

Spotlight on Studies in Conservation: Latest Articles

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Image



By Chandra L. Reedy, Editor-in-Chief, Studies in Conservation

The 2024 Met Gala fundraiser for the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art recently concluded, with both beautiful and bizarre fashions worn by celebrities being highlighted in major news sources. A recent *Studies in Conservation* paper looks back at the 2022 Met Gala, focusing on a dress that instigated worldwide discussion about conservation ethics. “Conserving Performance, Performing Conservation: Kim Kardashian x Marilyn Monroe”, by Jules Pelta Feldman, takes an innovative look at the issue of a celebrity being allowed to wear a fragile historical garment.

At the 2022 Gala, Kim Kardashian wore the so-called ‘Happy Birthday Dress,’ a skin-tight nude rhinestone-covered garment made for Marilyn Monroe by the designer Jean Louis to wear for a 1962 Democratic Party fundraiser in Madison Square Garden, where she sang a breathy ‘Happy Birthday’ to President John F. Kennedy. The decision by a museum to allow Kardashian to borrow the dress for the Met Gala received wide attention. Many news outlets decried potential damage to the garment and collected quotes from conservators and other museum professionals declaring that allowing this famous historical dress to be worn was a severe violation of conservation and museum ethics. Feldman goes beyond a narrow focus on physical damage to the garment. She explores how public performance use fits into complex issues being grappled with by an emerging field of performance conservation, informed by preservation and conservation of contemporary art, material culture, and intangible cultural heritage. She connects this case with conversations surrounding conservation of electronic or time-based media, operational machinery, and Indigenous cultural heritage. She notes that some museums now allow Indigenous communities to borrow and wear items from their heritage for important events as part of “peoples-based conservation” practice which recognizes that the value of some objects is inherent in their use during rituals, dances, or other ceremonies.

Feldman also draws on the discipline of performance studies and on recent ideas that fashion may include embodied performance not well conveyed by inert displays of garments on mannequins. She points out that some garments, especially this one, lose their significance without that embodied performance. The history of this dress, designed with the intent of it being worn for a dramatic public performance by a widely known celebrity, means that part of the integrity of the object is embedded in it being used as intended, not solely in the physical materials of the textile. From that point of view, Kardashian’s performance of wearing Marilyn Monroe’s dress, even for a few moments while a multitude of cameras flashed, can be seen as a form of conservation, linking back to the original use by Monroe and helping to preserve the past.

For a thought-provoking read, this open-access paper is [available in the Latest Articles section of *Studies in Conservation*](#) and will appear in print in Vol. 69, No. 6, 2024.

Read the article in the June-July 2024 "News in Conservation" Issue 102, p. 24-25