

COSTUME IN DETAIL

The MHS has an astounding collection of historic costumes ranging from the early 1700s to the 1960s. This online publication explores pieces from the Society's collection. Each issue spotlights a different garment.

Issue 11 | Brown Velvet Dress | 1883 - 1888

About:

The MHS

The Madison Historical Society, a nonprofit organization founded in 1917, preserves, collects, interprets, and promotes the history and heritage of Madison for present and future generations.

About:

The author

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Dress, 1883–1889, silk and lace.
Accession # 81.302.

Left: Front detail. Above right: bustle detail. Below right: Skirt detail.

Photos by Bob Gundersen.



Survival in Style

Modern audiences often look at petite historical clothing in museums and voice a familiar phrase: "People were just smaller back then." The truth is complex, but one fact is certain: a very small amount of clothing survives from the past. This gown, unusual in its survival, helps us discover whether body sizes have increased over time.

Likely created by a trained dressmaker, this stylish dress was made for a woman of common height, about 5 feet 5 inches, with a 33-inch waist tape and a 34-inch skirt waistband. In its surprising survival, it shows us that bodies were not all that different 140 years ago.



The Game of Preservation

What is preservation bias? This archeology and museology term and its synonyms, survival bias and survivorship bias, are nebulous in their different meanings. Survival bias and survivorship bias are used with different meanings and in many different fields. So, I will use the term “preservation bias,” which most simply refers to the likelihood that artifacts are preserved.¹



Wedding dresses. Left: 81.243, Right: 81.240 a b, from MHS collections. Photos by Bob Gundersen. These gowns had a better chance at survival than the dress featured in this issue.

In fashion history, this term is used to indicate the disproportionate survival of small, expensive, or garments with sentimental meaning. For example, a wedding gown worn by a young woman is likely to survive; wedding gowns were rarely worn, unfit to adapt to a changing body, sentimental objects, and valued aesthetically and monetarily. The MHS, for example, has more wedding dresses in its collection than any other kind of garment. So, which garments are most likely to *not* survive? This quote provides an answer:

“...the material record of large-size women’s dress is scanty at best, and non-existent at worst. Indeed, a survey of historical fashion and costume collections yields little insight into the dress practices of larger women since these objects simply have not been collected or conserved...” – Lauren Downing Peters, *Reinserting the Fat Body into Fashion History — A Reading List*, November 30, 2018

This dress is part of this elusive large-size category, making it an unusual survival. The gown is made from a substantial expanse of silk velvet and lace. Therefore, the cost of these rich materials – or perhaps a sentimental attachment – may have been the motivation for its preservation into the present day.

¹ Garvey, Raven. (April 5, 2018) Current and Potential Roles of Archaeology in the Development of Cultural Evolutionary Theory. *The Royal Society Publishing*.

Referencing the Past

The nineteenth century was a period of both invention and nostalgia for art. Though new materials were in use, aesthetics belied heavy historical influence, and dress was no exception. The mid-to-late century saw revival styles in dress, such as fashions of the 1700s. Interested in recreating the shapes, colors, and prints of the previous century, the Olivia Bonnet style² of the 1880s and the Dolly Varden style³ of the 1870s are reputed in modern scholarship. More obscure is the fleeting mode of the panier bodice, as reported here;

"The panier corsage still continues to be very much in vogue, especially for corsages made of a different material from that of the skirt." – Hearst Magazines, *Harper's Bazaar*, February 2, 1883

Bodices were often called corsages in the past. A "panier" is an eighteenth-century understructure worn to give formal gowns their silhouette. This accentuated form is copied in this vogue of 1883. A similar style can be seen in the dress; the front falls in long panels pleated up to the bustle and consequently inflating the hips. Despite its fashionable aspects, its subdued brown color and its lack of extravagance for the period would make this dress suitable for an older woman. These "matronly" characteristics blend with modes of the day to create an admirably grand gown that not only attests to the existence of large bodies but also dignifies them.



Dress, 1883–1889, silk and lace. Accession #81.302. Left: front. Right: side. Photos by Bob Gundersen.

² Oakes, Leimomi. (March 19, 2017) Terminology: the Olivia cap / Olivia bonnet. *The Dreamstress*

³ McCort, Emily. Truth is Stranger than Fictional Characters; Dolly Varden in the 1870s. *Maryland Center for History and Culture*