

WHY COLLECT ANTIQUE OR VINTAGE CLOTHING AND EPHEMERA?



A writer may present a picture using words which evoke the colour, form and texture of people and places from another time. Artists through the ages have captured the essence of their time, with portraitists, particularly, giving us an insight into the people. Photography too allows nineteenth century faces to peer at us impassively, resplendent in their finery, with details of their way of life forever captured in a flash. The theatre and popular films have also dictated our view of history, coloured by the skills of the theatrical and film company's costume makers.

But nothing, in my view, equals the thrill of 'tangible history' – that which can be touched and felt as well as seen, whether it be clothing, accessories, or any other real items from the past. To be able to touch items and to imagine the story behind them is one of the main reasons why I collect antique and vintage clothing. I always marvel at objects which proclaim that they have survived, sometimes hundreds of years, and that remind us of lives lived in earlier years.

Social history can also be powerfully evoked by examining things. Like a man's 1880 suit, a red waist-coat, or a pair of a lady's dainty shoes. The fact that more women's clothing survives can be evidence that these often contain more workmanship or, sometimes, simply because they might be able to be recycled into new fashions. All these things contain numerous stories. Even a simple stain can remind you that people lived and once wore the clothing.

Some items were proud possessions, others were worn everyday. Some indicate professions and trade or even, domestic service. Some of the items come to me with a story attached while others require research to put them into a context. Others inspire my imagination – for example, what sort of life did the tiny bride who wore the silk wedding dress have?

Wire bustles and crinolines, corsets and voluminous petticoats now astonish everyone with their extraordinary remodelling of the female form. Clothing and accessories for special occasions such as baptisms, marriages and mourning tell of times when these events were more important than today.

But perhaps one of the best things about collecting for me is the pleasure I get from sharing it. In the last four years I have been able to show the items to many people, mostly older than me. Often the items evoke memories of people and places in their own lives. Many wonderful anecdotes have been passed on to me, which I treasure.

The Canberra Museum and Art Gallery has given me an opportunity to show some of the collection with an extended audience. I hope everyone will enjoy seeing these old, and real, and sometimes, quite remarkable objects. Some they will recognise, others may be a surprise. For a younger audience I'm sure the collection will intrigue them and let them know something of the ways things were done in the past.

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OCTOBER 2007

