

Rites of Passage Symposium – Exeter

The Symposium in Exeter started with a visit to St. Nicholas Priory. Closed to the public on this day, the delegates enjoyed exclusive access to this 900 year old guest wing of a former Benedictine Priory presented as a Tudor home.

After dinner Dr Jane Malcolm-Davies and Ninya Mikhaila spoke to the delegates about their research exploring childhood in the late fifteenth century to the early seventeenth century. Based on their illustrated book *The Tudor Child* handmade costumes featuring replica fabrics and trimmings brought the subject to life with supporting portraits, sculpture and drawings.

Report on Saturday July 5, 2014

By Ingrid Mida

Even though I was weary with jetlag, it was with rapt attention that I listened to the speakers on the first day of the *Rites of Passage Symposium* held on Saturday, July 5, 2014 at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter. This select group of accomplished orators presented engaging and informative talks on topics relating to dress for ceremonies relating to life passages, such as marriage, coming of age, and death.

Rosie Taylor-Davies, PhD candidate at the University of Southampton, was the first speaker of the day in presenting: 'What has love got to do with it? Marriage and Presentation at Court in mid-18th century England'. In this talk, Taylor-Davies emphasized that the purpose of marriage was not for love, but was focused on security, family, title, honour, and that dress was used as a signal of political allegiance. In considering a much-altered hand-embroidered eighteenth-century English court mantua and petticoat, Taylor-Davies offered the evidence that led her to the likely identity of the wearer Anne Fieldhouse. This daughter of a country cheesemonger from Rugeley, Staffordshire married Baront William Wolseley, 5th Baronet, and was presented at St James' Palace in 1738, wearing this exquisite mantua and petticoat.

Dr. Kate Strasdin, lecturer and curator, offered insight into the local manufacture of Honiton wedding lace in her talk 'Royal wedding lace: Reviving an industry 1840-63'. Having fallen out of fashion with the mechanization of lace making, the handmade bobbin lace industry was devastated, but later revived with the royal patronage of Queen Victoria as well as Princess Alexandra.

Keynote speaker, Edwina Ehrman, Curator of Fashion & Textiles at the Victoria & Albert Museum, presented highlights of the exhibition *Wedding Dresses 1774-2014* on display at the V&A May 3, 2014 – March 15, 2015. Ehrman noted that people are fascinated by wedding dresses since these garments 'have the power to make us think about the people that wore them' and offered up the stories behind the wearers of many of the gowns on display, such as the extravagant satin wedding

dress designed by Norman Hartnell for Margaret, Duchess of Argyll for her wedding at Brompton Oratory in 1933. Ehrman also considered the relationship between wedding dress and fashion, including the effect of high profile individuals and celebrities such as Queen Victoria, Dita von Teese, and Gwen Stefani.

After lunch, keynote speaker, Joanna Hashagen Curator of Fashion & Textiles at Bowes Museum, considered a wedding dress designed by Lucile that is part of the Bowes Museum collection. This short-sleeved wedding dress with a train was worn by Linda Beatrice Morrith (1886-1974) in June 1912 for her marriage to pioneer aviator William Barnard Rhodes-Moorhouse. This relatively simple wedding dress was the entry point into the story of the adventurous life of the wearer, Linda Rhodes-Moorhouse, author of the book 'Kaleidoscope: A Family of Flyers'.

After refreshments, Harriet Waterhouse gave a lively and engaging talk called 'His First Suit', in which she talked about the rituals related to breeching. Using a rich variety of paintings to illustrate her talk as well as a vivid cherry red reproduction suit that she made for her son, she poignantly presented her research on this rite of passage in which young boys left off their skirted coats and allowed to wear breeches for the first time.

Lace and mortality in 17th century England was the focus of the talk given by Dr. Beth Walsh, Visiting Fellow at the University of East Anglia. In her talk, Walsh argued that representations of lace in paintings and statuary carry meanings about life, death and mourning.

Alexandra Kim, Co-editor of Costume, gave the after-dinner talk on wedding clothes of the little known Princess Patricia (1886-1974). This almost forgotten granddaughter of Queen Victoria was the beloved Colonel in Chief of a regiment of Canadian infantry and her white velvet and silver lace wedding dress is stored in a regimental museum in Calgary. Wedding relatively late in life at the age of thirty-three, Princess Patricia was married to the naval officer Sir Alexander Ramsay at Westminster Abbey on February 27, 1919. Kim argued that the simple lines of her wedding dress was not only informed by royal protocol and contemporary fashion, but was fitting for a somewhat shy princess who chose to leave her royal personage behind upon her marriage.

Other highlights of the day included guided tours of the museum including panels of Honiton lace as well as a presentation of selected dress artifacts such as a black silk and crepe bodice worn by Queen Victoria and a child's mourning dress by Shelley Tobin, Curator of Costume and Textiles at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum and National Trust Killerton.

The Student Design Awards organized by Chairman Sylvia Ayton MBE featured the work of five students from Taunton, University of Plymouth who used the theme of rites of passage as inspiration for their work. The winner was Samantha who adopted a surrealist approach to fashion in creating a latex cape that was

transformed to reveal a sheer evening dress embellished with beads and embroidery that mimicked the veins of a heart.

The day was full, and by the end, I felt that I had benefitted from this wealth of oral and visual information on the dress for life's significant rites of passages.

Sunday 6 July 2014

Following a commendably brief AGM, during which we bade a fond farewell to Sylvia Ayton who had come to the end of her highly successful term as Chair, and welcomed new Chair Deirdre Murphy, delegates were then treated to a master class in reconsidering one's own research history by Dr Lou Taylor, Professor of Dress History at Brighton. Lou's book on Mourning Dress has been the vademecum of every dress curator since it was published in 1983 and it was fascinating to follow her thought processes as she described how the book had come to be written, and how her own attitudes had changed over the years since she first began research for an exhibition at Brighton Museum in the 1970s.

If she were to do a new edition (yes, please...) it would include much more on the social history of widows and other new aspects would include how clothing is related to the specific clothing communities in which they are worn, using object-focussed material culture approaches – looking at an object, its design, making, retailing, use and re-use, to draw out the stories associated with it. She would look at how mourning dress was the earliest form of 'ready-made' and was also the basis of the first department stores; also stress the fashionability of mourning dress. She might also be braver about addressing the issues of present day mourning dress, including the influence of celebrity, as well as looking at multi-cultural issues, and ended by posing the question to current curators – how would you collect contemporary mourning clothing?

Lou Taylor left us, as always, with much food for thought and post-lecture discussion. Patterns of Fashion Awards followed, judged, very thoughtfully, by John Bright of Cosprops. The 3 finalists were all worthy of commendation and presented their research and beautifully finished garments with aplomb. Clementine Greenley from Cardiff RCMD, with her cotton morning dress and handmade Dorset buttons, won the prize with an impeccably researched and sourced garment, extremely well presented; Lorna Watts from Wimbledon College, with her Heather Firbanks dress and Jessica Hardy from Bristol Old Vic Theatre School with a mid-18th century riding habit, were both also very talented finalists.

The afternoon comprised a trip to Killerton with a picnic in the sun, avoiding the showers, and being thrilled and impressed in turn by the collections of dress on display, superbly mounted, and also the collections brought out of stores by Shelley Tobin. The delegates very much appreciated Shelley sharing her knowledge, and allowing wonderful access to the carefully selected items.

The day ended on a delicious note with a proper Devon cream tea, including not only scones and Devon cream but delicious Eton mess, with more Devon cream!

Christine Stevens

On Monday 16 of us went to the Somerset Heritage Centre in Taunton; this opened in 2011 and draws together in one location all the Somerset Archives, Local History, archaeology and storage of objects for Somerset museums. Senior archivist, Esther Hoyle, showed us where all the paper records for the county are kept under controlled conditions, and let us see their oldest document from the year 705, in which the King of Wessex granted land to the Abbot of Glastonbury. We saw the large search room with facilities for researchers, and the store-rooms for objects, mostly in boxes, but farm equipment and a large stuffed horse were visible. The costume curator, Estelle Gilbert, showed us the costume store, where again, understandably, most things were in boxes or covered, but in another room Estelle had laid out a few choice objects. There were traditional country smocks and quilts, and a selection from the Primrose Peacock collection of buttons, which apparently are one of their most popular items. Three beautifully embroidered waistcoats from the 18th and 19th centuries were lovely to look at, but for me the real stars were the early 17th century lace-trimmed gentleman's shirt and two lady's smocks.

VANESSA HOPKINS