



OCTOBER 2017

## FABRIC, FROM FLAT TO FABULOUS

*Portrait of a Young Woman* | Frans Hals

*Puff 3* | Annet Couwenberg



Take a length of fabric. Fold it or twist it. Pinch it or stretch it. With these simple moves, cloth that once lay flat on a table can be transformed into ingenious three-dimensional structures. Just look at the work of a painter and a textile artist, separated by almost 400 years.

The young Dutch woman in Frans Hals's portrait wears a collar or ruff several inches high that reaches from one shoulder to the other. A skilled tailor folded many yards of fine linen into tiny figure-eight pleats, sewed them to a neckband, and then fitted the collar with a wire so that it tilted upward behind her neck. In 17th-century Holland, ruffs heavily stiffened with starch were favored attire for prominent merchants, bankers, city leaders, and their wives, who willingly sacrificed comfort for fashion. Some ruffs were so large and cumbersome that Dutch men and women had to use extra-long utensils while eating their dinner.

The ruff in Hals's painting inspired the work of Baltimore textile artist Annet Couwenberg, who grew up in Holland. Updating the labor-intensive process of producing such a collar, she used sophisticated 21st-century technology to create *Puff 3*. A computer-guided digital laser cutter allowed her to prepare her fabric by making precisely measured lines and perforations on stiff fabric. Folding the cloth by hand along the perforated lines, Couwenberg transformed her flat yardage into a three-dimensional sculpture featuring carefully creased "mountains and valleys." Rather than mimic a 17th-century ruff with evenly-spaced pleats, she squeezed some of her pleats together, pushing them deep into the structure, while letting others open wide and sweep around the outside to create a contemporary take on a centuries-old idea.

### VISIT THE BMA

and see Hals's *Portrait of a Young Woman* in the central European Art gallery.

See Couwenberg's *Puff 3* in the Berman Textile Gallery through February 18, 2018.

Frans Hals (Dutch, c. 1582–1666). Detail, *Portrait of a Young Woman*. 1634. Oil on canvas. 43¾ × 32¾ inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art: The Jacob Epstein Collection, BMA 1951.107

Annet Couwenberg (American, born Netherlands, 1950). Detail, *Puff 3*. 2014. Laser cut and origami-folded buckram, wood, nails. 9 × 14 × 11 inches. Collection of the artist. Photography by Dan Meyers

### CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS

What kinds of neckwear have been worn by people from different historical periods and cultures? Check out [bit.ly/2xNWeTi](http://bit.ly/2xNWeTi). Design your own neckwear for the 21st century, or make your own pleated collar out of paper.

Search fashion magazines for examples of clothing that may be more impressive than comfortable. Discuss how much discomfort you would endure for the sake of fashion.

The kind of collar that appears in Hals's painting is called a millstone ruff. Discuss why it was named for a stone used to grind grain. [bit.ly/2flrUPi](http://bit.ly/2flrUPi)



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PRINT THE IMAGES ON PAGES 2 AND 3 FOR YOUR STUDENTS.



*Portrait of a Young Woman*

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*Puff 3*

Annet Couwenberg (American, born Netherlands, 1950). 2014. Laser cut and origami-folded buckram, wood, nails. 9 × 14 × 11 inches. Collection of the artist. Photography by Dan Meyers