

## **Tracing the Threads of Life: Biographical Clues in Dress**

M. Elaine MacKay  
Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia, Canada

### **Abstract**

Dress is so fundamental to a woman's self-image; it reflects her age, class, moral code, and role in society. This paper unpacks coded symbols to explore dress as a means of recording biographies. It investigates the lives of specific women through their clothing; a gown worn by Laura Roche at her coming out party; two dresses belonging to Eliza Gordon worn over a forty year span; and an outfit owned by Mrs Minette Bridger, wife of a Royal Military College professor. Understanding how, why, and when a garment was worn deepens our understanding of dress and its importance to women in Victorian Canada.

**Contents:** Introduction / History of the Collection / Research Goals During The Fellowship / Women, Fashion and Photography / The Evidence of Surviving Garments  
Case Study One: the gown of Laura Roche / Case Study two: dresses worn by Eliza Gordon / Case Study three: the suit of Mrs Minette Bridger / Bibliography

### **Introduction**

In January 2015 I settled into work at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, as the most recent recipient of the Isabel Bader Fellowship in Textile Conservation and Research. This biannually granted award permits the Fellow access to, and focused study of, garments and textiles in the Queen's University Collection of Canadian Dress which is under the mandate of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre. The beauty and condition of many of the pieces, coupled with the extraordinarily documented provenance connecting pieces with many of the founding families of Kingston, places this collection amongst the most important in Canada.

### **History of the Collection**

This collection was formed almost by accident (MacKay 10). Historian Margaret Angus, who was also the wife of the head of the drama department, became the wardrobe mistress of the drama club. From the 1930s she was active in soliciting donations of items of clothing for the theatre productions. Pieces too special for school productions, were put aside and accumulated until the collection was officially recognized in 1963. Kingston, in the mid-nineteenth century, was one of Canada's more established settlements. Military, religious, and political elites settled there with a goal of making a prosperous community which would be central to the governing of the new country of Canada. The clothing donations came from these founding families, often with hand written notes delineating their provenance.

### **Research Goals During The Fellowship**

Items in the collection have been presented over the years in exhibitions which looked at the broad visual language of nineteenth and early twentieth century changing silhouettes. I wanted to look beyond the silhouette to translate personal and historical stories which were embedded in the fabric of the dress collection. The fellowship allowed me to investigate and identify signs and symbols which were used, either intentionally or subconsciously, to construct the individual's appearance in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The

project theme was distilled down to the single sentence: *Since clothing is fundamental to a woman's self-image it can therefore be used as a means to read her own, personal biography.*

I worked very closely with intern Emma Neale who had just earned her Master's degree in conservation from Melbourne University in Australia. We chose garments which worked well individually and as a cohesive collection. We designed and fabricated mounts which projected a strong period shape and in one case devised an appropriate mount for a garment too damaged to be displayed on a traditional dress form. The work of a three month fellowship could not be translated into an exhibit but four women's garments were professionally photographed for future publications.

### **Women, Fashion and Photography**

My interest in understanding personality traits from the way women curated their public look grew out of my Masters of Fashion thesis in which I analyzed Southern Ontario daguerreotypes. Figure 1 shows one of my favourite images taken by Toronto daguerreotypist, Eli J. Palmer. It was probably taken at the studio he opened in June 1849, at the corner of King and Church Streets, Toronto. The crisp knife pleats, rounded point at the waist, and gently flared sleeves secure the dress's date in the late 1840s. If we look past the stylistic details we can glimpse personality traits. A neatly repaired tear on the bodice speaks to a culture in which altered and mended clothing was an accepted practice. Her collar is a fashionable Jenny Lind collar which was one of dozens of popular culture items named for the famous singer who traveled with P T Barnham and was described in *Peterson's* in June of 1848. "For dresses high in the neck, the little straight collar called the Jennie Lind, made of edging ... or narrow ruffling, is very fashionable." (*Peterson's*: 230) This girl has dressed it up with a pinked bow and a locket at her throat.



Figure 1: Eli Palmer, Sitter unknown, Daguerreotype, c.1850, private collection of Mike Robinson.

The decorative front trim is an obviously homemade addition to the bodice which may be covering an earlier decorative detail. It mimics a centre front opening, simulating another trend noted in the March issue of *Godey's*, 1845 "bodices open to the waist with laced or diamond-shaped openings." (Severa 111) At the joining of each diamond, she applied a decorative acorn-shaped button. (Acorns themselves were highly emblematic of the Victorian virtues of patience, perseverance, strength, and fertility). These buttons have the size and general shape of mourning veil buttons which were sewn onto the edges of veils to prevent them from blowing in the wind (J. Chambers, personal communication, 4 April 2012). As this use of decorative front buttons was just beginning to be popular, their availability may have been limited and she may have adapted veil buttons for her bodice. What I see in this photo is a young woman who was deft with a needle, keenly aware of currents trends, and who used whatever tools were available to position herself at the forefront of fashion.

### **The Evidence of Surviving Garments**

#### **Case Study One: The Gown of Laura Roche**

The earliest and first piece I chose at was a ecru silk and velvet gown (Figure 2). It was donated with a note saying it was worn by Laura Roche for a coming-out ball in 1848 or 49. While we can't take this note as proof of provenance, Laura was a member of the Kilborn family, who were United Empire Loyalists with a well-documented lineage. This fan-shaped bodice and knife-pleated skirt confirm its date to the late 1840s. Coming out, or debutante balls, are almost unknown in Southern Ontario today but in the nineteenth century they were one of the many types of social gatherings. Their greater purpose was to introduce a young woman into society and to advertise her availability for marriage. Marriage, in the nineteenth century, was a civic duty, and a defining moment in a woman's life. Marriage determined who a woman was, where she lived, her social and economic status, and the direction of her life's work. (Errington 26)



Figure 2: Dress, Silk, c.1848, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University C67-589.1, attributed to Laura Roche.

This gown was the height of modern styling. Buttons, again, play an important decorative role. Between 1840 and 1854 at least fourteen button patents were issued in the US (USPTO). Many were for purely decorative buttons including faceted buttons, covered buttons, molded gutta purcha buttons, and glass bead buttons. These are light in weight and seem to have an adhesive securing the fashion fabric to a pre-stamped shape of an unknown material (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Button Detail, Silk and unknown material, c.1848, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University

The dress tells us little about Laura Roche as an individual. But as a garment made and worn for a single important event it takes on the mode of a vestment which some people believe possess the power to transform the wearer with a grander personality. Unfortunately it is this power which ensured its demise as an unknown number of young woman donned this garment either before being donated, or during its drama club days. Almost all of the deterioration is a result of women being forced into the dress. The centre back was altered for quick change access. An extension piece was added to replace lost inches from the first alteration. The area where thumb and fingers would have pulled the back closed at the waist



is completely decimated. The destruction is itself evidence of the strong appeal of the garment.

### **Case Study Two: Dresses Worn by Eliza Gordon**

This next outfit chosen was donated by the owner's daughter, Wilhelmina Gordon, with a note; "Mother's silk dress, made in 1869." Emma Neale and I found it housed in a box at the bottom of a tower of boxes in the far corner of the East Vault. Not only were the bodice, skirt, bustle and bow all in excellent condition but to my knowledge, had never been displayed. The next morning Emma greeted me with a huge smile. She had found thirty-four other items in the Gordon donation including other dresses, fans, collars, and two photographs of a mature Mrs Gordon shown wearing a dress and lace jacket also housed in the collection. These spoke directly to the premise of the project; the clothing of one woman worn at different stages of life. How would the garments differ? What would they say about the wearer? Would there be any similarities in her public dress over the forty year span?

This gown was made for Eliza Gordon the year she married Rev. Daniel Gordon and was likely part of her trousseau (Figure 4). The two most apparent design elements of this outfit are its colour and its sense of movement. The colour blue was, in the nineteenth century, gaining almost as much popularity as it holds today. Blue was the most feminine colour strongly associated with harmony, loyalty, honesty, and confidence. The fabric is shot silk with threads of blue and green creating a turquoise hue.



Figure 4: Dress, Silk, c.1869, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University C68-590.14a,b,c,d,e., Wilhelmina Gordon

The second and possibly strongest decorative element, which we can only see in our imagination, is movement. The skirt, which is promenade length with a small train, would have attracted attention while the wearer was walking. The sense of motion would have started with the swaying pendulum gesture of the unseen crinoline. It developed further with the undulating qualities of shot silk fabric and was finalized with a fine silk fringe. This would have moved with every breath of air to create a constant ripple. Imagine Eliza walking down the aisle of her husband's church in Ottawa with all the eyes of the congregation fixed on her. Without a word she would be communicating confidence and femininity. The cut of the bodice is demure enough to be appropriate for the wife of a Presbyterian minister but strong enough to give the congregation a sense of pride that their minister had chosen well.

By the time Eliza Gordon sat for the photograph in Figure 5 forty years had passed. She had given birth to four children. Her husband was now the Principal of Queen's University. As a minister's wife she had been involved in the women's league caring for the needy. As the Principal's wife she was a member of the strict social structure in Kingston. While not an old woman, in her early sixties, she was the matriarch of the family and carried that stance. Today this dress is in dreadful condition, but coupled with the photograph it stands as important documentation. Its only expressive element is the elaborate (and albeit stained) lace on the neckline and sleeves which make a strong statement of established wealth. Throughout her life Eliza embraced the white collar as a decorative element. She had seen it grow from the modest neck edging to one which takes up much of the bodice.



Figure 5: Photograph, c.1903 -04, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, C68-590.36, Wilhelmina Gordon

Today, many see nineteenth century black and white as representative of mourning. Given the statistics that one in five women was widowed while still the mother of young, dependent children, it is often assumed that elderly women spent much of their later years in mourning. This is undoubtedly the reason that mourning wear was considered an essential part of a woman's wardrobe. But is it reasonable to assume that women in their later years were always in mourning? I believe they were simply not permitted the vast colour choice offered younger women. By the end of the century, women over forty were expected for to wear black or another dark colour. Mrs Gordon was not a widow. In wearing this black and white garment she was dressing in a style appropriate to her age group as defined by society.

I also believe there was deeper reason for wearing black. For half a century new chemical recipes could produce any dress colour. As the colour palette for dresses broadened, black became the uniform colour of the business world. It was the colour of banking and finance, and government. It was also the colour of knowledge. Judges, magistrates, lawyers, and professors, wore black (Pastoureau 274). Queen Victoria not only expressed mourning by wearing black, she placed herself at the top of the professional business world as well as the ruler of the realm. Mrs Eliza Gordon was at the top of her social group with a successful husband and three adult children. In wearing black, she acknowledged she was passed her childbearing stage and placed herself on par with many successful men.

Black was meant to be serious but she was anything but austere. This jacket, with a flat rounded collar, rows of silk crepe ruffles, flared cut, and floral embroideries, is extremely feminine; almost girlish, (Figure 6). Eliza Gordon was a woman of the nineteenth century. Her dress was appropriate for her age at both life stages. Always feminine, she stood out as a young woman and stepped into the background as a mature one.



Figure 6: Jacket c.1903 -04, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, C68-590.15, Wilhelmina Gordon.

### Case Study three: the suit of Mrs Minette Bridger

In the last outfit we see an altogether different type of woman (Figure 7). The raw silk suit belonged to Mrs Minette Bridger. From my previous work at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, I knew that the name Bridger was connected to some spectacular garments. I also remembered that Mrs. Bridger was the wife of Professor W. R. P. Bridger who taught at the Royal Military College in Kingston. I wondered how the military connection fit into Kingston high society. She was born Minette Clark in 1884 and lived in Pittsburgh PA until she married Professor Bridger in 1910. The couple settled in Kingston and had three children. Her mother, Julia Clark, must have held a major position of influence. She kept a number of her mother's outfits throughout her life. By looking at her mother's garments we can get a sense of how clothing was valued in the Clark/Bridger home. They are extraordinary pieces – substantial in their presence and ornamentation. Stowing these garments throughout two generations is a testament to their value as family possessions.



Figure 7: Suit, silk, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, C62-552,a,b, Mrs. W.R.P. Bridger.

All aspects of this suit project a tall stance and confidence including the slim line and tone on tone colouring. It presents a new twentieth century attitude with an abrupt departure from the frilly and heavily corseted silhouette of the Belle Epoque with a strong masculine influence both in the swinging of the jacket and the decorative detail. After sixty years of successful experimentation with colour this shows a return to and appreciation for the beauty of natural colouring. What you can't see in this image is a shocking pink silk lining which must also be



seen as a strong statement of confidence.

Although it is similar to a *Vogue* illustration of 1912, it was not a common styling (*Vogue* 1912 50). The decorative detail is strongly reminiscent of the military trim of the hussars with parallel, horizontal rows of gold braid and corresponding buttons on the breast and sleeves. Hand embroidered circles imitating buttons indicates the suit was couture-made which is itself, emblematic of wealth. As a woman whose social connections were in the military sphere, this symbolism could not be lost on Minette Bridger. This is an example of dress as uniform and authority. But it is very much a woman's outfit. The repeated pink silk framing the face and wrists is the most feminine of elements. The colour shocks the perceiver to step out of the military association to see an emancipated woman.

Of course I never knew these women and my view of them is simply speculation. But it is speculation based on sound research. These garments are the only tangible legacy we have of their lives. We owe them our deepest investigation, research and understanding. It is the only way their voices will be heard across the decades. Looking at the woman behind the clothes is at the very least it is a valid interpretation of dress which can bring a closer connection with the viewer and a deeper understanding of the garment.

## **Bibliography**

- Errington, Elizabeth Jane. *Wives and Mothers, Schoolmistresses and Scullery Maids: Working Women in Upper Canada, 1790-1840*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995.
- "Fashions for June." *Peterson's Magazine of Art, Literature and Fashion*, June 1848
- MacKay, M. Elaine. *Beyond the Silhouette: Fashion and the Women of Historic Kingston*. Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre Queen's University, 2007.
- Pastoreau, M. *Black: The History of a Color*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- Severa, Joan L. *My Likeness Taken: Daguerreian Portraits in America*. Kent OH: Kent State University Press, 2005.
- USPTO. "A Sample of U. S. Button Patents The First 60 Years 1830-1890." 2012. *The United States Patent and Trade Mark Office*. <<http://www.buttoncountry.com/Patents.html>>.