

exhibition does no more than increase public awareness of the cultural context in which trade silver played a brief but conspicuous part, it will have accomplished its goal.

N. Jaye Fredrickson

### "The Covenant Chain: Indian Ceremonial and Trade Silver"

This exhibition originated where all museum exhibitions should – with the objects themselves. Rather than starting with a story-line and trying to illustrate it the way one would a book, we began with the artifacts and tried to depict the context in which they existed. In so doing we were able to illustrate various aspects of life in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North America, including the fur trade, colonial wars, Indian dress styles, colonial silver-smithing, and Indian-white relations. Because trade silver is made today, we were also able to give it a contemporary setting. Thus we could explore a number of themes while holding on to a continuing thread, the trade silver itself.

Although the collection of the National Museum of Man was the basis of the exhibition, we drew on more than twenty other collections, both public and private, to give greater variety. The research involved in ferreting out pieces in other collections was largely based on work done by Arthur Woodward before World War II, but in our search we discovered previously untapped sources of trade silver. The lists now available will be useful to future researchers. Nearly every collection in North America has a few pieces of trade silver; it is therefore a part of our material heritage that, although hitherto relatively unknown, has had an interest for many museum curators.

A great deal of effort was made to display the objects in a way that would both put them in their context and show them to their best advantage. Security was an important consideration because the objects are small and portable. It was decided that the viewing surface should be close to the visitor but that the cases themselves should be large and not easily opened. To reduce the handling of the silver (thus protecting it from tarnishing), most of the pieces were mounted on the exhibition panels. The materials in the case were carefully selected and all the cases were lined with Pacific silver cloth as a tarnish inhibitor to reduce further the presence of sulphur which could affect the pieces. Subject to individual institutions' restrictions, all the silver was cleaned by a conservator and coated with Incralac, a substance used to prevent tarnish.

One disappointment in the installation of the objects was the unfortunate angle of the gorgets. Although they have been mounted in a secure way, the beautiful engrav-

ings on many of them are difficult to see because they face downward, and the cases are not deep enough to allow them to be mounted on a shelf, thus changing the angle of display.

I think the National Museum of Man can be proud of this exhibition because it accomplishes what museum exhibitions should: it shows artifacts, placing them in a context that allows the visitor to understand a little-known part of our heritage. The exhibition has been built to ensure the safety of the artifacts and their proper care both on display and in transit. Finally, it is an exhibition that is visually attractive so that visitors want to look at it. To me, these are the most important aspects of any museum exhibition.

Sandra Gibb

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"Waisted Efforts," Vancouver Museum. Curator: Ivan Sayers. Designer: Mary Paddon. Vancouver Museum, August 1981-May 1982. Brochure.

The History Division of the Vancouver Museum is currently presenting an exhibit of women's underwear dating from 1750 to 1960. Wryly entitled "Waisted Efforts," the exhibit focuses upon sometimes futile attempts to compress and distort the female figure into a succession of shapes, each of which was deemed fashionable in its time. Most of the artifacts displayed are mechanical contrivances designed to produce an artificial form; they range from whalebone (baleen-reinforced) corsets to wire bustles to the rubber girdles of the 1950s.

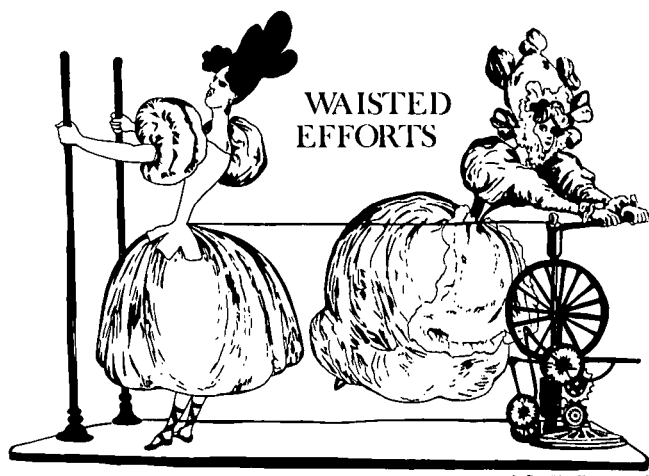


Fig. 1. Cartoon depicting the excesses of nineteenth-century corsetry. (Photo: Henry Tabbers, Vancouver Museum.)



Fig. 2. Vancouver Museum History Curator Ivan Sayers preparing Edwardian undergarments for display. (Photo: Robin Goldie, Vancouver Museum)

An exhibit of underwear inevitably exercises an attraction unrelated to historical thought. History curator Ivan Sayers has deliberately interpreted the subject in a low-key, formal manner which seeks to reveal not the frilly underthings of bygone eras but rather the transition of women from constricted, ornamental beings to physically active members of society. Despite a low curatorial budget, a representative selection of artifacts is coherently interpreted on the basis of accepted historical information. The exhibit, located near the end of the museum's permanent history gallery, provides a sound chronology of the subject as well as stimulating thought on how social and economic conditions are reflected in fashion.

The relatively small group of artifacts displayed includes several items borrowed from the British Columbia Provincial Museum in addition to garments from the Vancouver Museum collection. The selection is not limited to items known to have been worn in British Columbia, although it is assumed that garments similar to those of foreign provenance were worn by Canadian women. Sayers was unable to present any artifacts of the

period 1840-50; the trends of this decade are described in the text. The exhibit includes cheaper garments worn by working-class women as well as the high-fashion items they imitated. Wherever possible, ensembles of complementary pieces of underwear have been assembled. Generally the chronological arrangement of artifacts clearly illustrates changes in the feminine silhouette.

The presentation is aided by lengthy labelling and effective graphics. Reproductions of advertisements point out what was regarded as the desirable features of certain undergarments and portray contemporary concepts of the desirable woman. Contemporary cartoons satirize women's attempts to remodel their unfashionably shaped bodies, and illustrations of outer garments demonstrate the shapes women sought to achieve by means of concealed engineering. A brochure accompanying the exhibit pro-



Fig. 3. Shift, drawers, corset, and bustle frame – underwear of the 1870s. (Photo: Henry Tabbers, Vancouver Museum.)

vides insights into relationships between feminine fashion and other aspects of material culture, for example, the manufacture of chairs without arms to accommodate the huge hooped skirts of the 1860s.

The theme of this exhibit would be more explicit if the text placed greater emphasis on the influence of political, social, and economic factors upon fashion. Although the well-known influence of two world wars on women's work and apparel is referred to, additional factors ranging from the French Revolution to the bicycle fad of the 1890s might have been mentioned. Sayers stated that he expected viewers to draw their own conclusions on women's social role as revealed in the construction of their underwear. An illustrated lecture complementing the exhibit promised to explore this theme in more detail.

Designer Mary Paddon altered an existing group of cases, whose mauve backgrounds are surprisingly warm and attractive, to produce an enclosed exhibit area. Most of the garments displayed are set off by plain black dress forms, but store display forms with interior light bulbs are used effectively to reveal the structure of "foundation garments" of the 1950s. There is one major design flaw: a blind corner near the end of the exhibit leads the viewer to proceed directly from a case containing turn-of-the-century undergarments to a case concerned with the 1950s. Not until later does one catch sight of a nook interpreting the intervening period.

The rather conservative interpretation and design of this exhibit provide reliable historical information, and the low-key display is a visual relief for the visitor overtaxed by complex and dramatic presentations. The theme of the exhibit is thought provoking and has greater potential than is tapped by the established information used in the text. The theme is not strongly stated, and one wonders if the straightforward chronological approach taken would sustain the viewer's interest if the subject itself did not exercise a peculiar attraction.

Marian Brown

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"The Comfortable Arts: Traditional Spinning and Weaving in Canada," National Gallery of Canada. Prepared by Dorothy K. Burnham. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 24 October-22 November 1981. Catalogue.

The roots of "The Comfortable Arts" can be traced back forty years to the donation of a coverlet to the Royal Ontario Museum. This seemingly mundane event marked a

turning point for the Textile Department – it was the first coverlet woven in Canada that Dorothy Burnham had ever seen. The arrival of this artifact set in motion, slowly but surely, research into Canadian textile history. Burnham's role in these studies over the years has been a key one. The 1972 publication of *'Keep Me Warm One Night'* and the exhibit of the same name at the ROM are both testimony to her involvement in the field. Even though these two works broke new ground, they concentrated only on the Canada to the east of the Ontario-Manitoba border. Several years ago, Burnham contacted the National Gallery of Canada, suggesting that an exhibit be mounted that could survey the whole of the country and, more importantly, explore textiles on a new plane. No longer should textiles in museum collections be of historical interest alone, they should also be considered as art-forms in their own right. The National Gallery gave its encouragement, and "The Comfortable Arts" was finally realized. After Ottawa, it is scheduled to visit the MacDonald-Stewart Art Centre in Guelph, Ontario, from 16 January to 14 February 1982, the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan, from 6 March to 4 April and the Vancouver Centennial Museum from 24 April to 24 May.

Burnham chose to structure the exhibit on the work of Canadian ethnic groups, and through this approach she was able to give it a general chronological dimension. The first section focuses on the native peoples, and begins with what seems to be a fur coat composed of rabbit pelts. In actual fact, the coat was produced from long strips of fur twisted into cords which were then looped to form a quite dense textile. This technique is well illustrated by a simple schematic diagram accompanying the text of the display. Similar small drawings were prepared for a number of artifacts in the collection and are much more effective than written descriptions alone in clarifying the making of the fabrics. Native textiles are further illustrated by snowshoes, bags, and a number of blankets. A series of woven and beaded belts forms the second section and creates a bridge to the next ethnic group, the French Canadians. The organization of the braided work into a separate section, however, seems unnecessary. There are numerous instances in which similar overlaps in textile techniques transcend ethnic lines, so this special grouping is not justifiable.

In the third section, French Canadian products are spotlighted. As with all the other groupings, there is no consideration of chronology within their arrangement. A number of coverlets of weft-loop or boutoné weaving, some skirts, shawls, and a man's work shirt make up the bulk of the French selection. One of the highlights here is a handwoven and hand-embroidered altar cloth, which is effectively mounted as the final piece. The Loyalist traditions comprise the fourth section. Linens are displayed, as well as the predictable blue and white coverlets of summer and winter weave and doublecloth. The Scottish, Irish,