

DRESSES FROM THE TOWSON UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE ARTS

HISTORIC CLOTHING COLLECTION

The visual arts can act as a conduit between history and the present. They evoke significant cultural moments and touchstones of the past, recalling colors, textures, and styles, as well as significant cultural moments or mores. Yet against the stark white walls of the museum or gallery, these same works can feel surprisingly removed from the lived experience of their own eras or those that they recall. In contrast, clothing is part of everyone's daily lives, and party clothing in particular brings us back to significant moments and milestones in our own lives. By hanging representative "party" clothes—from an "exotic" flapper dress to a 1950s prom gown and a "far-out" psychedelic shift just right for a fashionable be-in—on the white walls of the gallery, the dresses become a conduit between experience and memory, and between the body and the gallery itself. The clothing creates a liminal experience, welcoming the viewer to find a personal connection to the clothing, and in turn, preparing them to have the same familiarity with the artwork in the exhibition, all of which, in their own way, welcome a personal aesthetic understanding and invite the viewer to experience the connection between then, and their own now.



1920s gown. Silk velvet/Paillettes. Julius Garfinkle & Co. Washington, New York, Paris

This velvet gown is sophisticated, chic, exotic and evening appropriate, perfect for a party, out to dinner, or a night on the town. Short dresses were very popular in the 1920s, when jazz clubs and energetic dances like The Charleston were all the rage. The design of this dress also illustrates the 1920s interest in East, with design elements taken from Egypt and Japan.



1930s blue silk/metallic gown. Donor: Grace Turnbull

This dress was also formal evening wear, because it is long to the floor and includes metallic shine in the fabric. It would be appropriate to an evening event or part. It is also seasonless, as it is sleeveless but is made from a mid-to heavy fabric.



1940s blue silk chiffon print. No provenance.

This dress would have been appropriate for dinner, an evening event, or even a wedding. The subtle, understated print is modern and unassuming. Long dresses could be worn to any formal or evening event. With the Great Depression of the 1930s and WWII war rationing, it was common for 1930s-made dresses to be multi-functional and evolutionary, able to be dressed up or down, updated, shortened, or handed down. This dress came with an overjacket and belt with a jeweled buckle, allowing the dress to be appropriate to a variety of occasions and in different seasons as well.



1950s red tulle ball gown. Silk Taffeta/lace. Axt Baltimore.

The perfect dress for an evening event, party, formal dinner, dance, or even a prom. The crinoline styling and strapless silhouette were very popular in the 1950s.



1960s Black and White velvet and silk faille gown

In the 1960s, it was still common and acceptable to wear a classy, classic, high quality gown such as this to an evening event. The silk faille has a body that adds to its elegance, and the silhouette was one that was the height of fashion in the 60s. Perfect for an elegant party, the block color was also popular at the time.



1970s Polyester dress. Mr.Boots limited edition.

This dress plays on the “flower power” ethos of the late 1960s and the aesthetic of the “maxi” style of dress, meaning that the old rules that dictated what length was appropriate for an occasion were out the window by the 1970s. The fabric and color palette, however, still suggest it would be appropriate for a daytime event. The synthetic fabric was new and extremely popular at the time. Not only was it chic, it was more affordable, which led to women having more variety in their closets.



1960s Green pucci print from stock. Nylon. Made in Germany.

This dress, while striking, is certainly more casual in style with its short length and chic color/pattern, reminiscent of a “Pucci” designer print. The psychedelic print was popular in daytime or evening, and could be worn to a party, but not a formal occasion.



1970s Lion dress. Paganne by Gene Berk

This nylon dress has a very similar shift shape to the green pucci, and the black and white bold “lion” design would have been perfect for a dinner party.



1970s long dress

By this time period, synthetics and a wider range of personal styling led women to have more choices in dressing and afford more garments in their closets. Unless an event was particularly formal, mini to maxi and everything in between was appropriate, and time of day was less of a dictating factor in length than ever before. This dress might have been worn to a house party, restaurant, country club dinner, or a night at the theater.



1980s. Winter dress. Richilene

With its velvet and metallic shot through certainly suggest dressy evening wear. Previously reserved for daytime, this length was now popular at more formal evening events as well. At weddings, formal dances, and black-tie events, it was popular and youthful to show off your legs either in sheer nude or black hose. Black hosiery and colored hose became very popular instead of the “older” nude hosiery of the past when showing off leg.