Georgia: Welcome to season two of Catching the Editor's Eye. I'm your host, Georgia Alexia Benjou. For me, fashion and music have always been inseparable. My obsession with fashion took root as a teenager listening to British and American art and post-punk bands in the 1980s, groups like Japan, Susie and the Banshees, Kate Bush, Bauhaus, and Joy Division. They had incredible visual presence and created style moments that matched their sound, teaching me early on that clothing isn't just decoration. It tells a deeper story about who you are. That intersection of performance and fashion is why I was thrilled when the Denver Art Museum was named the exclusive venue in the Americas to host the V&A Museum's landmark Diva exhibition. And that brings us to today's very special episode.

Georgia: We're taking you behind the scenes of the Diva exhibition with the two women who brought it to the Denver Art Museum. Jill d' Alessandro, director and curator of the Avenir Institute of Textile Art and Fashion, and Holly Harmon, Interpretive Specialist for Architecture and Design. Together they represent the essential partnership behind turning a massive global exhibition into an unforgettable experience. Jill and Holly, welcome to the show.

Holly Harmon: Thank you for having us.

Jill D'Alessandro: Thank you. Pleasure to be here.

Georgia: Let's start off by talking about how you brought this exhibit to life. Most museum goers understand, I think, what a curator does, but less people realize how closely a curator and an interpretive specialist work together. How do your two roles intersect when turning an exhibition of this scale into a physical experience for visitors?

I'll ask that of both of you.

Jill D'Alessandro: From my point of view, I'm fairly new to the Denver Art Museum and it is unique to have interpretation specialists. So, it's been really fun and this is my first really large project at the Denver Art Museum. So, I would say we were in the trenches together, like day in and day out. And I think we just gelled that way.

And so**,** it was just constant conversation. For me, I think it was really about constant conversation. So, we were looking at things, we discussed things. it wasn't so much like I was being the curator and you were being the interpretation specialist. We'd look at something that needed to be resolved or discussed and we just talked about it, and then we were bringing our own backgrounds to the project.

Holly Harmon: Yeah, I would agree. I mean, Denver is definitely unique in the way that we incorporate interpretation from the inception of a project. And so, we really want to think about the holistic visitor experience.

I would say the way I usually frame it is that our curators are definitely experts in the objects and the art, and they really bring a deeper understanding and knowledge of what the subject is, and interpretive specialists are experts in visitor behavior and how people engage and how they interact. We really can bring an eye to how we can bring these stories to life and how we can create engaging moments within an exhibition that makes it relevant and personal for the visitors who are exploring.

Georgia: I think that's great. It sounds really collaborative, as I know from working with my producer Julie, it's nice having someone else, as you said, in the trenches with you. It's always nice having someone to bounce ideas off of or talk to about talk about things with. Jill, when you experienced the V & A's presentation in London, what made you say like we have to bring this to Denver and how did you approach changing the show for the American audience?

Jill D'Alessandro: In all honesty, I think the museum was already on board with bringing this show by the time I saw it in London. I went there with the eye like it's already been sold, like our director was so enthusiastic about the exhibition. So, when I went to see it, I was like: What works? What do I want to change? What would I want? How do I make it, a better create it for the Denver audience? Like how do I do that?

And so I was already going in with the mindset of this I really love, this I'd like to change, this is where I want to add, and really it was about telling the stories that I felt would make it a better fit for an American audience and then specifically a Denver audience.

And so we added about fifty objects and several and several divas, which has been written about and I've spoken pretty openly about is that one of the first things that came I came out of there was that there was no Latinas in the exhibition. From an American perspective, I was like “where are they”? There's a hundred divas. So it wasn't that we needed to add too much, but there were a few things that we definitely wanted to add and so we added some

Georgia: Yeah.

Jill D'Alessandro: We added Latinos. We were able to augment, significantly augment the section on Dolly Parton. They were already in conversation with Taylor Swift’s team, but we were able to

sort of create that narrative around Taylor Swift. And then, and then there's like little things that we did throughout the exhibition that you might not even know.

But you know, I like to say that like curating is a lot like art making and I think everybody thinks of it is like you've got these you've got ideas, but then there's also something that's just really rooted in practicality, right? How much could we really, financially and logistically, what could we add, And so, we added seven video clips and I think they were really important video clips. We added Divine to a section and we added Rhythm Nation. We added ANNA MAE WONG. We put some of our rock posters in the exhibition. We bought some album covers, so there are little things we did. Not big things,

Georgia: Yeah.

Jill D'Alessandro: Just here and there.

Georgia: I think what's interesting is the vast amount of as you just said, the type of objects you're looking at, it's not just garments; its album covers, it's these beautiful photographs, the ANNA MAE WONG one actually was I thought really lovely.

I was surprised I think at the range of objects included in this exhibition. You've got so many different types of objects and then trying to whittle that down into the essential. That that I thought that was really interesting.

Holly Harmon: Yeah.

Georgia: Holly, as a follow-up to that, from an interpretive angle, how did adding iconic American figures into the exhibition, how did that shift the storytelling or the flow of the exhibition for visitors?

Holly Harmon: Yeah, that's a great question. I would say largely we tried to work within the larger story and the sort of structure that the V&A had created. And so really we thought carefully about divas that would amplify the narrative that was already in place, which is why we don't have a section of Latina divas. Instead, we wanted to spread them throughout the exhibition so that as we're talking about these different themes related to the divas and how they express themselves, that there would be this amplification and this more representation. And so, for me, it was really

about making space so that especially our Latina audiences can find resonance within these works as well.

Georgia: Now that we've kind of discussed how the exhibition came together, let's shift gears to talk about the performance art itself and how these garments kind of function in that space. And I'll put my first question to Jill: When a performer steps onto the stage, how does what they wear move beyond just simple adornment to become an active piece of storytelling for that artist?

Jill D'Alessandro: Well, that's a great question. I I think that they step into a role, I really think the role of opera, right? In the context of this exhibition and in actually in working on this exhibition and actually this question has made me think about this more is that was opera really the first time that we're seeing a musical performer adopting a role and having a costume and performing. And so, I think that it is something about role playing, right? And I think a lot of these performers and particularly some of today's pop stars they are using costume as a multimedia experience, right? And so, there's something very theatrical about their stage performance.

You spoke about the kind of music that you listen to; I come out of the sort of classic rock genre. I'm used to my musicians in jeans and t shirts, the diva in the show that I've seen the most is JOAN BAEZ. So it is really like I have to put my curatorial hat on to answer that question. So, I think get it gets down it gets to the point where it's multiple artistic expressions at the same time, right?

Jill D'Alessandro: It's theater, it's singing, it's stagecraft. and so all this kind of comes together for that experience.

Georgia: I think really fascinating. I was thrilled to see the SIOUXSIE SIOUX. I think Julie and I were both thrilled to see SIOUXSIE in there and P J Harvey, those were the two that we wrote.

Jill D'Alessandro: Yeah. And they sound so good together. We were like Do you know that we love that? We actually, 'cause we reshuffle, like or we had to reorganize for our space. And so, the we put the three musicians together and then they're all on the same soundtrack with Billy Eilish and we're like, oh no, PJ Harvey's with I'm sorry, I'm wrong about that. Sorry.

Georgia: I think she's a little later in the

Jill D'Alessandro: She's with Patty Smith, yeah.

Holly Harmon: Patty Smith. Yeah. But right next to Susie and Billy and Yeah, and Debbie, of course. All of our divas who need no last names.

Georgia: Building off of that question, and this is again to Jill, stage attire has long been a tool for rebellion and pushing boundaries. So how have iconic performers in this exhibition used their style to challenge traditional societal expectations around gender, status, or beauty?

Jill D'Alessandro: Well, I think following up on the last question, what's also very interesting is these stars like Grace Jones, when she her relationship with ISSEY MIYAKE, and she was one of his models first while she was starting her musical career, and the BUSTIER, the sculpted BUSTIER that's in in the exhibition, was from a runway line.

And so, I think that's also really interesting where something can come off the runway and be worn on the stage. And because of the sort of magnetism of the diva that it presents itself as stage costume when it really it is also, it is fashion. And so, I think it's a a lot about their magnetism. And, of course, she was just somebody who's like almost futuristic in her sensibility, in her presentation and being sort of androgynous and strong and a strong woman. She's right next to Pink and which is really interesting. And then one of the pieces from her fun house tour. So Pink is there in her fun house tour outfit and she's one of the jackets is was an

Georgia: Very yes.

Jill D'Alessandro: created by BOB MACKIE but is an homage to Freddie Mercury. And so here you have, a strong athletic woman wearing a costume, like wearing something that's an homage to a flamboyant gay man. And you know, Freddie Mercury famously says, I have more in com with what's it, Holly, do you remember the quote? I have more in common with

Holly Harmon: With Liza Minnelli than Led Zeppelin.

Jill D'Alessandro: And so there's that kind of fluidity. I actually think that question's better for Holly, to be honest. but there is that kind of fluidity that's in the kind of diva persona and which honestly you know, I got this idea from Holly, so I'll let her say, but it traces all the way back to the pants roles or opera singers male roles and so that's always been part of the diva experience.

Georgia: Holly, do you want to add anything?

Holly Harmon: Yeah, absolutely. Even Sarah Bernhardt, who's featured in the show, she took on very challenging and complex roles, including Joan of Arc, but she also played male roles like Hamlet. and so I think very early in our in our story and in Diva history, they're really challenging the stereotypes around gender incredibly early to push those boundaries and to think about how women can really I would say gain more liberation, right? I mean, we're also talking about a time before women had the right to vote, before we had equality with men in the workplace. And so, these women were really early pioneers in thinking about how we can bring equality through sort of representation and costume and performance is a absolutely a part of that.

Georgia: I would totally agree with that Holly, we're kind of touched on this just briefly, but the word diva carries a lot of cultural weight, right? From either empowerment to sometimes negative. From an interpretive standpoint, how do you guide visitors to look beyond the surface glamour and see how these performers strategically use fashion to take control of their own image and story.

Holly Harmon: I think the way that we do it is really through the storytelling. We spent a lot of time with this show in particular thinking about the labels and the text that people will read as they explore this exhibition and really wanting to create a narrative that carries through. As Jill was saying, there's a lot of connections between Act One, which is our more historic section, looking at how the diva originated and how that term came to these sort of negative connotations, which was really a result of this sort of women's rights movement and women fighting for the right to vote. We see that evolve, but then we see how in later Act Two, which is our more contemporary performers, really take on that as this term of empowerment and how divas do run the world. I mean, it is incredible to see what these women have accomplished.

And so, we really try to tell stories through the exhibition. We use text, but we also use graphics, paint color, lighting, everything that you see in an exhibition is a decision that's been made by at least five people, I would say, as we collaborate together to create this experience. And so, we hope that that is all sort of invisible in a way to visitors as they're exploring, but really everything that goes into it is really designed to help create a a an experience. And in Diva, we really wanted one that would be empowering and uplifting for women and joyful as they explore this incredible history.

Georgia: And I think that definitely happened. I felt that way when I was leaving, especially at this time right now that we're kind of living through I left there feeling, like you said, uplifted. It was positive.

Jill, I know you've curated both runway haute couture and now obviously performance clothing or attire. Where do you see the line between high fashion and more performance costume blurring today.

Jill D'Alessandro: Yeah, I I mean that's a great question. I think that, to be honest, the earliest like sort of first phase of of couture. Lucille Lucille or LUCY DUFF-GORDON, She's a British designer, first wave of designers. And she actually came out of theater and started to do so in the 1900s, she was actually doing theatrical performances as her runway show.

So, there is a really long history between the relationship between the costume designer and the fashion designer. And so many of the great couturiers, if it's Yves Saint Laurent or Christian Lacroix or Jean-Paul Gaultier, also designed both for theater and runway.

But interestingly, from an American perspective, which is so based in the ready to wear and very functional clothes. A designer like BOB MACKIE showed twice a year in New York Fashion Week for twenty years. And nobody ever thought of him as a fashion designer.

It's always been a blur and I love the fact that great piece, which MILEY CYRUS wore when she won the Grammy Award, it was from his 2002 runway collection that he did about Broadway. So, there's always been a blur. I do think

Jill D'Alessandro: the exhibition has a wide swath of different forms of fashion or costumes. So, we have opera costume, we have Hollywood designs, we have people's personal wardrobe, and we have runway looks, red carpet looks. And I think what's interesting and sort of is that the red carpet has become almost a stage into itself. Right. some of those pieces that you might go into the exhibition and think, my goodness, you know, what's what performance did she wear that in? And be like, the Met Gala. That performance of walking up the steps of the Met of the Met, right? So, like Rihanna's two two ensembles that she wore to the Met Gala

Georgia: Yes, definitely.

Georgia: Yeah.

Georgia: Right.

Jill D'Alessandro: And they are as dramatic as any of the of the stage costumes. So, I think it has a lot to do with the individual. So, it I guess what you're saying is that we are in this moment where your personal wardrobe can be as dramatic as a stage costume and your stage costume can be as

simple as as everyday wardrobe, which is actually really interesting when you go and study. If you look at Rihanna lent five costumes to the exhibition. And the most simple one is actually what she wore on stage.

Georgia: And social media in a way is almost created another layer to that, right? It's your social accounts are almost like another stage, right? Especially for a performer. So that's interesting.

Georgia: Holly, how do you take those theatrical garments and recreate like the lighting, the drama, the energy of a live show inside what is a very quiet museum space?

Holly Harmon: I would say in DIVA particularly, we really went over the top with graphics, which is very the Diva way. I think our designer, graphic designer Matt Rue created this illusion to the spotlight. And so, as you go through, you'll see these sort of shapes on the wall and shapes that these diva's images appear in, and that was really designed to mimic this idea of the spotlight and the diva in the spotlight. And so, we're really trying to give her her stage.

But in addition, as I said, we have lighting that's very different from our normal shows. You can see some of the platforms are lit from below. We really tried to create drama through that. Paint color absolutely plays a role. And so, we really, like I said, think holistically about the design and how we can communicate a feeling through that. We really wanted it to feel like a lively space.

One thing I'll also share, I think that really adds to that is the musical component to the exhibition, which is not in the space, but it is an audio experience that you listen to as you go through. It's triggered by beacons. So, as you're looking at a particular diva, you'll hear music from that diva and when you look at a video, the headphone will sync to the video. And so, I think that also creates an additional layer that really enlivens this show. But funnily enough, if you're going through without the headphones, it's such a quiet exhibition. And so, I really recommend take the headphones, do the full experience. It will not be the same without it.

Georgia: Julie and I were saying we need to go back to see the exhibition because we were so busy trying to listen to I think Jill's talking when we went through the media preview that we were like, Oh, we need to go back and actually listen to the music on the headphones because I love that that it syncs to the to whatever showcase you're in front of or vitrine or space.

Jill D'Alessandro: Yep. I just wanted to follow up on that one of the other things that we did, and again, because we wanted to, as you were saying, just the climate right now that we really wanted the exhibition to be uplifting and fun. And one of the things that we did, and because we had 30%

more space here than at the Victoria & Albert, we made our videos larger. And so, where they might have a screen on the wall, we were able to project them large. And that was something that Holly and I were like, no, let's move that there so that we can have more space until we'd have a larger video. And so, we were really amping that up. And also, because, you know, the diva's art form is performance, is song, it's stage. And so, we really wanted to show that as much as possible. And also for that interpretation, but also like How do you create an environment that's lively?

Georgia: Jill, historically, how have divas acted as champions for non-mainstream designers? You know, kind of bypassing the corporate fashion gatekeepers and how does that work with their own visual identity?

Jill D'Alessandro: Well, I think that a lot of these individuals, it's through creating personal relationships. I think it's happened a little bit organically. I can speak best to the divas in the exhibition and what I know of their relationships with designers.

For example, BOB MACKIE is somebody who was really, despite the fact of have being such a household name, he wasn't really part of fashion, he was an independent designer and, he worked very closely with a lot of a lot of the stars, but he was really sort of independent. I think that one of the things that I learned from studying him and his relationships and getting to know JOE MCFATE, who was his right hand for twenty-six years. And so stars went to him because they could work directly with him and get to know them.

I think the other example is that Dolly Parton worked with a man, Tony Chase, for 15 years. He really helped develop her style, her signature style, which was sort of, a bedazzled Western style, right? She didn't dress like anybody else. She had her own style.

And so, I think it's about having those personal relationships. And I think that there's a lot of trust in it, right? And then I we mentioned before that ISSEY MIYAKE and Grace Jones had this great friendship. But I also think that some of those, mainstream or sort of really well-known designers are also having their relationships with with their with their stars. When I worked on the Gaultier show, and I got to meet Jean Paul Gaultier and he told me that actually it was Madonna's idea to put the cone bra on men—it was not his. So I have to say that they have these relationships. And I think that again, you know, like finds like, right? They find the person who they they can work with and who they trust and who they can build image together.

Georgia: I think for me, the other part that's been kind of fascinating about the exhibition is that, stage clothes I always think of as being made or built for movement, right? They're not necessarily, like haute couture, eventually something to be part of an archive. They have to withstand like sweat, movement, quick changes. So, Jill, when these garments transition from say the stage to the

museum, what are you finding a lot of hidden engineering or structural engineering in them? Like reinforced panels or corsetry or anything like that?

Jill D'Alessandro: So, this is kind of a fun thing about the Victoria & Albert, which is as a museum that tours fashion exhibitions, they have mastered sending a dressed mannequin. So, the mannequins all come in their own individual crate and that they have figured out how to keep them like in them, like in the in the crate. So, I haven't gotten to see the inside of too many of the fashions, but I will say this is that I have had the opportunity to see a number of Bob Mackie designs. And you're absolutely right,

Georgia: Really?

Jill D'Alessandro: I have never seen such strong nude stretch nylon—in my life. They're like sheer but like armor. I don't know if they're made, what's that queve or whatever that's called. That's it. Kevlar.

Georgia: Kevlar?

Jill D'Alessandro: We did get to dress Dolly Parton's costumes. And it is a very strong stretch nylon in a lot of these designs. And then the other thing is which I didn't see in any of these pieces again because I wasn't part of it, but a lot of Velcro. You're not going to have a nice little zipper; you're going to have Velcros if there if there's going to be a lot of stage changes.

Georgia: That makes sense.

You just have to hope that Velcro holds.

Georgia: Following up on that a little bit, because stage lighting is built to create an illusion from say fifty feet away or whatever, but the museum visitor is standing, you know, inches say from the glass. What is something surprising about these garments that people only realize up close? Is it like the scale? I mean, I know I when I looked at a bunch of the garments, I was like, God, this person is so small in real life.

Jill D'Alessandro: I will say this, that a lot of a lot of the stars are small. A lot of small stars. I mean that they are petite. And then in fact I love to point out that it was Carmen Miranda who I think was five one (5'1"), she is the one who popularized the platform shoe.

Georgia: Yeah.

Jill D'Alessandro: She popularized the platform shoe in the 1940s. She was not the first person it was designed for. It was actually designed for another star, another diva, for Judy Garland, but it was Carmen Miranda, and she actually did advertisements for platform shoes. So, they are very they are very small.

I will also say I in the Hollywood section, that aha moment that I had was how beautiful things were made. And I it might be because of seventy years has gone by and the quality of craftsmanship at the time, but one of my favorite, one of the things that really took my breath away in how beautifully made it was is Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra costume and that cape is exquisite. And if you can get close up and I keep pointing this out and people are like, I can't see it, but maybe bring your magnifying glass. No, but so it's this trapunto-like shaped embroidery, and then it's embroidered in blue thread. And then there's four different types of sequins sewn into the embroidery. And some of them are shaped like little stars.

Georgia: I'll have to go back to see that 'cause yes, I don't think I picked up on that when I saw it. I thought the Josephine Baker piece, it was a beaded coat. I thought that was amazing.

Jill D'Alessandro: Yeah. Yeah. Yes.

Jill D'Alessandro: Yeah, and that's interesting. So we actually, the museum acquired that from auction last year, specifically to put it into the exhibition, and it was from her personal wardrobe. And I think that this is a really interesting thing when we talk about personal wardrobe and stage costume. So, Josephine Baker, who was like kind of known for this sort of show girl, you know, sort of risqué on stage in her own personal wardrobe

Jill D'Alessandro: She was highly sophisticated and and also later stage presence was also highly sophisticated. She dressed to project herself as a grand dame of high society, which she was. And she wore a lot of poiret, she a lot of wore a lot of VIONNET, and she was personal friends with with Christian Dior.

And so we actually acquired the piece, the auction had some of her stage costume, but we wanted to show her in this kind of in this totality, right? We have a photograph of her in her as in her uniform. she worked for the French Resistance. She was such a multifaceted person.

And in a similar way that Lady Gaga, you have her Valentino gown that she wore to the Golden Globes, and then next to her is a photograph of her in the slime dress. These divas are so multifaceted, and they can have and they use fashion to show how multifaceted they are.

Georgia: Holly, through your tour and docent program, what is the one design detail or behind the scenes story that changes how visitors see fashion as an art form?

Holly Harmon: There are so many incredible stories in the show. For me, like looking at the fashion by itself doesn't necessarily tell that story. And so that's what the tour can help people reveal those amazing connections.

I would say one that I always come back to is the Tina Turner flame dress that was designed by Bob Mackie. I just think it's an incredible piece, and when you know her story of being in an abusive relationship, coming out of that. She was in her 40s at the time. People were like, she's too old for a comeback, which seems crazy. But she commissioned Bob Mackie to create this look for her and wanted it to be inspired by a Phoenix rising from the ashes. And I think the dress totally captures that and it really has that spirit to it. And when you see her I haven't seen her perform, the photos of her performing in the dress, you can see her come to life. Being able to tie sort of those personal relevance with these fashion moments, I to me that's what really brings this show to life.

Georgia: Yeah. That's a really good one. I think that the Tina Turner one. I think we were talking about this when we were had wrapped Julie and I had wrapped up seeing the exhibition. But I remember as a kid, like watching the variety shows in like the seventies, and any time we knew Tina Turner was going to be on, my sister and I were just glued to the TV so that we could watch her dance.

Holly Harmon: Absolutely. And in a design that was made to show off those dance moves, right? I mean when you also think about the way that it's fringed and her legs and it moves with her. I mean, yes, absolutely. There's like a a a number of ways you can interpret it.

Georgia: And her legs.

Georgia: That's awesome. As we wrap this conversation up, my last question for both of you is if emerging designer emerging designers, brand founders, and fashion lovers take away just one

lesson from how these legendary figures curated their public identity and stage style, what should it be? That's for both of you.

Jill D'Alessandro: So, what I would say is that the exhibition isn't about one diva, it's about the concept of diva. And what it shows is that there's many ways to be fabulous and to be exceptional. And that you can so be your authentic self.

And also, take the lessons from Madonna, from Lady Gaga, it's okay to change. You can dress one way one day to be one person and another and if that's your authentic self. So, what I would say is be true to yourself, take chances and and if it doesn't work, be someone else the next day.

Holly Harmon: I think that's great advice. I think the the big lesson for me from the Divas, I I think very much aligns with what Jill said. It's to be unapologetically you. I think it is making space for people to be individuals, to express themselves in ways that challenge us and push us into new directions. But that ultimately can lead to incredible social and cultural change. And so yeah, there's no reason to hide who you are and to not be yourself.

Georgia: I think that's great advice because I think fashion has been in such a serious place for so long. And everything, you know, every show season it's like make or break. These stage performers obviously take their stagecraft very seriously. But I think the fun aspect of it and like you said, trying new things and being who you are and be someone else the next day if what you did before didn't work. I think that's great advice and it tells people they can take risks, right? I love that.

Thank you so much, Jill and Holly, for joining us today and opening the doors to Diva at the Denver Art Museum. And a special shout out and thank you to the Denver Art Museum's Communications and Media Relations Senior Manager Andy Sinclair for arranging this interview.

And Thank you so much for joining us. I'm your host, Georgia Alexia Benjou. This podcast was produced by Julie Bassignani of Jabber Production. Theme music and audio post production by Coupe Studios Music and Sound Design. If you like what you heard, leave us a 5 star review and share with a friend and be sure to follow this podcast so you don't miss any upcoming episodes.