

COSTUME IN DETAIL

The MHS has an astonishing collection of historic costumes ranging from the early 1700s to the 1950s. This online publication explores pieces from the Society's collection. Each issue spotlights a different garment.

Issue 17 | Maternity Dress | Made 1840 – 1843, altered 20th c.

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, made 1840 – 1843, altered 20th century. Cotton, #81.336.
Photos by Bob Gundersen.

Left: skirt detail. Top right: sleeve detail. Bottom right: sleeve detail.

Two Lives

This dress, now a valued historical artifact in our museum collection, was surprisingly once viewed by a former owner as a lesser object. Made in the early 1840s, this printed cotton dress follows the stylistic conventions of that era. But something shocking has been done to it – the front of its bodice was crudely cut and sewn with a modern machine. This alteration, likely intended to accommodate pregnancy, and the original construction of the dress use very different techniques; how does the making of the dress change with its intended use?



First Days

The dress in its original state is an example of the fashionable garments of the middle class in the early years of the 1840s. Its style, materials, and construction were used to promote sincerity in a middle-class culture, a quality that was revered in a world that was considered poisonously hypocritical by contemporaries.

... the conventions governing dress, etiquette, and social ritual in the parlor represented the middle-class effort to establish sincerity as the guiding force behind polite social conduct. But first it is necessary to examine what was perceived as the greatest threat to the sincerity of parlor society: the hypocrisy of fashion. (Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 1982, page 61)

Therefore, dress had to reflect the internal sincerity of a woman for them to fight the hypocrisy of the outside world within the home. This was achieved by subduing fashion in service of highlighting the self. Aligning with this goal, this dress has a full, long skirt balanced by a sleeve style with limited volume between the upper arm and wrist (See Costume in Detail, Issue 4). The original waistline would have had a soft point, and the front panels were shirred over the stomach in a popular 1840s style. These stylistic decisions contribute to a feeling of restraint throughout the garment and highlight the honest human personality underneath.

MATERIALS & TECHNIQUES | Roller Printing

This dress uses a technique called roller printing. Universal by the 1830s, roller printing quickened the process and lowered the price of attractive printed fabrics, popularizing these textiles among the growing middle class. Using engraved copper cylinders, roller printing could achieve patterns with complex shading and color – metal rollers were combined with wooden blocks for more accurate patterns, and machines were made that had a different roller and color trough for each shade.¹ Despite the busy pattern of this dress, the subdued colors effaced the body and drew attention to the demure sensibility of the wearer.



Fashion plate, 1840, from the collections of the National Portrait Gallery

¹ Cooper-Hewitt Museum, *Printed Textiles 1760–1860*, published by the Smithsonian Institution, 1987

Second Coming

This dress was altered after the use of snap closures became popular during the early twentieth century. Snaps began to appear in garments as closures in the early 1910s. From then on, their employment became more common, until they were a ubiquitous choice in the 1930s. The alterations of this dress include elimination of the 1840s pointed waistline, addition of brown bias tape on the seam joining the skirt and bodice, machine topstitching, and snaps. The tape and snaps together suggest an alteration date of about the mid-twentieth century, as both were common during this time.



Dress, made 1840 – 1843, altered 20th century. Cotton, #81.336.

Photos by Bob Gundersen. From the collections of MHS.

This neatly serves the changes in the body during pregnancy, but one question remains. Why did the person who altered the dress not buy purpose-made maternity clothing? Inexpensive ready-made garments were available at department stores, surely making altering old clothing obsolete (this dress was 100 years old at the time of its alteration). An answer may be found in a diary of a pregnant woman during the 1950s;

*I was surprised to see how few maternity clothes are luxurious or reflect the current styles. Not many of the more expensive stores advertise maternity dresses, which seem to live a life apart from the rest of the fashion world: a life of loose, draped lines, supplementary snappers and drawstrings and hidden tucks; a form too set by necessity to attract designers... (Abigail Lewis, *An Interesting Condition*, 1950, Page 49)*

In this entry, the author laments the lack of good choices for maternity clothing that was concealing, attractive, and inexpensive. In the end, the author buys subpar maternity wear from the “expensive stores.” Through this experience it is easy to understand why this dress was chosen to be altered for maternity. Likely already in the owner’s possession, it was well made, attractive, and concealing of the early stages of pregnancy after alteration, all characteristics that were lacking in even ready-made maternity wear at the time.