

T. Eaton Co. cape, ca. 1900s.  
Toronto Metropolitan University  
FRC2017.05.004. Donated by  
Mary Wyatt. Photograph by  
Victoria Hopgood, 2018.



# READING A CAPE

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## PART ONE

Toronto Metropolitan University's Fashion Research Collection is home to many capes ranging from evening capes to nursing capes, but one in particular caught my eye. **This stunning full-length wool cape with velvet appliques and a bear fur collar had me in awe at first glance (FRC2017.05.004). It is bold, striking and emanates a sense of power.**

Donated by Mary Wyatt, it is believed that this garment was worn by her grandmother who lived in Carleton Place, a small town not too far from Ottawa, Ontario and was dated to the 1900s (note 1).

**Intrigued by the beauty of this specific garment, I did a close reading of the garment** following the approach outlined by Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim in [The Dress Detective](#) (note 2). In part I of a series of three blog posts, I will consider the construction of the cape. In Part II, I will compare this cape to others of the same time period. In Part III, I will compare the labels of different T. Eaton Co. garments to more precisely date this garment.



T. Eaton Co. cape,  
ca. 1900s. Toronto  
Metropolitan University  
FRC2017.05.004. Collar  
detail. Donated by Mary  
Wyatt. Photograph by  
Victoria Hopgood, 2018.

**Manufactured by the T. Eaton Company, this cape is made of natural materials - wool, silk and fur.** The outer shell is a very fine wool woven into a twill weave producing horizontal ridges. The lining is made of a smooth, black silk which would help to regulate the body temperature and wick away moisture. It is evident that this cape has been worn until no longer possible as the lining is fraying and has shredded beyond repair. After the cape was donated to the FRC, mesh was sewn on to prevent further damage. In between the outer and inner layers, there is an interfacing made of wool felt, which would have provided an extra layer of warmth.

**The outer wool layer is constructed of two pieces with a center back seam, whereas the inner lining of silk is made up of four pieces.** The flared cape is 40 inches/101 cm long from neckline to hem and would fall to about shin length. The use of machine-stitching is consistent with the dating of this garment to the early 1900s. The machine stitching of the seams is not visible except under the Bertha collar. Hand-stitching is evident in the ruched pocket decoration and in attaching the label.





T. Eaton Co. cape,  
ca. 1900s. Toronto  
Metropolitan University  
FRC2017.05.004. Front  
detail. Donated by Mary  
Wyatt. Photograph by  
Victoria Hopgood, 2018.

**The cape has three collars that layer over each other.** The first layer is a large stand collar that sits close to the neck. The outer side, facing away from the wearer is decorated with floral velvet appliques. To add warmth and decoration, the inner side of the collar which would touch the neck is lined with bear fur. This is the most striking and unique aspect of the garment. The fur is in immaculate condition with the exception of an area that has become slightly matted from touching the back of the neck. The fur is smooth to the touch and would keep the wearer warm. The second and third collars are considered Bertha collars which drape over the shoulders, almost as if they were short capes. The top Bertha collar is sewn into the neckline with the stand collar and the under-Bertha is attached about 4 inches/10 cm down from there. The left side of the under-Bertha is slightly detached at the centre, likely due to use/wear.

The collars are not the only areas that have been embellished with black velvet appliques. Machine sewn onto the lower half of the cape is a large section of the same appliques that runs around the entire garment. This section is about 10 inches/25 cm wide.

Keeping the cape fastened are seven hook and eye closures, two on the collar and five on the front. They are spaced 3 inches/7.5 cm apart, stopping just under halfway down the bodice. The eye portions are made of metal and wrapped with thread. The first and third eyes are fraying, exposing the metal. The hooks are also made of metal; however, they have been painted black. On the left side of the garment is an extension made of the same wool fabric about 1 inch/2.5 cm wide resting underneath the closures to prevent them from touching the wearer. The eyes have caused fraying and discolouration turning the black wool a rusty yellow-orange colour.

**Three pockets are located in the lining of the garment.** Two of which are placed vertically on either side of the centre front opening. The pockets are placed towards centre front for easy access. Decorating the 4 inch/10 cm opening, pieces of ruched fabric and bows have been hand sewn on, but are now slightly coming detached due to the delicate nature. The pockets are about 3.5 inches/9 cm wide and are located about 14 inches/35 cm down the centre front. They have been placed here so they could be reached easily by simply bending the arm at the elbow. These pockets are quite small, but would fit small objects like a watch or a key. An additional pocket is located horizontally on the left side of the cape. Its 6 inch/15 cm opening is decorated with the same ruching and bows. This pocket is 7.5 inches/19 cm wide located at about 19 inches/48 cm down centre front and about 7.5 inches/19 cm in. This puts the pocket at about hip level at the side of the body. **This larger pocket could be used for objects such as money and gloves. In addition to the wool interfacing and fur collar which would provide warmth, the pockets make this cape even more practical.**

**The cape includes a manufacturers label that reads "The T. Eaton Co. Limited. 190 Yonge St. Toronto" written in white on a black background.** The label is approximately 1 inch/2.5 cm wide by 2 inches/5 cm long. This label will be further examined in Part III to more precisely date this garment.

**Given the fabrics used, the number of pockets and the style of the cape, this garment is both beautiful and functional.** The hand sewn decorative touches, visible selvedge within the seams and use of high quality materials makes it evident this garment was created with a high degree of care and attention to detail. A garment like this would likely be worn by someone of means. In the next post in the series, I will compare this cape to others manufactured around this time.

## NOTES

**Note 1:** Email communication between Ingrid Mida and Mary Wyatt.

**Note 2:** Mida, I., & Kim, A. (2015). *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object-based Research in Fashion*. Bloomsbury Academic. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.e.ca>



Toronto Metropolitan University



Toronto Metropolitan University

T. Eaton Co. cape,  
ca. 1890s. Toronto  
Metropolitan University  
FRC2014.07.457.  
Photograph by Millie  
Yates, 2015.

Short velvet cape,  
ca. 1980s. Toronto  
Metropolitan University  
FRC2014.07.156.  
Photograph by Victoria  
Hopgood, 2018.

## PART TWO

In Part I of this blog post series, I considered the construction of a T. Eaton Company cape (FRC2017.05.004) in terms of fabric, surface decoration and function. **In this blog post, I undertake a comparative analysis of capes as suggested in the Reflection checklist from *The Dress Detective* (note 1).**

A cape from T. Eaton Co. dating to the 1890s (FRC2014.07.457) is shorter in length than the cape being studied, but the black wool fabrics are very similar. Although this cape would probably not be worn in the middle of a cold Canadian winter, it would still provide some degree of warmth since it is made of wool. This wool has also been woven into a twill weave, similar to FRC2017.05.004. Instead of velvet appliques, this cape features decorative beading and a frilled hem and collar.

This 1890s cape (FRC2014.07.156) is about half of the length of the cape being studied and likely made to be worn in the evening. It is made from black velvet with a fur trimmed collar and hook and eye fasteners. The most strikingly similar feature to FRC2017.05.004 is the embellishment of hand-sewn floral braid that spans the entire surface of the cape.





Velvet cape, ca.  
1980s. Toronto  
Metropolitan University  
FRC2014.07.160.  
Photograph by Victoria  
Hopgood, 2018.

Another evening cape (FRC2014.07.160) from the 1890s is made of black velvet, with a short mandarin collar and a silk tie and lining. Floral cutwork decoration and beading embellish the shell of this cape. Its surface decoration is quite similar to the cape being studied, even though it is much shorter in length. **This floral surface decoration on both these evening capes leads me to believe that this was a popular style at the time.**

**In considering capes from other collections, I identified two capes with Bertha collars that are similar in styling to the T. Eaton cape that is the focus of my project.** The Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art has a similar cape ([C.I.41.78.1](#)) that dates back to 1901. Although this garment was made in America, the styles are similar. Made out of a plaid wool, the cape has an identical long Bertha collar in addition to a short turned down collar.



Cape, ca. 1905. The  
Victoria & Albert Museum  
T.333-1995.

Cape, ca. 1901. The  
Costume Institute  
Metropolitan Museum of  
Art. C.I.41.78.1.



The collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum includes a cape ([T.333-1995](#)) that is also similar in styling. Made of a deep, moss green wool, the cape also has a long Bertha collar, similar to the collar of the cape being studied. However, instead of a stand collar, it has a small turned down collar. **Dated to 1905 and identified as originating from France, this cape illustrates how fashion is a global phenomenon.**

**Capes are one-size fits all garments and especially suitable to wear over the fashions of gigot sleeves in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.** Gigot sleeves were snug at the elbow and full at the shoulder making them quite large (note 2). Therefore, a fitted coat would not easily fit over the large sleeves, making a cape a more suitable option for the cold weather. Some of the capes considered would have been worn mainly for warmth and others for style. **The T. Eaton cape that is the focus of my study is both stylish and warm and this comparison shows that it fits within the fashions for capes of the time.**

#### NOTES

**Note 1:** Mida, I., & Kim, A. (2015). *The Dress Detective: a practical guide to object-based research in Fashion*. Bloomsbury Academic.

**Note 2:** From paris: The gigot sleeve. (1905, Jan 26). *Vogue*, 25, 123. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/docview/879154695?accountid=13631>

### **PART THREE**

**According to dress historian and curator Ingrid Mida, when an item is donated to a collection, the donor can sometimes provide information that helps to date a particular garment.** In this case, the donor thought that the cape might have belonged to her grandmother but it might also have belonged to another member of the family. **Like many garments that are treasured for many years in the family home, memories fade and that information has been lost.**

**Dating a cape is more challenging than dating a dress since the general shape of a cape is largely the same whatever period it originated in.** In the comparative analysis presented in part II of the series, I observed that the materials used and the type of embellishment on this cape confirmed the date of origin as the late nineteenth century or early twentieth century. **In this final blog post in the series, I will compare the label in this cape to that of other T. Eaton Co. garments in the Fashion Research Collection to match fonts and attempt to more precisely date this garment.**

**Using the label to help date a garment is one method to narrow the range of manufacture according to dress historian and curator Ingrid Mida.** With an interest in graphic design, I decided to use my knowledge of typography to do exactly that. **Fonts go in and out of fashion like anything else.** For example, the popularity of blackletter in the fifteen century or the sans serif styles of the 1930s (note 1). With the knowledge of these patterns and when fonts were created, we can determine a more precise date for when this garment was manufactured.

Even so, determining the font used on a label can be tricky. **Labels, unlike books for example, are not printed, they are woven. This can make it difficult to make a font appear exactly like it would be printed on a piece of paper using a press. The corners would not be as sharp nor the curves as smooth.** Taking this into consideration, I combed through many fonts that were popular at the time to determine which was used on each label. While it is definitely possible that these fonts were used on the labels after the date of creation, it still provides a starting point and suggests the garments were made sometime after that year.

**The T. Eaton Company was founded in Toronto in 1869 by Timothy Eaton and in 1905 expanded operations to Winnipeg.** Over time, its retail operations spread across Canada (note 2). Over the course of the history of the company, different labels appeared in garments and are associated with various fashions in fonts. **In the four comparable garments that I examined, the general logo of the T. Eaton Company label remained the same. However, a different font was used for each one.** As well, other information on the label also changed. For example, one label says "Made in France for T. Eaton Co" while another whereas another reads "T. Eaton Co. 190 Yonge St. Toronto".





T. Eaton Co. cape,  
ca. 1890s. Toronto  
Metropolitan University  
FRC2014.07.457. Label  
in Cape. Photograph by  
Victoria Hopgood, 2018

A black wool cape (FRC2014.07.457) dated to the 1890s uses the font **Akzidenz-Grotesk Condensed**. This font was released in 1898 and designed by Ferdinand Theinhardt for Berlin's Berthold Type Foundry (note 3). It is sometimes referred to as Basic Commercial or Standard in English-speaking countries. Therefore, the garment was made after 1898.



T. Eaton Co. blouse,  
ca. 1900s. Toronto  
Metropolitan University  
FRC2014.99.001. Label  
in blouse. Photograph by  
Victoria Hopgood, 2018

This white sheer cotton blouse (FRC2014.99.001) was dated to 1900-1910. The font used for this label is also **Akzidenz-Grotesk**, however it is not the condensed version rather the regular version which was also released in 1898. Therefore, this garment was also manufactured sometime after 1898.



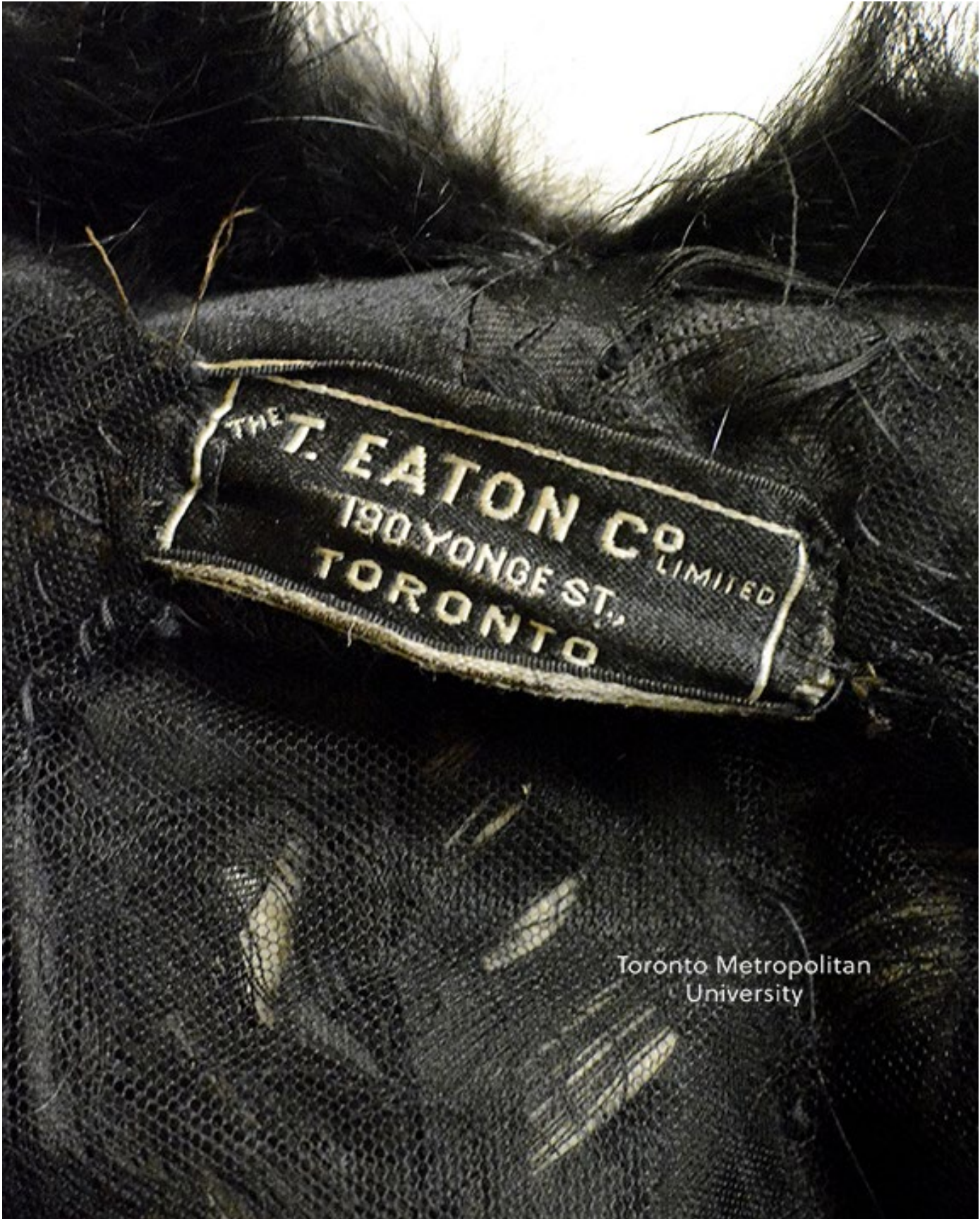


Ryerson University  
Fashion Research Collection

T. Eaton Co. shirtwaist,  
ca. 1900s. Toronto  
Metropolitan University  
FRC2008.03.007. Label.  
Photograph by Victoria  
Hopgood, 2018

A black silk shirtwaist (FRC2008.03.007) was also dated to 1900-1910 based on the silhouette. However, the font used on this label is **Franklin Gothic Condensed**. Franklin Gothic was named after Benjamin Franklin. It was drawn in 1902 by Morris Fuller Benton but released in 1905 by the International Typeface Corporation (note 4). The condensed version was not released until approximately a year later when the family was expanded to include italic and extra condensed (note 5). In addition, the first T. Eaton Co. store in Winnipeg opened in 1905 therefore this garment could not predate that (note 6). Taking this information into consideration, this garment was not manufactured until at least 1905.





Toronto Metropolitan  
University

T. Eaton Co. cape, ca. 1900s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2017.05.004. Label.  
Donated by Mary Wyatt. Photograph by Victoria Hopgood, 2018.

The font used on the label of the cape being studied is the original **Franklin Gothic** which was released in 1905 therefore the garment must have been manufactured sometime after that (note 7). However, the exact date of manufacture cannot be determined from an analysis of the fonts alone since font usage is not limited to the year they were created. **However, at a minimum it tells me that the cape was made sometime after 1905.**

Sans serif fonts like **Akzidenz-Grotesk** and **Franklin Gothic** were considered grotesque fonts because they were viewed as ugly compared to the serif and Roman styles before them (note 8). However, in present day they are considered clean and minimalist being widely used everywhere. **These sans serif fonts were used for labels because they contain less decorative elements such as serifs, making them easier to weave.**

Capes are a type of garment that is difficult to date based on the silhouette. The inclusion of the address on the label indicates that the cape must have been made between 1882 and 1930, when the store moved to a location at Yonge & College (Note 2.) **The analysis of typography indicates that this garment was made sometime after 1905. Putting that information together with the knowledge gained from my comparative analysis of capes in Part II, I suggest that the cape can be dated to 1905-1910.**

## NOTES

**Note 1:** Haley, A., Poulin, R., Tselentis, J., Seddon, T., Leonidas, G., Saltz, I., ... Alterman, T. (2012). *Typography referenced: A comprehensive visual guide to the language, history and practice of typography*. Beverly, MA: Rockport Publishers.

**Note 2:** McQuarrie, J. (2017, August 14). Eaton's. Retrieved from <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/t-eaton-company-limited/>

**Note 3:** see note 1.

**Note 4:** Jacobs, M. (2017, October 20). Franklin gothic font family. Retrieved from <https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/typography/font-list/franklin-gothic>

**Note 5:** see note 4.

**Note 6:** see note 2.

**Note 7:** see note 1.

**Note 8:** Harding, M. (2017, August 21). What are grotesque fonts? history, inspiration and examples. Retrieved from <https://creativemarket.com/blog/grotesque-fonts>

This post was edited by Dr. Ingrid Mida.