Importance of Preserving History: A Conservation of an Edwardian Wedding Dress

Brittany Aris
Western Michigan University, brittanyaris@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors_theses

Part of the Cultural History Commons, Public History Commons, Social History Commons, and the Women's History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors_theses/2611

This Honors Thesis-Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Lee Honors College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.
Importance of Preserving History: A conservation of an Edwardian Wedding Dress
# Importance of Preserving History: A Conservation of an Edwardian Wedding Dress

**INTRODUCTION: WHY IS PRESERVING HISTORY IMPORTANT?** ................................................................. 2

**CHAPTER 1: A HISTORY** ......................................................................................................................... 4

- *King Edward VII and the Edwardians* ................................................................................................. 10
- *Life in America* ................................................................................................................................... 14
- *Fashion* ............................................................................................................................................... 18

**Ch. 2- The Conservation of the Edwardian Wedding Dress** ............................................................... 39

- *Conclusion* ......................................................................................................................................... 41
- *Bibliography* ...................................................................................................................................... 43
Introduction: Why is Preserving History Important?

Recorded history is not only fascinating, but it is essential to any modern civilization. In the days before written records were implemented, important events were passed from one generation to another by word of mouth. Some parts of history became separated from fact and became stories, some became distorted over time, and some was lost forever. Some history lies buried, waiting to be found by those who will probably never be motivated to do so. “But what is still worse is that too many people think that with so much information available, it is more important to teach children how and where to find information than to confer knowledge-as if creating a solid frame of reference for our youths is a trivial matter.”¹ There is one item from history however, that if not lost, will show the truth, and that is the artifact. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then an artifact is worth many times that. The artifact is not only the preserved finished product, but a blueprint that offers information on every type of material, or crafting technique used.

Properly recorded history is fact. It is important because it shows us who we are and how we got here. We are naturally curious creatures and have a need to know the history of our species, from the cavemen all the way up to the present. People will often try to explain an unknown with whatever reasoning they possess. Lack of historical evidence only leads to myths, ignorance, or gaps in our past. Cultural history, because of it is constrained within an envelope of time and place, is the easiest to lose, and the most precious to keep. “People who live without a sense of history live essentially in a meaningless world. History also embodies the cultural tradition and is therefore an important source of strength which allows each person to find his or her place in a common culture, a shared body of ideas, values, and experiences which has a

coherent shape.”

History is full of people who made a difference to us in the present; the pioneers the politicians, the great soldiers, and the mighty monarchs. Each piece of history reads like a novel as these people’s lives unravel for each of us to read. We want to know about the scientific discoveries, the explorers, and the architects. When all of this becomes available to us, we can see how one small segment of our past has affected other areas of history and made a huge contribution or change. We also have a need to know about the every-day lives of our ancestors and heroes, the history that tells us who they were, not just what they did. “History also functions as a story, a coherent, interesting account of the lives of people in the past.”

This simple, yet elaborate, Edwardian wedding dress is an important part of our history. Styles have evolved over the centuries, even decades. Somebody designed and constructed this dress, putting their whole life-learned talent into the pieces of material as they took shape. This was not just any shape. It evolved over time, keeping pace with the changes of society, and it deserves our attention and admiration. This dress should be appreciated for what it is today: a piece of art from a small segment of our history.

The question has to be asked. Why is the Edwardian style of women’s fashion so special that makes it so important? Probably the most logical, though not the only answer, is that the Victorian age lasted so long, that by comparison the Edwardian era was very short. “Victoria stayed too long, Edward arrived too late.” 

---


was also the end of a long evolutionary fashion heritage. After the Great War, all semblances of
the styles and craftsmanship once used, gave way to convenience and mass production and were
lost forever. That is, except for the preserved artifacts.

Chapter 1: A History

Many consider the Edwardian period to begin at 1901 and extend up to World War I
which was 1914, even though King Edward died in 1910. The Great War as it was called,
changed everything, and with fashion, it changed suddenly. After the war ended our nation had
transitioned from the extremely conservative Victorian era, through the progressive Edwardian
era, and emerged as a giddy society of flappers, jazz, wild dances, and automobiles.

Many of us are aware of the grand and shiny things the Victorian era brought us.
When we think of an era we automatically include an all-encompassing world that signifies an
age or an accomplishment, such as the reign of a monarch, or even the nuclear age we live in
today. Queen Victoria ruled Britain for sixty four years in an era that bears her name. During
that time, not everyone in Britain, or anywhere else, wore “Victorian” clothes. Only those who
were of the upper classes wore such stylish and expensive clothes. Most of the working classes
in any country were lucky to have the basic clothes they had that were not stylish at all. “Not
one father of a family in ten in the whole neighborhood has other clothing than his working suit,
and that is as bad and tattered as possible.”

The Victorian era represented more than architecture and clothing styles, it was the
culmination of the mechanization of Britain, the industrial expansion. British factories were able

to supply the world with manufactured goods and technology. These were the fruits of the Industrial Revolution. Not just the factories, but trains for transportation, iron smelting methods, and developing farm equipment and techniques necessary to move from an agrarian society to one of manufacturing. Queen Victoria saw many amazing developments in science, art, exploration, and the expansion of the British Empire. However, it all came at a cost. A cost to humanity as factory owners paid their workers starvation wages to keep their own profits high.

Queen Victoria’s reign began at the tail end of the Industrial Revolution during which time rapidly expanding villages and towns suddenly became the new cities. “With a population of 21,677 people in 1801 where forty years earlier had only been a village of 100 houses, Oldham was one of the most typical towns of the cotton and coal dominated Pennine foothills in the 19th century. By 1851 in Lancashire, Oldham was only smaller than Manchester, Liverpool, and Salford.”6 They were planned and created strictly for the benefit of industry in a methodical manner. The new cities were stark, basic and bland. They were located close to natural resources, transportation, and financial funding. Factories, all requiring the same amenities, were built in close proximity to each other. These early industrial parks were powered by coal fired steam which meant that soot and smoke spewed from factory chimneys and enveloped the entire areas.

The newly extended cities soon developed slum areas as the factory workers became overcrowded, overworked, and unable to control the environment they lived in. Basic cottages were hurriedly erected to offset the housing boom created by increased factory jobs. The homes were poorly built, usually damp, and were very small. “These slums are pretty equally arranged in all the great towns of England, the worst houses in the worst quarters of the towns; usually one

---

Importance of Preserving History: A Conservation of an Edwardian Wedding Dress

or two-storied cottages in long rows, perhaps cellars used as dwellings, almost always irregularly built.”

To make matters worse sanitation did not keep pace with construction. Consequently, with too many people living too close together in unsanitary conditions, a breeding ground for disease was created. “The streets are generally unpaved, rough and dirty, filled with vegetable and animal refuse without sewers or gutters, but supplied with foul, stagnant pools instead.”

This was the area of town where barefoot women and children were a common sight. Where people without work starved to death, or sold their belongings, or even their children, so they could buy food. For the factory worker, having children meant extra wage earners. The children would become a source of income for the family at an early age. It was common at that time for young children to work long hours in the factories, often in unsafe conditions.

There was a huge gap between the low class factory workers and the rest of society. The poor working classes were considered dirty, dishonest, and expendable, and they were worked hard for long hours, being paid only enough money to survive. The elite did not live inside the city where the slums were, they lived away from the dirt and the soot, where the air was clean. They associated disease with the poor, and chose to live where the low class workers and all of their problems were noticeably absent. The workers’ slums were even concealed in such a manner, that the better classes could travel the city without having to see them “Every great city has one or more slums, where the working-class is crowded together. True, poverty often dwells in hidden alleys close to the palaces of the rich; but, in general a separate territory has been assigned to it, where, removed from the sight of the happier classes, it may struggle along as it can.”

Another development of the Victorian era’s struggle with class distinction was the

---

emergence of a middle class. Not all factory workers were unskilled; those with premium jobs lived better than the rest of the workers. It became possible with luck and hard work, to build a successful business, even in some cases an industrial empire. Suddenly all of the money did not remain at the top, and that was important because the standard of living increased not just for the fortunate few, but for a whole new section of the population.

During the last twenty years of Victoria’s reign Britain entered into an economic slump brought on by an effort by Parliament to keep grain and beef prices high to prevent cheaper products from being imported from other countries. Money spent on necessary food meant that the manufactured goods market suffered, which in turn put factory employees out of work. As in any such situation this put a spin on the world of economics. Some people became richer, many became poorer, and some lost everything. The economy made a recovery just in time for King Edward to inherit the throne.

During this time there was a semblance of effort to make education important enough to be mandatory. Several acts were passed between 1870 and 1902 but all were only halfheartedly pushed by officials who saw education as an upper class advantage. “Education which was to prove perhaps the most effective consolidator of the elites of the nation, was to act as perhaps the most insidious class barrier among the population at large.”\textsuperscript{10} It was met with equally halfhearted enthusiasm by the poor working class who viewed complying with the law as losing wage earners from their families. “The poorer sections of the working class were often unconvinced of the benefits of education or were more cognizant of the immediate need of income derived from their children.”\textsuperscript{11}

The poor working class who did not get work in the factories had very few alternatives to


make a living. Often young boys because of their size or agility became chimney sweeps, having to climb through the inside of the chimneys to clean them. Rat catchers could get occasional employment using ferrets to “ferret out” the rats in a home. Other than a few other meager and usually temporary jobs, a life of crime was always the alternative, with pick-pockets being very common in the crowded streets. This was the life of the poor in Victorian times, which had no idea of Romanticism, of poetry, art, or anything as glorious that was going on around them. All they knew was the struggle to survive.

Not all who worked jobs were at poverty level. The middle class was made up of Bank employees, civil servants, even skilled factory workers. They were nowhere near as blessed as the rich, but were living a life that the poor would only wish for, but never realize. With enough money and free time to travel third class on the railways and spend family time together at the seaside, or even to go to the park and listen to the brass bands, the middle class were enjoying themselves maybe as much as the rich were. “With the newfound mobility of rail travel, increased income, and less demanding work schedules, Victorians found themselves with free time on their hands and set about filling it with trips to resorts, sports, and leisure activities previously available only to the wealthy.”

Public houses in some neighborhoods not only served drinks, but also provided recreational programs such as concerts, club meetings, or special outings.

The stigma of the public house or “pub” and its ongoing drinking, along with other less desirable influences encountered there, such as betting or prostitution, led to the temperance societies offering alternative programs. One of these, started by Thomas Cook, grew with popularity into the famous “Cooks Tours”. “To counter these attractions temperance societies

---

Importance of Preserving History: A Conservation of an Edwardian Wedding Dress

grew up. Thomas Cook, founder of the world's first major travel business, started his career in 1841 by arranging a train trip for temperance supporters in Leicester to attend a convention in nearby Loughborough. Five years later he organized his first Scottish tour.\(^\text{13}\) Another attraction to towns such as Loughborough was the designation by royal charter, for a town fair. This centuries-old tradition allows for cities or towns that were specifically contracted by a monarch to have an annual town fair at a predetermined time of the year. The fair at Loughborough, as well as those at other towns such as the neighboring Nottingham Goose Fair, were weeklong events where the whole town center was shut down to allow room for the fair. The local people, as well as those from nearby towns could enjoy the food and rides as well as mixing socially without social standing becoming an issue. “People living in market towns and villages looked forward to the annual fair, along with the occasional visits of circuses, menageries, and traveling theatres.”\(^\text{14}\)

One contribution middle class women made to the Victorian and Edwardian eras was their quest for equal voting rights for women. The fight was a long one with forty years of Victoria’s reign spent on petitions and speeches, until in 1903 the Women’s Social and Political Union was formed. The former gentle banner waiving canvassers turned to more militant acts under the guidance of WSPU’s founder, Emmaline Pankhurst and her daughters. After many violent outbursts and attacks on other people, hundreds of these suffragettes wound up in prison. At the end of the Edwardian age, shortly after King George V ascended the throne.

Emily Davidson, a WSPU member died when she deliberately put herself in front of Anmer, the king’s horse, during the Derby race at Epson Downs. The violent collision left

\(^\text{13}\) Pamela Horn, “Victorian Recreations,”\texttt{http://search.proquest.com/docview/217048521?pq-origsite=summon&accountid=15099}.

Davidson with head injuries that she did not recover conscious from. “The suffragette Emily Davison was killed by King George V’s horse during the 1913 Epsom Derby while trying to draw attention to the campaign for women's suffrage.”

Emily Davidson had become politically involved with women’s rights after attending Oxford University where as a woman she could not, by law, be awarded a degree for her studies. She became a women’s rights activist, and had been arrested nine times for militant activities prior to her death.

The Victorian rich however lived a life of luxury. They had wonderful houses, some that even had running water piped to them. They also had many servants. Even the upper middle class families had at least one, as it was almost impossible to run a household without help, and it was certainly an indicator of wealth if a family had servants. Those who could afford to sometimes employed more help than they actually needed because the number of servants one had was reflected as a status symbol.

Major events were staged by the Victorian rich who meant the servants were indeed necessary to complete their social lives. Dinners were extravagant and very proper affairs. The Victorian etiquette demanded the correct rules be followed from manners to the correct jewelry, what to wear, who to talk to, with social standing being kept in consideration at all times. Dances were also huge affairs, much too large for any house, because even the best mansions did not have a very big ballroom. Instead, dances were scheduled outside under a full moon when lighting didn’t have to be a major consideration.

**King Edward VII and the Edwardians**

When Queen Victoria died Edward VII became king and as can be expected, thus began the Edwardian era. Albert Edward, who had been affectionately known to the queen as “Bertie”

---

was already sixty when he ascended the throne as Edward VII, was only to rule for nine years before he died, making the Edwardian era much shorter than the Victorian era. An important part of the Edwards reign was that it was the beginning of a new century and it was a time of peace. It was also a time of prosperity for the rich, who unfortunately did not pass anything down to the working class, making the distinction between the classes even more defined.

The new king, who had lived a life devoid of any training for the job he was to inherit, was suddenly thrust into the forefront of British politics and domestic affairs. Not only was he not accepted as being on the same level as his mother had been, but her insistence on treating him as being insignificant to the monarchy was hard for him to overcome. “Allowances were freely made for his unfortunate training, and the Queen’s stubborn refusal to take him into partnership met the censure it deserved.”

It was also hard for Edward to reciprocate interest in matters that had not concerned him until his coronation. He had become the head of the Church of England, and in doing so he had inherited the problems associated with the politics of religion. He was also forced to become involved in the politics of Parliament, something that he had never been exposed to before. In domestic politics the King showed scarcely more interest than in the government of the Church, and he was speedily bored by attempted explanations of legislative schemes. He shared the dislike of liberalism prevalent among the upper classes, and the Radicalism represented by Mr. Lloyd George filled him with alarm.

Queen Victoria, who had been obsessed with her late husband, Prince Albert, had become somewhat of a recluse after his death. One of the reasons that King Edward had not received any formal training was because as then, Prince of Wales, his job was to make public appearances, and as Edward had defined it “have fun”. He had been quite happy along with his wife

---

Alexandria, to live the good life. His mother Victoria had been equally happy being left to brood, leaving Buckingham Palace devoid of any social affairs which had transferred to Sandringham House, the home of Edward and Alexandria. “Since the death of the Prince Consort the Queen had withdrawn behind her widow’s veil, and the social life of the upper classes had revolved around Sandringham and Marlborough House.”

When Queen Victoria passed away the revelry was reborn. It began with Edward VII “… (who announced her passing To friends at Osborne House with the words "Gentlemen, you may smoke").”

King Edward moved into Buckingham Palace after his coronation, let some light into the rooms, and did what he did best. He entertained the high society. “The court now awoke from its winter sleep, for the King loved happy faces and good cheer, and the gracious charm of Queen Alexandria won every heart.” For what was lacking in the King’s political skills, he made up with his social graces. He made his way around the best manors and country houses, and racetracks, but the best was to come. Mixing his interest in society and foreign affairs he began his many travels abroad, which like everything he enjoyed doing, he did to the extreme. He finally had his wings clipped, with Britain wanting their monarch to spend more time at home.

For Britain’s upper classes this was the age of excess. The king enjoyed fine dining, and as his figure showed, he ate very well. As the upper class emulated his poor diet and immense appetite, so too did many of the middle class, who by wanting to “fit in” ate many more calories than they needed spending money on their food that they did not have.

The beginning of the Edwardian age was also the beginning of great restaurants. Queen Victoria had always eaten her meals at home, but King Edward liked to eat out. All of his

18 Hearnshaw, Edwardian England, 10.
20 Hearnshaw, Edwardian England, 10.
followers, and there were many, did the same, encouraging restaurants to entertain exotic dishes, and celebrity chefs. “Unlike his famously stay-at-home mum, Edward VII loved French food and loved eating out. Where he went, the more well-to-do of his admiring subjects followed, generating the first great restaurant boom, an explosion of new and exciting dishes, the arrival of the celebrity chef, and the birth, in the shape of the Pall Mall Gazette's Lieutenant-Colonel Newnham-Davis, of the restaurant critic.”21 The amount of food was enormous, with the dinner menu boasting twelve course meals. Not counting the Madeira wine or the whole chicken nighttime snack this was a five thousand calorie a day diet. Not surprisingly it caused misery for many through weight gain and the painful onset of gout.

At home a typical Edwardian breakfast would consist of: Porridge, sardines, curried eggs, grilled cutlets, coffee, hot chocolate, bread, butter, and honey. Lunch would typically be: Sauté of kidneys on toast, mashed potatoes, macaroni au gratin, and rolled ox tongue. The afternoon tea would consist of: Fruit cake, Madeira cake, hot potato cakes, coconut rocks, bread, toast, butter. A normal dinner would be: Oyster patties, sirloin steak, braised celery, roast goose, potato scallops, and vanilla soufflé. It would have been normal to eat at a restaurant once or twice a week with friends, and dressed in full evening formal wear. The nine-course dinner menu is from The Savoy which was served on January 14, 1905.22

1 Beluga Caviar and native and rock oysters
2 Pot au feu Henry IV -the shoulder, shank, rib and tail of beef braised all day and served in their broth with béarnaise.
3 Sole cardinale or whitebait
4 Chicken d'Albufera, served in a sauce of boiled cream, triply-reduced, with mushrooms and

---
black truffles and quenelles of veal tongue and chicken.

5 Saddle of lamb with spring vegetables and parsley potatoes.

6 Pressed Rouen ducklings,

7 Asparagus hollandaise.

8 Peach Melba served in a hand-carved ice-swan

9 Canapés a la Diane

   In contrast the poor working class population was still living in poverty. Things had been bad for them during Victorian times, and if anything, they got worse after the turn of the century. The separation between the gluttonous rich and the starving poor was as vast as ever, with no change in sight for either class. “In the 1890’s, Charles Booth’s London investigators confirmed what many social agitators had long held - that the continuing industrialization of England had not resulted in the disappearance, or probably even the reduction, of the portion of society living in poverty. He found that 30.7 per cent of London’s population lived in poverty and these unfortunates were neither confined to Dickensian “rookeries” nor recruited solely from the ranks of beggars and criminals. On the contrary, he found, pockets of misery existed throughout the metropolis, often close to wealthy areas, and were populated largely by casual unskilled workers.”

Life in America

Victorian America had lagged behind Europe at first by staying a primarily agrarian society until later in the century. “By the early twentieth century, the United States had transformed from a mostly rural and agricultural society to a largely urban and industrial

---

society.”24 This had more to do with the vastness of the country that was not really connected as a whole nation until the advent of the transcontinental railroad. The farming industries were also quite unlike those in Europe, with tobacco, cotton, sugar, and rice being grown as well as the traditional grains.

Once the American infrastructure was established, the population flourished until by the end of the Edwardian era it had doubled. “Between the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876 and the San Francisco one in 1915, the US population doubled, redistributed itself, and developed the character and lifestyle identified with the middle classes in the 20th century. Its mobility required roads, trains, trolleys, maps, canals, autos; new means of communication in telephones, telegraphs, and mass media; and a standard time devised by railroads and measured by alarm clocks, time clocks, and cheap watches.”25 At the beginning of the Edwardian era life was not much different in America than in Britain. The Industrial revolution in Britain had become the architect of big cities. Cities full of factories, their resulting smoke and grime, and their poverty ridden workers. Coal, needed to produce the steam energy for the factories, was itself a huge industry. The coal mines provided employment for workers who were as equally, if not more oppressed than the factory workers. There were rich people too, many of them profiting from the misery of the poor, but like two opposite poles, the rich and the poor were so far apart socially that they lived in their own separate worlds.

America had been different during the Victorian age when most of the population had lived in rural areas. By the turn of the century, thanks in part to the development of the railroads, America had become more industrialized, which in turn meant a need for coal, and as factories

25 “VICTORIAN AMERICA,” Jim Kobak’s Kirkus Review no.11, (Jun 01 1991),
hp://search.proquest.com/docview/917173730?accountid=15099.
sprang up, a working force for the mines and the factories. Workers who were destined to live at poverty level just like their counterparts in Britain. “Unchecked industrialization led to deteriorating living conditions for urban labor and the working poor.”

America’s success led to big industrial cities, especially in the north, and like Britain, that meant there were a few rich families who set themselves apart from those not so fortunate. “There was a marked economic divide between the rich and the poor in the country during the first decade of the century. There were very few wealthy people, but they lived in a grand and ostentatious style that the rest of Americans could only dream of affording.”

This was not a country of royalty, of lords and ladies, kings and queens, but it was a country of powerful railroad barons, industrial magnates, and rich and powerful farmers. For these people and the emerging middle class, the Edwardian era was called “The Gilded Age.” This term reflects the shining outward appearance of society that was layered over the grim conditions of the working poor hidden below. “It is true that during what came to be known as the 'Gilded Age,' capitalism had run amok. There was widespread corruption and wealth was displayed ostentatiously. The rich were covered with diamonds. The poor were covered with rags.”

Everything was not lost for the American worker however, because the Progressive movement, a political group aimed at improving American life in general, was pushing for reform. “Most Progressives felt the government should help solve social problems, such as labor issues, poverty, slums, and disenfranchisement.”

What followed was a period of unrest, leading to strikes, and ultimately the government’s involvement. The work of the activists and politicians eventually led to

improvements of working conditions and workers’ rights. Progress during the administration of President Theodore Roosevelt led to the government having a much bigger hand in the affairs of business.

During the Edwardian period in America almost nine million immigrants entered the United States; people from the Soviet Union and other parts of Europe, as well as from Canada and Mexico. Either from not being accepted, or from wanting to maintain their national identity, many immigrants remained isolated in their own neighborhoods much as the Chinese had done in California after the gold rush. “Immigrants entered the United States but rarely assimilated. Instead, they attempted to retain as much of their ethnic identity and cultural practices by settling in pockets within neighborhoods, building stores, churches, and services identical to those left behind in their native lands. This separatism, combined with language barriers, often led to conflict and discrimination.”

In a replay of events from one side of the Atlantic to the other, the Edwardian era was good to the rich in America just as it was in Britain. In both countries the bountiful wealth led to excess as the rich got richer and the poor, at the very most, stayed stagnant in their poverty. Samuel Clemens, was an American contemporary who observed the huge difference between the haves, and the have not’s in America. Using his pen name Mark twain, he wrote sarcastically “What is the chief end of man? - to get rich. In what way? - dishonestly if we can; honestly if we must.”

The time of the rich and great business leaders was at hand. Sometimes accused as “Robber Barons” because of their aggressive business tactics, these prominent pioneers of finance, publishing, mining, industry, and railroads, as well as many other fields of enterprise,

31 William E. Phipps, Mark Twain’s Religion (Mercer: Mercer UniversityPress, 2003),
were indeed rich, but they were also great in their own right. They were the ones who helped to transform and build our nation, from its fledgling Victorian industry based, but still agrarian roots, to the giant industrial society it became as the gilded age gave way to the progressive age of the Edwardian era. “The term robber barons is part of a vociferous debate about the characteristics and motives of America’s leading nineteenth century industrialists. Historians question whether these men, such as the premier oilman John D. Rockefeller (1839 - 1937) or financier and railroad magnate Jay Gould (1836 - 1892), operated simply as monopolists or whether in spite of their faults they acted as the builders of America’s industrial might with its attendant high standard of living for the wealthy made possible by the early twentieth century.”

These powerful magnates were not the same as the original robber barons who were powerful, but corrupt, medieval European nobility who illegally taxed all commerce passing through their domain. Apart from making the medieval nobility very wealthy, the tariffs were responsible for considerably driving up the prices of the goods for the end users. The Edwardian comparison was coined because business was conducted in a legal, but ruthless way, where investors or small business owners could be victims of a tycoon’s shrewd or sometimes predatory business strategies. What was sometimes overlooked was that these moguls contributed toward producing new products, highly efficient processes, and big businesses that created millions of vital jobs.

Fashion
Fashions in Victorian America were mostly admired and worn by the wealthy, with the latest styles imported by those who could afford it. All heads turned to Europe for the latest

ideas in fashion. France became the predominant inspiration, although British royalty was also a
major influence in fashion. The first French fashion houses were firmly established by the
1860’s. Offering expensive, original hand-made clothes lines, the haute couture became the
exclusive high-end suppliers to the wealthy. “The story of couture begins in 1858, when Charles
Frederick Worth founded his custom fashion house. In the face of industrialization, couture
offered a guarantee of exceptional quality, luxury and customer service.”33 Even though
America had no desires to support the archaic idea of a monarchy, it was still very desirable to
emulate the styles that royalty wore. “The bride often wore orange blossoms in her headpiece or
bouquet, and a wedding veil, which became popular after Queen Victoria had been married in
one.”34 Another accessory that caught on from European fashion via France was the folding fan.
These were usually quite elaborate as well as functional. The Southern American lady had a
need for such an accessory in the warmer South. Fans could be constructed with ivory, bone,
wood, mother of pearl, tortoiseshell, sometimes with gemstones or even feathers. As a status
symbol it was important for the fan to look glamorous even when closed. The wealthy could
import the most extravagant and intricate fans from Europe, especially France.

Parasols and gloves were also necessary accessories for ladies of the South because the
sun could ruin their white complexion. A tan was considered the mark of the poorer working
class and was to be avoided. “The belles of Louisiana … their pale ivory complexions which
their suitors compared to the magnolia flower must not be marred by contact with the fresh air;
for protection they made judicious use of rice powder.”35 “A parasol or umbrella protected a

35 Robert Lacour- GayetLacour. Everyday Life in the United States Before the Civil War, 1830-1860 (New York:
woman’s skin from the sun, keeping it fashionably pale instead of unfashionably tanned.”

The dresses had grown from the neo Grecian styles at the turn of the nineteenth century, to progressively wider bottoms, puffier sleeves and thinner waists. All of this shaping of the female form required undergarments such as the corset that were both uncomfortable and restrictive. “Corsets, and often bodices, were stiffened with whalebone and had a long front busk pushing down on the embonpoint (plumpness of the stomach), creating a narrow waist.”

 Petticoats were layered to fill out the dresses to accentuate their bell shape.

By near mid-century the petticoat gave way to the horsehair or crinoline petticoat making the use of several layers obsolete. “The invention of a petticoat made with horsehair (crin in French) suddenly made it unnecessary to wear lots of layers of petticoats.”

Unfortunately the styles dictated bigger and bigger dress bottoms, which eventually made it awkward for a woman to get through doorways, or in and out of a carriage. The dresses became not only hard to get around in, but also too wide for the use of a coat. This was the reason that shawls became in vogue, because they could be used where a coat could not. “During the second empire (1852-1870) crinoline dresses became so large that it was impossible to wear a coat over them, and even larger cashmere shawls came into fashion.” Another necessary innovation was the long cotton drawers that had to be worn underneath the crinoline frame due to its unstable manner.

Women became the center of ridicule wearing the crinoline dresses, especially in Britain where anything French was already a thorn of contention. This became ammunition to those opposed to women’s rights, which cited women’s inability to think of anything but fashion fads.

“By resorting to stereotypes of women as gossips and slaves to fashion that cannot be trusted to walk past a bonnet-maker’s, it suggests that the consequences of women’s having control over their own money, while extremely beneficial to milliners, would be disastrous for society at large.”

By 1850 some Northern women had become more focused on the suffragette movement, and the dress code that stylized that movement. The women from the North were anxious to gain their independence, be able to own property, and be as equals with the men. Many wealthy women in the American South were not as independent, and because the American women’s rights movement was born out of the abolitionist movement, they were not exposed to the concept as early as their contemporaries in the North.

In 1840 the World Anti-Slavery Convention convened in London, England. Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were both abolitionist delegates from North America who attended, but as the convention started, they found that only the men were allowed to participate or vote in the meeting. They were appalled that they were not recognized as bona fide members because they were women. “The presence of women in the antislavery societies inevitably raised questions about the position of women in nineteenth century American society”.

Although the two women remained abolitionists, the direction of most of their energy changed toward the support of women’s rights. Later in New York the fruits of their cause as feminist reformers culminated in a convention in Seneca Falls where, in 1848 a Woman’s Bill of Rights was drafted. By 1850 the cause for women’s equality had completely separated from the abolitionary cause. “By 1850’s women’s rights had emerged as an identifiable movement


separate from the issues and organizations of abolitionism."

The Northern women’s lifestyle became quite different because many were affected by the politics of the suffragettes, and the way they suffragettes presented themselves. The prominent American suffragette women were all from the North with the exception of Angelina and Sarah Grimke, and were mostly abolitionists. The list includes Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Paula Wright Davis, Abby Kelly Foster, Lucy Stone, and Susan B. Anthony.

“The mid-century woman’s rights movement was primarily a Northern concept.”

By the eighteen forties materials became available in the Northern states that had, at one time, been imported. New England’s Industrial Revolution had developed its own textile manufacturing factories. Readymade cotton and woolen materials soon became available to the American middle class. At the same time the Northern women were able to draw from styles that the suffragette movement had recommended as feminine, yet sensible and affordable. The suffragettes fought to maintain styles that gave them a soft image, while wearing what was to become their signature color of green, white and violet. “Suffragette jewelry is primarily made with green, white and violet stones, signifying "give women votes". But the stones have further meanings: green stood for hope, white for purity and violet for dignity. They might have looked like pretty pieces of jewelry, but the pieces were the expression of a desire to overturn the established mores of a society.”

Not all women in the Northern states wanted to be associated with the suffragettes because the attention from the male population was usually negative. Some of the styles however, such as bloomers, caught on because they were practical in the colder climates or when traveling.

---

One could easily imagine the dresses of the late nineteenth century as dull and drab. It was after all still the Victorian era, which creates thoughts of everything straight-laced and boring. The dresses of the 1880’s were nothing like that. They were incredibly beautiful with vivid deep colors, and intricate in design and materials used. Colors were often used in pairs and sometimes even colors that did not match were utilized. Black dresses were still in use, but they definitely did not set the standard, and even black mourning dresses were often ornate in texture.

This was a time when women had day dresses, afternoon dresses, walking dresses, dinner dresses, evening dresses, and even the extravagant fancy-dress ball dresses. All were different in materials used, complexity, practicality, or how much freedom of movement they afforded, but they all followed the same style. That is except for the bloomer suit which was designed for women to ride bicycles in and featured loose baggy pants. The bloomers got their name from their designer Mrs. Amelia Jenks Bloomer who was a proponent of the movement for the emancipation for women. Bloomer suits were a little ahead of their time, but gained followers toward the end of the 1880’s when women needed appropriate clothing to participate in sports such as croquet and tennis.

The bustle dress style of the early 1880’s was long, pleated and folded, although narrower than the dresses that had been worn previously. The corset was popular, as were sleeves which were three-quarters long and close fitting. The bustle that once was very pronounced had now evolved into a more practical, smaller size. The dresses were very ornate and included materials such as wool, silk, satin, velvet and lace. Bar shoes, which featured straps or bars across the front of the foot were very popular, and hats became smaller and smaller. Capote style hats were one of the common features of the 1880’s. They were small hats that tied

underneath the chin with ribbons.

During the mid-1880’s the bustle once again grew in size as had the material gathered at the sides. The dresses had become wider, incorporated heavier drapes, and looked very wide at the hips. The corset had become shorter, and eventually gave way to the even shorter bodice. As the decade progressed the bustle once again reduced in size, the sleeves became looser and puffier, and the dress returned to being tighter, but now it was hanging straighter. At the end of the 1880’s every-day dresses were narrow, and tied at the back which were quite restrictive.

The 1890’s brought major changes in the style of dresses. Queen Victoria was no longer a major influence on fashion, and other younger ideas were coming into play. The bustle, along with all the associated drapery was on its way out, and more practical dress was making a breakthrough. This was simpler attire that was less ornate and easier to move around in.

The shirtwaist, which was the forerunner of the blouse, was worn with a skirt, and this became commonplace. The earlier skirts were mostly bell skirts which were snug at the waist and wide at the bottom.47

The intricate use of fabrics, textures, colors, and tucks and pleats that were used on the dresses of the 1880’s were now relegated to the decoration of the bodice during the early 1890’s.

The most significant features of the 1890’s dress were the sleeves. They changed shape and size much like the bustles had done a decade before. At first the sleeves featured a puff over the shoulder above a tight sleeve. Later the puff extended down the arm, and tapered to the wrist. This was known as the gigot sleeve, but was better known as the leg-o’-mutton sleeve because of its resemblance to its namesake. Another variation was the bishop’s sleeve which

Importance of Preserving History: A Conservation of an Edwardian Wedding Dress

stayed full all the way down the arm and suddenly tapered to the wrist.\(^{48}\)

As the decade advanced the sizes of the sleeves gained in proportion to the dress. The puff sleeves and the gigot sleeves especially, became extremely big before shrinking back again by the end of the 1890’s. By the turn of the century the tight sleeve had returned with a just a small acknowledgement of a sleeve puffs at the shoulder.\(^ {49}\)

By the time of the Edwardian period the French fashion houses had become the leaders in the fashion industry. Haute couture became the most desirable attire for the rich and the most copied outfits for the middle class. “The business of fashion experienced innovations and changes to its character during the period from 1900 to 1949. Haute couture, the French high-end fashion business, was at its height for most of the period. American designers copied French fashions line-by-line, and French designers competed against each other to produce the original styles that shaped trends.”\(^ {50}\) In an effort to preserve their exclusive appeal to their patrons the French fashion houses held fashion shows and put their names on each creation. They also created branded fashion accessories such as gloves and jewelry to keep their names established. “Couture ushered in modern branding about 1910, when logos and other forms of visual marketing clearly identified each house.”\(^ {51}\) The crowning glory came when Paul Poiret, who after starting his career with the House of Worth, quickly started his own fashion business in 1903 including the sale of his perfume called Rosine as an accessory. “Paul Poiret was the first couturier to branch into perfume.\(^ {52}\) One of the attractions for a couturier to sell perfume as once


\(^{50}\) Amy T. Peterson, The Greenwood Encyclopedia of clothing Through American History, 149.


noted by Poiret was that even when the clothes went out of style, the perfume would not. As it became more and more expensive to produce haute couture pieces, the sale of perfumes and accessories were useful in defraying the costs of fashion shows and expensive materials and labor. “Nonetheless, the fashion houses are able to make up some costs with perfumes, jewelry, and their ready-to-wear activities. Haute couture gives them an image that cannot be bought by advertising.”

The Edwardian period was not an exceptional time for developing new technology in the fashion industry but it was a time for the expansion of recent Victorian technology. This included widespread use of the sewing machine, the cutting machine, and the assembly-line style manufacturing processes. These technologies came into their own once electricity became more available. Assembling clothes a station at a time allowed for faster and easier construction without the need for a seamstress, drastically reducing costs. “In essence, the new technologies being used during this period sped clothing manufacturing and helped make ready-to-wear clothing more widely available.”

The mass-produced ready-to-wear clothes were perfect for the working class of America who wanted stylish clothes but were on a smaller budget. They also appealed to recent immigrants, whose only clothes were from their country of origin, making them stand out. Buying clothes already made allowed them to function without making themselves so obvious. “At the beginning of the century, ready-to-wear clothing was worn primarily by the working class.”

The availability of ready-to-wear clothing coincided with the advancement of places to

---

purchase them. Montgomery Ward’s and Sears Roebuck sold clothing in their mail-order format, while in the bigger towns department stores were becoming established. The department stores grew into elaborately detailed structures that sometimes boasted several floors. These were the “downtown” stores such as J.C. Penney’s Golden Rule stores that sold almost anything one could need. Credit terms were available for high-priced items, and soon financing was offered for major clothing purchases. “Department stores owners built magnificent, multistory stores with ornate décor. These elaborate stores were often described as shopping “palaces” and became destinations for family outings.”

The department store concept was so successful that by 1913 J.C. Penney’s had expanded to thirty six locations.

The middle class could afford to wear tailor made clothes that were often copies of French originals. Designers could get ideas of the latest fashions from magazines or keeping track of the rich and famous at their events where they often wore the newest fashions. “During the early years of the twentieth century, the United States’ wealthiest class was a visible and publicized component of American society. The elite were often featured in newspapers through both articles and photographs. When women in the uppermost social circles went to parties and events, their fashions were often described in social sections of the newspapers. This provided another helpful resource for women looking for the most up-to-date fashion information, because the social elite’s fashions usually came directly from the haute couture designers in Paris.”

This became such a common practice that the infringements became obvious, especially to those who designed the originals. “Knockoffs of French designer fashions were common in America at the beginning of the century. When Paul Poiret came to the United States in 1913 to market

---

his lines, he left in anger over the number of Americans wearing copies of his designs.\textsuperscript{58}

The haute couture habit was an expensive one to have, even for the rich. For this reason the fashion house would often get creative with their billing, allowing credit or purposely writing a confusing bill. “Surviving bills indicate that this customization extended to accounting procedures. Credit was freely given, and women could pay in installments, hiding their true expenditures from their husbands. Indeed, it was common practice for couturiers to draw up two bills, one for the husband and a second-the real one-for the lover.”\textsuperscript{59}

The nineteen hundreds ushered in the Edwardian era of fashion and the first decade started with a continuation of the narrowing waist and the corset was a vital foundation for this achievement. The neck was considered dignified and designs accentuated the length and elegance of the neck. “During the Edwardian period, a long graceful neck was fashionable, and ball gowns were designed to accentuate it.”\textsuperscript{60} Between 1900 and 1908 the predominant fashion for women was the S-curved silhouette. This fashion was built around a corset that required a second person to tighten, until the wearer was contorted into a shape that when viewed from the side, resembled an S. The exaggerated fullness of the front of the dress in contrast with the small waist gave it the pigeon breast look. The high necklines received high, stiff collars which balanced the extra length of the dress. The silhouette of this style of dress made it necessary to have an almost flawless fit which usually required the skills of a seamstress. A lining of perfect fit would be the first part to be constructed, and then the dress would be constructed around the lining. This prevented mistakes being made with the expensive dress materials. “The S-curve silhouette marked every style of women’s fashion during the Edwardian period. The silhouette

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
was modeled after the figure of a mature woman and featured a full monobosom that whittled into a tiny corseted waist, which blossomed into a rounded hip and bottom. The corset pushed the bosom forward and threw the hips backward, resulting in a curvaceous S shape when a woman was viewed from the side. This silhouette was worn by old and young alike.61

In a huge departure from the Victorian bright and sometimes clashing colors, the Edwardian fashions displayed soft, pastel hues. This was in acknowledgement to the preference of King Edward’s wife, Queen Alexandria, who preferred to wear what became known as “sweet pea” colors. “Queen Alexandria of Great Britain, who succeeded Queen Victoria in 1901, ushered in the popularity of the pastel colors that dominated the sumptuous ball dresses of the first decade of the twentieth century.62 The colors of choice were white, silver, gold or gentle muted colors, all of which served to amplify, rather than distract from the silhouette.

After 1908, and leading up to World War I, known as the empire revival period, women’s fashion developed into the empire style which was exemplified by the high waistline that began just beneath the bosom, and ending in a slender floor-length skirt that flared out as it descended. The new period also warranted new colors, the washed out look gave way to more vibrant pastel colors. “Usually, the tunic was net over silk to give the dress a diaphanous appearance, Pale colors such as steel blue, pale blue, lemon yellow, cream, pink, and white were popular, but dark colors such as black, royal blue, and emerald were not rare.”63

Edwardian dresses were comprised of a bodice and a separate skirt. Different functions, along with different stages of society, dictated different styles of skirts. The accompanying bodices with their restrictive boned construction, were almost worn as an outer corset. High society women who were privileged enough to have an entourage to assist them, wore long

trailing skirts to functions, while others wore skirts at a more sensible ground-length. “Sweeping skirts with trains were fashionable for women when they attended receptions or the opera. Typically these skirts were only worn by the wealthy, those who had enough money for carriages and valets to keep their skirts from getting dirty.” Dinner gowns and ball gowns were similar except the ball gowns were more ornate and were worn with underskirts which were sometimes visible beneath the hem of the gown. Dinner gowns were collared or had had high necklines, and usually had short puffed sleeves of lace or a similar material. The ball gowns had formal, lower necklines ending in various shapes which emphasized the neck, and puffed sleeves that extended down to the elbow. Both gowns had trains, although the ball gown was more likely to have the longer of the two. Some ball gowns were already being designed with an empire waist which meant the bodice had to be shorter. “Even in empire-waist dresses, the torso and waist were corseted and fitted.”

In the empire revival period the bodices were less restrictive and bulky, often with the ability to be fastened from the front. The neckline was most often formed in a V-neck. The skirts were made of silk; they were shorter, narrower, and noticeably lighter as the new style used less than half of the material of the dresses from the beginning of the decade. “Skirts narrowed and became shorter. Earlier in the decade, skirt designs required five yards, and, by 1912, they only required two (New York Times 1912). Skirts behaved more like underskirts, because they usually had a long tunic over them that extended to the lower thigh.”

One of the outstanding features of Edwardian fashion was the attention to detail, and the amount of embellishments that were used. The earlier Edwardian dresses concentrated on the waist and the hem with lace or ruffles with the neckline receiving extra detail, again with lace or

ruffles, sometimes a drape decorated with bows or flowers enhanced the all-important neck. Sometimes a sash or waistband was incorporated to accentuate the waist. Later gowns used pleating, beading, or gathered fabric to enhance the fullness of their appearance. Ball gowns especially were embellished with embroidery, ribbons, net, and jet beads. Bodices were similarly trimmed and could sometimes be trimmed with fur. The dinner gowns were not as decorated, receiving most of their decoration from lace which was contrasted using darker colors in the gown’s construction. “Whereas dinner toilettes were usually adorned with lace, the decoration was far less elaborate than it was on ball gowns. Dinner gowns were made in dark colors that offset the white of the lace.”

As women penetrated the workplace they needed stylish, yet functional clothes to wear. The suit was the answer, and besides being professional in appearance it allowed more freedom for activity. The woman’s suit consisted of a jacket that was matched to a long skirt which cleared the ground, and was worn with a shirtwaist. Not only was this convenient, but it also allowed women to coordinate different suit components together in what was probably the very first mix-and-match. Working women began wearing suits made of tweed or similar materials, and accessorized them with large decorated hats and fur trimmings. “These suits were often called “tailor-mades” and consisted of a narrow skirt, a simple jacket, and a basic blouse, which was called a shirtwaist. Tailor-mades were worn as an everyday outfit, for traveling, and by working women.” As the 1910’s approached the suit skirts became narrower and were slit at the bottom to allow easy movement. The jacket became more tailored to fit closer around the waist and hips and was long enough to clear the hips. Shirtwaists worn with suits were more functional than decorative. Often similar to men’s shirts, they included the high collars and

---

neckties, although some of the later shirtwaists had lower lapels which created lower necklines. “The blouses that were worn under suits tended to be less elaborate than other blouses that were worn during the Edwardian period- because they were worn under close fitting jackets. They featured high collars, with wire supports, that reached up to the chin.”

Edwardian casual wear pretty much followed the silhouettes of the formal wear of the period. The earlier dresses were often one-piece featuring a bodice and skirt sewn together. They followed the same S-curves and featured a bell shaped skirt. The bodice also displayed the same monobosom and high collar as the more formal wear. The later version emulated the popular empire waist that was slightly lower than the formal version, and the now slimmer skirt sat up to three inches off the ground. The high collars were no longer in fashion, instead they gave way to the V-neckline or sometimes the round or square neckline. The sleeves became close-fitting, “Usually, dresses were one piece, although separates and suits were equally popular. By 1909, the silhouette had straightened, eliminating the S-curve that had been popular earlier in the decade. The waistline had begun moving toward the bust, and the skirt narrowed.”

The 1910’s started out with the hobble skirt. It got its name from the design which was long and much smaller around the ankles than around the waist. This made it difficult to walk properly. “From 1909 to 1911, simple narrow skirts were the norm, but, in 1912, the hemline narrowed further. The most extreme of these skirts was a hobble skirt, because it effectively restricted the wearer’s stride. Some women wore restraints around their ankles to keep themselves from ripping their skirts. Less severe skirts often included a slit to ease

---

Importance of Preserving History: A Conservation of an Edwardian Wedding Dress

movement.”71 No outfit was complete without a hat and they came in a variety of styles. Most had brims although some were brimless. Those that did have brims were available with wide brims as well as narrow; some brims were turned upward, while others were turned down. What they all had in common was that they were well decorated, with the earlier hats being very busy, and the later hats being quite larger with a more sparse approach to decorations, although some featured feathers that were big. “Around 1910, oversized hats were popular. These substantial hats could be as wide as a woman’s shoulders and quite tall. Embellishments were heaped onto these hats. They were topped with enormous ribbons tied into bows, artificial flowers and leaves, and feathers.”72 Within two or three years the hats were more conservative and narrower and the decorations were reduced to just plumes of exotic feathers, although these alone could be substantial.

By 1912, the decoration became more subdued and the height of the crown shrunk. Narrower, less constructed hats such as berets and turbans became stylish. By 1913, plumes of exotic feather jutted vertically and horizontally from hats. Hats were constructed of straw, velvet, and woven horsehair.”73

Unfortunately high fashion was interrupted in 1914 when World War I changed everything. Most of the young men went off to war, and with such high casualties being reported, everyone knew a lot of them would never make it back home. During their absence, women were recruited to perform the jobs that the young men left behind. The young women worked on farms, in factories, and in other physically demanding jobs. It was not long before they were looking for something less restrictive to wear. The new labor force was now in less feminine surroundings, with very few men to impress with their sexuality. “As the men left for

---

war, women took on what were previously male-dominated roles such as farm or factory work. The physicality of the work meant that traditional women’s attire wasn’t appropriate. Women raided men’s wardrobes and altered shirts and trousers to fit.”74 Women’s attire became very basic. Underskirts and corsets were deemed difficult and unnecessary. Dresses became shorter partly because of rationing, and partly because of maneuverability, and stopped at least above the ankle. Extravagance was avoided as women wore basic low heeled lace-up shoes, muted colors for their clothing, and costume jewelry. Frugality in fashion became popular as a practical alternative to spending money unnecessarily during wartime. “After World War I began, so many American women donated their steel corsets to the war effort that there was enough steel-28,000 tons- to build two battleships. Freed from their corsets, women also entered the workforce, where they rid themselves of their overdone and cumbersome dresses in favor of more appropriate pared-down apparel.”75

The modern young woman of post-World War I dressed differently than her mother did, and she wanted more freedom than society had previously allowed. Women’s clothing styles, because of the necessities of wartime flexibility, had started to change at the onset of the war. By 1915, women's clothing styles had already begun to change: high necklines had disappeared, blouses of transparent silk or cotton were becoming popular, and hems had risen above the ankles.76 As the war progressed the clothing styles for women went through an evolutionary process, where common-sense played a big part in the results. Clothing became looser fitting and the corset was becoming a thing of the past. By the end of World War I, clothing styles were

becoming more functional for women: skirts shortened and the corset, while still manufactured, was losing sales.\textsuperscript{77} The Edwardian era was definitely over, and after the war it began to sink in that fashion, and even life itself, would never be the same. When the battle-weary servicemen returned home from the war, they had been exposed to more than fighting and killing in combat. They had traveled the world and had seen places such as Paris, and they liked the excitement they had experienced. The girls that they came home to had experienced an excitement of their own. They had become independent and were making their own choices. “For a brief time the country tried to return to the way of life that had been enjoyed before the onset of World War I. However too many things had irreversibly changed. Many women resisted going back to their previous invisible position.”\textsuperscript{78} American society was heading toward an upheaval as the war veterans wanted to erase the memory of the hardships of war, but wanted a life that was tempered by the more exciting times they had experienced. The women who had previously worked in the men’s absence, now wanted to retain their independence, but they wanted more. Much more.

The new woman wanted equality. Not in getting the vote, the suffragettes had become successful with that on August 18\textsuperscript{th} 1920. What young women wanted next was to be free from the high morals and conservative dress of the previous generation. They also wanted, like the suffragettes before them, equality between men and women. They wanted the rights to a higher education, and to be able to work as professionals or to be businesswomen. “What modern women sought to achieve was the abandonment of the double standard. If higher education was available to men, similar levels of education should be available to women. If men could choose


Importance of Preserving History: A Conservation of an Edwardian Wedding Dress

careers in business and/or the professions, equal opportunities should be open to women.”
79 The modern woman of the 1920’s also wanted equality in their personal lives. Women were out
of the house and quite comfortable in what used to be a man’s world. They did not just want to
emulate men in the workplace; they wanted to unwind like them too. This included smoking,
drinking, dancing, and even a little swearing. “She spent an outrageous amount of time riding or
driving with friends in an automobile, dancing the Charleston and drinking illegally procured
alcohol.”
80

The modern young women of the 1920’s became known as flappers, which is an
ambiguous term. Some claim the expression stems from their fad of wearing unfastened
galoshes which made an amusing flapping noise when they walked. “The flapper was the
rebellious young woman of the Jazz Age. The term supposedly came from the sound of the
unbuckled galoshes that the fashionable girl of the period wore.”
81 The flapper had a distinctive
attitude and style of clothing that reflected a need for a more active woman. “If the United States
became modern in the decade after the First World War, a popular symbol of that modernity is
the flapper, a scantily clad, frivolous young woman whose newfound freedom from restrictive
clothing represented a way of life free of Victorian social strictures.”
82 If there was ever a
generation gap, it was between these young girls, and their mothers. “One writer, describing
conditions in 1927, had this to say: “What a gulf separates even two generations! Mothers and
daughters often understand each other’s viewpoints so little that it seems as though they [aren’t]

81 Encyclopedic Dictionary of Women in Early American Films: 1895-1930, an. London, United Kingdom,
ry/routwfilm/flappers/0.
speaking the same language” 83 The flappers did not follow the same Anglo-French styles as their mothers before them had done. They chose instead, to copy their styles from stars of the motion picture industry for their fashion sense. “The well-dressed flapper no longer took her cues from European royalty. Instead she looked to Hollywood’s movie stars.” 84

The flappers’ clothes reflected their need for freedom to move around and to dance. They were not restricted by underclothes such as corsets or petticoats, and the hemline of their skirts was raised to above the knee instead of at ankle length. Their hair was worn short in a bob instead of the long hair that was in vogue prior to 1920’s. As the flapper strived for equality, they would visit men’s barbershops to get their haircuts rather than visit a women’s hair dresser. “Hair was worn short and long tresses were out. The “boyish bob” became the vogue and the barbershop, still a bastion for an all-male environment, fell to women who found the barber more efficient than the hair stylist.” 85 Flesh colored silk or rayon stockings became the rage, and they were rolled down to the knees. In hot weather they sometimes were not worn at all. Dress sleeves were too restrictive and were shortened or eliminated altogether and their dresses hid their bust line. The flapper style gave the now thinner girl a boyish appearance, which was accentuated by the close fitting cloche hat which was usually made of felt. This whole outfit was accented by two strings of pearls around the neck and bangles worn around the wrist as well as their signature unbuckled galoshes which of course were not worn to dance in. “This new style featured short dresses with dropped waistslines, cloche hats, rolled down silk stockings, and long strings of beads, combining beauty with functionality to afford the wearer a great deal of freedom. It also eliminated the need for waist constraining corsets, which had often caused

women to be short of breath.”

Another facet of the flapper that distinguished her from her mother was the use of cosmetics, or the over use of cosmetics, depending on where one stood on the issue. With the advent of the flapper, the perfume and cosmetics industries saw a boom in sales of over six hundred percent. “In 1927, 7000 kinds of cosmetics were on the market. The perfume and cosmetics industries, including lipsticks, talcum powder, hair tonics, and hair dyes, had grown six times what it was in 1917.” Perfume, face powder, hair dyes, and lipstick were part of the persona as well as rouge which was worn on the knees as well as the face.

The practicality of the flappers dress made it easier for them to enter the business workforce. They still were not accepted as equals, but they did work in the entry level positions as office workers. “Flappers’ fashion made it possible for women to move around in the world of business, albeit at the lower rungs, as secretaries, stenographers, and telephone operators.”

The impact made by the flappers was significant. They fought for female equality and freedom of self-expression; they wanted to indulge in life’s pleasures with a devil-may-care attitude. They had lived through the insane reality of war, and wanted to live life to the fullest. “Early in the 1920’s, flappers epitomized the battle for freedom in terms of self-expression, female equality, and indulgence in pleasures. They believed life should be lived moment to moment, not according to moral or societal conventions.”

The flappers were bold and outspoken, and often remembered as not following the moral rules outlined by society. They smoked, used slang, listened to jazz music, and danced the Charleston. She was criticized for her morals and her lifestyle, but as this energetic, radiant,

---

even brazen young lady cruised through life she broke through some of the gender barriers on the way. “Flappers were energetic, independent, self-sufficient, and sure of themselves, and they ushered in a new era of freedom for women. The changing attitudes they inspired increasingly allowed women to enroll in colleges, enter the workforce, participate in politics, and generally play a greater role in society and public life.”90 She wore clothes that allowed her to stay on the move, but retained her femininity. She was subservient to no-one, not even her parents, Alas, when the great depression hit America the fun times were over, and the flapper disappeared forever. She will be remembered as both marvelous and shocking.

In the short space between 1900 and 1920 the American woman’s fashion went from stuffy Victorian dress to the incorrigible flapper style. Historically speaking this was the blink of an eye. Somewhere in this one pulse of the American fashion heartbeat, the Edwardian era came and went. There was no fanfare when it came, no eulogy when it left, just a few artifacts, such as this dress remain to remind us that this was a real time in our history.

Ch. 2 - The Conservation of the Edwardian Wedding Dress

This 1909, Edwardian Wedding dress is very unique in its own way. It is made out of cotton, silk and wool; which is quite unusual. When taking a first look at it, it didn’t look much like a wedding dress. It was extremely dirty and the sleeves were almost torn out. This poor dress definitely needed some conservation work, but first I had to go through a few steps.

The first step was to analyze and document the findings. Before getting busy and fixing the holes, it was important to make sure to analyze the garment’s condition. One of the essential things to observe when analyzing an historic garment is to figure out the fiber content (or what

the dress is made out of). This was achieved by obtaining a piece of thread from the garment, and studying it under the microscope. This process can tell a lot about a garment and ways of conserving it.

The next thing on my agenda was to: create a drawing of the dress, mark areas that needed attention, and initiate a plan. This always helps get a better understanding of the garment, and the ways of conserving it. It also keeps the processes timely and organized.

Typically, the next step would have been to vacuum the garment to get rid of the dirt. Unfortunately, while in the planning stage, I noticed how extremely dirty the garment was, and decided it was best to wet wash it. Wet washing the garment, is usually avoided where possible, as it can put a strain on a garment’s fibers which are already fragile. However, considering the amount of dirt on this garment, wet washing was the best thing to do for it.

Prior to initiating wet washing of the garment, I had pictures taken of the dress. This was a good way of documenting what the dress looked like before washing, as well as recording the size of the holes, and any damage the dress had sustained over the years in storage.

Wet washing required placing the dress into a special tub that was created specifically for this purpose. Big museums have a professional tub for washing historic garments. They are very expensive however, and for our purpose this one was made out of vinyl pipes that were lined with plastic material, with nylon window screen placed over the plastic. The dress was placed inside the tub on top of the screen.

Hot water was poured into the tub until the garment was completely covered. Then a very gentle soap called Orvus was measured into a cup and poured into the water. The garment stayed soaking for an hour, and then while still in the soap solution, I used a sea sponge to dab the stains, and I lightly patted my hands on the dress to remove the dirt.
When my mentor was satisfied that the dress was clean, the screen was lifted up to bring the dress out of the soap solution. The dirty water and soap was allowed to drain from the dress through the screen and the tub was emptied, and refilled with warm water. This process was repeated until the soap had been rinsed from the dress. Afterwards, the garment was laid out, dabbed with towels, and was left to air dry for a few days.

When the dress was dry I was able to begin the stabilization stage. Stabilizing an historic garment such as this dress, required the use of crepeline, a sheer material used to protect and stabilize worn textiles. The crepeline was hand sewn into the dress with silk thread. This process helped to hold the garment together without harming it, and kept it from sustaining any further damage. The main problems were the sleeves. I had to assemble pieces of the sleeves together, much like completing a puzzle. When the pieces had been satisfactorily assembled, I used crepeline to stabilize them, and then stitched each sleeve back to its original shape. Unfortunately the sleeves took a long time to complete. In the future I would like to finish conserving the rest of the garment.

**Conclusion**

This rare Edwardian wedding dress from a tiny, but easily recognizable niche in American fashion history deserves to be recognized as a valuable artifact from an historical era. No, they do not make them like this anymore. In fact taking into consideration that many of the working class was at poverty level in Edwardian America, and the rich were a small minority, there were few who could afford such a dress. This was a short period of history when only the people who had money could afford to wear the handmade, stylish, and delicate clothes that changed in design at such a fast-paced rate of speed.

During the course of time, many great people worked hard to make life better, not only
for themselves, but for their society and their culture. The least we can do is learn about them and recognize their contributions. We should remember these obscure people for what they are: a valuable part of our history.
Bibliography


Importance of Preserving History: A Conservation of an Edwardian Wedding Dress

Published by Organization of American Historians.
http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.library.wmich.edu/stable/25162529


http://libproxy.library.wmich.edu/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/abcamerecon/robber_barons/0


