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RECREATED MARTHA WASHINGTON GOWN ON DISPLAY AT THE WADSWORTH ATHENEUM IN HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

Gown made by material culture historian Dr. Cynthia E. Chin is based off of an original in the collection of the New Hampshire Historical Society

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT, July 9, 2024 Early American material culture historian Dr. Cynthia E. Chin created a completely handsewn replica of a purple silk gown owned by Martha Custis Washington (1731-1802). It is on view in the “New Nation, Many Hands” exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut from July 2nd to November 8th, 2024. “New Nation, Many Hands” is curated by Philippe L.B. Halbert, PhD., the Richard Koopman Associate Curator of American Decorative Arts at the Wadsworth Atheneum.

The original gown is in the collection of the New Hampshire Historical Society and is one of only three surviving dresses with histories of ownership by Washington. Created from an older textile, it was made in the late 1750s to early 1760s when Washington was in her late twenties to early thirties. Evidence suggests the gown was remade during the American Revolution (1775-1783), and possibly worn during Washington’s tenure as First Lady from 1789 to 1797.

Dr. Chin’s meticulous recreation was based on her eight years of research of the original object. Close analysis of the original garment and its alterations, some of which were most likely undertaken by enslaved seamstresses laboring on the Washingtons’ Mount Vernon estate, reveal evidence of how the gown was constructed when it was new, and how Washington may have appeared when she was young.

“I wanted to recreate the gown as it may have appeared unworn and unaltered,” says Cynthia Chin. “This approach to replication and methodology helps us understand how the original object would have looked prior to the layers of alterations and damage to the original, and allows us to view a younger Martha Washington in such a fresh light. It also prevents the re-enacting of forced labor present in the original object.”

“Overall, my work remembers and honors the ‘many hands’ that created our new American democracy.”

The project began when Dr. Chin was a 2020-2021 Research Fellow at the George Washington Presidential Library at Mount Vernon. It was independently funded by Dr. Chin. She commissioned the Gainsborough Silk Weaving Company in Suffolk, UK to replicate the original textile specifically for this project.

The original gown, on loan from the New Hampshire Historical Society, is on view in the Donald W. Reynolds Museum at George Washington’s Mount Vernon in Mount Vernon, Virginia from June 6th to December 5th, 2024.

Dr. Chin will be giving a public lecture at the Wadsworth Atheneum on September 15th, 2024. Tickets can be found on: <https://www.thewadsworth.org/event/public-lecture-off-the-dressmakers-needle-recreating-martha-washingtons-purple-silk-gown-and-recovering-the-lives-within-with-cynthia-e-chin>.

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Dr. Cynthia E. Chin is an early American material culture historian. Formerly on staff at George Washington’s Mount Vernon, she was a 2023-2024 Winterthur Fellow and a 2020-2021 Research Fellow at the George Washington Presidential Library at Mount Vernon. She is currently a PhD researcher at the University of Glasgow. Learn more about her work on cynthiachin.com.

For inquiries regarding The Wadsworth Atheneum, please contact media@thewadsworth.org. For inquiries regarding the “New Nation, Many Hands” exhibition, please contact Philippe.Halbert@TheWadsworth.org.

PHOTOS

To request photos for use in digital or print publications or as downloads for institutional files, please contact Cynthia Chin cynthia.e.chin@gmail.com.



Photo 5 Caption: Back of the gown in the maker's home. Photo by Cynthia Chin.



Photo 2 Caption: Detail of wool-padded serpentine neckline trim. Photo by Cynthia Chin.



Photo 6 Caption: Side and back view of the gown installed in “New Nation, Many Hands” at the Wadsworth Atheneum. Photo by Andrew Kirk.



Photo 10 Caption: Side front view of the gown installed in “New Nation, Many Hands” at the Wadsworth Atheneum. Photo by Andrew Kirk.



Photo 9 Caption: Detail of the gown bodice installed in “New Nation, Many Hands” at the Wadsworth Atheneum. Photo by Andrew Kirk.



Photo 3 Caption: Detail of the gown bodice back and skirt pleats. Photo by Cynthia Chin.



Photo 4 Caption: Full back view of the gown in the maker's home. Photo by Cynthia Chin.



Photo 7 Caption: Front bodice detail in the maker's home. Photo by Cynthia Chin.



Photo 8 Caption: Side view of the gown installed in “New Nation, Many Hands” at the Wadsworth Atheneum. Photo by Andrew Kirk.



Photo 11 Caption: Full front view of the gown and labels, installed in “New Nation, Many Hands” at the Wadsworth Atheneum. Photo by Andrew Kirk.



Photo 1 Caption: The gown and maker Cynthia Chin in “New Nation, Many Hands” at the Wadsworth Atheneum. Photo by Andrew Kirk.