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UNH Museum Exhibit Features Local Antique Clothing

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UNH News Bureau

DURHAM, N.H. -- Step into the University of New Hampshire Museum and you feel surrounded by the ghosts of women who lived 100 years ago. But it's just their dresses. Mannequins, hand crafted to the smaller, rounder shapes of Victorian women, bear the shimmering satin, silk and taffeta, the sensible wool and linen, the layers of corsets and hoops, bustles and petticoats that our great-grandmothers wore.

These vintage dresses, many of which were donated by Durham and Dover families, were collected by Irma Bowen, assistant professor of home economics, in the 1920s. The exhibit, titled "Tailored to Teach: Highlights from the Irma Bowen Textile Collection," runs through December. Bowen, who taught at Thompson Hall, used the garments in her classes exploring the history of fashion.

Guest curator Astrida Schaeffer, who earned her master's degree in history last year at UNH, heard about the Bowen collection by chance. Schaeffer had long been interested in the conservation and reproduction of antique clothing. UNH archives assistant Mylinda Woodward met Schaeffer when they took a class together and put her in touch with University Museum curator Dale Valena. Valena showed her the Bowen collection, which has more than 600 pieces, including wedding gowns, bonnets, children's clothing, and accessories, and they agreed to organize an exhibit.

The oldest pieces are "Robe a l'Anglaise" and "Quilted Petticoat," both from the 18th century. Made with the skirt open in front to display a petticoat, the gown was put on like a robe and fastened at the front of the bodice with straight pins. The quilted petticoat, worn underneath, provided another layer for warmth and remained in use in New England long after going out of style in the mid-1700s in Europe.

The petticoat in the Bowen exhibit belonged to Temperance Pickering Knight (1732-1823), whose husband, John Knight, ran a ferry between Newington and Dover Point, a lucrative venture. Their wealth is reflected in the quality of the petticoat, which is made from yellow silk and lined with wool and flax.

Over the years, women grew taller and wider and became more muscular. The changes in body shape can be traced by the changes in the garments -- a seam let out, a bodice shifted, a waistline dropped. Schaeffer became intrigued by the information the dresses held about the women who wore them. "You really have to let the dresses talk to you," she says.

Among Schaeffer's favorites is a black evening gown from Paris, circa 1890, made from yards of net and chiffon, hand sewn with thousands of spangles and jet beads and draped over a satin foundation. "This is a case of letting the dress talk," she says. Upon close inspection, she had discovered there were more hooks than eyes on the bodice, indicating an alteration -- a horizontal tuck -- that some seamstress had made, probably to update the style for a younger woman.

"Dresses were quite often re-made to suit newer fashions, as fabrics were much more valuable than the dresses themselves. This can make dating dresses difficult, as style elements from an earlier time are often present in a later dress," she says.

Last September, she began the painstaking process of cataloging the collection. Schaeffer took notes on the condition of the garments she selected for the exhibit and photographed each one. In some cases, after consulting the curator, she made small repairs.

In preparation for the Bowen exhibit, Valena sent Schaeffer to a week-long seminar at the American Textile History Museum in Lowell, Mass., last fall to learn how to build archival dress forms. An antique dress displayed on a modern mannequin droops in all the wrong places; but put it on a form constructed in the shape of a woman who might have worn it, and it comes alive.

Schaeffer made six of these full-size mannequins and two to fit children's clothing, along with altering several others.

She has formed an attachment to these eerie, headless forms and the beautiful dresses they wear. The night before the exhibit opened, she needed to take a few moments to be alone in the museum. Before long, she felt a bit strange, as if the scene had come alive. "That's when I knew it was time to go," she says.

The University Museum is part of the UNH Milne Special Collections and Archives Department located on the ground floor of Dimond Library. Hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays, and 1 to 5 p.m. Saturdays. For more information, call 862-1081.

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