

# MATERIAL WORLD

All in the Family at the Museum of International Folk Art

On our way out of the house to the Museum of International Folk Art's new exhibit, *Material World: Textiles and Dress from the Collection*, my thirteen-year-old daughter Poppy stopped me. "Dad," she said, frowning, "those pants look weird."

"What do you mean?" I looked down at my (very) easy-fit jeans covered in streaks of blue and white paint, holes the size of peacoat buttons dotting the knees and cuffs. "I don't look cool, like an artist maybe?" I flashed her my used car salesman grin, which she expertly ignored.

"Not really." Her face winced as if in serous pain. "They're too big, for one thing, and they're torn."

My wife Lala came out from the bedroom to her uncool husband's defense. "Your friends pay to have holes in their clothing. Your dad's are real."

"Well, whatever," Poppy answered, which could have been translated into so many unkind things that would bruise my inner hipster.

I didn't tell Poppy or Lala, but I'd recently pulled the old pair of Joe Boxer jeans out from the recesses of my closet and had the groin patched by a very kind seamstress. I had been inspired by a recent visit to the Jean Shop in New York City, where I saw celebrities paying \$200 and up to have their Japanese denim stained, distressed, and punctured, not unlike my own fashion understatement. I know very little about style, other than trends come and go and return again like the stomach flu, so I thought I'd throw caution to the wind and let my freak flag fly (just a little).

Driving to Museum Hill, we stopped to pick up Poppy's friend Emily, who, upon entering the car, continued with the fashion chatter. Her eighty-eight-year-old grandmother was visiting for the holidays and could not believe anyone wore shoes that weren't made from leather.

"So my sister and I had to convince her," Emily said excitedly from the back seat. "We told her, 'Grandma, people wear shoes made from plastic,' and she said, 'All my friends wear only leather.'"

"How long did that go on?" I asked, recalling the time I over-argued with my own father when he tried to pin the sins of his generation on mine.

"A while. We said 'plastic!', she said 'leather!', until my dad came in and ended the discussion on our side." Emily's victorious smile filled my rearview mirror.

Even though the conversation moved to other important items that fascinate thirteen-year-olds, like Sarah Jessica Parker filming a movie in Santa Fe and having a mole removed (and, according to the tabloids, keeping it), I thought it serendipitous



# material girls

By Robert Wilder ■ Photography by Addison Doty

that we had already discussed textiles and dress before even hitting the museum's parking lot. The show's premise is that the best way to understand the myriad world cultures is through textile art. Each of the 138 items chosen for the show tells a story, and we were all excited to see every one of them.

"We are living in a material world, and I am a material girl," I sang (with apologies to Madonna) once I saw the colorful sign inviting us into the show.

"Dad, please never do that again," Poppy pleaded.

"Can't say that I can make that promise," I said, and meant it. Fathers are born to embarrass their children.

## **Material World offers no prescribed way to wander,**

which I enjoyed. After the welcoming entryway (painted brown to showcase the striking colors of the exhibit), you could choose to walk left or straight or right. Poppy and Emily went left, and as any chaperones worth their salt would, we followed close behind. Like many teenagers in an unfamiliar locale, they were cautious at first, and when I asked Emily if she would wear that delicate black Philippine blouse behind the glass, she declined on the basis that it was "too old." Poppy said she might wear the garment, woven from the fiber of a relative of the banana, given the right occasion. But both agreed that the skirt next to it would not work for either one of them at any time in history.

Emily forgot her glasses and, at first, believed that a stringy garment adorned with shells and beads was made mostly from human hair. Upon closer examination, we saw that it was a

*rahat*, or skirt, circa 1900 from Egypt or Sudan. The *rahat* was worn by girls in the region who, once married, would exchange it for a white cotton dress or veil. I thought better than to make a wedding joke, given that my trousers had been established as an easy target for public mockery.

The girls started warming up, as I knew they would. What is so engaging about *Material World* is that you don't need to be Tom Ford to dig it. Visually, the different colors, patterns, and textures are stunning. Emily paused at a coat made in Hokkaido, Japan, around 1880. Being a text guy, I read that it was made from elm bark and cotton, and employed embroidery and applique techniques. I later read in the catalog that the elm bark cloth is called *attush*, perhaps the most famous of all Ainu (an indigenous, Caucasian-like ethnic group in Japan) textiles. Even though the designs, handed down from mother to daughter, have no significance other than to beautify the garment and please the gods, Emily connected with the black blocks and geometric white lines. "It's like a maze," she said, her gaze unflinching. That's when I knew the show was a success: it stopped teenagers dead in their tracks.

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### Left to right:

Blouse (detail), Mindanao, Philippines, Mandaya group, abaca, cotton, ca. 1900, gift of Mrs. Gregg Ward.

Coat, Hokkaido, Japan, elm bark, cotton, ca. 1880, gift of Sallie Wagner.

Blouse (detail), Sulawesi, Indonesia, To Kaili group, cotton, paper, mica, 20th century, International Folk Art Foundation.



**Curator Bobbie Sumberg may not agree with the comparison,** but *Material World* is like a chef's tasting menu, a tantalizing glimpse into the museum's extensive collection of textiles, stored in fifty-seven closets (they've counted) and numerous trunks and drawers. A few days before the show's opening, I was lucky to get a tour with Sumberg of the bowels of the museum, where the 20,000 textiles, ranging from household items to elaborate ceremonial wear, are stored. Walking into the storage room was like reexperiencing the final scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, where the bored warehouseman seals the wooden box and pushes it down a long aisle in the enormous warehouse. Sumberg, however, is neither bored nor boring, and I could actually view the textiles firsthand without government clearance or a permission slip from Steven Spielberg. Imagine row after row of vibrant fabrics, rolled and wrapped and stored in long, multitiered aisles. As Sumberg casually opened a white drawer, an explosion of color would emerge—a blouse from Indonesia, say, or a ceremonial bib from Norway. I didn't want to leave that room and suggested that Sumberg hold fund-raisers there.

## As Sumberg opened a drawer, an explosion of color emerged.

"Oh, we've been doing that for a while now," she said, far too kindly. My mistake was naive but honestly enthusiastic. I thought I knew something about the folk art museum since it is my family's favorite. We've experienced the meditative (and often dizzying) labyrinth out front; the Girard Wing and its staggering amount of amazing miniatures; and the Neutrogena Wing and all its cool exhibitions, such as *Curiouser and Curiouser: A Walk Through the Looking-Glass*, where they created trippy pieces based on Lewis Carroll's books. Still, I never realized the extent and history of the textile collection.

As Sumberg writes in *Textiles: Collection of the Museum of International Folk Art*, the stunning book that accompanies the show, Florence Dibell Bartlett donated her collection of art to start the Museum of International Folk Art in 1953. Concerned with collecting art that represented vanishing traditions, Bartlett purchased Palestinian dresses in Jerusalem, textiles in Sweden, Moroccan textiles and jewelry in North Africa, and Plains Indian

dresses in the United States. The museum has since built upon this incredible foundation by adding more Palestinian dresses, amulets, and hundreds of pieces from Mexico. Other acquisitions include such major gifts as the Shook Collection from Guatemala, 3,000 textiles and costumes from the Girard Collection, and 1,500 textiles and costume parts donated by Lloyd Cotsen as part of the Neutrogena Collection. I had no idea that the museum holds the second largest group of Swedish textiles from before 1850 in the United States, or that, as a whole, its textile collection is considered one of the finest in the world.

**My own little collection of people learned so much** from the show. The pilgrimage vest from Japan highlights how journeys to shrines and temples were documented using stamps. Two altar cloths from Mexico illustrate the difference between devotion in the rural home and the European influence on Mexican urban life. I even got to embarrass the two teens by pointing out a Nigerian undergarment worn by boys until puberty. Lala and I also gained some tangential knowledge triggered by pieces in *Material World*, ranging from details of Poppy and Emily's global studies teacher's extensive tour of South America to Emily's love of flax seed on yogurt (after seeing a garment made from flax).

Before we left, I asked the girls to choose their favorite pieces. Emily's was a red and white friendship quilt from Morristown, New Jersey. "The red just really makes it pop," she said, deriving joy from the resonant colors and patterns. "Pop it like it's hot?" I asked, a lame joke referring both to a 2004 Snoop Dogg song and a corny T-shirt we bought Poppy last year. Poppy chose as her favorite a baby's hammock from Colombia for its vibrant colors and what I refer to as the "cuteness factor," usually seen when we encounter babies, puppies, and films involving talking babies and puppies. Lucky for us, we have neither species in our home, and Lala and I plan to keep it that way.

Leaving the museum, I couldn't help but remember that Poppy wanted to hit an Albuquerque mall to go shopping for more modern textiles. I was glad that we had gone to *Material World* first so we could intelligently discuss the cultural implications of her purchases, and so I could get the chance to sing some more Madonna songs in public. ■

**ON EXHIBIT:** *Material World: Textiles and Dress from the Collection* continues at the Museum of International Folk Art through September 11, 2011.

### Left to right:

Quilt (detail), Morristown, New Jersey, cotton, 1870, gift of Mrs. A. K. Montgomery.

Skirt (detail), Egypt or Sudan, leather, shells, various beads, ca. 1900, gift of Florence Dibell Bartlett.

