A new exhibition at the University of Melbourne's Ian Potter Museum of Art’s "Utopian Visions" features four terry-towelling costumes from the Grainger Collection displayed alongside some 34 works by artist Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack (1893–1965). The exhibition’s curator, Joanna Bosse, has drawn a fascinating parallel between Grainger’s unusual fashion concept and the modernist paintings and prints of Hirschfeld Mack — tracing both artists’ creations back to the leading avant-garde concerns of the early 20th century — and thus providing viewers with a rare insight into their shared quests for a 20th century utopian ideal.

Percy Grainger’s flamboyance and freedom of expression in his attitude towards clothing design is, by now, well known. During his professional career as a concert pianist he confounded to stereotypical protocols that demanded a performer wear formal garb, yet in his private life he delighted in experimenting with colour, form and the tactile nature of different fabrics in his dress.

Many of Grainger’s early experimental towellng designs articulate a certain playfulness and daring practically unheard of in 1910. Although there is little evidence in his writings of a personal (or utopian) desire for some kind of universal clothing reform, he was clearly reacting to the oppressive dress conventions of the Edwardian middle-class. He created garments that allowed him greater flexibility of movement and it is commonly supposed that he regularly jogged through London’s parks in his novel attire.

The Conservation of Percy Grainger’s Piano Stool

Initial examination of the stool showed the wooden underframe and winding mechanism to be in good condition. The upholstery of the seat was another matter entirely. The leather was torn, thin, and worn. Percy’s enthusiastic playing has revealed horsehair and hemp cushioning materials inside the seat — he literally loved the seat to bits! The underside of the seat upholstery was also torn and dropping dust and debris whenever it was moved.

For many years Grainger Museum curators and researchers have been aware that the collection has been put in jeopardy by the extremely cramped storage conditions within the Museum. The logical solution is to establish an offsite repository to store selected material. However, the relationship between the collection and the building is integral to the Museum’s high value of cultural significance.

The Grainger collection is made up of items donated by Percy Grainger and material collected after his death in 1961. The Museum also holds collections that although related to music, are not directly related to Grainger. The Information Division at the University of Melbourne, the umbrella body that manages the Grainger Collection and Museum, recognised that concise guidance on possible options for the collection and building use was required. The consultants commissioned to undertake this assessment are Dr. Kevin Pewster, AM, Director of Sydney’s Powerhouse Museum and the museum sector’s representative on the Collections Council of Australia. He will be assisted by Melbourne-based arts/heritage communications specialist, Robyn Oswald-Jacobs.

Brian Allison
Grainger Collection Curator

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Percy Grainger’s spectacular towellng clothes take the spotlight once again in a new exhibition at the University of Melbourne’s Ian Potter Museum of Art: "Utopian Visions" features four terry-towelling costumes from the Grainger Collection displayed alongside some 34 works by artist Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack (1893–1965). The exhibition’s curator, Joanna Bosse, has drawn a fascinating parallel between Grainger’s unusual fashion concept and the modernist paintings and prints of Hirschfeld Mack — tracing both artists’ creations back to the leading avant-garde concerns of the early 20th century — and thus providing viewers with a rare insight into their shared quests for a 20th century utopian ideal.

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The result was satisfying: visual cohesion was achieved and the stool is strong enough to stand up to the rigours of display in the museum. The surface of the leather seat is still extremely delicate and will never be able to be sat upon (and why should anyone other than Percy?)! On a more serious note, the treatment preserves the stool and its original materials for the appreciation of future museum visitors.

Megan Phillips
Grainger Collection Curator

Student Projects at the University of Melbourne

The establishment of the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne has enabled new student-focussed programs for the research and conservation of the University’s cultural collections. Students in the Centre’s Master of Arts by Coursework (Cultural Materials Conservation) are introduced to the various collections held within the University during the course and items from the collections are incorporated into a range of teaching subjects. Students then use objects from the University’s collections for extensive research and conservation treatment projects. The following is a report by Megan Phillips, a second year student who spent 50 hours conserving one of Percy Grainger’s piano stools as her major work for semester 1, 2005. The stool’s significance lies primarily in its historical connection to Grainger’s life as an internationally acclaimed composer and concert pianist.

Megan Phillips
Grainger Collection Curator

Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack, Untitled, watercolour and pencil on paper, c. 1950. The University of Melbourne Art Collection

Photograph of Grainger wearing one of his towellng costumes, c. 1940. Photo: Grainger Collection

Megan Phillips
Grainger Collection Curator

Utopian Visions

Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack and Percy Grainger
ASME conferences since 1999, the Young Composers Project provides secondary school students with an invaluable opportunity to work with experienced composers, people involved in the music industry and young composers’ peers from around the nation.

Six young composers, one representing each Australian state, performed works with The WhaiaBang Orchestra, a contemporary popular ensemble from Ballarat High School. The six works ranged from film music (complete with film) to jazz ballad to big hand works. A highlight of the concert was the premiere of a new work commissioned for the concert from Melbourne composer Lachlan Davison, titled ‘A Way Back’. The concert was sponsored by Billy Hyde Music, one of the largest Australian companies working in music education. In recognition of this support the concert was dedicated to Billy Hyde and his wife Violet Hyde.

Grainger tutored at the annual Interlochen Nature of Music’ Conference and Grainger's role as a music educator was widely respected.

Grainger again follows a ‘Morris-type’ approach to teaching. Morris helped him become a member of the Art Workers’ Guild and encouraged him to exhibit a print from the 1896 Arts and Crafts Exhibition. Dolmetsch is said to have played on Morris’s death bed.

In his handwriting designs, Grainger again follows a ‘Morrisian’ approach to developing design and fabrication skills. He methodically pulled examples of ethnographic beadwork apart to learn the complex knotting and threading techniques.

The University of Melbourne’s Baillieu Library recently displayed an exhibition titled Kelmscott: A Medieval Adventure in the Age of the Arts and Crafts Movement at William Morris’ remarkable Kelmscott Press.