Dress

Place of origin: London (possibly, made)
Cambridge (possibly, made)

Date: 1880-1883 (made)

Credit Line: Given by Verity Isitt

Museum number: T.91:1,2-2013

Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description

This dress (bodice and skirt) or reception gown is made of stamped silk velvet, trimmed with silk machine lace and self-fabric rosettes. The bodice of the dress demonstrates the ‘cuirasse’ style, cut to fit smoothly over the torso and hips, worn over a long stiffened corset. There are whalebone strips in the bodice, emphasising the smooth line of the torso, while the skirt is well organised with a flat vertical front, a section of smocking, and swags and puffs supported by internal bones and tapes, culminating in a train. The unknown maker of this dress was highly skilled. The fact that there is no label in the dress suggests that it may have been made by a local dressmaker working independently. Larger dressmaking shops employed seamstresses organised in separate workrooms specialising in bodices or skirts. This dress shows the many different techniques involved.

The dress could have been made in London, although it comes from a family based in Cambridge. Before it came to the museum, it was cared for by the same family for three generations, although it is not clear which family member may have worn it originally.

Descriptive line

Bodice and skirt of dark red stamped silk velvet, c.1880

Physical description

The close-fitted bodice with long sleeves has a 2 cm high neck. It fastens to the left with two hidden hooks and eyes (at the neck and at the end of the front opening), plus 18 silk velvet buttons that cover the entire front opening, the last button is ornamental as it covers the hook and eye. There is a small 6.5 cm pocket on the left at the height of the waist. The bodice demonstrates the ‘cuirasse’ style, cut to fit smoothly over the torso and hips, would have been worn over a long stiffened corset. A silk machine lace of the same colour trims the entire hem of the bodice and is 4.5 cm wide; this lace also decorates the cuffs. These are trimmed with 5.5 cm (diameter) self-fabric rosettes. Each cuff has 7 overlapping rosettes. The front of the bodice has 2 darts on each side; both are between 30 and 33 cm long.

The bodice is lined with two different types of cotton, one is beige with orange and grey stripes, while the other is purple. Five pieces of whalebone strips have been inserted in the lining, emphasising the smooth line of the torso. These are between 12cm and 15cm long, whereas a 23cm long strip has been inserted at the lower part of the centre opening in order to achieve the straight and vertical effect at the front. The bodice does not attach to the skirt.

The bodice falls over a perfect cascade of drapery and profusion of pleats at the back of the skirt to create the fashionable bustled silhouette, while the front remained comparatively flat. At the front and 23 cm below the waist it has a small section of a vertical smocking technique (13 cm long), plus three layers of horizontal swags and puffs, the bottom layer ends in a scalloped edge. The hem of the skirt has been decorated with the same dark red machine lace and rosettes (6cm diameter). The skirt has been lined with a cotton fabric and has four whalebone strips and tapes inserted into the back to pull it into the required shape through the tying up of straps. These bones have been added to an extra lining. At the same time it is possible to find one 38 cm long whalebone strip attached to the train in order to maintain its fall. The skirt has slit pockets on each side.

Dimensions

Circumference: 28 cm bodice, waist, Length: 100 cm Skirt length, centre front, Length: 142 cm Skirt length centre back

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URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1273058/dress/