

Lincoln Keckley Dress

Response: You could call it the Lincoln Keckley dress, right, you could combine them or the Mary Todd Lincoln Elizabeth Keckley question mark [00:00:11] dress. If what you want is someone to search for Elizabeth Keckley and find a— I don't know. I don't know. It's a real question we have about presentation of [00:00:25] the artifact, also.

Q: Excellent. So, we've got sort of three areas of questions. The first one is about describing the object generally and we want to do a sort of a close [00:00:36] reading of this and so I'm wondering if you can sort of slowly go through what the dress looks like and what you notice [00:00:40] in it when you look at it and those sorts of things.

Response: Okay. The dress is made of this really deep purple velvet and [00:00:50] I think probably it's got three different parts to it. It's got a skirt which is this huge skirt made up of a different panels and along each panel it's got this [00:01:03] white piping sewed into the seam, so it— which would've run vertically, which run vertically all around and then there're two different tops or bodices, one with three-quarter length sleeves which would be for [00:01:17] daytime and one sleeveless which would be for evening, so just the fact that it existed with these two different bodices [00:01:26] represents using all this incredibly expensive imported fabric, but using it to wear more than once because obviously the evening gown would be described [00:01:38] and she wouldn't wear it too many times but she would wear it also as a day dress.

When I look at it, it's just kind of a riot of ornament. [00:01:47] The bodice, especially the evening bodice, it's got so many things decorating it that it must be a whole different aesthetic from [00:01:59] the one that I grew up with anyway. It's got lace all around it. It's got this ecru lace coming down in cascading layers along [00:02:08] the sleeve. It has these chenille hanging caterpillars. Chenille is the stuff you make pipe cleaners with, so if you just think of the pipe cleaners [00:02:17] without a wire in it, you have these little loopy pieces of chenille that would've moved when she moved and then on top of that, she [00:02:29] apparently wore a lace collar and sometimes carried a shawl. She had a fan that went with it with ivory sticks and purple and then a hat with [00:02:42] a plume that went with it, so you get this image of somebody who is not just dressed but almost upholstered, you know, just covered with this fabric [00:02:54] in a way that I guess looked great in the 1860s, but it looks incredibly hot and uncomfortable today, so there's many many layers of different [00:03:07] kind of laces, different kinds of brocade, things that would all have been noted in the press at the time, something like *Harper's Weekly* [00:03:17] which began to describe ladies' dress, elite ladies' dress, in that kind of detail just about this era.

Q: And so this is Mary Todd Lincoln's [00:03:30] dress. When did she have it made?

Response: She— We don't exactly. Some people think she wore it on New Year's Day 1864. There's certainly [00:03:39] reports that she did that. I don't think we absolutely know that. Presumably that's about when, sometime between '81 and '84 obviously.

Q: Can [00:03:50] I ask you to go back and do that using her name?

Response: Oh, sure. Mary Todd Lincoln was said to have worn this on New Year's Day [00:03:58] 1864 for a reception at the White House. We don't absolutely know that or we don't have an account at the time saying that's what she did, [00:04:07] but according to family lore afterwards, that's when she wore it.

Q: Call you tell us about [00:04:11] the making of the dress? Do you know about the making?

Response: Well, the making of the dress is tough. There's a real question of whether the dress was made by [00:04:20] Mary Todd Lincoln's favorite dressmaker who is now famous, named Elizabeth Keckley, or made by somebody else and the evidence is a little mixed. [00:04:29] We got the dress from— The Smithsonian got the dress back in the 19 teens from the son of Mary Todd Lincoln's cousin and the logic her [00:04:43] was Mary Todd Lincoln after Lincoln was shot, she went back to Springfield and she gave away many of her dresses that were not black dresses since she would be wearing [00:04:53] mourning for the future. She gave this dress to her cousin who was a really good friend of hers and who had lived in the White House with [00:05:02] the President and Mrs. Lincoln for some six months early in his first administration. That cousin's son and daughter-in-law sold the dress to the collector and curator who [00:05:15] donated it to the museum.

When they gave the dress, they had a story about who had made it and they said it was made by Mrs. Lincoln's favorite dressmaker, the [00:05:31] one who made most of her dresses who was an octoroon woman named Ann. Now, that's tricky because octoroon would mean I guess one-eighth part African American. [00:05:45] That's not a category that's very used precisely in the 19th century, but certainly Elizabeth Keckley whom we know as Mary Todd Lincoln's favorite dress maker and confidant [00:06:00] was an African American woman whose father was white [00:06:11] and probably had other white ancestors. Her son enlisted as white in the Civil War so that may be a description of her from down the family lore and then the name Ann, we don't— That doesn't [00:06:19] sound like it applies to Elizabeth Keckley but— So, there may have been another woman. There many have been a woman named Ann or maybe this man John [00:06:29] Griswold who was the— Oh, I'm sorry. It may be this man John Grimsley, the son of Mary Todd Lincoln's cousin just got the name of [00:06:37] the dressmaker wrong.

We just really don't know one hundred percent if Elizabeth Keckley made this dress. There's no way to be absolutely sure. Dressmakers weren't [00:06:52] putting labels in the dress. It was custom made. You can look at the stitching and curators of costume and textiles have looked at the stitching [00:07:01] carefully but that's pretty inconclusive. The skirt stitching is apparently— The seams are pretty roughly sewn. That seems to indicate [00:07:10] it was taken apart and put back together. This happens a lot to dresses where the fabric's valuable. It's very possible somebody after Mary Todd

Lincoln [00:07:21] had it remade for the new fashion of smaller skirts, maybe even took out a panel and resewed it.

The bodices are beautifully stitched which [00:07:31] makes you think that might've been the original because whoever made it for the First Lady, it would've been well made, but we don't— There's [00:07:39] no signature style of stitching even though the Smithsonian has a another dress identified as made by Elizabeth Keckley. I don't think anyone can look [00:07:50] at the stitches and be absolutely sure the same woman did this.

Let me add also that when we say— talk about Elizabeth Keckley making the dress, depends [00:08:00] what you mean by making. She designed, she cut the fabric which was very— which was a very skilled task, but at the height of her [00:08:10] success during this time period when she was dressmaker to the First Lady, she had 20 women working for her in her studio, in her workshop, [00:08:20] so other people would be very likely to do the stitching, especially the long seams on the skirt or other parts. She might do the fine curve stitching [00:08:31] or that sort of thing, so when we say made by her, it's really hard to know how you could absolutely with a hundred percent certainty identify this [00:08:42] as her dress, so I've come to feel it might be her dress. It's a very good chance she made this dress. We have mixed evidence. Whether she made [00:08:49] it or not, some woman made this dress whose life took place behind the scenes, whose life didn't lead her to the celebrity and the fame of Mary Todd Lincoln [00:09:04] and I find that the most interesting thing about that dress.

Q: That was going to be my next question for you. What you sort of think is the most interesting piece about [00:09:12] this object?

Response: I got interested in this dress because it, to me, it represents a relationship and it raises a whole host of questions, both about the 19th century when it was [00:09:27] made and worn, but also about the 20th century when it was collected and saved and viewed and now on into the 21st century when we still look at First [00:09:36] Ladies' dresses at this museum, raises questions about who we see and what we see and what we don't see and I think for museums-goers, the most valuable [00:09:49] thing is to learn interesting things about the past but also think a little bit about what we see and what we don't see, so I guess the most interesting thing to [00:10:03] me about the 19th century is this relationship between a First Lady who has to keep up appearances, show herself in a certain way, and a working woman [00:10:15] who helps her behind the scenes with doing that.

The dress tells us some really interesting things about Mary Todd Lincoln or it represents one of many of her dresses. [00:10:27] She was someone who was really fixated on her appearance. She spent a great deal of time and unfortunately a great deal of money on getting [00:10:38] just the most fashionable ornaments for herself and fabrics and always being the best dressed and you can understand that partly as her personality and [00:10:52] partly as a reaction to some of the tragedies in her own life. There she is First Lady and members of her own family do not recognize her husband [00:11:02] as the

president. Many of the Todds take the Confederate side. She tries to represent the nation. She wants to dress like a queen and there's [00:11:15] a lot of references in the literature of the time to Mary Todd Lincoln appearing as a queen. Writers in the press would describe her at this or that occasion or people in [00:11:27] private correspondence would write and say I was at the reception, she wore this, she looked every inch the queen and to me, that represents not [00:11:35] just her vulnerability or her obsession with her appearance, but the anxieties of that moment when the United States were fighting to be a nation and for [00:11:47] that matter, elite Americans' regret for having lost royalty anyway.

It's hard to remember that even after the Revolution, there were people who thought [00:12:00] a monarchy was the best form of government and even through Jackson's Age of the Common Man, there were people who regretted that we didn't have a [00:12:11] more stable system with more hierarchy and that kind of notion of royalty and I think you can see today— I think there're signs today of people's [00:12:21] obsession with or desire to honor the Princess Di or some princess figures. Every daughter of the White House, every— Certainly through the [00:12:33] 19th century you see this discussion of queens and princesses. Not in the very early years. It wouldn't have been okay to describe Martha Washington as [00:12:44] a queen because the Washingtons were definitely not monarchs and they underscored that and you wouldn't have seen many of the other First Ladies, but about [00:12:55] this time you get this statement of the First Lady description of her as the queen. Mary Todd Lincoln is known as the Republican Queen in her White [00:13:04] Palace of the White House, so the dress represents her anxiety about her role.

It even represents a certain regional tension because she's from the [00:13:17] west and she's very aware that these snobby Washington East Coast ladies are going to be looking at her and examining her and one of the [00:13:28] things she tells her dress maker Elizabeth Keckley is that these women will be watching everything she does and everything she wears, so it's interesting to [00:13:38] think that at this moment of contest between north and south there's also an east west divide of some significance, so there she is with the concern [00:13:51] about she looks going in debt to substantial amount in purchasing partly because she feels she has to dress up to the role. Her husband doesn't make a lot [00:14:03] of money and she starts accepting credit. I always thought this was something that most visitors could identify with that, that she gets in over her [00:14:14] head accepting gifts from various people and accepting credit from various stores in New York City and so she ends up quite a bit in debt. I think it's [00:14:24] \$27,000 by 1864 and \$27,000— This is in an era when a woman who's working at the Treasury Department is making \$50.00 [00:14:38] a week, so that's a lot of money. It's a lot of money now to be in debt, so it's an interesting artifact in the way it represents something of tremendous [00:14:53] importance to her, that she's trying to attain and also her downfall in certain ways because that's a terrible scandal at the time and she tries very hard [00:15:04] to make sure it doesn't become public. It might ruin her husband's chance for re-election, so it's kind of shocking. So, that's the story from [00:15:15] her angle.

What's interesting from the other angle is that this same dress probably— What would it have represented for Elizabeth Keckley? If this her fine [00:15:30] work, this has been her way as an African American who was born a slave, her way out of slavery was this development of skills as a dressmaker and then a variety of circumstances [00:15:45] that let her purchase her own freedom and let her reach the pinnacle of success in her chosen career of being a dressmaker of sewing [00:15:56] for the First Lady, so this one artifact is at one and the same time this prop to this one woman's social and public life and also this representation [00:16:04] of another woman's skill and achievement and entrée into a world out of slavery and into freedom, so that's an extraordinary artifact [00:16:15] in the way that it captures two— At least two American stories.

Q: That's excellent. Can you [00:16:24] tell us a little bit— Do we know much about the relationship between Mary Todd Lincoln and Elizabeth Keckley?

Response: We know a fair amount about the relationship between Mary Todd Lincoln and [00:16:33] Elizabeth Keckley. Keckley wrote a book that was published in 1868 called *Behind the Scenes* and it was about her years as a slave and then [00:16:43] years in the White House and there're also some additional things such as letters occasionally from these women to one another but also other [00:16:54] people round about and I've done some research and various other people have done research tracking down things like birth records and freedom papers and church [00:17:03] records for Elizabeth Keckley, so by combining this information about each woman's life, we gain some insight into the relationship.

It's a tricky relationship. Mary Todd Lincoln describes [00:17:17] Elizabeth Keckley as her friend and at some point, as her best friend. I don't know that Keckley ever describes Mrs. Lincoln as her friend and the [00:17:29] impression one gets in reading about them is that every few days Mrs. Keckley is over at the White House fitting Mrs. Lincoln with clothing, [00:17:41] chatting with her. They clearly become close in important way. They— When Abraham Lincoln dies, it's Mrs. Keckley who nurses Mrs. Lincoln for [00:17:55] the next six weeks, so there's clearly a closeness. There're many reasons for closeness. They're the same— These women are both born in 1818, [00:18:07] one in Lexington, Mary Ann Todd, one in Dinwiddie Court House, Virginia, Elizabeth Keckley who was both Elizabeth Hobbs. They're [00:18:14] both southerners. They both grew up with slavery.

Q: We need to stop you _____

Response: Talk about the relationship. Okay, let me talk [00:18:23] about the relationship. We know a fair amount about this relationship although it's really complicated and it's hard to pin down entirely what it felt like for [00:18:35] each of these two women. Mrs. Keckley was every few days at least, she would be over at the White House fitting Mrs. Lincoln [00:18:46] for dresses, dressing her hair, doing that sort of thing, but she really became Mrs. Lincoln's confidante and Mrs. Lincoln described her as her friend. I'm not [00:18:56] sure that Mrs. Keckley ever describes Mrs. Lincoln as her friend. I think that might've been too forward and it might not have been entirely

[00:19:05] true. The impression I get is that while these fittings were going on, Mrs. Lincoln poured out some of her troubles to her dressmaker. I don't [00:19:16] think the dressmaker poured out too many of her troubles to Mrs. Lincoln. They had one of those complicated, unequal but sometimes intimate relationships that [00:19:25] women have had through history that go across but also stay within the bounds of class and race. At different moments it would be a relationship between an Anglo [00:19:40] woman and an Irish maid or an Anglo woman/Hispanic maid. Different ethnic groups women have this sort of relationship. Different aspects of life. Relationships [00:19:56] with hairdressers, women who raise children or take care of children, and dressmakers and I think part of what's intriguing [00:20:07] is that although few of us have been First Ladies, many more of us have been maids and seamstresses and hairdressers, that all of us have probably or [00:20:16] at least many many American women have been on one side or the other of these relationships and we don't have to go very far back to have an ancestor [00:20:24] who's been on one or the other side of these relationships.

These women had a lot in common. They were born the same year, [00:20:34] 1818. Mrs. Lincoln was born in Kentucky. Mrs. Keckley in Virginia so they're both from the south. They both grow [00:20:42] up with slavery. They both lose a child during the time period of the war. Mrs. Keckley's son who had been at Wilberforce University signed [00:20:55] up as white to the Union Army and was killed in one of the early battles in Kansas. Mrs. Lincoln's son, Willie, died [00:21:05] in the middle of the first term, so they did have many things that drew them together and it was an interesting relationship in [00:21:17] the way it worked for both women. Mrs. Keckley, excuse me. Mrs. Lincoln got a sympathetic listener, this incredibly skilled helper and [00:21:30] dressmaker. Mrs. Keckley in addition to getting good customers and becoming the hottest dressmaker with many orders, the real pinnacle of her profession, [00:21:47] she also could use her contacts with well-to-do Republicans that Mrs. Lincoln had so, for example, Mrs. Keckley and her church, the 15th [00:21:58] Street Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., the African Americans in that church organized early in the war to gather money for relief efforts [00:22:15] for the people who were— the refugees who were coming into D.C. from the south.

Those refugees were people who were— had been enslaved [00:22:25] and they weren't yet free. It's before the Emancipation Proclamation. They're called contraband because they were either escaped [00:22:32] or were seized when the Union Army marched and took over parts of the south and so many African Americans who could, fled rebel lines and came to D.C. [00:22:43] where they were destitute, so the African American community in D.C. organized to gather relief, and Mrs. Keckley got Mrs. Lincoln to donate some money and, of course, [00:22:54] she knew Mrs. Lincoln's friends, so this was a really valuable relationship for each of them, but it's hard to get at the emotional tenor. There's obviously [00:23:07] a lot of reliance by Mrs. Lincoln on Mrs. Keckley and when Abraham Lincoln is shot, it's Mrs. Keckley who nurses Mrs. Lincoln for the next [00:23:18] six weeks.

Q: Fascinating.

Response: It is fascinating.

Q: It's good stuff. I'm sort of wondering if you feel like there's something in particular [00:23:30] that the dress reveals about slavery, about free communities, about those sorts of things. I'm wondering if sort we can get towards a more concise [00:23:44] statement about Keckley and her journey as a dressmaker from slavery to freedom.

Response: Sure. Her story is pretty amazing. [00:23:54] She's born in Virginia in 1818 to a— into a slave-holding household of Armistead Burrell. He has four—

Q: _____ what the [screaming] is.

Response: Oh, it's [00:24:12] the ride— They have a ride. Don't get us started . . . Don't get [00:24:18] the scholarly staff started on that. It's a money-making ride. Okay, so you want me to start with her. Okay. All right. Elizabeth Keckley [00:24:29] was born in 1818 in Virginia and she's born to— into a household headed by a man named Armistead Burrell. He's a landholder and he has [00:24:43] I think six sons, four daughters and about 70 enslaved people working for him. Later on in life, Elizabeth Keckley learns that he's her biological father, [00:24:55] okay, but she doesn't know that for— until her mother is dying and shares that with her much later. She, however, is a house slave, [00:25:06] house servant, and she learns to sew and learns also to read and write in the 1820s in this household.

She has some incredibly [00:25:21] complicated experiences and terribly difficult experiences. At one point, she goes off to live in the household of one of the sons. There she remembers, [00:25:28] in her memoir, of being abused in various ways, beaten, yelled at, told she was worthless by the son's wife. She was sexually exploited [00:25:45] by a white neighbor and that's the father of her son. She then goes with one of the daughters who married a man named Garland. [00:25:55] They go to St. Louis because they run out of money and they do what Americans do when they go broke. They went west. West was St. [00:26:04] Louis. Hugh Garland was a lawyer there. He didn't make much money, but she, Elizabeth Keckley, did quite well. She connected with the free black community [00:26:13] there in some ways and she connected with the elite ladies community and she was one of the who made much of the money that supported the Garland family [00:26:23] by making fashionable dresses for these ladies in St. Louis and it was that relationship which helped her gain her freedom.

When Hugh Garland [00:26:30] died in 1855, she had to buy her own freedom—\$1,200. Of course, she had no money because she was a slave, hadn't been able to keep her [00:26:40] earnings, couldn't borrow it, tried to figure out how to get it and finally some of the white ladies for whom she had sewed decided to lend her the [00:26:51] money and so they give her the money. She buys her freedom. She sets herself up and she's listed in the St. Louis City [00:27:00] Directory, 1859-60, I think, as a free colored dressmaker and she pays them off and then early in 1860, travels to Baltimore and then to D.C.

Now, [00:27:14] I think it's interesting she chooses cities that have large free African American populations. St. Louis has that kind of population where there's a tremendously strong [00:27:24] presence of free blacks who have jobs as longshoremen, waiters, barbers, from the really working to the middle class and Baltimore similarly has [00:27:40] a large free black population. So does D.C. and when she gets to D.C., she decides she's— maybe she'll teaching sewing but she wants to sew for the [00:27:50] ladies of D.C. and she'd really— Her goal is to sew for the First Lady, right? I mean, that would be the absolute pinnacle. That would [00:27:58] be the best you could achieve and she has a little trouble getting started. She needs to find a white woman she knows to agree [00:28:07] to sign a paper saying it's okay for her to stay in the District.

She gets a job finally sewing a dress for Mrs. Captain Robert E. Lee, [00:28:16] okay? This is early 1860s so Virginia hasn't seceded yet. The war has happened yet and she sews a fabulous dress for her and makes her a very very [00:28:25] popular dressmaker. According to Keckley, later, Mrs. Robert E. Lee— Oh, I'm sorry, that's wrong . [00:28:35] She also says— Who is the—

Q: Is it Mrs. Davis?

Response: Mrs. Davis. Mrs. Jefferson Davis, thank you. I forgot entirely. Right. [00:28:45] She also sews dresses for Mrs. Jefferson Davis. Okay? Jefferson Davis is the senator from Mississippi and he's about to become the President of the Confederacy [00:28:55] but that hasn't happened yet. They're still in D.C. and according to Keckley, later on in her memoir, she says that Mrs. Jefferson Davis asked [00:29:05] her to go south with her when they seceded because she would need nice clothes as First Lady of the Confederacy and now I think—[00:29:14] You think of that and you think I'm not sure why having just gained your freedom you might want to go south again, but that does [00:29:26] remind us how much for granted people took slavery. That— That's an institution that from the point of view of Mrs. Jefferson Davis and most people had been there [00:29:34] their own lives, had been there for a hundreds of years and was always going to be there, so it seems like a very odd request now. Oh, come— [00:29:46] you know, come to Mississippi would seem like the last thing you'd do if you just got your freedom, but that isn't how Keckley describes her [00:29:54] response.

She appreciates it, says thank you, but she want to sew for the First Lady and she does eventually get an invitation of somebody who'll [00:30:05] introduce her to Mrs. Lincoln and I think she just then worked like crazy and accommodated every whim that Mrs. Lincoln had for needing [00:30:16] such and such a thing done by such and such a time, and made herself indispensable.

Q: Wonderful. You started out sort of in an earlier answer [00:30:27] talking about the 19th century and the 20th century when the dress was collected and the 21st century. As a curator in the 21st century, what are your [00:30:38] feelings about what you would display the dress with?

Response: Well, I think it's interesting because the dress was originally displayed with the matching fan, [00:30:51] the matching hair ornaments. There's a shawl that we don't know if it was worn with it, but certainly could match it and the purpose of that exhibit [00:31:04] was to show Mrs. Lincoln's tastes. If you came to the exhibit of First Ladies in the 1920s, the label would say this is an example of Mrs. Lincoln's [00:31:14] taste in clothing and that would be really probably not the interesting thing to me. I would want artifacts that capture Elizabeth Keckley's life and the life of [00:31:29] African American Washington, D.C.

Ideally, this is my ideal exhibit of this artifact. You'd start with the dress and realize it exists between [00:31:40] these two women and we have other artifacts connected to Mary Todd Lincoln as one would expect. The Smithsonian has her tea set. We [00:31:48] have these beautiful things that represent the life she led in the White House. There's very little we have of Mrs. Keckley although there a few [00:31:57] artifacts here and there in other collections we might borrow [00:32:03] but there're many images of Washington, D.C. at that time and you can trace her life and I think this exhibit would move out from each woman's biography [00:32:13] to the people they were connected with, the church they attended, the world they operated in and you'd see this elite white Washington, D.C. of the era [00:32:25] and the working African American D.C. of the era, and they'd been an area of overlap and there'd be interesting—

For example, there's a wonderful [00:32:35] image of the celebration of emancipation in the District of Columbia and you could go back and look at [00:32:47] that sort of event and events such as Lincoln's inaugurations and look at it and realized there're a lot of different eyes looking at this. [00:32:58] There's these invited wealthy people up on the podium but there're many other people watching and that this event is meaningful in different ways for African Americans [00:33:09] and for white Americans at the time and I think that duality or just the presence of different perspectives and different stories around this one artifact [00:33:19] is the key insight I would want people to— I'd want to make available to people and I think most people would be fascinated to realize how many stories [00:33:33] are connected with this one dress.

Q: We started having this conversation as the taping began. I'm wondering if you could say for us how you got connected [00:33:43] to the dress.

Response: Sure. I'm actually not a historian of costume. I'm an historian now of politics and reform and I work on the America Revolution and early [00:33:54] national period, but I was working on an exhibit with a group of people and we were looking for artifacts that had different stories. Are there [00:34:02] different ways? Trying to teach different ways of looking at the same artifact and acknowledging different meanings and this artifact struck me as [00:34:14] interesting for that reason. It also has the tremendous value of making us a little bit aware of what it is we normally see when we see these First [00:34:25] Ladies' gowns. There's a whole history of collecting and display of these gowns, why they were collected, how they were seen, what did people [00:34:36]— What did curators think people would learn from them and you can go back and read in the Smithsonian records ideas about American women, American [00:34:47] women's

style that were very important in the 1920s. The idea that these First Ladies' dresses would teach people who came a sense of fine [00:35:00] American taste. It's almost as if it's kind of an art exhibit and it's kind of a lesson, certainly in the '20s [00:35:08] for the new immigrants coming in. It's sort of an American ideal.

And so when I first came to the museum, I stayed away [00:35:18] from the First Ladies' gowns because to me they represented an emphasis on only the most famous women, women who were famous largely because they were married [00:35:30] to somebody. That's not true about Eleanor Roosevelt. It's not true about some of the others, but many of them would not be in a history museum [00:35:40] for their accomplishments otherwise, women who weren't particularly all that fashionable with the exception [00:35:45] of Jackie Kennedy and Dolley Madison and a couple of others, and not only was it about women who were not necessarily the most exciting or interesting women [00:35:56] who accomplished great things and gained women's rights or changed the world or, you know, saved humankind. They were— It was not just about them. [00:36:08] It was about how they looked. It was about this public persona and it put this emphasis on their bodies, on their sizes, on precisely the thing [00:36:17] that seemed to me women ought not to be focusing on and that a history museum ought not to be focusing on, so it certainly wasn't the idea of the old First [00:36:27] Ladies' Gown Exhibit to look only at women's bodies or appearances but the appearance as a public self, as a public [00:36:40] role and presentation.

Since then, they're redone the First Ladies Exhibit to put much more emphasis on the role these women played, [00:36:50] the interesting engagement either in reform politics or campaign politics or various aspects of their role as hostess, as [00:37:01] leading the nation, as a mourner in the case of the many First Ladies whose husbands died in office or other— in other roles, so it's [00:37:11] become more broadly about women's history than it was, but there was a really interesting shift there around the 1970s, '80s, in the way [00:37:21] we looked at women's history, so I really— I sort of kept my distance from the First Ladies' dresses and I think the First Ladies' [00:37:30] dresses kept their distance from me and getting interested in this dress was seeing it— looking at it again and saying, you know, maybe there's more here [00:37:42] and it makes you wonder why when we see the First Ladies' dresses we don't see all the people who made them. They're not all haute couture things [00:37:49] and we know famous designers make the recent First Ladies' dresses, but who were the people who made those other dresses and I generalize that and say when [00:38:02] we look at certain kinds of artifacts, why do we see only the people who used them and not the people who made them.

Q: If you were to put the dress in conjunction [00:38:15] with another artifact that was not of the First Ladies' exhibits, if you were to juxtapose it with, let's say, maybe [00:38:24] the Jefferson desk, if you could put sort of two very disparate objects from early American 19th century together, would you do something like that?

Response: I [00:38:37] don't know. I'd be interested in juxtaposing it although I think I might juxtapose— I'm not sure with what artifact. Maybe though with a [00:38:47] very ordinary artifact. I mean, the other— There's another way you could go which is

compare it with costume or clothing worn by other women of [00:38:57] other classes and regional groups, religious groups of the time, fashion for middling women. I don't know if I'd contextualize [00:39:08] it with other famous people's things because it's intriguing as belonging to someone who's famous, but that kind of gets at our desire to see something [00:39:20] that's a relic. This is famous because it's connected with—

And I have that same emotional response. When you show me Abraham Lincoln's [00:39:27] hat, I get a little awestruck because Abraham Lincoln is the great, extraordinary man who exists up here and hats are these little ordinary things and it's [00:39:41] sort of wonderful to learn, of course, he was a real person, he had a hat, so that's one way of looking at artifacts but I would [00:39:48] want to contextualize something that's interesting because it's a famous person's artifact, like this dress. with things that are interesting in a different way, just to shift [00:39:58] the way we think, so it might be interesting to put it in the context of what other people wore at the time.

Q: That's very good. I wanted to know if [00:40:12] you wanted to say— I mean, this is sort of generic question about sort of what themes you associate with the dress.

Response: Oh, themes. [00:40:18]

Q: Historic themes you associate with the dress and we talked some about costume and we've talked some about the relationship with Elizabeth Keckley and Mary Todd Lincoln.

Response: Right.

Q: I wonder [00:40:27] if you wanted to say something about consumption, consumerism generally.

Response: Yeah, I do think it— This dress tells us something about the growth of consumption, [00:40:38] consumerism and women's role in it in the 19th century. It does connect, in fact, with business history and the history of the grand emporiums and department stores [00:40:51] that are growing up at this time. It connects with the history of credit, of what it— the way that Mrs. Lincoln became embroiled in debt in part [00:41:06] due to credit, partly because it was suddenly available to her in a way that it hadn't been before.

It certainly is connected with the history of consumption [00:41:17] in the way that it's described in the press. You can go back to *Harper's Weekly* and sometimes you'll see drawings of what the First [00:41:26] Ladies and other ladies at these various social events were wearing and frequently you'll read very precise details and that suggests [00:41:37] both a public interest in what First Ladies are wearing or what women wear and also a sense that everyone should know what the style is, which [00:41:49] is a kind of, you know, we take so for granted that there is this thing, this style, and, of course, there was style before this, but the notion that everyone [00:41:58] should always be in style as opposed to wearing the dress that you've got that works perfectly well except it's

not in style, you know, that's [00:42:08] something that's really becoming much stronger by this time period. That's interesting.

Q: Good. All right. Now, it's my turn to turn to the peanut [00:42:17] gallery and ask—

Response: I have a meeting in seven minutes, you guys.

Q: Style—was this a way of showing Europe we could do it or were we beyond Europe, ahead of [00:42:29] Europe, you know, that—

Response: We were behind Europe. The behind the— It's all a matter of perception in terms of fashion but, yes, Paris [00:42:42] was a style center and London was a style center, so—

Q: _____ answered the question _____ . . . talk to me.

Response: Oh, I have to talk to you. I [00:42:52] have to talk to you. Yeah, the center of fashion would've been Paris and, to some degree, London and in fact, Mary Todd Lincoln apparently said to people that she [00:43:01] wanted to dress like Princess Eugenie of France, that that was— it was being known as one of these elite ladies that was what she was aiming [00:43:12] at, so it was important and also she was aware of representing the United States to diplomats from foreign nations. At this moment when the United States is trying to stay [00:43:24] intact and get aid or at least prevent the Confederacy from getting aid from those foreign nations, so the notion that the dress has much to do [00:43:32] with it may seem sort of farfetched but that's certainly how Mrs. Lincoln thought of her role. She thought of it as very much a political statement that [00:43:43] she should be as much in fashion, as much au courant with European fashions as she could be.

Q: Thanks. All right. By my count, you've [00:43:54] have less than seven minutes—

Response: Oh, it's terrible.

Q: Until your meeting. Let me just ask for one second. Heather, [00:44:00] do you have _____ question was.

Q: I think they _____

Response: Good.

Q: Excellent.

Response: Okay, great. Thanks.

Q: I appreciate this [00:44:10] so much.

Response: Oh, no problem at all. It's really fun. Thanks.