

That gown — he must have it

By Lisa Bertagnoli
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Noren Ungaretti's closet is missing two beautiful, expensive dresses: a bolero-topped, balloon-hemmed Donna Karan and a cocktail dress from the late Gianni Versace's final collection.

She blames it on Champagne.

Last summer, Ms. Ungaretti invited Timothy Long, costume curator at the Chicago History Museum, to her Lincoln Park home for an afternoon chat. The two have known each other since Mr. Long joined the museum, as costume collection manager, in 1999.

After finishing a bottle of bubbly, Mr. Long sprang a proposition on Ms. Ungaretti: "Hey, let's go see what's in your storage closet." He deemed the two dresses museum-worthy and asked her to donate them.

"My daughter wanted the Donna Karan," Ms. Ungaretti says ruefully. But, she adds, "it's an honor to have something at the museum."

As keeper of the world's fifth-largest collection of fashion pieces, it is Mr. Long's job to wangle dresses from women like Ms. Ungaretti, a prominent socialite. So Mr. Long, 33, regularly attends society events, armed with a keen eye and a pocketful of business cards. When he sees a dress he wants, he taps the wearer on her shoulder with a few words: "When you're finished wearing that dress, give me a call."

It's trickier than it sounds: "I have to be careful about whom I approach because I don't want to be not invited to parties," he says. He is not joking.

He also turns away many offers; not every flapper dress from grandma will be immortalized. "I say 'no' more often than I say 'yes' to prospective donors," Mr. Long says. "People get mad. People have cried."

Topping his wish list right now is anything worn by future first lady Michelle Obama, especially the black-and-red Narciso Rodriguez frock she wore on Election Night. "I thought it was perfect," he says of the dress, which other observers referred to as the "butcher apron" or the "exploded tomato."

FASHION AMBASSADOR

But flattery is part of the job. The elegant, soft-spoken Mr. Long moves easily in social circles; the museum's 150-member Costume Council includes the city's best-dressed women. He is tall and slim, with artfully messy auburn hair and a day or two's worth of stubble on his chin. His conservative yet contemporary business attire — charcoal pants, a gray-blue shirt and tie, and light-gray fleece blazer, one winter day — hides a web of fashion-inspired tattoos. Both arms are covered, wrist to mid-bicep, with patterns inspired by the Art Nouveau embroidery adorning a gown that Bertha Honoré Palmer wore to the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris.

"As an academic, he is so hip," gushes Costume Council member and public-relations maven Carrie Lannon, who donated a 1998 Ferragamo evening gown, a gift to her from the Ferragamo family, to the museum. "We have a meeting every two months, and he looks different every time."

Interior designer Laura Barnett Sawchyn agrees: "He wears clothes so well, and he's handsome, slim and gorgeous." Mr. Long persuaded Ms. Sawchyn to donate a 2003 Issey Miyake gown to the collection, even though at the time the dress was still part of her active wardrobe.

For donors, there's a payoff in prestige: Biographical details of both giver and garment are displayed when the gown is exhibited.

But he doesn't always get what he wants. Mr. Long regrets that an important Issey Miyake stash from the estate of Muriel Newman, the Chicago art collector who died in 2008, likely will not end up at the Chicago History Museum. Ms. Newman famously donated her art collection to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, not the Art Institute of Chicago, and the executors of her estate aren't returning his calls. "I think that's the big one that got away," he says.



Tim Long curated "Chic Chicago," an exhibition of 62 designer gowns spanning 17 decades. It's been a hit at the Chicago History Museum, where officials credit it for doubling attendance from October 2007 to October 2008

PHOTOS BY LISA PREDKO



To fit the museum's mission, the pieces he collects must not only be beautiful, but also have strong historical ties to Chicago.

Now, Mr. Long is determined to snare anything any of the Obamas wore during the campaign. Inauguration ceremony garments automatically go to Smithsonian Institution, but everything else is fair game.

Still, "I've been told, 'Cool your jets,' " Mr. Long says, as museum management wants to collect Obama-related documents and other material as well as clothing. "We need to pursue it as an institution. I trust we'll get something."

With an eye to Maria Pinto's most famous client, he also is eager to design a retrospective on Ms. Pinto, whose work Ms. Obama has pulled into the spotlight. "Maria is working at the highest level of couture in Chicago," Mr. Long says.

"She does it so beautifully."

He has even put the touch on his boss, Museum President Gary Johnson, who went to high school with Park Ridge native Hillary Clinton: "Tim wants one of her pantsuits," Mr. Johnson says.

Indeed, Mr. Long's challenge isn't coming up with ideas for exhibits; it's figuring out what people will pay to see. "The museum has a glorious collection of men's shoe buckles, but will people pay to see shoe buckles?" he says. "We are a business. We are competing with other entertainment venues in town."

But he's had a hit with "Chic Chicago," a collection of 62 designer gowns, spanning 17 decades, that opened in Chicago in October and runs through June. Museum officials say attendance has almost doubled from October 2007 to October 2008, and they give "Chic Chicago" credit for the draw. The gowns on display represent a famous designer or sea change in women's fashion, and were worn by well-known Chicago women.

Mr. Long found it curious that many of the exhibit's dresses are so cutting-edge, given that the rest of the world considered Chicago an unsophisticated "cow town." He asked donors, including Ms. Newman, who donated a black Balenciaga dress, why they bought such expensive, dramatic clothing.

The answer: social anxiety. "They knew that, coming from Chicago, they'd be judged rigorously. So they bought the best they could."

Mr. Long's fascination with clothing was sparked by ancestral photos hanging on the walls of his childhood home, a working farm in Downstate Manteno. "The clothes they wore were so different, so formal," Mr. Long recalls. He also liked "Gone with the Wind" and "The King and I" and began to associate garments with certain periods of history. "If someone said 'Civil War,' I'd think 'hoop skirts,'" he says.

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, an adviser suggested he take a class in anthropology. "The first day, the professor mentioned hoop skirts and the Civil War," Mr. Long says. "It was the first time I got excited about something."

He transferred to the International Academy of Design and Technology in Chicago, graduating in 1999 with a bachelor's degree in dress studies. His parents were "very concerned" about the move to the big city and said, "Halloween costumes? You're going to study Halloween costumes?" Mr. Long recalls with a small smile.

A KILLER DRESS

His training in fashion construction has proved invaluable because, he says dryly, "people don't donate their underwear along with their dresses." He makes the bustles, hoop skirts and other foundation garments necessary to display vintage garments.

Such work has turned Mr. Long into a fashion victim of an unusual sort. In 2006, while working on the Christian Dior "New Look" exhibit for the museum, he unwrapped a black satin-and-velvet Dior evening gown that had been in storage for nearly 50 years.

He put the dress on a mannequin, and then, like a car mechanic, slid under it to determine what type of foundation garment it would need. As he worked, dust fell on his face and hands.

An hour later, he felt crushing chest pains, "like someone was stabbing me," and went home to sleep. He awoke from a Benadryl-assisted nap to find his hands and face had turned blue.

Doctors at the emergency room, flummoxed, hooked him to a morphine drip to ease the excruciating chest pains. Finally, one doctor mentioned poisoning, and Mr. Long immediately thought of the Dior dress. He sent it for testing and learned that the netting inside the dress had been coated with cellulose nitrate, a highly toxic compound, which had decayed into the dust he inhaled.

The offending garment is now back in storage.

"It can't be displayed; it will poison people," he says. "Too bad. It's such a beautiful dress."

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