

# Kiri's dresses: an exhibition about an iconic New Zealander

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**ABSTRACT:** The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) holds the significant Kiri Te Kanawa Collection from which a small dress exhibition called *Kiri's dresses – A glimpse into a Diva's wardrobe* was created in 2003. The exhibition storylines and interpretation were determined by the dresses and the first person memories of Dame Kiri and her designers. These curatorial and interpretive approaches are explored as a case study on an object/memory approach to developing an exhibition about an iconic person. Dame Kiri's approach to dress is illuminated throughout the paper.

**KEYWORDS:** Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, New Zealand, Te Papa, museum, exhibition, dress, wardrobe, memory, oral history, iconic.

## Introduction

*Kiri's dresses – A glimpse into a Diva's wardrobe* was a small, intimate dress exhibition held at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa from 2003 to 2004. The exhibition showcased eighteen garments worn by Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, one of New Zealand's most famous stars, and one of the world's most admired lyric sopranos of the late twentieth century.

Dame Kiri's fame ensured that the exhibition was very successful with both museum visitors and the media.<sup>1</sup> The display of beautiful dresses interpreted through memory, gave museum visitors an unprecedented insight into a famous person's life.

The concept of the exhibition, which drew upon Dame Kiri Te Kanawa's career and fame, fitted within one of Te Papa's core research themes, which explores New Zealand's iconic people, objects, and events. The museum celebrates the iconic, asks what creates it, investigates how official and unofficial histories are differentiated, and shows how fame is dealt with in different communities (Te Papa 2000).<sup>2</sup>

## Background

In 1965, at the age of twenty-one, Kiri won two of Australasia's most prestigious competitions, the Mobil Song Quest and the Melbourne Sun Aria. By the mid-1960s she had become New Zealand's most popular lyric soprano, winning audiences through stage and screen performances and recordings of both opera and popular songs.

In 1966 she left New Zealand to study at the London Opera Centre. Within five years she became one of opera's most promising new stars. Her debut as the Countess in Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden in 1971 brought her international fame. Three years later, she played an acclaimed Desdemona in Verdi's *Otello* at the New York Metropolitan Opera in a last-minute first appearance.

In 1981 came the extraordinary opportunity to sing at the wedding of the Prince of Wales and Lady Diana Spencer. In recognition of her performance she was created a Dame Commander of the British Empire. Over two decades later, in 2002, Kiri's performance for Queen Elizabeth's Golden Jubilee marked her long association with the Royal Family.



Fig. 1 Case one featuring the Mobil Song Quest dress (left), twenty-first birthday dress (centre), and the traditional outfit (right) (photograph by Abby Davidson, Te Papa registration number I.007962).

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw Kiri performing to enormous crowds in open spaces: firstly the Australian Outback in 1988, then in New Zealand for three concerts in 1990. Three hundred thousand people turned out for these 'Homecoming' concerts, which marked the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. On New Year's Day 2000, about one billion people around the world watched as Kiri heralded in the new Millennium on the Gisborne foreshore.

Kiri's ability to sing across musical boundaries has won her huge admiring audiences around the world. She is much admired for her achievements and is considered by many as the greatest diva of her generation (Singer 2004). Her intriguing Māori ancestry (she was adopted in infancy), her talent and beauty, have all contributed to her international reputation. The length and success of her career have given her an iconic status in the world of opera and beyond, and has increased New Zealand's cultural capital.

Part of Te Papa's mandate is to acquire and display objects 'that reflect the lives and achievements of our living icons' (Te Papa 2004a). An icon is 'a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol or as worthy of veneration' (Pearsall 1999). Dame Kiri is considered such a

person in New Zealand and within the world of opera, and is, therefore, an apt subject for the national museum of New Zealand to explore.

## Kiri Te Kanawa Collection

Owing to Kiri's performance needs, but also because of her love of clothing and fabric, she has significant collections of clothing stored in New Zealand and Britain. The wardrobes of famous people can be conspicuous for the amount and variety of clothes, each may be seen only once in public. Even for ordinary people wardrobes can hold an immense amount of material, as 'clothes are among people's favourite collectibles in modern society' (Cwerner 2001: 82). For many years, Kiri has kept 'relics of the sartorial past' alongside her current wear (Cwerner 2001: 83). Some dresses lay dormant in her wardrobe for many years (such as her twenty-first birthday dress), while others were reworked for other events, and stayed active for long periods. She has been reluctant to dispose of these garments or give them away. However, when Te Papa expressed an interest in collecting objects from her career, Kiri reasoned in regard to her Mobil Song Quest dress, 'that one I gave away because I thought it should be



Fig. 2 Case two featuring Desdemona's dressing gown and nightdress (left and centre) and the *Manon Lescaut* dress (right), courtesy of the Royal Opera House Archives, Covent Garden (photograph by Michael Hall, Te Papa registration number I.007015).

preserved in the museum because it's sort of falling to pieces a little bit' (Te Kanawa 2003).

In 2002, Dame Kiri agreed to a long-term loan of significant objects relating to her life and career.<sup>3</sup> Museum staff members went to Dame Kiri's homes in the Bay of Islands and London, and to her daughter's home in Brisbane to sort, select, and pack objects for freighting to the museum in Wellington. Family members had carefully archived photographs and programmes, and Kiri had kept many of her favourite dresses. The resulting Kiri Te Kanawa Collection includes twenty outfits or individual garments, as well as opera costume sketches, scrapbooks, photographs, posters, recordings, programmes, awards, books, music scores, videos – making Te Papa the key international repository of material relating to Dame Kiri's career.

Kiri's individual sense of style, her love of strong colour and shape, and evolving look over the last four

decades, are well represented by the Collection. She has kept many examples: from the 1960s when she wore second-hand dresses or the latest fashion (for example her Mobil Song Quest dress and twenty-first birthday dress in Fig. 1), to the 1970s and 1980s when she made innovative use of fabrics and references to popular culture (for example the 'Elvis' dress was designed to evoke Elvis Presley's Las Vegas concert outfits, and the 'Purple Sunflower cage' was a caftan-like garment made from sari material; Fig. 3). In the 1980s she also 'liked a generosity in a dress, a big skirt, and big lovely sleeves', so that she could flow on to the stage 'like a fairy princess' (for example the 'Telecom' dress in Fig. 4) (Te Kanawa 2003). In the early 1990s, Kiri updated her look to a straighter silhouette, often finished with a shawl (for example the 'Seville' dress in Fig. 4). 'We've stuck with that because it's such a good look' (Te Kanawa 2003).

## Exhibition

The overall concept of the exhibition *Kiri's dresses – A glimpse into a Diva's wardrobe* was to illuminate through memory how Dame Kiri has expressed and continues to express herself through stage dress.

The exhibition was roughly chronological and divided into six themes (dictated by the six cases of the Eyelights Gallery on level four of the museum). Each case represented one theme, and three garments were displayed in each case (as indicated in Figs 1–6). The first theme focused on Kiri's budding career, early successes, and rites of passage in the 1960s; the second focused on her operatic career; the third showcased the wide variety of designs of her concert dresses (including the dress she wore for the Royal Wedding in 1981); the fourth continued the previous theme but focused on her changing look from a puffed sleeve and full-skirted 'fairy princess' look to a column-like silhouette; the fifth showcased her dresses worn at large outdoor performances; the sixth and last theme considered two important moments in Kiri's life – her fiftieth birthday and the Queen's Jubilee concerts.

Five themes drew upon the Kiri Te Kanawa Collection. The second theme based on Kiri's operatic career required borrowing from an overseas institution, as Kiri does not own any of the opera costumes she has worn – these are made and owned by the opera houses. Some institutions have their own archives and museums, and have kept material from Kiri's performances over the last three decades. The most significant collection is held by the Royal Opera House Archives in Covent Garden, London. Opera National de Paris and The Metropolitan Opera in New York hold smaller collections.

With the assistance of the Archivist at Covent Garden we were able to choose three significant garments – a night-dress and dressing gown from one of Dame Kiri's signature roles (Desdemona from *Otello*, Fig. 2), and an operatic version of an eighteenth-century court dress from *Manon Lescaut* (Fig. 2), enabling us to show a 'classic' example of the type of operatic dress most favoured by Kiri.

## Curatorial approach

The curatorial approach in *Kiri's dresses* was to explore the interplay between objects, people, and memory. Objects such as items of clothing have more meaning and value when related to people and events (Kreps 2003: 312). The

potential for evocative interpretation is much greater when the visitor can relate to the person and/or an event.

Clothes can mark out different stages in women's lives – connecting feelings and memories with significant performances and rites of passage (Taylor 2002: 245). In Kiri's case, she has documented her life by keeping many of her favourite dresses (such as her twenty-first birthday dress) along with an extensive archive of objects and ephemera relating to her career. Therefore, the overall concept and narratives of the exhibition could be determined primarily by the dresses. They were also strong objects in their own right – being beautiful and well-made examples of stage dress. They provided the opportunity to focus on the designers as well as the wearer, thus providing a rich 'biography' of each dress on display.

Therefore, the exhibition team decided to develop a small, intimate exhibition focused on Kiri's stage dresses, her memories of them, and those of her designers. Dame Kiri was approached with this idea and was happy to participate. I interviewed her in Auckland about the dresses we intended to display, showing her photographs of the dresses on mannequins and images of her wearing them to prompt her memory. She talked about how each dress was designed, how she felt wearing it, and what happened to it over the years. Many of her memories were based on whether she felt and looked good, and how much she enjoyed the corresponding events. This interview became the interpretative foundation of the exhibition. Kiri was then consulted on all aspects of the exhibition, from object selection and interpretation to design and marketing. It was essential for the museum to have a good working relationship with Kiri to ensure that the exhibition was a true 'glimpse' into her sartorial life. Without her participation and approval, it would have been impossible to gather first hand accounts of the dresses from her and her designers. Everyone participated willingly and fully, and very few amendments were required to the structure and content of the exhibition.

## Display

The challenge for the exhibition team, when considering how to display Kiri's dresses to maximum effect, was how to take a dress made specifically for performance – on a living, moving, body spot-lit on stage – and display it on a static dummy behind glass. The danger is to avoid a garment becoming simply 'an elaborate piece of fabric' (Taylor 2002:

24). However, we chose to display the dresses on headless and limbless tailor's forms, covered in black conservation fabric, in order not to indicate Kiri's personality or performance movement. Photographs and some film extracts of Kiri wearing each dress in performance were displayed alongside to fulfil that role. In this way, visitors could appreciate the craft and details of each dress, and then see the context separately. However, even though we decided not to evoke Kiri's personality in the tailor's forms, we wanted to respect her changing size over the years so that her dresses could be displayed to reflect as closely as possible her body shape at the time. Therefore a range of sizes was made to suit her evolving body shape over a forty-year period.

The display was slightly limited by the shallowness of the cases used; these could be viewed only from the front. The key benefit of the shallowness was to allow the visitor to get close to the details on the front of each dress, but visitors could not see the backs of the dresses (which was pointed out by some visitors; unfortunately the cases were so shallow that mirrors could not be used to any effect). However, the shallowness of the cases brought the visitor 'up close' to Kiri herself. Through her dresses she was no longer a distant celebrity figure as depicted in the nearby film clips, but a real, intimate, and bodily presence.

Another issue for displaying performance dress is lighting. Conservation principles of low-level lighting ensure minimal fading and damage and so preclude the use of brightly lit environments, which would have allowed the play of light on the shimmering sequinned and beaded fabrics. Fabric weight and texture were also almost impossible to convey – Kiri noted that the Elvis dress was made from a light silk, but that its weight is almost impossible to discern in a static display. Similarly, the light flowing silk georgette of her Royal Wedding dress looked limp (Fig. 3).

Ironically, the most impressive dress visually for visitors (the 'Seville' dress, Fig. 4) was disappointing to Kiri as a wearer. Performance dress is not always practical clothing – its value lies in its visual impact (Taylor 2002: 179). Kiri observed that the Seville dress needed 'a driving licence to get into it' (Te Kanawa 2003).

## Memory

Clothes can be kept long after their owners stop wearing them 'because they become repositories of deeply valued personal memories' (Taylor 2002: 5). The wardrobe provides a safe place to store such a pool of identity objects,

housing secrets and belongings that largely define who people are (Cwerner 2001: 80 and 87).

Dress historian Lou Taylor observes that memory based on feelings 'is often a neglected aspect of the story of dress' (Taylor 2002: 305). Museum curators routinely record object-related memories, but there is usually only enough time to establish basic provenance (i.e. source, creator, dates, and ownership). As this exhibition project set out to explore both Kiri's dresses and first person memories of them (through oral history interviews), it provided a unique opportunity to learn about the emotional as well as factual history behind each of the dresses in the Kiri Te Kanawa Collection. Kiri's memories are linked to intense feelings of excitement, pride, being daring, feeling 'like a princess', and professional 'highs'. Her memories are also linked to the initial 'hunt' for the fabric, the vision of how she wanted to appear, and the reality of wearing a dress. Conversely, many New Zealanders and admirers around the world have their own memories of how Kiri has dressed over the years (particularly of the Royal Wedding dress of 1981 and of the dresses worn at the 1990 Homecoming concerts).

This oral history approach also allowed the opportunity for Dame Kiri to talk about aspects of clothing that are 'hidden from history' (Taylor 2002: 259). Kiri revealed an interesting truth about stage costume; 'with all these dresses, a lot of them were never cleaned. Because once you cleaned them they died ... So once they got to a stage they're so smelly, I just give them up. I've got these protectors in it [the 'Jubilee' dress] but there's something about the material, your body fluids don't like. The whole thing gets a bit stinky' (Te Kanawa 2003). Thus the perfection of the performance image belies the human reality beneath the fabric's surface.

However, there are dangers in relying on memory, such as censoring, bias, confused dates, and events (Taylor 2002: 259–260), and memory alone is not enough to interpret dress history. Memory may seem to be authentic but is 'inherently revisionist ... What is forgotten may be as important as what is remembered' (Taylor 2002: 260). The final theme in *Kiri's Dresses – A glimpse into a Diva's wardrobe* featured the story of her fiftieth birthday dress, which she wore for a special birthday concert at the Royal Albert Hall, London in 1994. Kiri had wanted to appear in different outfits during the concert but had little time to change. So her designer Gary Dahms created a sleeveless dress with detachable sleeves and train. For the first part of



*From top, clockwise*

Fig. 3 Case three featuring the Elvis dress (left), Royal Wedding dress (centre), and Purple Sunflower 'cage' (right).

Fig. 4 Case four featuring the Telecom dress (left), Greenwich dress (centre), and Seville dress (right).

Fig. 5 Case five featuring the Jellybean dress (left), Mary Mary dress (centre), and Millennium coat (right).

Fig. 6 Case six featuring the Fiftieth birthday cape and dress (left and centre), and Jubilee dress (right).

(All photographs by Michael Hall, Te Papa registration number I.007015).



the concert, Kiri covered the dress with a cape. Later in the concert, the cape was removed and the detachable sleeves and train were attached to the dress, creating an entirely different look (Fig. 6). The concert and behind the scenes footage were filmed for the *South Bank Show*. The film featured Kiri and Gary Dahms discussing how the different parts of the outfit would work. But when asked about the cape, Kiri ascribed it to a different concert held across the world in New Zealand. Its original use was eventually found only through film research.

Therefore, interpretation of dress through the study of images and the materials used in construction is critical in order to see how clothing is used, fits, and moves with the body, and the messages it sends to the audience. With stage costuming, there are usually designer sketches and fabric swatches, film and images of actual performances to draw upon for evidence. However, dress alterations for different events can sometimes only be studied in the object itself. For example, the fabric of the *Manon Lescaut* court dress still bears the stitching holes from the original trim (since removed), which can now be seen only in photographs.<sup>4</sup> But neither Kiri nor the designer could remember that the dress had been altered in a particular sequence of events. As this type of construction process is rarely documented, it was necessary to carefully scrutinise the object itself, along with the relevant film and photographic records.

However, regardless of technical facts, memory gathered through oral history can draw people to exhibitions (Taylor 2002: 253). A significant part of the success of *Kiri's dresses* was due to first person quotes. Oral history provides insight into a wearer's thoughts, providing a bridge between an object and the audience, as they too bring their own thoughts and feelings about the clothes they wear. 'Our clothes have ... a clutch on us. Styles of clothing carry feelings and trusts, investments, [and] faiths' (Taylor 2002: 260).

## Kiri's designers

Memories have to be set within the individual's context and a 'viable interpretative framework' otherwise they become valueless (Taylor 2002: 262). To strengthen the context of Kiri's memories, I interviewed her designers/costumiers and dressmakers: Gary Dahms (her first British dressmaker), Janice Pullen (former wardrobe mistress at Covent Garden), and Gwen Russell (Kiri's current dressmaker); and asked for their memories of the outfits they

had designed and worked on, and their working relationships with Dame Kiri.

I also interviewed Diggeress Te Kanawa who made the traditional outfit on display (Fig. 1). This outfit was presented to Kiri before she went to London in 1966. She had performed in traditional costume before (such as in the musical *Uwane* in 1962) but by the late 1960s did not have many opportunities to wear traditional clothing. 'I would have, if I had an opportunity, but I was doing completely different things – I was doing opera' (Te Kanawa 2003). However, Kiri has been mindful of incorporating Māori design and motifs within her stage dress, characterised in the Collection by the Millennium coat in which she wanted a garment that gave an impression of a Māori feather cloak, but which also had a modern feel (Fig. 5).

Throughout these interviews with the designers, it immediately became apparent that the creation of Kiri's look on stage was a collaborative process of equals. Kiri recalled, 'there's hardly a dress there that I'd say I didn't have a lot of involvement in. It's like my music; I'm equally involved in what I do' (Te Kanawa 2003). From scheduling a stop at favourite fabric stores to adjusting the trim moments before going on stage, Kiri is involved in most aspects of how she will eventually look on stage.

Gary Dahms noted that 'Kiri well understood the importance of a good strong shape and bold or dramatic colours necessary for big concert halls or outdoor venues ... I would make suggestions, but in every detail, Kiri was enthusiastically involved and the final decision was always hers' (Dahms 2003). Gwen Russell added that Kiri 'has a very strong idea of what she wants. She knows what kind of fabric she wants, what kind of colour she wants. It's absolutely vital to have a relationship with the artist. Costume needs to become part of who they are' (Russell 2003).

Kiri's dresses need to be conspicuous from a distance to make her prominent on the stage but not ostentatious (Wilson 2003: 111). Her designers achieve this through colour and shape. Gwen Russell noted that the designer's job is to create a dress that not only 'has a strong silhouette and looks striking on stage, it must also be comfortable' (Russell 2003). Kiri's silhouette is often dramatic – from the extremes of her puffed sleeve, full-skirted look in the late 1980s (Fig. 4), to her current slim-line column silhouette (Fig. 6). She very rarely wears black, as it tends to read as a void on stage.<sup>5</sup> To focus the audience's attention on her overall presence and singing, her necklines tend to be low and plain and her head uncovered.



Kiri's dresses are a result of a private one-to-one collaboration with her designers/costumiers who are experts within the performance industry. Her dresses are foremost stage dress, designed according to several physical and technical specifications, and therefore are often outside of the mainstream (and temporality) of fashion, though elements of the period are incorporated. They are made to last, but when a different look is required Kiri has no hesitation in adapting existing dresses. Longevity through adaptation is part of Kiri's intention, as is the desire to make the most of each commissioned dress.

## Biographies of dress

Sociologist Saulo Cwerner notes that 'clothes have distinct biographies: they are born out of raw materials ... worked upon by labour, tools and machines', acquired and brought home, and then worn, often in public (Cwerner 2001: 82). Clothes can lie at rest for years within the wardrobe, be adjusted more than once, and be worn to many different occasions. These memories are generally not recorded, and records of acquisition, construction, and wearing from personal wardrobes are rare. Comparatively less is written about the origination and acquisition of clothes (and their domestic management), than why people dress the way they do, and the language of dress (Cwerner 2001: 81).

However, Kiri has recorded part of her dresses' biographies by keeping costume reference books to record where and when she wears each dress (Fig. 7). Such documentation is a rich and invaluable resource for dress historians and museum curators. Being an extremely busy person with a huge performance schedule, Kiri has developed the costume reference books as tools over the years for her and her staff to manage her wardrobe. She attaches a photograph of herself wearing each dress in her home environment (without stage makeup or lighting), names each dress, and lists in handwriting when and where she wore it, and sometimes even the weather (if the dress was worn at an outdoor concert). Once a dress is named and photographed, she can easily ask her staff to retrieve it for her. These reference books also save her from any embarrassment of wearing the wrong dress: 'I had to know where I'd been wearing them otherwise I doubled up sometimes' (Te Kanawa 2003).

The naming of each dress creates an immediate and

unique identity. Kiri's memories are tied up in the name of each dress, which are sometimes prosaic, sometimes poetic. The dresses named after events are forever tied to those moments irrespective of their history before and after. The twenty-first birthday dress, Mobil Song Quest dress (Fig. 1), Royal Wedding dress (Fig. 3), Millennium coat (Fig. 5), Fiftieth birthday dress and cape, and Jubilee dress (Fig. 6) were all named for the events they were created for. Some had histories before being acquired by Kiri; some were worn once; others became favourites and were worn many times again (particularly the Mobil Song Quest dress which was worn for over thirty years).

Some of Kiri's dresses are named after the pattern of the fabric (for example the Jellybean dress (Fig. 5) and the Purple Sunflower 'cage' (Fig. 3)); some are named after the place where the dress was first worn (for example the Greenwich dress and the Seville dress (Fig. 4)); one is named after the sponsor of the event for which the dress was made and features the colours of the company (the Telecom dress (Fig. 4)); some are named according to what they evoke (for example the Elvis dress (Fig. 3) and the Mary Mary dress which reminded Kiri of a nursery rhyme character (Fig. 5)). Some, like the Purple Sunflower 'cage' are named after their shape.<sup>6</sup>

'Drawing up the "biography" of altered clothes ... can sometimes be even more culturally and socially revealing than collecting pristine garments' (Taylor 2002: 18). The Mobil Song Quest dress has one of the most interesting biographies of Kiri's wardrobe. She bought it second-hand in 1963 to wear to her first competition (Fig. 8). She kept it in her wardrobe for many years, had it reconfigured by her designer Gary Dahms (Fig. 1), and wore it until the mid-1990s, when she finally felt that it was no longer fashionable. The following label provides an example of how such a dress was interpreted in the exhibition to take into account the biography of the dress but also the feelings it inspired, and technical details of its design:

### *Long lasting favourite*

At nineteen Kiri entered her first major singing competition, the Mobil Song Quest. Her dress for the competition was bought second-hand, and had 'little flowers made out of a piece of tin' and thin straps. Designer Gary Dahms remembers that 'Kiri was terribly fond of this dress. She kept it safe and treasured, and when she eventually asked me to alter it, I took great care'. He remodelled it, adding the sleeves, and Kiri wore it again many times until the 1990s.

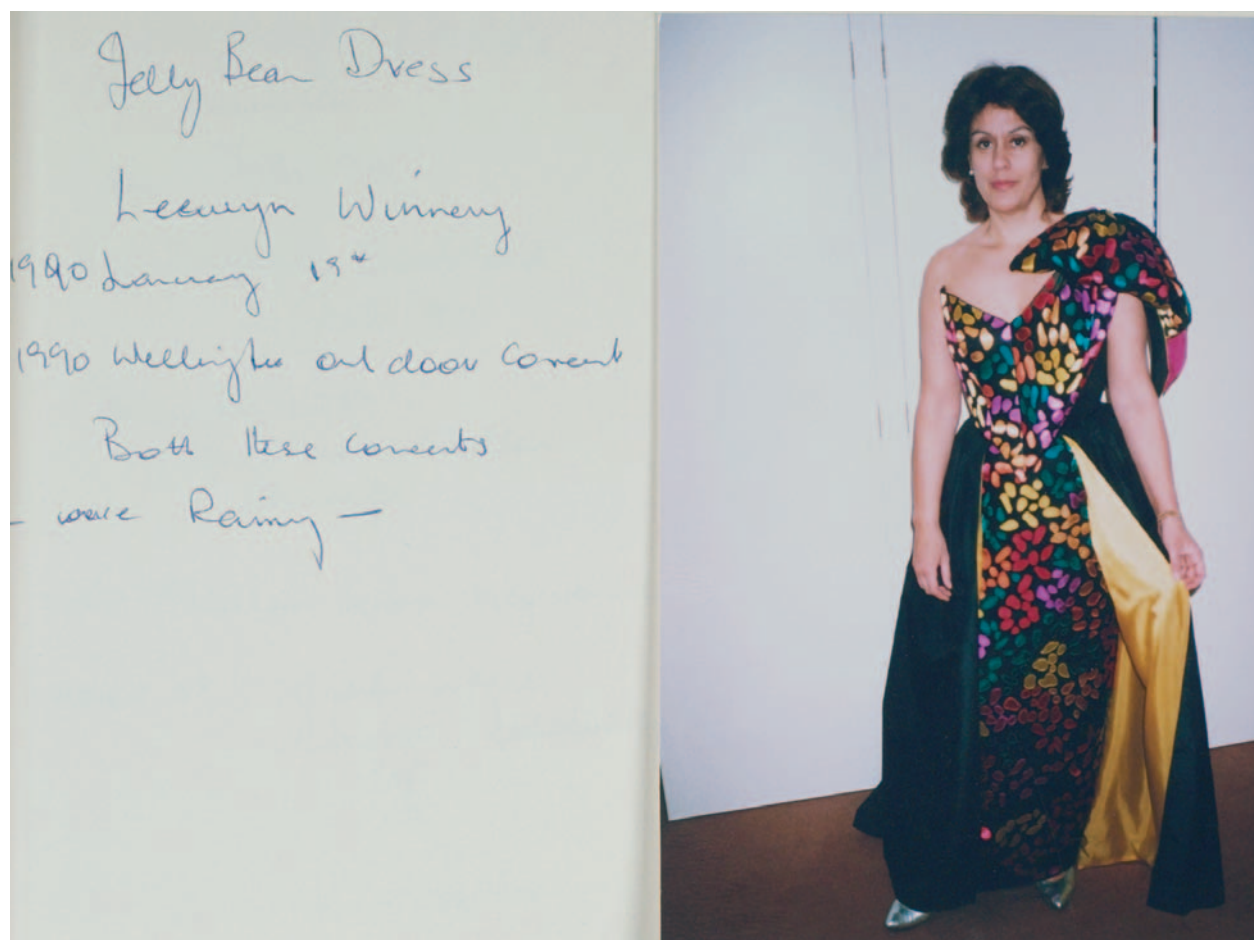


Fig. 7 Costume reference book (photograph by Michael Hall, Te Papa).

Kiri recalls that the Song Quest 'was a wonderful night and although I came second I thought I was Queen of the thing ... if you come second you can try again next year.' Two years later she came first.

## Limitations

While the exhibition drew on Dame Kiri's personal memories, the memories of her designers, and the dresses' own biographies, the dresses were key to determining the exhibition content. Therefore, if a dress no longer existed, its corresponding storyline could not be explored in any detail within the exhibition.

Some clothes survive by chance, some because of happy personal associations, and some because of good fabric and design. 'A deep, joyful emotional attachment' ensures the survival of wedding, party, and christening robes in particular (Taylor 2002: 5). In Kiri's case, the dresses

that did *not* survive are as interesting as the ones that did. The outfit Kiri wore when she finally won the Mobil Song Quest in 1965, her debutante dress (bought second-hand), and her wedding dress by Auckland designer Colin Cole, have 'well gone now' (Te Kanawa 2003). All that remains is a visual record. The absence of these dresses meant that the corresponding parts of Kiri's story were not told in great detail within the exhibition. This was not seen as a disadvantage to the overall narrative, which had not been intended as a comprehensive history of Kiri's life and career.

In addition, complete biographies of each dress could not be illuminated in the exhibition due to word limits on labels, and because not all aspects of a dress were key to the interpretative needs of the exhibition. For example, the biography of Kiri's twenty-first birthday dress starts well before that particular moment as a Benares silk sari with its own complex history of manufacture and cultural significance. Its journey to New Zealand and adaptation into a

fashionable empire-line dress could only be touched upon lightly. For the purposes of the exhibition, the night of Kiri's twenty-first birthday party was the key interpretive moment.

Other interpretive techniques could have been employed – most obviously a retrospective of Kiri's life and career illustrated through dress and archival material. However, an exhibition driven by such an approach may not have allowed for the more intimate experience provided by the object/memory approach, which made the 'iconic' appear accessible and human.

### Iconic objects

Along with people, objects such as clothing can also acquire iconic status. Once Kiri's dresses left her wardrobe and entered the museum storeroom and display cases, they could begin a 'second life as venerable, valuable and treasured icons' (Taylor 2002: 18). However, even though Te Papa seeks to collect iconic objects, it acknowledges that objects may not have this status immediately: 'the Museum's primary emphasis is on collecting items that have, *or might grow to have*, iconic value for New Zealand' (author's emphasis) (Te Papa 2005).

For an object to become iconic, 'it is the context, the news story, and the audience reaction that makes it meaningful, whether as a hate object or venerated icon' (Attfield 2004: 215). Possibly only one dress in the Kiri Te Kanawa Collection fits both definitions of iconic (venerated and notorious) – the Royal Wedding dress Kiri wore when she sang at the wedding of the Prince of Wales and Lady Diana Spencer in 1981 (Fig. 3). Most New Zealanders over a certain age remember this dress – where and when it was worn, and how they felt about it at the time (feelings that were based on national pride that Kiri had been chosen to sing by Prince Charles). Her performance was greatly admired, but her dress and hat caused some consternation. Kiri had thought that only her head and shoulders would be visible during the performance and therefore felt she 'had to have something as colourful as I could', so chose a brightly coloured flowing dress with ruffled neck and a small hat perched low on her head (Te Kanawa 2003). One journalist described it as a 'multi-coloured tablecloth and air hostess's hat' (Jenkins & D'Antal 1999: 249). But Prince Charles commented; 'it was marvellous – like a wonderful canary or budgerigar – a stunning combination of colours' (Fingleton 1982: 181). In retrospect, Kiri didn't



Figure 8: Kiri after the Mobil Song Quest, 1963 (photograph by Kevin Bunbury, courtesy of John Bunbury).

mind about the criticism; 'it didn't really matter that they didn't or did like it – Bird of Paradise I was exactly' (Te Kanawa 2003).

### Conclusions

Dress exhibitions in museums around the world are increasing interest and knowledge in the significance of dress to human experience and identity. The popularity of recent dress exhibitions and the opening of dress-specific museums attest to this development.<sup>7</sup>

The challenge for museums when developing dress exhibitions is to decide upon the most appropriate interpretive strategy – for the objects themselves, and for a

successful visitor experience. Interpretation may rest on artefact research, social or economic history, material culture studies, literary sources, visual analysis, oral history, or other possible approaches (Taylor 2002). In the case of an iconic person such as Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, the object/memory approach to interpretation enabled the museum to consider a variety of viewpoints within certain parameters, but also enabled the visitor to interact with their own memories of a dress and/or occasion.

By providing a 'glimpse' into Kiri's wardrobe through memory, the exhibition enabled a closer relationship between the objects and the visitor, thereby forming a closer relationship between the visitor and the subject. Instead of being just illustrations of Kiri's life story, the dresses could be biographies within themselves. The object/memory approach is still a selective one, but can trigger a deeper investigation into dress history and why clothing has such a 'clutch' on us.

## Acknowledgements

This paper was greatly helped by the insights and comments of Alan Gibson (San Francisco, USA) and Eileen Jacob (Washington DC, USA; former Concept Developer, Te Papa). I am indebted to Fiona McKergow (Palmerston North; former Social History Curator, Te Manawa) and Dr Jane Malthus (University of Otago and Honorary Curator of Dress at Otago Museum) for their critical reviews of the manuscript, and gratefully acknowledge Dame Kiri Te Kanawa for participating in the development of the exhibition and paper.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Positive public interest was indicated by: the findings of Te Papa's Visitor and Market Research Unit (2004b); several well-attended public talks given by the author; high attendance in the exhibition space; and anecdotal evidence. Media interest included newspaper articles following the opening; a Paul Holmes' interview with Dame Kiri on Television New Zealand; and an interview with the author on National Radio.
- <sup>2</sup> The core research themes fall within Te Papa's Core Projects Strategy. Initiated in 1999, this strategy is currently under review.
- <sup>3</sup> As opposed to an outright gift, the long-term loan allows flexibility for the family, which is an important consideration when collecting from a living person.

- <sup>4</sup> Kiri wore the original dress for *Manon Lescaut* in 1983, and then wore it in altered form several years later for her performance in *Capriccio* for the *South Bank Show* in 1991.
- <sup>5</sup> However, the black fabric of the Jubilee dress is an exception because of its scattering of coloured sequins, which catch the light and give the wearer form (Fig. 6).
- <sup>6</sup> Kiri personally labelled her caftan-like garments as 'cages'.
- <sup>7</sup> Such as the recent successes of dress exhibitions including those on Vivienne Westwood, Gianni Versace, Giorgio Armani, Jackie Onassis, and the opening of dress-specific museums (such as Zandra Rhodes's Fashion and Textile Museum in London).

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