you learn during the development of this exhibition?

Judith: Personally, I've learned a great deal about historical, social and political aspects of marriage and weddings, a subject I must admit I wasn't particularly interested in beforehand. One of the joys of immersing myself in a subject that didn't initially appeal, is that I have come away surprised and delighted by how interesting, complex, highly personal and emotionally uplifting wedding celebrations can be, no matter when, where or how they take place. I think the take away message for me is that love and commitment is one of the most enduring ideals for most people whatever our background.

What do you hope Queensland Museum's visitors will take away from this exhibition, and why should students come to see this exhibition?

Judith: I hope the exhibition will stimulate lots of discussion about the idea and history of marriage and weddings. I'd particularly like students to understand how fashion is a product of the time, place and historical context in which it emerges - basically, how fashion changes over time and is itself a response to the changing times.

Recently, the pandemic and before that, bushfires, has had a very profound impact on people's view of the world, and has, in fact, turned many people's worlds upside down. I'd love students to go away

thinking about what marriage really means, in its essential form, and how they think weddings might be celebrated in future, especially in light of climate change and how the fashion and wedding industries are contributing to global carbon emissions and to pollution and waste.

I think another important take away for students is how marriage laws have changed over time and how they have impacted and ostracised various groups in society, especially same-sex couples and First Australians, but also about women's place in society before and after marriage and how women are affected by their change in status. And last, but not least, how social media has impacted weddings so that they are often productions primarily targeted at social media platforms, in contrast to weddings in the past, where most couples had only a very few images taken at their weddings which were mainly kept for private or family enjoyment.

Most of all, I hope everyone learns something interesting that they might not have known before, have their eyes opened to possibilities or ideas they may not have previously considered or simply, find a favourite garment, object or story that will stay in their memories for many months or years to come.



Clockwise from left:

Nellie and William Kee, 1934;
Craig Burns and Luke Sullivan, 2018;
Christie Nicolaides and Stephen Sourris, 2017