

COSTUME SOCIETY OF NOVA SCOTIA

THE CLOTHES PRESS

SUMMER 2009

NO. 96

MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

Costume tells our stories. This edition of *The Clothes Press* has some great stories to tell – of impressive costume creations and collections – and the personal stories of our members profiled here. You may be discovering members featured for the first time, or learning something new through their costume connections. Many enthusiastic stories were exchanged around the table at our annual general meeting in April. Meg Wilcox shared Florence, Italy and her memories of a wonderful experience at the Costume Colloquium tribute to Janet Arnold. *The Clothes Press* is our record – reaching members near and far – a tremendous vehicle for the Society to fulfill its mission, and we invite you to tell us your stories. A sincere ‘thank you’ to all contributors and the editorial committee.

CSNS Chair, *Karen Pinsent*



Bonnie Elliott discusses 18th century female clothing to 'Dress Like a Planter' workshop participants using a doll from the Randall House Museum collection. See page 11 for more info.

ANNUAL BOOK DONATION TO HALIFAX PUBLIC LIBRARIES



This year the Costume Society of Nova Scotia has chosen *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England*, by John Styles (Yale University Press, 2008) as our book donation to the Halifax Regional Libraries. The book joins a growing collection of costume-related books in the reference section of the Spring Garden Road Memorial Public Library.

Anita Campbell presents book donation to Kelli Wooshue, Reference Services Manager, Spring Garden Road Memorial Public Library.

NOVA SCOTIA DRESS HISTORY: MATERIALS ON HAND RE-CREATED

By Sally Erskine Doucette



People around Nova Scotia take great joy in saying “Recession? What recession? This is just how we’ve always lived! In truth, in spite of the luxury sports cars and grand homes which dot our rugged coastal shoreline, we are not that far from the days of rural subsistence living, handmade clothing, and re-cycling, of necessity. And Gloria Drysdale possesses a coat that represents our thrifty attitude toward life in spades. The coat looks like a crazy quilt, and is all handmade by Gloria’s mother, Violet Drysdale.

Each tiny detail is a colourful memory from Violet’s life and the natural world that surrounded her. Stitched with love and care, the embellishment is a treasury of bright threads set against a surprising ground of earthy tweeds and corpo-

rate pin stripes. Together they are shaped into a classic coat that continues to bring the feeling of home and mother to Gloria. The same coat was featured on the Costume Society of Nova Scotia ‘Year of Costume’ poster in 2000. This honour speaks to the quality of the garment, and the original creativity of the design. It’s no wonder that the coat has such an unusual history.

Violet Drysdale owned a fabric store called The Sewing Basket in Bedford’s Sunnyside Mall during the 1960s and ‘70s. Next to her shop was a tailor shop, and one evening as she locked up and walked past the tailor’s trash, she spied a gold mine. As anyone who is thrifty knows, one person’s garbage is another’s prize. The tailor had thrown out suit fabric samples. Violet didn’t know what she would do with them, but she decided to take them home anyway, certain only that she would think of something. This inspired move is now known as ‘dumpster-diving’ or freegan-ism, but in those days or these, such actions are smart moves. She saw the potential locked into fabric scraps, in a timeless needlewoman tradition.

Violet was an accomplished designer and seamstress, and soon those pieces were neatly assembled into a length of pieced cloth. She wisely chose a classic coat style that would not go out of fashion, and then the fun began. The earthy greys, brown tweeds and mellow solids were an uncommon ground for a crazy quilt. In general, velvets, silks and other lush, richly coloured fabrics provide the traditional background. No matter. This fortunate happenstance is partly responsible for the delightful end result. It is quite unexpected. Violet outlined each picture in tiny feathery stitches to frame her memories. While the original coat was for Violet herself, Gloria loved the coat so much that her mother made another one as a Christmas present for Gloria. Gloria still treasures it to this day. Truly, this is ‘living’ history which continues to provide inspiration for other handmade pieces which Gloria designs herself.

The only downside to this garment was experienced by the tailor. After seeing the finished coat, he decided he didn’t have anymore scraps to share with Violet. He thought he would try his own hand at creative designs. However, his skills were more invested in classic tailoring. The results of trying to duplicate Violet’s work ended up in his trash bin, angry frustration clearly evident in the failed attempt. DIY is not always as simple as it looks.

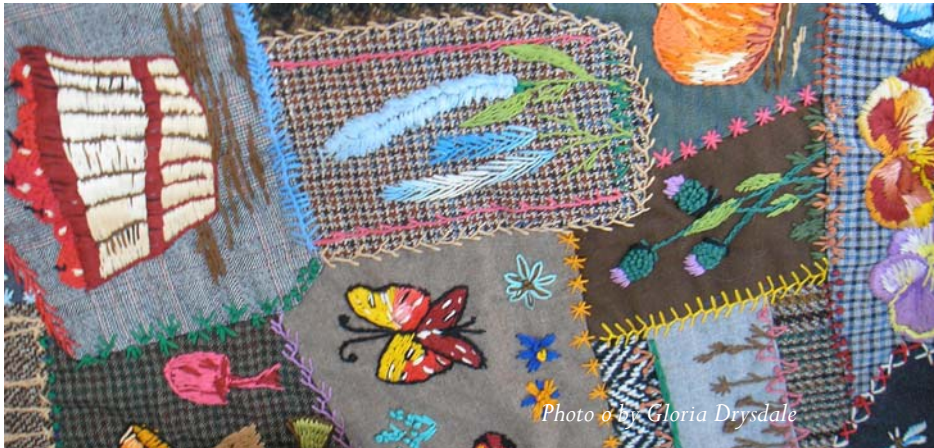


Photo © by Gloria Drysdale

ONE DEFINING MOMENT...JUST ONE

By Laura Legere

It becomes increasingly difficult, the older one becomes, to find a single defining moment in fashion and although restricting it to the last thirty years narrows the field somewhat, I am still overwhelmed and overcome by so very many images. Combine that with the love and passion I have for fashion, designers, costume, cloth, and fashion icons and you have someone who follows this sort of thing the way that some rabid sports fans follow their team, player or sport in general and you begin to understand my dilemma. Although I have been around for only half a century, I have seen the impact of CoCo Chanel and how she liberated women, how Dior costumed Eva Peron to be a wolf in sheep's clothing to achieve her ends and to experience the lasting sex appeal of Marilyn Monroe, often imitated but seldom replicated and that was with or without clothes. I was there for Diane Von Furstenbergs' little wrap around dress, the bright and free flowing sixties, the androgynous 70's, Halston's reign, Oscar de la Rentas' capture of the feminine spirit but I will attempt at this point to narrow my focus. I believe that the 80's belongs to Princess Diana or her polar opposite "grunge" and Courtney Love. The 90's gave us "Rap" and the undeniable influence on fashion that has and no one can make that fun and trendy like Gwen Stephani and her "Lamb" line. Few of us could ever afford to dress like Diana, nor would we for practical purposes but she does deserve her place in fashion history right up there with Jackie Kennedy. I do wish to be clear at this point that Jackie Onasis was not a fashion icon in the same sense.

But the one defining moment has to be for me, Jennifer Lopez in that wispy, barely there green print Versace gown that she wore to the Oscars. Let me explain why I feel it captured the essence of this particular era, the narcissism, the hedon-

ism, the competition to draw and hold everyone's eye even after she had walked away and left everyone else in her well rounded shadow. She succeeded in holding my interest, in fact I recall moving forward to the edge of my seat and focusing on the unbelievable fit, the perfect balance of toned and beautiful exposed flesh and material playing hide and seek but also the suspense of wondering if that balance would be forever marred by a slip or a "costume malfunction" as they now refer to it.

It brings to mind the story of a famous opera singer, a genuine prima donna whose name escapes me, who claimed that she could upstage any of her peers even after she had left the stage to them. To prove this point, she sang her aria one night while holding a glass of champagne in her hand which unbeknownst to audience and cast had double sided tape attached to the bottom of the glass. Her solo finished, she proceeded to place the glass down in such a way that the glass was more than half off of the edge of the table mid stage but held solidly in place by the double sided tape. The audience gasped and continued to watch the glass while other divas came and went and none of them were noted or heard, the audience was so transfixed on the precariously positioned glass.

Well, yes, all I could do was think about the beautiful Versace gown, the way it clung to certain body parts of Ms. Lopez and her accessories, Sean Puff Daddy Coombs included and wonder long after she had strolled down the Red Carpet how it stayed in place. And months later when I found out that she too had resorted to double sided tape to hold material to flesh, did I feel robbed of the moment, or even cheated? Not at all, my memory of that moment is forever intact just the way it was that night and although I am not actually a J-Lo fan, she will have her place in fashion history

MEMBERS' PROFILES CONT.

**Meg Wilcox**

1. Clothes are art that we wear. They make a statement about us like nothing else in our lives. Plus they are pretty and feel good!
2. I taught myself to make costumes for the Society for Creative Anachronism. I figured things out by trial and error, and learned what I could from anyone who seemed to know more than me. Then I went to Costume Studies at Dalhousie (after I had won the highest awards possible for costuming from the SCA). That's when I found out how limited self-instruction can be!
3. I am the Wardrobe Supervisor for Historic Sherbrooke Village.
4. Eleanora of Toledo's burial dress, which is in the Medici Gal-

lery of the Galleria del'Costume in Florence. I got to see it for all of thirty seconds when I was there in November last year.

5. Janet Arnold is the Costume History Angel, but I have also leaned heavily on Jean Hunnisett.
6. I'm doing it right now, although I suppose if I was allowed to really dream, I would love to go to Italy and help with the latest find of burial clothes from the Medici Chapel; a mixture of mostly 19th century, middle and lower class clothes.

This is a picture of my interpretation of an Eleanora of Toledo-style gown, and a Cosimo di Medici suit. I made them in the late 1990's using Janet Arnold's Patterns of Fashion. I always regretted not figuring out the partlet and caul that she always wore with her gowns, although I tried very hard. I have since realized that Italian women of this period (c.1560) padded their waists and let their breasts drop, to give them a bulkier, more tubular silhouette, without cleavage. (I've looked at a lot of paintings from the period, and that is my conjecture. Can I find someone to pay me to try it?)



On November 21, 1673, James, the Duke of York and heir apparent to the British throne, married the young and lovely Mary Beatrice d-Este of Modena as soon as her ship landed on the pebbled Dover shore. For the ceremony he wore this magnificent suit of the latest fashion encrusted with silver and silver gilt parchment embroidery. My personal connection with the suit occurred during a work study period at the V&A that was fortuitously timed between the its conservation and its unveiling in the V&A's new British Galleries. Over a number of weeks I analysed the jacket and breeches, carefully mapped an accurate paper pattern, and constructed a duplicate woollen toile complete with 99 buttons and an appliqued garter star. This picture shows both James II's original suit and my "James The Pretender's" toile.



Elaine MacKay

1. I love costume on three equal levels.

i) Firstly, I love the technical craft of costume construction and cutting. There is so much to learn and so much skill to be appreciated in the seemingly simple task of clothing construction. It is a constant challenge and is almost always rewarding.

ii) Secondly, the artistry of colour, form, cut, texture, and movement is limitless and profound.

iii) Thirdly, it is the best and most honest means of historically connecting with people. We can all relate to clothing because it touches us so intimately. Moreover, what better connection to artists and technicians of the past than through the fabric and garments that was molded in their hands.



2. I first loved embroidery and collected any number of embroidery books and worked to perfect the stitches. I think the first time I thought of clothing as art was in the early '70s when I bought an inexpensive copy of *Inventive Paris Clothes 1909-1939 A Photographic Essay* by Irving Penn with text by Diana Vreeland. This is still a favourite. My formal training at Dalhousie was key to expanding my horizons. I continue to educate myself by attending exhibits and going to conferences. I seem to be having a bit of a problem reading these days - don't know why. I have five or six beautiful books that have been in their wrappers for the last year or so. I hope I get back to that joy eventually.

3. Since graduating from Dalhousie, all of my main work has been costume related.

4. This is constantly changing depending upon what costume I'm working on. I think you have to be in love with the one you're involved with at the time to do it justice. Presently I am in love with the King James II wedding suit at the V & A because I did a lot of work on it and am giving a paper about it at the upcoming CSA region 3 symposium in October.

5. Not sure. Over the years there have been a number but now since I'm on my own most of the time I don't have that contact.

6. I think I've had it. I have been so incredibly lucky in my work. I've worked with some of the best, most inspirational designers in theatre. I've worked at the V & A with some spectacular garments. I've curated my own costume exhibition. And I've had some great teaching experiences. I mean really, could I have asked for more? My current job has its challenges and rewards but do I miss the spectacular. And I was sure impressed with Mary Westerman Bulgorella who was the conservator who worked on the Medici Burial Costumes. Wow.

Fashion Blogs

If you haven't already discovered these fashion-filled and fun blogs, here are some links members recommend

<http://thesartorialist.blogspot.com/>

<http://advancedstyle.blogspot.com/>

MEMBERS' PROFILES CONT.

**Annette White**

I am a teacher by career, recreational pilot at leisure, but my passion is historical costumes. I grew up watching my mother work as a dressmaker and I would have to say that she was my mentor. I began researching and reproducing mostly 19th century costumes and hosting 'old fashion' shows and exhibits of my collection through a number of venues, locally. For years, I worked as textile conservator at the Musée acadien de l'Université de Moncton, while collaborating with other museums and living villages to offer my expertise, particularly in the cut and construction of costume. I contributed to the production of a film, the publication of various articles, presentations and workshops on the subject of historical clothing. In collaboration with the Moncton Museum, I sketched, drafted and produced five full-size patterns for the city's Centennial celebration, based on costumes found in various local collections.

More recently, I worked as a consultant for the Village Historique Acadien in Caraquet to give advice on textile and clothing; such as doing character analysis to determine what would have been worn in the particular area by a specific person, at the proposed time period. I am featured on a new Acadian web-site called: Acadie Vivante as specialist in the study of Acadian clothing. I have been invited as lecturer at the 2009 World Acadian Congress to speak on Acadian clothing. At this time I plan to present my most recent research.

Although generally speaking, the Acadians made use of the resources within their medium to make their own clothes from either flax or hemp which they cultivated, or wool from the sheep they raised, another dimension seems to have been neglected in the study of Acadian clothing: that of incorporating fashion trends in their own clothes even as early as before the Deportation. My research features primary and secondary sources in sup-

LIBRARY RESOURCES

The Costume Society of Nova Scotia donated its library collection to the Costume Studies Program at Dalhousie University. This costume reference library is available to members of CSNS by contacting Dianne Kristoffe @ 494-2178 dianne.kristoffe@dal.ca

The library collection is housed within the Costume Studies accommodations at 1515 Dresden Row, Suite 202 in the City Centre Atlantic. Please allow time for scheduling visits as the room is used for classes also. Books, journals and videos of Costume Studies fashion shows are available.



Dress like a Planter! Making a pocket is the first sewing project for the workshop participants. Bonnie Elliott shows the group an embroidered pocket from the Randall House Museum's collection. Meadow Pinch stitches her pocket. Next project is a cap. It's not too late to join Bonnie. You too could be stitching up an 18th century costume.

Dress like a Planter

It's the 250th Planter Celebration in 2010 and
You Can't find a thing in your closet!

Don't worry- Bring your kit and we'll provide the instruction for
making a complete outfit. Everyone Welcome who has a
needle, thimble, fabric and a penchant to sew!

Starting June 25th

Every Thursday throughout the summer 10:00-12:00 Noon

Admission \$2.00

Randall House Museum

259 Main Street

Wolfville, NS

For more information Call 902 542-9775