

An Interview with Dr. Lori Hall-Araujo, Curator and Assistant Professor at Stephens College

by Jason Baird Jackson on July 5, 2016

*In fall 2016, [Lori Hall-Araujo](#) will begin a position as Assistant Professor and Curator in the [School of Design](#) and the [Costume Museum](#) at [Stephens College](#) in Columbia, Missouri. She recently concluded a year as Anawalt Postdoctoral Fellow in the Center for the Study of Regional Dress at UCLA's [Fowler Museum](#) in Los Angeles, California. She holds the Ph.D. in Communication and Culture from Indiana University as well as an M.A. in the History of Religions from the University of Chicago, and a B.A. in Philosophy from Michigan State University. She has extensive experience as a museum professional and, during her time in Bloomington, she curated the exhibition *Clothes, Collections, and Culture . . . What is a Curator?* for the [Mathers Museum of World Cultures](#). Learn more about her work at <http://www.lorihallaraujo.com/>.*



Jason Baird Jackson (JJ): Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview. I know I will want to ask about the varied things that you have been doing in the museum world since you left Bloomington, but I have to begin with a big CONGRATULATIONS on the news of your tenure-track position at Stephens College. As you look ahead to moving to Missouri and getting started there, can you describe your new position?

Lori Hall-Araujo (LH-A): Thanks so much for the well wishes. I'm absolutely thrilled about embarking on this next phase of my career and feel very fortunate. *The Atlantic* recently published an article about how colleges and universities are offering buyouts to senior faculty and staff to encourage retirement and save on spending. While Oberlin, the story's featured college, is promising not to replace its tenured faculty with part-time instructors and non-tenure-track faculty, that's the direction many colleges and universities are heading. Most academic jobs now are either part-time or non-tenure track so I feel extraordinarily lucky to have been on the job market just as the Stephens position opened up.

My role at Stephens College calls on me to wear two hats, one as professor in the fashion program and the other as curator for the Costume Museum and Research Library (CMRL). Stephens' fashion program emphasizes practice within a liberal arts environment. The classes I teach will tend towards the academic side. This year I teach writing intensive courses on dress history that situate changing modes of dress within their cultural and sociopolitical contexts. For my course on 20th century dress I plan to use the Costume Museum's collections in my teaching.

The Costume Museum and Research Library at Stephens has over 13,000 objects from the mid-18th century to the present and includes designer and everyday attire. As curator I am responsible for mounting two exhibitions each academic year though my ambitions for the CMRL go well beyond that. This fall I will work with staff to conduct an overall assessment of the facilities and collections to determine ways we can improve storage and increase access for students, faculty, and outside researchers. Finding ways to incorporate the collections into the curriculum is a top priority. The fashion program recently earned an [affiliation with the Council of Fashion Designers of America \(CFDA\)](#). This is a highly coveted and prestigious affiliation as it provides students with scholarships as well as industry opportunities. The CFDA tapped Stephens to participate in its scholarship competition based on the strength of student portfolios and the Costume Museum's collections so the work I do as curator has real potential to resonate in our students' futures.

JJ: That sounds great on every front. I love my dual museum-faculty role and I feel confident that you will really thrive in that environment too. Before we get to what you have been doing most recently, can you reflect a bit about the ways that your studies at Indiana contributed to the work that you are being called to do at Stephens? This matters not only in a MMWC context, where we are always seeking to be more impactful in the careers of museum professionals-in-training, but also in the context of Indiana University's new [School of Art and Design](#), where students and faculty share so many interests in common with you. You came to IU with a lot of museum background. What did IU add to the equation?

LH-A: I had been Collection Manager for Costume and Textiles at the [Chicago History Museum](#) before enrolling in my IU doctoral program. One of the reasons I chose IU was for its museums. I wanted to dip my feet into curatorial waters and the Mathers Museum gave me that opportunity. Working closely with [MMWC Chief Curator] Ellen Sieber and other Mathers staff, I was able to experience first hand how a well run university museum operates. The Mathers [offers credit-granting practica](#) for students, which are a great way to learn about the collections and to gain hands-on supervised museum experience. At Stephens the Costume Museum offers work-study positions in its collections. In the future I'd like to see us offer museum practica along the lines of the year-long cataloging and curating project I worked on at the Mathers.

JJ: You came to IU as a doctoral student in the Department of Communication and Culture. As a Ph.D. student you thus had a research agenda that you hoped to establish and then carry forward into your career. Do you feel that you were able to integrate your training as a researcher and your museum interests? One of your foci is dress in Latin American contexts. How did this interest mature at IU and how has it carried forward through your work at the Fowler Museum and up to the present?

LH-A: While there was no museum studies track in my department per se, I was able to get the support I needed. Before his retirement, [Dick Bauman](#) was my advisor and he really pointed me in the right direction as far as coursework and training went. [Beverly Stoeltje](#) in Folklore was my earliest advocate for writing a dissertation that incorporated my interests in dress theory, film, performance studies, and museum studies. I took a short exploratory visit to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in my second year at IU and it was Beverly who urged me to check out the [Carmen Miranda Museum](#) there. From that kernel of an idea my research and dissertation bloomed.

Dick encouraged me to do a practicum at the Mathers, which I did thanks to the faculty sponsorship of [Pravina Shukla](#). Several years before enrolling at IU I had spent some time in Oaxaca, Mexico making art and learning about indigenous textiles. When I met with Ellen Sieber I expressed my interest in Latin American textiles and she suggested I work with one of two sizable collections. I chose to work with the Royce Collection as it includes Zapotec clothing and objects from Juchitán, Oaxaca. My work on that project was incredibly rewarding in terms of the intellectual and creative freedom it provided. My exhibition was highly reflexive and examined how the meaning of objects changes depending on context—art, wearable garment, museum object, and so on.

The themes I addressed for the Mathers practicum have informed my research at the Fowler Museum where I have been studying two significant collections of objects collected in Mesoamerica throughout the 20th century. I ask questions such as, “Why does the collector collect what she collects? What does it mean for outsiders to come into indigenous Mesoamerican communities and buy clothing? What happens when the collector’s cultural biases cause her to misinterpret or misrepresent other cultures?” These are difficult and sensitive topics but I think there’s a way for productive dialogue to emerge from this project. Ideally these issues would be addressed not just between academics but also in a more public way such as a museum exhibition.

JJ: Needless to say, hearing you recount your experience at IU is very gratifying. We can't let your Carmen Miranda research go unexplored, but you have just referred to your Mesoamerican clothing research, including your earlier visits to Oaxaca, your work with [Chancellor's Professor Anya Royce's](#) collection at the MMWC, and your more recent work on such collections at the Fowler Museum. In my corner of the field, the Fowler Museum has a strong reputation as a leading university museum of world cultures. When administrators here ask me to identify aspirational peers for the MMWC, it is always on my list. How did you secure a postdoctoral fellowship there? What was it like to work there? What's next for you Mesoamerican research?

LH-A: From 2014 to 2015 I worked on the [Hollywood Costume](#) exhibition organized by the Victoria and Albert Museum and hosted in Los Angeles by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Just prior to the exhibition's closing, the curator, Deborah Nadoolman Landis (professor in UCLA's Theater, Film and Television Department and founding director and chair of the [David C. Copley Center for Costume Design](#)), invited the Fowler staff to come check out the exhibition. That was when I first met the Fowler director, Marla Berns, who suggested I stay in touch. After *Hollywood Costume* closed I visited the Fowler and got to see their many treasures in storage. Marla told me they were planning to offer their first ever post doc fellowship and invited me to apply. Happily they offered me the fellowship and in September I hit the ground running.

During my time at the Fowler I've been impressed by how much they accomplish with such a small staff. They have an incredibly full exhibition schedule for their own galleries and of course have any number of objects out on loan at any given time. The first six months were magical when I got to throw myself fully into research. Then from March to June I had the opportunity to teach an undergraduate class for the [World Arts and Cultures](#) Department, "Collecting Indigenous Mesoamerican Dress." The class was essentially the research I'd been working on in the preceding six months. Every week we looked at objects from the collections and addressed issues of collecting practices, interpretation, and different theme-driven exhibitions. My students were amazing. Their final projects asked them to conduct original research in the Fowler archives and to discuss the objects. The questions they raised and the discoveries they made have been so helpful to me as I write about my own research.

This past January I had the opportunity to look at pieces in the Fowler collections with the [Oaxaca Textile Museum's](#) founder, Alejandro de Ávila Blomberg. He's been an ideal colleague, so generous. He's invited me to attend a textile conference in Oaxaca this October so I'll be there and plan to do a little exploratory research while in Mexico.

JJ: That is great to hear. I hope that you can continue your work with Oaxacan textiles while based at Stephens. People are understandably passionate about them and they both raise and help address so many key questions, as your comments reflect. Selfishly, we would love for you to weave our collections into your ongoing work. Happily, I can report that Professor Royce is continuing to add new works to our collections on the basis of her still active research and her strong relationships with friends in Oaxaca.

While many of your projects are getting short changed here, we can't conclude without giving your dissertation research and its famous subject—Carmen Miranda—its due. Brazil is about to host the world for the 2016 Summer Olympics. I recently heard an [interview with vocalist Carla Hassett](#). She was discussing Carmen Miranda on NPR and cited Brazilian composer “Caetano Veloso [whom she said] said, [she] is the original *tropicalista*, meaning she was really the first artist to leave Brazil and influence and bring the culture to outside of Brazil. She was really our pioneer of that.” Hearing that interview, I immediately thought of your work and how you have tried to understand the role of dress in how the world made sense of Carmen Miranda and, by extension, all of Brazil. As Brazil is now a focus of much global attention for so many reasons, what does your research tell us about Carmen Miranda's legacy?

LH-A: What can I say? I could fill a book addressing your question and am in the midst of doing so!

As far as Carmen Miranda being the original *tropicalista* goes, I can say this. The *tropicalistas* of the late 1960s and early 1970s inherited a Brazilian tradition of “cultural cannibalism.” Brazilians have long understood that their land and people have been acted upon whether via slavery or environmental or cultural exploitation. Yet rather than allow themselves to simply be the passive subjects of external fantasies and oppression, they have taken those external fantasies and turned them on their heads. Carmen was European born but she fully embraced the Brazilian *feijoada* and considered herself a Brazilian. When Caetano Veloso called her the original *tropicalista* he was saying that she wasn't a sell-out to Hollywood as some suggested but instead was consuming Hollywood versions of Brazilians and regurgitating them in unique and distinctly Brazilian ways to create a kind of cultural chaos for global audiences. I've no doubt Brazil and its culture will surprise and confuse Olympics tourists this summer.

JJ: That is good food for thought as we all gather around screens to consume the spectacle in Brazil this summer. We can watch and look forward to your book. You will face the challenge of moving to Missouri and getting situated in your new post while also taking notes on those themes in the Brazil context. I can hardly imagine that the costumes worn in the opening and closing ceremonies won't be ringing these bells and playing again off the tradition of cultural cannibalism you note.

I want to thank you so much for sharing these glimpses of some of your work in progress. Good luck with your new position and with your exciting research. We hope you are able to get back to the MMWC very soon.