

RISD MUSEUM

Inherent Vice, January 29, 2022–July 10, 2022

Inherent vice, also known as inherent fault, is the tendency in an object or material to deteriorate or self-destruct because of its intrinsic internal characteristics, including weak construction, poor quality or unstable materials, and incompatibility of different materials within an object.

—American Institute for Conservation (2021)

This project was born of conversations about how we as conservators and curators can make our behind-the-scenes work more accessible. Though museums typically present meticulously mounted garments in clean, well-lit galleries, their storage closets are full of shattered silk, dry-rotted cotton, degraded net, and corroded beads—all examples of inherent vice.

Never meant to be with us indefinitely, the damaged garments on view here are currently all candidates for deaccession, the formal process of removal from a museum collection. The label texts describing these once-luxurious and now-ghostly gowns address their current conservation issues as well as their origins during America's Gilded Age (1870s–1910s). An era of wealth and opulence, the Gilded Age was a time of enormous economic growth across the United States. Natural resources were extracted, factories were built, and fortunes were made. In this societal context, inherent vice also existed on many levels, including toxic materialism, gross economic disparities, corrupt politics, and white-supremacist social and racial hierarchies. The inherent-vice metaphor also extends to the Gilded Age foundations of many institutions, including this museum, which was founded in 1877 by (and in many ways for) Providence's elite.

Inherent Vice encompasses this yearlong exhibition, deaccessioning and other collections-care initiatives, community-building conversations, and related RISD courses and creative output produced therein. As a whole, the project reframes collections care as a reparative, empathetic act that embraces both literal and metaphorical cracks as opportunities for revealing and making room for neglected narratives.

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CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Likely Filipino for the American market

Day Dress, 1909

Cotton plain weave (batiste) with cotton lace inserts

Gift of Mrs. John B. Irwin 58.167.4

Material Context

This dress bears such extensive staining, discoloration, and dry rot that its cotton fibers are now structurally unsound. According to museum professional standards, every conservation treatment should be reversible, and should not damage original material. Many museums, however, wash and bleach garments to reduce stains and remove soil. Because the fabric of this dress is so fragile, cleaning it would likely result in holes and other significant, irreversible damage.

Social Context

From the alternating vertical bands of tucked batiste and Valenciennes lace to the ruffled flounce at the hem, this casual day dress was expertly hand-sewn, very possibly by women garment workers in the Philippines. After the Philippine-American War (1899–1902), lingerie trade to the US surged, and detailed undergarments and lingerie dresses such as this example flooded the market. Lingerie advertisements in women’s magazines celebrated the delicate handwork produced by Filipino women, though few Americans considered the unlivable wages these women were paid to sew garments for wealthy Western consumers.



American

Evening Dress, 1880s-1890s

Silk damask with silk velvet trim, embellished with glass beads, sequins, and silk-floss embroidery

Gift of Lila and Martha Wetherbee D56.203.31.ab

Material Context

This dress has seen some action. There is heavy staining throughout, and the silk lining of the skirt has completely shattered. Garments differ from other works of art—before entering museum collections, they often were worn, sweated in, and treated as functional objects. They may have been tucked away for years, a precious link to



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memories, events, or loved ones. Clothing can be difficult to part with, even when it is damaged. Stains and wear speak to the history of a piece.

Social Context

A world of romantic, exoticized references resides in this fanciful evening dress. The slashing on the sleeves and stomacher (the central panel on the bodice) borrows from European fashions from the 1600s and 1700s, while the embroidered and patterned silk indiscriminately melds Japanese and Chinese design vocabularies. The widespread import and export of goods in the late 1800s led to what has been called the “intimacies of four continents.” Wealthy white consumption of textiles connected Europe and the Americas to Asia in particular, while Western silhouettes, like this one, created cultural hierarchies that placed Euro-American fashion above the “traditional” clothing of the rest of the world.

Jacques Doucet, designer

French, 1853-1929

Dress, ca. 1902

Silk satin with silk chiffon overlay, embellished with handmade cotton lace, glass beads, silk velvet ribbon, and celluloid sequins

Gift of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities
D60.034.69.ab

Material Context

The shredding and losses in this dress are the inevitable result of how its fabric was produced. During the late 1800s, when silk was sold by weight, textile manufacturers sought to increase profits by dipping silk in tin salts and sodium phosphate. This initially makes the yarn heavier, crisper, and more lustrous, but over time, that process rendered it increasingly brittle and light-sensitive. This garment’s self-destruction has become as much a part of its story as its sleeves, sequins, or rosettes. Conservators continue to search for ways to stabilize weighted silk, but there is currently no effective treatment to slow or halt the damage.

Social Context

Most fashion histories center Jacques Doucet’s atelier as the heart of the Paris fashion world in the early 20th century, especially for American women yearning to embody French style and allure. If you squint your eyes and ignore the tangle of shredded silk, you will likely



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notice how the layered excess of sequins, rhinestones, and pearls add

luster to the ethereal lace and chiffon. This dress's decadent accumulation, now caving in upon itself, could be seen as mirroring the rise and decline of industrial capitalism, whose wealthy early beneficiaries indiscriminately amassed and consumed goods from around the world, leaving a long history of oppressive labor practices and environmental problems in their wake.

French or American

Evening Dress, ca. 1855

Silk satin bodice; silk tulle overskirt embellished with lamella metallic stars and gold metallic purl; silk satin and silk velvet trim

Museum Collection S83.015

Material Context

This dress's construction suggests that it was made quickly, without considering longevity. The stitches on the outside are perfect and precise, while on the inside, where the stitches are concealed, the construction is irregular. Its materials are also structurally incompatible—the lightweight silk tulle, now brittle, can no longer bear the weight of the metal spangles.

Preserving items that are not intended to last can pose a philosophical quandary: when we set out to replace lost material, at what point have we constructed an entirely new garment?

Social Context

It requires imagination to see beyond the rotten, soiled silk net that sheds fibers and metal spangles every time this poor dress is moved. Once it was a confection of frothy tulle, sparkling star-shaped spangles, and hyacinth-colored velvet trim—a ball gown seemingly made for a princess. It appears to have been sewn hastily, perhaps for an important society occasion that had all the city's fashionable dressmakers hustling at once. All that mattered was the effect for one night. Even 170 years ago, fast fashion had a grip on consumers.



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American

Dress, 1911

Silk satin with silk net overlay, embellished with faux-jet glass beads
Museum Collection DS84.139

Material Context

This dress suffers from structural weaknesses, with significant losses at the shoulder line, but its faux-jet glass beads are actively causing damage. Exemplifying what conservators call glass disease, the beads are inherently unstable. Their chemical breakdown is causing alkali deposits to leach out, forming the gray film that has discolored and weakened the silk net and is rubbing off on other items. Not only is this dress becoming more fragile every day, but it poses a danger to the items stored alongside it.

Social Context

Even in mourning, the woman who wore this dress cut a fashionable figure that signaled privilege. Her dress of silk satin is studded with glass beads made to imitate jet, a gemstone materially similar to coal. It is tempting today to associate the destructiveness of these coal-black beads with the corrosive inequities of the Gilded Age. During that era, many fortunes were made from the coal industry, which actively repressed workers' rights. The wealthy woman who wore this dress likely stayed at some remove from the social and economic realities of her day. These would have included the experiences of the lower-status women who labored in the dressmaker's studio.



B. Altman Co.

New York, 1865 - 1989

Cape, ca. 1904

Silk velvet exterior with cotton lace trim and silk lining
Museum Collection S1986.047

Early 1900s silk lining fabric often suffers from inherent vice—or irreversible deterioration—due to the weighting and dyeing processes it was subjected to earlier. This garment is a perfect example of the damage caused by weighting, leaving a once smooth and luxurious textile shredded and brittle.



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House of Worth

Paris, 1858-1952

Ball Gown, ca. 1900

Silk satin brocade with silk satin trim

Gift of the grand-daughters of Mrs. Robert Ives Gammel: Mrs. Carlton R. Mabley, Jr., and Mrs. Curtis B. Brooks D67.005.12ab

Material Context

Though this dress appears pristine, close inspection reveals tightly clustered cracks running vertically throughout the silk satin of the skirt and bodice. The interior of this garment suggests it was rarely, if ever, worn, and museum's records state that it has never been on display. As this garment lived its entire life anticipating a future use, its weighted silk self-destructed. This inevitable, irreversible process speaks to the ironies of preservation. We may keep something forever, waiting for the right moment to savor it, only to discover that it has already rotted away, unseen, in storage.

Social Context

Look carefully for the cracks in this ball gown, which stuns the eye with its jacquard-woven textile of realistic roses blooming against a glistening off-white satin. At the turn of the last century, silk fabrics—even the most expensive examples, like this one—often were weighted with corrosive metallic salts. This gown's original design, by the Paris-based couturier House of Worth, appears to have been altered to reference 18th-century French court dress, perhaps for a masquerade ball. Such "fancy dress" occasions provided ways for the privileged and moneyed to indulge aristocratic fantasies, distancing themselves from the stark socioeconomic realities of the Gilded Age.



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Rose Carraer-Eastman

American, active in Providence ca. 1896 – 1940s

Wedding Dress, 1909

Silk satin embellished with silk embroidery and handmade cotton lace applied to silk net

Gift of Mrs. Donald E. Jackson, Jr. D59.055.1

Material Context

In addition to the soiling, discoloration, and losses throughout the tulle net overlay on the bodice of this wedding dress, its weighted silk satin is yellowed, brittle, and severely shredded.

Wedding dresses are overrepresented in museum costume collections. Imbued with memory, they are saved, passed down within families, and often offered to cultural institutions before being thrown away. In many cases, as here, their material ephemerality is at odds with sentimental associations ascribed to them.

Social Context

Now in unsalvageable condition, this wedding dress made by Providence dressmaker Rose Carraer-Eastman shows exquisite craft and a trendy silhouette. The hobble skirt, close-fitting from the hips to the knees, has an interior elastic that would have reduced the wearer's movement to small steps, a style popularized by Parisian designer Paul Poiret and adopted widely in Europe and America between 1908 and 1914. Fine details, inside and out, highlight the talent of dressmakers such as Carraer-Eastman, who brought the vision of international designers to local communities.

