

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 15 | Wedding Dress from Whiteley's | 1897

About:

The author

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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.

Wedding dress, 1897

Accession # 81.240 a b

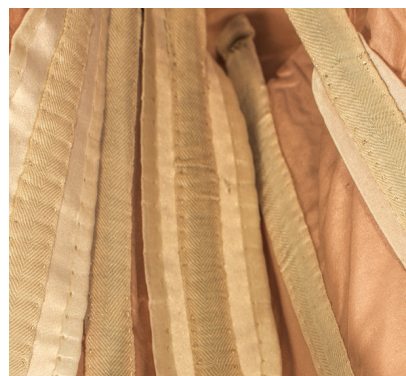
Left: sleeve (detail). Above right: front (detail). Below right: skirt (detail). Photos by Bob Gundersen.



Changes

NOTICE! See more from the costume collection at our exhibit of wedding attire during our March 2 and 16 open houses.

The last decade of the nineteenth century was a striking mix of old and new cultural ideas. In some ways, the cultural climate of the 1890s abandoned old routes and paved new roads. Namely, consumption became newly excessive. Department stores, a radical departure from clothing production by small-time dressmakers, were everywhere in the 1890s. This wedding dress from Whiteley's department store indicates which practices were still in place and which were absent in a decade that shaped our modern world.



The Whiteley Way

Whiteley's department store, referred to formally as "William Whiteley Ltd.," is advertised in modern marketing as the world's first department store. Though the presence of French department stores in the decade before Whiteley's 1863 inception contests this assertion,¹ Whiteley's presence in mid-nineteenth-century London heralded the shift from small dressmakers and sparse clothing purchases to huge retail stores and the normalization of overconsumption. The story of the store's owner, William Whiteley, is rather dramatic; in 1906, he was murdered in his own store by a man who claimed to be his illegitimate son. Though the company suffered the loss of its figurehead, William Whiteley Ltd. continued until 2013 when it was bought by Myer Bergman and redeveloped as "The Whiteley."²



Street Photo of Whiteleys Bayswater location [2]

The shift into our modern way of consumption made a big impact on the store experience for both consumers and producers. For the consumer, the shopping experience was much more impersonal and even somewhat detached. One did not buy a dress from a dressmaker, but rather from a dressmaking department. For the dressmakers working in these commercial behemoths, the experience of producing clothing changed notably. Wendy Gamber describes this change in her book on the history of the millinery and dressmaking trades:

*More often than not the department store workroom, which might employ forty, compared to the seven or eight who toiled in the typical retail shop, resembled nothing so much as a miniature factory – or sweatshop. – Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy*, 1997 (page 196 – 197)*

When analyzing the changes in clothing production in the department store and factory, Gamber notes newly dismal conditions for workers. This raises the question: what was the quality of the garments made in the lacking conditions of a department store workroom?

¹ Bittman, Lana. "Compartment Couture; New York City Department stores 1850 - 1930." Fashion History Timeline, Fashion Institute of Technology, 22 February 2019. <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/compartment-couture/>

² "A Bold Ambition." The Whiteley London. <https://www.thewhiteleylondon.com/history>

Methods of Making

Department stores in the 1890s were analogous with couture fashion houses. Both establishments took up whole buildings, employed lush interior design³, and used similar dressmaking techniques. This last fact is perhaps expected, as skilled dressmakers were recruited away from big couture houses and small shops by department stores. Does the quality of the work differ between couture and department store gowns?

COMPARE AND CONTRAST | Whiteley v.s. Worth

Comparing this dress to a c. 1892 dress made by House of Worth (2019.192.001) reveals that couture and department-store dressmaking were similar. Both bodices have a petersham ribbon waist tape bearing the maker's mark, a similar ratio of hand to machine stitching, and high-quality hand sewing. The materials used are excellent in both garments. The bodices differ in their treatment of the seams and boning channels. The bodice by Whiteley uses cotton twill tape for the boning channels, while the bodice by Worth uses silk tape; a more expensive choice. However, Whiteley's uses silk tape to bind the seams, while Worth only overcasts the raw edges. This reveals a surprising reality: though department stores offered more for lower prices, the quality of the work was so high that it equaled that of the high fashion houses.

In the twentieth century, department stores soon became harbingers of "fast fashion," but the associated decline in quality with cheaper garments was absent, in at least these examples, in the 1890s. However, the change to our modern ways of making and consuming clothing was in full force by that time.



*William Whiteley Ltd., Wedding dress, 1897, silk and steel.
Accession # 81.240 a b, Photos by Bob Gundersen.*

³ Groom, Gloria. *Impressionism, Fashion, and Modernity*. The Art Institute of Chicago and Yale University Press, 2012.