

A Treasure Trove

Explore Syracuse University's inspiring costume collection

BY CAROL J. FRESIA

New York City is known for its fashion schools and museums with fabulous collections of historical garments. But the Big Apple has competition upstate, in the Sue Ann Genet Costume Collection and Research Center at Syracuse University. What is unique about this collection, compared with those of larger institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, is that it focuses on American-made garments by famous designers such as Geoffrey Beene, Bill Blass, Mary McFadden, and Pauline

Trigère. The Genet collection also reveals the often overlooked originality of smaller fashion houses and even of home sewers of decades past.

Its curator, Jeffrey Mayer, truly understands garment design and construction. His interest—which flows through the collection and the exhibitions he curates from it—is in unique details that make outstanding, but not outlandish, garments.

The university is home to a renowned fashion design program, which, in turn, houses the collection named for the wife of the late Leon M. Genet, a longtime benefactor of the



Curator Jeffrey Mayer and senior fashion students examine a 1997 Bill Blass embroidered velvet jacket.

of Vintage Fashion



Racks of Gilded Age garments serve as inspiration for design and history students at Syracuse University.



To mark the publication of *Vintage Details: A Fashion Sourcebook*, Jeffrey Mayer mounted an exhibition of star garments in the Sue and Leon Genet Gallery.

university. Sue Ann, who passed away in the 1970s, was an accomplished textile artist and sculptor, and Leon honored her memory by supporting the College for Human Development at Syracuse, now the School of Design.

Today, the collection contains nearly 3,500 objects and is used as a study resource for the university's students. Jeffrey, a fashion designer and associate professor of fashion, fashion history, and textiles, has brought this hidden gem into the public eye. Recently he's coauthored, with Basia Szkutnicka, *Vintage Details: A Fashion Sourcebook* (Laurence King, 2016), based on the Genet Collection. This hefty volume is a thoughtfully organized compendium of photographs showing details from garments in the collection. It's a must-have book for any sewer or designer interested in the beautiful, the unique, and the inspirational.

A CHALLENGING HISTORY

Before Jeffrey took over as curator in 2008, the collection had been through difficult times. It was established in the 1930s as part of the School of Home Economics, and by the 1960s it had grown considerably and was named the American Costume Collection. In 1972, however, much of the collection was destroyed in a fire. To rebuild its holdings, the university requested donations from alumni. The response to this call was impressive, yielding many garments dating from the Victorian era to the present day.

In the 1980s, Leon created the Genet Gallery as a campus home for the costume collection.

When the School of Design, now part of the College of Visual and Performing Arts, undertook a building program in 2004, the collection was boxed and moved to a storage facility. It remained completely inaccessible until 2009, when its new home in the Nancy Cantor Warehouse was completed. Jeffrey

and his registrar, Lauren Tagliaferro, had six weeks to unpack the 350 boxes into the new space, a challenging task but one that revealed deficits and unexpected riches in the collection. For example, Jeffrey relates that he was "surprised to find lots of Pucci dresses. I then discovered that Syracuse, somewhat surprisingly, had a Pucci boutique in the late 1970s. That explained why there were so many Italian dresses in a largely American collection."

A DEDICATED CURATOR

Jeffrey earned a bachelor's degree in fashion history and design, and a master's in fashion history and museum studies. In 1992, he joined Syracuse University's faculty, teaching various classes in the fashion design department. Three years later, in 1995, he founded Conover Mayer with his business partner, Todd Conover; their design company developed women's eveningwear for high-end department stores.

This background qualifies him ideally for his position as curator of the Genet Collection. He has a great appreciation for the fine details of fashion and the technical knowledge to understand how they were created. Trained in textile restoration, he's also able to make minor repairs or stabilization treatments as needed.

The Genet Collection has no official budget for acquisitions, so it still relies on donations. However, Jeffrey has a keen sense of the vintage and antique clothing market and has filled in the occasional gap when he needs an example of a certain designer's work or of a particular technique for an exhibition or as teaching supplements.

"I love Lesage embroidery," he confesses, "and I was lucky enough to find a rare Bill Blass design on eBay that incorporated Lesage embroidery and beading. I bought it and added it to the collection, where it fits in perfectly."



Silk evening dresses typify the sleek 1930s silhouette.



Curator Jeffrey Mayer purchased an unusual Bill Blass jacket on eBay (above and at left) to enhance the collection's holdings. The jacket is embellished with beads and sequins, in a Matisse-inspired design, by the Lesage workshop in Paris.



Design students get a hands-on lesson with a reproduction 18th-century corset and side hoops.

A RICH STUDY RESOURCE

Today, the collection is stored on open rolling garment racks in a climate-controlled room where students and faculty can access pieces for research. Jeffrey's philosophy is that "you have to keep the holdings in view in order to get the best use from them." Shoes, hats, bags, and other accessories are archivally boxed and placed on the racks' tops and bottoms—as though in a giant walk-in closet. Categorized by date, the objects reflect changes in fashion over the past two centuries and more. Fashion design classes turn to the collection for inspiration, of course, and Jeffrey selects examples of whatever garment feature or construction detail is being studied.

History students visit to gain an understanding of how people dressed in the past. "Some students come in to look at the collection just for fun, and we have had visits from writers, including a novelist doing research on 18th-century costume. We were able to help him understand the sort of garments his characters would have worn," Jeffrey says. Similarly, the drama department researches costume styles in the collection and industrial design students study closures, purse hardware, and other manufactured elements.

The collection has few examples of French haute couture, but Jeffrey doesn't see that as a shortcoming. Instead, he continues to be fascinated and enlightened by the beautiful craftsmanship and notable originality displayed in the works

of less well-known designers and dressmakers.

A CREATIVE EXHIBITION CENTER

In addition to storage and classroom space, the Fashion Design department boasts a gallery where Jeffrey and his students regularly mount thematic exhibitions to highlight the collection's assets. Some shows have been taken to larger venues, such as the Everson Gallery in Syracuse and the Stickley Museum in Morris Plains, New Jersey.

In recent years, the collection has been used as the basis of hugely popular exhibitions on the Art and Crafts movement in the United States; the influence of Marie Antoinette's style on 20th- and 21st-century fashion; the designs of Emilio Pucci; and Marlo Thomas's distinctive outfits in the 1960s television series *That Girl*.

Although the collection began as a reference for home economics students, it has value for anyone interested in sewing and fashion. For home sewers, in particular, the abundance of unusual and lovely garment details is exciting. Most of the pieces aren't over-the-top runway looks, but stylish clothes that could easily be updated to a contemporary wardrobe. The collection is open to the public by appointment, so consider paying a visit. You're guaranteed to leave inspired.

Carol J. Fresia is Threads' senior technical editor.



An original 1980s Japanese kimono by Katsuhiko Hayashi of Kyoto at top left; late 1960s dresses by American designer Donald Brooks, top right; teacher, designer, and curator Jeffrey Mayer amid the collection's many racks of vintage garments.