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“Dressing was . . . a torture to her”: Lady Falkland’s Fabulous Costume

BY JAMES CLIFTON, PHD, DIRECTOR, SARAH CAMPBELL BLAFFER FOUNDATION
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From Paul van Somer’s life-size portrait of Elizabeth Tanfield Cary (1585–1639), one might not know that she was a writer of note: translator, historian, and author of the first published original drama in English by a woman. Rather, it is a study of a glittering costume in silver, gold, and black, with accents in red intensified by the red drapes, tablecloth, and carpet framing the figure. From a wealthy Oxfordshire family, Elizabeth had married Henry Cary, Lord Falkland, in 1602, though they had previously scarcely spoken to each other. Van Somer (1576–1621) portrayed her around 1620, the year she gave birth to her eighth child (of eleven) and her husband was created Viscount Falkland in the Scottish peerage.

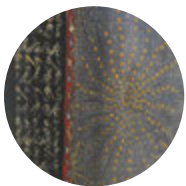
Lady Falkland’s formal costume comprises diverse elements, all richly decorated, especially with gilt-metal thread. Her red petticoat, hemmed with silver-gilt fringe reaching to her latchet shoes, is barely visible behind a pleated gray apron edged in spangles and covered with a repeated sunburst pattern in silver and gold. Her torso and arms are encased in a doublet with overlapping tabs. The breadth of her hips is accentuated by a bum roll worn beneath her high-waisted skirts. Over these pieces, she wears a long, black, open gown with hanging sleeves (often called a nightgown), heavily embroidered. Around her neck is an impressive tiered ruff of lace, matched by the cuffs on her wrists. Most spectacular is the towering

lace headwear fitted into her hair (or wig). Framed by golden hair extending like rays of light and the lace of the headwear and ruff edged in innumerable points, Lady Falkland’s face glows like the sun echoed in the pattern on her apron.

In Van Somer’s portrait, Lady Falkland’s slight smile suggests that she is well pleased with her splendid costume. But several decades later, her daughter wrote that “dressing was all her life a torture to her”; she found it tedious and paid it little attention. She walked around the room “seriously thinking on some other business” while her servants followed her, trying to “pin on her things and braid her hair,” or she sat to read or write while they tried to “curl her hair and dress her head.”

According to her daughter, Elizabeth Cary dressed to please her husband, “because he would have it so,” and it was “alone for his will she did undergo the trouble.” Soon after this portrait was painted, however, the Viscountess Falkland no longer had reason to please her husband nor the money to dress so lavishly. In 1625, she was disinherited by her father for squandering her dowry on her husband’s career and alienated from her mother. The next year, her conversion to Catholicism precipitated a final rupture in her marriage, which had been strained for years. As her daughter explained, the “carelessness she had of herself” was evident after the viscount “was angry with her,” and she always wore plain clothes of coarse black cloth.

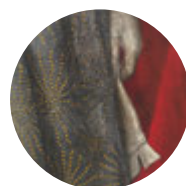
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Though Lady Falkland’s costume is muted in color, it is flamboyant in expensive materials and labor-intensive artistry.



Here, Lady Falkland dons a doublet, usually a man’s garment but sometimes worn by women. Hers is embellished with evenly spaced horizontal bands couched with metal-gilt purls and edged with looped purls of matching metal threads.



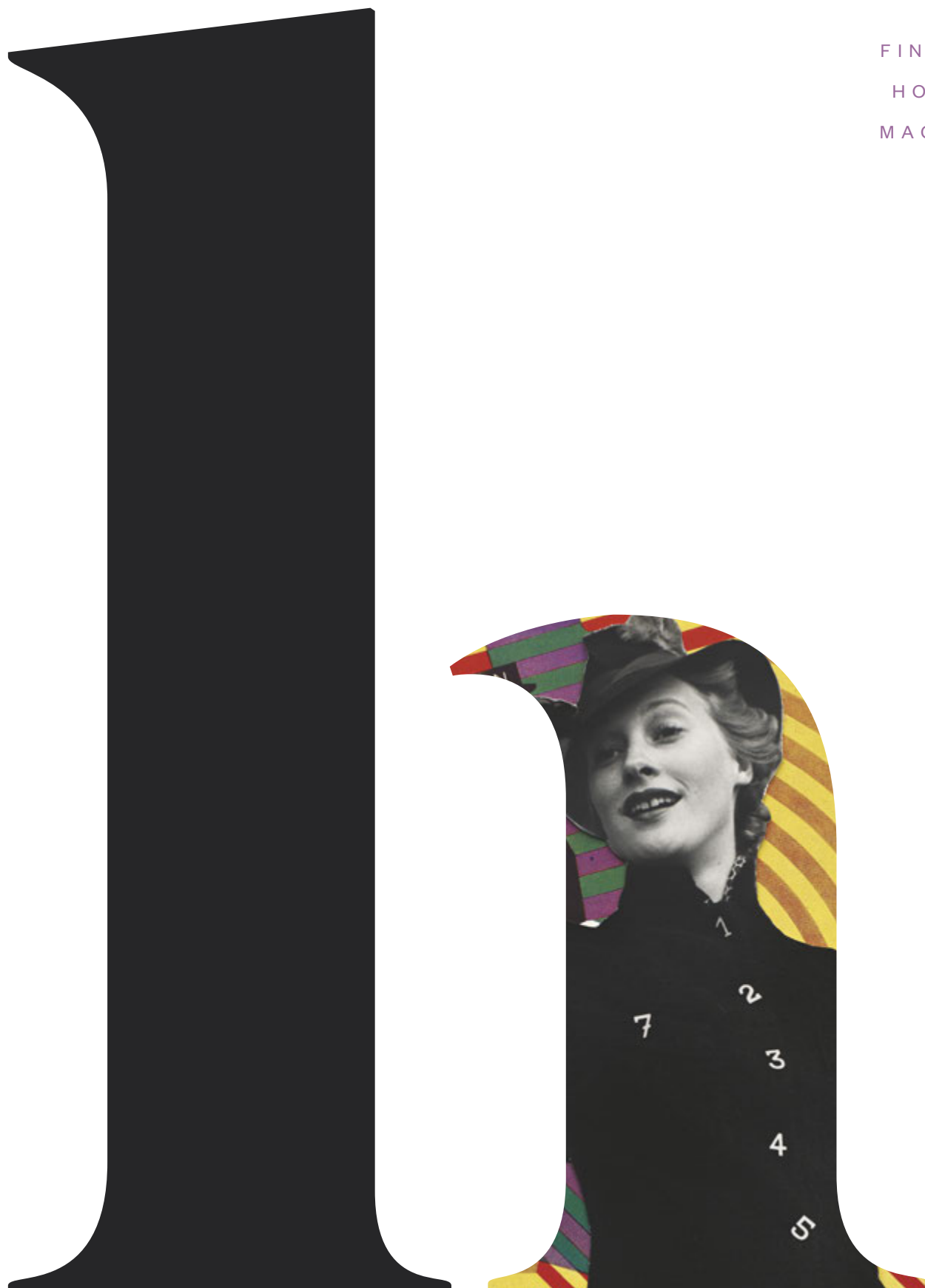
In conformity with both male and female portrait convention of the time, Lady Falkland wears one glove and holds the other, which is trimmed with pearls at the cuff.



The red of the bows nestled in the bobbin lace of Lady Falkland’s headwear serves as a subtle accent throughout the costume, appearing again in the ribbon around her waist and the barely glimpsed petticoat and silk stocking.

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Jean Moral, *Mode (Schiaparelli)*, 1938, gelatin silver print and offset lithograph collage, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by Photo Forum 2018, 2018.178. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SAIF, Paris

Posed with Panache

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Derek Boshier, *Portrait of Zandra Rhodes*, 1984, oil on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of the artist, 93.64. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London

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Album Page Depicting a Youth in European Dress, Safavid Iran, late 16th–early 17th century, gold and watercolor on paper, the al-Sabah Collection, Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait, LNS 222 MS.

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Paul van Somer, *Elizabeth Cary, 1st Viscountess Falkland*, c. 1620, oil on canvas, Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Houston, BF.1985.20

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Counterclockwise from top: Halston, *Feathered Pillbox Hat*, c. 1958–68, dyed coque feathers and haircombs, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harris Masterson III, 94.684; Halston, *Cocktail Hat*, 1959–67, bird of paradise feathers and silk taffeta, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harris Masterson III, 94.686; Halston, *Hair Ornament*, 1963–67, bird of paradise feathers, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harris Masterson III, 94.688.

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Bernhard Schobinger, *NYC 1980*, 1980, metal, asphalt, and wire, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of the Rotasa Collection Trust, 2025.618. © 1980 Bernhard Schobinger

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Bernhard Schobinger, *Magdalénien Necklace*, 2021, rock crystal and copper, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of the artist, 2024.1171. © 2021 Bernhard Schobinger

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Bernhard Schobinger, *Drop of Water at the End of a Clothes Line*, 2000, gold, white gold, enamel, and diamond, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of the Rotasa Collection Trust, 2025.619. © 2000 Bernhard Schobinger

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Bernhard Schobinger, *Mermaids Wedding*, 2019, antique fishing tools, hooks, and spinners, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of the Rotasa Collection Trust, 2025.620. © 2019 Bernhard Schobinger

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Daniele Tamagni, *Chalereux Abbot with Friends*, from the series *Sapeurs of Baongo*, 2008, printed 2019, inkjet print, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by Claire Poole and Ron Auchter, 2019.60. © 2008 Daniele Tamagni

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Top: Halston, *Hat with Tasseled Pom-Pom*, c. 1967, black silk satin, white ostrich feathers, black gros grain ribbon, and haircombs, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harris Masterson III, 94.665; **bottom:** Bob Mackie, *Evening Bolero Jacket with Horse Heads*, 1980–89, silk fillee, cotton, ostrich feathers, silver thread, and onyx and rhinestone buttons, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Carolyn Farb, 97.425.

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Baudouin Mouanda, *Untitled*, from the series *Sapeurs de Baongo*, 2008, inkjet print, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by Bryn Larsen, 2019.168. © 2008 Baudouin Mouanda

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Baudouin Mouanda, *Untitled*, from the series *Sapeurs de Baongo*, 2008, inkjet print, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by Bryn Larsen, 2019.167. © 2008 Baudouin Mouanda

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Nick Cave, *Soundsuit*, 2011, mixed media, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by the Edward R. Broida Bequest, by exchange, 2011.984. © Nick Cave. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

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Alexis Pye headshot by Frank Xavier.

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Alexis Pye, *Oh joy! Long time no see*, 2023, oil, oil stick, and oil pastel on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Cecily E. Horton, 2024.1172.A-D. © 2023 Alexis Pye

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Winslow Homer, *Along the Road, Bahamas*, 1885, watercolor on paper, Charles Butt Collection.

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Andrew Wyeth, *Sea Legs*, 1984, tempera on panel, Charles Butt Collection. © 2026 Andrew Wyeth / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

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John Marin, *Weehawken Sequence*, by 1916, oil on canvas board, Charles Butt Collection.

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Alma Thomas, *Summer at Its Best*, 1968, acrylic on canvas, Charles Butt Collection. © 2026 Estate of Alma Thomas (Courtesy of the Hart Family) / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Coming Soon

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John Mosley, *African American Women Posing on Chicken Bone Beach in Atlantic City, New Jersey*, c. 1955, inkjet print, Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA. © John W. Mosley Photograph Collection, Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA

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