

# Girlhood (it's complicated)

Smithsonian Collection Online Exhibition: <https://3d.si.edu/collections/girlhood>

Alana McPake

*Girlhood (it's complicated)* is a digital exhibition first curated by the National Museum of American History and later digitised by the Smithsonian. Adapted from a larger project of the same name, it began its life in October 2020 and will tour the United States in 2023. *Girlhood (it's complicated)*, or simply *Girlhood*, features 26 exhibits in total. Each is a garment or outfit that studies some

aspect of 'what it has meant to grow up female' in an American context. The website for the initial exhibition underlines that the meanings of 'girlhood' are not static but does not offer us any examples (National Museum of American History, no date). 'What it has meant to grow up female' is admittedly a vague definition, but a workable one; at the least, it leaves room

for visitors' own understandings of the term to take centre stage.

*Girlhood* celebrates a century of female suffrage by highlighting areas where girls and women have exercised agency and enacted change: politics, education, work, wellness, and fashion. The garments are access points to important experiences and histories. *Girlhood* covers from the mid-nineteenth century to present-day and includes items from leather jackets to beach coverups, aprons to Olympic uniforms. All entries are realised as an interactive 3D model; some are also photographed on staged mannequins or in storage. The exhibition considers space and place in different ways. Firstly, it examines the United States as the place where these girlhoods occurred. Secondly, it invites us into the museum space in a novel way through its digitalisation. (As such, I refer to 'visitors' and 'users', as we both visit the online museum as well as use its information and tools).

The digitisation of this project is certainly an impressive feat. Undoubtedly, the exhibition's core strength is the level of interaction on offer. Information is not presented in

just one format: you can read the accompanying panel at the side of the model, click through annotations, take an 'interactive tour'. In addition, audio and video narrations accompany some of the more recent garments like the 'Native American Prom Dress' or the 'Escaramuza 5 piece ensemble'. The annotations pick out key details of each garment, normally something about its style, materials, or context. The interactive tour then presents these annotations in a different way – as you click, the models spin around to the area in question. The models are, quite simply, fun to experiment with; the images are high quality and can sometimes offer a new perspective. For example, the 3-piece gymnasium suit seems dark when digitally rendered but light when photographed. Using this combination of display and communication methods (3D models and photographs for the former; interactive annotations, accompanying videos, and related articles for the latter) is a clever choice which creates a more immersive, multi-faceted experience.

Users can share their thoughts via email or on social media; full screen access is available; and a great deal of

effort has evidently gone into the Tools and Settings section. Visitors can change the views, materials, environment, and lighting of the models – in fact, they can even measure and slice it. Under ‘material’, you can explore what garments would like look if made in clay or put under an X-ray. ‘Measure’ allows users to pinpoint – literally using pins, a nice touch – where they would like measurements to and from. This extensive toolkit improves the user experience immensely by offering something off-limits in traditional museum settings: to go behind the glass.

The order of the exhibition is fixed, and a handful of exhibits are first hidden from view behind a ‘see more’ button. This is a slight drawback. Museumgoers may sometimes miss exhibits due to the physical layout of a room or building, but an online space could theoretically counter that by presenting everything on one page. To not do so here misses an opportunity. Moreover, a random order generation could have emphasised the significance of all exhibits and girlhoods. The online visit is rather disrupted by having to return to the main page to move from

exhibit to exhibit (more ‘effort’ than moving from one to another in a museum). This interrupts the flow of *Girlhood* and its arguments. It wants us to consider changes in ‘girlhood’ over time but our ability to do so is stunted by the website’s mechanics, as exhibits can feel quite self-contained rather than in conversation with each other. Leaving visitors to draw connections between exhibits is not necessarily a disadvantage, but neither the interface nor the order of items facilitates this. Framed more positively, however, perhaps this approach offers us more freedom. In this format, there are no other visitors to contend with – you may spend as much time as you like with one exhibit without inconveniencing them. Similarly, the digital presentation removes the pressure of pretending to absorb a whole exhibition when only a handful of items are of interest.

*Girlhood* champions the successes and power of girls in everyday and extraordinary levels. Famous examples occupy a fair portion of the digital exhibition space. In fact, the first exhibit is titled ‘Selena’s Leather Outfit’, a metal-and-pearl-studded jacket and brassiere which belonged to

famous Tejano artist Selena Quintanilla-Perez. Included from the sporting world is basketballer Rebecca Lobo's bright red Olympic uniform, emblazoned with the Team USA logo, and gymnast Dominique Dawes' stars-and-stripes leotard. Lastly, Minnijean Brown Trickey – one of the Little Rock Nine – donated her graduation dress of her own design, a white tea-length full-skirted dress with a sheer neckline. The exhibits celebrate individual achievement while placing contributions in a wider context. Just as Dawes' leotard represents her own success as the first African American woman to win an Olympic medal in gymnastics, so too does it embody American achievement at the 1996 Olympic Games and female athletic excellence overall.

More 'ordinary' accomplishments are also recognised. *Girlhood* praises the work of girls through the centuries, whether admiring the fine needlework on a gifted apron, the re-imagining of a feedsack bag into a fashionable dress, or the organisation of strikes to achieve better conditions for garment-workers. Indeed, enacting change stands out as another theme of *Girlhood*. Often, it comments on girls

adapting traditionally male experiences or objects. In the only explicitly religious entry, a dress tells the story of the invention of the bat mitzvah in 1920s America. The exhibit argues that by the end of the twentieth century, Jewish girls had 'claimed' the boys' ritual of the bar mitzvah 'for themselves'. Returning to Cindy Whitehead and her skater's jersey and shorts, *Girlhood* shows change in both concrete and abstract forms. Whitehead carved a place for women in professional skating in the 1970s – some two decades before the production of female skate clothing. Her achievements, therefore, were realised while competing in a modified boy's uniform. Through this entry, we understand the changes girls enact on both micro- and macro-levels, sometimes all at once: to the seams and fit of a garment, or to the history and trajectory of a sport.

*Girlhood* boasts several advantages. It allows insight into prominent themes and moments in American history in a grounded, accessible way. For example, Minnijean Brown-Trickey's graduation dress opens up the history of segregation and the civil rights movement, positioning

something as routine as a graduation against huge social unrest and change. A house dress from 1935 lets us consider women's historical roles in the home, as well as the context of the Great Depression. The feedsack dress explores thrift as an American moral and value – always valued in rural areas, but nationally recognised and extolled in times of hardship. These would work well as a teaching tool: a gateway to complex subjects like the racial, gender, moral, and economic histories of the United States through an 'entry-level', relatable source. We all, after all, wear clothing. *Girlhood* also does well to recognise that the United States is not a monolith but an ethnically diverse nation. Thus, it includes trousers worn by a Chinese American girl on special occasions in the 1920s; the outfit donned by a Mexican American girl to compete in an *escaramuza* competition in 2009; and the West African dashiki adopted by some Black Americans in the 1960s. Scholars by no means exclusively use documentary sources to study history today, but these nevertheless often remain the default. What *Girlhood* neatly demonstrates is that when it comes to people's lives,

memories, and experiences, material culture – the *things* of the past – taps into the experiential and embodied elements in a way that other sources simply cannot.

Occasionally (perhaps too occasionally), *Girlhood* takes care to spell out how the garments relate to its themes. Where this is done, it is done well, allowing precise and nuanced insight into the varied experiences of American 'girlhood'. The shirtwaist entry is a fully developed example of girls' experience of work, politics, and fashion. Firstly, we gain an insight into the trends of the early 1900s, when this style was popular. Secondly, we learn that the industry employed many immigrant girls and young women who later unionised to demand better working conditions, wages, and holidays. The shirtwaist is therefore a symbol of work as well as play, fleshing out these facets of 'girlhood' and the relationship between them. Where such explanations are absent, however, *Girlhood* suffers. It is possible that the exhibition wishes visitors to infer their own conclusions, but this does not always work. One sports jacket seems completely out of place: in fact, the

annotations refer to it as being worn by an unnamed 'he'. This may be just a typographical error, but the lack of other information leaves us questioning whether it is an oversight or a deeper mistake.

Inconsistency is also apparent in the exhibit's titles, which are often uninformative or even misleading, and differ from the 3D model's own label. For instance, one hoodie takes on two titles, 'El Camino Junior High School Titans Hoodie, Santa Maria, California [...] 2007' and 'farmworker hoodie'. Reading the first, we expect the high school or location to be the focal points, but they are not. By the exhibit's own admission, the experience showcased by this garment is that of a young, female farmworker – so why is this not foregrounded in its title? Confusion is further compounded by repeated labels: three exhibits share the same uninformative title of 'dress, 1-piece'; two aprons are identically billed. Ultimately, these are minor drawbacks to the one-off visitor, but could certainly become a nuisance in long-term use.

In all, the benefits of *Girlhood* (*it's complicated*) outweigh its drawbacks. While let down sometimes

by nomenclature and lack of clarity, the exhibition celebrates American girls' and women's histories through the clothing that they made, repurposed, gifted, and wore. *Girlhood* explores the United States as a place to grow up female and suggests some spheres or spaces of 'girlhood' for us to think about. It must be applauded for the unusual interactions it allows users to have with its objects, to 'touch' as the traditional museum space could never allow. The aforementioned 3D models and toolkits, in particular, provide a type of access that equals (if not surpasses, in some ways) more typical research experiences. Looking at *Girlhood*, we can not only imagine those who went before us but consider our own contributions – what garments might be selected as emblematic of our time? As ever, material culture remains evocative and provocative. It is generally a moving exhibition, but never more so than when you notice the time elapsed between production and acquisition dates of some garments. Evidently, some have not only cherished their own possessions, but those of their mothers and grandmothers before donating. Through their belongings, *Girlhood* (*it's*

*complicated*) is able to deliver on its name, providing multi-layered, complex histories, and surely inspiring most to pass through its virtual doors more than once.

## **Bibliography**

National Museum of American History (no date), *Girlhood (it's complicated)*. <https://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/girlhood-its-complicated> (Accessed: 26 May 2022).