

# **The Rothe House Collection: An Aladdin's Cave of Costume and Textiles**

**Mairead M. Johnston**

Kilkenny's well-known medieval merchant's house is now home to one of the most comprehensive collections of costume and textiles in Ireland. The collection, though little known, includes garments from the late 18th century to the 1970s – 200 years of social and economic history in Ireland. The items, which all have an Irish provenance, have been collected through the generosity of their donors, another unique aspect of the collection. With a conscious start to developing the collection in the early 1980s, the exhibition has gone from a small number of late 19th century Tee Gees, or afternoon gowns, to evening dresses festooned with lace trimmings and a large collection of accessories and related ephemera, which are, in themselves, a museum. This article will present an overview with highlights from the Rothe House costume and textile collection, of which there are now over one thousand pieces.

The costume collection has many colourful and interesting examples, which go on exhibition from time to time. However, it is not always the spectacular gown alone which interests the social historian and student of fashion. Some years ago an acquisition to the museum was thought to be a riding habit. It came in four separate pieces. After some examination of the garment it was discovered to be a day dress of the early 1860s, in a cream twilled cotton, with dark tan trim. It consists of a bodice, belt and matching skirt. The bodice is high waisted with a front fastening. The skirt, the front of which is flat with two inverted pleats, trails at the back and is gathered into a tiny waistband. The garment is interesting because it represents a style distinctive of the early 1860s. The sleeve line is narrow again, and the skirt, which was bell-shaped in the previous decade, is now moving the bulk of fabric to the back, where it forms a train. The fact

that the skirt band was removed, and the belt stitched onto the skirt fabric would seem to indicate that its owner had planned to alter the skirt in some way. The waistband, which measured approximately 15 inches (41mm) may have become too tight for its wearer. There were signs of stressing to the fastening edges of the band fabric. She may also have decided to have the dress 'modernised', incorporating a bustle, with an extra skirt to be added. However, the latter is unlikely, because the colour is one that was worn by a young woman, and by the time the bustle had arrived ten years later, the woman would be considered too old to wear such a light colour.

As with any collection of 19th century women's wear, there are numerous black capes, jackets and skirts and dresses. What is interesting about these are the various fabrics used. These vary from wool, heavy slipper satins and poplins, to light-weight cotton voile for summer dresses, and the elaborate trims of jet beading or ribbon, decorating these sombre-looking dresses. The use of aniline and coal tar dyes accounts for the brown and green shades of black seen in the collection. These dyes faded under natural light and have changed considerably from their original density of colour. The black jet button or black thread indicates the true colour of the garment.

An example of this dyeing process is to be seen in one of the dresses from the Shankill Castle donation. It is a tiered dress of black cotton gauze trimmed with satin ribbon, incorporated in the open-weave. The dress is very similar in style to one worn by the Countess of Rosse in a photograph taken at Birr Castle, in the 1850s. Many of these dresses had interchangeable bodices, making them functional for both day and evening wear. Black was such a popular colour. Women seemed to be in a perpetual state of mourning because so many young children and babies died at an early age. One of the most treasured items in the collection is a widow's cap, of the late 1860s-1870s in white cotton voile. It was normal to wear a black cap for the first six months of mourning, a grey cap for the following, and a white cap in the second year.

There are some luxurious evening gowns dating to the late 19th century. One such example is made by Forrest and



Sons of 100/101 Grafton Street, Dublin c.1895. This firm, established fifty years previously, was considered the best in the country at that time. They specialised in Irish laces, Irish poplin, silks, hosiery, haberdashery as well as ladies' costumes. The gown itself comprises a skirt and bodice of salmon pink and maroon slipper satin trimmed with chemical lace. A feature of the bodice is the large shoulder line created by the full sleeves. The skirt is plain with a trim of off-white lace and inverted pleat at the small of the back. This opened out over a small bustle pad into a train. The inside of the garment is as interesting as the outside. The bodice is lined with a glazed cotton and cased whalebones are sewn along each seam to shape the garment closer to the figure. The skirt is interfaced with a stiffened gauze over which is placed a lining fabric.

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*Billhead James Forrest & Sons, collection M. Johnston*

The most interesting aspect of the skirt's underside is the pleated and stiffened cotton gauze with machine lace trim. This is attached with tacking thread to facilitate removal when dirty. This trim was bought by the yard and used to protect the skirt fabric from the dust and dirt of the streets. The chemical lace decorating the garment, was manufactured from a coal-based derivative, and then bleached. Today it has become brittle and cracks, rather than unravels. This is due to the method of manufacture.

The lace was formed from a molten substance, which was pressed into the design with the use of a mould. Hence the textile is not woven as other machine laces, and does not have the strength of warp and weft threads. Bleaching would further weaken the lace, causing it to disintegrate. It was not unusual for cheap laces to be used on such garments, as they were replaced from season to season.

Another beautiful exhibit is the black velvet day dress of the mid-1880s that is decorated with heavy jet bead trimming and expensive lace. Constructed as a one-piece dress, the opening is concealed along the side of the front panel. The bustle is severe and angular in shape, and is different to that of the preceding decade. An important group of garments are the Tee Gees, or Tea Gowns of the early 1890s. Made from a variety of printed and plain fabrics, the Tee Gee was a loose, informal gown worn exclusively indoors. It became the dress of women confined by pregnancy. The back of the dress is gathered into the neckline with a 'Watteau' pleat, from which drapes a fold of fabric that is incorporated in the train of the dress. One of the examples at Rothe House has had lozenge-shaped fabric inserted in the front panel to adapt it for maternity wear. The sleeves are comparable to contemporary styles, narrow at the cuff and gathered high above the shoulders.

When the dresses in the collection were worn there were elaborate undergarments accompanying them. The collection includes many cotton pantaloons, drawers and petticoats. There are also examples of the chemise and combinations. The selection of undergarments dates from the 1850s to the early 1900s. They are plain and elaborate in design, reflecting the prices paid for such garments during that period. Those decorated with Broderie Anglaise cut-work vary from hand-stitched examples to machine-made replicas. The chemises and combinations are decorated with fine lace and needlework around the necklines and cuffs. By the 1870s the chemise was shorter and less voluminous. These garments had more decoration because of the availability of ready-made drills of machine-worked embroidery. Combinations, or combination garments, as they were first called, combined the chemise and drawers. This was

influenced by the advent of tighter skirts in the late 1870s and 1880s.

There are two corsets in the collection. These are made of a cream cotton twill, stiffened by close, shaped pipings. The busk broadens at the base, with a second busk set behind the fastening. They are laced and hooked, and date to the 1890s, when the corset becomes shorter and more decorative. The most interesting item in this part of the museum collection is a small bustle, comprising rows of coiled wire held at the back with a webbed waistband. This is a very rare example, and dates to the late 1870s-early 1880s.

There is an extensive selection of children's clothing, dating from the 1850s to the 1930s. Within this grouping there are a large variety of christening robes. These vary from examples with elaborate panels of open-work and Broderie Anglaise, to less decorated robes. The latter were worn by the infant up to and including his/her sixth month. There are petticoats worn beneath the main robe, with decoration on the neck and sleeve edges only. Accompanying these garments are carry covers. These are small cape-like covers made of cashmere, or fine wool twill, and decorated with silk embroidery work, usually done by hand. Most of these wraps feature a half cape and collar, and were fastened at the neck and middle by lengths of silk ribbon. Unlike the christening robes, the wraps, or carry covers, are not always in white or cream. Pink, fawn and blue examples have been found, some featuring a contrast trim.

Amongst the most important exhibits in this section are the small boy's dress and jacket, again from the Shankill Castle donation, and the Little Lord Fauntleroy suit, of the late 1880s. The dress, or tunic, was made of a tartan velvet fabric in the skirt, and a plain velvet for the jacket. The dress had short sleeves, and was worn over a Broderie Anglaise petticoat and drawers. As the boy got older, this dress could be adapted and worn hip length over trousers. The Fauntleroy suit comprises a velvet plush jacket and lace collar, matching breeches and a silk shirt. These suits became popular in the last two decades of the 19th century. A direct influence from 17th century men's fashions, the outfit was popularised by Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel,

14TH OCTOBER, 1893.]

THE LADY OF THE HO

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## ❖❖❖ THE NEW BASQUE BODICE. ❖❖❖



*Fashion Plate 1893, from the Society's Collection*

*Little Lord Fauntleroy*, 1886.

There are many dresses in silk and cotton, decorated with cutwork and embroidery. These were made for children aged between two and five years of age. However, one of the most intriguing items in the children's section is an 'ear flattening cap' made in the 1920s, to prevent protruding ears. It is made of a grid of cotton tapes, shaped like a skull cap, and tied under the chin. This was worn by a baby, while in the pram or cot. In theory, it looks as though it might have worked, but in practice? There are many lovely silk bonnets and caps worn by infants and toddlers. These were decorated with swansdown trims and rosettes, to denote whether it was a boy, or girl.

The selection of men's clothing is less extensive. This, however, is not unusual. Men's fashions did not change very much in comparison to their female counterparts, and from the early 19th century, suits and coats tended to be worn to full capacity. This rendered the garments fit only for the rag merchant, having been passed on to possibly as many as two subsequent owners. Few have survived today. The most impressive piece is a late 18th century coat, which originally formed part of a court suit. It is made of a burgundy coloured wool, and is embroidered with French silk embroidery on the cuffs, edges, collar, pocket flaps and tails. Its buttons, decorative rather than functional, were made with wooden discs covered with embroidered fabric, similar to the coat. The fabric was purchased by the tailor, already embroidered in the shape of the garment to be cut out and sewn to fit his client. The coat is part of a three-piece court suit, the waistcoat and breeches now missing. The coat is made of wool rather than silk. The harshness of the Irish winters no doubt accounts for this preference.

Another interesting exhibit is a bishop's frock coat, with matching breeches. These were worn with gaiters, or silk stockings and a tall hat. Indeed, amongst the hat collection is a very fine late 19th century smoker's cap, with a long silk tassel. An item that students of fashion and textiles should not miss is a late 18th century linen waistcoat, made to imitate the expensive embroidered examples of the period. It is block printed with the embroidery design in red, yellow

and blue/green dyes ready to cut out as a waistcoat. There are pocket flaps and button covers to match. It is interesting how the colours contrast with the soft muted tones of the silk embroidery threads. It is indeed a rare example, and illustrates the dyeing and printing techniques of that time. It also tells us that there was a market for cheap imitations of expensive fashion clothes in the late 18th century.

The textile section at Rothe House is fairly extensive. There is a representative collection of Irish and continental laces, as well as knitted and woven fabric samples. The lace collection consists of independent pieces, which do not form part of any costume. These many pieces are worthy of study in themselves. There are collars and cuffs of Irish crochet lace with expertly executed designs. There are example of Limerick tambour and run lace, Carrickmacross appliqué and needlepoint lace, as well as Brussels and Honiton lace, to name but a few. Recently, the collection has been augmented by material from the Jennifer Davidson bequest. There are also examples of 20th century block crochet lace.

The textiles in themselves are beautiful, and range from an 18th century embroidered linen panel, made for inclusion in a bedspread, to a finely worked Mountmellick table throw, or cover. There are sheets of Irish linen, grown and woven in Tullaherin and Gowran, in the early 19th century. There are two crochet and knitted bedspreads, with patterns similar to those seen in patchwork quilts of the 19th century. A sample of red wool flannel bears witness to the lost weaving industry at Ballinakill, Co. Laois, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A Board of Education sewing sample book shows the standard and types of needlework taught to students in the last century.

Linked to this collection is the ever-growing selection of haberdashery. Ribbons, threads and sewing implements form part of this collection. The related ephemera collection includes needle packets, sewing, knitting and crochet patterns, all of which are important accessories in building a picture of the history of needlework and dressmaking. Advertisements, fashion plates and old photographs are as important as the costumes for showing how garments were worn, and what accessories and

hairstyles were used with them. Boxes for hats, clothes, collars and hairpieces, – the list goes on!

The museum, through the work of its curator, Sally FitzMaurice, has continued to collect as broad a range of material as possible. The collection reflects life in Kilkenny and other large towns in the country, over the past two hundred years. The exhibition space has increased threefold since the concept of having a costume museum within Rothe House took root in 1985. In 1992, as recognition for the work done in the costume galleries, the museum received the Gulbenkian Award for the most improved museum with limited resources.

While the costumes and textiles, themselves, have always been generously donated to the collection, the props for display and storage requirements have been met from a small budget. The museum visitor tends to forget the hidden costs of display, often wishing there were more exhibits. Conservation needs have to be considered and met in order to ensure the safe-keeping of the collection. Again, this is a costly exercise.

It is hoped that the Rothe House costume museum will continue to expand and perhaps develop in particular, its accessory collection, in the future. Its recognition as one of the forerunners in the collecting and recording of Irish fashion has not yet come to fruition. As the interest in, and study of social and women's history continue to evolve different facets, the collection will become an important reference tool for such research.