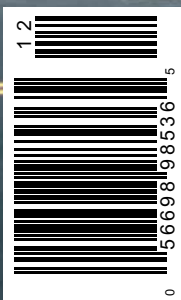


# Cabinet

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## ARTIST PROJECT / REVIVING THE HABIT

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The nun's habit is a sister's wedding dress and a symbol of her commitment to a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Before monastic communities were formally established in the late third century, Christian women in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria called to consecrate their commitment to God adopted a uniform that resembled both peasant clothes and women's mourning attire. Many of these women were widows inspired to turn towards a religious life in the second stage of their lives by the radical Gospel of St. Paul, who declared that all people are equals in the eyes of Christ; their garments were an outward symbol of their transformation.

Once the general form of the habit was codified in the sixteenth century by St. Teresa of Avila and the Carmelite order, the founding sisters of new orders would design a variation of their own. Habits slowly became more elaborate, requiring special machines and custom sewing techniques, and by the seventeenth century, orders were further embellishing their uniforms by adding ornamentation where they could, deviating from their original ascetic nature. This trend led European convents to document their preferred design through the production of a handmade "nun doll" wearing an accurate, miniature version of the complete outfit. When a new community within that order was established in a distant European country, this doll was sent to be copied, but was otherwise locked away in the convent's coffers to ensure the preservation of the original design.

As convents evolved and gained independence, nuns developed significant and diverse roles outside of the cloister and sisters began to question the costume, as it seemed to widen the gap between them and the lay people they served in the secular world. By the mid-twentieth century, liberal-minded sisters, primarily in the US, began to voice their mounting resentment toward the elaborate, high-maintenance garb imposed on them by the church and sought to recoup the right to determine their religious dress code.

By the 1960s, the habit had become a potent symbol of tension between Catholic nuns and the church, and also between the active orders who were no longer confined to the cloister but acting as social workers, nurses, doctors and educators in the secular world. Feminist nuns eventually won the right for sisters to determine their own dress in Vatican II, the ecumenical conference of 1962–1965. With this change came unforeseen complications such as a new awareness of body image, and anxiety and dissent about what the

new standard for dress should be. And, much to the dismay of those who had lobbied for these changes, postulants today are often choosing to join orders that maintain their original habit, as opposed to modified versions, many of which evolved into dowdy polyester suits.

One particularly remarkable response to this debate can be seen at the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, Connecticut. Here, the sisters maintain the traditional Benedictine habit that their founder, Mother Benedict Duss—a medical doctor by training—brought with her from her abbey in Jouarre, France when she emigrated to the US in 1944, but only when in prayer. In 1947, Mother Benedict introduced an alternative denim "work habit" in solidarity with the American blue-collar worker. A progressive, self-reliant farming and artistic community, they live by the motto *ora et labora* (prayer and work), and each member is encouraged to find her professional and artistic calling so that she can better serve the community as a whole.

Regina Laudis created an additional habit instead of modifying their black-and-white robes, but for many other orders, this was not the case. When habits were modified in the 1960s after Vatican II, complicated designs were lost. Now, miniature nun dolls provide the last remaining examples of the vestments for various orders. Contemporary orders that would like to return to their historical habit search for these dolls in order to use them as templates for the garments' construction. Although these dolls were first produced as unique artifacts by the convents, over time families who could not afford to have a portrait painted of their daughter in her new religious garb, and who might never see her again once she joined the cloister, began to create demand for replicas. Now, they are popular first communion gifts and collectors' items, produced by doll companies and hobbyists.

The Nun Doll Museum at the Cross in the Woods Shrine and Parish in Indian River, Michigan, houses a permanent display of 525 dolls dressed in historically accurate habits, all crafted and collected by one member of the parish, Sally Rogalski. She began her collection in 1945, purchasing the dolls she could find, and working with individual orders to create others. I visited the museum in the winter of 2011 to photograph the collection. I was pleasantly surprised to discover the origami-like shapes the contorted garments made as I peeled back their layers to reveal their construction. These images function as a body of photography, and as an archive with a practical purpose: they can be used to extrapolate the patterns for adult-sized habits, of interest to aficionados and nuns alike.



Cloistered Discalced Carmelites, Grand Rapids, Michigan.





Servants of Our Lady, Queen of the Clergy, Lac-au-Saumon, Quebec, Canada.





Benedictine sisters of the Abbey of Regina Laudis, Bethlehem, Connecticut.

