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Inside Out: Revealing Clothing's Hidden Secrets

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The art of creating beautiful custom clothing has always entailed beautiful workmanship that is hidden when the pieces are worn. This exhibition showcases these secret inner-workings that are usually out of sight. Pockets, quilted linings, boning, and labels all come to light when the garments are flipped inside out.

The pieces selected for this exhibition, which span the 18th to the 20th century and include both men’s and women’s wear, are excellent examples of their respective eras. Unlike many period garments, which have been reworked or have had their linings and waistbands altered or removed, these pieces have maintained a remarkable degree of integrity. In fact, in some cases, the insides are as beautifully finished as the outsides.

Fashion history usually focuses on changing silhouettes with the rise and fall of hemlines or the tightening and loosening of waistlines. Underlying these external shifts are structural changes that appear only when the garments are laid out and examined closely. Creating three-dimensional garments from bolts of cloth demands solving certain basic problems: how to finish the edges, how to fasten the garments, how to shape the material around the body’s curves. Dressmakers and tailors have addressed these problems with a number of ingenious methods. Some of these techniques reappear in every era while others are specific to a period. This exhibition tracks these changes with a careful selection of representative pieces, which are mounted in ways to allow visitors to take a close look at the interiors.

Sara Hume, PhD
Curator/Assistant Professor
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Robe à l’anglaise
European, 1770s
Iridescent purple silk with brocaded flowers, lined with linen, silk hem facing, linen tapes
Gift of Ross Trump (Museum Purchase), KSUM 1995.68.1

Open robes like this had no fastenings down the center front. The bodice would have been stitched closed when the wearer was dressed, while the skirt would have remained open down the front to reveal the petticoat beneath.

Dresses in the 18th century were often designed to showcase the textiles. This particular textile is brocaded which means that the colored threads that appear in the floral motifs do not extend the whole width of the fabric. Looking at the reverse of the textile is the easiest way to identify this technique.

This handwoven brocaded fabric was so valuable that every effort was made to use the entire width without cutting away waste pieces. The edge of the fabric or selvedge was left intact, leaving a neat finish.
An examination of the lining shows places where seams have been taken out, indicating that the dress has been altered. It is typical of dresses of this period to be stitched loosely, in anticipation of taking the dress apart so that it could be updated as styles changed.

This skirt was designed to be lifted up from the ground in a style known as à la polonaise, which was created by tying the linen tapes together.
Blue satin quilted petticoat
European, ca. 1750-75
Blue silk satin, wool lining, woolen batting, linen waistband
Silverman/Rodgers Collection, KSUM 1983.1.3

The skirt worn under the open robe was called a petticoat although it was meant to be seen.

While the outer layer of this petticoat is a fine silk satin, the inner face is a loosely woven wool. The batting between the quilted layers is also wool and would have kept the wearer warm during the winter.

The hem of the petticoat is finished with a facing in blue silk. This finishing technique protects the bottom edge from wear and snags. Hem facings can be seen on almost all of the skirts in the exhibition, including the brocaded open robe.

The skirt and petticoat have openings at each side to allow access to the pockets, which would not have been attached to the skirt. Instead they were like flat purses worn inside of the skirt.
Shirts were the man’s basic undergarment and would have protected the outer-garments from the body’s oils. To show just how beautiful the finish is, the piece is displayed inside out.

While the outer silk garments would not have been washed, the linen shirt would have undergone many washings, so it had to be sturdy. The shirt is reinforced in areas that would take the most wear. Across the shoulders and at the top of the side slit, additional pieces of linen have been appliquéd to the reverse of the fabric.

Every edge of the fabric is expertly finished, particularly the tiny rolled hem along the bottom and the edge of the ruffle.

The gathering along the ruffle and at the back of the neck is perfectly even. To achieve such exactitude, the gathering stitches must have been carefully counted to ensure the same number of threads was drawn into each pleat.
Embroidered silk satin coat, waistcoat and breeches

English, 1780s
Silk satin, silk embroidery, linen lining
Silverman/Rodgers Collection, KSUM 1983.1.22 a-c

This exquisite man’s suit shows a stark contrast between areas that would be seen and those that would be concealed. The coat is intricately embroidered; however, the interior is lined with a relatively coarse linen lining.

While the coat is the most visible element of the suit, the waistcoat is only seen along the center front where the coat opens. The back of the waistcoat is therefore made of much less costly material, in this case linen. Any cut edge of the silk satin is hidden by the linings and wide satin facings.
Although the 18th-century suit is an easily recognizable style, the shape of the breeches is unfamiliar. The cut of these breeches differs strikingly from the style of modern trousers. The breeches were only visible along the center front and below the hem of the coat, so the fullness in the rear is rarely seen.

All three pieces of the suit include pockets. Those for the coat and waistcoat are conspicuously embroidered, while those for the breeches would not be seen at all when the suit was worn. Although normally hidden from view, these breeches have several flaps and panels that form three pockets on each side for a total of six!

The very visible buttons along the outside of the knee and thigh conceal the edge of the textile which is a beautiful contrasting selvedge edge. Any cut edge of the silk satin is hidden by the linings and wide satin facings.
Sheer white cotton dress
English, ca. 1815-20
White cotton gauze, cotton embroidery, cotton appliqués
Silverman/Rodgers Collection, KSUM 1983.1.32

The delicacy of the sheer cotton fabrics of the early 19th century stood in stark contrast to the stiff silks of the earlier decade. This cotton gauze demanded careful attention to stitches, since sloppiness could not be concealed and because the delicate cotton would unravel if the edges were not finished.

There are two fasteners on the back of the dress. The neckline closes with a hook and eye closure. The waist is shaped and secured with a drawstring, which is visible through the casing in the back although a linen tape reinforces the gathered waistline at the front.
Piping is used along the neck edge and over the shoulder seams to reinforce the seams. The band of piping across the shoulders hides the gathering and the cut edges of the fabric.

The bottom edge is finished with decorative whitework embroidery that suggests lace. The leaf motifs are created through appliqués applied to the reverse, then edged with cotton cord.
Printed day dress
American, ca. 1850
Printed fabric with wool weft and cotton or linen warp, bodice lined with cotton twill, baleen (whalebone), skirt lined with plainweave cotton, braid
In memory of Blanche M. Bartshe (Mrs. Glen E.), KSUM 1984.2.46

This small dress was probably worn by a girl in her teens. Although the skirt is full-length like adult styles, the style of the bodice with a yoke and pleats down the front and back is typical of children’s dress at the time.

The bodice is completely lined with cotton twill fabric. The hook and eye closures down the center front are on the lining rather than on the outer wool fabric and are hidden by the pleats.

This underbodice is stiffened with baleen from a whale’s mouth (misleadingly known as whalebone), which is enclosed in casing stitched into the lining.
The fullness of the skirt was created with the cartridge pleating at the waist. The thickness of these pleats, which is pushed to the inside of the dress, would cause the skirts to stand out from the body.

The skirt is fully lined with a different cotton fabric, which is also used to make a pocket. The bottom edge of the skirt, which would have grazed the ground, is protected with a strip of wool braid.
Black wool tailcoat with quilted satin lining
American, 1850s
Wool broadcloth, satin, braid, cotton twill pockets
Gift of Mrs. F. Eugene Schumacher, KSUM 1986.17.1

The beautifully finished interior of this mid-19th-century man’s tailcoat provides an interesting counterpoint to the comparatively crude linings of the previous century.

Although none of the lining would be visible when the coat was worn, the quilting is a thing of beauty. Tailoring had developed into an art form, which is particularly impressive considering that this garment predates the adoption of the sewing machine.

A close examination also reveals that the edge of the lapels is finished with a very fine braid.
The fine wool was steamed into a three-dimensional shape and the interior padding serves to round out the suit into the desired silhouette. The tailcoat has several interior pockets including the one in the chest and one in each tail.

The felted finish of the wool prevented it from unraveling. The bottom edge of the coat is actually the raw edge of the fabric. The raw edges of the facings on the interior however, are finished with a pinking edge, which resembles dovetail joints.
During the second half of the 19th century, most women’s dresses were actually composed of a separate skirt and bodice. Generally the waist of the bodice would conceal the waistband of the skirt.

The skirts by the 1860s were enormous and supported with a steel cage crinoline. In order to maintain body in the bottom edge of the skirt which extended below the bottom hoop of the crinoline, a stiff facing fabric of polished cotton was added. This skirt actually has two different layers of polished cotton at the hem, with the brown layer extended over a foot from the hem. A less heavily waxed polished cotton also forms a large pocket in the skirt. The hem itself is protected with a braided edge.
The brown cotton underlining of this bodice provides a beautiful contrast to the green silk taffeta of the outer fabric. The taffeta and cotton layers were cut and sewed as one piece. When the seams were opened, the edge of the taffeta was turned under and finished. The boning was cased in the brown cotton and attached to the inside of the seams.

The seams on the bodice are finished with piping. The piped edge along the bottom of the bodice is created with a piece of cord inside the bottom facing which is hand-stitched in place once the facing is flipped under.
Gold silk and blue velvet ensemble

Label: “Mrs. C. Donigan 109 West 12th St. New York”
American, ca. 1880

Jacquard woven gold silk, ivory taffeta, silk fringe, dark blue velvet, petersham waistband, baleen (whalebone), ivory cotton petticoat, starched cotton ruffles and lace, buckram
Gift of Elizabeth Macintyre, KSUM 1995.49.1 a-c

The interior of this dress is so beautiful it is no surprise that the maker added her label.

One of the benefits of custom made clothing is that it can compensate for perceived figure flaws. A peak inside this bodice reveals that the bust has been generously enhanced with padding.

Waistbands of petersham ribbon were common in dress bodices from the 1870s through to the 1910s. While they anchored the waist of the bodice, they also served as a place for the dressmaker to add her name and address.
The fullness at the back of the petticoat was created by tying the sides together with tapes. The ties on the inside of this petticoat combine elastic and silk ribbons. Such ties are typical of the full bustle skirts of the 1880s. While a similar concept to the ties in the 18th-century skirt, these run horizontally when tied rather than vertically.

Around 1880, skirts were relatively slim down the legs but finished in a wide, sweeping train. To keep the train from folding in on itself and from wearing out on the floor, the floorside of the skirt was finished with rows and rows of ruffles. The term in French for the bottom ruffle is *balayeuse*, which means sweeper. This cotton ruffle was easily replaced once it wore out.
This suit was made by Elias Rheinheimer, a Cleveland tailor. The label in the neck of the jacket was removed, but the tailor’s name appears on the buttons of the trousers. Although the cut of this coat is similar to the earlier tailcoat (#7), the lining is not quilted. The quality of the tailoring remains in evidence. The silk lining, which continues onto the face of the lapels is handstitched along the edges.

The vest is lined with brown cotton, which includes an interior pocket in addition to the four exterior pockets. Rheinheimer made the back of the vest from the same silk twill as the lining and lapels of the tailcoat.

Both the back of the vest and the back of the trousers have adjustable tabs and buckles, which would have allowed Mr. Allison to let out his suit a little when needed.
Man’s dress shirt
Label: “Jourdain-Brown/Jourdain-Legeay/14 rue Halévy/Paris”
French, ca. 1900
Cotton
Gift of Phyllis F. Edmison, KSUM 1998.92.4

Man’s wingtip collar
Label: “Arrow/Cluett, Peabody & Co, Inc./USA”
American, ca. 1930
Heavily starched cotton
Gift of Mrs. Willard F. Bixby in memory of Ida Tieleke Bixby, KSUM 1997.79.8 b

White bowtie
Label: “The Perfect Tie/Pat’d June 21st 1898/May 9th 1905/Keys & Lockwood, NY”
American, ca. 1910
Cotton
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. C.A. Williams, KSUM 1986.55.7

Men’s formal shirts were actually composed of a number of separate elements. The collar and sometimes cuffs were detachable. The motivation behind disassembling these pieces was to allow for washing. The collars were most in need of washing and would also be heavily starched. The component parts were held together with separate studs. By not having attached buttons, the shirts and collars were much easier to press. The interior of the shirt retains the red stitches which probably identified the shirt when it was laundered.
Ivory silk and lace wedding dress
American, 1898
Silk broadcloth, machine lace, cotton lining, baleen (whalebone), velvet hem facing
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Roland B. Mitchell, KSUM 1993.18.1 ab

This dress was worn by Mary Bishop Whisler of Hancock County, Ohio for her wedding on September 25, 1898.

The blousing at front of the bodice was typical of the turn-of-the-century. A look at the interior structure reveals that the underbodice is heavily boned down the front, with the loose appearance being created with a space between the two layers of the bodice.

The loose front of the bodice also conceals a secret pocket in the underbodice. This pocket is not visible when the dress is worn, but its outline can be seen in this backlit photo. Most likely the bride tucked a personal keepsake next to her heart.

The herringbone stitches attaching the boning to the seam allowances provide a beautiful finish to the interior. The pinked edges of the casing and seam allowances have a function – to prevent frayed edges – but also add to the aesthetic appeal.
The waist of the bodice has two hooks at the center back, which align with corresponding eyes on the skirt’s waistband. These points of attachment ensured that the dress remained straight and in place.

The lace flounce on the skirt is not simply stitched onto the surface of the skirt; it actually conceals the seam between the pieces of the skirt. The flared trumpet shape is created with a semi-circular piece wrapped around the back and bottom of the skirt. This ruffle is then stiffened with a form of interfacing. The bottom hem is finished inside with an inch deep facing of matching velvet.
Evening dress of grey-green satin and taffeta
Pierre Balmain
French, 1958
Satin, taffeta, petersham waistband, elastic garter suspenders, boning, silk organza underlining
Transferred from the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, Gift of Ernest Byfield through The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980, KSUM 1995.17.576

The interior of this evening gown from the 1950s is as stiff and structured as any of the pieces from the 19th century.

The drapery of the bodice has been stitched onto a support that is essentially a corset. The very deep waiststay anchors the bodice into place and ensures that the strapless neckline will not dip too low. The underwire cups at the bust have been padded out. The skirt has been fully underlined with a sheer silk organza that is cut in one with the silk satin.
The closure in the back of the dress includes many different types of fastener. The waist stays close first with four hooks and eyes, then is concealed with the zipper.

The drapery then laps over the zipper and fastens with several more snaps and hooks and eyes. When the whole garment is secured, the fasteners are completely undetectable.
The lining is sewn to the jacket and the skirt in parallel vertical lines. These stitches go all the way through to the outside of the garment but they line up so perfectly with the loose weave of the fabric that they are barely detectable.

Another distinctive element of a Chanel jacket is the chain used as a weight along the hem. The weighted bottom ensures that the jacket will lay flat.
The suit is carefully finished in order to reduce bulkiness that naturally results when working with such a heavy and loosely woven fabric. The buttonholes are finished with stitches on the outside but bound on the inside lining. The edges of the jacket along the collar, cuffs, front opening and bottom hem are finished with whipstitches that are decorative and functional.

The hem of the skirt is finished with a lightweight facing which is less bulky than turning under the heavy wool. The waistband of the skirt is a crisp silk that is laid on the bias to ensure it remains neat and flat.
Further reading:


