

STUDY OF A SUMMER DAY DRESS

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The dress I selected for this project is a muslin day dress dated from mid-19th century 2014.07.409, with the catalogue record specifically indicating it to be from the 1860s. The dress is one piece, with a ½-inch waistband sitting at the natural waist line. It features a fitted bodice with 4 inches of small cartridge pleating on both the center front and back at the waist, and a high neck line with a small ½-inch collar. The bodice is constructed from one back panel and two panels in the front. The dress has long one-piece sleeves that are fitted and feature a ruffle with one row of pin tucking in the middle just above each cuff. The skirt portion of the dress is cartridge pleated all along the waist line into the waist band with more concentrated cartridge pleating at both side of the dress. The skirt has been constructed from six panels of fabric, and features a 10 inch opening on the front right side of the dress most likely serving as a pocket slit. The hem of the skirt has also been adorned with two rows of ruffles, each with a row of pin tucking in the middle of the ruffle. The dress has a front closure from neck to waist at the center front, and then continues 4 inches to the right side of the dress to be closed at the waistband with two hooks and eyes vertically placed, closing right over left. The closure above the waistband is missing, apart from one hook remaining at the neck suggesting there were hooks down the front with sewn bars.



Left: Summer Day Dress
in white striped muslin,
ca. 1860s. Ryesron
FRC2014.07.409.

Right: Sketch of 1860
Day Dress by Alys Mak-
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The fabric used in the construction of the dress is very fine, lightweight, white muslin, with faint horizontal woven stripes. Also visible, on the fabric facing outward, is a delicate two-toned brown motif of what appears to be elongated stylized feathers or leaves, in pairs, overlapping in an X shape. The pairs are further organized in vertical stripes creating a pattern on the fabric. In between the motif of the stripes of feather/leaf pairs, equally distributed are very tiny clusters of three brown dots organized in a triangular configuration.

The dress appears to be a day dress given the more casual fabric, probably intended for warmer weather as the weight of the fabric is quite light. Looking at the information provided by the record of the previous collection the dress resided in, the dress was purchased in London, UK, and so would most likely be from the UK, or at least Europe. With this in mind; as well as the previous collector, Alan Suddon labeling it as a summer day dress; it seems that the dress would indeed have been intended for wear in the summer, or at least late spring.



Close up of motif on textile, ca. 1860s.
Toronto Metropolitan University
FRC2014.07.409.

Upon inspection of the inside of the dress, a small inner bodice can be seen. The inner bodice is made of what looks like medium weight white cotton and has a front closure, of six hooks and small sewn eyelets also closing right over left. The neckline is much lower than the outer bodice sitting 8 inches lower at the center front, and 6 inches below at the center back. The inner bodice also has small capped sleeves and is trimmed with off white $\frac{1}{2}$ inch lace at both sleeve openings and the neckline. There are also 7 bones in the inner bodice, one on each side seam, two on each front side encased in the dart legs, and the remaining one placed at the center front on the right side.

The overall condition of the garment is very good. Besides the absence of the front closures above the waist, the garment seems complete. The fabric is still quite sturdy, and no major tears in the fabric or signs of wear or discoloration are visible. Given that the dress does not seem to have much sign of wear, it could be surmised that the garment belonged to someone who could afford to take care of their clothing and owned a number of garments. The design of the dress is quite simplistic and suggests that the dress probably would have been worn in the day, in more casual circumstances. It also seems to be a fairly conservative, demure design as the dress covers most of the body, and has a fairly restrictive quality with the fitted, boned bodice. The lightweight sheer fabric used for the dress gives it an airy quality and suggests it was worn in the summer.



Sketch of Inner Bodice by
Alys Mak-Pilsworth.

The dress has been constructed well. The close and even stitching makes it look like it was sewn on a sewing machine, even though sewing machines would not have been widely available until later in the decade. The dress has been nicely finished with hand sewn details, such as the eyelets on the inner bodice. The seam allowances visible on the inside of the dress do not appear to be finished now, but they may have been pinked originally. During this time in fashion, dresses were typically worn over a crinoline and given its small size, it seems likely that the dress might have belonged to a younger woman.

This post has been edited by Dr. Ingrid Mida.