

# Untying the Bow Audio Feature Transcript

Further untie the bow as four graduate students offer additional insights into their favorite bow objects from the exhibition.

## 1. 1930s Red Bow Dress

**Learn more about how this dress influenced the design for the exhibit, and how it exemplifies Abstraction!**

*1 minute, 43 seconds*

BELLA: This dress is my favorite object in the exhibition because it is an example of what happens when you take a 3-dimensional object--a bow-- and transform it into a 2-dimensional motif, but then take that 2-dimensional motif and make it a 3-dimensional element again. If you look around the neck and waist of this dress, you'll see that the bow motifs were cut out of the printed fabric and attached so that they appear 3-dimensional and flutter while the dress is in motion. It perfectly encapsulates this concept of abstraction that we are trying to make in this exhibition. Because the bow as a flattened motif had only begun to become popular in the 1920s, it is fun to see how immediately people started to play with it afterwards, and into the 1930s.

We also knew we wanted our logo for our exhibition to be adapted from a bow on one of our objects. When we saw this dress as a class in our initial viewing, we all just knew this had to be it. The color also has a big impact, which is why it really inspired our color scheme and became the tone of red we used throughout. We even loved this bow so much, we decided to scatter more of them throughout the exhibition, to jazz up the walls.

I also personally love this piece because I adore the style of dresses from the 1930s. They have beautiful drape and movement. In the 1930s, dresses were cut and constructed on the bias, which has more flexibility to hug the wearer's curves and when in motion, gives it that characteristic bounce that makes dresses from this time "slinky." I personally love the open back because I didn't expect it, and it frames the spine, which gives a sense of strength and sensuality but in a very elegant way. I think this dress is timeless and gorgeous, and it wouldn't look out of place on a wearer today.

## 2. Opera pumps

### Learn more about Bows in menswear!

*1 minute, 57 seconds*

PHILIP: These opera pumps are my favorite object in our bow exhibition because they are one of the rarer examples of bows in modern menswear. I think they particularly encompass a lot of what our exhibit is about in that the bows on these shoes are purely decorative. Whereas many bows on men's shoes are about the functionality of tightening the shoe around the wearer's foot using shoelaces, the bows here, made of silk ribbon, have no function other than aesthetic pleasure.

Another thing I love about these shoes is that people generally seem to be surprised when they realize they are "men's shoes," since they do not expect men's formal shoes to have dainty silk bows on the vamp - the technical name for the front of a shoe. Given modern ideas of masculinity and how it is represented in menswear, it's easy to see how someone might not realize these shoes are traditional formalwear dating back to the Regency period in the early nineteenth century. Or even more shocking, that this type of evening footwear was worn by Frank Sinatra. It highlights how social ideas of masculinity are so temporal; what is considered masculine in one period of time is considered feminine in another. It also shows how the bow as a symbol can be interpreted in different ways based on body placement, shape, or material.

Lastly, this object aligns with my enthusiasm for historical menswear and the relationship between formality and changing style. It seems that the more formal an ensemble, the more resistant it is to changing over time. These types of shoes are still a standard piece of men's formalwear worn with white or black tie ensembles, having remained relatively unchanged since their popularity in the early 19th century. While they may be mostly reserved for the most formal events such as the Vienna Opera Ball and state dinners, I think it's so interesting and special that we can still be connected to 200 years of history through what we wear.

### 3. Halter dress and jacket

**If one of the functions of clothing is to distinguish men from women, what might this ensemble from the 1930s say about the wearer?**

*1 minute, 50 seconds*

What is fascinating about this set, to me, is that it stands the test of time. Almost a century later, it could still be worn today and look sophisticated, elegant, and au courant. Take the jacket off, and the halter-style cut of the bodice reveals the shoulders. Turn around and the low cut of the bodice reveals the back. The whole conceal-and-reveal dynamic suggests the wearer was sophisticated and flirtatious.

Dating to circa 1937, the dress borrows from men's white tie dress code. An invitation to a white-tie event conveyed that it was the height of formality. In 1930, Marlene Dietrich was the first actress to wear a tuxedo onscreen in the movie *Morocco*. Dietrich projected elegance and confidence, commanded attention, and caused some controversy. However, seven years later in 1937, when this dress and jacket set were made, it was still not appropriate for women to wear pants outside the home, even to a formal occasion. To quote from Alison Lurie's book, *The Language of Clothes*, "Any female who appeared on a formal occasion in a trouser suit was assumed to be a bohemian eccentric and probably a lesbian." Dietrich, who was bisexual, borrowed from menswear both on- and off-screen and subverted societal and gender norms.

The wearer of this set was pushing the boundaries of what was appropriate to wear for a woman at this time. The white tie tuxedo bodice gives the set the look of formality while projecting confidence and elegance. However, the set still has a long A-line skirt that can be read as the wearer not taking the daring plunge that wearing pants would require. The wearer wanted to project confidence and elegance and perhaps be a provocateur but still adhere to the societal norms of the time.

## 4. Victor Edelstein, evening dress

**Learn more about the British Designer both Anna Wintour and Princess Diana loved**

*1 minute, 59 seconds*

MIYO: This dress, with its giant pink bow, epitomizes the volume that characterized much of formalwear and fashion in the 1980s. British designer Victor Edelstein created this dress for Vogue editor in chief, Anna Wintour. He designed many dresses for elite clientele, and one of his most prominent customers was Diana, Princess of Wales. Many of Edelstein's gowns during the late 1980s feature giant bows on the back of the dress, such as the dress Princess Diana wore for her 1986 portrait for Terence Donovan, or the 1987 wedding dress worn by Miss Marilyn Watts held in the Victoria and Albert Museum collection in London.

Edelstein's early career was spent training at Dior and working for Norman Hartnell, but he closed his couture services in 1993 because of what he saw as a dwindling clientele for couture, amid the surging minimalist trends of the 1990s. In an interview with the Daily Mail newspaper he said, "If there was eventually going to be a new generation of younger women who wanted to buy couture they were not going to come to me. I didn't want to turn into Norman Hartnell, bringing my mailing list up to date by checking the obituaries." Edelstein eventually moved to Spain and became a painter.

I think Edelstein must have been really interested in the way satin could be shaped and draped. It really stands out against the contrasting black velvet fabric in this dress. In 1987, Liz Smith wrote in the London Times, referring to Edelstein, that "London designers are practiced at cutting the sumptuous dress that provides the frame for jewels and garter sashes. They know how to sculpt heavy satin for the grand entrance."

A piece that made a grand entrance would have made sense for the donor of this dress, Anna Wintour, at a time in her life when she was about to embark on a major career shift. In 1987 she would leave British Vogue and move her family to the United States where she would eventually take the helm of American Vogue in New York. Wintour is credited with reviving the popularity of Vogue magazine and making it a dominant voice in fashion journalism.

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These audio recordings were created for The Museum at FIT's exhibition, *Untying the Bow* (March 1–29, 2024). For more information, visit [fitnyc.edu/museum](https://fitnyc.edu/museum).