A Different Kind of Costume: The Middlebury College Antique Clothing Collection

The Middlebury College Antique Clothing Collection (MCACC) is an oasis for fashion and history enthusiasts alike. Every one of MCACC’s 400+ garments from the 1830s to 1930s is imbued with deep cultural significance, offering lessons in American, women’s, and the college’s history alike. The Collection, created by Professor Mira Veikley over the last few years, positions Middlebury as a further font for the study of history through the sartorial eye and is an ever-expanding resource for the campus and larger Middlebury community.

Student Katie Concannon, MCACC’s current research assistant, represents the Collection’s interdisciplinary and boundary-breaking mission: she is both an Environmental Studies major and an antique fashion maven. With experience ranging from a series of draping internships with the Middlebury Costume Shop Director, Carol Wood, to an original exhibition of 1790s women’s workwear with the Vaughan Woods and Historic Homestead, Katie embodies the depth of historical fashion knowledge to be found at MCACC. Indeed, such knowledge sustains one of her primary roles with MCACC: identifying and dating items of historical clothing. Katie is currently cataloguing three racks of garments dating from 1900 to 1930, as well as boxes of shoes and purses, which each demand meticulous research and investigation to place them in time. While requiring a kind of fastidiousness that surely necessitates a lot of hard work, the slow fashion she spends her hours deliberating over are moreover a source of beauty and education; “the really intense amount of thought and technique, [and] the exquisite detail, that goes into a single piece of clothing is incredible to witness,” she says. The discovery of women’s history and American culture through these pieces also appeals to Katie, which makes her experience as a research assistant a widely encompassing pursuit. These MCACC resources are not limited to insiders, alone. The same digital archives that Katie helps create are open to any member of the Middlebury community, as are the College courses which use the collection, and the faculty of MCACC, themselves. One such faculty member eager to bring students and community members onboard is the Collection’s founder and sustaining lifeforce, Mira Veikley.

Mira, who studied fashion at Cornell and NYU, went into her own college years with no particular interest in costume specifically. As she recollects, her exposure as a young person growing up in North Dakota was limited to the magazines she would get in the mail, and it was not until the rich exposure and technical training she received as an undergraduate that she got into costume (a testament to the doors our education can open, should we choose to enter). From her years studying garments first hand in school to the later ones working in New York as a costume designer with the likes of Emily Rebholz, Mira built an incredible foundation of knowledge and passion that supports her work at MCACC today.

With grant money acquired through the Costume Society of America, Mira took long neglected garments, “too old for the stage,” and reinvented them as vehicles for learning and historical exploration. “The biggest value is education for students,” she says, but the impact on student learning extends far beyond MCACC’s premises in Middlebury’s Wright Theater. A high school class from Rutland visited to study the collection, and now anybody can access the garments online through MCACC’s ongoing digitization project, available at <https://repository.middlebury.edu/islandora/object/islandora:mcacc>. The educational value of MCACC breaks beyond the disciplinary silos of conventional academia, and even beyond the boundaries of what is typically taught in our education system: “[the Collection] teaches people the value of keeping and caring for things [... and] there is so much you can learn about society and people from looking at these garments.” Mira continutes, “[you can] approach it from an anthropological perspective, or from an art history perspective.” The Collection works to dismantle the “misconception that fashion is frivolous” by demonstrating in practice how the connections between ourselves, our past, and our clothes help to comprise the fabric of our world today. As Mira says, “fashion is telling stories. Period,” and I encourage everyone to explore the over 400 stories currently housed in the Middlebury College Antique Clothing Collection.