



The Costume & Textile Specialists

Exhibitions, Collections Management, Appraisals, & Conservation

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In 2011, my business partner Newbold Richardson and I conducted collection assessments of the Smith College Historic Clothing Collection and the Historic Northampton Historic Clothing Collection. This project was one of the beginning steps in making a proposed Smith College Center for the Study of Dress a possibility. The goals of these assessments were to provide an overview of what is in each collection and, by profiling selected object categories or individual objects, affording glimpses into the potential significance of these combined collections as a scholarly resource.

A Center for the Study of Dress would successfully marry the two collections, both of which have range and depth in the 19th and early 20th century periods. In addition to the clothing and textiles, Historic Northampton's collection would be accompanied by archival materials supporting object provenance, offering research opportunities complementing the resources of Smith's renowned archives. The Center would present scholars and students with exceptional opportunities for making discoveries about clothing's role in issues such as social behavior, the impact of technology on society, economic and trade patterns, cultural values and the decorative arts. Because clothing is so directly associated with the individual who wore or used the artifacts, it is both an effective and affective connector to past lives. Clothing artifacts help make concepts, such as the changing role of women in the early 20th century, come alive.

I would like to illustrate this using the example of bathing suits from the 1910. As women started participating in competitive swimming in the early 1900s, it became clear that the cumbersome suits worn up to that time with full bodices, knee-length skirts over ample bloomers were very unsuitable for this sport. Annette Kellerman, an Australian competitive swimmer who also invented the sport of synchronized swimming, developed a form-fitting, knit bathing suit (similar to what men wore), first for her own use, and later she sold versions of the bathing suit marketed under her own name. The Smith collection has a rare example of one of these Annette Kellerman suits from the 1910s, labeled "The Annette Kellerman Swimming Tights." The other two Smith suits, dated on their labels 1911 & 1914, are also one-piece suits, but conservative styles with full bodices and bloomers. The Northampton collection has six suits from this period, two still with skirts over the bloomers and the others like Smith's 1911 & 1914 examples. These suits, all worn within a few years of each other, could be the basis of several research projects, such as connecting the development of the Kellerman's bathing suit to her roles as a sports innovator, women's rights advocate and entrepreneur or the gender and legal issues surrounding

the introduction of this controversial suit—Kellerman was arrested for wearing one at Revere Beach in 1907—or what type of woman was likely to choose which suit in the 1910s and what were the forces that led to the gradual acceptance of much more daring bathing suits by the 1920s. These topics illustrate how a group of bathing suits could spark meaningful research—there are hundreds of other artifacts in the collections' racks and boxes waiting to have their stories investigated.

Smith College Collection: History & Collecting Policies

The Smith College Historic Clothing Collection (Smith) was established as a collecting entity by the Smith College Theatre Department (SCTD) in 1978. Its mission, in keeping with the collection being at a women's college, is to collect women's clothing and accessories from 1800 to the present¹ and to serve as a resource for students and scholars. Most of the collection has come through donations from Smith alumnae, friends of the college or individuals in the Northampton area. When accessioned into the collection, the provenance of these items is recorded in document files and all items are given accession numbers. The collection is well organized with like objects of similar date stored together, making access straightforward. Approximately 85 percent of the artifacts in Smith's collection date before 1950. Since its inception the collection has provided valuable design and clothing construction information for students and faculty producing theatrical costumes for Smith productions. In recent years, the collection has been as a resource for students and faculty from many other departments.

As is the norm with most museum collections, many of the donations in the Smith collection came from middle to upper class donors and most of the clothing reflects these class biases. Most garments were also probably worn by relatively young women. A number of these items were worn by Smith College students or were perhaps trousseau items that had limited wear after the young woman was married.

- **Collecting before 1978:** All items acquired before 1978 were donated with the intent that they be used as theatrical costumes in SCTD productions, and were stored in the costume stock. . In 1978, women's garments dating from the 19th century to the mid-20th century were separated from the costume stock to form the basis of the historic collection, never to be worn again.
- **Collecting since 1978:** Women's clothing items offered to the SCTD since 1978 are carefully examined to determine their appropriateness for the collection or for the theatrical costume stock. Men's and children's items offered to the collection are directed to other collections, including Historic Northampton. With the donor's permission, women's garments that are not accessioned are either added to the theatre stock or sold at auction to supplement funds for student exhibits.
- **Criteria for collecting artifacts:**
 - the item is a good example of its type in terms of design, fabric, trim details, construction techniques and/or whose wearer had an association with Smith College
 - the item does not unduly duplicate other pieces in the collection

- the item is in good condition, or it not in good condition, it must be sufficiently rare to warrant inclusion in the collection and/or be a candidate for conservation

The Historic Northampton Collection: History & Collecting Policies

For a history museum collection, the provenance of the object is of paramount importance so the main criterion for the items collected by HN collection is that the items have an association with the city of Northampton, and specifically in the case of clothing, that the items were worn, made or purchased in Northampton. As with donors to the Smith collection, most of HN donors were from the middle or upper economic classes.

Items collected from 1905, the year that HN was founded to 1975 were officially accessioned in 1975. Luckily, many of these items had provenance information associated with them, which was recorded in the accession records. Items collected after 1975 also generally have good provenance, though like almost any collection run by volunteers and limited professional staff, a “found in collection” provenance applies to a number of items. In recent years relatively few items have been added to the collection.

HN was fortunate to have two curators, Nancy Rexford (between 1975 and 1983) and Lynne Bassett (1990 to 1995), both speakers at this symposium. These women organized the collection storage, putting like objects together and much of their work is still intact, making the collection accessible for assessment. From 2007 to 2010, Lynne Bassett was hired to cull the collection of items that did not have a Northampton provenance, so that these pieces could be deaccessioned. We examined paperwork relating to this deaccession and discussed it with Lynne. Lynne was very careful in her selection, focusing on items in poor condition without Northampton provenance and making sure that other pieces with good provenance from surrounding towns were offer to the appropriate historical societies or collections like Sturbridge Village or Historic Deerfield.

The Combined Collections

Together the Smith and HN women’s collections would have about 3500 women’s clothing artifacts with nearly 3000 of these dating from 1800 to 1930. These figures are based on the 2011 assessment—the Smith collection has since added a number of significant late 20th century pieces. The men’s, children’s and textile collection at Northampton add another 1300-1500 pieces, nearly all of these dating from before 1900. The combined collections would be a unique resource, joining the Smith collection with its strong artifact base in women’s clothing to the Historic Northampton collection with its documented historical connections to a specific locale as well as a strong artifact base in women’s clothing.

In our report, we detailed the specifics of the two collections in a two ways. First we made up quantitative assessment charts that documented in detail the garments in each collection by date in 50

year increments and by type. For the women's clothing, the Smith collection pieces are listed on one side of the chart and the Historic Northampton items listed on the other side so that we could compare what was in the two collections. I can send copies of these charts to anyone interested.

These assessment charts will be a valuable tool as this project goes forward. Not only do they record the types of artifacts in enough detail for readers to get an overview of the holdings, the listings make both the strengths and weakness of the collections more apparent. For example, there are no corsets in either collection dating between 1850 and 1880. Given the importance of corsets in creating the artificial 19th century fashion silhouettes, the collection should have at least one example from every decade. Once identified, this and other lacunae can be prioritized and efforts made to secure needed objects through purchase or donation. The assessment charts provide the type of collection overview and documentation also needed to determine the storage requirements of the collection, including space needs and the number and type of storage units. Grant applications, especially for federal grants, also usually require specific documentation about what is in the collection, which is well summarized by the assessment charts.

Using the assessment charts, we developed a qualitative overall summary of the types of garments in the collection for each 50 year period and detailed exceptional or rare examples in three categories: Dresses, All other Garments, and Accessories. We called this section *Findings* and included this as part the narrative of our formal report. In the *Findings* section, we were struck by how often the women's clothing holdings from one collection bolstered or complemented that of the other. For example, Smith's relatively few early 19th century artifacts would add to Northampton's strength for that era, in particular making Northampton's outstanding bonnet collection even more significant. Where both collections have volume and depth, as in the late 19th century, the artifacts do not duplicate each other so much as provide a wider selection of objects, allowing for more in-depth research into the material culture of the era. After 1900, Smith has the larger and more diverse collection over all, but HN's contributions for the century's first three decades would act much like Smith's for the early years of the 19th century. HN's men's and children's collections are not large but their holdings are representative of the 19th century and the textile collection provides perspectives on 19th century domestic life.

With the greatest portion of the combined Smith College and Historic Northampton collections dating from 1800 to 1930, together these collections would form a core research collection, making a Smith College Center for the Study of Dress a leading resource for the scholarly study 19th and early 20th century American dress.