

Condition as Content: Focusing on Condition in Dress Exhibitions

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Abstract:

The City of Toronto's Museum & Heritage Services maintains a collection of dress and dress-related ephemera used to interpret the city's material culture and social history. Items are displayed at historic sites within period room displays in a manner that complements thematic programming. In order to prepare garments for display, textile artifacts undergo typical stabilization conservation treatments and secondary supports are designed in order to facilitate safe mounting on dress forms and mannequins. Conservation treatments and mounting practices usually aim to minimize the appearance of condition flaws and show artifacts to best advantage. While these practices conform to accepted professional standards and ideas of museum quality, condition and display, do they also limit and/or avoid other areas of interpretation and dress history?

Recent dress exhibitions at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto and The McCord Museum in Montreal have included garments with, what might be called, "condition issues". These faults have been explored in exhibit labels and used as important interpretive content. Alternative methods of display were used for artifacts that would otherwise be damaged by mounting on dress forms and mannequins. The City of Toronto Museum Collection has numerous examples of garments in poor condition. Many of these items belonged to known local individuals, were sold by important retailers or made by Toronto tailors and dressmakers. Visitors to the collection storage are often intrigued by these items in poor condition. Many of these garments are rare survivors, and condition aside, have important narrative potential.

Does this interest in imperfect clothes reveal a larger trend in relation to public perception of museum work and dress collections? Condition flaws can be part of the exhibit content, helping museums interpret new themes, while showing the broader life cycle of garments from the past typically not shown in traditional museum exhibitions on dress.

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Introduction: City of Toronto Historical Collection

The Corporation of the City of Toronto maintains a collection of historical art and artifacts that seek to document the city's past. The collection contains over 150,000 historical artifacts and over one million archaeological specimens; thirty percent of the collection is currently on display or is out on loan. The historic dress collection is composed of 1,800 pieces of civilian clothing and roughly 575 pieces of military dress. The majority of the collection dates to nineteenth and twentieth-century Toronto. As a social history collection, the collecting and interpretive focus revolve around assembling as wide a range of examples as possible in an effort to help document and tell the Toronto story.

Condition as Content

The collection of dress and dress-related ephemera has been built over the years as part of a strategy to detail the city's material culture and social history. While many items have been acquired, in part, for their exceptional condition and quality, others have been collected for their historical associations and research value. The result being that many garments in the collection present in poor condition: items have been soiled, stained, strained, ripped, torn and altered. Some garments have suffered from insect damage and inherent vice in ways that have weakened textiles or resulted in deformation or discolouration. These garments do not portray a pretty picture of the clothes people wore in the past. Physical appearance aside, many of these items belonged to known residents, were sold by local retailers or made by Toronto-area tailors and dressmakers. Their poor condition is sometimes the result of use, reuse and misuse typical of clothing within a particular context. Many of these garments are rare survivors, and despite their poor condition, have important narrative potential.

In terms of display at historic sites and within period interiors, historical objects are presented in a manner that complements site histories and thematic programming. Temporary exhibition spaces are also used for the presentation of historic artifacts and cover a wide range of themes. In order to prepare garments for display, textile artifacts undergo typical documentation and stabilization conservation treatments. Treatments and mounting practices usually aim to minimize the appearance of condition flaws and show artifacts to best advantage while providing support sufficient to limit stress and strain. Textiles unable to withstand the mounting process are generally turned down for exhibition in the early planning phase. While these practices conform to accepted professional standards and ideas of museum quality, condition and display, they can limit and/or avoid other areas of interpretation and dress history.

To explore this idea of how exhibition requirements can limit the type of historic dress used in museum displays, I have chosen three nineteenth century dresses from the City's collection. Each piece has its own story to tell and I will focus specifically on how that narrative can be driven by condition, pointing to interpretive opportunities that might be overlooked otherwise.

Removing Ruffles: 1982.7.1170 a-c

One of the gems within the City of Toronto historical collection is the *Spadina Collection*. This collection was acquired in 1982 when the last member of the Austin family donated her home (Spadina) and its contents to the City of Toronto and the Province of Ontario to be preserved as an historic house museum. The collection contains furnishings and personal effects from three generations of the wealthy and prominent Austin family dating from between the 1830s through to the 1970s. Nothing from this collection can ever be deaccessioned. Because the house and its contents were treated as an anthropological assemblage, many of the garments found in the house collection are in poor condition.

One such example is a dress, 1982.7.1170a-c, made by a local dressmaker known as Miss Sullivan (Figure 1). Miss Mary Sullivan was first listed in the City of Toronto directory in 1884. At that time she lived on Agnes Street in the city's east end, a working class neighbourhood where new arrivals frequently settled; her occupation was listed as dressmaker. She later moved up to fashionable College Street, opening shop at a rented house at number 76. She worked with her sister Annie and appears to have employed as many as twelve other seamstress / dressmakers. The business was in operation until around 1907.



Figure 1: Miss Sullivan gown with day bodice (left) and evening bodice (right) (1982.7.1170a-c)



Figure 2: Day bodice cuff (left) and skirt hem (right) showing broken threads from trim removal

The garment dates from the 1890s and is composed of a full-length skirt, day bodice and evening bodice. The principal fabric is a grey silk satin embellished with metal beads, lace trim, net and pleated organza overlays. When new, the garment was formal and fashionable; it may have been bought for a young adult member of the Austin family for an important season of events. What is curious about this ensemble is that the majority of the original ornaments (beads, lace etc.) (Figure 2) were removed, but the underlying garment was retained. The piece

presents in an overall dishevelled appearance and would make an unusual choice both for exhibition and acquisition.

That said, the intentional removal of trim, net lace and beadwork either to renew the garment or for re-use on other pieces of clothing, may have been common practice for the Austin family. The *Spadina Collection* contains many boxes of lace collars, cuffs, lengths of used trim, scraps of lace / net beading, petticoat flounces etc. showing that this practice of removing trim and embellishments was customary – even for this wealthy family. The embellishments from this garment, and others like it were saved and often not re-used as fashions changed in the years after World War One. To display this garment within the upper-class context of today's house museum would require not only careful selection of mounting techniques, but also consideration of how and where to describe this process of removal and saving within the walls of the historic site. Nevertheless, an exploration of this practice would certainly help flesh-out the house and its inhabitants.

Alterations, Re-workings & Changing Styles: 1975.69.1

Many other garments in the general collection show evidence of alteration. One particular example is a navy blue cotton velvet dress (1975.69.1). It was worn for the 1885 wedding of a Mrs Ledger. Originally an 1870s skirt and bodice, the garment was updated in the 1880s with the insertion of a blue and gold coloured striped silk panel at the centre front bodice; lining fabrics were also changed at that time (Figure 3). The waistband of the skirt was modified to change the fullness and overall silhouette. The original parts of the garment are skilfully executed showing a mix of machine and highly refined hand sewing skills; the later modifications are carefully done, but not nearly as careful or skilled as the original sewing. The garment is also remarkable for its pristine condition and may have been worn infrequently. It certainly appears to have had two separate phases in its fashion history and is not in original as-designed condition.



Figure 3: Bodice showing silk insert at centre front and complementary facing at cuffs (left) and (right) showing bodice open with alterations along each side of centre front closure (1975.69.1)

Although this garment, in a material sense, is intact and robust showing few signs of wear, it isn't original. The evidence of modification makes it an atypical example for display; it's neither

a good example of an 1870s dress or an 1880s dress, rather it is a hybrid. This is an important point for social history museums, where human interaction with the object is more important than how the item fits into a design arc or fashion history narrative. The very fact of re-working and re-styling an out of fashion garment (even for a special occasion) makes it interesting for enquiry and display. Also, an investigation of how modifications are carried out, with or without skill / attention to detail, could lead to a study of how old clothes are esteemed across a given period of time within a society.

The main challenge for the display of these garments is finding a method to highlight or enhance unique qualities and alterations. This might lead to showing pieces inside out, providing enlarged photographs of alteration details or supplying magnifying glasses. Also, showing the garment alongside fashion plate prototypes would help to reveal how style silhouettes can be a springboard for dress research.

Condition, Alternations and Changing Uses: 1979.75.54

The third example from the City's collection is an 1850s dress donated by Jean Pain in 1979. The acquisition file leaves many questions unanswered about this piece, however what it does share is that Jean Pain operated the Vandorf General Store, north of Toronto, between 1962 and 1980. She donated nearly sixty pieces of historic dress, including formal wear and undergarments dating from 1850s to the 1890s. This may have been a collection of family pieces as there is no evidence that she was a known collector.

The dress is composed of light grey-green silk with a woven check pattern in shades of darker green and deep purple. The gown is one piece with a large full skirt, fitted bodice and full-length bishop's sleeves. The dress was well worn showing evidence of deterioration and staining in the underarms (Figure 4), splitting silk at the hem, areas of discolouration to the covering fabric overall and numerous pin-pricks at the centre front neck closure from brooches. These condition flaws appear to date from when the garment was new or originally worn. In addition to these issues, there are numerous later modifications to the construction of the garment that appear in the form of new bodice darts, the attachment of the bodice to the skirt, changes to the centre-front skirt panel and the removal of a watch pocket from the bodice. These alterations are characterised by the use of a modern white thread, they were never completed and likely date to around 1960.



Figure 4: 1850s silk dress with underarm staining and torn fabric (1979.75.54)



Figure 5 Detail showing original stitching inside skirt seam allowance (left) and modern dart alteration at bodice (right) (1979.75.54)

The condition of this garment poses two avenues for interpretation. The first being the poor condition to underarms, hem and pinpricks at centre front closure appear to indicate that this was a frequently worn garment (often a mystery for garments in good condition – why was it not worn?). This can open up a discussion around what survives in museum collections and what does not. Is a trove of never-worn clothing truly indicative of how people clothed themselves or does it illustrate the exact opposite? The second avenue of interpretation would focus on the twentieth-century alterations. These appear to suggest the use of the dress as costume (there are no conservation records indicating that these changes were made for mounting purposes). Historic garments were frequently used as dress-up items for historic fetes throughout the twentieth century and in Canada, the 1967 Centennial Celebrations witnessed an increase in this type of activity. This item may show the re-working of an historic garment, not for stylistic reason, but for a change in use as a costume used as part of a nostalgic re-enactment of a bygone era.

Conclusion

Many artifacts housed in historic collections bear the marks of use. Due to their fragile nature, collections of historic dress can see the patterns of wear, alteration and re-use with greater frequency. Traditionally, these characteristics have been minimized and disguised in order to show garments to their best advantage and in a state of good repair. Although this approach to artifact presentation has its place within museum exhibitions, given the context of the social history museum, particularly historic sites, condition flaws can add texture to the interpretation of the historical contexts surrounding the clothes that people wore. The practice of removing and saving embellishments for future use, the act of alteration and re-use, and the evidence of wear all help to illuminate avenues of interpretation that put people back into these pieces of historical dress.

In terms of exhibition, these items offer challenges for mounting and exhibition armatures. Exhibiting fragile and worn-out textiles requires unconventional approaches and new ways of seeing in order to reveal, rather than conceal condition flaws and evidence of use. Digital or virtual formats can also help show how these garments have been changed or modified over time: original garments can be left intact or as-is. Whatever the strategy, traditional or technological, the exploration of clothes in poor condition and the people who wore them will continue to spark my curiosity as my work with this dress collections continues.

References

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