

THE RADAR CULTURE

BY ANNE SPIELMAN

CHIC-AGO!

Want a history lesson? A new exhibit celebrates the city's love affair with fashion

Carrie Lannon never imagined the dress she wore to chair the Fashion Group International of Chicago's 13th annual gala in 1998 would end up displayed in the Chicago History Museum. But, as part of an exhibit titled *Chic Chicago: Couture Treasures from the Chicago History Museum*, that's exactly where you'll find her black backless silk jersey gown. And Lannon's dress has some prestigious company: It's displayed alongside Jeanne Lanvin's *Robe de Style*, worn by Mrs. Charles S. Dewey when she was presented to the Court of St. James in 1927; the Madeleine Vionnet smoky-gray chiffon Mrs. Potter Palmer II donned to meet the Queen of England in 1938; and 59 other important pieces from the museum's permanent costume collection, only second in size to the Met's collection in New York.

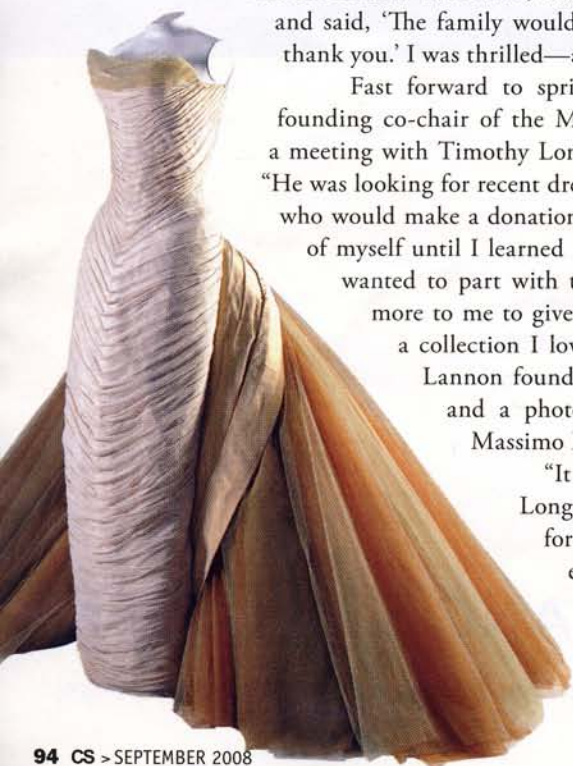
Initially, the president of Lannon Communications, a PR firm specializing in luxury-lifestyle clients, didn't know the dress would be hers to donate. Her client, Ferragamo, wanted her to wear it at the event, so she borrowed the gown. "The same dress was in the fashion show,"

Lannon recalls. "Afterward, Massimo Ferragamo came up to me and said, 'The family would like to give you the dress as a thank you.' I was thrilled—and taken totally by surprise."

Fast forward to spring 2008 and Lannon, who is founding co-chair of the Mayor's Fashion Council, was in a meeting with Timothy Long, CHM's curator of costumes. "He was looking for recent dresses and asked if I knew anyone who would make a donation," she says. "I didn't even think of myself until I learned that none of the women I knew wanted to part with their gowns. I decided it meant more to me to give the Ferragamo a good home in a collection I love than to continue to wear it."

Lannon found newspaper clips about the gala and a photo of herself in the dress with Massimo Ferragamo.

"It was everything I wanted," says Long, whose criteria in picking pieces for the exhibit was that they be in excellent condition, significant to fashion history and connected to a Chicago woman.



THE CENTURY CLUB Clockwise from top left: Paul Poirer's Sorbet dress, 1913, worn to a debut ball at Gladys Hall. Emile Pingat dress, 1878, cream silk brocade, lace, gold and yellow satin. The sleeves of the Pingat. Bottom: Charles James' Butterfly dress, 1954, made with *peau de soie* and nylon netting.

That Long even adhered to all of his criteria is a quite a feat, considering the sudden way the exhibition came about. In June 2007, Long had lunch in New York with Valerie Steele, director and chief curator at the Museum at FIT (Fashion Institute of Technology), during which he disclosed his fantasy exhibit was a "best of" CHM couture. Several weeks later she called to ask how serious he was, since FIT had an unexpected void in its autumn 2007 schedule. For years, Long had been keeping a file of his favorite CHM couture pieces—which he started when he found Paul Poirer's 1913 Sorbet evening gown, the first couture dress designed for an uncorseted figure and the one that sparked his passion for fashion as a child—and he and Steele were able to pull the New York exhibit together in just three months.

But *Chic Chicago*, starting September 27, will be different from the New York exhibition: Some pieces have been cut and 29 others have been added. The Chicago exhibit starts with an 1861 Worth gown owned by Mrs. Cyrus Hall McCormick and flows into the present with a 2008 Issey Miyake blue pleated, silk-wrapped evening gown donated by interior designer Laura Barnett Sawchyn. "The slant in Chicago is on the women who wore the fashions, rather than on the designers," Long says. "There will be more historical and biographical text and first-hand accounts." The exhibit also gives viewers a glimpse into the city's long-lived affinity for high fashion. "Clothing is an index of social change," says Long, "and the exhibit shows that Chicago women have been conscious of the trends since the 19th century." ■

Chic Chicago runs September 27-July 26, 2009. www.chicagohistory.org.