

Conference Report

Rapport de conférence

American Dress as Social History

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A review of the Seventeenth Annual Meeting and Symposium of the Costume Society of America, Boston and Plymouth, Massachusetts, 15-19 May 1991

"The relevance of costume to social history is that people made it or wore it." This simplistic statement effectively summarizes the theme of the Seventeenth Annual Meeting and Symposium of the Costume Society of America, held in Boston and Plymouth, Massachusetts, May 15-19, 1991. Two hundred and fifty costume enthusiasts convened to examine "American Dress as Social History." The relevance and importance of this topic to the study of Canadian material culture was reflected in the large contingent of Canadian participants at the symposium. Twelve individuals representing Canadian institutions as diversified and as far flung as the Fortress Louisbourg, the Ontario, Prairie and national headquarters offices of the Canadian Parks Service, the McCord Museum, the University of Prince Edward Island, L'Université de Montréal and the Bata Shoe Museum attended the four days of presentations and the tours of Plimoth Plantation and Old Sturbridge Village.

The keynote address provided by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich of the University of New Hampshire, entitled "A Social Historian's Perspective of Costume History," kicked off the symposium on an upbeat note. The recent author of two social history publications, the Pulitzer Prize winning *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* and *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*, she introduced her ambitious new pro-

ject of a history of textiles in the colonial period in America. The extreme economic, social and political importance of textiles in this period has been relatively unexplored in mainstream history. Ulrich examined the reasons for this void, and offered two hypotheses. The history of textiles is the history of women in this period, as these are often the only records remaining of women's life in the colonial era. Study of this topic has historically been compartmentalized into the field of home economics, museums and academia. Ulrich legitimized the study of costume in the field of social history by proposing a wholistic approach, examining items of apparel connected to economic themes, transportation and trade, inter-racial and ethnic identity and religious themes.

As promising as the keynote address and the theme of the symposium sounded, many of the papers presented over the next three days fell somewhat short of their goal of exploring costume in any real context of social history. Costume, like all artifacts when formally analysed, can reveal the attitudes, beliefs and assumptions that form a culture. Using a well known methodology devised by E. McClung Fleming for studying material culture, objects can be "read" on many levels. Fleming's model is best recognized for its five properties and four operations that apply to these. The properties are: history, material, construction, design and function. His operations are: identification, evaluation, cultural analysis, and interpretation. Identification is the complete physical description of the clothing with regard to date, provenance, materials, construction, use and maker if known. Evaluation involves an examination of quality of workmanship and materials used in construction, as well as

judgements on the aesthetic properties of a piece in comparison with others of its kind. Cultural analysis looks at an object in the context of its own milieu among the people and culture that produced it. Interpretation, the highest level of analysis, engages scholars to use their understanding of the historic importance of an object in its time, and place the object correctly. Demographics, economics, political and social history are drawn into making this assessment, and from this analysis conclusions may be drawn about culture.¹

As social historians, we see the importance of interpreting the past to yield issues of particular interest and meaning to us today. From topics as diverse as, "Social Response and Clothing Adaptations of Civil War Amputees," to "Suburbanization, Automobile and Shorts: What it Takes to Bare Men's Legs," conference attendees were tantalized with the prospect of new and revolutionary glimpses of costume and social history. Unfortunately many of the papers did not progress beyond the identification and evaluation levels of analysis.

Linda Baumgarten, of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, in "Underdrawers and Waistcoats: Layered Clothing for Cold Weather," described Thomas Jefferson's woollen undergarments in great detail but did not reveal much about the society that produced Jefferson, the garments or the chilly Monticello that required Jefferson to don these layered garments.

Patricia Warner of the University of Massachusetts in "The Comely Rowers, Crew of Wellesley, 1876-1900: The Beginnings of Collegiate Sport Uniforms for Women," illustrated year by year the fanciful costumes of the "singing crews" in their "tubs," but fell short of the cultural analysis that may have enlightened us to the broader social context of these gaily uniformed students.

A handful of presenters managed to delve beyond mere identification and evaluation and truly approached their topics through a careful cultural analysis and interpretation including Christina Bates of the Canadian Parks Service with "How to Dress the Children? A Comparison of Prescription and Practice in the Late Nineteenth Century." She examined the juxtaposition of prescription and practice in dressing children by comparing dress reform advice in authorita-

tive books, with descriptions and illustrations in women's fashion journals and the Eaton's mail-order catalogue.

Loyce Arthur of SUNY at Stonybrook examined "An Avon Lady in Philadelphia, 1938-1968: A Study of Beauty, Culture and an African American Women." Avon afforded women the opportunity through self-promotion to become business women and "ladies" at the same time. This concept appealed to black women who were intent on establishing a respectable place for themselves in the postwar society of America.

Adrienne St. Pierre, an independent researcher from Dayton, Ohio examined, "Luther Edgerton's Cloathing Books: A Record of Men's Ready-to-Wear from the Early Nineteenth Century." These business records from the first store in the Northwest Territory, in Marietta, Ohio, from 1817 to 1821 were used to describe ready-made men's garments and their costs. Through these, the social and economic situation in the rapidly expanding western territories was examined. The particular significance of this paper was that it studied material culture, minus the material, as there are no extant examples of this type of clothing remaining in museum collections.

The majority of presentations fell somewhere between the merely descriptive and truly interpretive. Most attempted to stay within the broad theme of social history, indeed choosing topics and examining costume items that might be too utilitarian and commonplace to notice in any sense of connoisseurship or antiquarianism. The fact that the Costume Society of America chose as its theme "American Dress as Social History," may indicate that costume has finally been legitimized as a valuable cultural resource deserving the scholarship of the members of this illustrious society.

NOTE

1. Joan Severa and Merrill Horswill, "Costume as Material Culture," *Dress* 15 (1989): 50.

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