

Fashion and Design at the Peabody Essex Museum  
Petra Slinkard  
April 12, 2023

Summary by Sascha Duggan

Petra Slinkard uses her role as Curator of Fashion and Textiles at the Peabody Essex Museum to challenge how we define design. Slinkard received degrees in Fashion Merchandising and Art History from Indiana University, which was followed by a Master of Science in Fashion/Textile History. Following her position as the Curator of Costume at the Chicago History Museum, she joined the Peabody Essex Museum as the Director of Curatorial Affairs in 2018. Since joining, she has facilitated the new Carl and Iris Barrel Apfel Gallery of Fashion and Design exhibit, which invites viewers to reflect on how design is inherent to human nature. Through her exhibitions, Slinkard spotlights the impact that fashion and textiles have on the world and us.

The Peabody Essex Museum has given Slinkard the ability to showcase fashion and textiles with the intention to inspire learning and form connections. Displaying pieces, whether a gown or military uniform, is done with great care at the museum. Pieces within the exhibition are also rotated to offer different views and preserve their integrity. Slinkard describes how she is intentional with the pieces she selects when she puts them on view for the public.

Questioning what design is and means is one of the perspectives Slinkard uses to select pieces for an exhibition. Some may define design by well-known movements such as the Bauhaus; however, Slinkard approaches design with a more holistic approach. In the Fashion and Design gallery, design is explored as having multiple definitions and meanings. Slinkard believes that we design for our bodies, environment, and society. With her philosophy, she hopes to demonstrate that design is a universal impulse and human characteristic. Design comprises many aspects of human life that people interact with, which is what Slinkard is trying to convey with her work. In her exhibitions, there is this idea that no design is less important in comparison to others. Good design is about perspective, which means a World War II Red Cross uniform is just as important as a Margiela dress. Slinkard ensures that each design plays a role in the display and is noticed by viewers walking through. The physical organization of the exhibit also plays a role in guiding viewers through why design is important and how it impacts our lives.

Regardless of what side viewers start at, they will be greeted by videos and screens introducing the exhibit to them. Throughout the entire gallery, viewers will be shown various ways in which design can be interpreted and executed. As the viewer goes through, they will see various installations curated to define design as “expressive” or “imaginative.” Slinkard’s work is not meant to influence, but to show how designed objects can be executed in different ways. The juxtaposition of typically “low” design with “high” design offers a great visual of how the creation of objects can be different to all of us.

Slinkard’s work with the Fashion and Design gallery has been able to showcase designs in a unique way. Every piece within the gallery is given equal importance and attention when it comes to display, which allows viewers to approach the exhibit without any bias. For Slinkard, showing how fashion and design can be interpreted in many ways is one of the main goals of the exhibition. In her eyes, good design is all around us even if we may not realize it.