

On display in *A Century of Style: 1860 – 1960* are ‘special occasion dresses’ including an exquisite two-piece white cotton tea gown that conjures up the romantic aesthetic of contemporary designer Stella McCartney; a pink and green lace and velvet bridesmaid dress that would be at home in Raf Simon’s (for Dior) vintage inspired fall runway show, and a Chanel-esque sheer bejeweled black flapper dress as ‘on trend’ today as it was 100 years ago. The featured clothing ranges from hand-made to mass-produced and reflects changes in length, size, and exposure. ‘Special occasion’ status is likely the reason these items have survived. Perhaps the wearers also recognized their value as objects with cultural significance — documenting a particular time and tradition in Wilton’s history.

What do Wiltonian’s closets — and the special occasion clothing inside them — say about who we are, what we value and how we live in 2018? What is important for us to know regarding the way our clothing is designed, produced, distributed, worn and cared for? And which items will be worthy of closer examination 100 years from now? Will yoga pants, for example, survive the test of time?

An edited excerpt from *A Century of Style* by Pamela Hovland, as published in the September/October 2018 issue of *Wilton Magazine*

The items in *A Century of Style* represent a small sampling of the clothing the WHS has amassed over the decades. The Society’s equivalent of a walk-in closet is actually their basement, overflowing with treasures documenting the lives of Wiltonians past. An abundance of carefully wrapped and tagged clothing and accessories for men, women, and children, represents every decade beginning around 1740. The collection includes wedding gowns and suits, mourning coats, infant christening outfits, hostess’ dresses, even a whole collection of nightshirts. And a plethora of great shoes (about 350 pairs)!

A Century of Style: 1860 – 1960 was made possible through the generosity of Catherine Romer, *Co-Vice President, Collections*, at the Wilton Historical Society.

The exhibition is the result of a collaboration between the Wilton Historical Society, writer and designer Pamela Hovland, and Megan Smith-Harris, Editor of *Wilton Magazine*.

We hope you enjoy the exhibition and return for more forays into Wilton’s history. Collections, exhibitions and preserving 18 historic buildings are only possible with funding. Please consider supporting these efforts by becoming a member or giving a donation. Thank you!



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Design: Pamela Hovland Design



Tea Gown
1870-1890
Cotton
Gift of Fran Andrews



**A Century of Style:
1860 – 1960**
A Glimpse Inside
the Wilton
Historical Society’s
Clothing Archive
August 2018 – October 2018



1 Evening Dress
1850–1860
Silk, Cotton
Gift of Lindsay Alston



This two-piece Victorian evening dress has a 'Bertha' collar, a low neckline style that began in the 1830s and grew increasingly popular the middle of the 19th Century. The tight waist of the bodice works with the wide skirt to create a bell shape. Dresses of the 1850s saw the skirts grow wider than previous decades, frequently assisted by the development of inner crinoline cages as well as tiered flounces sewn into the skirt. Note the wide 'Pagoda' sleeves which were briefly popular in the 1850s and imitated the flared roofs of East Asian buildings.

2 Tea Gown
1870–1890
Cotton
Gift of Fran Andrews



Fashionable women wore a tea gown such as this example to slightly less formal events, and when hosting afternoon tea for guests. By the 1870s and 1880s, the emphasis on large bell skirts had given way to a slimmer profile, with flat-fronts and full backs. Tea gowns, particularly ones intended for afternoon entertainment, had higher necklines than evening dresses of the period.

3 Special Occasion Dress
1887–1895
Silk, Cotton Netting, Jet Beads
Museum Purchase, Elizabeth Ambler Estate Auction



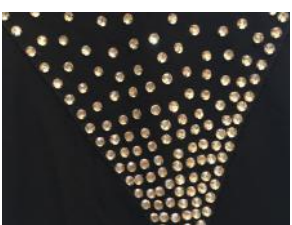
In many ways, the fashion trends of the late 1880s and 1890s were the complete opposite of what was in vogue during the 1860s. High and elaborately decorated necklines took shape during the 1880s, and by the turn of the century they would be the height of fashion. This two-piece dress also has 'leg-of-mutton' sleeves, characterized by large puffed shoulders which tapered down to a tight-fitting cuff. The shoulders of these 'leg-of-mutton' sleeves would reach an extreme during the mid-1890s, often requiring wire supports.

4 Bridesmaid Dress
1902–1904
Chiffon, Satin
Gift of Clark Travell



Women's dress by the turn of the 20th-century was increasingly designed with practicality in mind, particularly as more women entered the workforce. This bridesmaid's dress, while designed for a special occasion, was influenced by this trend. Much of the superfluous fabric and artificial supports of past decades are gone, replaced by straight skirts and thinner sleeves. Dresses at this time created an hourglass figure, the waist typically accented by a tight belt or sash like the one seen here. New corsets modified the figure into an 'S' shaped profile, which pushed the wearer's chest forward and the hips back.

5 Cocktail Dress
1920–1929
Chiffon, Rhinestones
Gift of Lindsay Alston



The flapper dress is the iconic fashion of the Roaring Twenties. Inspired by women who were rejecting previous social norms, flapper dresses were far more revealing than previous styles. Sleeveless dresses with knee-length skirts became in vogue for both day dresses and evening dresses alike. Loose fitting drop-waist dresses replaced the corsets of earlier decades, and in many cases dresses achieved a more androgynous look with no defined waist at all. The rhinestone design of this dress was inspired by the Art Deco movement which rose to popularity in art and design throughout the 1920s.

6 Tea Dress
1930–1935
Silk, Lace
Gift of Mrs. Alfred Birch



The Great Depression impacted fashion just as it affected every aspect of American life. The care-free optimism of the previous decade was replaced by more reserved and sophisticated fashion. This tea gown demonstrates the longer skirt length of the period, as well as the popular 'handkerchief hem', an asymmetric hem with several hanging pointed corners. Also noticeable is the 'bias cut', a style created by French designer Madeleine Vionnet, where dresses would cling to the wearer and accentuate feminine curves.

7 Special Occasion Dress
1941
Chiffon Velvet, Silk Embroidery
Gift of Mrs. Alfred Birch



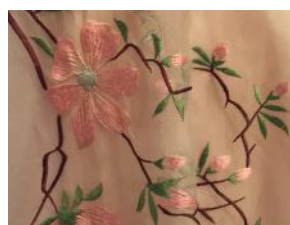
This luxurious dress was created in 1941, shortly before war time rationing affected both the quantity and quality of textiles available to the fashion industry. It continues many of the trends that first appeared in the 1930s, including the hourglass shape produced by the bias cut. Dresses at this time also featured neutral, muted tones to emphasize the more sophisticated look that began in the previous decade.

High Heeled Shoe
1941
Suede
Gift of Mrs. Alfred Birch



Custom-made shoes complete the ensemble. It is likely the shoemaker dyed the suede and chose the ribbon to match the fabrics chosen for the one-of-a-kind dress.

8 Cocktail Dress
1950–1959
Silk Chiffon
Gift of Laura Caravatt



In 1947, designer Christian Dior presented his first fashion collection. The style shown here was almost immediately considered a revolution in the fashion industry; it was in stark contrast to the heavy, square, military-influenced designs of the early 1940s. Known as the 'New Look', the Dior style was defined by soft shoulders, a tight waist, and full skirts. Dior's influence can be seen throughout the 1950s, including this dress, which embodies the softness and feminine curves of the New Look. Layers of padding and fabric choices help achieve the hourglass shape.

9 Cocktail Dress
1960–1969
Rayon Crepe
Gift of Marie Donahue



Sheath dresses like the one on display here were a popular and versatile style for women in the 1960s. While embracing the popular trend of more youthful designs, this fitted, straight-cut dress could be used as professional attire for a working woman, or as a cocktail dress. Also noticeable is the increased use of synthetic materials in the 1960s, such as Rayon, which were cheaper and easier to care for. By the end of the decade, 'Space Age' inspired clothing made of plastics were commonplace.