

Second Chances for Paisley Shawls

Linda Welters, Elizabeth Beasley, Nicole Dee-Collins, Sallie Gilcrease, Catherine Lukens, Ananis Rentas-Vega, and Maria Vazquez

University of Rhode Island

Many historic collections include garments recycled from old paisley shawls. Shawls with a paisley motif, also called *butah* or pine cone, first appeared in Western fashion around 1800. They originated in India where skilled artisans produced hand-loomed twill tapestry sashes of cashmere fiber worn by men. In Europe, the sashes became an important fashion accessory for women: shawls to wrap around their bodies. Soon European companies manufactured large shawls on machine-powered jacquard looms, substituting silk and wool for cashmere. Entire towns, such as Paisley, Scotland, churned out shawls, bringing the price down to middle-class affordability (Ratti 1987).

The shawls worked especially well as outer wraps during the crinoline era when women's skirts reached large proportions, reaching the peak of their popularity in the 1850s and 1860s. When the crinoline changed to the bustle silhouette in the late 1860s, paisley shawls faded from fashion. This research project asked the question: what happened to paisley shawls after they went out of style?

While some women repurposed their paisleys as piano shawls or lap robes, others remodeled them into garments. Such artifacts in museum collections do not receive much attention because they have been altered from their original use. This study examined six remodeled paisley garments in a university collection as examples of recycling and reuse.

To systematically study each garment, E. McClung Fleming's material culture model was used as the framework (Fleming [1974] 1982). Fleming employs five properties (history, material, construction, design, and function) in four steps: identification, evaluation, cultural analysis, and interpretation. Recently Mida and Kim updated the material culture model for fashion artifacts in *The Dress Detective* (2015), which aided in studying these six garments.

The remodeling efforts ranged in date from the 1870s to 1940s. All objects were made from machine-woven jacquard shawls as opposed to Indian shawls hand-woven in twill tapestry technique. In all examples, the seamstresses took pains to match designs and optimize features of the original shawls for reuse.

The earliest is a long cloak circa 1870 with a false hood and steel-cut clasp closure. It features a warm quilted lining, rendering it ideal for outdoor use in the winter. The original shawl, with its teal-colored center section, resembles shawls manufactured in the 1840s. Thus, this shawl was not long outdated before it became a cloak. Both fashion plates and sewing patterns showed enterprising women how to remodeled shawls into cloaks similar to this one.

The dolman, a short cape-like outer garment, emerged in the 1880s to wear outdoors with the bustle silhouette. A dolman in the collection made from a paisley shawl sports lavish silk chenille trim. The original owner (b. 1832, d. 1907) probably wore the shawl in the 1850s and 1860s, and decided to extend its use by remodeling it into a dolman. She used a sewing machine for some of the work. Major museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston show comparable dolmans from this period on their websites.

A woman's paisley vest with a collar dates from the Edwardian era as evidenced by the monobosom cut. Oddly, the remodeler used the reverse side of the shawl with its fuzzy yarns as the face fabric. This inversion resulted in a blurred pattern on the surface that does not necessarily resemble a paisley design. The vest's outer surface is a kaleidoscope of color with no distinct pattern immediately

visible as a result. In 1907, *Vogue*'s Paris correspondent reported on a Parisian dressmaker who remade old paisley shawls into a variety of garments, including a vest identical to the one studied ("Features: Paris," 1907).

The next garment is an evening coat given to a bride-to-be as a wedding present in 1909. Sadly her fiancé died before the wedding. Paisley shawls had been a popular wedding gift in their heyday. This coat is open-sleeved with decorative buttons evoking the "Orientalism" influence coming from Paris at the time. Orientalism refers to Asian-themed designs appropriated from China, India, Japan and other Asian countries.

A drop-waisted, V-neck dress circa 1920 was donated by an affluent family involved in textile manufacturing, design education, and publishing. The donor stated that the dress was made from an 1870 shawl belonging to her mother. She wore the dress with a silver belt that had Japanese designs, another example of the fascination with Asian design at this time. The fabric shortages experienced during WWI may have inspired this remodeling effort if the dress dates a few years before 1920; in 1917 the *Ladies Home Journal* featured an ad: "Old-Fashioned Cashmere Shawls And What You Can Make From Them" (Advertisement, 1917). A dress was one of the items featured.

Fabric rationing during WWII might have been the impetus for using an old paisley with a white ground for a jacket in the 1940s. The original shawl, with its large-scale butahs, had silk warps and wool wefts. The jacket features shoulder pads, a boxy silhouette, and fabric-covered buttons in rows down the center front and along the outer sleeve.

The reasons for remodeling paisley shawls into garments over this long stretch of time are varied. First is the practical reason of revamping a luxury textile no longer in fashion. Second, the large shawls provided fabric that could be repurposed into dresses or jackets during wartime when Americans experienced shortages. Third, the paisley motif, with its exotic origins in India, tapped into the Orientalism that permeated the early years of the twentieth century.

References

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