Avery Martin: Welcome to Health and Human Science Matters, a podcast by Colorado State University's College of Health and Human Sciences. I'm Avery Martin, co-host and digital media strategist.

Matt Hickey: And I'm Matt Hickey, associate dean for Research and Graduate Studies. In our college, we make it our mission to optimize human health and wellbeing through discovery and innovation. But don't just take our word for it, each episode we sit down with people who fulfill that mission, our college faculty and staff.

Avery Martin: Today we're speaking with Dr. Paula Alaszkiewicz, assistant professor in the Department of Design and Merchandising at Colorado State University and the curator of CSU's Avenir Museum of Design and Merchandising.

Matt Hickey: A relatively new member of our College of Health and Human Sciences community, Paula, welcome, glad to have you.

Paula Alaszkie...: Hello. Thank you so much for having me.

Matt Hickey: It's our pleasure. We want to do a couple of things. We want to get to know you better as a person and as a scholar, and we'll talk a little bit about your scholarship. So when you think about things that are important to you that you want to raise awareness about, whether we call these opportunities or grand challenges, whatever kind of language we want to use, talk to our listeners about the things that engage you as a scholar.

Paula Alaszkie...: I identify as a fashion historian, and because fashion is inherently an interdisciplinary subject, that means working at the intersection of numerous disciplines, history, material culture, art history... for me that's the background that I come from. And the challenge that I see in my field is encouraging others outside of our field to take fashion seriously. There's a very well-known scholar in our field who once referred to fashion as the F word because it's often considered to be frivolous, vapid, and there's a lot of gendered elements here that it's feminine and therefore it's not important. And a lot of work has been done to unpack a lot of these sort of stereotypes and judgements around fashion within the academy. But speaking to someone you meet in the grocery store about what you do, I think there's still a challenge and an opportunity there to be able to engage a wider audience about why fashion is so powerful as a medium, as a product, why it's so central to who we are. So dismantling the F word, that's the opportunity.

Matt Hickey: I like it.

Avery Martin: Love that. There's the title right there. That's great.

Matt Hickey: So origins of this, where did your interest in fashion writ large come from?

Paula Alaszkie...: I, as long as I can remember, have always been interested in fashion. And I felt, I think, as a child and a high school student torn in different directions because I had that sort of creative impulse that I wanted to fulfill. I was really into art, drawing, painting, music, fashion, but I also loved the academic part of school. And at that time it seemed impossible to reconcile those two interests. Then I learned about art history and I thought, as a high school student, "Oh, that's a way of putting the creative, the art, and the passion and curiosity around history together." I soon found out that art history is, at least the program that I did, was a very academic, theoretical, rigorous program, which was great. It really strengthened my approaches, but I had to keep going to be able to find how I could satisfy that impulse towards creativity.

Matt Hickey: Now we'll talk about your academic journey in just a minute, but I want to run a little bit more with this notion. Now what I'm hearing here is someone who is both a maker and an appreciator of art. So tell me more about that. I'm hearing the mix of both coming from you.

Paula Alaszkie...: I certainly felt the mix of both. I think I felt though that I had to pick one over the other, that it would be impossible to reconcile both of them. And it was in, not to get ahead, but it was really in graduate school that I realized that creative thinking is a tool that helps us in our most academic, theoretical, scientific pursuits. That creative thinking really is a tool that we can use regardless of what it is that we're exploring.

Matt Hickey: Here, here. Yes, well said.

Paula Alaszkie...: Yes, so I should say I am not a maker when it comes to fashion. I'm an appreciator. But I think folks are often surprised to learn that I have limited sewing skills and I come from generations of very talented seamstresses. So maybe there's some regret there that I didn't develop those skills when I had the opportunity, but there's always more opportunities-

Matt Hickey: Of course.

Paula Alaszkie...: ... to learn. But I certainly pursued drawing, painting, music, I mean, I messed around with a sewing machine trying to do some self-teaching as a teenager. But yes, I think that notion of the making and the appreciator or the theorist and the historian of that same subject that you're engaged in making is a really lovely place to be able to work.

Matt Hickey: It sounds like it. Now, if memory serves me, you went to McGill as an undergrad.

Paula Alaszkie...: Yes.

Matt Hickey: And for our domestic lower 48 folks, tell us where is McGill? How did you end up at such an august institution?

Paula Alaszkie...: McGill is in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. I grew up in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, north of Montana.

Matt Hickey: So you traveled quite a long ways.

Paula Alaszkie...: I did. I did. And I went to French immersion for my grade schooling and I felt like I had put so much effort into learning the French language, and I had friends who had also been in French immersion who had gone to English universities who within a year lost their French. And I said, "I will not be doing that," so I only applied to universities in French-speaking regions in Canada.

Matt Hickey: But nothing in France?

Paula Alaszkie...: Nothing in France.

Matt Hickey: Okay.

Paula Alaszkie...: I did live in France at a later period. McGill is an English-speaking university in Quebec. Students have the right to submit their work in either official language regardless of the language of instruction, but I was really drawn to just being in the French environment and I felt, okay, if I'm getting groceries or taking the bus, just chatting to someone out in a cafe, that the opportunity to continue to be immersed in French would help me maintain those language skills. And they did. And the bonus was that I got to attend a great university, meet a lot of really interesting people who I'm still close with, train with a lot of incredible professors, but the language was the first goal. McGill itself was the second goal.

Matt Hickey: And Montreal is a city with a lot of history. Again, atypical for the Northern Hemisphere here. I grew up about an hour south of there for what it's worth so I got a chance to spend a bit of time in Montreal, and I think it's underappreciated, like Quebec City as well, it's got kind of a European vibe to it in some ways and several hundred years of history, going back to Jacques Cartier and Champlain and names like this. So tell us about your four years training as an undergrad in such a vibrant and interesting urban environment.

Paula Alaszkie...: I love Montreal. If any listeners are looking for a long weekend getaway, let me say Montreal, direct flights, only a few hour time change, great food scene, great arts and cultures, lots of music festivals, and you feel like you are elsewhere, I think, when you go to Montreal. I really appreciated that Montreal had such a vibrant arts and cultural scene. I think at that young age I was really interested in engaging more with such a vibrant cultural scene and it was just a wonderful place to be a student.

Matt Hickey: Good for you.

Paula Alaszkie...: And so I went back for my PhD.

Matt Hickey: Yes, yes. We'll be at the PhD level in just a minute. So right away, sort of fall semester freshmen, you're thinking art history or did that emerge as part of your awareness of the opportunities that a place like McGill presented to you?

Paula Alaszkie...: I think I initially applied for political science, but I switched into art history when I registered for courses. Quebec has a slightly unique university structure because for students who are coming from the province of Quebec, they've attended CEGEP, which is in between of high school and university that cuts out one year of the undergrad. So the undergrad becomes three years instead of four. So they've already decided what major they're going to pursue at the CEGEP level.

Matt Hickey: Interesting.

Paula Alaszkie...: So there was no introduction to art history course. There's no 100 level courses, just thrown into... there was Introduction to Modern Art, Introduction to Renaissance Art. So the learning curve was quite high because you're in classes with third and fourth years as a first year student. And I was simultaneously so engaged with my courses I hung on every word that my professors said, but I did very poorly in my first year of university. I just didn't have the practice of doing well in university. It's really different than doing well in high school. And I really panicked because I wasn't doing well and I ended up after my first year of courses taking a year off and going to Paris and I was an au pair, a live-in nanny with a family.

Matt Hickey: Interesting. May I ask, how did you find your French to land in Paris?

Paula Alaszkie...: I got on the plane thinking I am bilingual and I landed and said maybe not. But that year that I spent there really solidified the language.

Avery Martin: That's good.

Paula Alaszkie...: Yes, really, really solidified the language. And I wanted to basically give myself a, I think they use the term foundation year, in art school. I wanted to give myself a foundation year. I wanted to go see all of the museums and works of art that my professors were talking about. I wanted to read all these books that they were dropping, Foucault, [inaudible 00:11:03], that I had never had the opportunity to read. I wanted to give myself a year of learning before I went back. And when I was in France for that year, I became really passionate about food and cooking.

So much so that I said when I go back to university I'm going to switch majors and go into the School of Environment and pursue, I think the program was social determinants of health. So I did about a week in that program when I went back and had to take math classes and some science classes. And when the reality settled in, I hightailed it back to art history after about a week, 10 days, in the School of Environment, and realized that food could still be my passion and my happy place outside of my studies and it still is.

Matt Hickey: So there's a couple of lessons here that if we have prospective students listening to this, I think, are important. You described a year of immersion into art history as a first year, what we call freshman student, where you hung on every word. You really loved what you were studying, but didn't do well academically, because the background of behaviors and disciplines we often think about that compliment the passion into a really nice platform for learning and progression and what have you. But part of this is it's okay to be passionate about something. In fact, of course, I hope everybody is pursuing something that's a passion, but that alone is not going to get you through a rigorous academic program. There are some behaviors that accompany that and we all learn those at some point, right, sooner or later one hopes.

Paula Alaszkie...: One hopes, yes. And now that I'm in the position of faculty member-

Matt Hickey: And mentor.

Paula Alaszkie...: ... and mentor, if I could give my younger self advice, it would've been, "Ask for help." Ask your TA, go to office hours and just simply say, "I'm really struggling." But I was, I think, nervous to admit to myself that I was struggling and didn't want to have to share that with these professors who I admired so much and was enjoying their course. I didn't want it to seem like a reflection necessarily of their teaching or their course. And I wish that I could have encouraged myself to seek that help, leave the ego at the door, it's okay to ask for help.

Matt Hickey: That's a good piece of advice for sure.

Avery Martin: That's powerful. So walk us forward to when you ended up landing at CSU. What piqued your interest specifically about the Avenir Museum of Design and Merchandising, which is such a big part of your role?

Paula Alaszkie...: In order to fast-forward to arriving at CSU, I have to do a little bit of in-between.

Avery Martin: Please do.

Paula Alaszkie...: By the end of my undergraduate degree, I had identified a strong interest in fashion in museums. I had the opportunity to do an internship with a local museum in Montreal, the McCord Museum, that is a public history museum but has an extensive collection of fashionable dress because Montreal historically was an important fashion manufacturing city in the textile and apparel industries. And for that internship, I had to write a paper in order to get credit for my courses. And I wrote a paper about the tension between displaying fashion in department stores and shop windows and museums. That interest carried me through my master's degree and my PhD degree and ultimately informs what I do now with the joint appointment between faculty and curator. So I have both academic interest in fashion display and also a practice-based interest. I did my master's at the London College of Fashion.

I had decided after my undergraduate that I wanted to keep going. I distinctly remember feeling like I don't want to leave university. Well, maybe there's an option that I can explore where I'll leave this university but continue my learning and studies. And I was specifically interested in fashion history programs and I was really interested in doing it in Europe. I am a British citizen so there was a financial interest for me to study in Europe. There were other options in New York, for example, but if I had the opportunity to study in Europe it was beneficial for lots of reasons. And also the reality of studying abroad and then not having the right to stay there and work after was something I was really aware of. So I wanted to make sure if I was putting in this investment both financially and the time and effort, that I would be able to make the most of the connections that I made during my graduate schooling and stay and work if an opportunity came up.

And an opportunity did come up. I was studying in the fashion history, History and Culture of Fashion is what it was called, the program. It's now called Fashion Cultures, I think, this program. But I was really interested in another graduate program that the university offered that was MA in fashion curating. But ultimately I really wanted to write a thesis that was a history of fashion curating so I didn't know really where I fit between these two programs. But I sat in on a few of the other programs' classes and some of these classes were taught by a professor at London College of Fashion named Judith Clark, who's also a very prominent curator who works with fashionable dress. And I was just such a fan of her work. She had done a lot of exhibitions in department stores in like in Selfridges in London. So because I had this lingering interest in this tension between fashion and the museum and more commercial methods of display, the idea of a curated exhibition in a shop or a shop window was very enticing to me.

And I, through attending Judith's courses and developing a relationship with her, asking to interview her for my thesis, found myself in a position where she was looking for a research assistant for a project that summer. And the project was in Paris so my language skills came in very handy. And next thing I knew I was in the archive of a large fashion house in Paris, and that started about two years of full-time work with her when I completed the master's program. And throughout my PhD I continued to work project-based with her on exhibitions.

Avery Martin: So tell us a little bit more about these exhibitions then. What were you able to put together and curate?

Paula Alaszkie...: The first opportunity was for an exhibition for Louis Vuitton. And we think of Louis Vuitton, I think, as just the LV brown monogram handbags.

Avery Martin: Not the pronunciation that you just said either, let's make that clear. This is the right way to say it.

Matt Hickey: We're doing it right, that's right.

Paula Alaszkie...: Language skills.

Avery Martin: Yes, yes.

Paula Alaszkie...: But Louis Vuitton's history is really interesting. They were founded in the 19th century. Louis Vuitton himself was a packer. So let's go back to the 1860s. Women in France are wearing huge crinoline skirts. Imagine packing one of those crinolines.

Avery Martin: Define crinoline for us.

Paula Alaszkie...: A crinoline is an underskirt that is very structured that would create that bell or domed shape that was so prominent in the 1860s. And that volume of underskirts used to be achieved with layers and layers of petticoats, so layers and layers of skirts. But the skirts were hot, it was unhygienic, they were heavy. So much of the history of fashion is the history of technology. And crinolines initially were made with stiffened horse hair around the different sections of the skirt to create that circular structure, but later were made with steel to become lighter. But imagine packing one of the skirts. So packing was a professional practice. People were professional packers, and that's what Mr. Louis Vuitton was. So I found myself in the archive of Louis Vuitton for a few months and put together, with Judith and a team at Louis Vuitton and other collaborators, an exhibition about the history of the company and what they're doing currently. And that was in a private gallery on the site of the historic family home and where the trunks that are made to measure are produced today.

Matt Hickey: My goodness. What fun, huh?

Avery Martin: What an opportunity. That is so cool.

Paula Alaszkie...: Yes, it was an amazing experience and one that I'm extremely grateful to have had, particularly at that really formative time in my career and professional development. And to be able to work on that project and other projects with Judith with different clients, in between my master's degree and the PhD, really solidified for me the direction that I wanted to pursue with the PhD.

Matt Hickey: Was a doctoral degree kicking around in your head this whole time? It sounds like such a rich environment, a natural question is how did you pull yourself away from that to pursue the PhD?

Paula Alaszkie...: It had been lingering in the back of my mind. I felt that writing the master's thesis was a really rewarding experience, but I wanted to do more. I didn't feel like those hundred pages were enough to keep going so it was in the back of my mind. I certainly wanted to pursue the opportunities that were in front of me, but exhibitions have a natural sort of flow and rhythm and I found myself in a time when there weren't a ton of exhibitions forecast for the next few years. I also found myself living in France as a British citizen when Brexit occurred. So I was having a lot of questions come up about where I maybe wanted to go next and put down roots and maybe have a sense of stability amongst the uncertainty of Brexit and living in a European country when that happened, and the PhD was the answer.

Matt Hickey: So you head back to Montreal.

Paula Alaszkie...: So I head back to Montreal.

Matt Hickey: But not to McGill.

Paula Alaszkie...: No, to Concordia, which I was drawn to studying at Concordia because I wanted a different institutional experience. I really valued being at such different institutions at my two previous degrees that I wanted to continue to see how different institutions and departments function. I also appreciated that for this particular research project that I was embarking on about fashion, that the department at Concordia had a really wide definition of what art history can do, and I felt really supported with pursuing a somewhat unconventional topic within the definitions of art history.

Matt Hickey: So the PhD is in art history?

Paula Alaszkie...: Yes.

Matt Hickey: Okay. And the unconventional aspects of it are?

Paula Alaszkie...: The unconventional aspects are that when I started out on the project I didn't necessarily know how it related to the discipline of art history. I was researching histories of fashion display that predate fashion in the museum. So the 1970s are when fashion, contemporary fashion particularly... not historical dress, so not a dress from the 1880s but an ensemble that could have been on the runway two seasons ago... it's in the 1970s that that type of fashion enters the museum. So many histories of fashion curating start at that time period. And I have a wider historical perspective about really experimental ways that fashion has been displayed in sites such as international exhibitions or department stores that I wanted to bring into this conversation and widen the parameters that we use to talk about histories of fashion display.

Matt Hickey: Interesting. So you're in an art history PhD program at Concordia in Montreal. You're working your way through the normal progression of such things, which of course varies from institution to institution and even desk mates sometimes at the same institution of course. At what point was what am I going to do next thing beginning to emerge?

Paula Alaszkie...: It probably was simmering somewhere the entire time. I think that it is only reasonable that when pursuing a PhD, especially in the humanities, that you go in with an awareness that the prospects on the other side aren't a guarantee. So it's fair to say that I was aware of that when I went in and that there were certain moments of existential crisis along the way as I think is a tradition of the PhD experience, the ritual. And because I was still pursuing some opportunities with Judith Clark and other curatorial opportunities, I had a foot in each door in the curatorial experience and in the academic path and I was wanting to leave doors open for myself to pursue one or the other or in the case of this position, both.

Matt Hickey: And at that time, were you aware of an overflowing abundance of opportunities to combine both?

Paula Alaszkie...: I was not aware of an abundance of opportunities. I was aware of the opposite, of how rare the opportunities are.

Matt Hickey: So when did CSU and this rare opportunity get on your radar screen?

Paula Alaszkie...: In the end of 2021, I was almost done the dissertation. I had a goal to finish it before winter break. And it was in one of those moments of existential crisis when I realized the finish line is nearing that I thought, "Uh-oh, what's next?" I've been so excited about finishing that I've been putting off the reality of what comes after this monumental occasion of finishing the PhD. And it was in one of those moments of crisis that I googled fashion history professor, curator job, and not much came up as active opportunities except for a position in Fort Collins, Colorado.

Matt Hickey: Had you ever heard of Fort Collins prior to that point?

Paula Alaszkie...: It was not on my vision board necessarily, but Colorado held something special to me. I had never been here, but I thought that it would be similar to where I grew up in Alberta because I am someone who really appreciates the mountains, the landscape, and I thought of tracing the Rockies down from Alberta through Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and I thought Colorado would feel like a homecoming of sorts to me despite it not being a place that I had been.

Matt Hickey: Sure, and so you applied.

Paula Alaszkie...: And so I applied. And I actually had to ask myself, because I was in the intensity of finishing the dissertation, can I take two or three days out of my writing schedule to prepare the materials for this job? Is it worth it? And maybe giving myself a certain number of days to apply, maybe that actually, in hindsight, was beneficial because I think we all know what it's like to overwork the application and stress over every comma and period. And when you have a limited amount of time, maybe there's a freedom that comes with that. So I sent off the application and went back to focusing on finishing the dissertation, finished it when I wanted to, spent days formatting the PDF... didn't have that in my writing plan... and heard back about the interview in January.

Matt Hickey: Of 2022?

Paula Alaszkie...: 2022.

Matt Hickey: And then you got an invitation to come out.

Paula Alaszkie...: Yes, and the timing seems, in hindsight, magical, almost unbelievable, because I came for the campus visit the week after I defended the PhD.

Avery Martin: Wow.

Matt Hickey: Yay.

Paula Alaszkie...: Yes.

Matt Hickey: Good for you.

Avery Martin: So now, a year and some change in, tell us about the Avenir, the work that you're doing and the impact that it has on our community.

Paula Alaszkie...: The Avenir is such a special resource. I feel so grateful to have my office 10 feet away from a museum collection that has such special textile and dress objects. I feel so grateful to use those objects in my teaching to be able to give students the opportunity to put gloves on and handle the types of textile objects that we're learning about in class. What an amazing gift to our students that this resource is there to support them and that the mission of the museum is that of a teaching collection. So our primary focus in collecting and in preserving these objects is for learning. I also appreciate that the museum grounds us in our community because the museum is a community facing organization and we want to serve our community, be that our community of students, our neighbors in the geographic community, our community of scholars and researchers.

I really appreciate that opportunity to know that what we're doing is rooted in other people and the community, particularly when we're developing exhibitions. I think about the unique nature of the work that we do at the Avenir Museum, where we are creating exhibitions for our community, and that is a broad definition of community. I want to ensure that a visitor who comes in and maybe skims the intro panel, doesn't read much, that they're going to get a sense of the story that we're telling just through the objects that are presented and how we've presented them. I want to make sure that a 7-year-old kid who comes in is able to have a meaningful experience. I also want to make sure that that exhibition is engaging for the visitor who comes in and reads every single word. And that what we're doing can be thought of as scholarship, that it is something that fits into my research program that I can submit to conferences or write up as publications. So I'm always thinking about constructing an exhibition at those different levels. And that is a really, I think, unique place to be working from.

Matt Hickey: For our listeners who are not familiar, where is the Avenir Museum?

Paula Alaszkie...: The Avenir Museum is located in the University Center for the Arts part of campus at the intersection of Remington and Lake Street. The entrance is on Lake Street across from the dog park.

Avery Martin: Love it.

Paula Alaszkie...: Which I like dogs so that's something I really love about where our museum is located, is when I go for a walk I get to see the dogs.

Avery Martin: Yeah, and right by the trial garden as well.

Paula Alaszkie...: Yes, right by the trial garden.

Matt Hickey: In what is the old Fort Collins High School, so there's another element of rootedness in the community here. This has always been a source of amusement for me. My mom, who passed away a couple of years ago, was very much into textiles. When I came out here, she was aware of the collection. This goes back to the late 1990s. The Avenir Museum, of course, didn't exist at that time. But she had access to a publication I think was rooted in Loveland that she had a subscription to that had sort of a textile history flare. And so when I would go visit her, she would often introduce me to friends as, "He's at that place where the collection is." And I said, "Well, Mom, would you like to tell them what I do?"

So there's an appreciation, a multi-generational appreciation in our family for the preservation of history and stories that are told in what we wear as much as what we do, and other objects of art that are part of any given culture. So on behalf of Mom, I'll say thank you for stewarding such an important collection. It's appreciated, well, all the way down in Florida.

Avery Martin: That's really cool, man.

Matt Hickey: As it turns out, yes, a true story.

Paula Alaszkie...: Thank you for sharing that.

Matt Hickey: It's my pleasure.

Paula Alaszkie...: I think that intergenerational connection is something I'm really aware of and interested in, in the space of the museum particularly, so it's lovely to think about how we engage a range of generations and be a place for cross-generational learning and sharing.

Matt Hickey: Well said. So cast your vision 5 to 10 years down the road, and again, impacts that you would like to have on the status, again, of Avenir, its national and international visibility. But the parallel, so that's the curatorial role, the influence you have on students who you get to touch. What would you like to be able to say 5 years, 10 years, down the road about those two aspects of your mission?

Paula Alaszkie...: It already has been such a rewarding year with regards to working with students. I feel that the opportunity to engage our students in world history through textiles and apparel, through diverse cultures coming together and meeting through textiles, which is largely for thousands of years, the way that cultures and the reasons that cultures were brought together was to trade textiles. And I take that opportunity to teach this content specifically, very seriously and with a lot of responsibility, to do it in a way that connects to these students today, that gives them some tools to be able to utilize in their practice as emerging design professionals, be that just contextual knowledge about something or be that research skills. So when they're developing a collection they know how to research and draw upon the history of textiles in a responsible and appropriate manner.

Matt Hickey: Well said. Thanks for spending a few minutes with us. We've had quite an engaging conversation and I appreciate it.

Paula Alaszkie...: My pleasure. Thank you so much for having me and come visit us at the Avenir Museum.

Matt Hickey: Absolutely.

Avery Martin: Yes.

Matt Hickey: Thanks for your time.

Paula Alaszkie...: Thank you.

Matt Hickey: Another great interview is in the books. Thank you for listening to this episode of Health and Human Science Matters.

Avery Martin: Stay tuned for the next episode. It's on the way. In the meantime, go listen to our episodes from seasons one through four. And if you want to learn more about our College of Health and Human Sciences at CSU, go to www.chhs.colostate.edu.