



Fashioning a Legacy

Helen Geier Flynt and Historic Deerfield's Fashion and Textile Collection

*H*ELEN GEIER FLYNT (1895–1986) helped create one of the country's best collections of 18th and early 19th-century American and European textiles and fashion. What began as an effort to furnish historic houses with domestic textiles quickly grew to include important English, European, and American examples in the arts of embroidery, weaving, dressmaking and tailoring. The results of her efforts culminated in her lifetime with the opening of Fabric Hall in 1965, what we know today as the Helen Geier Flynt Textile Gallery. The pioneering path blazed by both Helen and her husband, Henry N. Flynt (1893–1970), created the core of today's fashion and textile collection. Over the last several decades, museum staff have grown and refined its holdings in this area, which today number more than 8,000 objects. Through an examination of Helen and the masterpieces she assembled, we can get not only a clearer understanding of the museum's important collection, but also a better understanding of her role in 20th-century museum studies.

by David E. Lazaro, Associate Curator of Textiles

Early Life · Helen Margaret Geier was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1895, one of three children born to Amanda Virginia Mayer (1866–1898) and Frederick A. Geier (b. 1867), the son of German immigrants.¹ Her mother died in 1898, and in 1903 Frederick married Juliet I. Esselborn (1875–1959). In 1889, her father had started an extremely successful machine tool manufacturing company known as Cincinnati Milling Machine Company (later operating as Cincinnati Milacron), allowing the family to live comfortably. It was the success of the company that helped provide a good deal of the resources for Helen and her husband to develop the museum that became Historic Deerfield.

In 1914, Helen enrolled at Vassar College. While visiting her older brother Frederick at Williams College, she met and fell in love with his roommate, Henry Needham Flynt. The pair soon began dating. In 1918, Helen graduated with a degree in languages. Henry served in the Army during World War I, then attended law school at Columbia University in New York City. After the couple married on June 5, 1920, they briefly lived in Brooklyn. As Henry's profession as a



as the Heritage Foundation in 1952, taking the name from Deerfield Academy's motto "Be Worthy of your Heritage." It wasn't long before they acquired more houses along The Street, renovating them with the help of local builder Bill Gass (1902–1986), into the 1950s and 1960s.

Fabricating Furnishings: The House Museums · Historic house museums naturally required domestic and decorative arts with which to furnish them. Collecting textiles to fulfill that aim became Helen's focus. The first 28 textile items recorded in Helen Flynt's accession book were quilts and coverlets, acquired from a range of sources. Woven masterpieces like a turn-of-the-19th-century paste work printed cotton quilt in dramatic dark blue set the tone for the iconic nature of many items making up this section of the museum's holdings. Because documented, local 18th and early 19th-century textiles survive in far fewer numbers than do objects like furniture, made from more durable media such as wood, the Flynts recognized that representative, historic examples of the fashion and textile arts could act as stand-ins where actual examples owned by local residents were lacking.

But the Flynts were able to procure domestic textiles with local histories of ownership to Deerfield and its inhabitants. One example is a spectacular, partial set of bed hangings attributed to Esther Meacham Strong (1725–1793) of Coventry, Connecticut, the daughter of the Reverend Joseph Meacham and Esther Williams, who herself was a daughter of famed Deerfield minister, John Williams. Their acquisition underscores the efforts and interest of both Henry and Helen in collecting for all aspects of the museum, and founding curator Joseph Peter Spang III notes that Mr. Flynt in particular was pleased with the Meacham bed hangings, having

4. Whole cloth quilt, pastework (resist) indigo dyed plain weave cotton face, possibly printed in Rouen, France, c. 1800. As the museum's first textile accession recorded by Helen Flynt, this quilt was numbered "F.001," denoting the first "Fabric" item. Purchased from New England dealer Winsor White in 1949.

5. Bed curtain, polychrome two-ply wool (crewel) embroidery, white plain weave linen ground. Made by Esther Meacham Strong (1725–1793), Coventry, CT, c. 1760, F.058.

6. Bed hangings, blue linen embroidery, white plain weave linen ground. Made c. 1900 by Deerfield Society of Blue and White Needlework. 69.1201–69.1207.

7. Northwest bed chamber of the Allen House, Deerfield. Designed by Helen Flynt, the room is an inspired amalgamation of influences that reference 18th-century New England bed chambers.

8. *The First, Second and Last Scene of Mortality*, 1776–1783, polychrome silk embroidery, plain weave silk ground, ink. Made by Prudence Punderson (1758–1784) of Preston, CT. Courtesy of The Connecticut Historical Society, Gift of Newton C. Brainard, 1962.28.4. Punderson's pictorial needlework inspired the curtains designed by Helen Flynt for the northwest bed chamber of the Allen House.

convinced none other than Colonial Williamsburg to sell the part of this set they already owned, to make Deerfield's more complete.

As she built the collection, Mrs. Flynt also looked beyond the 18th century. She recognized the importance and beauty of the early 20th-century Deerfield Society of Blue and White Needlework (1896–1926), perhaps influenced in part by her relationship with Margery Howe (1902–1997). Howe had befriended one of the Society's founders, Margaret Whiting (1860–1946), and Whiting's friend, Gertrude Cochrane Smith (1875–1956), an accomplished creator of netted bed testers in the early 20th century.

As the Flynts furnished more houses with museum quality artifacts, Helen played an active role in their display, honing her skill at and interest in arranging the rooms within several Deerfield house museums, especially those that interpreted textiles. This is perhaps best seen today in the north bedchamber of the Allen House, the home of the Flynts when in residence in Deerfield several weeks out of the year. The elaborate window curtains in particular encapsulate a combined inspiration from several sources—the personal (her favorite color was red), the historical (18th-century red and yellow shot silk twill fabric purchased in France are layered over linen curtains), and the documentary (Prudence Punderson's needlework picture).³ The resulting arrangement of needlework and textiles seen in this and other installations undertaken by the Flynts reveals a multi-layered approach that spanned across different periods within one house, or even within one room, a notable characteristic of the mid-20th-century historic house movement.

Fashioning a Wardrobe · Mrs. Flynt, more than many of her contemporaries, passionately collected examples of historic fashion from the 18th century. She worked with dealers both in the northeast United States as well as those abroad to collect whole, intact garments that she recognized had a beauty and importance to 20th-century audiences as pieces of fashion art in and of themselves. She aggressively pursued sartorial masterpieces worn by men, women, and children, with the three highest years of clothing purchases occurring in 1956, 1957, and 1964. Many of the 18th-century pieces she acquired served as high style English or European examples of more humble garments worn by Connecticut River Valley inhabitants.

As in their pursuit of domestic textiles, the Flynts also collected clothing with local connections. Some of the best items acquired were, in fact, donations. The waistcoat owned by Deerfield's William Stoddard Williams (1762–1829) on the occasion of his 1786 marriage to Mary Hoyt (1762–1821) is one such example. A rare survival donated by Miss Elizabeth Fuller, the waistcoat provides concrete evidence for the real, if limited, ownership of expensive patterned silks (probably

English) in the wardrobes of Connecticut River Valley inhabitants.

Displaying a Legacy · Assemblage of this rich mix of locally owned and representative fashion and textile items presented opportunities and challenges for Helen's passion. Clearly, bed chambers and parlors were one of the best venues to display domestic textiles such as bed hangings and needlework. But how best to display clothing? An early attempt at a vignette to display the clothing trades and its products was made with the Sewing Room, located in the Sheldon House. Inspired by a museum vignette they saw while traveling in France, the shop was located in the south kitchen of the Sheldon House. The cramped confines, however, combined with the fact that the dressed mannequins representing dressmakers or seamstresses were wearing rarified brocaded silk gowns, made for an awkward presentation.

On June 4, 1965, having far exceeded the display capacity of the historic houses for showcasing clothing, needlework, and domestic textiles, the museum unveiled its new Fabric Hall. Housed in a renovated 1870s barn behind the Silver Museum, a building dedicated to her husband's passion, the barn surprised visitors with a significant investment in her particular collecting focus. The gallery was outfitted with innovative ambient lighting, air conditioning, and radiant floor heat, reflecting an early awareness of the damage the environment could have on these fragile items.⁴

Fabric Hall provided a display space for clothing and textiles without having to adjust to the interpretive confines of a Connecticut River Valley house museum. Building on rooms she furnished in the houses, Fabric Hall's concept provided Helen with a free reign to display a range of items, including more exotic and opulent textiles, without regard for local connections or domestic settings. Instead, various historic fashions and textiles demonstrating an aesthetic or technical excellence were layered with objects in other media for a visually complex decorative effect. The resulting efforts suggested the past to visitors and scholars, while appealing to 20th-century audiences.⁵

Initially in the museum's history, clothing was displayed on mannequins obtained from nearby Greenfield, Massachusetts, department store, Wilson's. In order to more properly display the clothing on view, Mrs. Flynt enlisted the help of leading mannequin manufacturer Mary Brosnan (1909–1999), based in Long Island City, Queens. Brosnan manufactured high quality, life-like mannequins for leading department store window displays, and had previously worked on display mannequins for the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Between 1957 and 1971 (with most purchased in 1967 and 1971), Brosnan created and sourced mannequins for Mrs. Flynt that conformed to the correct 18th-century posture for men and women, which at the time would have been

aided by the use of stays or corsets for the proper stance. Purchased at a considerable expense, the \$150 cost per mannequin equals about \$900 in today's currency. Nevertheless, Mrs. Flynt recognized that fashionably cut clothes required equally fashionably shaped bodies to best present them to museum audiences.

Fashioning a Past · Together, the Flynts represent one of the few husband and wife teams who jointly assembled one of the premier 20th-century American museums of history and decorative arts. Mrs. Flynt's own participation mirrored that of other independent women at this time, including collectors, scholars, and tastemakers such as Electra Havemeyer Webb, Katharine Prentiss Murphy, and Margery Burnham Howe. Mrs. Flynt's workspace, on the north side of the Fabric Hall ell, was a female-occupied space where volunteers and staff cleaned, repaired, and mounted textiles and clothing for display. Despite these achievements, and as was typical for the period, her accomplishments were rarely singled out apart from those of her husband. She was, however, recognized by the Newport Preservation Society in 1954 for her efforts.

Insights into Helen Flynt come from other sources, including her own clothing. In the fall of 2014, Bartels Curatorial Intern, Kayla Diggins, began cataloguing the clothing owned and worn by Helen Flynt when she was in residence in Deerfield. The garments, ranging from day suits to cocktail and evening dresses, mirror the complexity of their owner. Mrs. Flynt's day suits, all worn with skirts, suggest a uniform for her daily work in the village. Her more formal dresses and gowns reveal the patronage of both ready-to-wear (Adele Simpson, Jo Copeland for Pattullo) and custom designers, mostly purchased from Frederick's, the exclusive dress shop

9. Sleeved waistcoat, green-blue figured silk, mid-18th century.

Worn by William Stoddard Williams (1762–1829) at the time of his marriage to Mary Hoyt (1762–1821) in 1786. Gift of Miss Elizabeth Fuller, F.080.1.

10. "Sewing Room," an early vignette for the display of the clothing and textile arts, located in the Sheldon House south kitchen, about 1960.

11. Fabric Hall opened to the public on June 4, 1965, in a renovated 1870s barn at the north end of The Street. The gallery gave space to display more elaborate clothing and textiles in the museum's holdings than could otherwise be properly shown in the historic houses.

12. Helen Flynt was involved in many aspects of repairing and displaying clothing at the museum. Her notes record garment measurements for the construction of specific 18th-century mannequins commissioned from mannequin manufacturer Mary Brosnan (1909–1999).

13. Evening gown, yellow-green polyester chiffon, by Barbara Costume Company (active 1920s through c.1955), early 1950s. Helen Flynt favored bold colors and simple, flattering silhouettes in her wardrobe. 2014.803.11.

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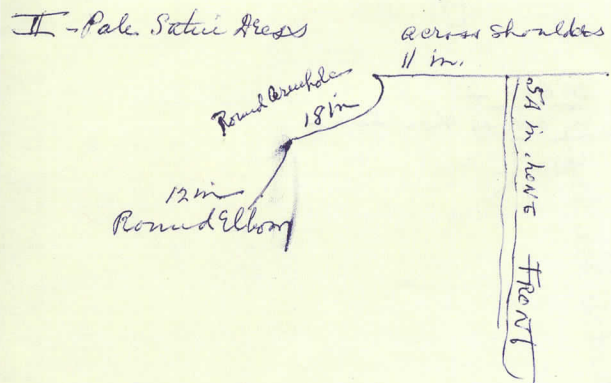
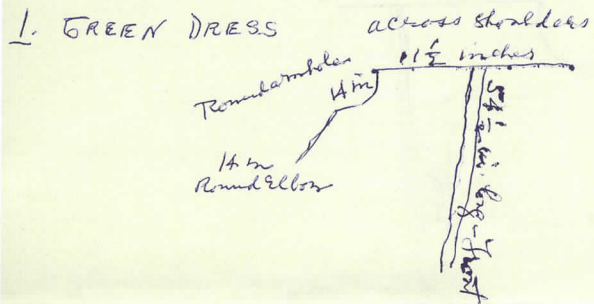
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Mrs. Henry N. Flynt

547 North Street, Greenwich, Conn. 06832





14. Embroidered sampler, polychrome silk embroidery, plain weave linen ground. Made by Olive Eldredge (1812-1887) of Ashfield, MA, c. 1827. Wrought by Eldredge under the tutelage of M.D. Williams. The named instructor suggests one source for the "White Dove" motif wrought in Franklin County academies between about 1791 and 1832. Museum Collections Fund, 2003.48.1.

15. Helen Flynt as Trustee and Vice President of the newly named Historic Deerfield (formerly Heritage Foundation), 1972.

16. Pictorial coat of arms, watercolor, gouache, gold leaf, silver leaf, wove paper. Wrought by Mary Rogers (1794-1837) of Norwich, CT, while attending the Misses Pattens' school (active c.1785-c.1825) in Hartford, c. 1810. John W. and Christiana G.P. Batdorf Fund, 2008.27.

17. Woman's jacket, glazed, polychrome block printed and hand painted, plain weave cotton, white plain weave cotton lining, drawstring, English, c. 1800. Museum Collections Fund, 2012.1.



located in Spring Lake, New Jersey, near the couple's summer home.⁶ Her hats (part of any well-dressed woman's wardrobe of the period) were made by Mr. John, Sally Milgrim, Best & Co. and Bloomingdale's, among others. All Helen's garments reveal her preference for bold, solid colors, and simple, uncluttered silhouettes.

After Henry's death in 1970, Helen continued her leadership at the museum as Trustee and Vice President, supporting founding curator Joseph Peter Spang III's initiative, with the Board of Trustees, to change the institution's name from Heritage Foundation to Historic Deerfield in 1971. In 1973, failing health prevented Helen from attending her 55th Vassar class reunion.⁷ Sadly, her health continued to decline, culminating in a September 1974 stroke that prevented her return to the place she had loved so dearly. She eventually passed away on April 10, 1986, having created the core of the fashion and textile collection.

Fashioning a 21st-Century Legacy · Today's collecting builds upon the masterpieces assembled by the Flynts and subsequent staff members. Its cornerstone, the Helen Geier Flynt Textile Gallery, reflects the spirit of its namesake, highlighting stellar New England examples and select English and European examples of the weaving, embroidered, and sartorial arts of the 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries.

The museum continues to refine and grow its collection of domestic textiles. While the Flynts had collected glazed, whole cloth wool quilts for the houses, one connected to Hadassah Chapin Ely (1767–1808) of West Springfield, Massachusetts, is the first acquisition with a local history of creation and/or ownership. One of the most significant areas of growth for the collection has been in the realm of schoolgirl art. Over the last three decades, in particular, the museum has deepened its holdings of pictorial needlework, embroidered samplers, and watercolors made by girls attending various academies in the Connecticut River Valley during the genre's heyday in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Examples like the sampler made by Olive Eldredge (1812–1887) in the 1820s, adds significantly to our knowledge of Franklin County needlework through its partial identification of at least one teacher of the so-called White Dove needlework. Grander, more urban examples of schoolgirl art from the Valley have also been added, such as a watercolor and gilt coat of arms wrought by Mary Ingraham Rogers (1794–1837) while a student at the Mrs. Patten's school in Hartford, Connecticut.

The museum has enriched its fashion holdings, filling in gaps where they existed while also expanding our definition of what makes a masterpiece. The recent



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18. Whole cloth quilt, glazed, blue twill weave wool (shalloon) face, 1775–1800. Owned by Hadassah Chapin Ely (1767–1808) of West Springfield, MA. Hall and Kate Peterson Fund for Minor Antiques, 2009.4.

19. Hoop skirt, spring steel, white cotton tape, made by the Odessa Skirt Company, Gloucester, MA, 1867–1869. Gift of Kevin L. Jones, 2011.26.

20. Patent for a hoop skirt, paper, ink, silk ribbon, May 22, 1866. Mr. and Mrs. Hugh B. Vanderbilt Fund for Curatorial Acquisitions, 2001.10.4.

acquisition of a woman's English block printed and hand painted glazed cotton jacket, dating to the turn of the 19th century, represents more typical day wear styles found in Valley women's wardrobes of the period, but which rarely survive today. We have also looked to the intersection of technology with the fashion arts through a rare pairing of a hoop skirt with its patent created by Amherst, Massachusetts, resident Anna Bardwell (1827-c.1900).

Conclusion · The 50th anniversary of the Helen Geier Flynt Textile Gallery presents an opportunity for reflection on not just the collection, but also its founder. As a 20th-century woman of means with a strong passion for American decorative arts, Helen Flynt assembled a collection that today stands as a testament to her life's larger work creating Historic Deerfield with her husband. The core importance of the fashion and textiles at the museum reflects her interests and opportunities, her growth in the field, and her innate eye of what made something both beautiful and an artistic achievement to be appreciated by future generations. We have been fortunate to continue that legacy where possible, especially through the generosity of donors, allowing us to add to existing strengths while continuing to collect examples of local and regional tastes. The first 50 years of official recognition for this part of the collection has been eye-catching and informative, and we look forward to the next 50 years. ❖

ENDNOTES

1. Helen's siblings included Frederick V. Geier (1894-1981), Virginia Amanda Geier McCurdy (1898-1987) and Paul E. Geier (1915-1981).
2. *Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian Institution, Henry N. and Helen G. Flynt interview, August 1, 1969.
3. More recently, aspects of Punderson's parlor were again borrowed, this time by artist Kiki Smith for her 2010 show at the Brooklyn Museum. See www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/kiki_smith
4. Marilyn Magee, "Newest of Old Deerfield," *Greenfield Recorder-Gazette*, Friday June 4, 1965; 9.
5. Adele Jay-Filene, "Old Deerfield," *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society* 4 (1970): 53-55.
6. According to family members, she may also have employed the services of two dressmakers; one in Greenwich, Connecticut, and the other in the Spring Lake area.
7. Helen Geier Flynt to unnamed classmate, February 23, 1973. Vassar College Archives.



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Fig. 1.

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