

ANNA DUNLEVEY



CONCEPT

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women's fashionable dress came to be regarded as the hallmark of good taste, social status, and moral character. Women of high social and economic position sought out talented dressmakers to design, cut, and fit custom-made gowns that exhibited the highest standards of contemporary style. Quality of materials, excellence of craftsmanship, and elegance of fit for the client elevated the handwork of highly skilled artisans to that of a noble art. Cincinnati's Anna Dunlevy was among the elite of dressmakers of her time and established a loyal following of wealthy clients that spanned several generations. As a successful entrepreneur she was able to elevate her social status and way of life to one far above other early immigrants to the city.

INTRODUCTION

During the nineteenth century, Cincinnati rivaled many other major metropolitan cities in the country. By 1850 the city was a major commercial center supporting both a wealthy upper class and a healthy middle class. Great wealth had been accumulated by railroad and steamboat magnates, bankers, and lawyers. Therefore the women of these families had ample means at their disposal to maintain a fashionable wardrobe. Spurred by desire and social pressure there was an enormous need for fashionable custom-made garments. A steady stream of social events required an extensive collection of finery. Indeed American women of the time were often accused of having an obsession with dress.

Prior to the advent of ready-made clothing, nineteenth century women's fashions were unique handmade creations of dressmakers. Rules were prescribed

VOCABULARY

dressmaker
seamstress
silk
cotton
velvet
bretelle
handwork
embroidery
appliqué
embellish
client
entrepreneur
immigrant

CRITICAL THINKING

Published writings in America during the nineteenth century affirmed the prevailing ideology that men and women belonged naturally in separate spheres of the social and economic order. Discuss the lingering repercussions of that ideology on family and economic life in present day America.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Amnéus, Cynthia. *A Separate Sphere, Dressmakers in Cincinnati's Golden Age, 1877–1922*. Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2003.

for correctness of dress for women. These rules often followed the prevailing ideologies of the day that stated a women's role was defined to that of the home. Women's dress was designed for elegance and leisurely yet uplifting activities connected with her duties within the domestic circle.

Gowns were created from carefully selected fabrics and trimmings most of which were obtained from European markets. Gowns would be meticulously constructed by hand to custom fit and flatter the client's body. An individual's appearance served as an indicator of character and social status. In the eyes of society a well-dressed lady was considered socially and morally superior to a poorly dressed woman. The perfect agreement of one's dress and the occasion was the mark of success in fashionable dress.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Anna Dunlevy became one of Cincinnati's most successful nineteenth-century dressmakers. Her reputation for artistry and craftsmanship reached far beyond the Queen City and many of her clients traveled hours by train to secure her services. Dunlevy immigrated to America from Ireland in 1865 at age fourteen. The first record of her employment was as a sales lady for Le Boutillier and Simpson, a fashionable fancy goods retailer located on Fourth Street in Cincinnati. Married and the mother of six children, Dunlevy continued to work in retail until she began to make dresses of her own design in 1889.

In 1894 Dunlevy was widowed. Although it was reported that she could neither read nor write, within just a few short years Dunlevy managed to create a thriving business as a premier dressmaker. She initially worked out of her home on Central Avenue, eventually establishing her salon and studio in the Neave Building at the corner of Fourth and Race Streets. Close regular contact with the upper class allowed Dunlevy to develop poise and social ease beyond the social standing she had as an immigrant. Through her indomitable work ethic, her remarkable talent as a designer, her impeccable attention to craftsmanship and handiwork, and her entrepreneurial spirit Dunlevy was able to live a life that paralleled the genteel status of the clientele she served.

ABOUT THE ART

Afternoon Dress (1906) was created by Anna Dunlevy for Anna E. Winston, the daughter of the prominent Kentucky attorney Albert G. Winston. The dress is constructed of deep red velvet silk and is appliquéd with red silk flowers, ribbon edgings, and hand embroidery. This type of gown would have been worn at home for receiving afternoon guests or for evening activities such as dinner parties or an outing to the theater. Because low necklines were considered inappropriate in America during this time for such occasions, this gown utilizes lace and sheer silk on the bodice to imitate the bare-necked styles popular in Europe. Dunlevy has employed a version of the bretelle, suspender-like bands on the bodice. The bretelle served to enhance the appearance of broadened shoulders which subsequently caused the waist to appear smaller than it actually was. In addition the gown has the fuller sleeves popular between 1905 and 1908, which also serve to accentuate the desired look of a small waist.

In 1954, *Afternoon Dress* was gifted to the Cincinnati Art Museum by its owner, Anna Winston. Pinned to it was her handwritten note that said, “This chiffon velvet gown is the Master Production of Miss Dunlevy of Cincinnati Ohio... for Anna E. Winston. It was the realization of a girlhood dream.” It can be assumed that as a child the young Winston accompanied her mother to the salon of Madame Dunlevy and had long anticipated wearing such a lovely creation herself. Finally, as a young woman her dream came true. Anna Winston cherished this gown throughout her adult life.

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

SOCIAL STUDIES

Europe was the primary source of goods for contemporary clothing in the nineteenth century. Investigate how these goods were acquired and then marketed across the sea to dressmakers in the United States.

LITERATURE

Read a nineteenth-century American novel and discuss the differences between its inherent social order and that of the present day. What parallels, if any, can be found?

Suggested Titles

Henry James

The Portrait of a Lady

Edith Wharton

The Age of Innocence

The Buccaneers

MATH

Explore the ratio of usable material to waste in the cutting of a simple garment pattern from a given yardage of fabric.

SCIENCE

Investigate the sources of materials used in creating the extravagant fabrics that women loved having their gowns made from during the nineteenth century. Find out how silk is made, how the dyes were produced, and which types of fibers were compatible in the manufacture of woven yard goods and trimmings.



Anna Dunlevy, *Afternoon Dress*, 1906, Gift of Anna E. Winston, 1954.414 a,b

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