

matter of if there was an archive, but rather if historians desired to sharpen their gaze to notice the places girls appear,” Chatelain writes. The exhibition invites the audience to see where girls have been involved in transforming politics as well as the social construction of girlhood, in sometimes surprising ways.

Together, these two reviews demonstrate multiple ways and arenas where politics and civic engagement can be found.

As always, we welcome your responses to these reviews and invite suggestions of exhibitions, memorials and monuments, historic sites, multiplatform projects that combine media or modes of presentation, performances, and other programs. In coming public history reviews, we aim to feature public projects that historically engage or illuminate socially pressing issues. Please consider this a call for proposals and write to us with recommendations.

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“Politics at Home: Textiles as American History,” Ruth Davis Design Gallery, University of Wisconsin–Madison Center for Design and Material Culture, Madison, Wisc. <https://cdmc.wisc.edu/event/politics-at-home-textiles-as-american-history/>.

Temporary exhibition, Sept. 1–Nov. 14, 2021. Marina Moskowitz, University of Wisconsin–Madison, and Natalie Wright, University of Wisconsin–Madison, organizers.

The language of textiles has long provided political observers with a rich field of metaphors. Attempting to capture the complexity at play in a given historical moment, we describe a range of social factors—for instance gender and class—as interwoven, enmeshed, or entwined. We point to networks of social, political, and economic actors. We see enduring themes as threads and through lines running across the long sweep of time. The list could go on: texture, fiber, warp and woof. “Politics at Home” invites visitors to take these metaphors literally, showing us that textiles have always been an important means of expressing political sentiments and engaging in struggles for change, reform, and counterreform.

The exhibition was built around materials housed in the Helen Louise Allen Textile Collection (HLATC) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s Center for Design and Material Culture (CDMC). Together with several students, the curator and professor Marina Moskowitz used the HLATC’s holdings to examine the many ways that political values and agendas have been made manifest through the arts, forms, and industries of textile production in U.S. history. For a time, the exhibit was slated for display at the Democratic National Convention in Milwaukee in the summer of 2020. Though the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted those plans, Moskowitz and cocurator Natalie Wright (a Ph.D. student in design history) regrouped to develop this more expansive exploration of politics that opened in September 2021.

“Politics at Home” took a four-part approach, utilizing the subthemes of the “Federal Home,” the “Progressive Home,” the “Revival Home,” and the “Activist Home.” This imaginative choice enabled the curators to combine period-intensive explorations with concept-driven inquiries. The gallery itself was quartered into sections that brought to mind the rooms of a house. Helping establish that spatial metaphor, the title wall featured a door-like design framing the exhibition’s introductory text. With admirable brevity, the wall introduced the exhibit’s central questions, priming visitors to see the fluidity of public and private realms. “Political ideas shape civic, national, and international arenas,” the statement explained, “but they are often formed within the home.”

Moving clockwise through the gallery, visitors first encountered the Federal Home’s inquiry into the relationships between textiles and the formation of a national consciousness. Even the austere settings of the early Republic home were replete with furnishings, such as handkerchiefs hung on the wall, that channeled the era’s ideologies. Tacking up the printed cotton likeness of George Washington, to cite one example, did more than memorialize the recently deceased president; it embedded the intimacies of homelife within the larger project of building a virtuous republic. In a second handkerchief, dating to the William Henry Harrison campaign of 1840, visitors could see how such practices were, by the Jacksonian era, instrumentally leveraged in service of party politics. Picturing the candidate’s trademark log cabin, the artifact also signaled important shifts in U.S. political iconography as emblems of the frontier displaced the neoclassical motifs of Washington’s times.

Mythmaking was a running theme of the exhibition, especially in its first two sections, and the artifacts selected brought these dormant political codes to life. As Roland Barthes argued, myths are a system of half-truths. They tell stories of national triumph and leave the sordid details unspoken. Their power derives from the emotional wallop they pack. In these affective responses, loyalties are quickened and reaffirmed. There is an intimacy to myths, in other words, and the familiar and familial nature of textiles as objects lived with at home endows them with unique communicative powers. Thus, we see emblems of national expansion but not the acts of dispossession and enslavement through which it was secured. In the rare cases when those brutalities were acknowledged, as for instance when the furnishings in an abolitionist home bore the antislavery motifs of British painter George Morland, the medium through which those injustices were visualized—cotton—was itself the product of enslaved labor. By bringing these terrible ironies to the visitor’s attention, “Politics at Home” effectively highlighted the foundational role that textile production, and the horrifying supply chains feeding it, played in the nation’s political economy.

Stepping roughly a century ahead, the Progressive Home placed visitors in the domestic confines of the early twentieth-century middle class. The set of artifacts in this section, on the one hand, conveyed a sense of continuity. The “Rough Rider” bandanas dispensed by Theodore Roosevelt’s backers in 1912 tells us that printed cotton remained an important medium of campaign communication. This evocation of overseas adventurism, on the other hand, alerted us to sweeping changes at work in the political imaginary, as imperial ambitions were stitched into earlier dreams of continental expansion. How these changes registered at the personal level was powerfully evoked by a handkerchief produced by the U.S. Mint at the Alaska-Pacific-Yukon Exposition of 1909. Featuring a busy *mélange* of images depicting Native cultures giving way to Euro-American

cityscapes and the opening of transpacific markets (as symbolized by a geisha sharing tea with a middle-class housewife), all rendered in the familiar filigrees of the dollar bill, the souvenir offered a paean not only to the nation's expanding boundaries but also to the state facilitating that growth. Watching the mint's presses roll, fairgoers got a firsthand view of the state's machinery at work.

A less spectatorial perspective could be seen in the colorful crazy quilt featured at the center of the Progressive Home. Crafted in 1919 by Isabella Baker of Portage, Wisconsin, from the dozens of colorful badges and ribbons her family collected over a lifetime of political engagement, the quilt was one artifact among many that illustrated just how blurry the lines were that cleaved the private from the public during a period when housekeeping served as the dominant metaphor for civic reform. Tending to such items daily, homemakers were reminded that their work inside the home mirrored that beyond its walls as the efficient and loving middle-class household was transformed into a model for the well-ordered, harmonious society.

The Revival Home shifted the organizing framework from period to theme, showing how domestic textiles have been conduits of national memory. In an imaginative choice, the curators did so by exploring how the nation's founding was commemorated in fabrics dating to the times of the centennial and the bicentennial. Though produced a century apart, many of these artifacts bore a remarkable resemblance. Among the first encountered were a pair of furnishing fabrics—one from the 1870s and the other from the 1970s—venerating Washington's role in the revolutionary struggle. In both cases, symbols of the Continental Army general formed decorative medallions that repeated endlessly across the printed cotton fabric. That sense of repetition, both on and across the swaths, offered a striking illustration of the degree to which the forces of professionalization and industrialization had come to shape the interior spaces of American life.

Though unremarked in the exhibit, the amalgam of mass marketing and identity formation at work in such artifacts provided an opportunity to see a new relationship between textiles and politics in effect, whereby access to consumer comforts and the ability to participate in fashion cycles had become key objectives of American democracy. In a sense, we see a new type of political import layered onto domestic textiles. Delving deeper into how that process played out may have allowed "Politics at Home" to create a greater sense of chronological accretion in the exhibit's second half. It might also have offered an opportunity to widen the analytic frame by placing questions of "revival" into more direct conversation with the confidence-sapping crises of the 1870s and 1970s.

The area closed by asking what a different understanding of cultural renewal, one that emphasized the "practicing [of] historical making techniques," might look like by exploring early twentieth-century beadwork of Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe women. Crafted for the white tourist market at a time when federal policy called for the evisceration of Indigenous arts, the coin purse and pin cushions on display provided a powerful example of the ingenuity that went into preserving tribal customs. In this case, the middle class's yearning for novelty was pitted, successfully, against its desire for assimilationist order.

With their emphasis on the political possibilities of craft production in a mass manufacturing economy, the whimsies were a fitting segue to the Activist Home. This final room examined how efforts to decommoditize textile production or to infuse textiles with an ethos of dissent were defined as political projects among the movements of the

twentieth-century Left. The tapestries produced by the Works Progress Administration's Milwaukee Handicraft Project (MHP) offer a powerful lens on this process, showcasing the work of African American and white ethnic women who labored together in the early 1940s to craft tapestries celebrating the poetic and scientific achievements of medieval Persia. A model of New Deal cultural pluralism at both the national and international levels, the MHP's *Rubayait* was a favorite of Eleanor Roosevelt, who displayed a copy at her personal retreat.

By the 1960s, we see a shift in tactics. Increasingly, activist textiles no longer took the appearance of an alternative to large-scale corporate commerce. Rather, they had the general look of mass-produced commodities. In part, this reflected the influence of contemporary trends such as pop art. But also it reflected the growth of university programs in which praxis-oriented models of professional education were embraced. The confluence of these developments is vividly illustrated in a series of fabrics produced by design professor Mathilda Schwalbach and the students who studied under her in the 1960s. Their colorful, silk-screened collages offered a kind of textile corollary to the agitprop posters of the era. However, Schwalbach's choice of medium—domestic textiles—gave her feminist calls to action a double meaning.

Among the most eye-catching items in the area was an early 1970s toile featuring the off-putting image of a roadside rubbish heap piled behind a sign that read "No Dumping Allowed." At first glance, the fabric would seem to be the handiwork of Schwalbach or one of her students. On closer inspection, however, we see that "No Dumping" was a commercial product manufactured by the Reltex company. In it, one can see an environmental consciousness moving into the mainstream of American politics. Viewed from another angle, though, the toile provides a striking example of the market's capacity to capitalize on the visual language of dissent. In a larger exhibit, it would have been interesting to venture further into these tensions, especially in light of an arch-reactionary Right's cooptation of similar rhetorical styles in recent decades. Indeed, the ongoing status of the struggles documented in the Activist Home were fully visible in a pair of artifacts—a Gee's Bend quilt and Black Lives Matter T-shirt—representing the Black freedom struggle. The former, crafted in 2020 by Sharon Williams in the style of her native Boykin, Alabama, an area known for both its grinding inequality and its brilliant needlework traditions, was further detailed in a wonderful interview included in the CDMC's *Refrangible* podcast.

"Politics at Home" closed on a self-reflective note. Visitors approaching the exit were presented with the artist Sarah Caplan's *New York* dress, a Tyvek garment prominently featuring the former World Trade Center of lower Manhattan. One of five "poster dresses" Caplan created in 1999, it was acquired by the HLATC within weeks of the twin towers' destruction. Quirky one moment and tragically poignant the next, the dress offered an object lesson in the politics of curatorial choice. Visitors were then invited to offer suggestions as to what considerations the CDMC should bear in mind when making future acquisitions.

It was a thoughtful conclusion to an exhibit that consistently found ways to create the feelings of hospitality one associates with being in a home. In fact, it was only after I finished viewing the artifacts and turned my attention to the exhibition design that I realized that "Politics at Home" had been staged inside a relatively industrial space, complete with exposed brick walls and ductwork. Savvy lighting and color design not only

imbued the space with a livable scale but it also brought out the inherent familiarity of the artifacts themselves. That much was clear watching other attendees engage with the exhibit. A small group of young people clearly enjoyed the half hour they spent there, discussing the materials and relating them to domestic spaces from their own pasts in a manner that was both casual and thoughtful. Looking at the late twentieth-century decors, I had similar feelings of recognition. In achieving this sense of intimacy, “Politics at Home” did more than make a case for textiles as a vital medium of political communication: it furnished a space in which the simultaneously personal and public nature of the home had a felt resonance.

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“Girlhood (It’s complicated).” National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. <https://www.si.edu/exhibitions/girlhood-its-complicated-event-exhib-6376>.

Temporary exhibition, Oct. 2020–Jan. 2023. Traveling exhibition through Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, 2023–2025. Kathleen Franz (lead curator), Nancy Bercaw, Mireya Loza, Kenneth Cohen, Sam Vong, Veronica Mendez. Designer: Howard+Revis Design.

“But what about the archive?”

I heard this question, and versions of it, throughout my early career when I shared my research topic with other historians. For my dissertation and my first book, *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration* (2015), I wanted to imagine Chicago’s Great Migration era from the perspective of African American girls and teenage women. Although the scholarship on the migration has presented the impact of the growth of Black urbanites on housing, education, politics, the arts, and mass culture, I discovered that few had spent time thinking about how girls fared during this transformative period. Despite my enthusiasm for the topic, the question of archive loomed large as I searched for signs of girls’ lives among court records, newspapers, and pamphlets about Chicago and its expanding Black belt between 1917 and 1970. At first glance, the traditional archives of African American history, even the collections devoted to Black women’s history, did not yield many stories. If I wanted to write a book about what Black women urban reformers thought about girls or their activities to protect girls from the dangers of city life, the archive was rich with essays, news articles, and announcements about the racial uplift activities that made up middle-class women’s activism. Yet, going beyond women’s clubs and etiquette guides provided a considerable challenge, and the question of whether Black girls could be found in the archive at all pushed me to reconsider where I was looking for girls, and where girls were hiding in plain sight. Girls have made and continue to make history, and after the publication of my first book, I realized that writing girls’ history was not a matter of if there was an archive, but rather if historians desired to sharpen their gaze to notice the places girls appear.