

The Fabric of our Lives ? Museum looks at birth, marriage and death through textiles



By Brock Weir

If you've ever flipped through the family album and groaned at some of the things you or a loved one wore in the past – be it a bridal gown or a suit worn for a particularly special occasion – you know firsthand how fashion can be a snapshot in time.

For the Aurora Museum and Archives, however, fashion can mean so much more; just a few garments can tell the story of a whole life, or a whole community, and it is this idea they are set to explore this spring in a new exhibition *Births, Marriages and Deaths*. Curated by Museum Studies students from the University of Toronto, the exhibit aims to illustrate the fabric of Aurora's history through garments associated with the major milestones of a person's life, through beautifully preserved christening and wedding gowns, uniforms, period mourning clothes and much more.

The exhibition is the brainchild of Rachel Dice, a U of T student who has worked as a summer intern at the Aurora Museum of Archives. Joining the museum team, she jumped at the chance to work on textiles preserved in the collection, a passion she had since she was a child watching her mother, who owns a fashion design school.

Ms. Dice's area of expertise is actually historical literature, but when she got her hands on these local textiles, the creative juices began to flow.

“By the end of [working with the textiles as an intern] we realised we had a lot more stuff than we thought,” says Ms. Dice. “We thought it would be really cool to put them on display. As for themes, we weren't really sure how to show the most number of our textile collections under one comprehensive idea, so that was when we all started working together on themes like life, death and all those fun and not-so-fun occasions in between. A lot of the clothing we have here is the best clothing people would have owned, things you wouldn't have worn all the time, which is how they managed to survive to come to us. We wanted to show that off with as much information about Aurora and its history as we could.”

Joined by fellow students Carolyn Ben and Jessica Ho, they set an additional goal for themselves: narrating an exhibit through objects alone.

“Textiles invoke the presence of the person who wore them when you see them up on a stand,” says Ms. Ben. “They are very personal. They tell a bigger story. When you have a wedding dress on display, you can see the bride on her wedding day, but [in the museum] you can also see the cards of sympathy for her husband dying 50 years later and you can trace the family through all those special occasions.”

Ms. Ho and Ms. Ben came into the project not quite as familiar with the stores within the Aurora Museum & Archives as Ms. Dice,

but they were soon hard at work going through hundreds of pieces carefully stored in innumerable boxes.

They uncovered a story through a christening gown about a local librarian who adopted a little girl who may or may not have been her niece. Intrigued by what they describe as this 'missing link' they uncovered a story that just kept unfolding like a 'spider's web.' The guest curators say they each found birth, marriage and death equally interesting in their own right, the rites 'and indeed the commercialization' surrounding death was particularly intriguing.

'Death is a little bit difficult to portray because our practices around death have really changed quite a bit over the years, especially over the two World Wars,' says Ms. Dice. 'We have some really cool mourning items and practices, including a wreath of flowers made of coiled and embroidered hair of the dead. It was a very common thing with mourning jewellery and making stuff out of your loved one's hair.'

Adds Ms. Ben: 'Death was a huge industry. If you went to Eaton's, they would have a whole section on mourning clothes. If someone died, you had to wear non-stop black for over a year. Some women just never bothered to go out of it because someone else would die and they would be back in black again. We have a lot of beautiful condolence notes of people who died, we have information about their funerals, which is really interesting.'

Ms. Ho, on the other hand, is a champion of the marriage component in the exhibition.

'Different wedding outfits really show the personalities of the person,' she says. 'It is a time to get the family together for an occasion that is about the whole family.'

One area that is slightly lacking in the collection, she adds, are uniforms and other garments associated with the First World War. The trio of curators have a few theories on why that is; the prevailing one being that after the reality of the First World War 'then known as simply The Great War as it was unlike anything they had ever experienced to that point' set in, people wanted no memory of it. They wanted it gone and saved very little. This extends beyond uniforms to the everyday clothing of that period which, at a time of shortage, were often cut down into rags and put to other uses.

'We want to tell a story about Aurora's past,' says Ms. Dice. 'If they come out of here knowing something more about their local heritage and history, even if it is about a specific person or some gossip about an adopted daughter or just an idea of the way christening gowns have changed, but not really, I think we would have done a good job.'