Threading Our Way Through History
In The Galleries
History Museum Special Exhibits

**A Stitch in Time**

We all know the phrase “History repeats itself.” We hear it applied to politics, wars, and large social movements, but what about the small things? In our new rotating exhibit, *A Stitch in Time*, the Vermont Historical Society will explore how your fashion choices today are informed by the fashions of history.

In our first rotation, we will examine the new trend of luxury loungewear—at home comfort clothes that are also seen as status symbols. Has the pandemic and working from home ruined couture, or is this just another rotation of the fashion history wheel?

*On view in the National Life Gallery through June 2024.*

**Calvin Coolidge:** Vermont’s President

On loan from the Coolidge Foundation, this exhibition presents key episodes and questions from Coolidge’s life with specially-commissioned illustrations and explanatory text. Visitors will also be able to learn about Coolidge’s communications styles through interactive, hands-on history. *On view in the Calvin Coolidge Memorial Gallery through June 2024.*

**Fancy Goods: Hats and Fashion Accessories 1850-1950**

What was once the storefront of Mrs. S.C. Adams Millinery & Fancy Goods is now home to the Middletown Springs Historical Society. Mrs. Adams’ store inspired the Society to explore the history of these “fancy goods”—mass-produced luxury goods that were designed for ornamental purposes rather than practical ones. This exhibit features items such as hats, purses, shawls, and ties, considered “fancy” by the people of Middletown Springs between 1850 to 1950. On view in the Local History Gallery through January 2024. *On view in the Local History Gallery through January 2024.*

**History Center Special Exhibits**

**Icons and Oddities**

Vermonters have always been keen to reuse and recycle. For this newest iteration of Icons, Oddities, and Wonders, VHS staff sought items from our collections that show hundreds of years of clever adaptation and thoughtful reinvention. *Visit the gallery during Library open hours.*

**Events**

Want to learn more about upcoming events and programs? Visit our calendar at vermonthistory.org/calendar and follow us on social media!

The following introduction was written before the devastating floods of July 2023. As a valued member of the Society, I want to reassure you that our irreplaceable collections were unscathed by the disaster.

After the 1992 Montpelier flood, the Society decided to find a new home for the library, archives, and museum collections. The Barre location, situated on its hill, stood well above the flooding. The History Museum, on the raised first floor of the Pavilion escaped all water damage. Thank you all for your ongoing support and concern.

One of the reasons I so enjoy working in museums is the ability to reflect individual stories and lived experiences in ways not dictated by the written word. In academic terminology, we call this material culture. By using material objects as our primary source, we can strive to understand lives that may not leave a written record.

In this issue of History Connections, we are exploring costumes and textiles. What is more personal material culture than the clothes from our back?! Over the coming months we will feature costumes in the Vermont History Museum in Montpelier with *A Stitch in Time*, an exhibit displaying items from our historic collection with modern examples of the same form. Since older textiles are fragile and susceptible to light damage, the contents of this exhibit will change throughout the year — providing a wonderful opportunity to visit the museum again and again.
A STITCH IN TIME
How the fashion of yesterday informs today’s textiles

By Teresa Teixeira Greene

Every generation likes to imagine they are rediscovering new ideas, setting trends more innovative than any previous generation. Those left behind imagine the same: they established good taste in fashion for the first time in recorded history. Today is no different. Individuals from Gen Z are parting their hair in the center and rediscovering flared pants, while Baby Boomers are bemoaning the decline of appropriate formality.

But is this perception true? A new exhibit at the Vermont History Museum’s National Life Gallery explores this question by examining four aspects of fashion over the course of the next year, with the first installation focusing on loungewear and athleisure. Both terms have wide definitions, but they do overlap. Each are designed with an eye for both fashion and comfort, meant for wear at home and during particularly informal activities, such as visiting close friends and running household errands.

Informality has always been a part of people’s lives, and for those who could afford it, their wardrobes. Historically, loungewear represented heightened informality; clothing only appropriate to be seen by members of one’s family and closest confidants. For the rest of society, this informality was achieved simply by removing outer layers of clothing. For men in the eighteenth century, this could mean simply removing their coat and waistcoat, leaving their shirt (considered underwear) completely exposed. For those who could afford it, specialized garments such as banyans and wrappers (roughly equivalent to today’s robes) allowed the wearer to lounge at home in a structured way with close friends. These garments often conveyed one’s wealth; they were made of show fabrics such as silks or printed cottons, rather than the plain linen used for undergarments.

With the Industrial Revolution, textiles became far more affordable, and a greater number of people now had leisure time. One result was the creation of the tea gown, a garment made specifically for women to wear at home while entertaining their female friends. While ostensibly informal, they differed from housecoats and robes by being purely fashionable. Like housecoats and chore clothes, tea gowns were cut slightly looser than regular clothing, giving them the appearance of comfort and utility despite being worn over corsets and bustles, which maintained the wearer’s fashionable silhouette. Additionally, they were made from expensive, stylish fabric, rather than the easy-to-wash cottons of utilitarian chore clothes and undergarments.

These tea gowns hold a significant place in fashion history. They are one of the first garments created specifically for this informal social sphere. Unlike wrappers, they were not created to be worn while performing household chores or lounging alone with immediate family, but specifically to be shown off to one’s peers.

Men were not exempt from this trend. Instead of tea gowns, men wore smoking jackets. Like tea gowns, these garments carried markers of comfort without the ease of care and thoughtlessness of true informality. At their inception, smoking jackets were used to keep ash and smoke from one’s clothing, so they were worn over formal clothing. However, because they were made of silks and other heavy, expensive fabrics, smoking jackets were often much more expensive than the clothing they were protecting. Unlike tea gowns, smoking jackets have persevered in both actual use and public imagination as a symbol of luxury.

Our current trend for athleisure and loungewear is widely attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, after everyone quarantined in their homes for months. Without social activities and work to get dressed up for, people prioritized comfort, favoring elastic waists and soft fabrics. Those are not the only concerns in designing clothes to fit the trend. With these fashions increasingly making their way out of the home by way of social media images and informal, in-person activities, they also reach for the same goal as tea gowns and smoking jackets: exhibiting wealth. Historically, garments could be identified as expensive, and thus symbolic of wealth, by the material they were made from. Today, synthetic and imitation fabrics make this difference difficult to spot by the untrained eye. A dress made from silk might look identical to one made of polyester, while hitting vastly different price points. The same could be said for coats made from wool and acrylic. Without those easily identifiable, visual markers for showing off wealth, we have moved to more representative messaging as well as explicit, legally protected markers such as visible branding.

The leisure clothing fashionable today trends more toward athletic wear than sleepwear, showing off the wearer’s perceived access to healthy activities as the markers of status, such as taking yoga classes. Many status brands, like those sponsored or designed by celebrities, are marketed more similarly to everyday clothing rather than activity-specific clothing, indicating their intended use as leisurewear over gym wear.

It can be easy to recognize the inspirations and influences of history within the past while still viewing the present as separate from, and thus unaffected by, it. In this exhibit, we hope to use the things you interact with the most—your clothing—to show how we are all part of our collective history.

Right: Tea Gown made of silk and steel between 1880 and 1890. These garments were made specifically for women to wear at home while entertaining their female friends.
A brief history of a time(piece)
Harold Hawes, World War I and the rise of the men’s wristwatch

By Andrew Liptak

Do you have the time? If you wear a wristwatch, you might have just glanced at your wrist, looking at what the tiny arms and numbers on the dial tell you. Presently, the global wristwatch industry accounts for tens of billions of dollars in revenue each year, encompassing everything from expensive, high-end timepieces like Rolex and the modern Apple Watch, to the ubiquitous and utilitarian Timex. For more than a century, the wristwatch has been a popular and useful accessory. One item in the Vermont Historical Society’s vast collection is a good representative example of how watches became a common and useful accessory. One item in the Vermont Historical Society’s vast collection is a good representative example of how watches became a common and useful accessory. One item in the Vermont Historical Society’s vast collection is a good representative example of how watches became a common and useful accessory.

The mechanized nature of war brought a new level of precision to the battlefield: maneuvers and actions could be coordinated in time and space, and in the heat of battle, fastening a watch out of a pocket cost precious seconds of attention. In her book, Marking Modern Times: A History of Clocks, Watches, and Other Timekeepers in American Life, Alexis McCrossen explains how British soldiers began to strap their pocket watches to their wrists during the Second Boer War in South Africa, so they could read them at a moment’s notice. It was a move that helped prompt the clock’s shift from a man’s pocket to his wrist. The mechanized nature of war brought a new level of precision to the battlefield: maneuvers and actions could be coordinated in time and space, and in the heat of battle, fastening a watch out of a pocket cost precious seconds of attention. In her book, Marking Modern Times: A History of Clocks, Watches, and Other Timekeepers in American Life, Alexis McCrossen explains how British soldiers began to strap their pocket watches to their wrists during the Second Boer War in South Africa, so they could read them at a moment’s notice. It was a move that helped prompt the clock’s shift from a man’s pocket to his wrist.

This is where Hawes enters this story. Born on May 24, 1889 on Vine Street in Berlin, Vt, he spent his childhood in Montpelier and Barre. When the United States entered World War I in 1917, he qualified for the draft, but ended up volunteering for a specialized training program set up by the University of Vermont to train blacksmiths, carpenters, machinists, and mechanics for the Army. After he completed the program, Hawes was assigned to the 87th Infantry Division, where he likely was part of the 336th Field Artillery Regiment, which was deployed to France in September 1918 — mere months before the Armistice in November. Among the items he brought with him was his Lancet wristwatch.

Made by Switzerland’s Langendorf Watch Company, Hawes’s watch, and those like it, saw widespread use by U.S. soldiers during the war, with several innovations designed to help the wearer in the field. Fastened to one’s wrist with a sturdy leather strap, it features large, easy-to-read, radium-painted numbers on a white dial, and comes with a metal shrapnel protector for the glass face. We do not know if Harold saw combat while in France (he likely he served in an engineering role), but it’s a tool he would have relied on while there.

After returning home, Hawes settled into a quiet life. He married Carol Batchelder in 1922 and found work in insurance as a salesperson and then as a fire inspector. He became deeply involved in the Barre community through the local chapters of the Masons, American Legion, and other community organizations. When he passed away on May 11, 1945, the city’s papers reported his funeral was attended by a large gathering of his friends, colleagues, and neighbors. Hawes was, in many ways, a typical citizen soldier. He was someone who went off to serve his country and returned to civilian life in his community, where the utility of the wristwatch did not fade away. In a piece for The Atlantic, “A Brief History of the Wristwatch,” Uri Friedman points out that while the pocket watch was an emblem of the railroad era, World War I ushered in a new, modern world, one where the wristwatch quickly became part of the fashion of the new, technological world. It’s endured the technological advances of the last century, a testament to its utility and function, and continues today to function as both a tool and a fashion accessory, ready to tell you the time at a moment’s notice, whether you’re in Barre or a distant country.

Facing page: The Lancet Watch owned by Harold Hawes of Barre. Above: Members of Company M of the Vermont Volunteer Militia march in Bellows Falls as they prepare to travel to Camp Devens in Massachusetts on April 2nd, 1918.
People buy clothes not just for their utility, but because they signify something about the wearer to society at large. The history of clothing is the history of the public's changing norms and values, as well as the relationship between manufacturing, markets, and consumers.

In the middle of the 19th century, industrialization began to change the kinds of products available to buyers, bringing more variety and consumer goods, like disposable trinkets and mass-produced clothing, into stores. In many small towns in Vermont and elsewhere, those items were called “fancy goods.” The term broadly applied to novelties, accessories, or notions that are primarily ornamental or designed to appeal to taste or preference, rather than essential.

Around the turn of the 20th century, Julia Adams operated a millinery and fancy goods store in the Adams House, now the home of the Middletown Springs Historical Society. A photo of Julia with members of her Sunday school class sitting on the steps of the shop beneath the sign “Mrs. S.C. Adams Millinery & Fancy Goods” inspired the exhibit Fancy Goods: Hats and Fashion Accessories, 1850-1950, curated by the Middletown Springs Historical Society. It documents what residents of Middletown Springs considered fancy goods, and includes items such as hats, purses, shawls, and ties. The items were donated to the Middletown Springs Historical Society collection by local families.

“While I love all the hats and fashion accessories,” exhibit curator Mary Lou Willits explained, “my favorite object in the exhibit is a framed pastel portrait of the late Kay Avery, a resident of Middletown Springs, painted by artist Mary Seymour in 1928. She is posed in a lovely soft green sleeveless chiffon dress with a draped ruffle on one side, and she is wearing a long string of white pearls.” Kay Avery (1908-2005) was one of the founding members of the Middletown Springs Historical Society back in 1969.

The exhibit was on view at the Middletown Springs Historical Society last year, and visitors commented on how pleased they were to see a part of the collection that had not previously been on display. The Vermont Historical Society is excited to bring this exhibit to the Local History Gallery at the Vermont History Museum to further expand its reach and introduce the town’s fancy goods to the greater public. The Middletown Springs Historical Society’s Collections Care Committee works year-round to catalog and properly house textiles and other objects, archival material, and photographs so they can be enjoyed and studied by future generations.

Fancy Goods
in the Local History Gallery

By Eileen Corcoran

Keep an eye on our website and social media channels for an opening date for Fancy Goods: Hats and Fashion Accessories, 1850-1950.


Above: Portrait of Kay Avery by artist Mary Seymour Pastel, 1928. Gift of Kay Avery, a founder of the Middletown Springs Historical Society.
Diamond Dyes of Burlington

Color and Craft in Vermont

By Juls Sundberg

In today’s world of fast fashion, it might seem strange to imagine dyeing a piece of clothing a different color instead of purchasing something new. But home dyeing used to be a well-practiced and thrifty way to keep your wardrobe fresh. The fabric dye of choice for Vermonters was Diamond Dyes, produced by a Burlington-based company called Wells, Richardson & Company. A 1926 booklet from the company held by the Vermont Historical Society titled “Color Craft” explains “The most expensive dress is that one you see one of our state’s truly beautiful sunsets and feel inspired to head to your local craft store for fabric dye, know you are continuing a time-honored Vermont practice.

Above: From an undated Diamond Dyes pamphlet that was cataloged as “Circa 1900”.

Threading Play into Learning

Clothing as an Immersive Tool in Museum Settings

By Danielle Harris-Burnett

I n college, my campus shared land with a living history museum, and as an anthropology major, that meant a quick and easy commute to work. But it also introduced an interesting question: where was the barrier between the historical landscape of the museum and the modern world of the college? The museum covered a span of several miles, interpreting what the state of Maryland would have looked like a few decades after European colonization. Even the college’s newer buildings featured a historic façade to match the original architecture, meaning it was easy for museum visitors to accidently wander into the campus’s newer buildings. One way the museum separated the spaces was through immersive historical costing. Visitors could look out over the field to see a 17th century interpreter tending to the museum’s pigs and sheep, a scene easy to imagine taking place in the same space centuries earlier.

Since part of the company’s mission was to teach its customers the process of home dyeing, in addition to selling their products, these booklets and advertisements give the reader a peek into early examples of the do-it-yourself crafting and sustainable dyeing practices still prevalent in Vermont today.

The inside cover of “Color Craft” emphasizes the local Vermont setting of Diamond Dyes by saying, “This beautiful region, with its gorgeous sunsets, is a splendid setting for those who work with color. Nature’s own inspiration is at ever at their door.” So, if the next time you see one of our state’s truly beautiful sunsets and feel inspired to head to your local craft store for fabric dye, you are continuing a time-honored Vermont practice.

COVID-19 adaptations we retained in the exhibit is the dress-up mirrors in the Catamount Tavern, where kids can line up their faces and feet with hats and shoes in the reflection. When I started at the museum in January 2023, I noticed the hats and shoes did not match up with one another. One of my colleagues explained this was an intentional choice. By mixing and matching images of 18th century clothing from different economic levels and gender expressions, children can create their own image. This sentiment carries into the dress-up station in the Tavern.

We recently added a new interactive activity in the museum’s Farming section, where visitors can learn to card wool. This process involves repeatedly running wool through a set of combs to create a worked set of wool fiber called a rolag, which is then used to create yarn. In the month since this interactive opened, we have seen both adult and child visitors stop to learn how to card the wool. While visitors experience varying degrees of success with their wool, they all walk away with a new understanding of the work required for a common household fabric.

By experiencing historical clothing at various stages of development, visitors can gain a new appreciation for the work and time that went into making clothing and other hand-made items. They also learn how clothing signals identity. By playing with recreations of historical garments, we give them a better understanding of how people in the past used clothing to express themselves.

Above: Danielle Harris-Burnett cards some wool at the Vermont History Museum in Montpelier.
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