



Gorgas Dress: An Artifact Analysis

Daniel Whitlow, Dr. Virginia Wimberley,

The University of Alabama, USA

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The subject of this study is a brown velvet day dress from the late 19th century to the turn of the 20th century from the Gorgas Family Archives. Analysis of this garment has been undertaken to explore the methods of construction and establish specific ownership within the Gorgas family. The analysis and results are organized in four sections: description of the artifact, identification, dating, and provenance.

Description of the Artifact

Description covers the condition and dimensions of the garment, as well as, the materials and couture construction techniques used in its production. The silk velvet dress remains in fair condition, with the fabric, lace and bead trimmings largely intact; however, the skirt has been dismantled but still retains the impression of two pleats and the bodice shows evidence of an alteration at the waistline. As is expected of a couture garment and the transition period of late 19th C to turn of the 20th C, the construction makes extensive use of hand stitching and highly detailed construction and embellishment techniques. The identification of the garment as couture is made from the waist stay inside the steel-boned bodice which has a label of Maison Emile Pingat attached. The trim for the pigeon-breasted style bodice is made from silk organza, jet beading, and black lace appliques.

Identification

The garment can be identified as being a day dress from the late 19th century. It contains no label identifying the owner or date of creation as some from the period do, but it does have the manufacturer's label that identifies it as a creation of the House of Pingat. Dresses, cloaks, capes and coats are described as being very highly sought after by the woman of the period. Emile Pingat was active in French fashion from 1860 to 1896, after which he retired and his partner A. Wales continued the label into the 20th century. The specific dating identification is made through comparisons with known styles of clothing for the identified period. The details of the dress are aligned with his design aesthetic and with other extant garments.

Dating

A comparison of extant garments with Pingat labels is used to help date the dress. Pictorial and written sources of Pingat labels narrow the production date to between 1896 and 1900. This comparison of labels also serves as a visual timeline for the evolution of the labels and ownership of the house of Pingat. Since the label reads "Maison Emile Pingat, A Walles and Cie. 30 Rue Louis le Grand, Paris" and not "A. Walles 15 Rue Auber, Paris", it indicates that Walles closed his house and moved to Pingat's facilities. More specific dating remains elusive due to scant information about the designer.

Provenance

Specific provenance of the dress is explored and determined through analysis of digitized personal correspondence and photographic evidence. Ownership of the garment is confirmed through three photographs of Amelia Gorgas, former University of Alabama librarian, wearing the dress in 1905. Correspondence between Amelia and members of her family mention her daughter's return from living in Europe, where Maria may have acquired the dress for her mother. Letters also confirm Amelia's fondness for using older garments as patterns for new dresses; this preference for revival may explain the deconstructed nature of the skirt.

Conclusion

Examination and research into the dress style, designer label, and owner has determined that the artifact of study, a now brown velvet day dress, belonged to and was worn by Amelia Gayle Gorgas. Mrs. Gorgas is pictured wearing the dress in a photograph from 1905 with the addition of a white lace collar. She may have worn it to commencement exercises held on that day.

Resources

Gorgas, A. (1900). A letter from Amelia Gorgas to Maria Gorgas, July 4, 1900. William Stanley Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama. http://acumen.lib.ua.edu/u003_0000580_0000436

Gorgas, A. (1900). A letter Amelia Gorgas to Maria Gorgas, July 4, 1903. William Stanley Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama. http://acumen.lib.ua.edu/u003_0000580_0000458#item%3Du0003_0000580_0000436