

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 12 | *Moiré Evening Bodice* | 1852 – 1858

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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Bodice, silk and baleen, 1852 – 1858.

Accession # 81.249

Left: front. Above right: sleeve detail.

Below right: back detail.

Photos by Bob Gundersen.



Creative Concession

NOTICE! This bodice has an associated pattern available [here](#).

In the 1850s, one would find the etiquette of dress more vague for formal receptions than for other occasions. An ensemble described as “full dress” was required for such events, but due to the nebulous nature of the phrase, the wearer could indulge their personal whims in dress. Both now and then, dress is noted to be indicative of the character of the individual that the clothing adorns. How did the wearer of this evening bodice assert their creative choices?



Compare and Contrast

Often, in museums, we see clothes extravagant enough for a fashion plate. However, within the past's extravagance, there are variations. For example, this bodice from the 1850s lacks the abundant decoration popular in the period. This not only makes it difficult to date, but makes it notable in its lack.

There are three possible explanations for this anomaly. The first is that the wearer worked within etiquette and simply selected a plain design. However, this possibility seems illogical. Why would the wearer leave off decorative elements when the other materials are quite rich? Perhaps the decision is explained in this book of manners, which describes a degree of expressive freedom:

"A lady's "full dress" is not easily defined, and fashion allows her greater scope for the exercise of her taste in the selection of materials, the choice of colours, and the style of making. Still, she must "be in the fashion." - The Walter Scott Publishing Co., LTD, How to Behave, 1857

The second explanation considers that ornament was considered "in bad taste" by some groups. As shown in the illustration below, a divide was recognized between wealthy women: the overly decorated opposed to the simply elegant. The wearer of this bodice may have wanted to come across as a woman of the latter.

The third possibility is that ornament, such as a lace collar or other frill, was pinned or tacked on with thread. This is evidenced in the "scarring" on this garment; small, evenly spaced holes are apparent around the neckline of the bodice. These are most pervasive on the shoulders. This is a likely option, considering a similar scarring pattern is seen in another, slightly later evening bodice in the collection (#81.251).



THE VERY FINE LADY.



THE LADY.

Illustration for "Rambles about the City" (Florence Fashionhunter) in Godey's Lady's Book, Volume 54, January 1857

Making Waves

TECHNIQUE | Moiré Silk

This bodice is made with a striking fabric known as moiré. During manufacture, ribbed silk was folded double, and laid in folds with paper board and heated plates between. Next, the piece was put under a press for the watered effect.¹ In the 1850s, production was improved by the invention of new embossing rollers and a double-faced variation.² Made with precision and skill, the wave-like pattern of this bodice is mirrored perfectly. The fold line at which the cloth was doubled is seen at the exact center front.

This bodice was intended for evening wear to the opera or a ball – events that favored low necklines and short sleeves. As this periodical explains, this composition was not just for design:

“The bodices ... intended for full evening costume, frequently have corsages rounded in front of the waist; others have corsages pointed both in front and at the back — a style which has the recommendation of giving increased slenderness to the waist.” - *Peterson Magazine*, Volume 34 Issue 4, October 1858

This waist-slimming optical illusion served to beautify, which was a high priority for upper-class women – or for those aspiring to that status. This group also aimed for style, as demonstrated on the sleeves trimmed with lace with a leaf motif. This choice reflects a fashion of the era for narrow, pointed lace at the ends of sleeves,³ illustrating this bodice's synthesis of fashionable materials and techniques.



Bodice, silk and baleen, 1852 – 1858. Accession # 81.249. Photos by Bob Gundersen.

¹ Alexander Macintosh, *The Repertory of Patent Inventors* (p. 436), 1854

² R. A. Brooman, *The Mechanics' Magazine*, Volume 65 (p. 596), 1856

³ *Graham's Magazine*, Volume 48 Issue 3, March 1856