



White sprigged muslin day dress, ca. 1860s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2014.07.409. Suddon-Cleaver Collection. Gift of Katherine Cleaver.

A COMPARISON OF 1860s DRESSES

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As the book *The Dress Detective* makes clear, an important step in reproducing historic dress is studying comparable examples from the same era. This step aids in identifying the typical attributes of the period as well as anomalies of the artifact being studied. This article compares the white sprigged muslin day dress (FRC2014.07.409) from the Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection (shown below) with five comparable examples of 1860s dresses. Two dresses from the Fashion History Museum were examined in person and three comparable dresses of the same period were identified from the online collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Kyoto Costume Institute, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The white sprigged muslin day dress from the FRC, and the two following examples from the Fashion History Museum came from the Suddon-Cleaver collection, and were gifted to the respective collections by Katherine Cleaver in 2014. Originally collected by Alan Suddon, they have a shared past. From the examination of these three dresses, it appears that they were all homemade.



Blue silk striped dress with black velvet trim, ca.1860s. Fashion History Museum, FHM15.01.95. Suddon-Cleaver Collection, Gift of Katherine Cleaver.

On first glance, this blue silk dress (FHM15.01.95) from the Fashion History Museum might appear to be distinctly different than the white muslin dress from the FRC. The most noticeable differences are the colour, weight of the textile, and the type of surface embellishment. **The blue silk textile is a slightly heavier weight, and the woven pattern of two tones of blue, and black and white vertical stripes is very large and vibrant in comparison to the delicate muted pattern on the FRC dress.** The blue silk dress also has more embellishment with black velvet trim on the bodice and sleeve at the shoulders and cuffs (with lace edging), as well as a row of decorative black velvet buttons along the centre front.



However, **what is similar is that both dresses share a similar silhouette, and have long sleeves, high necklines and long full skirts.** The waist sits at the same level, slightly above the natural smallest part of the female torso. Both skirts have straight waistbands that are constructed in a similar fashion with multiple panels gathering into the waist, and with the excess seam allowance left hanging on the inside of the dress. However, on this blue dress the waistband is only visible on the inside and the skirt seems to be constructed with less fabric, as it is not as closely gathered at the waist. The embellishment of the skirt is very similar with a ruffle along the hem of the skirt.

Both dresses also share similarities in construction of and closures for the bodice. The dresses close with hooks and eyes all the way down the centre front to the waist, and then along the waistband. Though the blue dress does not have a separate inner bodice, its bodice has been boned in the same fashion, having two bones on each front side encased within the darts, as well as having one bone on the left centre front. Instead of including an inner bodice, the bodice has been flat lined. Additionally the sleeves are slightly fuller, with a little more volume at the elbow.

Blue silk striped dress with black velvet trim, ca.1860s, Fashion History Museum.FHM15.01.95. Skirt hem ruffle. Suddon-Cleaver Collection, Gift of Katherine Cleaver.



The green and brown checked dress from the Fashion History Museum (FHM15.01.92) shown above is very similar to the blue checked dress. The neckline is of the same design, as is the skirt shape and sleeve length. The waist line is also similar in terms of placement, and construction. The closure along the waist seems to be very similar, again carrying on from the centre front to the left side ending with hooks and eyes, although reaches slightly farther to the side than the previous example. The waistband, like the last example, is similar to the FRC dress, but is also only visible on the inside.

The skirt creates a similar silhouette, but again does not have as much fabric pleated into the waistband. **The skirt has been cut in panels similarly to the FRC dress, and is also finished the same way at the waist, leaving the excess seam allowance hanging on the inside of the dress.** The sleeves, like the previous example are also fitted at the shoulder and cuff, but again are slightly wider at the elbow.

Green and Brown
Checked Dress, ca.1860s.
Fashion History Museum,
FHM15.01.92. Suddon-
Cleaver Collection, Gift of
Katherine Cleaver.



Green and Brown
Checked Dress, ca.1860s.
Fashion History Museum,
FHM15.01.92. Inside
bodice detail. Suddon-
Cleaver Collection, Gift of
Katherine Cleaver.

The bodice is boned, but the centre front bodice bone is on the right hand side, instead of the left, and there are no bones at the back of the bodice. The front bones have been encased within the two darts on either side of the front of the bodice, like both the FRC dress, and the previous dress. **The bodice has been flat lined instead of having a separate boned inner bodice, like the last example.**

The most notable visual difference is the surface embellishment, and the fabric choice. This dress is trimmed with black velvet edged with black beading at the bodice and cuff of the sleeve. It also has black beaded decorative buttons down the centre front on the left hand side. The woven cotton in a green and brown medium sized check is quite unlike the subtle pattern on the FRC dress.



Cotton muslin dress trimmed with bobbin lace and machine embroidered whitework, ca. 1869. V&A Museum, T.12 to B-1943. Gift of Miss Ada B. Cooper.

Three similar dresses from the 1860s were identified for comparison from online museum collections including the V&A Museum in London, the Kyoto Costume Institute in Japan and the Costume Institute at The Met in New York. **These dresses exhibit more intricacy in construction and embellishment and are made of finer materials, and for these reasons, were likely owned and worn by persons with access to highly skilled dressmakers.**

This cotton muslin dress (T.12 to B-1943) from the Victoria & Albert Museum is similar in season, fabric, and general silhouette to the FRC dress. **It shares the same high neckline, waistline placement and full skirt, but has a more distinct bustle shape, and appears to have a more substantial train.** This dress is highly embellished with contrasting trim, and appears to have a separate waistband.

Another key distinction is that the V&A dress is described as being three separate pieces, comprised of a blouse, skirt, and polonaise. As well the sleeves also have a slight width added to the elbow area, like the previous two dresses. The description makes no mention of boning or a lining.



This dress from the Kyoto Costume Institute is labelled as a summer day dress, and is made of a comparable fabric - a white cotton tarlatan with woven stripes. The silhouette of the dress is very similar with fitted long sleeves, a high neckline, a straight waistline sitting slightly above the natural waist, and a full floor length skirt. **The skirt has a more defined bustle and a train than the FRC dress, and is also distinctive with its use of a bright contrasting red trim, and its construction as it consists of a separate bodice and skirt.** The description does not provide any information about the dress closure, nor does it specify whether the dress has boning or is lined. Nonetheless, given the very transparent look of the top layer of the dress, the garment is likely lined or meant to be worn with an under-dress.

Day dress, ca. late 1860s. The Kyoto Costume Institute Online Collection, AC4324 82-17-43AE. Photo by Taishi Hirokawa. Copyright of The Kyoto Costume Institute.



American Silk Dress,
ca. 1865. Metropolitan
Museum of Art,
Cl.69.33.8a. Gift of Mary
Pierrepont Beckwith.

This silk dress from the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art bears a most striking resemblance to the FRC's white sprigged muslin day dress. Although the textile is silk instead of muslin, it still looks to be a very comparable weight and has a similar small repeating pattern in contrasting colours.

Both dresses share a similar silhouette, with a full floor length skirt, a straight waistband with the same placement, fitted long sleeves, a high neckline and a small collar. **The surface embellishment is very similar, featuring self-fabric ruffles, in a very similar scale and amount. The most noticeable difference is the more defined bustle and train on the skirt.**

From what is visible in the photographs, the skirt looks to be cartridge pleated at the waist. **Although there is no mention of an inner bodice in the short description, there seems to be a very similar outline of a capped sleeved inner bodice with a low neckline trimmed with lace.** The pictures also appear to show an indication that the closure is at the centre front and carries along the waistband to the left side as it does the dress on the FRC dress.

CONCLUSION

This analysis of dresses from the 1860s has led me to better understand the common and uncommon attributes of 1860s dresses.

What all the dresses share is a common silhouette. Whatever the fabric choice, the dresses were long sleeved, high necklines with small collars, and had full pleated or gathered skirts with more fullness toward the back were the prominent look of the era. All had an element of surface embellishment – with trim and flounces or ruffles placed at the bodice, sleeve cuffs and skirt hems. Additionally these examples also show the variety of sleeve styles available; though they are all full length, they have distinctive differences in shape. Hooks and eyes down the centre front and along the waistband appear to be a typical feature of 1860s dresses.

In contrast, the inclusion of a separate inner boned bodice does not seem to be a very common occurrence. This could be attributed to the resources available, or perhaps could be unique to dresses constructed from sheer fabrics. In any case, this is an interesting feature showcased in the white sprigged muslin day dress from the Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection.

REFERENCES

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