



“I can’t remember ever seeing her in a hat”: Anomalies in a southeastern university costume collection

Dina Smith-Glaviana, Maggie Zeeman, and Sophie McMahon
Virginia Tech

Keywords: Collecting practices, Material culture, University collections

Like many university fashion or dress collections, this southeastern university fashion collection was founded in the mid-twentieth century to enhance teaching in home economics curricula and was later formalized into a study collection as home economics programs transitioned into industry-focused clothing, textiles, and apparel programs (Green & Reddy-Best, 2022). The field of home economics was described as “a back door for women to enter science” by Danielle Dreilinger (2021), where women were able to carve out a space for themselves in male-dominated land grant universities and systems (Green & Reddy-Best, 2022). This southeastern university fashion collection bears the name of its founder, and the items she donated are considered the “hallmark” of the collection (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2022, para. 4). The name, as well as the importance placed on the items she donated, often elicits questions about the founder—questions few can answer. In addition, although the costume collection was initially established in 1955, there was no official documentation until it was formalized in 1978 (Glisson & McKinney, 1978). However, it is known that the founder significantly grew the collection’s holdings between these years by donating over 300 items herself (Mailand, 2001). Therefore, this research aimed to uncover the collection’s full history, learn more about its founder, and understand how she shaped the collection during its formative years.

Method and Procedure

A multi-methodological research approach was used to uncover the history of the collection. First, historical documents relating to the collection and the founder were examined, including grant applications, condition reports, collection records, newspaper clippings, and event programs. In addition, an artifact analysis using Mida and Kim’s (2018) checklists for observation and reflection was conducted on the 345 artifacts donated by the founder to understand how she shaped the collection. Data from the artifact analysis were triangulated with historical documents about the collection and oral histories collected via interviews with individuals who knew the founder, including a previous alumna and former student of the founder (Informant 1), a former collection graduate assistant (Informant 2), and a former colleague, close friend, and director of the collection (Informant 3). These oral histories were conducted and analyzed via thematic analysis to gain additional information lacking in documentation, add cultural context to the artifacts, and provide insight into the founder’s tastes (Dawson, 2013; Granata, 2012), thereby allowing the researchers to learn more about the founder herself. While collecting and analyzing data, the researchers regularly discussed emergent themes to increase reliability.

Results and Discussion

The multi-methodological research approach revealed the importance of the founder's collection and provided insight into how she shaped the collection. While it is clear that the founder's collection is held in high esteem because it is stored separately from the rest of the collection, the reason it is held in high esteem is not. This research revealed that the founder's collection symbolizes the history of the university's clothing and textile department. Although she began her career as a professor of Home Economics in 1948, by 1960, she had developed the university's first clothing and textiles program, which was recognized as a model for education in the clothing and textiles field. The founder was credited as being a "visionary and a role model" and "the first to promote the study of clothing from the perspective of the apparel industry" (Unknown, 1998, para. 1) and described by the International Textile and Apparel Association as "a pioneer in the profession and association" (Anonymous, 1993, p. 8). Her leadership extended to establishing storage facilities for the collection, which was recognized upon her retirement when the collection was named in her honor (Anonymous, 1992). The founder, like many women working in the field of clothing and textiles, carved out a space for herself in the sciences, and as a result, the collection represents her contribution not only to the university where it is housed but to the field of clothing and textiles (Green & Reddy-Best, 2022).

This research also revealed that the founder focused on building volume while establishing the collection. Items were "obtained during her travels, purchased from [local] dress shops, and developed as original designs," with the specific intent of forming the collection (Unknown, 1998, para. 1). Informant 3 explained that the founder wore these items for one to two years before donating them. Items she bought during her travels were purchased on school trips with students to New York City and European countries, particularly Finland (Informant 3) when she served as Director of Study Abroad. These items included fabrics she used to sew her original designs during her tenure as a fashion design and sewing teacher (Informants 1 & 3). Among the 345 artifacts studied were 46 hats believed to have been collected specifically to form the collection rather than to wear (Unknown, 1998, para. 1; Informant 3). First, the examination of the founder's hats raised questions about whether or not the hats aligned with her tastes and how she dressed. According to text from a de-accessed collection webpage (1998), "Many [of her] ensembles coordinate with hat, handbag, and shoes. These items serve as a legacy to her sense of style and design" (para 2). This claim implies that the founder regularly engaged in "ensemble dressing," in which the color of hats matched that of gloves, handbags, and shoes (Glamour, 2021). However, the results from the artifact analysis do not support this claim, as many hats do not seem to contain colors that coordinate with her garments and accessories, which were most often neutral in color. For example, no other artifacts in the collection seem to coordinate with the raspberry pink Yves Saint Laurent hot pink felt wide-brimmed hat (Figure 1). Furthermore, while Informant 3 recalled the founder wearing fashionable ensembles, including a black crepe dress with matching hot pants that she wore to a staff party (now an artifact in the collection), when asked about the founder's extensive hat collection, she explained, "I can't remember ever seeing her in a hat" and remarked, "she had a beautiful head of white hair." Likewise, Informant 2 stated that "her hair was always perfectly

quaffed.” These responses suggested that hats were not memorable or regular components of her style. Since both Informants 2 and 3 were first acquainted with the founder in the 1970s, it may be that the founder rarely wore hats as they had fallen out of fashion during the decade (Tortora & Marcketti, 2015). However, 35 of her hats date when they would have been considered important accessories (Tortora & Marcketti, 2015). In addition, they remain in pristine condition. Therefore, it can be concluded that they were never or rarely worn, which provides further evidence that her collecting practices were focused on building volume in the collection. An alternative explanation was that the hats were purchased for an annual local Easter parade and were worn only once (Garland, 2016). However, no records associated with these artifacts indicate this.

Figure 1

Two of the Founder’s Hats



Note. 1940s stylish black beret-style hat (left) and 1970s Yves Saint Laurent hot pink felt wide-brimmed hat (right).

Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that the founder’s collection as a whole is symbolic of the clothing and textile department’s history. It is instrumental in telling the story of the department, university, and field of clothing and textiles (Green & Reddy-Best, 2022). However, many of her hats remain an anomaly. Gaps in collection records and informants’ recollections speak to the importance of gathering the stories of artifacts, which could provide more information regarding “the wider context of how [they were] experienced” and the artifacts’ cultural and historical significance (Slater, 2014; p. 136). Unfortunately, the founder took the stories of these hats with her when she passed, leaving only small clues on brief type-written descriptions on 3 x 5-inch notecards with no supporting documentation. Without their stories, the knowledge of the founder remains limited. Perhaps, now that artifacts can be documented digitally (Kirkland, 2015), more space can be afforded to record these stories. Thus, this research implies allowing curators to take advantage of this digital space.

References

- Dawson, E. (2013). ‘Comfort and Freedom’: The Duke of Windsor’s Wardrobe. *Costume*, 47(2), 198–215.
- Garland, R. (2016, May 27). Cornershot. *The Roanoke Times*, E1.
- Glamour. (2021, July 28). *Fashion historian fact checks The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel’s wardrobe* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1ebBZ4ld3c&t=724s>

- Glisson, O. & McKinney, C. (1978, July). *The XXX Historic Costume and Textile Collection accession, cataloging, and storage guidelines*. Department of Clothing, Textiles, and Related Art, XXX University.
- Granata, F. (2012). Fashion studies in-between: A methodological case study and an inquiry into the state of fashion studies. *Fashion Theory*, 16(1), 67–82.
- Green, D. N., & Reddy-Best, K. (2022). Curatorial reflections in North American university fashion collections: Challenging the canon. *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty*, 13(1), 7-19.
- Kirkland, A., Martin, K., Schoeny, M., Smith, K., & Strege, G. (2015). Sharing historic costume collections online: Why and how. *Dress*, 41(2), 107-127.
- Mailand, H. F. (2001, October 5). *Heritage preservation survey conducted July 16 & 17, 2001*. Textile Conservation Services.
- Mida, I., & Kim, M. (2018). *The dress detective: A practical guide to object-based research in fashion*. Bloomsbury.
- Tortora, P. & Marcketti, S. (Ed.). (2015). *Survey of historic costume* (6th ed.). Bloomsbury.
- Palmer, A. (1997). New directions: Fashion history studies and research and research in North America and England. *Fashion Theory*, 1(3), 297–312.
- Slater, A. (2014). Wearing in memory: Materiality and oral histories of dress. *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty* 5(1), 125–139. doi: 10.1386/csfb.5.1.125_1
- Unknown. (1998). *The XXX Historic Costume and Textile Collection*. Department of Clothing and Textiles. File://C | /COSTUME/COLLEC.ORI (de-accessed).
- Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. (2022). *Collection history*. The Oris Glisson Historic Costume and Textile Collection. <https://liberalarts.vt.edu/departments-and-schools/apparel-housing-and-resource-management/experience/collections/the-oris-glisson-historic-costume-and-textile-collection.html>