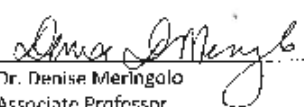


APPROVAL SHEET

Title of Thesis: *An Exhibit of Women, By Women, But for Women?: The Limits of Interpretation at the Smithsonian*

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ABSTRACT

Title of Document: AN EXHIBIT OF WOMEN, BY WOMEN,
BUT FOR WOMEN?: THE LIMITS OF
INTERPRETATION AT THE SMITHSONIAN

Kayla Elizabeth Piechowiak, Masters of Arts,
and 2019

Directed By: Associate Professor, Denise Meringolo, History
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This thesis examines the *First Ladies* exhibit as one of the only representations of gender in the National Museum of American History. As a result, a study of the exhibit also tells us something about the evolving place of women as subjects of study and as leaders in the profession. At the same time, the First Ladies exhibits' constant display of gowns created an interpretive nostalgia among visitors who saw this display repeatedly. Examining the public response can help us understand the role of museums in shaping public perceptions of the past, of gender, and of material culture. This thesis will look at the ironic place of women in museums as women push boundaries to be included in the national narrative, included in curatorial positions, and to be more broadly interpreted, but while they make some gains, women are also caged into specific interpretations of women and lower positions in museum staffs.

AN EXHIBIT OF WOMEN, BY WOMEN, BUT FOR WOMEN?: THE LIMITS OF
INTERPRATION AT THE SMITHSONIAN

By

Kayla Elizabeth Piechowiak.

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, Baltimore County, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Studies
2019

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Dedication

For my family, this wouldn't have happened without you, especially Marley.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my Mom and Dad for always inspiring me to reach for the stars and telling me that I could accomplish anything. I could never have done this without you. And thank you to my sister Marley. This is just proof that you can do anything that you set your mind too.

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Introduction

‘The First Ladies’ exhibit has been one of my favorite exhibits at the National Museum of American History since the first time I visited. I’ve always had a soft spot for it because I love fashion and the first ladies, and I find it fascinating to observe how style has evolved. Despite the draws of ‘The First Ladies,’ however, it’s not right that the exhibit provides little information about who these women were beyond their stylistic preferences in fashion and china sets... I definitely left thinking about how ‘The First Ladies’ hasn’t really changed since I first saw it when I was 11 years old. Permanent exhibits don’t go through major changes often, but in 2017, an exhibit about the first ladies should put more emphasis on the real contributions that these women made to their country.¹

Today, the *First Ladies* exhibit spurs a lot of controversy in its interpretation of women. Some visitors have strong opinions about what the exhibit says about women, wanting it to interpret more of “the real contributions that these women made to their country.” But so many visitors enjoy seeing the gowns displayed the same way since the exhibit started. The longevity of this exhibit makes it something that visitors come to Washington, D.C. to see, something they expect to see. Visitors can show their children and grandchildren the same gowns they saw the first time they visited the Museum and now they have expectations about its display. Consistency in the collection’s interpretation from the time of its origin in 1912, through the 1980s has shaped visitor attitudes and expectations. Subsequent curators have struggled to change the interpretation in the face of these expectations, but the exhibit has actually been quite radical in its subject matter, opening a place for women in the national collection and as professionals.

¹ Natalie Prieb, “‘The First Ladies’ exhibit should showcase more than gowns,” *The GW Hatchet*, April 6, 2017. <https://www.gwhatchet.com/2017/04/06/the-first-ladies-exhibit-should-showcase-more-than-gowns/>.

The First Ladies collection has been around for over 100-years. It predated the rise of women's history and modern feminism. Early curators, interested in including women as part of the Smithsonian's collections and display, established a particular interpretive lens through which the collection has been viewed, one that remained intact over the course of several redesigns and reinstallations. The fact that the presentation and interpretation remained fairly static for most the exhibit's first seventy years provides us with an opportunity to explore the ways in which exhibits have played a role in shaping public perceptions of the past. Can an exhibit create an interpretive nostalgia? Once visitors come to expect a particular interpretation, how do they experience changes in the exhibition? What factors hinder change? What factors enable change?

There are many forces that steer the interpretation of an exhibit: the curators' vision, public comments/reception, funding sources, political influence, and the collection process of the museum. While all of these factors combine to influence an exhibition, the museum's goals and the curator's vision have traditionally guided interpretation. However, starting in the mid twentieth century, public expectations have become progressively more influential in exhibitions. Correspondence records and published reviews indicate that the First Ladies collection has been a focal point of public attention for decades. Beverly Serrell has conducted many evaluations of museum exhibits for their ability to educate visitors. Visitor feedback, in the form of front and back end evaluations, have helped to make exhibits more effective for the

visitors. The California Museum of Science put-up computer-generated labels that allowed them to make changes based on the visitor response.²

The exhibit might not emphasize First Ladies' actions, but that does not mean it is not a radical exhibit. Today, the *First Ladies* has been one of the sole sites of women's history interpretation at the Smithsonian Institution since the gowns first went on display. In 1912, Rose Gouverneur Hoes and Cassie Julian-James wanted to start a Historical Costume Collection for the Smithsonian Institution. They set out to collect a dress from the hostess of the White House for every presidential administration, even for the presidents who did not have wives.³ They volunteered their time to organize an exhibit, and the costumes of First Ladies soon became the most popular part of the exhibit. The exhibition put women's lives on display in the United States National Museum, making the case that women's domestic achievements were as significant as the achievements of the men whose lives dominated collections and exhibitions.

² Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (New York: Altamira, 1996), 219. In the 1950's, museums started to take more of an interest in what the visitors think, when they come to museums. Many museums started to hand out visitor surveys and collect data on the people that walk through their doors. This got more complicated in the 1960s and 1970s, during the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Rights Movement. These movements created a greater awareness that certain people were not represented in the museums around them. This changed the way that museums had to market themselves to keep their visitors. Visitors gained even more control in the 1990s, during the Enola Gay scandal, the patrons of the National Air and Space Museum actively worked to hinder the opening of an Enola Gay exhibit that did not reflect their view of American history. Erik Christiansen, *Channeling the Past: Politicizing History in Postwar America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 204; Jessie Swigger, *History is Bunk: Assembling the Past at Henry Ford's Greenfield Village* (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 126-142; Andrea A. Burns, *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement* (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013); Edward T. Linenthal, *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (Henry Holt and Company: New York, NY, 1996).

³ Lisa Kathleen Graddy and Amy Pastan, *The Smithsonian First Ladies Collection* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2014), 6-7.

Women in the Profession

The popularity of the collection also opened up a place for women as professionals in the world of curation. Women have always had a role in museums, from patrons, to collectors, to educators, but the museum profession remained a male dominated field until the 1970s.⁴ Women had little access to paid, professional positions and little control over the direction of museums and exhibits. According to Joan Baldwin and Anne Ackerson even today, although women make up a large percentage of the staff in museums across the United States, few occupy upper level management positions. Museum boards tend to favor men in hiring.⁵

Despite their influential role, Hoes and James were working as voluntary, unofficial curators when they brought their idea to the Secretary of the Smithsonian. As volunteers, women, including Hoes and James, had a difficult time exerting interpretive control over exhibit content. They typically required permission from a paid staff member in the Museum to make changes. Women who entered the museum field often remained in low-ranking positions, so they never had the final say in the direction of the museum interpretation. Nonetheless, Hoes and James' work gave women a foothold in the field.⁶ Their successor, Margaret Klapthor, occupied a paid

⁴ Edith P. Mayo, "Women's History and Public History: The Museum Connection," *The Public Historian* 5, no. 2 (1983): 63–73, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3377251>. For women's presence in Historic Preservation see Barbara J. Howe, "Women in Historic Preservation: The Legacy of Ann Pamela Cunningham," *The Public Historian* 12, no. 1 (1990): 31–61, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3378321>.

⁵ Joan H. Baldwin and Anne W. Ackerson, *Women in the Museum: Lessons from the Workplace* (New York: Routledge, 2017). See also Marjorie Schwarzer, "Women in the Temple: Gender and Leadership in Museums," *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums: A Routledge Reader*, ed. Amy K. Levin (New York: Routledge, 2010), 16–27. Her article comes between the 1994 *Gender Perspectives* and the 2017 *Women in the Museum* on statistics for the museum's positions. She finds that women are present in museums, but they are not in the director positions.

⁶ Taylor's article looks at the history of women in the profession, as patrons, collectors and volunteers. These positions hold little to no power to change the interpretation of museums. Kendall Taylor, "Pioneering Efforts of Early Modern Women," *Gender Perspectives*, 11–27. See also Paul N. Perrot, "Influence and Effect," *Gender Perspectives*, 28–31 and Jean Weber, "Changing Roles and

curatorial position. She was hired, largely, because museum management believed the gowns should be in the care of a woman.

Women's Representation in Exhibits and Scholarship

Museum exhibits and collections speak not only about the time period of the things they exhibit, but also about the values and concerns of the moment in which they were collected and displayed. Museum interpretation is not only shaped by the curators who research and write for the exhibits. It is also shaped by collecting practices and priorities. Steven Lubar argues, in *Inside the Lost Museum: Curating, Past and Present*, that museums have been somewhat passive in this regard, failing to acquire collections in a mission-driven manner.⁷ Most museums rely on artifact donations because they do not have the money to purchase items. This reliance on donations meant collections were driven by the preferences and habits of collectors rather than curators. Before the rise of social history, the majority of objects categorized as “historical” tended to represent the history of white America, often focusing on the men in power and progress. Because of these limitations, changing the narrative displayed in exhibits is difficult. It requires reinterpreting the objects already in collections to tell different stories. The First Ladies collection almost exclusively focuses on decorative arts objects: dresses, accessories, and china. When the collection started in 1912, American decorative arts was a popular topic and was

Attitudes,” *Gender Perspectives*, 32-36. For women being overlooked in their importance in the museum field see Ruth Adams, “The New Girl in the Old Boy Network: Elizabeth Estevee-Coll at the Victoria and Albert Museum,” *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums: A Routledge Reader*, ed. Amy K. Levin (New York: Routledge, 2010). Elizabeth Estevee-Coll had trouble as the first female director of the Victoria and Albert Museum because she was seen as an educator and not a curator.

⁷ Steven Lubar, *Inside the Lost Museum: Curating, Past and Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 44-50.

the domain of women.⁸ These objects were generally collected to represent women because of their presence in the home. Not only is the collection limited in its scope, but the curators are limited by the view of women at the time of each reinterpretation.

The curators' commitment to maintaining a traditional representation of the First Lady as the "White House hostess" makes a statement about the role of women in society not only at the time of particular presidencies, but also over time. The display of these objects embodied a long-held belief that woman's proper place is in the home. By the late 1980s, influenced by women's history and social history scholarship, curators wanted to expand the interpretation of the First Lady's role, to explore her work on the Presidential campaign, her policy advocacy, and her efforts to promote social change, in addition to her duties as hostess. Such an analysis can help visitors explore both changing ideas about the broader role of women in society, and about the ways in which changing social roles can impact exhibit interpretation.

The emergence of women's history, in the 1970s, changed the way women were studied, as individuals and actors during periods in which they had little official power. The women's history movement, influenced both academic history and museum interpretation. Prior to that, exploration of women's lives was confined to the private sphere and decorative arts in both monographs and exhibitions.⁹ With the

⁸ "Images of the First Ladies May 2-8, 1993 A. Introduction and History of the Exhibit," Folder FL 1992 Media Materials, box from Mayo's Office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor file cabinet; Edith P Mayo, "New Angles of Vision," *Gender Perspectives*, 57-62.

⁹ Edith P Mayo, "New Angles of Vision," *Gender Perspectives*, 57-62. Scholars have written about the static nature of the First Ladies Exhibit, it fails to incorporate the First Ladies as independent actors. Many agree that the language used to discuss these women, reinforces a hostess position. Jennifer Keohane, "'The Most Important Dress in the Country': The Rhetoric of Glamour in the Smithsonian's 'The First Ladies,'" *Women's Studies in Communication* 40, no. 3 (July 2017): 270-88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2017.1346531>; Sara Kitsch, "Visuality, Role, and Representation: The First Ladies at the Smithsonian," accessed January 25, 2018, <https://comm.tamu.edu/wp->

rise of women's history, feminist scholars have reinterpreted both the First Ladies and their role, politicizing this public position. Especially in a public and political role, the First Ladies themselves and their position was reinterpreted. Very little literature existed on the First Ladies prior to the 1980s. The controversial and celebrated First Ladyships of Nancy Regan and Barbara Bush created a new popularity surrounding the First Ladies, and helped to found new scholarship. In 1987, Betty Boyd Caroli released a comprehensive text on the First Ladies looking at the transformation of the First Ladies role from "ceremonial backdrop to substantive world figure."¹⁰ Other scholars look at the First Ladies of the twentieth century. Myra Gutin analyzes the increasing role of media in the First Lady's image. She argues that the First Ladies developed more personal communication skills as they transitioned from "social hostesses to emerging spokeswomen, and then to political surrogates and independent advocates."¹¹ Catherine Allgor, in *Parlor Politics: In Which the First Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government*, argues that Washington women were political actors using social events and the "private sphere" to establish the

content/uploads/sites/9/2015/08/Spotlight_Kitsch_2-2015.docx.pdf. The First Ladies have even failed to gain respect in the minting of currency. Public memory is reinforced by the choices of Congress in the currency and the First Ladies Exhibit. Sara R. Kitsch, "Minting Public Memory: Substitution Logics and Gendered Commemoration in the First Spouse Coin," *Women's Studies in Communication* 40, no. 4 (October 2017): 419–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2017.1373717>. For other examples of women in museums see also Lois Banner, "Three Stages of Development," *Gender Perspectives*, 39–46. Tamar Katriel, "Pioneering Women Revisited: Representations of Gender in Israeli Settlement Museums," *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, 115–128.

¹⁰ Not all of the literature, on the First Ladies, in the 1980s was scholarly. The First Ladies had not become a topic of study for many historians. Other writers were responding to the popularity of the most recent First Ladies in the late 1980s and 90s, but this increase in literature spurred the scholarship that we see in the early 2000s from historians. Lewis L. Gould, "Modern First Ladies and the Presidency," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1990): 677–83. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20700152>; Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). Carl Sferrazza Anthony, "The First Ladies: They've Come a Long Way, Martha...," *Smithsonian* 23, no. 7 (October 1992): 135.

¹¹ Elizabeth Israels Perry, Review of *President's Partner: The First Lady in the Twentieth Century*, by Myra Gutin, *Journal of American History* 77, no. 3 (Dec. 1990): 1073–1074; Myra Gutin, *The President's Partner: The First Lady in the Twentieth Century* (Westport: Greenwood, 1989).

capitol and build the unofficial structures of government.¹² The women's right movement opened new avenues of research on women, creating new interpretations of the First Ladies.

Progression of Museums Role

Not only has the scholarship on women changed, but so has the role of museums. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the museum's role was to uplift society by showing examples of good taste and good manners to inspire the general public. The First Ladies collection fit this model because it documented the moral and aesthetic role of women in advancing American ideals. The majority of museum visitors were not really "the general public," however. Most were white, upper class, and committed to the vision of America on display. In his 1917 article, "The Gloom of the Museum," John Cotton Dana challenged museums to serve a broader public.¹³ Commentators like Dana believed museums should be

¹² Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 2000); William Hazelgrove, *Madam President: Secret Presidency of Edith Wilson* (Washington D.C.: Regnery History, 2016); Jeanne Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic: Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, and the Creation of a Iconic American Role* (New York: New York University Press, 2018); Edith P. Mayo, "From the Editor: Teaching a First Ladies Curriculum in the Classroom," *OAH Magazine of History* 15, no. 3 (2001): 3–4; Edith P. Mayo, "Teaching the First Ladies Using Material Culture," *OAH Magazine of History* 15, no. 3 (2001): 22–25; Anthony J. Eksterowicz and Kristen Paynter, "The Evolution of the Role and Office of the First Lady: The Movement Toward Integration with the White House Office," *Social Science Journal* 37, no. 4 (October 2000): 547; Anthony J. Eksterowicz and Robert N. Roberts, "First Ladies: Constitutional and Job Description Problems?," in *Conference Papers -- American Political Science Association* (Conference Papers -- American Political Science Association, American Political Science Association, 2002), 1, <http://proxy-bc.researchport.umd.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,url,uid&db=poh&AN=17985924&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

¹³ John Cotton Dana, "The Gloom of the Museum," *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson (New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 13–29; Gary Kulick, "Designing the Past: History Museum Exhibitions from Peale to Present," *History Museums in the United States*, eds. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

educational institutions, where non-elites could learn about American lifestyles and values.¹⁴

In the 1930s and 1940s, museum curators expanded their educational role by offering more direct interpretation of the objects on display. This concept of museums as vehicles for education dominated the 20th century. In 1942, Theodore Low argued that museums should recognize themselves as educational institutions, like schools, rather than marginalizing education in specialized departments.¹⁵ But the education provided by museums was not neutral. Each interpretation portrayed specific messages. The timing of Margaret Klapthor's display, in the 1950's, is relevant. The exhibit opened in post-World War II America, when most women were asked to return to their places in the home. She improved the display, contextualizing each costume in a period room.¹⁶ She also offered limited interpretation for each of the gowns and the women who wore them. Klapthor's position as a curator gave her more ability to advance the interpretation of the exhibit. She was as influenced by current scholarship and trends in museum display as she was by attitudes and beliefs regarding women after World War II.

The rise of social history had, by the 1980s, established new areas of study. Academics began taking seriously the lives of workers, women, and minority

¹⁴ Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹⁵ Theodore Low, "What is a Museum?," *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson (New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 30-43; Michael Wallace, "Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States," *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, eds. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1986), 137-161.

¹⁶ Graddy and Pastan, *The Smithsonian First Ladies Collection*, 7-10; Smithsonian, "First Ladies at the Smithsonian," National Museum of American History, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/first-ladies/new-exhibition>.

groups.¹⁷ Trained in this new scholarship, a new generation of museum curators sought to expand collections and interpretation. They worked to address contemporary research and debates. In 1990, the Smithsonian held a seminar, “Gender Perspectives: The Impact of Women on Museums,” to explore the state of women in the field.¹⁸ This seminar focused on both women’s participation as professionals in the field and women’s presence in exhibits. The presenters at this 1990 conference asserted that museums had ignored the feminist movement, and that women should be a larger part of museums.¹⁹ In this atmosphere, the First Ladies exhibit underwent a major reinterpretation.

The emergence of feminist theory created a new way to view collections and interpret them.²⁰ Collection practices at museums had been male dominated; the majority of artifacts had been interpreted and organized in terms of their relationship to men. Barbra Clark Smith, a curator at the National Museum of American History found that her coworkers believed there were not many objects in the collection that

¹⁷ Jeremy D. Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net: The Story of Historiography* (New York, NY: Oxford Press, 2016), 127-165.

¹⁸ The seminar inspired the Smithsonian to publish the papers of the speakers into a volume on the inclusion of gender in museums. Jane Glaser and Artemis Zenetou eds., “Acknowledgements,” *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), xxiii-xxv.

¹⁹ Jane Glaser and Artemis Zenetou eds., “Preface,” *Gender Perspectives*, xvii-xxi. Barbra Melosh says much the same thing in her essay, “Speaking of Women: Museums’ Representation of Women’s History,” the 1970s brought a new focus on women’s history and social history that focused on ordinary lives. Barbra Melosh, “Speaking of Women: Museums’ Representation of Women’s History,” *History Museums in the United States*, eds. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989) 183-214; Mayo, “Women’s History and Public History”; Emily Curran, “Half the Students in Your Museum Are Female: Gender Equity and Museum Programs,” *The Journal of Museum Education* 17, no. 2 (1992): 14–17. For the focus on gender in society see also Michael Kimmel, “The Power of Gender and the Gender of Power,” *The Material Culture of Gender The Gender of Material Culture*, eds. Katherine Martinez and Kenneth L. Adams, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997) 1-6.

²⁰ Feminist scholars develop new theories of looking at material culture to combat the sexism in exhibits. Levin, “Theories,” *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, 49-52; Jenna C. Ashton ed., *Feminism and Museums: Intervention, Disruption and Change* volume 1 (Boston: MuseumsETC, 2017); Lois W. Banner, “Three Stages of Development,” *Gender Perspectives*, 39-46.

pertained to women, but she recognized that a variety of traditional objects like the spinning jenny could be interpreted to represent women's lives rather than emphasizing male inventors.²¹ Smith's work models feminist curation, a strategy of looking at objects differently to include gender interpretation. Similarly, scholar Hilde Hein favored a complete change in the interpretation of exhibits. She advocated that museums abandon genderless language and expert voice, in favor of including many perspectives. To her, the museum classification system limits the ways that an object can be interpreted. By classifying an object, curators put the object into a set category or department, that limits its use in other categories or departments, creating a boundary of the considerable interpretations.²² Feminist theorists advocate adding women to every exhibit instead of interpreting them individually.

The advancement of feminist curation at the Smithsonian and elsewhere was popular with curators, but not always well received by funders or by the public. Women's exhibits at the Smithsonian, like the *Men and Women: Costume, Gender and Power* and *From Parlor to Politics: Women and Reform in America*, struggled to secure funding. Both of these exhibits were funded through the Smithsonian Institution's Special Exhibition Fund. Without adequate funding women's exhibits

²¹ Barbra Clark Smith, "A Woman's Audience: A Case of Applied Feminist Theories," *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, 65-70.

²² Hilde Hein, "Looking at Museums from a Feminist Perspective," *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, 53-64. See also, Katy Deepwell, "Feminist Curatorial Practices and Strategies, Since the 1970s," *New Museums Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, ed. Janet Marstine (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 64-84; Barbra Melosh and Christina Simmons, "Exhibiting Women's History," *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, eds. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1986), 203-221. For individual museums representation of gender see, Gail Levin, "Art World Power and Women's Incognito Work: The Case of Edward and Jo Hopper," *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, 93-104; Laura Brandon, "Looking for the 'Total' Woman in Wartime: A Museological Work in Progress," *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, 105-114; Tamar Katriel, "Pioneering Women Revisited: Representations of Gender in some Israeli Settlement Museums," *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, 115-128.

are confined to the more traditional interpretations that do not take advantage of women's history.²³ As curators tried to alter the interpretation of popular objects, they forced visitors to confront long believed narratives regarding American progress and values. Controversy erupted frequently during the 1990s, as audiences and curators struggled over new interpretations. In 1994, when the curators at the National Air and Space Museum attempted to change the narrative of the Enola Gay and the dropping of the atomic bomb, they were stopped.²⁴ Andrew Hartman argues, in *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, that the culture wars were a result of tensions between conservative Americans who thought America was losing its culture and liberals who wanted a more inclusive and accepting nation.²⁵ The gains of the sixties were countered by the reassertion of conservative power in the 1980s. The tensions between these two groups created intense debates in the realm of public culture and public history.²⁶ Social and cultural historians were

²³ Edith P Mayo, "New Angles of Vision," *Gender Perspectives*, 57-62. *Men and Women: Costume, Gender and Power* displays the changes in dress for both men and women. The exhibit challenges the bodily ideals of society. While this exhibit attempts to break barriers it was restricted by the funding. Farar Elliott, "Men and Women: Costume, Gender, and Power," *Off Our Backs* 19, no. 11 (1989): 8-9; Katherine C. Grier, "Men and Women: A History of Costume, Gender, and Power.," ed. Claudia Brush Kidwell et al., *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 3 (1991): 988-93, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2078799>.

²⁴ Otto Mayr, "The 'Enola Gay' Fiasco: History, Politics, and the Museum," *Technology and Culture* 39, no. 3 (1998): 462-73, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1215894>. See also Richard H. Kohn, "History and the Culture Wars: The Case of the Smithsonian Institution's Enola Gay Exhibition," *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 3 (1995): 1036-63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2945111>; Eric Gable, "How We Study History Museums: Or Cultural Studies At Monticello," *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, ed. Janet Marstine, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006) 109-128; Chris Bruce, "Spectacle and Democracy: Experience Music Project at a Post-Museum," *New Museum Theory and Practice*, 129-151; Malcolm Arth, "Interpreting Gender Perspectives," *Gender Perspectives*, 97-99. *Museums and the Public Sphere* debates the ability of museums to be a public space, and how can they interact with the public. Jennifer Barrett, *Museums and the Public Sphere*, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

²⁵ Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, Illinois, 2016); Edward T. Linenthal, *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (Henry Holt and Company: New York, NY, 1996).

²⁶ Andrea A. Burns, *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement* (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013); Michele Alicia Gates

accused of “revisionist history.” Historians were publishing books like *A People’s History of the United States*, from the perspective of the down trodden.²⁷ Looking at history from a different perspective countered the traditional narrative of the United States and many lashed out against this. In the wake of controversies like the Enola Gay, many Smithsonian curators were reluctant to include these new findings in their exhibits, because they feared backlash from the public and political leaders.

Nonetheless, Edith Mayo, the curator of the First Ladies in the 1990s, adopted contemporary scholarship to frame her vision for a new exhibit, *First Ladies: Political Role and Public Image*. Mayo interpreted the First Ladies not as passive hostesses, but as political actors. Her exhibit had a mixed response, with some visitors responding well to the increased information of First Ladies and others seeing it as a nuisance. Although Mayo’s exhibit opened slightly before the exhibiting controversy over the Enola Gay plane, it now seems evident that public comment on her exhibition foreshadowed the controversies that followed.²⁸

During the culture wars of the 1990s, it was common for conservative leaders and commentators to decry the American public’s ignorance about history. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen sought to challenge this perception. Their book *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* highlighted the

Moresi, “Exhibiting Race, Creating Nation: Representations of Black History and Culture at the Smithsonian Institution, 1895–1976,” (The George Washington University, 2003). <https://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/305326878/abstract/5EA648A864DC419BPQ/1>; William S. Walker, *A Living Exhibition: The Smithsonian and the Transformation of the Universal Museum* (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013); Eric Gable, “How We Study History Museums: Or Cultural Studies At Monticello,” *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, ed. Janet Marstine (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 109-128.

²⁷ Hartman, *A War For the Soul of America*, 254-255.

²⁸ Otto Mayr, “The ‘Enola Gay’ Fiasco: History, Politics, and the Museum,” *Technology and Culture* 39, no. 3 (1998): 462–73, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1215894>; Edward T. Linenthal, *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (Henry Holt and Company: New York, NY, 1996), Lisa Kathleen Graddy and Amy Pastan, *The Smithsonian First Ladies Collection* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2014) 10-11.

public's interest and approach to the past. They found that the public preferred museums to secondary school history classes or historical movies because they preferred access to primary sources and objects which they viewed as an unmediated past.²⁹ Visitors felt that seeing a real object conveyed truth.

Visitors often object to changes in museum interpretations. In part, this objection may reflect a sense of betrayal: if interpretations change, does this mean that objects are not “truthful?” In fact, the belief that museums can present an unmediated past is false. Historically, museums have been created by social elites and therefore the selection and display of artifacts reflects and reinforces particular values. Visitor expectations do not simply arise from their own misunderstandings, however. Museums create visitor expectations. Jessie Swigger's *History is Bunk*, examines the ways in which the goals established by Henry Ford at Greenfield Village influenced the visitor's perceptions of artifacts and created visitor expectations about the site.³⁰ Visitors do not always understand artifacts and exhibitions in ways that curators intend, but they do make powerful connections with popular exhibitions and artifacts. When a museum's interpretation remains static over time, visitors come to accept the message as a “universal truth” in an exhibit that cannot be changed. The more that visitors attach personal meanings to these “truths,” the more resistant they are to interpretive change. This is the foundation of interpretive nostalgia.

²⁹ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Pekarik Andrew J., “Understanding Visitor Comments: The Case of Flight Time Barbie,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 40, no. 1 (May 24, 2010): 56–68, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2151-6952.1997.tb01121.x>.

³⁰ Jessie Swigger, *History is Bunk: Assembling the Past at Henry Ford's Greenfield Village* (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014).

Understanding visitor's investment in museum interpretations helped legitimize and expand active audience engagement in interpretive processes. This was a significant shift in the history of museums. The original "cabinets of curiosities" had little interpretation; they were just cases full of objects for the visitors to see. In the early 20th century, museums began to interpret artifacts more directly, emphasizing the narrative of American progress. This interpretation often aligned with the visitors preconceived notions about the past, so it did not feel mediated. With the increase of social history, visitors' expectations were challenged, and the museum experience began to appear more mediated. By the late 20th and early 21st century, curators began to bring the public into the process of exhibition development.³¹ The culture wars brought about a new need for museums to establish community partnerships that promoted transparency in exhibits.³² Exhibit interpretation needed to reconcile historians and the public to avoid alienating either and teach the visitor.³³

³¹ Many public historians look at the intersections of scholarship and public expectations. Jennifer Barrett, *Museums and the Public Sphere* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Willard L. Boyd, "Museums as Centers of Controversy," *Daedalus* 128, no. 3 (1999): 185–228; Lonnie Bunch, "Embracing Controversy: Museum Exhibitions and the Politics of Change," *The Public Historian* 14, no. 3 (1992): 63–65, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3378230>; Jennifer Wild Czajkowski and Shiralee Hudson Hill, "Transformation and Interpretation: What Is the Museums Educator's Role?," *The Journal of Museum Education* 33, no. 3 (2008): 255–63; Victoria A. Harden, "Museum Exhibit Standards: Do Historians Really Want Them?," *The Public Historian* 21, no. 3 (1999): 91–109, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3378963>.

³² Public history requires collaboration to be successful in the communities that they enter, but the practitioners have to decide how much power to give the stakeholders in deciding the final products. Katherine T. Corbett and Howard S. Miller, "A Shared Inquiry into Shared Inquiry," *The Public Historian* 28, no.1 (Winter 2006) 15–38; Russell Lewis, "Curating with the Community," *Chicago Historical Society* 73 (June 5, 1994): 41–43; "Community and Museums," *6 Article Special Section* 72 (June 5, 1993): 44–90; Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, (Museum 2.0: Santa Cruz, CA. 2010). For sites that have had trouble negotiating the interpretation of the past see, Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling over the Memory of Sand Creek* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Alicia Barber, "Local Places, National Spaces: Public Memory, Community Identity, and Landscape at Scotts Bluff National Monument," *American Studies* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2004) 35–64, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40643712>.

³³ Museums transmit culture to the visitor in their interpretation, the visitors need to be critical observers of the exhibits that they attend. Janet Marstine, "Introduction," *New Museum Theory and Practice*, 1–36.

Women's role in museums has been defined by irony. In order to assume and maintain a position of authority inside museums, they have often had to reject any progressive narratives about women as historical actors. Women curators have often advanced interpretations of women's history that appeal to a broader public ideal, one that is possible only for members of an elite class. In all three versions of the First Ladies exhibition, the display created space for women as both subjects of history and as museum professionals, but it also served as a cage. Women were constrained to particular jobs and particular stories. Despite this, women curators of the First Ladies collection played a significant—even radical—role. They inhabited professional positions to which other women could not gain access and they represented women as historical actors on a national stage.

Methodology

This thesis will demonstrate that tracing interpretive changes in a single exhibit can tell us something about the evolution of museums as social and political spaces and allow us to observe changes in the larger profession of public history. Interpretation in the First Ladies exhibit has always been controlled by the curators, but visitors have attached their own significance onto the gowns and other artifacts. Interpretive nostalgia is created when visitors accept a long-presented interpretation as an accepted truth, and they attach personal meaning to that truth and its display. To identify and analyze the power of interpretive nostalgia, the history of the First Ladies exhibit has to be analyzed from both the curators' and the visitors' perspectives. The curators of the First Ladies exhibit knew they were mediating the past through their intentional display techniques. Their curatorial records reveal the intentions behind

their choices and provide a view of the attitudes toward womanhood they represented. This particular perspective remained relatively unchanged for eighty years, becoming part of frequent visitors' sense of personal and national identity. Just as everyone has a nostalgia for their own past, visitors have a nostalgia for the artifacts, exhibits, and institutions that contribute to their sense of self. Reading visitor's reactions to the First Ladies exhibit over time helps their sense of deep connection to the exhibit.

This investigation relies on institutional records from curators, directors, and visitors, which have been controlled by the curators, museums, and archives. As institutions collect documentations of their actions, they leave a traceable record of the changes to museums, but these records are often incomplete. Institution often care more about saving the historic object and producing the exhibit rather than saving the records of curators. The Smithsonian's Institutional Archives keeps records of most of the previous versions of the exhibit: old photographs, scripts, and correspondence. Prior to the 1940s, the records of the exhibit are scarce, but there are numerous letters between Rose Hoes and Cassie James with the Secretary about their work with the collection.³⁴ There are numerous photographs of the First Ladies exhibit from every era. The records of Margaret Klapthor are a bit more complete because she assembled documents from her time as curator herself, and participated in an oral history project, but they have also been censored by Klapthor when she put them together.

The institutional archives contain almost no material on the 1992 version of the exhibit. The relevant materials are, instead, located in unprocessed files in the basement of the National Museum of American History (NMAH). I could not access

³⁴ Julian-James is the legal name of Cassie Mason Meyers Julian-James, but for simplicity I have chosen to refer to her simply as James because she is sometimes referred to in correspondence as simply James, it is rare that she is referred to by her full name.

the files myself. They were retrieved for me by the current curator of the collection, and she selected materials she believed would be relevant to my project. Further, the government shutdown of 2019 closed the Smithsonian Archives and the National Museum of American History for thirty-three days, effectively stopping my research throughout the month of January.

This collection of sources documents the changes made to the exhibit in the more than one hundred years of its existence. With the photographs and scripts, the literal changes in the interpretation are apparent, these changes allow the analysis of the precise ways in which the interpretation of the First Ladies' role changed over time at the Smithsonian. The curatorial notes or oral histories show the influences and the proposed plans that may not have been implemented showing the impact of other authorities on the exhibit. The press releases for the openings of each rendition of the wing show the Museum's vision and objectives for the exhibit, while the letters from the public in response will tell if they are receiving the messages positively, negatively, or at all. Public inquiry and commentary provide evidence of audience response to changes in the interpretation, and curatorial responses to this inquiry will allow an analysis of the Smithsonian's perceptions and attitudes toward the audience.

In addition, the *First Ladies* exhibit is one of the only spaces at the National Museum of American History where women are the central focus. This was the case even, before gender became a category of museum interpretation. As a result, a study of the exhibit also tells us something about the evolving place of women as subjects of study and as leaders in the profession. At the same time, the First Ladies exhibits' constant display of gowns created an interpretive nostalgia among members of the

public who visited this popular display repeatedly over long periods of time. Each reiteration of the exhibit pushed some boundaries, whether the radical undertaking to include women in the museum displays of the initial exhibit, or the inclusion of curatorial positions in the 1950s, or the inclusion of current scholarship of the 1990s. Examining public responses to the exhibition can help us understand the role that museums play in shaping public perceptions of the past, of gender, and of material culture.

Chapter one looks at the first installation of the First Ladies collection at the Smithsonian, focusing mostly on the volunteer women who started the collection, James and Hoes, and on the professionalization process that pushed them out. Chapter two covers the first major renovation of the exhibit by Margret Klapthor. This chapter focuses on the female curator's place in the museum structure and the limits of what she could say and do. Chapter three discusses Edith Mayo's major interpretive change, *First Ladies: Political Role and Public Image*. This chapter focuses both on the decision to interpret the First Ladies as political actors, and the internal debates that surrounded the effort.

Chapter 1: “Show of Old Gowns White House Costumes Ready at National Museum”³⁵

-Newspaper Headline February 22, 1914

There was opened to the public on February 1, 1914, a collection of feminine import, which is quite unique for this country in its largeness of scope and in part at least for its method of presentation. With few exceptions this assemblage is illustrative of the fashions of the women of the United States from colonial times, including all manner of accessories and embellishments, and the articles of their particular sphere in the home life.³⁶

The *First Ladies* exhibit got its start in the exhibit of *American Historical Costumes*. The *American Historical Costume* exhibit was opened in the Arts and Industries building with fifteen gowns from the mistresses of the White House and numerous other gowns from important society women.³⁷ Among the National Museum’s collections dedicated to progress in natural history and technology, the “collection of feminine import” was revolutionary because it was dedicated to women. The exhibit displayed the costumes of female members of the upper class on mannequins designed to be plain so as to not interfere with the view of the gowns. The cases of the exhibit consumed an entire hall of the already too small Arts and Industries building, displaying fourteen cases of mistresses of the White House in the center of the hall and several other cases along the sides of the gallery with other important costumes.

The American Historical Costumes collection began the tradition of a women’s history collection at the Smithsonian. This collection was extraordinary

³⁵ “SHOW OF OLD GOWNS: White House Costumes Ready at National Museum. ...,” *The Washington Post*, Feb 22, 1914, 10, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

³⁶ Smithsonian Institution, *Report on the progress and condition of the U.S. National Museum for the year ending June 30 ... 1914*, (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1914) 23. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/4904#/summary>.

³⁷ Smithsonian Institution, *Report on the progress and condition of the U.S. National Museum for the year ending June 30 ... 1914*, 23.

because it was initiated by women. Cassie Mason Myers Julian-James and Rose Gouverneur Hoes were responsible for the idea of the collection and display of the gowns. Their initial efforts focused on the broad history of costume in the United States. James and Hoes' involvement in the First Ladies collection helped to establish the precedent of a women's exhibit focused on fashion. But their involvement also broke barriers as they worked like female curators on an exhibit about women. Their involvement was both possible and limited by their social status and their status as volunteers of the Museum.

Women and Public History in the Nineteenth Century

In the nineteenth century, women's inequality in society made it difficult for them to assert their influence outside of the domestic sphere. Women had been pushed to the private sphere with the rise of the cult of domesticity, but they had always been looking for a way to push those boundaries further.³⁸ Women's position as guardians of the home allowed them to push the boundaries of the domestic sphere to the moral guardians of society.³⁹ Women used their position as guardians of morality to begin the preservation movement in the United States. Starting with

³⁸ Women had a brief period of entrance into the public sphere after the revolution, but men's fear of women's power pushed them back into the domestic sphere, creating the cult of domesticity. The domestic sphere limited women's access to power. But women found a way to use their role as guardians of the home and morality to gain more access to power. In the Antebellum Era, the rise of the Second Great Awakening expanded women's moral guardianship to include the community, in addition to their families. Middle- and upper-class women could now go out in public places to educate and better the poor. Women participated in many efforts to educate the lower classes, distributing bibles, poor houses, and training schools. This redefinition of women's role opened up new avenues for them, including their participation in museums. Lori Ginzberg, *Women in Antebellum Reform* (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2000); Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

³⁹ Lori Ginzberg, *Women in Antebellum Reform* (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2000); Barbara Howe, "Women in Historic Preservation: The Legacy of Ann Pamela Cunningham," *The Public Historian* 12, no.1, (Winter 1990) 32, 39.

Mount Vernon, Ann Pamela Cunningham realized that the home of George Washington had fallen into disrepair and wanted to restore it to its former glory as a national heritage site.⁴⁰ She organized the Mount Vernon Ladies Association (MVLA) to save the site. Women were responsible for teaching their children the values of patriotism and virtue; their work in preservation helped to reflect these values. Cunningham turned Mount Vernon into a pilgrimage site for the nation, instilling the traditional values of patriotism.⁴¹ “After the Civil War, southern women extended the bounds of their domestic sphere by caring for burial grounds, aiding their churches, and working on the moral reform of society.”⁴²

Both women and men started many societies for the preservation of buildings and museums. The Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA) and the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA) began preserving historic buildings “as a means to uplift society.”⁴³ Not only did the founders of these societies want to uplift the current citizens of the U.S., but also the recent immigrants. William Appleton, the founder of SPNEA, wanted to preserve the home of Paul Revere, in Boston, to create a memorial that would inspire citizenship

⁴⁰ James Lindgren, “‘A New Departure in Historic, Patriotic Work’: Personalism, Professionalism, and Conflicting Concepts of Material Culture in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” *The Public Historian* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1996) 43.

⁴¹ Lindgren, “‘A New Departure in Historic, Patriotic Work,’” 43.

⁴² James Lindgren, “‘Virginia Needs Living Heroes’: Historic Preservation in the Progressive Era,” *The Public Historian* 13, no. 1 (Winter, 1991), 11.

⁴³ Women organized a number of organizations for historic preservation and museums. The Mount Vernon Ladies Association was the first preservation organization for the preservation of George Washington’s home. The organization was created and run by women. After the Civil War, women created a number of other institutions to preserve buildings. The Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities was founded by women to preserve the traditional values of the nation after the Civil War. Women also created some museums like the Museum of Modern Art or the Whitney Museum. But the women who managed to be directors of these institutions were seen as unwomanly when they were successful. Lindgren, “‘Virginia Needs Living Heroes,’” 11; Barbara Howe, “Women in Historic Preservation: The Legacy of Ann Pamela Cunningham,” *The Public Historian* 12, no.1, (Winter 1990), 33; Joan H. Baldwin and Anne W. Ackerson, *Women in the Museum: Lessons from the Workplace* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 28.

in the immigrant youth.⁴⁴ Appleton and his colleagues hoped that the memorial would provide a lesson in “loyalty, simplicity, and civic pride” in the youth of Massachusetts’.⁴⁵ This new focus on instilling “correct” values in lower and immigrant classes, also translated to museums.

Museums in the nineteenth century were exclusive places for members of the upper class to mingle and admire the collections of their peers. These places reflected the bourgeoisie vision of society.⁴⁶ Objects represented the power of the upper class because they were the ones who collected them and were allowed to see them. “The rules and proscriptions governing attendance at museums had served to distinguish the bourgeoisie public from the rough and racous manners of the general populace by excluding the latter.”⁴⁷ Museums’ locations also served to limit the clientele that it attracted, in places out of the center of the city, and difficult to get to, many could not afford to reach its doors.⁴⁸

But as American society began to expand with the arrival of “new immigrants” in the late 19th century, elites began to recognize that museums could serve Americanization, educating new comers and members of the lower classes about “proper” American values and behaviors.⁴⁹ If the classes could mingle in museums, then the members of the lower classes could learn from their “superiors.” Thus, the museum developed a new purpose as a public institution. The museum’s

⁴⁴ Lindgren, ““Virginia Needs Living Heroes,”” 19

⁴⁵ Lindgren, ““Virginia Needs Living Heroes,”” 19.

⁴⁶ Tony Bennet, *The Birth of the Museum: History, theory, and politics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995), 25-27.

⁴⁷ Bennet, *The Birth of the Museum*, 28.

⁴⁸ John Cotton Dana, “The Gloom and Doom of the Museum,” *Reinventing the Museum*, ed. Gail Anderson (New York, NY: Alta Mira Press, 2004), 18.

⁴⁹ Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks*, 31.

new purpose gave it an entirely new clientele from the male elite that traditionally visited museum, but now everyone was allowed in to be educated by the elite.

Not only did museums get new clientele from the lower classes, but women also became a part of museum culture. Prior to the nineteenth century, women were not a part of the public sphere and therefore not a part of museums. Museums, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, had been seen as the domain of men because they were a part of the public sphere. But in the late nineteenth century, when museums were redefined as public institutions that could improve society, women took part in this public space. Elite women helped to found many museums through their benevolence, donating money or artifacts to the institutions. Women like Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney donated her art collection and money to establish the Whitney Art Museum, but other women founded museums to support their social values that were being challenged by changing times.⁵⁰

Industrialism and sectionalism created tensions in the U.S. that women tried to assuage by reasserting the importance of traditional characteristics. Like Mount Vernon, the APVA preserved the home of Mary Washington, the mother of George Washington, to bring the ideals of republican motherhood some tangibility. Her home represented a mother's responsibility to teach the values of truth and honor.⁵¹ After the Civil War, in 1896, the women of the south created the Confederate Memorial Literary Society (CMLS) who found the Confederate Museum. Their goal was to vindicate the Lost Cause and preserve the distinctive characteristics of the South.⁵²

⁵⁰ Taylor, "Pioneering Efforts of Early Museum Women," 14-15.

⁵¹ Lindgren, "A New Departure in Historic, Patriotic Work," 46-47.

⁵² Reiko Hillyer, "Relics of Reconciliation: The Confederate Museum and Civil War Memory in the New South," *The Public Historian*.33, no. 4 (November 2011) 36.

The Confederate Museum justified Jim Crow through their portrayal of slavery as a benevolent institution. This narrative of southern valor and sacrifice helped to earn the sympathy of the North. Women used museums as their voice in the public sphere to combat the changes of the times and build a particular narrative of the U.S. that supported their identity.

Smithsonian History

Congress established the Smithsonian Institution under unique circumstances. British naturalist James Smithson bequeathed his fortune to the United States “to fund at Washington under the name [of] the Smithsonian Institution, an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men.”⁵³ Although the money was available in 1839, Congress debated this gift for seven years. The members of Congress could not agree on how to interpret the gift. Should it be simply a research institution or a museum? If the United States created a national museum, it would expand government power. Congress decided to create a Board of Regents to oversee the use of the gift. The Board contained the vice president, the chief justice of the supreme court, the mayor of Washington, three members of the Senate, and three members of the House, and six civilians. The Board of Regents considered three plans for the use of the gift, “constructing a grand building, supporting a museum,

⁵³ Handwritten Draft of James Smithson Will, Pages 1 and 3 and 2 and 4, by Smithson, James 1765-1829, 1826, Smithsonian Archives - History Div, 72-3960-A and 72-3960 accessed from the Smithsonian website, <https://siarchives.si.edu/history/james-smithson>; William S. Walker, *A Living Exhibition: The Smithsonian and the Transformation of the Universal Museum* (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 15.

and sponsoring an active program of popular lecturing and publishing,” or “a great national library,” or “promoting scientific research and publication.”⁵⁴

The first Secretary of the Institution, Joseph Henry, had no interest in establishing a museum. He thought that the museum would be too expensive for the Institution’s budget. The Museum would detract from the research goals of the Institution. The Board of Regents had to fulfill both of Smithsonian’s requirements, so they decided that the “increase” of knowledge would be fulfilled with a research institution and the “diffusion” of knowledge by a National Museum. The National Museum became the repository for the government collections, most of which were natural history based.⁵⁵ The National Museum would house the specimens that were collected on government research expeditions, but starting a museum was expensive. James Henry initially made a deal with the patent office to give them some space in the National Museum for their patent models, if they gave a part of their budget to the Museum.⁵⁶ The initial Museum looked more like open storage than the museums that we know today.

The second Secretary of the Museum, Spencer Baird, brought George Brown Goode to the Smithsonian, as his assistant, to help direct the Museum. Goode valued the educational function of the Museum.⁵⁷ In the eighteenth century, museums abided by an object-based epistemology, objects were meant to stand on their own.⁵⁸ The objects were believed to tell their own stories even to an untrained observer.

⁵⁴ Walker, *A Living Exhibition*, 14-15.

⁵⁵ Denise Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History* (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 7-12.

⁵⁶ Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments and National Parks*, 20-21.

⁵⁷ Goode brought numerous collections to the National Museum, two box cars full of natural history objects, and a new classification system. Walker, *A Living Exhibition*, 22.

⁵⁸ Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 4.

European museums were divided into two categories, science and art, but Goode believed there should be something in between. He wanted to create “an illustrated encyclopedia of civilization.”⁵⁹ The Smithsonian used both typological and ethnological approaches to organize collections and their displays. Typological displays put similar objects together to show progress over time, while ethnological exhibits brought objects from a single geographic area to put the object in the context of place and culture.⁶⁰ This mode of display often made the museum appear cluttered like the Victorian museums.

This is the environment that Cassie Mason Myers Julian-James and Rose Gouverneur Hoes entered, when they began development of the American Period Costume Collection in 1912.

The Founding of the Collection

James and Hoes developed the idea for the costume collection on their own and formed a Costume Committee, that contained just the two of them, to bring their idea to the National Museum in 1912. James had

the plan for assembling the dresses of distinguished women, the idea in mind was possibly more a desire to preserve for future generations historic costumes. As time passed and the educational features of female apparel dawned upon the Costumes Committee, it was decided to considerably broaden the scope of work by adding to the exhibition everything appertaining to the attire of women.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, “Introduction,” *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment*, ed. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 8.

⁶⁰ Walker, *A Living Exhibition*, 28-30.

⁶¹ Rose Gouverneur Hoes, “Evolution Of Fashions For Women For More Than A Century Shown By Period Costumes On Exhibition At The National Museum,” Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files, 1; Smithsonian Institution. *Report on the progress and condition of the U.S. National Museum for the year ending June 30 ...*, 1912, (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1912) 35. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/4904#/summary>.

James had been a long-time donor to the National Museum.⁶² She and Hoes sought permission from the Secretary, Charles Walcott, to collect material for a female centered exhibit.⁶³ The American Costume collection collected both men's and women's clothing, but it would help create the plethora of artifacts needed for an exhibit of women's costume from the colonial period to the current times. Although James and Hoes were volunteers, they made themselves instrumental in the collecting of the gowns and gradually increased the control they could exert over the exhibition. Through their efforts, Hoes and James established the definition of "First Lady." The original idea for the collection was to get a gown from every presidential administration to show the changing fashions. Sometimes the only gown that could be collected was a gown from a daughter, sister, or niece. In some cases, no gown survived for a President's wife. In other cases, a president had no living wife. Hoes and James decided that anyone who acted as hostess during the Presidential Administration should be included in a First Ladies Collection.⁶⁴

⁶² James had been donating to the National Museum since at least 1907. She gave a number of things on loan for different exhibits. Smithsonian Institution, *Report on the progress and condition of the U.S. National Museum for the year ending June 30 ...*, 1907, (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1907) 74. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/4904#/summary>; Smithsonian Institution, *Report on the progress and condition of the U.S. National Museum for the year ending June 30 ...*, 1909, (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1909) 35. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/4904#/summary>.

⁶³ Walcott was the honorary curator of the Department of Fossil Invertebrate before becoming Assistant Secretary of the U.S. National Museum. After the passing of Secretary Samuel Pierpont Langley, he was named the successor. Walcott wanted to reorganize the Institution. He encouraged the expansion of the collection, to include the Star-Spangled Banner and the First Ladies Dresses. "Charles Doolittle Walcott, 1850-1927," Smithsonian Institution Archives, accessed March 10, 2019, <https://siarchives.si.edu/history/charles-doolittle-walcott>.

⁶⁴ James and Hoes were questioned on some of the gowns that they choose. The decedent of President Hayes came and questioned the decision to include Mrs. McKee, the daughter if President Benjamin Harrison, as the mistress of the White House, and not the second wife of President Harrison. But the second wife was not married while President Harrison was in the White House and Mrs. McKee served as mistress after her mother's passing. James and Hoes were able to control the definition of a First Lady, by choosing to display anyone who acted as hostess. Letter from Ravenel to Hoes, November 29, 1926, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files; Letter from Hoes to Ravenel,

James used her numerous connections with high society women to acquire additions to the collection. As a member of both Washington D.C. and New York society, James and Hoes collected gowns from many distinguished women, not just First Ladies.⁶⁵ James and Hoes made personal contact with the descendants of Presidential families to ask for donations for the exhibit, and they retained a great deal of control over the disposition of the collection. Many of the objects “were loaned, and not given upon their representations and statements to the owners who look to [Hoes and James] individually and not to the National Museum for the return, if such return should be demanded, at any time in the future.”⁶⁶ James and Hoes were using their reputations to acquire the objects necessary for the collection. James and Hoes social status put them in the same social circles as the families of former presidents. Hoes was a descendant of James Monroe, a fact that lent her social power and legitimacy that the curators at the National Museum lacked. The contributors lent or donated their family heirlooms to Hoes and James because they respected them; they addressed their correspondence to them personally, not to the National Museum.

December 7, 1926, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

⁶⁵ The opening of the American Costumes exhibit included more than just the fifteen gowns from presidential administrations. Gowns from Mrs. Cornelius Wyncoop, Mrs. Capt. Miles King, Eliza Pinckney, Mrs. Richard Rush, Mary Catherine Bryun, Helen Hovey, and a wedding dress from the wife of Rear Admiral D.D. Porter. These women were distinguished women, mostly for the work of their husbands, and their clothing was an example of fashion in the time. While Hoes and James asked people for gowns, most of them were loaned for the exhibition and not donated to the collection till years later. Smithsonian Institution, *Report on the progress and condition of the U.S. National Museum for the year ending June 30 ...*, 1914, (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1914) 29-30.

⁶⁶ Letter to Walcott from Butler, February 27, 1918, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files; Object Labels for Martha Washington, Dolly Madison, Maria Hester Monroe Gouverneur, Mrs. Andrew Jackson Donelson, Sarah Angelica Van Buren, Julia Gardiner Tyler, Sara Childress Polk, Harriet Lane Johnston, Julia Dent Grant, Lucy Webb Hayes, Caroline Lavinia Scott Harrison, Ida Saxton McKinley, and Helen Herron Taft, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

Hoes and James were not only granted exceptional control over collecting, but they were also given unusual monetary support from the Secretary. Hoes traveled to secure a Jefferson, Washington and Lincoln gown.⁶⁷ Not only did the Secretary allow her to be the U.S. National Museum representative in talking to potential donors, she was given some of the same support an employee might have. The Secretary supplied her with ten dollars to travel for the Jefferson dress and fifty dollars to travel for the Lincoln dress. While women often collected objects that were later donated to museums, they did this collecting out of their own interests. Most of the early women involved in museums collected artwork for their own personal use, and then donated their private collection to a museum or founded one themselves. Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney collected art from up and coming artists and established the Whitney Art Museum to display their works. While Whitney did the initial collecting for her museum, she hired a director after its establishment to collect on behalf of the institution.⁶⁸ At the same time that Hoes was collecting for the collection, she was not purchasing the objects, but merely approaching donors. Women often worked in these volunteer positions, but they did not often approach donors on behalf of an institution that they were not a part of. The women in the MVLA collected money to preserve Washington's home, but they were official members of the organization when they approached donors.⁶⁹ Hoes and James did not occupy the same position because they had no authority in the Smithsonian Institutional structure.

⁶⁷ Letter to Hoes from Ravenel, Administrative Assistant, April 23, 1915, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files; Letter to Secretary Walcott from Ravenel, Administrative Assistant, April 10, 1916, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

⁶⁸ Taylor, "Pioneering Efforts of Early Museum Women," 14-15.

⁶⁹ Lindgren, "A New Departure in Patriotic Work," 42-43.

While contemporary museums still rely on donors to obtain most of their objects, curators and other staff limit the control that donors have over the use and interpretation of collections once they enter the museum.⁷⁰ This was not always the case. In the past, collectors and family members might demand that artifacts go on display in a particular way. James and Hoes operated as mediators between artifact lenders and the museum, and they used their position to leverage a bit of authority for themselves. If either woman was displeased with plans for the costume exhibition, they could encourage lenders to demand the return of their artifacts. The Museum did not own all of the gowns in the collection, in 1920, they requested the lenders present the dresses to the Museum. As a result of the large number of loans, Secretary Walcott choose to grant almost complete control to James and Hoes for the acquisition of the objects.

Cassie James and Rose Hoes did the work of curators, breaking the barrier of the male dominated museum world. Their status as elite women made it possible for them to gather the collection because of their many contacts, and possible for them to convince the museum of the importance of this collection.

Setting Up the Display

Even though they



Figure 1

⁷⁰ Steven Lubar, *Inside the Lost Museum: Curating, Past and Present*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017) 51.

were volunteers, James and Hoes designed and installed the Period Costume Collection without supervision in 1914. They controlled the gowns that were chosen and the way in which they were displayed. At the opening, the collection contained fifteen White House hostesses and numerous other gowns from society women. Each dress had its own display case, arranged in a line in the center of the hall. There were few identifying labels. Visitors were presumed to understand the significance of the materials based on their history of ownership and their display with other personal artifacts.⁷¹ Hoes and James took great care in the design of each case, paying close attention to how each mannequin was arranged and making deliberate decisions about additional objects. Hoes and James understood that the arrangement of objects communicated something about the character of each First Lady.

For the opening of the exhibit, each case had a small label listing only the presidential administration it represented and the current owner of the gown.

Dress worn by Martha Washington,
Wife of President George Washington.
1789-1797
Lent By Miss Sally P. Mackenzie.⁷²

⁷¹ Smithsonian Institution, *Report on the progress and condition of the U.S. National Museum for the year ending June 30 ...*, 1914, (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1914) 23-24. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/4904#/summary>. "All museum material should speak for itself upon sight. It should be an open book which tells a better story than any description will do." This theory is object-based epistemology. The objects did not need any interpretation to be understood. William P. Wilson to Edward Everett Ayer, July 16, 1894, Field Museum Archives, quoted in Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 4.

⁷² Martha Washington Object Label, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

Hoes and James used subtle but very intentional additions to the labels and gowns to conjure the personalities of the different mistresses of the White House. Hoes and James were informed about the way society remembered each of the First Ladies and they sought to portray that in their display. The display of the mannequins were meant to show the visitor a bit about the First Lady without the text of a label. Hoes and James stuck to the common museum display techniques of object-based epistemology, leaning on the combination of objects to invoke the character of each woman.

Figure 2 shows a mannequin representing Martha Washington sitting in a chair from Mount Vernon with a workbag in her hands and a table beside her with a



Figure 2

china cup and saucer on top. Hoes and James informed their placement of the mannequins with some historical knowledge. They used letters from visitors of Mount Vernon that described how well Martha Washington managed her home and reflected the joy that Martha Washington found in her home through her mannequin's placement sitting and knitting.⁷³ Hoes designed the display to reflect "a shining example of every domestic virtue." James and Hoes were not professional historians or curators, but they were able to inform their display with some historical research, common perceptions of the First Ladies in society and the role of women in the 1910s that they wanted to portray.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the United States was experiencing the second industrial revolution. Change was taking place for everyone, including women. Women were now taking part in the workforce and in social programs. More and more women took jobs outside the home, as clerks or typists. With education and independence, they were becoming the "new women" of the twentieth century.⁷⁴ But this "new woman" contrasted starkly with the "true woman" of the nineteenth century, who was self-sacrificing and virtuous. The "true woman" took pride in being a mother, and stayed in the home. Many upper-class women, particularly women from an older generation, began to fear the demise of women's special place at the turn of the century.⁷⁵ The display of Martha Washington reflects the idea of the "true

⁷³ Rose Gouverneur Hoes, "Evolution Of Fashions For Women For More Than A Century Shown By Period Costumes On Exhibition At The National Museum," Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files, 8.

⁷⁴ Dorothy Schneider and Carl J. Schneider, *American Women in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920* (New York: Facts on File Inc., 1993), 13.

⁷⁵ Dorothy Schneider and Carl J. Schneider, *American Women in the Progressive Era*, 16; Dorothy M. Brown, *Setting a Course: American Women in the 1920s* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 30-31.

woman,” in the home, doing domestic chores, an idea that Hoes and James would have wanted to emphasize in the changing times. Museums were responsible for projecting upper class societal values to teach the lower classes. Hoes and James would have wanted their display to reflect their ideas of womanhood. Without any scholarship in women’s history, society’s common perceptions of these women, and their own perceptions of womanhood was the only information they had to guide their display.

The same decision making went into the display of Dolly Madison’s gown. Popular stories about Dolly Madison typically focused on her love of books. In the 1914 book, the *Life and Letters of Dolly Madison*, her affection for books is depicted as charming if not terribly intellectual:

When we stood, Mrs. Madison entered – a tall, portly, elegant lady, with a turban on her head and a book in her hand I said: ‘Still you have time to read.’ ‘Oh no,’ said she, ‘not a word; I have this book in my hand – a very fine copy of Don Quixote – to have something not ungraceful to say, and if need be, to supply a word of talk.’⁷⁶

Picking up on this narrative, Hoes and James posed the mannequin of Dolly Madison with a copy of *Paradise Lost*. Hoes and James’ display technique reflected the object-based techniques used in museums at the time. Their exhibits were similar to the other exhibits at the National Museum, combining artifacts of a similar type and displaying them together to show the progression of costumes.⁷⁷

James and Hoes displayed a large amount of control in what information was released to the public. When the exhibit opened, there were short labels in each case, but Hoes and James soon wanted these to be replaced by a catalogue. “Mrs. James

⁷⁶ Allen C. Clark, *Life and Letters of Dolly Madison* (Washington, D.C.: Press of W. F. Roberts Company, 1914), 140-142.

⁷⁷ Walker, *A Living Exhibition*, 28-30.

and others desire to have a catalogue prepared of the material in the hall of period costumes, with a certain amount of descriptive matter ... One of her [Hoes] ideas is to number each article in the hall so that a person in looking at the catalogue could readily find the description of it.”⁷⁸ The catalogue would be available for purchase in the museum, and each of the objects would be labeled to assist the viewer in identifying them. Hoes produced the catalogue for the exhibit, and provided a deeper description of each dress in the collection.

Case 1

1. Heavy salmon colored pink dress, worn by Mrs. Washington. This dress is hand-painted in a set design possibly by a lover of nature, as wild flowers and insects are scattered over it, caught up here and there by a green jewel.
*Lent by Miss Sally P. Mackenzie.*⁷⁹

After the catalogue was produced in 1915, Hoes removed the labels from inside each case, making the catalog the only source of information on the gowns. Whether intentional or not, Hoes and James limited the access of the public to information on the gowns they displayed. The public was not privy to their decisions in choosing how to display the mannequins, nor did they get the expanded information in the catalogue, unless they choose to purchase it.

The administration at the Smithsonian did not want to rely solely on the catalogue for information. The administrative assistant to the Secretary, Ravenel, suggested that the ladies provide labels in the cases, “I told her that in my opinion individual labels would be much more valuable than a catalogue, as a large majority

⁷⁸ Memorandum to Rathbun from Ravenel, December 21, 1914, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

⁷⁹ Rose Gouverneur Hoes, *Catalogue of American Historical Costumes, Including Those of the Mistresses of the White House as Shown in the United States National Museum*, (Washington D.C.: Williams & Wilkins Company, 1915) 1.

of visitors would not take the trouble to buy a catalogue and look up the information.”⁸⁰ Labels would increase the knowledge gained by the visitor, over the catalogue. Ravenel’s advice to add labels helped to fulfill the Smithsonian mission to “diffuse” knowledge, but it also followed museum trends of accessibility. Three years later, John Dana wrote his article calling for museums to start serving a broader clientele. The Smithsonian’s place as a national museum made it even more important for this space to be accessible.⁸¹ James and Hoes made the decision to remove the labels before there was any professional oversight of their actions. They not only removed the initial labels, but they were able to stop the addition of any labels in the display in 1916.

When the Curator for the Division of History, Theodore Belote, tried to add labels to the Costume Hall as a part of the Secretary’s initiative, Hoes came to the Museum and requested that the action be stopped. Because Hoes felt that no action should be taken without her, Theodore Belote wrote to Professor Holmes, “I beg recommend that here after all matters concerning this collection be referred to her [Hoes] in writing before any action is taken.”⁸² Because women did not maintain positions of authority in early museums, they did not often have the final say on decisions about interpretation, but James and Hoes were allowed to dictate some interpretive elements. Women often served in educator positions in the early

⁸⁰ Memorandum to Rathbun from Ravenel, December 21, 1914, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files, 2; Letter to Professor Holmes from Theodore Belote, April 5, 1916, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

⁸¹ Dana, “The Gloom of the Museum,” 13-29.

⁸² Letter to Professor Holmes from Theodore Belote, April 28, 1916, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

twentieth century, while men held the curatorial positions directing the scientific analysis of objects.⁸³ This hierarchical structure often limited input in interpretation, but James and Hoes assert a non-traditional authority over the exhibit. Being in a superior social class, and the ambiguous nature of a mostly loaned exhibit allowed Hoes and James to reject the male authority's decision to add labels, in favor of their own interpretive plan.

Secretary Walcott started a Museum wide initiative to label all objects in the Museum.⁸⁴ This process made the Museum more equitable, because every visitor got the same information, instead of only those who choose and could afford to purchase a catalogue gaining the historical information. The practice of using a catalogue reflects the museums previous status as an institution for the elite to gain information. Hoes' rejection of labels on the cases demonstrates her view of the Museum as an elite place, and her control over the exhibit. While Hoes was breaking barriers as one of the first female museum curators, she still maintained the ideology of the upper classes control over cultural institutions.

However, their control over the exhibit did not last.

The Institutionalization of the Museum

Professionalization became a problem for many women engaged in preserving history. In the twentieth century, men become more influential in preservation and public history, often pushing women to the sidelines. The field of preservation had

⁸³ Margaret Schwarzer, "Women in the Temple: Gender and Leadership in Museums," *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums: A Routledge Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 2010) 19.

⁸⁴ Letter to Professor Holmes from Theodore Belote, April 5, 1916, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files; Letter to Professor Holmes from Theodore Belote, April 28, 1916, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

been seen as womanly in the nineteenth century, because of its emphasis on cultural heritage. To make it more masculine, men pushed women out of the field.⁸⁵ Appleton and SPNEA led the transition from a feminine personal preservation to a professional preservation method. Women in preservation societies often saved buildings for their association with prominent people and interpreted the buildings and objects in their relation to specific people and the values of “individual character, love of family, respect for community, personal intimacy, and humility before God.”⁸⁶ Appleton choose to focus on the architecture and historic archeology, making preservation more of a scientific discipline.⁸⁷ Appleton’s philosophy on preservation helped to push out the women who had been in charge of preservation in New England. Appleton’s agenda conflicted with the secretary of the Shirley-Eustis Home Association, Lillie Titus, and led to her dismissal as the secretary of the Association.⁸⁸ Preservation was becoming more of a business in its professionalization, making it not a place for women.

James and Hoes had difficulty fitting into the institutional structure of the Museum because of their status as volunteers. Just like so many other women in preservation, James and Hoes lost their control of the costume collection. The administration of the Smithsonian had to reconcile the professionalization of the field with the volunteer status of James and Hoes. By 1917, Professor Holmes conflicted with Hoes and James, thinking that the ladies were usurping the institutional structure

⁸⁵ Lindgren, “A New Departure in Historic, Patriotic Work,” 42, 52-53.

⁸⁶ Lindgren, “A New Departure in Historic, Patriotic Work,” 44.

⁸⁷ Lindgren, “A New Departure in Historic, Patriotic Work,” 52.

⁸⁸ Lindgren, “A New Departure in Historic, Patriotic Work,” 52-53

when they tried to control the objects that entered the Museum. Holmes wrote to the Assistant Secretary, Rathburn,

It is apparently the desire of the Ladies that the materials should be placed in their hands directly on accessioning, to be cared for and installed by them independently of the curator of History. I beg, therefore, to enquire, since these ladies have no official standing in the museum, whether we shall be justified in departing from the ordinary routine of the Department.⁸⁹

The professional status of Curator of History, Theodore Belote, and the Curator of Anthropology, William Holmes, was being challenged by the control of volunteers. Theodore Belote had just been promoted to Curator of the Division of History, in July of 1917, which may be a reason for his assertion of control over the collection.⁹⁰ The Smithsonian curators were trying to maintain best practices by handling the objects in their care according to museum standards. This required documentation of each object, and necessitated the knowledge of a professional. The current practice of the Department of Anthropology had objects first be accessioned in Holmes office and then transferred to the correct curator for cataloging, care, and installation.⁹¹ While James and Hoes' system had worked for them since the beginning of the collection, the Smithsonian curators now saw a need to take on greater control of the exhibit.

The Department of History was not an important department in the Museum until well into the 1920s. The creation of the Department of Anthropology took place after a reorganization of the museum. The reorganization moved the division of

⁸⁹ Letter to Rathbun from Holmes, September 26, 1917, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

⁹⁰ Smithsonian Institution, *Report on the progress and condition of the U.S. National Museum for the year ending June 30 ...*, 1918, (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1918) 94, <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/4904#/summary>.

⁹¹ Letter to Rathbun from Holmes, September 26, 1917, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

American history under the Department of Anthropology, but history was often a neglected collection because of the Smithsonian's emphasis on scientific collections. It was not until the early twentieth century that the historical collections gained more prominence when the National Museum of Natural History was built. The movement of the natural history collections to the new building opened more space for history and technology collections in the Arts and Industries building.⁹² The Division of History was under the direction of the Department of Anthropology, until 1921.⁹³ The staff of the anthropology department also hoped that they could use the gowns of the Mistresses of the White House to get a museum of Arts and History.⁹⁴ Prior to this, the Museum administration and the Costume Committee had existed quite well together, but when the Museum tried to take control of the Costume exhibit, James and Hoes realized just how little power they had as volunteers.

James and Hoes problems started with a simple miscommunication. James went to see Walcott and he thought that she was giving up her control of the Costume Collection, but she had no such intentions. After this misunderstanding, the Costume Committee began to "feel that it might be well to break up the collection, returning the costumes and heirlooms now on exhibition, lent on our representation and at our responsibility, to their owners."⁹⁵ Only four years after its opening, James and Hoes

⁹² Walker, *A Living Exhibition*, 39-40.

⁹³ Smithsonian Institution, *Report on the progress and condition of the U.S. National Museum for the year ending June 30 ...*, 1913, (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1913) 10, <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/4904#/summary>.

⁹⁴ Letter to Ravenel from W. Holmes, July 19, 1920, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

⁹⁵ Letter to Walcott from James, February 22, 1918, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files; Letter to Rathbun from Ravenel, March 5, 1918, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

wanted to disband the collection if the Museum administration and the Committee could not come to a consensus about their role in the Collection. James even sought the assistance of her lawyer to make her case to the Museum.⁹⁶ James and her lawyer saw the Costume exhibit as an independent creation of the Costume Committee that was on loan to the National Museum. Secretary Walcott had a different opinion of the exhibit. "This collection is composed of material some of which has belonged to the museum for many years, ... loans from various contributors to whom receipts have been forwarded from time to time by the museum, and who properly regard the museum as responsible for the guarding and preservation of the material."⁹⁷ Walcott viewed the National Museum as the owners of the collection and responsible to the lenders. In most cases, James and Hoes had collected the gowns and corresponded with the owners, but at this point the curators of the Museum started to maintain the collections and paperwork for objects. Because James and Hoes were volunteers, Walcott saw the collection as Museum property and James and Hoes as representatives of the Museum.

The Costume Committee and Secretary Walcott had to work out the role of the Costume Committee in the Museum. Secretary Walcott now had to make clear the Costume collections status as a National Museum exhibit. The exhibit clearly belonged to the National Museum because of the paperwork that shows the ownership of the objects. The Museum

⁹⁶ Letter to Walcott from Butler, February 27, 1918, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

⁹⁷ Letter to James from Walcott, March 1, 1918, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

would be more than pleased to have them [James and Hoes] continue this notable undertaking ... knowing that the material thus assembled does not constitute an independent exhibition and that it is subject to the rules and regulations which govern the acceptance and care of all historical material received by the Museum both as regards loans and gifts.⁹⁸

Walcott declared the Museum's direct ownership of the exhibit and made it clear that James and Hoes now needed to conform to the rules and regulations of the Institution. The Costume Committee now needed to get a list of material for consideration before it is accepted, and then entrust the material to the care of the division to be marked for identification. The Museum curators instituted more stringent rules to govern the care of exhibits. "All materials received shall be installed by or under the supervision of the officials of the division to which it has been assigned, and any future change in connection with such installation shall be made in the same manner."⁹⁹ Walcott now emphasized to James and Hoes that their work needed to be overseen by "the division it was assigned to" or "an official of the Museum." They no longer had control over the care of the objects in storage, the choices in the display, or the informative labels in each case. Just like Lillie Titus lost control of the Shirley-Eustis House Association to William Appleton, James and Hoes lost control of their collection to the Smithsonian curators. The charter of the Shirley-Eustis House Association was rewritten to exclude Lillie Titus from her role as secretary.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the terms of James and Hoes involvement in the collection were rewritten to specify their subordination to the curators of the museum. As the Museum institutionalized, the Museum officials needed to establish control over their collections.

⁹⁸ Letter to Butler from Walcott, April 6, 1918, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files, 1.

⁹⁹ Letter to Butler from Walcott, April 6, 1918, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files, 2.

¹⁰⁰ Lindgren, "A New Departure in Historic, Patriotic Work," 52-53.

After the Museum curators established their control over the collection, the position of James and Hoes changed dramatically. When Hoes and James wanted to come to the Museum to do some work, they needed to have a laborer assigned to work with them. Professor Holmes, the Curator of Anthropology, received a letter from James and communicated its contents to the Curator of History, Theodore Belote. "Mrs. James informs me that she and Mrs. Hoes expect to spend Saturday afternoon in making some rearrangements in the Costumes Hall, and request that a laborer be assigned to assist them in this connection."¹⁰¹ Not only did Professor Holmes dislike assigning a laborer to the Costume Committee, but also disliked having unofficial personnel handling objects, "I am not sure that the Secretary's final arrangement with Mrs. James is entirely in harmony with the employment by her of a non-official of the museum for the purpose of handling material belonging to the costumes collection but this is, of course, a matter entirely for your decision."¹⁰² Theodore Belote had the power to decide if these women could continue the work that they had started and made possible. The Museum curators succeeded in transferring the majority of the control over the collection to themselves.

Hoes criticized the Museum's control of the collection. She wrote to a friend,

I want to be able to control these dresses. They really belong to New York where the family have been so distinguished ... The reason these heirlooms have been sent to Washington is entirely on my account and my interest in the collection ... I state these facts very frankly because I was told the other day

¹⁰¹ Letter to Professor Holmes from Theodore Belote, July 9, 1918, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

¹⁰² Letter to Professor Holmes from Theodore Belote, July 9, 1918, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

by a party that the Curator of History stated that the Drayton Court Costumes now in the museum had been directly from the family to the museum.¹⁰³

Hoes claimed these statements to be false because she had the correspondence with the family and James had conveyed the dresses to the Museum herself. Hoes had trouble accepting her new place in the Museum structure. And the Curator of History was not happy when she stepped on his department. Theodore Belote was outraged by the claims of Hoes and wrote to Ravenel, "I recommend that the writer of this perfectly absurd letter be asked to address her communication to a responsible office of the museum. If Mrs. Hoes wishes to make public the disgraceful status of the so called costumes collection, she can adopt no better method of doing so than implying that I made a false statement."¹⁰⁴ Theodore Belote wanted to make his control of the collection clear. He thought that these women were responsible for the disorder of the costume collection.

The Museum staff even started to communicate directly with the lenders of the objects in the collection. Ravenel wrote to the lenders asking them if the Museum could produce educational materials related to the dresses, and if they would consider donating the dresses to the Museum. Upon knowledge of the correspondence, James was quite offended.¹⁰⁵ After she had put in the work to collect the dresses and had been the one corresponding with the owners, the Museum staff had pushed her out of her role. Most of James control of the collection rested on the donations of the

¹⁰³ Letter to Rosenbush from Rose Gouverneur Hoes, November 11, 1919, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

¹⁰⁴ Letter to Rosenbush from Rose Gouverneur Hoes, November 11, 1919, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

¹⁰⁵ Letter to Julian-James from Ravenel the Administrative Assistant to the Secretary, January 21, 1921, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

collection being lent on her regards to the owner. Without controlling which objects come to the Museum, James and Hoes had lost most of their place and control in the collection.

After this challenge to their authority, Hoes went to the Museum to discuss her position in the collection. She wanted to know “just where she stands now in regard to the Period Costumes Collection” because she had some leads on new acquisitions and wanted to know if she should pursue them.¹⁰⁶ While Hoes did continue to pursue objects for the collection, Ravenel made it clear that she was traveling as “the representative of the National Museum.”¹⁰⁷ As the Museum institutionalized, Hoes and James lost the power that they had gained as the creators of the collection.

The Period Costume Collection was a part of the National Museum, but to many it seemed not to fit. Mary Louisa Adams Clement, the granddaughter of Louisa Catherine Adams, wanted to remove the collection to a new building where it would be more prominently shown. The popularity of this exhibit ensured its continuation. The creators, James and Hoes, represented the First Ladies to the best of their ability capitalizing on the popular opinions of each First Lady in their displays. While the exhibit did not represent these women as political actors, it did break ground in being one of the first collection about women, and allowed two women to curate the display for a time. As the Museum institutionalized, the curatorial staff wanted to assert their

¹⁰⁶ Memorandum of call from R. G. Hoes from Ravenel, the Administrative Assistant to the Secretary, October 17, 1922, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

¹⁰⁷ Letter to Hoes from Ravenel, the Administrative Assistant in charge of the National Museum, November 14, 1924, Folder 12, Box 410, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 192, United States National Museum, Permanent Administration Files.

control over the exhibit and pushed these women out of their unique position as volunteer curators.

Chapter 2: “History’s ‘Fashion Parade:’” The First Ladies Under Margaret Klapthor¹⁰⁸

Curiously enough, at the time of Mrs. Hoes’ death, ... the Smithsonian Institution did not have on its professional staff a single female historian; however ten years later, along came Mrs. Margaret Brown Klapthor.¹⁰⁹

By World War II, the First Ladies collection was the only women’s history collection in the United States National Museum. The collection’s founder, Rose Gouverneur Hoes was never paid for her work, nor did she live to see the hiring of a female curator at the Smithsonian. She did, however, open up space for that to happen. Margaret Brown Klapthor became the first professional female curator for the First Ladies exhibit. Hired in 1943, solely to care for these dresses, Klapthor renovated the First Ladies exhibit, expanding on the work of Hoes and James, by placing the gowns in period rooms to reflect the time that each dress was worn. Klapthor’s efforts updated the exhibit to then-current museum education and display practices. While the popularity of the collection created a space for women on the Smithsonian’s staff, it also limited their role to this particular exhibit. Klapthor herself infused a new perspective into the display of women’s objects.

Twentieth Century Museum Practices

Museums in the twentieth century changed dramatically from the “cabinets of curiosity” model of the late nineteenth century, to a more focused approach on

¹⁰⁸ Ruth Shumaker, “First Ladies On View at Smithsonian: Eisenhower Launches Historic Exhibit of Gowns,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald* (1954-1959), May 25, 1955, 1, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

¹⁰⁹ Bill Carmichael, *Incredible Collectors, Weird Antiques, and Odd Hobbies*, (New York: Warner Paperback Library) 1973, 221, in Folder Magazine Articles, Box 12, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Accession 95-090, National Museum of American History, Division of Political History, Curatorial Records.

interpretation as a means of education. The Great Depression plunged many families into poverty, but the New Deal programs provided more funding for historic preservation. The 1930s saw an increase in funding for historic sites and research, as the New Deal brought white-collar workers into the National Parks and the Smithsonian to do cataloging and object preparation. New Deal funding for programs like the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Public Works Administration (PWA), and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) helped to put people back to work in cultural resources.¹¹⁰ Many of these workers ended up in the Park Service, the Smithsonian, and other historical areas. The PWA provided funds to build educational facilities at parks and purchase the tools necessary for museum work.¹¹¹

Other programs like the WPA's Federal Writers Project, Library Service, and the Historical Records Survey helped to find jobs for historians. The Federal Writers Project allowed for writers to collect oral histories, and the library service project helped to increase the people that were served by libraries and trained many in book conservation.¹¹² The Historic Records Survey had archivists identify and preserve historical records. The Park Service also began hiring more historians. Bringing academic historians into the Park Service allowed them to develop an interpretation

¹¹⁰ Denise Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History* (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 112.

¹¹¹ Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments and National Parks*, 112.

¹¹² Martha H. Swain, "A New Deal in Libraries: Federal Relief Work and Library Service, 1933-1943," *Libraries & Culture* 30, no. 3 (1995) 265-83. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25542771>; Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard, "New Deal Cultural Programs: Experiments in Cultural Democracy," The Institute for Cultural Democracy, 1995. Accessed March 14, 2019. <http://www.wwcd.org/policy/US/newdeal.html#HIST>.

that institutionalized the American progress narrative. There was also an increase in the staff at the Smithsonian, working to modernize exhibits.¹¹³

Historic sites saw an increase in visitors. After the First World War, traveling abroad became much more expensive, so many Americans elected to travel locally. National Parks had received 3,246,656 visitors in 1930, before the Depression hit. But in the latter half of the 1930s, National Parks had reached similar visitor numbers to their pre-Depression numbers.¹¹⁴ Not only did the Parks get more visitors, but so did other museums and historic houses because the affordability of the car made it possible to visit these places.¹¹⁵

After World War II, the anti-communist crusade, generally known as the Cold War, led national leaders to use history as a way to define American exceptionalism, identify the elements of a common heritage, and demonstrate American democracy's superiority over communism. The American narrative of progress offered a perfect counter to communist propaganda. By showing America's "superior" way of life, visitors would not be enticed by the communist message.¹¹⁶ Government propaganda could now come in many forms, with the spread of the radio and television. These new methods allowed direct communication with the public, increasing the educational influence of corporations and government. Programs could be controlled by capitalist corporations like Du Pont's *Cavalcade of America*, or by networks themselves, like *You Are There*. Du Pont's show praised capitalism and the free-

¹¹³ Christiansen, *Channeling the Past*, 194.

¹¹⁴ Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments and National Parks*, 131-132.

¹¹⁵ Patrick H. Butler III, "Past, Present, and Future: The Place of the House Museum in the Museum Community," *Interpreting Historic House Museums*, ed. Jessica Foy Donnelly (New York: AltaMira Press, 2002), 18-42.

¹¹⁶ Christiansen, *Channeling the Past*, 187.

market, creating characters with traits that resembled Du Pont, while *You Are There* interviewed historical figures with “leftist political ideology.”¹¹⁷ Historical sites all over the country were trying to find ways to add programs that displayed their Americanism. Colonial Williamsburg offered an orientation program for U.S. military soldiers to teach them the values and ideals of America, so they could explain it to the enemies.¹¹⁸ Historic sites connected the American narrative of progress to anticommunist propaganda.

In the Post World War II world, museums started to create educational programs to match their missions. Most museums had made education a part of their mission but they had not developed programs or departments for the purpose. During the 1950s, the Henry Ford Museum Education Department issued a Plans and Progress to make necessary changes in education. The department wanted to raise national awareness of their museum by developing literature for teachers, creating conferences and research on education, and distributing that literature. The Smithsonian was no exception to the national trend for increased education. The Museum’s mission changed, moving away from a sense of the institution as a “national repository” and toward an understanding of its role as a “public learning complex.”¹¹⁹ Curators’ lectures, publications, and outreach through loaned materials supported this mission.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Christiansen, *Channeling the Past*, 11-12, 100.

¹¹⁸ Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 91, 111-112, quoted in Jessie Swigger, *History Is Bunk*, 101-102.

¹¹⁹ Christiansen, *Channeling the Past*, 189.

¹²⁰ American Association of Museums, “A Preliminary Report on the Educational Work in the Museums of the United States, December 1961, Folder Education, Box 42, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 50, Smithsonian Institution, Office of the Secretary, Records.

After World War II, the Smithsonian exhibits were in poor condition. The Arts and Industries building was so cramped that the *Washington Star* said that visitors would “suffer at least a slight attack of claustrophobia.”¹²¹ The new exhibit philosophy created by Frank Taylor, the first director of the Museum of History and Technology, stressed the new commitment to history of culture and technology, which changed from the previous focus on natural history.¹²² The exhibits would have overarching themes that would be clear, and connect the story to objects on display. The philosophy also emphasized the U.S. contribution to the improvement of man.¹²³ To be sure that the themes of the exhibit were clear, curators began writing scripts for their exhibits. The scripts helped to bind the artifacts together. To accomplish better education, some of the curators wanted to renovate exhibits, but widespread success was difficult, so they decided to focus on the most popular exhibits, the Main Hall and the First Ladies exhibit, and a new Naval History Hall was created.¹²⁴

A Female Curator for These Ladies

Margaret Klapthor came to the museum in 1943, as a scientific aide, a position created to fulfill the need for more staff.¹²⁵ She earned her bachelor’s degree

¹²¹ Paul Sampson, “Smithsonian Turning ‘Attic into Showcase.’” *Washington Post and Times-Herald*, May -12, 1957, quoted in Christiansen, *Channeling the Past*, 195.

¹²² The National Museum of History and Technology opened in 1964, but the museum changed its name in 1980 to the National Museum of American History as it is known today. “Mission and History,” Smithsonian National Museum of American History, accessed January 27, 2019, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/museum/mission-history>.

¹²³ McMahon, “Romance of Technological Progress,” 87-88, quoted in Christiansen, *Channeling the Past*, 197.

¹²⁴ Christiansen, *Channeling the Past*, 197, 204.

¹²⁵ Margaret W. Brown’s position was created due to the resignation of Virginia Galt. Margaret Brown eventually married another Smithsonian employee, Frank Klapthor, and changed her name to Margaret Klapthor. Smithsonian Institution, *Report on the progress and condition of the U.S. National Museum for the year ending June 30 ...*, 1944, (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1944) 67. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/107714#page/75/mode/1up>.

from the University of Maryland in History. She entered the Smithsonian right after college. Even as men came to dominate the museum profession, they did not want to work with the First Ladies collection. This presented a problem for the museum, since no man wanted to be the curator of the collection, a woman would have to do it.¹²⁶ The installation of a women's collection, by James and Hoes, opened a position for Klapthor in the National Museum. Klapthor quickly assumed control of the First Ladies Collection. She recalled, "They told me right in the very beginning that one of the things they wanted me to have the responsibility for was the First Ladies Collection. That was one of the reasons they had hired me, was they wanted me to assume the responsibility for the First Ladies."¹²⁷ While the Museum hired Klapthor to take on the collection, they gave her very little training. Klapthor recognized the challenge this presented, "Here is the most popular exhibit in this museum, really the prize collection, too, and it was being ... casually tossed off to a museum technician type who was coming in direct from college. It's most amazing."¹²⁸ The Museum administration gave her control over a valuable collection when she was just starting her career, as a technician, simply because no man wanted to care for the collection.

While Klapthor was creating her reinterpretation of the exhibit, women were pushed out of the workforce by demobilization and the returning veterans. World War II had expanded women's role in the workforce out of necessity; women needed to fill the roles that men had vacated when they left for war.¹²⁹ As World War II came to

¹²⁶ Graddy and Pastan, *The Smithsonian First Ladies Collection*, 7-10.

¹²⁷ Oral History Interview of Margaret Klapthor, "On Being a Curator," February 17, 1983, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9522, Association of Curator Project (National Museum of American History) Records, 39-40.

¹²⁸ Oral History Interview of Margaret Klapthor, "On Being a Curator," 39-40.

¹²⁹ Marc Miller, "Working Women and World War II," *The New England Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (1980): 42-47, <https://doi.org/10.2307/365288>; Evan K. Rose, "The Rise and Fall of Female Labor

a close, many companies started to downsize, and veterans returned home to the jobs that they had left. As a result, many women lost the jobs that they had inhabited during the war. Women were met with propaganda as they lost their jobs that sent them back into the home, many still preferred that the husband be the sole wage earner.¹³⁰ The First Ladies display, of 1955, in period rooms reflected the image of women behind their husbands as “social arbiter of taste and standards and helpmate to her husband.”¹³¹ The First Ladies exhibit put women in home settings while it was created by a woman in the professional one.

As women entered the professional workplace, they often encountered double standards. Women often had to downplay their role in the field to emphasize the professionalism of the field. Women in social work struggled to become professionals, just like women in museums. As social work professionalized, it tried to emphasize the scientific objectivity of the field, distancing it from the philanthropic work of women.¹³² Social work institutions downplayed the number of women in the field so that the profession was not seen as feminine. Social work advocated that women work as volunteers, while men take the paid jobs, even though the field was dominated by women. While the field was dominated by women, they were not welcomed into it.

Force Participation During World War II in the United States,” *Journal of Economic History* 78, no. 3 (September 2018): 685-692, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050718000323>.

¹³⁰ Miller, “Working Women and World War II,” 56, 59; Rose, “The Rise and Fall of Female Labor Force Participation During World War II in the United States,” 703-705.

¹³¹ “Images of the First Ladies May 2-8, 1993 A. Introduction and History of the Exhibit,” Folder FL 1992 Media Materials, box from Mayo’s Office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor file cabinet.

¹³² Jennifer Cote, “‘The West Point of the Philanthropic Service’: Reconsidering Social Work’s Welcome to Women in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Social Service Review* 87, no. 1 (2013): 135, <https://doi.org/10.1086/669898>.

In museums, women had traditionally inhabited volunteer roles, but some women sought advanced degrees to obtain the professional positions. Even with the advanced degrees, women still did not command the same respect from the male coworkers. Women's volunteer positions often involved "helping male directors, tidying up, and keeping records," a position similar to their place in the home, but this was not the role for the new professional woman.¹³³ Women in professionalized positions had to gain the respect in their role, but they also had to maintain the professional legitimacy of their field. The First Ladies inherent double standard continued through Klapthor's interpretation. When Hoes and James created the exhibit, they inhabited a radical role as a curator, as they displayed women emphasizing the domestic sphere. Similarly, Klapthor displayed the First Ladies in the White House, a home, while she worked outside the home. Her choice to represent women in a way that reinforced common beliefs about women's place, could have gained her some legitimacy among her peers in curation.

The return of veterans included pressure for women to move back into the home, but Klapthor stayed at work in the Smithsonian through marriage and children. Klapthor got married and had a child within a year and a half. One of her peers outside the Museum, Paul Downing, wrote that he was glad she was staying on at the Museum,

I have received your letter of September 5 with great pleasure, occasioned by the two important announcements, your marriage and the expected addition. I am glad to hear that neither of these events will end your museum career,

¹³³ Taylor, "Pioneering Efforts of Early Museum Women," 12.

which would be unfortunate for the Smithsonian Institution and those of us who look to you for assistance from time to time.¹³⁴

In the 1950s, it was still common for women to leave work after having children, but Klapthor stayed at the Museum to work with the First Ladies collection. She had been one of the only people to work with the collection since the men at the Museum did not want to take over that collection. Klapthor's knowledge about the White House and the First Ladies allowed her to provide help to researchers and the Division of Civil History. After having her children, Klapthor went part-time at the Museum to care for her children.¹³⁵ Klapthor's position as one of the only authorities on the First Ladies gowns and the White House made her an invaluable asset to the Museum.

The creation of a women's collection opened the door for women to be successful professionals in museums. Women often struggled to break into the male dominated field, fighting into the old boys' network. Most positions were gained by knowing someone and women had very few connections. Even when they could get positions in museums, they often stayed in the lower ranks of staff never rising to the coveted positions as head of a department or director of the museum.¹³⁶ Klapthor had a bachelor's degree and was one of a few women to gain an upper level position in the Smithsonian at her time.¹³⁷ She worked at the museum for forty years, and eventually rose to the head of the Division of Civil History. Klapthor had to struggle

¹³⁴ Letter to Margaret Klapthor from Paul Downing, September 11, 1956, Folder Correspondence 1955-1957, Box 4, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 7466, Klapthor, Margret Brown, Margret B. Klapthor Papers.

¹³⁵ Annual Report 1958, Folder 28, Box 5, Smithsonian Institutional Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records.

¹³⁶ Jane Glaser and Artemis Zenetou eds., *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994); Joan H. Baldwin and Anne W. Ackerson, *Women in the Museum: Lessons from the Workplace* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

¹³⁷ Mary Van Rensselaer Thayer, "First Ladies' Star In Gala Opening At Smithsonian: Gowns," *The Washington Post and Times Herald* (1954-1959), May 22, 1955, F1, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

to gain her position as head of the department. First, the Division of Civil History was not even its own department when Klapthor started as a scientific aide, it was under the Department of Arts and Industries. Klapthor was promoted through the ranks to assistant curator, and then to acting curator of the Department of Civil History.¹³⁸ But even as the head of the department, Klapthor was still referred to as the assistant curator. “It is hoped that the administration of the museum will give due consideration to establishing the Division of Civil History as a real museum division in the sense of the personnel assigned to the division. It is not fair to the division or the museum to have the person who acts as curator of the division bound to the title of assistant curator.”¹³⁹ Visitors questioned the authority of the assistant curator and wanted to know who they were the assistant too and why that person was not answering their questions. Even though Margaret Klapthor had the position and power of a curator and head of a department, her title still reflected a lower status. This difference while not an issue inside the museum, gave her less standing with the public that she served.

The presence of a women’s collection created a place for Klapthor in the museum. Klapthor’s position gave her the ability to change First Ladies exhibit and offer additional interpretation about the women who served in the White House.

¹³⁸ Margaret Klapthor is listed as the Assistant Curator in the Annual Report of 1947, but by the Annual Report of 1949, she is listed as the Acting Curator. Annual Report 1947, Folder 21, Box 5, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records; Annual Report 1949, Folder 21, Box 5, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records.

¹³⁹ Annual Report 1951, Folder 21, Box 5, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records.

Preserving the Collection

As a professionally trained historian, Klapthor brought that professionalism into her control of the collection. She started researching each of the dresses in the collection to evaluate their authenticity and condition. While Klapthor did what she could to conserve the gowns, the division lacked the ability to conserve the fabric because there was no conservator on staff. The Martha Washington dress was one of the most important dresses in the collection and it needed substantial conservation. The initial display of the gowns did not have temperature or humidity control and that left the fabric damaged.

Each flower motif reveals the underlying destruction of threads on which the painting was done. In order to save the original fabric and decoration the dress must now be sandwiched between layers of crepline which is carefully affixed to the surface of the dress with tiny stitches following the decorative design. ... There are at least five other dresses in the collection which are urgently in need of the same type of restoration. In my opinion the time had come for the Smithsonian to have on its own staff people who can do the work necessary to restore this dress and the other unique and irreplaceable textile objects in the National Collection.¹⁴⁰

Klapthor not only used her own professional skills to preserve the gowns, but worked to get other professionals hired to care for the collection.

Only ten years after the opening of the First Ladies Hall in the Arts and Industries Building, the Smithsonian completed the construction of the new building, the National Museum of History and Technology. To move the collection, Margaret Klapthor developed special cases to allow the mannequins to be moved with the dresses still on them, so that they could be loaded onto the truck and unloaded

¹⁴⁰ "Conservation notes," Folder Care of the First Ladies 1964-1974, Box 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 7466, Klapthor, Margret Brown, Margret B. Klapthor Papers.

directly into the new cases.¹⁴¹ Margaret's professional training gave her the knowledge to protect the gowns as much as possible in the move to the new building.

Limiting the dressing and undressing of the mannequins helped to preserve the gowns, but Klapthor also found that the plaster mannequins were so heavy they place strain on the gown. For the dresses from Jacqueline Kennedy and Lady Bird Johnson, a plastic mannequin was constructed, that was lighter than the plaster. Klapthor had a plastic mannequin made for each of the other gowns to help preserve them for the future.¹⁴² While she had the mannequins cast for the First Ladies, she also had a copy of the dress made out of muslin for research handling to limit the gowns exposure.¹⁴³ As each copy of the gown was made so was the mannequin, so that when the two were both done the gown went back on display. Klapthor attempted to preserve the gowns for another seventy-five years, combining her training with her experience working with the gowns.

Klapthor's Renovation of the First Ladies

Klapthor's professional research enabled her to reconceptualize the interpretation of the First Ladies exhibit. She compiled her research to publish a book

¹⁴¹ Smithsonian Institution, *Annual Report for the year ended June 30 ...*, 1964, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1964) 66.

¹⁴² Memorandum to Bedini from Margaret B. Klapthor, February 9, 1966, Folder First Ladies Exhibit I 86-90, Box 2, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Accession 01-097, National Museum of American History, Dept. of Exhibits, Exhibition Records; Memo to Bedini from Margaret Klapthor, February 9, 1966, Folder 12, Box 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records.

¹⁴³ Letter to Taft from Margaret Klapthor, October 10, 1966, Folder Care of the First Ladies 1964-1974, box 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 7466, Klapthor, Margaret Brown, Margaret B. Klapthor Papers; Memo to Widner from Margaret Klapthor, January 12, 1967, Folder 13, Box 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records; Memo to Bedini from Margaret Klapthor, November 8, 1967, Folder 6, Box 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records.

on the First Ladies, *The Dresses of the Mistresses of the White House*.¹⁴⁴ Her book included a history of each first lady, and a description of the gown that was on display. The First Ladies collection had always contained the dresses and accessories of the Presidents' wives, but the Museum started to acquire more large furniture items. During the renovation of the White House under the Truman Administration, the Smithsonian obtained wall paneling, mantels, and parts of the interior, and furniture. With all these new items, Klapthor could recreate some of the rooms of the White House in the Museum.¹⁴⁵

Klapthor's work shifted the focus of the First Ladies Collection to include decorative arts as well as items of clothing. She conceptualized an exhibit that could capitalize on these strengths. To include these new elements in the display, Klapthor needed to know the history and interior design of the White House during each administration. She worked to find images or descriptions of the White House to support each period room.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Margaret Brown, *Dresses of the First Ladies of the White House*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1952).

¹⁴⁵ Thayer, "First Ladies' Star In Gala Opening At Smithsonian: Gowns,".

¹⁴⁶ Klapthor based her design of the Reception Room on a description of a White house room from the Van Buren Administration. She did similar work for the rest of the rooms, finding photographs of the Blue Rooms and using scraps of wall paper and mantels that were installed during Peirce Administration. For the first two rooms, the Washington and Adams families owned the objects displayed in the room. First Ladies Hall Case #1, Folder The Washington Room 1789-1817, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files; Music Room photo, Folder The Music Room 1817-1828, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files; Reception Room photo, Folder The Reception Room 1829-1849, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files; Victorian Parlor photo, Folder Victorian Parlor 1849-1869, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files; Blue Room photo, Folder The Blue Room 1869-1893, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files; Blue Room photo, Folder The Blue Room 1893-1921, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files; Red Room photo, Folder The Red Room 1921-1929, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files; East Room photos, Folder The East Room 1929-1963, Drawer First Ladies

Klapthor's vision required significant funding to achieve. The publication of the *Dresses of the First Ladies of the White House* helped a lot to gain publicity for the exhibit. Congressmen's wives, including Elsie Williams and Marie Schoeppel, came to the museum for a special tour of the First Ladies Collection and have their books signed by Klapthor.¹⁴⁷ Klapthor took the opportunity to discuss the collection's funding needs.

I went out in the hall with Mrs. Williams and Mrs. Schoeppel and showed them some of our outstanding specimens and walked through the Costumes Hall with them telling a little about the Dresses. I casually mentioned that someday we hoped to have the Ladies exhibit in period settings and gave them an idea of how the hall might look then. I did not mention budget or financing the plan.¹⁴⁸

Even though she never asked them for money, Klapthor put the idea in their heads that they needed to support this collection to get the exhibit she described.

Klapthor was not a high society elite, who could fund the exhibit on her own. Funding for the Smithsonian exhibit modernization came from Federal appropriations and corporate sponsorships. The Secretary of the Smithsonian went to the Congressional budget meetings and requested an amount for the functions of the Museums and research institutions, but they were dependent on the congressional decision. In the late 1950s, Congress approved \$650,000 for the exhibition

Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files.

¹⁴⁷ Marie Schoeppel was married to Andrew Schoeppel, a Republican Senator from Kansas and Elsie Williams was the wife of John Willimas, a Republican Senator from Delaware. Kansas Historical Society, "Andrew Frank Schoeppel," *Kansapedia*, modified February 2017, accessed March 12, 2019, <https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/andrew-frank-schoeppel/17042>; Sarah Lyall, "John Williams, Ex-Senator Dies; Represented Delaware for 4 Terms," *New York Times*, January 13, 1988, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/01/13/obituaries/john-williams-ex-senator-dies-represented-delaware-for-4-terms.html>

¹⁴⁸ Memorandum to Dr Kellogg from Margaret Klapthor, February 13, 1953, Folder Dresses of the First Ladies, Box 42, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 50, Smithsonian Institution, Office of the Secretary, Records.

modernization plan, almost triple the annual operating budget in 1952.¹⁴⁹ Klapthor created a network for herself, that brought her in communication with women who had indirect access to power. If wives convinced their husband to support an increase in the next Smithsonian appropriation, Klapthor could get her exhibit built.

The Opening of the New Exhibit

“Mamie Eisenhower flipped a light switch, officially illuminating and opening the First Ladies’ Hall, where her pink inaugural ballgown and gowns of all the other First Ladies from the time of Martha Washington are exhibited in specifically constructed cases that look like rooms of the White House.”¹⁵⁰

The First Ladies Hall was formally reopened on May 24, 1955.¹⁵¹ The new hall was meant to enhance the look of the dresses and the educational value of the collection. Klapthor’s new interpretation used the current practice of displaying period objects together in rooms to replicate the original surroundings of the objects.

¹⁴⁹ Christiansen, *Channeling the Past*, 197.

¹⁵⁰ Ruth Shumaker, “First Ladies On View at Smithsonian: Eisenhower Launches Historic Exhibit of Gowns,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald* (1954-1959), May 25, 1955, 1, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

¹⁵¹ Smithsonian Institution, Board of Regents, *Annual report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution*, 1955, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1955) 4. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/33415#page/5/mode/1up>, Back of the Washington Room photograph, Folder The Washington Room 1789-1817, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files.



Figure 3

The renovation of the First Ladies exhibit featured eight period rooms designed in the style of the White House rooms from the period. Each case contained three to six dresses from First Ladies spanning about twenty years in each room. The cases replicated a parlor in the Executive Mansion during the Washington Administration, a music room from the John Quincy Adams Administration, the reception room from the Martin Van Buren Administration, a Victorian parlor from the Franklin Pierce Administration, the blue room from the Ulysses Grant Administration, the blue room from 1898, the red room from the 1920s, and the east room from the 1930s.

The design of the exhibit allowed the curators to capitalize on the furniture and decorative arts collections contained in the Museum. Klapthor could use the mantels, pilasters and furniture from the White House to recreate the rooms where the dresses were originally worn.¹⁵² The objects that surrounded the dresses came from the First Ladies or from the White House. The gowns could be kept on display, but a number of furniture pieces could be moved from storage to exhibition. The Reception Room of the Administration of Martin Van Buren was based around the rug. “The rug [given by the Imam of Muscat] was installed in the room in the A[rts] and I[ndustries]



Figure 4

¹⁵² First Ladies Hall Entrance, 1963, Folder East Room 1929-1963, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files; “Images of the First Ladies, May 2-8, 1993, Introduction and History of the Exhibit,” Folder FL 1992 Media Materials, Boxes from Edith Mayo’s office, National Museum of American History, Division of Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files, 4.

Building in 1955 ... It was the key object in the room and the rest of the room was planned – period wise, color wise ect. because the rug existed.”¹⁵³ The rug was in storage at the Smithsonian, so Klapthor found a way to incorporate it into the exhibit. For the details of the room that were not original they were recreated to the best of her ability with the research of the White House. The “wallpaper is based on a description of a White House room in this administration which had ‘white paper sprinkled with gold stars.’”¹⁵⁴ Klapthor created an authentic representation of the White House in each of the periods that she represented.

While the display of the gowns got infinitely more complex than the plain cases that Hoes and James set up, the written interpretation remained fairly stagnant. The labels for the gowns remained fairly simple, relying on the room to give the added contextual information. Each dress had a label at the foot of the mannequin with the name of the First Lady and a label at the edge of the case gave slightly more information about the dress.

¹⁵³ “Images of the First Ladies May 2-8, 1993 A. Introduction and History of the Exhibit,” Folder FL 1992 Media Materials, box from Mayo’s Office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor file cabinet; Memo to Dr. Howland from Margaret Klapthor, October 22, 1965, Folder 12, Box 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records.

¹⁵⁴ Each room had extensive research like this, containing the same wallpaper that was initially in the room, or the instruments, tables and chairs that the administrations purchased for the rooms. Reception Room photo, Folder The Reception Room 1829-1849, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files; First Ladies Hall Case #1, Folder The Washington Room 1789-1817, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files; Music Room photo, Folder The Music Room 1817-1828, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files; Victorian Parlor photo, Folder Victorian Parlor 1849-1869, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files; Blue Room photo, Folder The Blue Room 1869-1893, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files; Blue Room photo, Folder The Blue Room 1893-1921, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files; Red Room photo, Folder The Red Room 1921-1929, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files; East Room photos, Folder The East Room 1929-1963, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files.

Dress of
Florence Kling Harding
Wife of President Warren G. Harding
First Lady 1921-1923
Slippers and evening cape worn by Mrs. Harding
Gift of Mrs. Harding¹⁵⁵

The label provided only the necessary information about the First Lady and her gown.

The information provided remained very similar to the information provided in the original display of the gowns. James and Hoes had similar information with the name of the First Lady and the years in which she served. Next to the label for each First Lady was a label for the room. The red room had a very simple description, “Setting Reminiscent of the Red Room of the White House As It Looked During the First Quarter of the 20th Century.”¹⁵⁶ The labels often listed the objects that were in the room on display with little other information.

This new display reflected the current trend in the field, focusing on decorative arts and period rooms. Period rooms had been a popular style of display since the 1920s. Collectors had sought authentic pieces of buildings to use as the background for their antiques.¹⁵⁷ But after World War II, there was an increase in the number of historic house museums and the period room style as a technique for display.¹⁵⁸ In period rooms, the display was still meant to mostly speak for itself with little interpretive information. The combination of the objects was supposed to

¹⁵⁵ Photo of the Red Room, Folder The Red Room 1921-1929, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files.

¹⁵⁶ Photo of Red Room, Folder The Red Room 1921-1929, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files; East Room Label, Folder East Room 1929-1963, Drawer First Ladies Hall File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files.

¹⁵⁷ Ivan Gaskell, “Costume, Period Rooms, and Donors: Dangerous Liaisons in the Art Museum,” *The Antioch Review* 62, no. 4 (2004): 615–23, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4614728>; Butler, “Past, Present, and Future,” 25.

¹⁵⁸ Butler, “Past, Present, and Future,” 18.

visually provide the information rather than through text panels.¹⁵⁹ The progression of the First Ladies gowns in chronological order showed the visitor a bit of the changing fashions throughout the administrations and the changing decorative arts. While the textual labels had not changed dramatically, there were now guided tours for visitors in some of the exhibits, including the First Ladies.¹⁶⁰ The Museum curators had also put together a teaching guide to the First Ladies. The interpretation in the teaching guide connected the First Ladies to their exceptional husbands, who came from all walks of life to serve the country, using the gowns to support the common man in his service of his country.¹⁶¹

One major change that Klapthor initiated, was the display of the current First Ladies gown. Prior to the opening of the 1955 exhibit, the current First Ladies gown was not displayed during her husband's term, but after it was over. Mamie Eisenhower took a great interest in the renovation of the exhibit, and Klapthor thought that her gown should be put on display.

At that time, I persuaded the museum that we should change our established policy and install Mrs. Eisenhower's dress in the collection. It had been my observation that the current First Lady's dress is a subject of great interest to the Museum visitors and it seemed to me the dress should be installed in the collection as soon as the Museum could prepare the mannequin for its display.¹⁶²

Klapthor created a tradition that continues today, the current First Ladies gown is added to the collection as soon as it can be prepared. It had already become tradition

¹⁵⁹ Butler, "Past, Present, and Future," 24-25; "Images of the First Ladies May 2-8, 1993 A. Introduction and History of the Exhibit," Folder FL 1992 Media Materials, box from Mayo's Office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor file cabinet.

¹⁶⁰ Smithsonian Institution, *Annual Report for the year ended June 30 ...*, 1956, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1956) 12.

¹⁶¹ Christiansen, *Channeling the Past*, 217.

¹⁶² Letter to Kicher from Margaret Klapthor, April 13, 1956, Folder Policy Statements – FLH, Box 11, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Accession 95-090, National Museum of American History, Division of Political History, Curatorial Records.

for the curators to ask for a gown from the First Lady, but the gown was not displayed till the end of her time in office. By displaying the current First Lady's gown, Klapthor responded to the concerns of the public and changed the exhibit to meet their wants.

In the James and Hoes' exhibit, the First Ladies gowns were displayed alongside other American Period Costumes, but the new layout of the gowns displayed the First Ladies as a distinct group. It separated them from the rest of the costume collection. This separation of the First Ladies from the other costume display reemphasized their status as notable women. But the change from individual cases to collective cases, "de-emphasiz[ed] the individual women and stress[ed] their collective identity."¹⁶³ These women were important for the fact that they were First Lady, not for their individual actions as women, but their collective identity.

The period rooms displayed the First Ladies gowns in rooms of the White House, in the home. The exhibit portrayed the women in their domain, and used the strengths of the Smithsonian collection in decorative arts to emphasize the narrative of American progress.

Visitors' Response

Museums did not start to systematically collect data from their visitors until the 1950s. As museum education became more important, so too did knowing your visitors. The Smithsonian did not keep records of the exhibits that visitors came to see, but they did file the letters that the public sent to the museum. Many people

¹⁶³ "Images of the First Ladies May 2-8, 1993 A. Introduction and History of the Exhibit," Folder FL 1992 Media Materials, box from Mayo's Office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor file cabinet.

asked for expanded information of the First Ladies, or asked for the slide lecture that museum provided free of charge for those that could not make it to the Museum.¹⁶⁴

One of the most common categories of visitor comments regarding the First Ladies related to the faces of the mannequins. Many wanted to know why they looked so plain. All of the faces of the mannequins were the same, modeled after a bust of Cordelia, King Lear's daughter, from the National Museum of Fine Arts collection.¹⁶⁵

The curators got so many comments on the faces of the mannequins that they moved

¹⁶⁴ Many people asked for the book, *Dresses of the First Ladies of the White House*, or they asked for other information about the First Ladies. Those that wanted to have a lecture on the First Ladies often asked for the free slide lecture, so that they could give the presentation themselves to historical societies or women's clubs. These slides brought the First Ladies across the country, increasing the educational programming of the Smithsonian Institution. Letter to Allen from Richard Howland, April 4, 1965, Folder 16, Box 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records; Letter to Lucile Clay from Margaret Klapthor, March 11, 1965, Folder 19, Box 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records; Letter to Margaret Brown from Ratsy Deer, Folder 19, Box 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records; Letter to Frances Davis from Margaret Klapthor, January 22, 1965, Folder 19, Box 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records; Margaret Klapthor, "Data for reply to Mrs. C. T Casey, Havensville, Kansas, Folder 18, Box 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records; Letter to Nan Comstock from Margaret Klapthor, October 23, 1964, Folder 18, Box 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records; Melinda Frazier, "Data for reply to Miss Lois Moss, 1463 South Fifty-second Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19143," January 22, 1965, Folder 4, Box 2, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records; Letter to Miss Myers from Richard Howland, April 2, 1965, Folder 4, Box 2, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records; Letter to Melinda Frazier from Lillian Albert, November 18, 1964, Folder 16, Box 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records; Letter to Miss Paula Bishop from Margaret Klapthor, October 30, 1964, Folder 17, Box 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records; Letter to Miss Isabel Sloan from Richard Howland, October 29, 1964, Folder 10, Box 2, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records; Letter to Leo Berner from Barbara Coffee, April 7, 1978, Folder B FY 78, Box 8, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records.

¹⁶⁵ Letter to Hopper from Richard Howland, September 12, 1964, Folder 23, Box 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, National Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records.

the bust of Cordelia into the First Ladies Hall in 1967, to show visitors that the bust was the inspiration for the mannequin.¹⁶⁶

Along with the visitor comments about the mannequins, costume historians also began to comment on the dresses in the collection. Some asked “if the donors, in some instances were mistaken in the dates of the clothes represented.”¹⁶⁷ In fact, upon closer examination some of the dresses in the collection may not have been authentic.

[The dress of Mrs. Adams] is indeed too late to have been worn by Mrs. Adams as it now appears. The dress was given to the Smithsonian Institution in 1914 by a member of the Adams family with the history that it was a dress worn by Mrs. Adams. ... I have kept the other dress on display because I think it is made from a Canton crepe shawl and that the shawl was probably the thing which had the association with Mrs. Adams.¹⁶⁸

Even though the dress might not have been worn by Abigail Adams, Margaret Klapthor kept the dress to keep the collection complete. The label for the gown stated that the dress’s date is ambiguous, but Klapthor wanted to avoid casting doubt on the collection by admitting to issues regarding the provenance of each dress. The Smithsonian had an image to maintain, so the curators worked hard to make sure that all the objects met the standards of authenticity that the Museum wanted. Klapthor’s extensive research on the gowns helped to identify the authentic dresses and to make that evident to visitors.

¹⁶⁶ Memo to Lawless from Barbara J. Coffee, April 4, 1967, Folder 9, Box 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records.

¹⁶⁷ Letter to Brown from Laite, July 5, 1955, Folder Dolls, Box 12, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Accession 95-090, National Museum of American History, Division of Political History, Curatorial Records.

¹⁶⁸ Letter to Sirkis from Margaret Klapthor, December 11, 1967, Folder 14, Box 5, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records; Memo to Dr. Howland from Margaret Klapthor, December 14, 1965, Folder 12, Box 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 252, Museum of History and Technology, Division of Political History, Records.

Margaret Klapthor's contribution to the First Ladies exhibit built on the foundation established by Cassie Julian-James and Rose Gouverneur Hoes, expanding the First Ladies costumes to period rooms that reflected the administrations of the gowns. Each period room drew on an extensive knowledge of the White House and textile display. The display of a women's history collection gave Klapthor a place in the museum and a position that allowed her to direct the interpretation, influence personnel in the Museum and the preservation of the gowns. Klapthor was able to start her career and make her impact on the gowns because the First Ladies collection was a women's history collection.

Chapter 3: “Going, Going, Gown:” The Reinterpretation of the First Ladies Exhibit¹⁶⁹

The First Ladies Hall, on view in this museum since 1964, is closed to allow building renovations and necessary conservation procedures of the First Ladies gowns. A new, small exhibit commemorating the 75-year history of the First Ladies collection will be located on the second-floor northwest area in this building. This new installation allows a First Ladies exhibit to remain in the Museum, thus continuing a Smithsonian Institution tradition that began in 1912. A larger permanent exhibition is scheduled to open in the fall of 1991.¹⁷⁰

The First Ladies Exhibit had remained a part of the permanent exhibition at the Smithsonian since its opening, but in 1987, the exhibit was closed for renovation and conservation, something the gowns had not had since the exhibit opened in 1964. The removal of the First Ladies exhibit was compared to the removal of the Holy Grail from display. “The public has traveled to see something that is an icon and finding it missing leads to their frustration.”¹⁷¹ Visitors clamored to see the gowns. Although the exhibit had been around for so long, the interpretation still remained much the same as when it first opened in 1914. Margret Klapthor had given the gowns context in the period settings, but still had not sought to interpret the personalities and accomplishments of the individual women who held the office of First Lady.

¹⁶⁹ Sarah Booth Conroy, “Going, Going, Gown: First Ladies Exhibit May Travel to Dallas,” *The Washington Post*, August 17, 1987; ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

¹⁷⁰ Label for the First Ladies Hall closure, August 20, 1987, Folder First Ladies Exhibit II, Box 2, Smithsonian Institutional Archives, Accession 01-097, National Museum of American History, Dept. of Exhibits, Exhibition Records.

¹⁷¹ Memorandum to Roger Kennedy from Elain Gurian, August 18, 1987, Folder First Ladies Reinterpretation History, Drawer First Ladies Hall Exhibit File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files.

While women had always been a part of the curation of this exhibit, they still had not changed the narrative. The professional staff at the National Museum of American History wanted to use the closure of the exhibit as an opportunity to revise the interpretation. Edith Mayo's *First Ladies: Political Role, Public Image* modernized the First Ladies exhibit to reflect current scholarship on women's history and social history. While Mayo responded to societal changes in women's place and looked at the First Ladies as individual actors, she also needed to consider visitors' potential responses to changes in the exhibition, a major change in the interpretation could counter the visitor's expectations. Mayo's interpretation of the First Ladies as political actors challenged the visitor's nostalgia. After working on the First Ladies exhibit, Mayo was not able to return to any other projects, experiencing the constraints of the First Ladies.

The Decision to Close the First Ladies Exhibit

The curators of Political History, Edith Mayo and Keith Melder, knew that the exhibit needed substantial renovations because it was becoming unsafe for visitors to go through.¹⁷² The carpet in the hall was coming up, a tripping hazard, and some of the panes of glass were chipped on the gown cases which put the gowns safety and conservation at risk.¹⁷³ The gowns had been on display without rest since the opening of the National Museum of History and Technology and needed a lot of conservation work. "Fragile fabrics such as lace and net have begun to disintegrate, and sturdier

¹⁷² Memorandum to Michael Carrigan from Edith Mayo and Keith Melder, "Condition of the First Ladies Hall," April 16, 1986, Folder FLH Takedown, Drawer First Ladies Hall Exhibit File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files.

¹⁷³ Memorandum to Michael Carrigan from Edith Mayo and Keith Melder, "Condition of the First Ladies Hall," April 16, 1986, Folder FLH Takedown, Drawer First Ladies Hall Exhibit File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files.

fabrics such as silk have begun to split as a result of natural deterioration process inherent in all fabrics.”¹⁷⁴ This natural deterioration process made drastic conservation work necessary. The Museum’s costume conservator, Polly Willman, stabilized many of the gowns, every garment was cleaned and structurally stabilized for the current damage and then proper mannequin support had to be developed to ensure that future displays would not compromise the gowns.¹⁷⁵ “Conservators [also] painstakingly constructed a life history of each costume in this exhibition, researching its use by a first lady; when and where it was made; and later owners who may have altered the garment.”¹⁷⁶ This comprehensive conservation plan required closing the First Ladies Hall, but this exhibit had become a staple of the Museum and the National Mall.

A Museum conducted a study, in 1989, proved that nine out of ten visitors came to the Museum specifically to see the First Ladies gown collection. While the hall was closed, many people expressed disappointment and a misunderstanding about the exhibit’s removal.¹⁷⁷ Letters came into the Smithsonian saying, “We strongly protest the decision to remove the First Ladies Exhibit from public view.”¹⁷⁸ The public did not want to see this extremely popular exhibit taken down. As a National Museum, the Smithsonian is often viewed as the people’s museum. Their

¹⁷⁴ Letter to Billie Scott from Marilyn Lyons, July 24, 1987, Drawer First Ladies Hall Exhibit File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

¹⁷⁵ Intro label, “First Ladies Conservation Project,” June 11, 1991, boxes from Edith Mayo’s office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

¹⁷⁶ Intro Label, “First Ladies Collection Conservation Project,” June 11, 1991, boxes from Edith Mayo’s office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

¹⁷⁷ Letter to Rogers from Marilyn Lyons, June 28, 1989, Folder Fundraising First Ladies, Drawer First Ladies Hall Exhibit National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor exhibit files.

¹⁷⁸ Note to the Smithsonian Officials from Mr. and Mrs. Frank Lane, August 17, 1987, Folder 1987, Drawer First Ladies Current, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor exhibit files.

promotional materials ask visitors to come and experience “your history.”¹⁷⁹ Some of the visitors wrote to the Museum asking for the gowns to stay up while they were being conserved, “I can understand this need [for conservation]. But it seems to me such a popular exhibit could remain if gowns were restored and maintained on a rotating basis.”¹⁸⁰ While many visitors wanted to keep the exhibit because they loved to come and look at the gowns, some realized the exhibit’s importance to women’s history. Although women’s history had been an area of scholarly inquiry since the 1970s, the museum had been slow to adapt. “For half the population who visited the Smithsonian, for many years this was the only place they ever saw themselves as actors in American history.”¹⁸¹ One visitor commented that “what precious little we have commemorating WOMEN should stay.”¹⁸² Not only had this exhibit become a permanent part of the National Mall because of the length of the display, but it remained one of the only exhibits that dealt with women. But regardless of the public opinion, the gowns needed to come off of view, and the exhibit closed in 1987.

What to Re-Open?

The timing of the renovation presented an opportunity for the National Museum of American History (NMAH). Just as museums had moved from the curio cabinets to educational experiences in the 1930s and 40s, they were again reinventing

¹⁷⁹ American History signs, National Museum of American History, March 13, 2019.

¹⁸⁰ Visitor Comment form from Johanne Coleman, November 17, 1987, Folder 1988, Drawer First Ladies Current, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor exhibit files.

¹⁸¹ Paula Span, “Return of the Gowns,” March 1, 1992, Folder FL 1992 Media Files, boxes from Edith Mayo’s office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

¹⁸² Visitor Comment form from Ann Beth Cohen, March 6, 1987, Folder 1987, Drawer First Ladies Current, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor exhibit files.

their role in the late 20th century. Museums, more in tune with visitor needs and more aware of their social role, began to transition into critical questioning, to move from the temple to a forum. The National Museum of American History had already begun this transition in the 1980s. Edith Mayo had curated *From Parlor to Politics: Women in Reform in America, 1890-1925*, examining the evolution of women's political activism. Spencer Crew, one of the first African American curators at the museum, had curated *From Field to Factory*, an exhibition about the great migration.¹⁸³ This shift to idea-driven exhibits took place in response to the broader shift in academic history toward social history. A new generation of curators –Mayo, Crew and others—had studied history from the “bottom up,” considering groups that had not previously been in the historical record.¹⁸⁴ Social history had become a major part of historical study, workers, minority groups and even women had become topics of research. This change created whole new areas of scholarship that museums wanted to add to their exhibits.¹⁸⁵ In this context, Margaret Klapthor's exhibit showed not only wear and tear, but interpretive age as well. She demonstrated the fashion changes the gowns represented, but the exhibit lacked a wider historical interpretation of the First Ladies role.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ Other Smithsonian exhibits had been provocative and controversial. The goal was to offer another interpretation of American history, “The West as America” offered a new interpretation of the frontier, showing the connection between politics and art. “From Field to Factory” examined the African American migration to the north. Linenthal, *History Wars*, 22-23.

¹⁸⁴ Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net*, 127-165.

¹⁸⁵ Marie Tyler-McGraw, “Parlor to Politics: Women and Reform, 1890-1925,” *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 1 (1991): 260–64, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2078100>.

¹⁸⁶ “Images of the First Ladies May 2-8, 1993, A. Introduction and History of Exhibit, Folder FL 1992 Media Files, boxes from Edith Mayo's office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files, 1.

As NMAH moved to a more critical approach, the curators in the Division of Political History wanted to integrate current scholarship into their work as well. Edith Mayo wanted to change the interpretation of the First Ladies,

In my opinion, the time has come to change the First Ladies presentation so that all First Lady gowns are not displayed simultaneously. We must remember, however, that the strengths of the collection- clothing, jewelry, accessories and White House period room furnishings – directed the present configuration of the hall and represent the collection's overwhelming bias toward the decorative arts. Changing the orientation of the exhibition from decorative arts to social history will not be an easy undertaking.¹⁸⁷

Including more of the First Ladies role outside of the role of White House hostess would be difficult since the collection did not focus on the women's political activity. The decorative arts focus of the collection helped to continue the traditional interpretation of the women in the home, changing that interpretation would require using other objects from the collection or collecting more objects that related to the political role of the First Ladies. Current scholarship influenced the curators' desire to tell new stories, but its impact on collections was much slower. Further, visitors were not necessarily privy to scholarship and many were unprepared for the change.

During this period, Smithsonian curators recognized themselves not only as following scholars, but also as producing scholarship. NMAH hosted a conference on women's representation in museums, in 1990, "Gender Perspectives: The Impact of Women on Museums," to discuss women's inclusion throughout museum exhibits, as a response to the turn toward social history.¹⁸⁸ This conference not only looked at how women were represented in museum collections and exhibitions, but also how

¹⁸⁷ Edith P. Mayo, Curator and Supervisor, Division of Political History, "Reconsideration of First Ladies Hall," September 11, 1986, Folder FLH Takedown, Drawer First Ladies Hall Exhibit File Cabinet, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

¹⁸⁸ Glaser and Zenetou eds., *Gender Perspectives*.

they were represented in staff. The lack of women in museum staff often contributed to the limitations on women in exhibits and collections. Women had struggled to gain their positions on museum staffs since they had been removed from them during the professionalization of the field of history and public history.

Women's place in museum work had changed drastically between 1912, when the exhibit started, and 1992. James and Hoes had worked as volunteers, in a time when white, upper class women rarely held jobs, using their social status as elite women to enter the curatorial field. Even though these women worked on this popular exhibit, they lacked a professional status in the museum. Women often started the societies and organizations that preserved our country's history, but then they were pushed out of them in the name of professionalization. Some women had risen to gain a professional status in museums, like Margaret Klapthor and Edith Mayo, but there were often few of them working in the field.¹⁸⁹ Even as women earned positions in museums, they often were kept out of positions of authority, giving them limited ability to direct the interpretation.¹⁹⁰

The First Ladies exhibit had been curated predominately by women, and the 1992 exhibition was no different. For the initial planning of First Ladies, the division hired an outside curator to conduct the research and write the script because Edith Mayo could not take on the project after she had just done *Parlor to Politics*. Karen Mittelman, a recent PhD was hired and she produced the first script for the show,

¹⁸⁹ When Edith Mayo started at the Smithsonian in the 1960s, there were only two women in the Political History division, Margaret Klapthor and Barbara Coffee. Edith Mayo, phone interview by author, Baltimore, Maryland, February 24, 2019.

¹⁹⁰ Taylor, "Pioneering Efforts of Early Museum Women," 11-27; Baldwin and Ackerson, *Women in the Museum*.

when she left, the division hired another contractor, Melinda Frye.¹⁹¹ Mayo came on the project during the last year of its development after both of the contractors had left. All three women were educated in relevant fields and well qualified for the positions that they held, but only Mayo had a formal staff position.¹⁹² She had difficulty moving into a position of authority because she only had a master's degree. Unlike any other museum, the curators at the Smithsonian are expected to have PhDs. It is almost impossible to move up without one even today. These extra qualifications for the Smithsonian limit the people who get curatorial jobs, and many who get the jobs have limited training in material culture and museums. Without a PhD, women had little access to the upper level positions in the Museum.

The rise of social history offered museum curators a unique opportunity to do research at the same time as their peers in academia. "There were so few people in the Museum that did anything with women's history ... So it opened up a niche for me that I had never thought about and benefited my career immensely. I got to know most of the major people in women's history and if they ever needed somebody from a museum to be on a panel they called me up."¹⁹³ Mayo had become a lead curator in the division of political history, but visitors often still addressed their letters "Dear

¹⁹¹ Karen Mittelman, "First Ladies: The Women and the Image," Exhibition Script, March 1990, Folder FL Script, boxes from Edith Mayo's office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files; Melinda Frye, "First Ladies: Society and Politics," Exhibition Script, Folder Frye Script, First Ladies Hall Exhibit Files, National Museum of American History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files.

¹⁹² Edith Mayo had gotten a master's degree in American Studies from George Washington University. "First Ladies: Political Role and Public Image Biographical Information," Images of the First Ladies May 2-8, 1993, A. Introduction and History of Exhibit, Folder FL 1992 Media Files, boxes from Edith Mayo's office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

¹⁹³ Edith Mayo, phone interview by author, Baltimore, Maryland, February 24, 2019.

Sir,” not recognizing the museum curators were women.¹⁹⁴ Even after all the gains of women in the museum field and their work in curating the First Ladies exhibit, women had still not gained the same respect as men.

As the museum’s role in society was changing and the available amount of scholarship on women was expanding, the new First Ladies exhibit could take advantage of that and display a broader interpretation of the First Ladies role instead of just the gowns. As the curators imagined a new version of the First Ladies exhibit, they had to determine in what direction that interpretation would go. These women had to be portrayed as individuals and activists in a role that they did not choose, their husband did.

The first proposal for the First Ladies exhibit was developed by Karen Mittelman. The reinterpretation “examines the First Ladies’ expanding role in American Society, highlighting both the public and private sides of their lives. It incorporates new scholarship in women’s history to suggest the ways that First Ladies serve as symbols of home, motherhood, and domestic values.”¹⁹⁵ This expanded interpretation required a complete overhaul of the First Ladies display. Curators would have to pull new and different objects to discuss the different themes brought out by the new exhibit. One could not have an inaugural ball gown and have the

¹⁹⁴ Letter to Smithsonian from Ruth Morley, April 23, 1993, Folder 1993, Drawer First Ladies Current, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor file cabinet; Letter to Smithsonian from Dorthy Kimball, August 19, 1992, Folder 1993, Drawer First Ladies Current, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor file cabinet; Letter to First Ladies’ Gowns from Miss Amy Bailey, March 23, 1987, Folder 1987, Drawer First Ladies Current, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor file cabinet; Letter to Sirs from Ms. Marcia Ritchie, December 20, 1986, Folder 1987, Drawer First Ladies Current, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor file cabinet; Letter to Smithsonian from Ann Bradley, June 15, 1993, Folder 1994, Drawer First Ladies Current, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor file cabinet.

¹⁹⁵ *First Ladies: The Women and the Image*, February 1989, Special Exhibition Fund proposal, Folder SEF Feb 1989, boxes from Edith Mayo’s office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

paired label discuss the political role of the First Lady as a hostess, or an advocate of social causes.¹⁹⁶ The objects and the topic discussed in the label had to align for the visitor to get the most out of the information presented. Without a clear alignment, the visitor will usually focus on the object and gain little of the other importance of the First Ladies role. This large-scale renovation required much more funding than a simple update.

Fundraising for the First Ladies

To reopen the First Ladies hall with the kind of reinterpretation that the new script suggested, the Smithsonian team needed to raise the funds required for the renovation and conservation of the gowns. To get the money for this new exhibit, the curators and the director of the Office of External Affairs, Marilyn Lyons, had to apply for congressional appropriations, appeal to private donors, and use other money-making endeavors to gain the funds necessary for the exhibit. Private donations proved to be the fastest route to funding the exhibition. Director Roger Kennedy told the press, “If we had to wait for a congressional appropriation and the Office of Management and Budget or to be fitted into the Smithsonian’s overall budget, it would take longer than I want to wait.”¹⁹⁷ To look for private sources of funding, the Smithsonian contacted many individual donors and companies.¹⁹⁸ The

¹⁹⁶ Memorandum from Karen Mittelman, First Ladies Exhibition Script, March 28, 1990, Folder FL Script, boxes from Edith Mayo’s office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

¹⁹⁷ Conroy, “Going, Going, Gown: First Ladies Exhibit May Travel to Dallas,” Aug 17, 1987.

¹⁹⁸ The Smithsonian used individual private donors to kick start the fundraising campaign. The Friends of the First Ladies and Les Dames raised a good bit of the initial donations. The Friends of the First Ladies raised \$121,300 and the Les Dames raised another \$152,000. But the Smithsonian also needed to contact corporations, like Lenox and Mary Kay. The Smithsonian capitalized on the popularity of the exhibit, telling corporations that they would be beloved by the American people if they brought this exhibit back on display. Letter to Mary Kay from Marilyn Lyons, May 22, 1989,

director considered using the First Ladies gowns to generate their own income, creating a traveling show to raise the funds necessary to renovate the hall. Visitors protested the idea of sending the gowns to any other city for exhibit. The First Ladies' gowns had become synonymous with the National Mall. The former curator, Margaret Klapthor thought the idea was "like prostituting the first ladies' gowns, sending them out on the street to raise money."¹⁹⁹ The gowns were seen as a national treasure that should be left in their place at the National Museum of American History.

Seeking private donations eliminated the need to send the gowns out to make money. Using private funds had other benefits for the Museum. By using private funds instead of congressional appropriations, the Smithsonian could control more than just the timeline for the reinstallation, but also the interpretation. When the Smithsonian receives federal funding, they are agreeing to a partnership, in which they have to abide by the goals of the Congressional Committee. Today the Smithsonian has received an appropriation for the Women's History Initiative. The congressional committee's goals for the initiative are

to provide funds to help develop a landmark exhibition to celebrate the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage in 2020, create print and digital resources such as books, documents, podcasts, and a website for a large and diverse audience, develop Washington, D.C.- based and traveling exhibitions, including a traveling exhibition of posters to reach hundreds of communities

Folder Fundraising First Ladies, Drawer First Ladies Hall Exhibit, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor file cabinet; Letter to Wanda from Marilyn Lyons, January 29, 1989, Folder Fundraising First Ladies, Drawer First Ladies Hall Exhibit, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor file cabinet; Memorandum from Marilyn Lyons to Roger Kennedy, Amount raised by Friends of the First Ladies, February 16, 1990, Folder Fundraising First Ladies, Drawer First Ladies Hall Exhibit, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor file cabinet; Letter from Lennox to Marilyn Lyons, December 15, 1989, Folder Fundraising for the First Ladies, Drawer First Ladies Hall Exhibit, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor file cabinet.

¹⁹⁹ Conroy, "Going, Going, Gown: First Ladies Exhibit May Travel to Dallas," Aug 17, 1987.

across the country, and launch a venture fund, to seed new projects and provide competitive grants for emerging topics in women's history across the Smithsonian.²⁰⁰

When the Smithsonian received funds for the initiative, whether they wanted to or not, they now had to create an exhibit for the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage. Their initial goal may have been to just create a women's history exhibition, but the congressional funds necessitated a suffrage exhibition. Receiving this funding came with certain restrictions. For the *First Ladies: Political Role, Public Image* exhibition, using private funds may have given the curators a little more freedom in determining the content of the exhibition.

A New Interpretation

The new interpretation of the First Ladies exhibit greatly differed from the exhibit that preceded it. No matter how many changes the curatorial team decided to make, they always had to keep the dresses at the center of the proposed show, as many of them as possible. Roger Kennedy wanted to be sure that the exhibit contained "every gown that can be left up. It should also include rotation of all those gowns that can be left up for some of the time. It should include, wherever possible, all presidentially-related female costumes, whether gowns or otherwise."²⁰¹ Kennedy especially wanted to see the gowns of Martha Washington or Mary Lincoln in the

²⁰⁰ "Smithsonian's American Women's History Initiative: Women's stories are the stories of our civilization," American Museum of Women's History Congressional Commission, 2019, accessed January 27, 2019, <http://amwh.us/smithsonians-american-womens-history-initiative/>.

²⁰¹ Letter from Roger Kennedy, First Ladies Gowns, May 17, 1990, Folder First Ladies Hall Reinstallation, Drawer First Ladies Hall Exhibit, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor file cabinet; Memorandum to Spencer Crew from Roger Kennedy, May 17, 1990, Folder First Ladies Copies, box from Edith Mayo's office, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor file cabinet.

exhibit at all times.²⁰² Kennedy knew that the public expected to see the gowns and wanted to be sure that while the new exhibit tried to change the way we looked at the First Ladies, it still centered on the gowns that could be displayed from each woman. While Mittelman was working on the initial script, Roger Kennedy wanted to include every gown, which did not fit Mittelman's vision for the exhibit.²⁰³

Mittelman's script gave background on the time period constraints felt by every woman and especially the First Ladies, as well as using the First Ladies own voices to discuss their role. Her script looked at the First Ladies role and the individual women, much more than a simple gown display.²⁰⁴ The script had a difficult organization, for the most part the script tried to go in chronological order for the First Ladies, focusing on the first two, Martha Washington and Abigail Adams as trend setters and then the women of the nineteenth century and then moving to the women of the twentieth century. This style was not conducive to the exhibit structure because each lady was given a large biography to discuss their multiple roles, but it was difficult to relate the First Ladies to each other, to see them performing similar roles.²⁰⁵

Melinda Frye's script followed a similar pattern to the Mittelman script. It was in chronological order, with a main label about women in the time, and then centering on the First Ladies. The labels discussed a facet of the First Ladies role, but there was

²⁰² Memo to Ann Golovin from Melinda Frye, September 21, 1990, Folder Polly Willman Cal Dresses, Drawer First Ladies Hall Exhibit, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor file cabinet.

²⁰³ Karen Mittelman, Phone interview by author, Baltimore, Maryland, February 27, 2019.

²⁰⁴ Karen Mittelman, *First Ladies: The Women and the Image*, Exhibition Script, March 1990, Folder FL Script, boxes from Edith Mayo's office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

²⁰⁵ Karen Mittelman, *First Ladies: The Women and The Image*, Exhibition Script, March 1990, Folder FL Script, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files from Edith Mayo's Office.

not always a specific First Lady that exemplified that facet described with every label that was written.²⁰⁶ While both Melinda Frye and Karen Mittelman wanted to convey the importance of these women, both of them struggled to grasp the whole of women's history in their scripts. Frye's script gave too little information about the women of the time and the First Ladies. Betty Sharpe, one of the editors for the script, commented, "the labels sound more like a cheerful society page. The voice behind the labels is not questioning, critical, or probing in any way."²⁰⁷ Frye's version did not make the First Ladies' comparison to the other women in their time clear. After three years of development, there was still no script for the exhibit, and only a little over a year till the exhibit was supposed to open.

One decision that Mittelman made while she was working on the exhibit was to stop including every First Lady. "A curatorial decision was made to represent only wives of the Presidents, and to exclude daughters, nieces, and other First Lady 'surrogates,' unless they played some important role in the White House."²⁰⁸ The curators removed the hostess from the Jefferson administration, the William Harrison administration, the Andrew Johnson administration, and the Chester Arthur administration because the women who acted as First Lady did not have an important role in the White House.

²⁰⁶ Melinda Frye, *First Ladies: Society and Politics*, Exhibition Script, Folder Frye Script, First Ladies Hall Exhibit Files, National Museum of American History, Fourth Floor Exhibit Files.

²⁰⁷ Memorandum to Ann Golovin from Betty Sharpe, Comments on the First Ladies Script, November 8, 1990, Folder First Ladies Script, box from Edith Mayo's office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files; Howard Morrison, Comments on the Script for First Ladies: Society and Politics, Folder FL Script, box from Edith Mayo's office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

²⁰⁸ Memorandum to Roger Kennedy from Karen Mittelman, December 11, 1989, box from Edith Mayo's office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

After the departure of Karen Mittelman and Melinda Frye, the museum administration decided to bring Edith Mayo onto the team for her expertise in women's history. There was still no usable script for the exhibit and the show was scheduled to open in 15 months. The tie to women's history in the Mittelman and Frye scripts were not as prominent as desired, so Edith Mayo suggested they throw out both scripts and start over.²⁰⁹

Mayo never thought that she would work on the First Ladies project because she was known for more "radical" history. She had done exhibits that focused on social history since the beginning of her career, with the *Right to Vote*, as her first exhibit and *Parlor to Politics*.²¹⁰ When Mayo came on the project, she had specific concerns and demands to take on the First Ladies project. Mayo wanted to maintain the publication rights to the *Parlor to Politics* exhibit that she had just finished, an assistant, and a promotion.²¹¹ Mayo wanted to receive a higher grade outside of the traditional promotion requirements. Mayo still needed to complete some publications to receive her promotion, but she had also worked to install a major exhibit and the deinstallation of two others. Mayo had no prior knowledge about the First Ladies, because her specialty was women's history. So, she picked a team to help her finish the exhibit. The team turned out to be almost all women. Because she was not as familiar with the collection, Mayo used people who were, the collections manager,

²⁰⁹ Handwritten notes, Folder First Ladies outlines, box from Edith Mayo's Office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files; Edith Mayo, phone interview by author, Baltimore, Maryland, February 24, 2019.

²¹⁰ Edith Mayo, phone interview by author, Baltimore, Maryland, February 24, 2019.

²¹¹ Memorandum to Anne Golvin and Spencer Crew from Edith Mayo, Folder First Ladies outlines, boxes from Edith Mayo's office, National Museum of American History, Division of Political History, Fourth Floor. Mayo brought on a recent college graduate and her former intern, Denise Meringolo, to serve as her project assistant.

Barbara Coffey, and an assistant curator, Kate Henderson. These women and the project assistant did most of the research for the exhibit in only fifteen months.

Edith Mayo wanted “to use this collection of association items to examine the contributions of women both as an historical group, and to highlight the contributions of these women as individuals.”²¹² The reinterpretation divided the exhibit into three major sections, the First Ladies’ political role, the gowns, and the public image of the first lady. The first section of the exhibit focused on the different roles of the First Ladies from hostess to social advocate, exploring how the First Ladies have turned a social role into a political position. The second section brought in the gowns and the conservation of them. The final section would look at the public’s fascination with the first lady, and how she managed her image. Mayo’s script combined women from different time periods, but all performing the same role. This new script brought the roles of the First Lady through time to show the changes.

Mayo and her team made some choices about the exhibit out of necessity. The glass for the gown cases was incredibly expensive, almost \$10,000 per sheet of glass. So, the exhibit needed to reduce the number of cases in the exhibit to reduce the cost of the exhibit. The decision was made to have two cases, one for the nineteenth century and one for the twentieth century.²¹³ Reducing the number of cases also made it easier to monitor the temperature, humidity, and light that was in the case and on the gowns. All the gowns would now be kept in the same controlled space. Mayo got the inspiration for the first section of the exhibit, the different roles of the First Lady:

²¹² “Images of the First Ladies May 2-8, 1993,” A. Introduction and History of Exhibit, Folder FL 1992 Media Files, boxes from Edith Mayo’s office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files, 5.

²¹³ Edith Mayo, phone interview by author, Baltimore, Maryland, February 24, 2019.

hostess, social partner, diplomat, ect. from a biography on Nancy Regan. The biography displayed her with her husband in very limited actions on behalf of her husband's administration.²¹⁴ But to Mayo, if these roles were politicized as part of the First Lady's job in support of the administration, then the importance of these women would be more apparent. This inspiration and necessary compromise made the structure of the exhibit into the three parts.

After the curators made decisions about the new interpretation, they had to defend their choices against critics who thought the exhibit might be revisionist. The culture wars, of the 1990s, had created a battle over the interpretation of history. The left had embraced the new field of social history, while the right wanted to maintain the traditional top down approach to history. The new discoveries of social history brought into question the validity of the field. This new branch of historical study divided historians into those that studied history from the bottom up and those that looked from the top down. This major division in the field of history called into question the objectivity of the field, who was representing the truth, both could not possibly be right.²¹⁵ If history was supposed to be completely objective, so that we could find the truth of the past, then there could not be two versions. With this split, historians and the public began to question if history was being controlled by political parties, something else that they could fight over in the culture wars. How could anyone know what was true, if each side had their own version of events?

With a debate over what was the truth, the term "revisionist" developed a negative connotation. Revisionists were changing history, altering the narrative. As

²¹⁴ Edith Mayo, phone interview by author, Baltimore, Maryland, February 24, 2019.

²¹⁵ Andrew Hartman, *A War For the Soul of America*, 253-284.

the First Ladies exhibit was about to open, the culture wars started to creep into museums. In 1991, the National Museum of American Art (NMAA) opened *The West as America*, a highly controversial exhibit. This exhibit displayed images of the west, with labels that critiqued the popular history of westward expansion, emphasizing the violence and racism that shaped America.²¹⁶ This exhibit was deemed revisionist by the critics who disliked its effort to change the popular narrative of expansion. After the controversy of *The West is America*, the administration of the Smithsonian feared increasing tensions with their exhibits. But the curators still wanted to include social history, “for Smithsonian curators to do this- to look for new and different stories from the past – is a risky undertaking in today’s contentious cultural climate. New research and new thinking is, after all, revision. Already burned by the culture wars, the entire institution may be advised to let things be.”²¹⁷

Since the new exhibit had a new focus on the First Ladies role and their public image, Secretary Adams worried that the new exhibit could be seen as revisionist. He asked Tom Freudenheim to review the script to make sure that it was not revisionist. “At your request, I have reviewed the manuscript on the new First Ladies exhibit at American History. The various kinds of issues that are presented are really interesting, and I found nothing there that could really be accused of being

²¹⁶ Roger Stein, “Visualizing Conflict in *The West as America*,” *The Public Historian* 14, no. 3 (Summer 1992) accessed March 14, 2019, 85-91. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3378233>. “The West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920/The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting, C. 1830-1865.” *The Annals of Iowa* 52 (1993), 92-95. <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.11043>.

²¹⁷ Polly Willman, “Inside the Smithsonian: New Views on First Lady’s Gowns,” 1988, Drawer First Ladies Hall Exhibit, National Museum of American History, Political History, Fourth Floor file cabinet.

revisionist.”²¹⁸ As a national museum, the NMAH needed to make sure that their exhibitions remained above suspicion during the culture wars. Since the Smithsonian was a government entity, they could not be seen to take sides in the history debates. The Smithsonian came under scrutiny two years after the opening of the First Ladies exhibit when the National Air and Space Museum tried to open their Enola Gay exhibit.

The National Air and Space Museum (NASM) was another museum that was criticized for its commemorative artifacts rather than placing the artifacts in historical context. But the “commemorative respect” around sensitive objects of war are expected to dominate, much like the public expected to see the gowns of the First Ladies without the reading involved.²¹⁹ The Enola Gay exhibit offered a new interpretation of the dropping of the atom bomb. This new interpretation was spearheaded by the new museum curators, who knew the planes importance and wanted to do something with it. The exhibit they planned would have examined the ethics of bombing and the impact that the bomb had on the Japanese. The NMAH tried to incorporate current scholarship into their exhibit just like many other exhibits of the time.

The Opening of the First Ladies Exhibit

Five years in the making, the exhibit replaces the old First Ladies Hall, which although wildly popular was little more than prattle and a parade of Inaugural Ball gowns. Many of the gowns and gewgaws are back, and if you liked them before, they’ll wow you now. But the chatty text is long gone, blown away by the winds of social change and, specifically, by the trenchant revisionism of

²¹⁸ Memorandum from Tom Freudenheim to Secretary Adams, February 28, 1992, Folder SI Review of FL Exhibit, box from Edith Mayo’s office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

²¹⁹ Linenthal, *History Wars*, 20

curator, Edith Mayo. Which it not to say that the exhibit has a feminist slant. It just seems a little strange at first because it's so straightforward that it sharply contrasts with the way our institutions usually portray the parts women play in our national affairs.²²⁰

The *First Ladies: Political Role and Public Image* opened in March of 1992.

With twenty-one garments in the exhibit and seven from the most recent First Ladies in the *Ceremonial Court* exhibit next door, the exhibit had nearly thirty gowns in the exhibit. But the purpose of the exhibit was to expand upon the political and social role of the first lady, so the gowns took up a comparatively smaller part of the almost 8,000 square foot display.²²¹ Since only one third of the exhibit focused on the gowns, the new exhibit added a lot of text about the other presidential related artifacts and photographs that were on display. The new layout and labels got mixed reviews from the visitors, who had been waiting impatiently, asking at the information desks, hassling the docents, and even calling the curators, for the exhibit to come back on view.²²²

Many visitors were pleased with the expanded information on “the political side of the First Lady” or the “characteristics of First Ladies.”²²³ The expanded amount of information was a great improvement for some, allowing them to get to

²²⁰ Hank Burchard, “First Rate, ‘First Ladies,’” *The Washington Post*, April 3, 1992, Folder FL 1992 Media Materials, box from Edith Mayo’s office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

²²¹ *First Ladies: Political Role, and Public Image*, Folder FL 1992 Media Materials, box from Edith Mayo’s office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files; Map of *First Ladies: Political Role and Public Image* Exhibit, Folder Fundraising First Ladies, Drawer First Ladies Hall Exhibit, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

²²² Paula Span, “Return of the Gowns,” March 1, 1992, Folder FL 1992 Media Files, boxes from Edith Mayo’s office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

²²³ Visitor Survey, May 1993, box from Mayo’s office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

know the many First Ladies of our country. One visitor even wrote to the Secretary of the Smithsonian,

I visited the National Museum of American History last October, and I was very excited by the changes that have been made in the First Ladies exhibit since the last time I was there several years ago. What an improvement! I think the exhibit's categories make it so much easier to see the real significance of the various First Ladies' activities, and the new items you've added to the exhibit add further to the meaning.²²⁴

Ms. Lisbeth Maxwell was pleased with the exhibit, but no matter how pleased she was, she still missed seeing the dresses. While the exhibit's new interpretation filled a hole in the knowledge of the First Ladies, people still came for the dresses.

Visitors had come to expect a gown exhibit. In 1993, the Smithsonian conducted a survey of the visitors to the exhibit. Approximately fifty percent of the visitors expected to see the gowns on display.²²⁵ One set of visitors "thought [they were] in [the] wrong exhibit because they did not see the dresses at the beginning like the old exhibit."²²⁶ The First Ladies exhibit had been so iconic at the museum that visitors expected to see the exhibit organized in a similar fashion. To some visitors, the first part of the exhibit was a nuisance. Visitors were "Rushing through to see gowns – The first part, meaning Political Roles – was seen more as an obstacle – But

²²⁴ Letter to Secretary McAdams from Lisbeth Maxwell, June 15, 1994, boxes from Edith Mayo's office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files. Visitors took the time to say that they "like[d] the way it is set up now but has been here 2x's before this," or "thought it was marvelous, said we [the curators] are doing a great job here." The exhibit succeeded in giving visitors more to think about. Visitor Survey, May 1993, box from Mayo's office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

²²⁵ Thirty-six visitors were surveyed. There were eleven of the thirty-six that specifically said they expected the gowns to be in the display, but twenty-eight of the thirty-six had heard of the exhibit before they visited the exhibit. After seeing the exhibit, twelve of the thirty-six thought the best part of the exhibit were the gowns. Visitors who had never been to the exhibit before had at least heard of it, and a number of them expected to see a gown exhibit. Visitor Survey, May 1993, box from Mayo's office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

²²⁶ Visitor Survey, May 1993, box from Mayo's office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

they liked the ‘cameo wall.’”²²⁷ The part of the exhibit that focused on interpreting the First Ladies role and the individual women was seen as something to be bypassed for the gowns.²²⁸ People often sped through the interpretive section of the exhibit to get to the gowns. Visitors had strong opinions about how the exhibit should look. The exhibits large amount of interpretation turned many visitors away. Visitors thought the exhibit was “Too much reading in front area – did not know who all these people are.”²²⁹ Even though this exhibit was completely different from the old one, many visitors went in with the expectation that it would be similar, since the old exhibit had been up in the museum since its opening and had been one of the most popular exhibits.

Some visitors outright objected to the new interpretation,

your institution is very obviously ‘politically correct.’ Your strong emphasis on the ‘new understanding’ of the Presidents’ wives so obviously promotes the feminist agenda that is offensive. To have a quote like you include about poor Mrs. Washington being confined and being obstinate by staying home and poor Abigail Adams talking about male tyrants are really a discredit to your museum.²³⁰

This visitor wanted the exhibit to have a different approach to the First Ladies. To them, the exhibit felt driven by a feminist voice that overpowered the exhibit. This exhibits lengthy display and popularity created an interpretive nostalgia that made visitors crave the outdated exhibit over the new interpretation.

²²⁷ Visitor Survey, May 1993, box from Mayo’s office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

²²⁸ Visitor Survey, May 1993, box from Mayo’s office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

²²⁹ Visitor Survey, May 1993, box from Mayo’s office, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

²³⁰ Letter to the Smithsonian from Ann Bradley, June 15, 1994, Folder 1994, Drawer First Ladies Current, National Museum of American History, Political History, fourth floor exhibit files.

No matter how much the Smithsonian wanted to change their display, to offer the public more, the public pushed back in equal measure. Whether they desired the old display because of the nostalgia of seeing it in their youth or hearing about it without ever going, or reeling from the changes in historical thought brought on by the culture wars, visitors were brought to the exhibit to see the gowns, to some the expanded information was a bonus to the gowns and to others it was an impediment or offensive to them. Edith Mayo could not have predicted how visitors would react to her exhibit, because nothing like it had been done before with such a popular exhibit. While women had gained new political rights since the founding the nation and women had achieved a place in the public sphere, visitors still wanted the old display because they had grown accustomed to it. And after the fall out from the Enola Gay exhibit two years later, the Smithsonian would take a step back from its provocative exhibits to regroup. Visitors expectations had just as much of an impact on exhibits as the curators in the midst of the culture wars.

Conclusion

“In 2017, an exhibit about the first ladies should put more emphasis on the real contributions that these women made to their country.”²³¹

While the First Ladies exhibit has broken barriers giving women a prominent exhibition on the National Mall and allowing women a space in curation, it has struggled to advance beyond an exhibition of gowns. The gowns have been the central focus for so long that visitors expect to see them. Even today, the First Ladies Exhibit displays mostly dresses and china from the presidential administrations. It still does not say much about the individual women that held this important position. James and Hoes’, the first curators, exhibit started a trend of displaying these gowns, as the centerpiece of the exhibit with little supplemental interpretation, which was continued by Margaret Klapthor.

While Edith Mayo, the curator in the 1990s, tried to expand the interpretation of these gowns to include more about the women who wore them, she still had to give the gowns a prominent space.

And the exhibit today does much the same, it is first and foremost a gown exhibit with a slight amount of interpretation.



Figure 5

²³¹ Natalie Prieb, “‘The First Ladies’ exhibit should showcase more than gowns.” *The GW Hatchet*, April 6, 2017. <https://www.gwhatchet.com/2017/04/06/the-first-ladies-exhibit-should-showcase-more-than-gowns/>.



Figure 6

The First Ladies exhibit is still curated by a woman, Lisa Kathleen Graddy, but the First Ladies are defined mostly by their fashion choices and their role as hostess. While many of the First Ladies are

represented in the exhibit, most of the

labels describe the gown and what it was made of, with little interpretation about the individual women themselves. This focus on the gown is very similar to the display in the 1950s. The label for Eleanor Roosevelt states, “A frequent traveler, Eleanor Roosevelt preferred simple outfits that could be worn with a variety of blouses and accessories. Understanding that ‘busy people like to buy their clothing ready made,’ the first lady promoted ready-to-wear clothing but cautioned against buying goods made in sweatshops.”²³² Eleanor Roosevelt’s label only addresses a small part of the work she did, and it centers on the work she did with clothing. Using the dress as the avenue into these women limits the types of information that can be given about these powerful women and restricts the display to a



Figure 7

gown exhibit. Due to the nature of the display, the information on the label has to be

²³² Exhibit label for Eleanor Roosevelt, *First Ladies* Exhibit, National Museum of American History.

limited. There are only four First Ladies who are interpreted in the period room style, so that they have slightly more interpretation about their changing policies.²³³ The power of these women is reduced to just a few sentences. Even the recent First Ladies, like Michelle Obama, have some description of their time in office but even she is reduced to seventy-eight words about the four programs that she spearheaded.²³⁴ With the popularity of women's history and the feminist movement, many visitors want more about these unique women. "It's not right that the exhibit provides little information about who these women were beyond their stylistic preferences in fashion and china sets... I definitely left thinking about how 'The First Ladies' hasn't really changed since I first saw it when I was 11 years old."²³⁵ While this exhibit is beloved; many visitors are starting to question what this exhibit is



Figure 8

saying and desire a more comprehensive look at the First Ladies.

Visitors have to be prepared for the changes in the museum interpretation, in 1992, some of the public loved the new information about

²³³ Exhibit labels four period rooms, Edith Roosevelt, Dolley Madison, Mary Todd Lincoln, Lady Bird Johnson, *First Ladies* Exhibit, National Museum of American History.

²³⁴ Exhibit label for Michelle Obama, *First Ladies* Exhibit, National Museum of American History.

²³⁵ Natalie Prieb, "'The First Ladies' exhibit should showcase more than gowns." *The GW Hatchet*, April 6, 2017. <https://www.gwhatchet.com/2017/04/06/the-first-ladies-exhibit-should-showcase-more-than-gowns/>; Deborah Dietsch, "'First Ladies' returns to Smithsonian," *The Washington Times*, November 24, 2011. https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/nov/24/first-ladies-returns-to-smithsonian/?utm_source=GOOGLE&utm_medium=cpc&utm_id=chacka&utm_campaign=TWT+-+DSA&gclid=Cj0KCQiAzKnjBRDPARIsAKxfTRDymIOKuLaM83lu7n4wncjL_5kfYnNxtDQ2lpJ6pdTHN1NaH0CiM7gaAi8ZEALw_wcB.

the First Ladies, but some wanted to see the gowns that they had grown accustomed to. The response to the exhibit was divided because of the interpretive nostalgia that surrounds this exhibit's display. The curators maintained a similar display for so long that the public came to expect it. Those that had no expectations for the exhibit loved the information about the women themselves.

Since the 1992 exhibition, the First Ladies exhibit appears to have taken a step back from interpreting these individual women, instead interpreting their gowns and china. Reverting back to the simple labels from the 1914 or 1955 exhibit. After the fall out from the culture wars, the Smithsonian backed away from more interpretive approaches in their exhibits. The Smithsonian curators need to please a lot of people with their exhibits, the new version may have seemed a safer option to the Museum staff. Nothing in the exhibit rocks the boat. But is a museum's role to play it safe and make its visitors happy, or is it a place to ask difficult questions and educate those visitors?

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