It is difficult to imagine a circus without the glamorous costumes worn by circus performers: the vibrant colors, feathers and luscious fabrics all help to tell a story. This story is created by the costume designer, whose job is to create outfits for each performer in the circus.

Many circus costumes require specialized adaptations for each performer; for example, tight wire walkers need shoes with soft soles so that they can feel the wire under their feet. In 1859, a man named Jules Leotard invented the flying trapeze. To perform safely he needed a costume that would not catch on the equipment and so he developed a one-piece suit now known as the leotard.

Search “Miles White” on https://emuseum.ringling.org for circus costume inspiration!

When Looking at a Circus Costume, ask yourself:

What type of performer wore this costume?

What is the costume made from?

Describe the colors used in the costume

Describe the textures you see in the costume

What features of the costume would add visual interest to the act?

What features of this costume would make it easy to move in during a performance?

What is your favorite part of the costume? What would you change?
Learning Extension: Try it Out!

Do you have what it takes to be a costume designer? Try to design costumes onto both the male and female mannequins below. Before you start designing, decide what type of act you are creating costumes for: do your performers train lions? Act as clowns? Walk on a tightrope? Try to incorporate functional elements for the act into each costume.