Fall of the American Dressmaker 1880-1920

Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer

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ABSTRACT


During America’s Progressive Era, the dressmaking and millinery trades offered women unique employment and entrepreneurial opportunities and a real alternative to both middle-class domesticity and the working-class wage. As women became more socially visible through their pursuits in education, employment, and sport, their clothing and headwear began to reflect their active lifestyles. Consequently, women’s journey toward female emancipation post-Civil War set in motion the dramatic decline of the very trades – dressmaking and millinery – which gave the women who worked them social influence, professional respect, and economic independence.

For this project, I created a public exhibit in which I designed and constructed seven historical reproduction gowns, including structural undergarments, representative of the dressmaker’s work from late-Reconstruction to WWI. Each gown marked a noticeable transition toward the professional decline of the American dressmaker through four decades of transformation in Progressive Era women’s fashion and industry.
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**Fall of the American Dressmaker 1880-1920**

I. Introduction

The purpose of this project, *Fall of the American Dressmaker 1880-1920*, was to reconstruct a visual timeline detailing the professional decline of the American dressmaker and milliner through four decades of Progressive Era women’s fashion and industry transformation.\(^1\) The dramatic decline of the dressmaking and millinery trades in the United States resulted from a perfect social storm, an amalgamation of industrial innovation, consumer revolution, expanding education, and fashion emancipation as women became more socially visible and physically active through their pursuits in education, employment, and sport. By the close of WWI, the number of women working in the dressmaking and millinery trades in America had dramatically decreased to only forty-percent of those employed a decade before.\(^2\)

Initially, this project began as a thesis paper with a broad approach to the subject and an extensive overview of the established research on the dressmaking and millinery professions during America’s Progressive Age. The changes in American society and the changes women made within this historical context were no less than remarkable. Therefore, a written thesis, devoid of their presence and their professional work, devoid of a tangible representation of

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\(^1\) Exhibited at the Robert and Elaine Stein Galleries at Wright State University, January 23, 2019- February 17, 2019. Physical examples of Progressive Era millinery were not displayed in the exhibit, and while the history of American millinery was limited to the contributions of Wilberforce University (Xenia, Ohio) and its millinery training program, the trade was a significant part of this project’s research.

\(^2\) United States Department of Commerce, *Comparative Occupational Statistics for the United States, 1870-1940* (Washington: GPO, 1943), 123, 131; these figures include dressmakers, female tailors, milliners, trade apprentices, and trade wholesalers/dealers.
the period, would not effectively illustrate or represent the social changes or the experiences of the women and tradeswomen who lived during this particular time in American history. The goal of this exhibit was to bring these women out from the pages of the past and into the visible present, and to create an interactive and educational experience around their narratives. For the public, these tradeswomen’s stories became real and approachable, and visitors left the exhibit with a more lasting impression of how the past contributions of these women shaped our present, in contrast to simply reading about them in a publication.³

Furthermore, creating a public exhibition highlighting the social and economic history of these tradeswomen allowed me to demonstrate the skills of the American dressmaker. I designed and constructed seven reproduction historical gowns, including structural undergarments, and displayed them on dressmaker manikins. Each of the gowns represented a notable transition in women’s fashion from the late Victorian Era to the start of the Jazz Age. The gowns effectively illustrate the dramatic shift of women’s place within American society, from the private to the public sphere, and in consequence, the decline of the very trades – dressmaking and millinery – which had given tradeswomen social influence, professional respect, and economic independence.

II. Dressmaking and Millinery in the American Industrial Age

During the American Industrial Age, women’s fashions changed significantly. Gone were the simpler, often austere, bonnet and clothing styles of the late-Romantic and Antebellum decades prior to the Civil War, and en made were the elaborate and complex dress designs that would define women’s fashion from Reconstruction until WWI. The lavishness of

women’s clothing and adornments was a discernable indicator of the nation’s prosperity and
projected the middle and upper classes’ social attitudes regarding American superiority as the
world’s new industrial superpower.\(^4\) American affluence, spurred by mass immigration and
the ethnic transformation of the nation’s workforce, the rise in employment, investments,
and productivity in manufacturing, created a professional boon for the dressmaking and
millinery trades. Consumer demands for fine custom-made clothing and accessories
flourished and the middle and upper classes eagerly spent their expendable incomes on the
skilled services of a dressmaker and milliner to dress them in the latest Parisian fashions. The
American Industrial Age created an \textit{haute-couture} culture,\(^5\) and from 1880 to 1910, those
women gainfully employed as dressmakers and milliners in the United States had nearly
doubled, from 334,000 to 623,000, respectively.\(^6\)

In sharp contrast to agricultural labor, factory labor, and domestic service - the top three
wage-earning occupations for women in terms of employment in Progressive Era America -
dressmaking and millinery required a high degree of artistic ability, construction skill, and
training. Dressmakers and milliners accomplished in the skilled trades found themselves
employed in high-end shops or owning an establishment of their own. Due largely to the
nature of their occupations, as purveyors of the latest fashion trends in service to affluent
clientele, the dressmaking and millinery trades offered women unique employment and

\(^{4}\) Thorstein Veblen, \textit{The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions} (New York:
Macmillan, 1899), 111.

\(^{5}\) \textit{Haute-couture}, or \textit{high-sewing}, is the business of custom-made, one-of-a-kind apparel and hats, constructed
from high-quality, expensive, and often unusual fabrics and rare materials. These garments and accessories are
sewn with great attention to detail and finished by a master dressmaker or milliner.

entrepreneurial opportunities and a real alternative to the “middle-class standard of
domesticity and the working-class idea of the family wage.”

Scholarship regarding the dressmaking and millinery professions in the United States
during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries establishes the social and economic
importance of these trades to the women who pursued them and the circumstances behind
the dramatic decline of these trades post-WWI.

Wendy Gamber, in *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930,*
examines the sexual division of labor in the dressmaking and millinery professions, how this
sexual division of labor changed over the course of the Progressive Era, and the economic
and professional pitfalls these tradeswomen experienced in consequence to these changes.
She argues that dressmakers and milliners “did not meekly accept the portion [of wage-
earning work] accorded them,” but embraced the gendered segregation of their professions,
which gave them the opportunity to create successful businesses for themselves,
independence, and social respectability. However, dressmakers and milliners were not
wholly in control of the trades they dominated; they were vulnerable to the scrutiny and
prejudices of creditors and wholesalers, who were invariably male, and victim to non-

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7 Wendy Gamber, “‘Reduced to a Science’: Gender, Technology and Power in the American Dressmaking
9 Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy, The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930* (Urbana: University of
12 Gamber, *The Female Economy*, 160; 162-168. Gamber highlights the records and ledgers of Boston wholesaler,
R.G. Dun & Co. A female proprietor’s credit worthiness was not generally based on credit, but character; she
notes that the Dun ledgers read like the society pages, making common references to a business woman’s
respectability (social and relational status), personality (“timid” and “refined”), general disposition (“boastful”
and “the character of a man”), and personal habits (smoking, drinking, billiard playing). But while this sort of
prejudice against businesswomen was common practice with creditors and wholesalers, the opposite was equally
as common – being a woman, was viewed as a disadvantage to the “gentlemanly” sensibilities of these lenders
and jobbers and often worked in the favor of the female proprietor. Gamber says that “[helpless] females,
forced by circumstances to earn their own livings...inspired sympathy in the hearts of potential creditors” (161).
paying clients, whose husbands or fathers refused to settle their wives’ or daughters’ accounts for services rendered. Dressmaking and millinery “existed within both a larger sex-segregated labor market and a larger system of gender relations that rewarded men at women’s expense.”

Although dressmaking and millinery offered women unparalleled professional opportunities and a real alternative to middle-class domesticity, the success and financial independence of these tradeswomen were often precarious affairs. If they were not subject to the discriminatory practices of creditors and wholesalers or saddled with unpaid client accounts, proprietors of printed clothing patterns and pattern drafting systems would shrewdly market their own “scientific methods” as superior to the dressmaker’s pin-to-form technique. Inventors and backers for these products claimed that once a woman learned to use their advanced dressmaking systems, she “could set up shop without the benefit of apprenticeship.” Gamber says this blurring of skill level between the master dressmaker and the slapdash methods of the novice sewer had devastating and lasting consequences for tradeswomen. Foremost, it challenged the dressmaker’s expertise and authority over her craft; in consequence, these amateurs, armed with printed patterns and scientific methods –

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14 Gamber, “Reduced to a Science,” 456.
15 Gamber, “Reduced to a Science,” 457; 462-463. Gamber remarks on the claims made by some of these printed pattern companies and proprietors of pattern drafting systems, such as “so simple…that a child can use it” and “[pupils] have learned the system well, and use it successfully who are both deaf and dumb, and foreigners, who did not know a word of English, but had to be taught by sign” (468). Today, the “pin-to-form” technique – or *draping* – continues to be the most accurate method of dressmaking, largely employed by fashion designers and fashion houses, like Chanel; there has yet to be a “scientific method” developed that can match the accuracy of draping the structure of a garment onto a client’s form.
16 Gamber, “Reduced to a Science,” 474.
victimized clients by their lack of mastery and shoddy work, and effectively and permanently tarnished the dressmaking profession.17

Patterns and pattern drafting systems may have subverted the skills and traditions of the dressmaking trade, but they certainly served the interests of the middle-class home sewer. In “‘Boundless Possibilities’: Home Sewing and the Meanings of Women’s Domestic Work in the United States, 1890-1930,” Sarah A. Gordon explores how the meaning of home sewing changed in the first decades of the twentieth century and why women began to sew their own apparel rather than pay for the services of a dressmaker.18 She says that as social and economic circumstances shifted during and after WWI, middle-class values of feminine thrift were reinforced through home craft, providing women with a means to contribute to the household economy within their private sphere.19 By the 1920s, the ready-to-wear industry was well in place and home sewing became less of a chore and more a pursuit of self-interest. Although some homemakers did make money, despite their general lack of skill, Gordon notes that home sewing was not associated with legitimate (wage-earning) employment, but was rather a means for women to “contribute to the happiest, healthiest, and most efficient family life.”20 The bottom line: proprietors invested in the home sewing industry (patterns, sewing machines, sewing notions, instructional books, fabrics and textiles) needed women to fashion their own clothing, and they cleverly marketed and capitalized on what women themselves already believed, that their sex was inclined toward domestic ingenuity and naturally endowed with the ability to sew.21

17 Gamber, “‘Reduced to a Science’,” 473-474.
19 Gordon, “‘Boundless Possibilities’,” 72.
20 Gordon, “‘Boundless Possibilities’,” 77.
21 Gamber, “‘Reduced to a Science’,” 463.
However, women’s position and dominion as purveyors and creators of women’s fashions was never a fixed endeavor, pre-ordained, or natural to any one sex.\textsuperscript{22} In “A Gendered Enterprise: Placing Nineteenth-Century Business Women in History,” Gamber challenges the prevalent notion among scholars that the dressmaking and millinery trades were extensions of domestic labor. She says that if scholars would have “consulted the historical record, they would have learned that this seemingly natural and timeless phenomenon had emerged only recently.”\textsuperscript{23} Until the late seventeenth-century, American Colonial and European men were the crafters of both sexes clothing, and it was not until the late eighteenth-century that dressmaking and millinery were identified as distinctly feminine trades.\textsuperscript{24} Claire Haru-Crowston’s research regarding gender and the guilds in early-modern Europe supports Gamber’s claim. She says that the making and selling of clothing was primarily a male enterprise “derived from the idealized vision of the pre-industrial family economy in which the master was the male family head, who simultaneously directed the labor of his wives, children, journeymen, and apprentices.”\textsuperscript{25} Women learned their trade skills in the workplace, rather than in the home, as participants in the businesses of their male family members, as guild members, and as sole-proprietors.\textsuperscript{26} Thus, nineteenth and early twentieth-century American female dressmakers and milliners were heirs to a centuries-old European craft tradition.

Susan R. Mack’s research examines the training and educational opportunities available to American women who wished to pursue the dressmaking and millinery trades. Mack claims

\textsuperscript{22} Gamber, “Reduced to a Science,” 456.
\textsuperscript{24} Gamber, “A Gendered Enterprise,” 206.
\textsuperscript{25} Claire Haru-Crowston, “Women, Gender, and Guilds in Early Modern Europe,” The Return of the Guilds (October 2006), 1.
\textsuperscript{26} Haru-Crowston, “Women, Gender, and Guilds,” 28.
that dressmakers and milliners resisted their gender-determined roles and that through their trade work “women were able to satisfy their natural desire to help one another.” 27 But, Gamber argues that these tradeswomen not only embraced their gender-determined roles, they exploited them in order to gain a foothold and maintain some semblance of professional dominion. Concerning the natural desire for women to help one another, “[businesswomen], after all, were in business” and women proprietors were as ruthless and exploitive to their employees as men proprietors were with theirs. 28 Gamber says that tradeswomen largely “rejected labor activism” to protect their professional interests, although their “lack of enthusiasm for collective endeavors did not necessarily imply acquiescence or ‘consent to oppression’. 29 Mack’s impression of women’s natural desires to help one another seems to derive from earlier academic views of “women’s culture,” a world of mutual appreciation and shared tradition. 30 Gamber says that “the notion of a single female experience, the notion of a universal women’s culture remains powerful…despite the recent scholarship which has dismantled this idea.” 31 Next, Mack remarkably claims that “we cannot know how [women] learned to be dressmakers and milliners,” considering that the whole of her research is dedicated to this very endeavor: the training of dressmakers and milliners. 32 Furthermore, and according to Mack’s own research, by the turn of the twentieth century, dressmaking and millinery were increasingly learned through vocational training

28 Gamber, “A Gendered Enterprise,” 202; Mack, “Gifts to be Cultivates,” 144 (Mack briefly touches on Gamber’s research regarding the exploitive practices of some dressmaker and millinery shop owners, but maintains the idea of a shared women’s culture through mutual experiences).
30 Gamber, The Female Economy, 200n34; Gamber discusses the concept of “women’s culture” and the contributions of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (“The Female World of Love and Ritual”, Signs 1 [1975]).
32 Mack, “Gifts to be Cultivated,” 139.
programs taught in secondary schools and vocational colleges across the United States and became the principle means by which women learned the trades before WWI.33

The sharp decline in custom millinery businesses during the first decades of the twentieth century was in part due to new environmental laws and industry restrictions legislated by the federal government, which greatly impacted the millinery wholesale industry by prohibiting the acquisition, sale, and use of exotic adornments. Jackson and Jackson discuss in “Once Upon A Time in Ornithology” the disappearance of the American passenger pigeon, whose foliage was especially fashionable as decoration in ladies’ hats in the late nineteenth century, and the millinery industry’s part in the bird’s extinction.34 Meretsky, et al, reviews the wildlife conservation efforts and laws introduced in the United States in the early twentieth century once state and federal governments acknowledged that there was a national wildlife crisis and that bird populations, in particular, were in swift decline from habitat loss and overhunting.35 The passing of the Lacey Act (1900) and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (1916) between the United States, Canada, and Britain helped bring to a close wildlife trafficking and the unregulated hunting market for birds and fowl in great demand in the millinery industry.36

33 Mack, “Gifts to be Cultivated,” 61-63. (The Combined Normal & Industrial Department at Wilberforce University introduced a three-year dressmaking program in 1887 and a two-year millinery program in 1902, both under the supervision of the Ohio Department of Agriculture. In 1916, Wilberforce began to transition its dressmaking and millinery programs into the new Household Arts Department. In 1920, the university graduated the last students enrolled in these trade programs.)
Furthermore, the lavishness and needless expense of women’s hats began to draw sharp criticism from conservationists. Mary Van Kleeck, who conducted an extensive study of the millinery industry in New York City during WWI, said,

“[Millinery is one] of the products of the world’s work, reflecting the foolish extravagance which is the main factor in creating extreme fickleness in market demands. Although extravagance is not limited to one sex, it would not be difficult for a student of feminism to trace a connection between expensive fashions in millinery and the characteristics and position of the present-day woman of leisure.”

While hats continued to be a compulsory component in the standard of proper dress, American enthusiasm for diversion also affected the millinery industry, especially with the invention of the automobile and the growing popularity of motoring, which made most women’s hats an impractical accessory to the sport. Hats necessarily became simpler in form and adornment. Hat bodies once constructed around large and intricate frames were replaced with blocked and fitted wool felt and fur felt bodies, like the cloche, which could be easily mass produced. By the end of WWI, hatters like J.B. Stetson & Co., who had traditionally supplied the millinery industry with only ladies’ riding hats and straw boaters, greatly expanded their businesses in the women’s millinery market and began producing and selling molded felt and fur hats inexpensively and in quantity. By the 1920s, millinery shops

38 Lorinda Perry, _Millinery As A Trade For Women_ (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1916), 16.
became mainly distributors for the wholesale trade, selling millinery supplies, sewing notions, untrimmed hats, and doing very little custom work.\textsuperscript{41}

However, the decline of the custom dressmaking and millinery trades began decades before the cultural shift toward domestic thrift, home crafting, and the legislation of wildlife conservation laws at the turn of the twentieth century. As more women enrolled in institutions of higher education post-Civil War, their exposure to physical education and their growing enthusiasm toward health, exercise, and sport required a new type of clothing – garments that were forgiving, comfortable, constructed from washable fabrics, and could be bought and worn as separates.\textsuperscript{42} Sportswear, the first true American fashion, sharply departed from the fashion dictates of Parisian haute-couture and it came to embody the \textit{American Lifestyle}, a life of health and leisure.\textsuperscript{43} The padded busts and hips and cinched waists of the Victorian Era silhouette gave way to the slender and athletic female figure of the 1920s and 1930s.\textsuperscript{44} This new American style was “democratic and unifying, pragmatic and versatile.”\textsuperscript{45} More importantly, it was easy to duplicate and mass produce.\textsuperscript{46}

The \textit{shirtwaist}, tailored on the simple and crisp lines of a man’s dress shirt, was the first successful women’s sportswear separate to transition from the gymnasiums of American colleges to the retail salons of American department stores. Introduced in the early-1890s, the shirtwaist fast became an essential garment for all fashionable women regardless of social class.\textsuperscript{47} Its simplified shape and cut made it easy to manufacture at varying price points in a

\textsuperscript{41} Van Kleck, \textit{A Seasonal Industry}, 38.  
\textsuperscript{43} Campbell-Warner, “From Clothing and Sportswear,” 47.  
\textsuperscript{44} Deborah Cohen, “The Way We look Now,” \textit{Atlantic Monthly}, May 2014, 106.  
\textsuperscript{45} Cohen, “The Way We look Now,” 105.  
\textsuperscript{46} Campbell-Warner, “From Clothing and Sportswear,” 51.  
\textsuperscript{47} Campbell-Warner, “From Clothing and Sportswear,” 47.
variety of styles, and it could be easily interchanged and paired with any number of jacket and skirt combinations, extending a women’s wardrobe considerably. The shirtwaist, and the women who wore it, became symbols of the “New Woman” – the Gibson Girl – and modern female independence.

Increased production in factory-made garments and hats greatly expanded commercial and retail opportunities for mercantile giants like Macy’s and Marshall Field’s. Department stores provided a retail venue for these mass produced goods, and it offered their customers, particularly women, unparalleled access to a world of luxury and choice. This included the services of in-house dressmaking and millinery departments at prices which undercut those of the dressmaker or milliner in business for herself. As the female controlled economy in women’s fashion lost its battle against the united forces of large-scale manufacturing and the commercial power of the department store, more and more female wage-earners were consigned to the repetitive work and dangerous conditions of the factories, exploited and subjected to the will and whim of male management, and offered little opportunity for professional advancement and financial independence.

Finally, where the current scholarship successfully establishes the economic and social importance of the dressmaking and millinery trades to the women who pursued them, challenges the view that women were in control of their gendered industries, and accounts for the swift decline of the dressmaking and millinery trades after WWI, geographical limitations and a narrow demographic focus have created a racial dearth in the scholarship.

51 Gamber, The Female Economy, 190, 191.
regarding these trades in Progressive Era America.\textsuperscript{52} The existing research is largely confined to the predominately white populated regions of the United States, particularly the Northeastern and Midwestern parts of the nation.\textsuperscript{53} While extensive research details the historic contributions of black women to the American economy as agricultural and domestic laborers, the dressmakers and milliners discussed in the research are generally white, European immigrants, and white native-born women of European descent. Black women have been largely discounted in the experiences of the trained dressmaker and milliner and a general account of their trade education, professional prospects, wages, and relationships with their trade suppliers and clientele has yet to be revealed. When they are featured in the scholarly literature, their examples are mainly pulled from the files of the exceptional, like Elizabeth Keckley, dressmaker and confidant to Mary Todd Lincoln, rather than from the ordinary.\textsuperscript{54} This implies that the economic contributions of the average African American tradeswoman are too small to warrant scholarly investigation. In contrast, and since the 1980s, the focus of women’s economic and business histories have moved away from the exceptional and toward the contributions of the ordinary working woman, the employee, the petty entrepreneur, and the small business owner.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{52} Cheryl A. Smith, Market Women – Black Women Entrepreneurs: Past, Present, and Future (Westport: Praeger, 2005), 7, 43.

\textsuperscript{53} Historian Catharine W. Bishir has investigated the lives of black tradeswomen in her work Crafting Lives: African American Artisans in New Bern, North Carolina 1770-1900 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2013). She features high-profile black families who worked the trades within the New Bern, North Carolina community, two of which, the Greens and the Stanleys, were generational tailors and dressmakers. She provides a brief sketch on the socioeconomic status and demographics of the female dressmakers and milliners in New Bern between 1870 and 1880; however, her work focuses on well-documented individual crafters, and not crafters as an industry whole.

\textsuperscript{54} Rosemary E. Reed-Miller, Threads of Time, The Fabric of History: African American Dressmakers and Designers, 1850 to the Present (Washington: Toast and Strawberries Press, 2007). Reed-Miller’s work focuses on high profile dressmakers in service to public figures, including Elizabeth Keckley (Mary Todd Lincoln) and Ona Judge Staines (George Washington).

However, the common challenge in researching nineteenth and early-twentieth century working women, especially black women, is their noticeable absence from official records and economic and business histories.\textsuperscript{56} This is not owing to female unemployment, but that women’s enterprise and economic contributions did not fit the Victorian social model of economic provider, an ideal constructed from the white male, middle-class breadwinner. Accordingly, nineteenth and early-twentieth century officials often excluded women’s business from the historical data.\textsuperscript{57} For example, individuals included in the United States Occupational Censuses had to be \textit{gainfully employed}, if not as a proprietor, then as an employee working full-time for at least six-months per annum, and receiving monetary compensation rather than payment in goods or services.\textsuperscript{58} Petty businesses and non-wage earning occupations, typically operated from a proprietor’s home, were largely undertaken by women and many worked on the basis of barter or trade, leaving a whole sector of economic contributors omitted from the official records; and, in particular, enterprising black women, who often ran their businesses in an informal and clandestine manner in order to survive and prosper under both sexist and racist social conditions.\textsuperscript{59} Thus, accounting for the data limitations in the federal occupational censuses and business histories concerning gender and employment, it is necessary to pull from diverse and unexpected resources to supplement official data and to construct a truer demographic and economic representation of dressmakers and milliners over time.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{56} Smith, \textit{Market Women},” 5.
\textsuperscript{58} United State Department of Commerce, \textit{Occupational Statistics}, 90.
\textsuperscript{59} Smith, \textit{Market Women},” 23.
\textsuperscript{60} Although outside of the scope of this project, considerable research was undertaken to identify and gather demographic information on African-American women within Montgomery, Clark, and Greene Counties, Ohio who identified in the federal population censuses (1880, 1900-1920) and local business directories as milliners or millinery apprentices. Additionally, a roster of the women enrolled in the millinery program at
III. Exhibit Design

To create the exhibit, I was able to pull from my experiences as a historical clothing researcher and a frequent visitor to fashion museums and repositories. For the first time, rather than simply experiencing an object within a particular space, I had to consider how the object occupied the space and why the space mattered to a visitor’s overall experience.

To begin, the extant garments held in museums and repositories are unique representations of the previous wearer’s socioeconomic status, position, and occupation within the context of their respective culture and time period. Also, they represent the dressmakers who created them and illustrate the individual dressmaker’s level of talent and skill as a professional tradeswoman. Most collections consist of garments that were once fashionable and sophisticated, clothes from special occasions and worn by the upper-classes. They are generally constructed from delicate fabrics and textiles, many with exquisite embroidery, beading, and appliqué techniques. Although some surviving articles of clothing are constructed from inexpensive cotton and linen fabrics and are quite ordinary, their value lies in the fact that they survived at all, particularly clothing worn by the lower-classes, slaves, and those employed in the labor trades. Their clothing was wear-worn and necessarily repurposed into children’s clothing and quilts “if there was anything left to save but rags.”61

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Whether elegant or plain, when these precious garments are on public display, they are usually presented in dimly lit galleries and staged behind a variety of barriers for their preservation and protection. What details can be seen are limited to the decorative and superficial. While many museums, like the Ohio State University Historic Costume and Textiles Collection, have employed enhanced viewing techniques, such as lining their gallery walls with mirrors to expand the view of a collection from behind, the views are unavoidably restricted. The gowns created for this project are modern reproductions of historical fashion and did not warrant the same attention to conservation as the surviving garments in a gallery collection. This provided an opportunity to create an unusually informal and interactive experience without barriers protecting the objects on exhibit – no ropes, no platforms, and no cases or enclosures where used to restrict the interaction between the visitor, the gowns, and the historical artifacts. In fact, the idea of the exhibit was to reveal the American dressmaker’s historical narrative in the details of the gowns, allowing the visitor to participate in her story in a familiar and intimate way, and creating a more authentic and memorable experience.

First, consideration was given to object placement and how this placement effects the direction and progress in a space. Because people are generally right-biased, the moment they walk into a defined area, most will invariably move to the right, often neglecting the objects and space to the left. To address this behavior, the more visually striking gowns and graphics were placed on the left side of gallery space to create a sense anticipation and to encourage movement around the space. Next, each gown was given a wide access perimeter to provide the visitor with a 365-degree presentation of the gowns. Then, rather than use

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descriptive labels at the base of each gown, which is a common practice in clothing exhibits, the gowns were tagged on the dress manikin’s neck with a number that corresponded to a particular mounted descriptive label on the wall. This served two functions: it brought the visitor’s eyes up from the floor and around the gallery where all the action was happening; and, there were no visual obstacles in the way to diminish the visitor’s engagement with the gowns or progress within the space. Finally, there is the experience of implied motion. Rather than face all the gowns in a “forward march” or “stand at attention” pose, they were slightly turned to face the gallery’s two entrances, like hosts greeting their guests. The trailing trains of the gowns and the forward extending arms on some of the dress manikins further emphasized this motion, like they were walking toward visitors in anticipations of their arrival.

Next, the appearance of balance and symmetry around the space were given consideration. Initially, the gowns were going to be placed along the perimeter of the room, but their placement up against the interior walls seemed to create an uneasy and lopsided experience. The whole weight of the exhibit would have been pushed back to the recesses and corners of the room, leaving the center floor space hollow and lifeless. Instead, the space across the long walls of the gallery were used to display the large and small descriptive labels, each set facing one another from opposite sides of the room. The placement of the historical artifacts mirrored this effect and they were staged in grouped settings across the short walls, each arrangement facing the other from opposite sides of the room. The gowns were placed directly down the center of the gallery filling the floor space, the largest of the seven gowns in front and the other six placed in well-spaced pairs behind. The graphics achieved additional balance and symmetry: the layout for the descriptive labels was identical to the next and allowed the visitor to easily move across the graphics for particular
information; and the design and typographic elements were uniform and consistent, from the fonts and sizes of the typeface to the mirrored placement of the images and text.

The final consideration was given to the exhibit’s aesthetics. For the gowns, outstanding structural and creative elements particular to their respective periods in fashion were featured using vivid colors, unique textures, and striking contrasts and patterns. This same emphasis was applied to the descriptive labels around the perimeter of the gallery - color, texture and contrast were used to give the two-dimensional graphics debt and form, provoke a sense of curiosity, and direct the visitor’s eyes across the space. To elicit a sense of warmth in the space, varying shades of soft rose were used as the principle color for the graphics to off-set the cool and neutral eggshell color of the gallery walls. The historical artifacts in the exhibit were grouped according to era and staged with plants and furniture to create familiar home and occupational settings, like mother’s work table or the dressmaker’s shop. Together, these aesthetic elements created a sense of excitement, elicited curiosity and anticipation, and pulled the visitor in close to the objects for an interactive and meaningful experience.63

IV. The Gowns

Each gown was inspired by a printed fashion plate from the period and created largely using historical construction methods.64 Within a fourteen week period, the details of each gown and their accompanying undergarments were designed, patterned, cut, and assembled. Patterns were drafted for the undergarments because of their simple block shapes and ease

64 Sewing machines were in wide use in dressmaker shops by the late-1870s. While the serger was first patented in 1877 by Joseph Merrow, a non-industrial model was not developed and sold to public until 1964, the year the Tacony Corporation introduced the “Baby Lock” portable serger to the American market.
of construction. But, for the structural garments – the corsets and bustles – preprinted theatrical patterns were used.\textsuperscript{65} Due to the complexities in shape and fit of the outer garments, their patterns were created by draping, pinning, and cutting muslin and scrap fabric over a dress form fitted with the proper under and structural garments from the period (shift, corset, bustle, petticoat, bum pad, etc.). Fabrics, trims, notions, and plastic and steel boning were purchased through a personal wholesaler and local hardware and fabric stores.\textsuperscript{66} All ruffled, pleated, smocked, and lace trims and accents, buttons, snaps, and hook and eyes were hand sewn to the garments, while dress seams, lining seams, button holes, and hems were machine sewn or finished off with a serger.\textsuperscript{67} For the Jazz Age and Edwardian dresses, arms were fabricated using craft felt, heavy gauge steel wire, and polyester craft stuffing to give their soft sleeves definition; with the exception of the short-sleeved dress representing the period from the Great War, the sleeves for the other gowns, which were constructed from stiffer fabrics, were simply stuffed with plastic shopping and garment bags for staging.

**Early Bustle Period 1867-1876**

Following the Civil War, the *cage crinoline*, or hoop, worn under antebellum women’s skirts gave way to the bustle, a structured undergarment similar to the cage crinoline in that it provided shape and definition to the skirt, but it had lost the balanced bell-shape of the previous era and shifted the weight and decorative emphasis of a woman’s dress to the back.

\textsuperscript{65} Bustle patterns used for the late and early bustle period are from Truly Victorian (www.trulyvictorian.net), pattern numbers TV 101 (Petticoat with Wire Bustle) and TV 163 (1887 Imperial Tournure); corset pattern used for the early bustle and natural form periods is from Past Patterns (www.pastpatterns.com), pattern number 213 (Late Victorian Corset). Historical dressmakers kept basic stock patterns for particular garments, like skirt forms, sleeve forms, shirtwaists, and underclothing.

\textsuperscript{66} Dressmakers were in the business of making dresses and did not typically make corsets for their clientele. By the 1880s, corsets were machine made and being mass-produced in factories.

\textsuperscript{67} Sewing machine and serger models used for this project were Husqvarna-Viking *Tribute* 145M and Husqvarna-Viking *Huskylock* 905.
Skirts were now flush down the front and were often accompanied by long trains with extra fabric draped up and around the bustle, and trimmed in an abundance of pleats, ruffles, and gathers. Bodice styles were tightly fitted to the upper torso and extended past the waist just over the hips. Early in the period, sleeves were reminiscent of the pagoda-style in Antebellum fashion, but later this bell-shaped sleeve transitioned to sleeves that were more fitted and tapered at the wrists. The general silhouette of the corset did not change during this period, and a woman’s waist and hips still held the full weight of her under and outer garments.

The early bustle gown created for the exhibit featured a trained and heavily pleated skirt accompanied by a six-foot detachable butterfly train fastened at the lower waist of the bodice back with a series of hidden hook and eyes. The ensemble was constructed from electric blue dupioni silk and trimmed on the sleeves, neck, skirt hem, and around the circumference of the butterfly train in navy blue dupioni silk. The bodice was lined in medium weight navy satin, boned at the seams, and closed up the center-front by buttons covered in the same electric blue silk. The trained skirt closed at the side with two hooks and eyes, but was not lined due to the volume of heavy pleating in the back. The butterfly train was lined in a light black cotton toile to maintain the crispness of the silk and the buoyancy of the “wings.” The petticoat bustle, shift, corset, and corset cover were all constructed from various weights of white cotton. The under and outer garments took 108 hours to design, pattern, cut, and assemble. The bodice, trained skirt, and butterfly train used 34.5 yards of sixty-inch wide fabric, including 1,260 inches of ten-inch wide navy silk ruffled trim and 3.5 yards of featherweight boning. The undergarments used fifteen yards of sixty-inch wide fabric, six yards of synthetic whale boning, nine yards of steel hoop boning, twenty-six sets of steel
corset grommets, six yards of white lacing cord, three yards of white cotton lace trim and one hook and eye.

**Natural Form Period 1875-1883**

The bustle briefly fell out of fashionable favor for a more natural silhouette achieved, no less, by a tightly laced corset and padded busts, hips, and derriere. The skirt’s weight and decorative emphasis remained pulled to the rear, but it became very narrow through the hips and thighs with its fullness being released at the knee and softly gathered in the back into a short train. The Princess Dress, a tightly fitted frock from the shoulders to the hem of the gown and constructed without a waist seam, was all the rage. Bodices were snug and very long, often extending in some sort of draped or asymmetrical shape to the hem of the skirt. Fish and fantail trains became popular about 1880 and tailored, full-length sleeves fit high up under the arm.

The natural form gown created for the exhibit featured a Princess cut bodice, which extended just above the hem of the skirt, a fantail skirt with a two-foot train, and a smocked bib across the bodice top. The ensemble was constructed from tangerine satin jacquard and trimmed with ruffles and pleats on the sleeves, neck, bodice hem, and circumference of the skirt in the same tangerine jacquard and a medium weight rust satin. The whole structure of the bodice was lined in rust satin, boned at the seams to the length of the waist, and fastened up the center back with seventeen peach celluloid buttons and a hook and eye. Two more peach celluloid buttons were used to pull up the bodice’s apron hem from the floor in soft front folds. The smocked bib detail on the upper bodice was constructed separately from the rest of the dress and attached to the center front panel before the side front panels were sewn in place. The fantail skirt remained unlined and fastened closed at the side with two
hooks and eyes; gathering tapes were sewn underneath and across the back of the skirt at knee height, then cinched tight and tied to pull the weight of the skirt to the back. The corset used to shape the silhouette was one that had been constructed prior to this project - a reproduction Victorian corset constructed from heavy weight red satin, fitted with twenty-four steel spiral bones, a five-tabbed steel busk, and lined in black cotton twill. A stuffed, half-moon bum-pad, made from cream cotton flannel and stuffed with polyester fiberfill, was secured under the back of the corset and gave the derriere shape; a combination Petticoat-shift, constructed from a light cotton batiste, was worn over the corset and bum-pad. The under and outer garments, excluding the corset, took seventy-eight hours to design, pattern, cut, and assemble. The Princess bodice and fantail skirt used 21 yards of sixty-inch wide fabric, including 620 inches of six-inch wide tangerine and rust satin ruffled trim, one yard of pleated and pinked tangerine satin trim, and 4.5 yards of featherweight boning. The Petticoat-shift used six yards of sixty-inch wide fabric, one yard of .25 inch wide elastic, and four metal snaps.

Late Bustle Period 1883-1889

The bustle returned to women’s fashion in the early 1880s and grew to ridiculous proportions by the end of the decade. Like the earlier bustle and natural form periods, the weight of women’s dresses and skirts was concentrated to the rear. But in the later period, the bustle’s structure protruded severely from the back of a woman’s waist and created a shelf-like shape where the shirts fell sharply to the floor, rather than the soft, rounded, and cascading silhouette of the earlier bustle period. Dresses continued to be highly adorned with numerous decorative techniques, and skirts were rarely trained, except for those worn for formal occasions. Bodices remained snug through the torso, and sleeves were now worn
high on the shoulder with a *kick-up* (a small gathered puff on the sleeve-cap) and snug down the length of the arm. Collars, stiffened with bone, inched up the neck, and tailored and nautical daytime looks began to replace feminine frills and flounces as the decade wore on.

The late bustle dress created for the exhibit featured a more masculine aesthetic; the bodice remained tight along the torso and upper hips, and extended smoothly around the shape of the bustle shelf in the back. The bodice fastened down the center front with twenty-one eye and hooks. The skirt remained smooth around the front and sides with the weight of the skirt evenly draped over the bustle in tight, heavy pleats to the floor. The front and side front panels of the skirt were adorned with pleated trim detail around the hem, but not the side back and back panels, which remained plain. The sleeves featured a small kick-up on the sleeve-cap and the sleeve cuff treatment was reminiscent of the leather gauntlet gloves popular in the late Renaissance period. The ensemble was constructed from a heavy olive rough-spun satin and a pink and green iridescent check tapestry cloth. The bodice was lined in dark olive shantung silk and stiffened with boning down the waist and hips at the seams. The skirt was lined in a light olive cotton voile and fastened at the side waist with two hook and eyes. The lobster-tail bustle, petticoat, and shift were all constructed from various weights of white cotton; a corset was not used to shape the silhouette of this dress. The under and outer garments took eighty-eight hours to design, pattern, cut, and assemble. The bodice and skirt used 18.5 yards of sixty-inch wide fabric, including 220 inches of four-inch wide olive satin box-pleated trim, 3.5 yards of featherweight boning, twenty-one gold impressed celluloid buttons and eight gold bauble metal buttons decorating the center front of the bodice and the sleeve cuffs. The undergarments used 11.5 yards of sixty-inch wide fabric, five yards of steel hoop boning, three hooks and eyes, and one yard of white cotton lace trim.
As more women entered the public sphere through education, employment, and sport, their clothing began to reflect their active lifestyles. Bustles and heavily draped, pleated, and gathered skirts were replaced by skirts that took on a simple A-line shape with little or no decorative adornment, except for eveningwear, which remained quite elaborate and feminine in style. Hemlines raised two to six inches off the floor to necessarily accommodate occupational environments and sporting activities. Tightly fitted bodices transformed into sports jackets and were worn over shirtd waists fitted with stiff paper or starched collars and neckties. Sleeves, while generally snug from the elbow to the wrist, took on voluminous proportions at the shoulders. The kick-up matured into the gigot or leg-o-mutton sleeve, an aesthetic design feature reminiscent of the 1830s that would dominate women’s fashion for the greater part of the decade. Furthermore, alternatives to the steel boned corset – bust girdles, corded corsets, corset waists, and sanitary corsets – were now commonly advertised in ladies magazines as the controversies surrounding tight lacing and women’s health were widely debated among fashion reformers, medical professionals, and the fashionable public.

The *Gibson Girl* gown created for the exhibit featured gigot sleeves, an A-line skirt, daggered sleeve cuffs, and a bowtie. The ensemble was constructed from black and white flocked taffeta, white dupioni silk, and black dupioni silk. Due to the oversized flocked filigree pattern printed on the taffeta, no significant structural embellishments were added to the gown allowing for the dramatic contrast of the fabric to be showcased. The bodice was lined in white cotton voile and fastened down the center back with nine black celluloid buttons and four hooks and eyes. The black silk was used to create the collar and bowtie and to add subtle detail around the bodice’s waist and white silk bib front to break up the large
and overwhelming print on the taffeta. The skirt was lined in the same white cotton voile and fastened in the back with two hooks and eyes. A corset was not used to shape the silhouette of this gown, but a combination petticoat-shift with heavy ruffling around the hem and across the bust, and made from well starched cream-colored dupioni silk. The under and outer garments took eighty-four hours to design, pattern, cut, and assemble, of which six of those hours were used to redesign and recut the skirt to the correct shape. The bodice, skirt, and bowtie used 18 yards of sixty-inch wide fabric; the petticoat shift used 7.5 yards of sixty inch wide fabric, eleven metal snaps, and one hook and eye.

**Edwardian Femininity 1900-1913**

The most notable change in women’s fashion was in the transformation of the corset. The straight–front corset replaced the Victorian hour-glass corset as a medicinal garment, meant to apply less pressure and stress to a woman’s stomach and waist, but in consequence shifted the pressure and stress to wearer’s back and shoulders. The straight steel busk in the center front of the corset forced a woman’s bust forward and pushed her hips and derriere back creating the stylish S-silhouette, or *Pouter-pigeon* shape. Sports jackets and shirtwaists were still popular from the previous decade, but were now embellished with feminine frills, flounces, and flourishes. Skirts were tightly fitted at the waist and hips and fluted at hem. Late in the first decade, the elasticized girdle began to replace the corset as the preferred figure-shaping undergarment and wider waistlines and higher skirt hems became the new mode in women’s fashion.

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68 The fabric yardage used to construct the gown reflects only the quantity used for the finished garment; for the reconstruction of the skirt, another 5.5 yards of taffeta and 5.5 yards of cotton voile can be added to the total, equaling 29.5 yards of fabric used.
The Edwardian gown created for the exhibit featured a Pouter-pigeon blouse with bishop sleeves and a fluted skirt. The blouse was constructed from beige lace and lined in ecru cotton voile. The bodice featured tiered lace flounces across the bust and shoulders, and was the first gown in the collection to sport barrel cuffs and functioning sleeve buttons. The blouse fastened down the center back with thirteen antique Mother-of-Pearl buttons from the era, and one Mother-of-Pearl button on each sleeve cuff. The skirt was made from the same beige lace and lined in ecru cotton toile; it fastened at the center back with a large hook and eye. No corset was used to shape the silhouette, but was achieved with a stuffed bandeau bra around the bust and a bit of strategic padding in the derriere for staging. The petticoat and shift were constructed from a medium-weight undyed rough-spun linen. The under and outer garments took eighty-hours to design, pattern, cut, and assemble, of which ten of those hours were used to remake the skirt twice to achieve the correct train length and draping effect. The undergarments used 11.5 yards of forty-four inch fabric, five yards of undyed crocheted cotton lace, and two hooks and eyes.

**The Great War 1914-1918**

In 1917, the United States War Industries Board asked women to stop buying corsets to conserve steel for the war effort – in fact, 28,000 tons of corset steel was stockpiled, enough to build two battleships. Soft brassieres and elasticized girdles now shaped the female silhouette. As women entered the military and filled professional vacancies on the home front left by drafted or enlisted men, they quickly adopted practical work clothing, including

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69 The fabric yardage used to construct the gown reflects only the quantity used for the finished garment; for the two additional reconstructions of the skirt, another 10 yards of lace and 10 yards of cotton voile can be added to the total, equaling 36 yards of fabric used.

overalls and trousers, for their own health and safety. The female waist was no longer emphasized and wartime rationing forced garment manufacturers to create and cut women’s clothing in plainer styles and using less fabric. By the end of WWI, women’s dresses were basic ankle-length tube-shaped dresses that could be slipped on over the head and body with ease.

The dress created for the exhibit to represent the fashion in the late 1910s featured a hobble-skirt and overtunic, and was the first in the collection to be a one-piece ensemble with short sleeves. The dress was constructed from a medium blue shantung silk, white cotton, and black taffeta (used for the upper half of the hobble skirt and hidden by the overtunic) and was not lined. A slip-over garment, it fastened closed down the center front of the bodice and skirt with eight light blue and four white celluloid buttons and one hook and (at the waist); a white cotton chemise and drawers combination set was used for the undergarments. The under and outer garments took forty hours to design, pattern, cut, and assemble. The dress used 9.25 yards of sixty-inch wide fabric; the undergarments used 3.25 yards of forty-four inch wide fabric, three yards of 1.5 inch wide white eyelet lace, one yard of .25 inch wide elastic, and fourteen metal snaps.

The Jazz Age 1920-1933

Women’s fashion through most of the 1920s continued to obscure the natural female form in favor of an androgynous silhouette. Breasts were bound or held flat in bandeau-style brassieres, fashionable waistlines were slung low on the hips, and hemlines rested just below the knees. In 1929, hemlines began to lengthen and women’s clothing designs became more feminine and accentuated the natural curves of the female form. Department stores, like Rike’s in Dayton, Ohio, were now the main suppliers of women’s apparel and accessories,
and most offered the services of an in-house dressmaking department for clientele who desired custom clothing or for those who needed alterations, embellishments, or repairs made to the mass-produced garments bought in their stores.

The dress created for the exhibit to represent the fashionable style in the late-1920s featured the modern tunic shape with a low and understated waistline.\(^1\) The bodice portion of the ensemble was constructed from vintage cut-work black silk velvet from the period, black dupioni silk, and lined in salmon cotton voile.\(^2\) Six salmon colored celluloid buttons with clear rhinestone centers decorated the bib front of the bodice, now called a *vestee*. Black velvet ribbon trimmed the sleeves, neckline, vestee, and the bottom parameter of the bodice where it meets the pleated skirt. The skirt was made from black dupioni silk and was not lined. Finally, a decorative flower constructed from twenty-two cut pedals from the same black dupioni silk accented the left shoulder. The undergarment constructed for this dress was a simple tunic slip made from mauve charmeuse satin. The under and outer garments took 37 hours to design, pattern, cut, and assemble. The dress used 2.25 yards of sixty-inch wide dupioni and 3 yards of thirty-six inch wide black silk velvet; the slip used two yards of sixty inch wide fabric, and the flower petals were cut from scraps of the black dupioni.

\(^1\) This dress was modeled after McCall's dress pattern #1920 (1927); the construction schematic from this pattern was used as the principle graphic on the exhibit announcement card and can be viewed in Appendix D.  
\(^2\) The cut-work black silk velvet used in the construction of this dress was purchased for $3.00 from a vintage fabric dealer at the Modern American Exhibit at the Cincinnati Convention Center in Sharonville, Ohio, in February 2014. The fabric was extensively damaged, shredded and crushed throughout, but there was enough workable fabric to piece together the bodice and sleeves.
V. Conclusion

In the late-nineteenth century, as women became more socially visible through their pursuits in education, employment, and sport, their clothing and headwear began to reflect their active lifestyles. Corsets and petticoats gave way to bandeau brassieres and elasticized girdles, while wire-framed garden hats were replaced by fitted cloches. Sportswear separates, like the shirtwaist and A-line skirt, were less restrictive than previous fashions and became the essential garments in the modern woman’s wardrobe. The simpler shapes and cuts of women’s apparel and hats made them easier for the homemaker to copy, the factory to manufacturer, and the department store to sell at varying price points and in a variety of styles. In consequence, women’s journey toward female emancipation from American Reconstruction to WWI set in motion the dramatic decline of the very trades – dressmaking and millinery – which gave the women who worked them social influence, professional respect, and economic independence. The female controlled economy in women’s fashion lost its battle against mass produced goods and the commercial power of retail giants like Macy’s and Marshall Field’s. Gradually, female wage earners were consigned to the repetitive and dangerous conditions of the factory, exploited and subjected to the demands of male management, and offered little opportunity for professional advancement and financial independence as the dressmaking and millinery trades collapsed.

The social and economic transformation of the United States in the late-nineteenth century and the social and economic progression of women within this historical context are fundamental to understanding the downfall of the dressmaking and millinery trades. Rather than write a thesis paper detailing these events, I created a public exhibit. Seven historical reproduction gowns were designed and constructed that were representative of the
dressmaker’s work during America’s Progressive Age. The exhibit served several purposes. First, it served as an educational conduit between the public and academic history. It helped to contextualize the experiences of these tradeswomen and to bring their narratives out from the pages of the past and into the accessible present.\textsuperscript{73} Second, as a professional historical dressmaker, an exhibit allowed me to demonstrate the trade skills of the Progressive Era dressmaker. The gowns were a physical manifestation of the dressmaker’s narrative over a forty-year period, and the functional transformation of women’s clothing during this period was a discernable indicator of nation’s economic transformation and its changing attitudes towards female emancipation. Finally, I had to consider how the gowns, historical artifacts, and informational materials for the exhibit were to be used in the gallery space, and how the use of this space would impact the public’s overall experience. Object placement, graphics uniformity, and visual aesthetics were used to direct the progress within the space, to balance the weight of the room, and to create an exciting and welcoming atmosphere. More importantly, no protective barriers were used to restrict the public’s interaction with the objects in the space.

At the close of the exhibit, a visitor wrote a comment in the guestbook which captured the intent behind the creation of this exhibit. It read, “I thoroughly enjoyed experiencing the dresses and learning the fascinating history. Thank you!”

\textsuperscript{73} O’Neil, “Experiencing History Where It Happened,” 27.
Appendix A (1)

Reconstruction: Early Bustle Period 1867-1876

Following the Civil War, the cage crinoline worn in Antebellum women’s fashion gave way to the bustle, a structured undergarment that shifted the weight and decorative emphasis of a women’s dress or gown to the back. Skirts were flat in front and were often accompanied by long trains with extra fabric draped up and around the bustle, and trimmed in an abundance of pleats, ruffles, and gathers. Bodice styles were tightly fitted to the upper torso and extended past the waist just over the hips. Early in the period, sleeves were reminiscent of the pagode style in Antebellum fashion, but later this bell shaped sleeve transitioned to sleeves that were more fitted and tapered at the wrist.

~American dressmaker gainfully employed in 1870 ~

189,984

~American garment factory workers gainfully employed in 1870 ~

7,383

1863. Ebenezer Butterick begins selling the first graded sewing patterns for children’s clothing at his home in Sterling, Massachusetts.
1866. Butterick begins manufacturing women’s sewing patterns in Fitchburg, Massachusetts.
1870. James McColl begins selling his clothing patterns in his New York City tailoring shop.
1871. A.M. Davis patents the first dressmaker’s mannequin for the home sewer made from wire and papier-mâché.
1872. Joseph and Lyman Bloomingdale open Bloomingdale’s Department Store in New York City.
1873. The Delineator, Butterick’s ladies’ fashion magazine, is first published to advertise the company’s patterns.
1877. Joseph Morroo patents the first overlock “crocheting” sewing machine.
1879. Albert McDowell patents his garment pattern drafting machine.

Figure 1. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, “Reconstruction: Early Bustle Period 1867-1876,” photographic print mounted on foam board, 24 in x 36 in.
Appendix A (2)

Figure 2. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, “Gilded Age: Natural Form Period 1875-1883,” photographic print mounted on foam board, 24 in x 36 in.
The bustle returned to women’s fashion in the early 1880s and grew to ridiculous proportions by the end of the decade. Its severe protruding structure created a shelf-like shape just below the back of the waist where the skirts fell sharply to the floor, rather than the soft rounded shape and cascading silhouette of the earlier bustle period. Dresses and gowns continued to be highly adorned with numerous decorative techniques and skirts were rarely trained, except for those worn for formal occasions. Bodices remained snug through the torso and waist, and sleeves were worn high on the shoulders and fitted down the arm. Collars inched up the neck, and tailored and nautical daytime looks begin to replace feminine frills and flounces.

~American dressmaker gainfully employed in 1890 ~

438,711

~American garment factory worker gainfully employed in 1890 ~

32,144

1892 Arthur Baldwin Turnure publishes Vogue, a weekly fashion and culture newspaper marketed toward New York City’s upper class.

1893 The zipper is patented by mechanical engineer Whitcomb Judson. That same year, Louise Austin patents the pinking shear.

1899 Vogue changes its format to a monthly paid subscription magazine and begins its clothing pattern mail order service. That same year, Albert McNew of the McNew Garment Drafting Machine, starts his own paper pattern company and subscription dressmaking and tailoring magazine, Pattern Review, Herman Bergdorf opens Bergdorf Goodman’s Department Store in New York City.

Figure 3. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, “Gilded Age: Late Bustle Period 1883-1889,” photographic print mounted on foam board, 24 in x 36 in.
Progressive Era: The New Woman 1890-1899

As more women entered the public sphere through work, education, and sport, their clothing began to reflect their active lifestyles. Bustles and heavily draped, planted, and gathered skirts fell from fashionable favor. Full-length skirts took on a simple A-line shape with little or no decorative embellishments, except for eveningwear, which remained quite elaborate and feminine in style. Bodices transformed into sports jackets and were worn over shirtwaists fitted with stiff collars and neckties. Sleeves, while generally snug from the elbow to the wrist, took on voluminous proportions at the shoulders. The Gigot or Leg-O-Mutton sleeve would dominate women’s fashion for the greater part of the decade.

American dressmakers gainfully employed in 1900 ~

490,899

American garment factory workers gainfully employed in 1900 ~

53,533

1905 Ladies’ Home Journal Magazine, first published in 1883, begins selling clothing patterns. That same year, Butterick Pattern Company begins selling their patterns in envelopes rather than the pattern being folded in an envelope form and held secure with a pasted label.
1907 Carrie Marcus Neiman, Abraham Neiman, and Herbert Marcus open Neiman-Marcus Department Store in Dallas, Texas.
1909 Media mogul, Conde Nast, purchases Vogue Magazine and Vogue Pattern Service.

Figure 4. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, “Progressive Era: The New Woman 1890-1899,” photographic print mounted on foam board, 24 in x 36 in.
Progressive Era: Edwardian Femininity 1900-1913

The most notable change in women’s fashion was the shape of the corset. The straight-front corset replaced the Victorian hourglass corset as a medicinal garment, meant to apply less pressure and stress on the wearer’s stomach and waist. The straight steel busk in the center front of the corset forced a woman’s bust forward and her hips and derrière back creating the stylish S-silhouette, or Pouter-pigeon shape. Sports jackets and shirtwaists were still popular from the previous decade, but were now embellished with feminine frills, flounces, and flourishes. Shirts were tightly fitted at the waist and hips and fluted to the hem. Late in the decade, the girdle began to slowly replace the corset as wider waistlines and higher skirt hems became the new mode in women’s fashion.

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American dressmakers gainfully employed in 1910 —

582,187

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American garment factory workers gainfully employed in 1910 —

242,086

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1910 Raven, discovered in 1855 by Swiss chemist, George Auldemars, is first commercially produced by Astex Fibers in the United States.
1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City, killing 146 women and injuring 71 others.
1913 McCall’s Magazine and McCall’s Pattern Company is purchased by White Weld & Company, a financial firm.
1914 Mary Phelps Jacobs patents the handkerchief brassiere.
1916 Vogue patterns are now sold in fine department stores.
1919 Butterick patents the Dolter, an instruction sheet included with each of their patterns.

Figure 5. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, “Progressive Era: Edwardian Femininity 1900-1913,” photographic print mounted on foam board, 24 in x 36 in.
In 1917, the United States War Board asked women to stop buying corsets to conserve steel for the war effort. Soft brassieres and elasticized girdles now shaped the female silhouette. As women entered the military and filled professional vacancies on the home front left by drafted or enlisted men, they quickly adopted practical work clothing, including overalls and trousers, for their own health and safety. The female waist was no longer emphasized and wartime rationing forced garment manufacturers to create and cut women’s clothing in plainer styles and using less fabric. By the end of WWI, women’s dresses were basic ankle-length tunics that could be slipped over the head and body with ease.

Figure 6. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, “The Great War 1914-1918,” photographic print mounted on foam board, 24 in x 36 in.
Women’s fashion in the 1920s continued to obscure the natural female shape in favor of an androgynous silhouette. Breasts were bound or held flat in bandeau-style bras, whereas fashionable waistlines were slung low on the hips, and hemlines rested just below the knees. In 1929, hemlines began to lengthen and women’s clothing designs became more feminine and accentuated the natural curves of the female form. Retail giants, like Rike’s in Dayton, Ohio, were the main suppliers of women’s apparel and accessories, and most offered the services of an in-house dressmaking department for clientele who desired custom clothing or those who needed alterations, embellishments, or repairs made to mass-produced garments bought in their stores.

~American dressmakers gainfully employed in 1930 ~

159,566

~American garment factory workers gainfully employed in 1930 ~

353,486

1931 Du Barry clothing patterns are printed and sold exclusively by F.W. Woolworth & Co.
1932 Hollywood patterns are printed and published by media mogul, Conde Nast, featuring Hollywood stars on the pattern envelopes.
1933 Advance clothing patterns are printed and sold exclusively by J.C. Penney & Co. That same year, Singer introduces the Featherweight 221 portable sewing machine at the Chicago World Fair.
1938 William F. Dillard opens Dillard’s Department Store in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Figure 7. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, “The Jazz Age 1920-1933,” photographic print mounted on foam board, 24 in x 36 in.
Appendix A (8)

Dressmaking & Millinery Training Program at Wilberforce University

Dressmaking students, Wilberforce University, c. 1914
(Photograph courtesy of Central State University Archives Department, Wilberforce, Ohio)

In 1886, the Ohio General Assembly passed a bill to fund the Combined Normal and Industrial Department at Wilberforce University. This educational endowment grant offered various commercial and industrial training programs under the supervision of the Ohio Department of Agriculture, including a three-year dressmaking trade course. In the 1902-1903 academic year, the Industrial Department expanded its Domestic Arts curriculum and added a two-year millinery trade course, which was described in the university's course catalogue as an easy to learn and profitable profession which "every girl should avail herself the opportunity to learn."

Student Sarah Daisy Barker enrolled in Wilberforce's millinery program in 1911, then under the instruction of Kathryn G. McRoberts. Barker's 163-page millinery notebook from her time at Wilberforce still survives. Written in neat and exact longhand, it provides a full and detailed account of what she learned during her two-years of training as a millinery student. Carefully tucked in the cover page of the notebook is a millinery "work room ticket" which reveals that Barker's training was not just academic in nature, but applied in a professional setting under McRoberts' careful supervision.

For the 1916-1917 academic year, Wilberforce enrolled the last students in its dressmaking and millinery trade courses. Their curriculums would be completely phased out by the university in the 1919-1920 academic year and replaced with a two year certificate program in Home Arts, which included basic sewing and millinery instruction as part of its curriculum. From the first dressmaking course offered in 1887 to the final dressmaking and millinery courses offered in 1916, more than 600 dressmaking students and 250 millinery students were enrolled at Wilberforce University.

Figure 8. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, “Dressmaking & Millinery Training Program at Wilberforce University,” photographic print mounted on foam board, 24 in x 36 in.
During the American Industrial Age, women’s fashions changed dramatically. Gone were the simpler, often austere, bonnet and clothing styles of the late-Romantic and Antebellum decades prior to the Civil War, and\textit{ en masse} were the elaborate and complex designs that would define women’s fashion from Reconstruction until WWI. The late-Victorian trend of extravagant and sophisticated women’s apparel projected the middle and upper classes’ social attitudes regarding American superiority as the world’s new industrial superpower. It was an era of unprecedented wealth and a testament to America’s industrial might, and the lavishness of women’s clothing and adornments was a discernable indicator of the nation’s prosperity.

In sharp contrast to agricultural labor, factory labor, and domestic service - the top three wage-earning occupations for women in terms of employment in Progressive Era America - dressmaking required a high degree of artistic ability, construction skill, and extensive training. Those women accomplished in the trade found themselves employed in high-end shops or owning an establishment of their own. Nearly all dressmakers were women, and despite this division of labor, the gendered segregation of their profession gave them an opportunity to create successful businesses for themselves, independence, and social respectability.

But, as more Progressive Era women entered the public sphere through education, employment, and sport their clothing necessarily began to reflect their active lifestyles. Corsets and petticoats gave way to bandeau brassieres, elasticized girdles, and light slips. Sportswear separates, like the shirtwaist and A-line skirt, fashionable in the 1890s, were less restrictive, generally washable, and became the essential garments for the modern woman’s wardrobe regardless of social class. The simpler cuts of women’s clothing made them easy for the homemaker to copy, the factory to manufacture, and the department store to sell at varying price points and in a variety of styles. Gradually, major retailers and proprietors of paper patterns, pattern drafting systems, and sewing courses would subvert the dressmaker’s skill to a domestic chore. By the close of WWI, the dressmaking trade in America declined dramatically to only forty percent of those previously employed a decade before.

Figure 9. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, "Fall of the American Dressmaker 1880-1920," photographic print mounted on foam board, 24 in x 36 in.
Appendix B (1)

Kathryn Gaynel McRoberts

Kathryn G. McRoberts was born in Hamilton County, Ohio in March 1884, the daughter of Thomas and Mary Isabel McRoberts. After graduating from Cincinnati Public Schools in 1902, she enrolled in West Virginia State University that same year, and later graduated with a certificate in teaching. In 1911, Kathryn accepted a position heading the Millinery Department at Wilberforce University. She maintained her position until spring semester of 1914. On June 25 of the same year, Kathryn married Edward R. Richardson, a fellow teacher, in Cincinnati, Ohio. For 18 years, the Richardsons dedicated themselves to the education of elementary school children in Princeton, New Jersey. In 1941, the couple moved from New Jersey to Michigan to be near their children and grandchildren. Kathryn died at the age of 67 on December 31, 1951 in Detroit.

Figure 10. Angela Cramer-Reichelderfer, "Kathryn Gaynel McRoberts," photographic print mounted on foam board, 10 in x 18 in.

Millinery students (Kathryn G. McRoberts, standing), Wilberforce University, c. 1914

(Photograph courtesy of Central State University Archives Department, Wilberforce, Ohio)

Figure 11. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, "Millinery students (Kathryn G. McRoberts, standing), Wilberforce University, c. 1914," photographic print mounted on foam board, 10 in x 18 in.
Sarah Daisy Barker

Born in Richland County, Ohio on March 25, 1877, Sarah was the daughter of George Washington Barker and Harriet J. Hurley. In 1896, she graduated from Mansfield High School, and in 1877, she enrolled in Oberlin College's Music Conservatory, where she graduated in 1900. From 1911-1913, Sarah attended Wilberforce University as a millinery student, but throughout her long life her chosen vocation was teaching music. On November 16, 1920, Sarah married Captain Walter S. Thomas, a Spanish-American War veteran. Together, they had no children, but Sarah dedicated herself to her community and church. She was a life-long member of the May Chapter of the Ladies of the Eastern Star and she was instrumental in organizing the first National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Chapter in Mansfield, Ohio. Sarah died at the age 96 on January 26, 1973.

Figure 12. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, "Sarah Daisy Barker," photographic print mounted on foam board, 10 in x 18 in.

Sarah Daisy Barker in front of her home at 53 Wood Street, Mansfield, Ohio, c. 1895

(Photo courtesy of the Mansfield Memorial Museum, Mansfield, Ohio)

Figure 13. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, "Sarah Daisy Barker in front of her home at 53 Wood Street, Mansfield, Ohio, c. 1895," photographic print mounted on foam board, 10 in x 18 in.)
Who was the American dressmaker?

- The American dressmaker was a tradeswoman - an employee or owner of a high-end bespoke clothing shop.
- She was a specialist - a master clothier of feminine fashion apparel.
- She was highly skilled - apprenticed for seven years or more under a master dressmaker.
- She was an artist - designed, draped, patterned, and constructed a garment from start to finish.

Figure 14. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, "Who was the American dressmaker?" Photographic print mounted on foam board, 10 in x 18 in.

A dressmaker was not a...

**Seamster/Seamstress**
(Home sewer, trimmer, finisher, garment or piece worker)

**Tailor/Tailoress**
(Master clothier of masculine male and female apparel)

Figure 15. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, "A dressmaker was not a..." photographic print mounted on foam board, 10 in x 18 in.
Appendix B (4)

Figure 16. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, "Golden Age of the American Dressmaker," photographic print mounted on foam board, 10 in x 18 in.

The Gilded Age: An Era of Unprecedented Affluence

American wealth, spurred by mass immigration and the ethnic transformation of the nation’s workforce, the rise in employment, investments, and productivity in manufacturing, created a professional boom for the dressmaking trade. Consumer demands for fine tailored clothing flourished and the middle-class and nouveau riche eagerly spent their expandable incomes and new fortunes on the skilled services of a dressmaker to drape them in the latest Parisian fashions. From 1880 to 1910, those women gainfully employed as dressmakers in the United States had more than doubled, from 285,000 to 580,000.

Figure 17. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, "The Golden Age: An Era of Unprecedented Affluence" photographic print mounted on foam board, 10 in x 18 in.
Appendix B (5)

Independence Through Entrepreneurial Propriety

As a purveyor of the latest fashion trends in service to affluent clientele, the dressmaking trade offered women unique employment and entrepreneurial opportunities and a real alternative to the middle-class standard of domesticity and the working-class idea of the family wage.

Figure 18. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, "Independence Through Entrepreneurial Propriety," photographic print mounted on foam board, 10 in x 18 in.

The American Dressmaker’s Demise
1911-1919

Figure 19. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, "The American Dressmaker's Demise," photographic print mounted on foam board, 10 in x 18 in.
Appendix B (6)

Paper Patterns

By WWI, middle-class values of feminine thrift were reinforced through home craft, providing women with a means to contribute to the household economy within their private sphere. Pattern companies needed women to sew and they capitalized on what women themselves already believed, that their sex was naturally endowed with the ability.

Figure 20. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, "Paper Patterns," photographic print mounted on foam board, 10 in x 18 in.

Pattern Drafting Systems

Proprietors of pattern drafting systems would claim dominion over the dressmaking trade, depreciate the dressmaker’s expert skill to a domestic chore, and glorify their own “scientific methods” as easy-to-learn for every woman and superior to the dressmaker’s pin-to-form or draping technique.

Figure 21. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, "Pattern Drafting Systems," photographic print mounted on foam board, 10 in x 18 in.
American Sportswear

Sportswear, the first true American fashion, sharply departed from the fashion dictates of Parisian haute-couture and came to embody the American Lifestyle of health and leisure. The padded busts and hips and cinched waists of the Victorian Era silhouette gave way to the slender and athletic female figure of the 1920s and 1930s. This new American fashion was pragmatic and versatile. More importantly, it was easy to duplicate and mass produce.

Figure 22. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, "American Sportswear," photographic print mounted on foam board, 10 in x 18 in.

Department Stores

Increased production in factory made garments greatly expanded commercial and retail opportunities for merchantile giants like Macy’s and Marshall Field’s, who not only provided a retail venue for these mass produced goods, but offered their customers, particularly women, unparalled access to a world of luxury and choice, including the services of an in-house dressmaking department at prices which undercut those of the custom dressmaker.

Figure 23. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, "Department Stores," photographic print mounted on foam board, 10 in x 18 in.
Appendix B (8)

From Home Sewer to “Dressmaker”

The blurring of skill level between the master dressmaker and the slapdash methods of the home sewer had devastating and lasting consequences for the dressmaking profession. Dressmakers not only lost income to home sewers, but their trade reputation. These amateurs, armed with printed patterns and scientific methods — the new tools of their trade, believed themselves to be skilled. Instead, they victimized clients by their lack of mastery and shoddy work, and effectively and permanently tarnished the dressmaking profession.

Figure 24. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, "From Home Sewer to 'Dressmaker'," photographic print mounted on foam board, 10 in x 18 in.

The Great War (1914-1918)

As more women sought employment outside of the home and filled positions left vacant by men who had left for war, full-length skirts, high-collars, and multiple layers of undergarments were abandoned by women for health and safety reasons, and looser, less constricting clothing was adopted.

Figure 25. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, "The Great War (1914-1918)," photographic print mounted on foam board, 10 in x 18 in.
Appendix C

Figure 26. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, "4," photographic print mounted on foam board, 12 in x 12 in.
Appendix D

Figure 27. Angela L. Cramer-Reichelderfer, "Fall of the American Dressmaker 1880-1920," postcard, high gloss print on cardstock, 9 in x 6 in.
Figure 28. View of the exhibit from the main entrance to Gallery 263, Creative Arts Center, Wright State University.

Figure 29. View of the exhibit from the side entrance to Gallery 263, Creative Arts Center, Wright State University.
Figure 30. View of the exhibit from the back of Gallery 263, Creative Arts Center, Wright State University.

Figure 31. View of the exhibit from the front of Gallery 263, Creative Arts Center, Wright State University.
Appendix E (3)

Figure 32. ACME adjustable dress form (1914) and White Rotary electric sewing machine with attachments (1913).

Figure 33. Singer Featherweight 221 portable sewing machine with pinking attachment (1933).
Appendix E (4)

Figure 34. Mounted posters displayed on the south wall of Gallery 263, Creative Arts Center, Wright State University.

Figure 35. Mounted posters displayed on the north wall of Gallery 263, Creative Arts Center, Wright State University.
Figure 36. Back view of the historical reproduction gown representing the Early Bustle Period (1867-1876).
Figure 37. Back view of the historical reproduction gown representing the Natural Form Period (1875-1883).
Figure 38. Bodice detail of the historical reproduction gown representing the Natural Form Period (1875-1883).
Figure 39. Side view of the historical reproduction gown representing the Late Bustle Period (1883-1889).
Figure 40. Bodice detail of the historical reproduction gown representing the Late Bustle Period (1883-1889).
Figure 41. Back view of the historical reproduction gown representing the era of the New Woman (1890-1899).
Figure 42. Bodice detail of the historical reproduction gown representing the era of the New Woman (1890-1899).
Appendix F (8)

Figure 43. Back view of the historical reproduction gown representing the era of Edwardian Femininity (1900-1913).
Figure 44. Bodice and sleeve detail of the historical reproduction gown representing the era of Edwardian Femininity (1900-1913).
Figure 45. Front view of the historical reproduction gown representing the Great War (1914-1918).
Figure 46. Front view of the historical reproduction gown representing the Jazz Age (1920-1933).
Figure 47. Bodice detail of the historical reproduction gown representing the Jazz Age (1920-1933).
Figure 48. Angela with her exhibit, Gallery 263, Creative Arts Center, Wright State University.
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Handwritten manuscript, in the private collection of Angela L. Reichelderfer.


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