Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

VICTORIAN LADY H312

Evening Dress



The two-piece evening dress has a purple and white check pattern and is made of silk taffeta. It probably dates from the 1890s. The relatively low neck line and full skirt would make it very suitable for a young lady to wear at an evening soiree or dance. It was evidently made for a small lady and shows signs of alteration and adaptation. Many evening garments were later used for fancy-dress or in amateur dramatics.

Bodice. The bodice is lined with white cotton for strength and is boned with whalebone. It fastens at the front with hooks and eyes, which are attached on alternate sides of the bodice to make the fastening secure. The puff sleeves are elbow length. The inner bodice of white silk is covered with a very fine silk net (called tulle) and the bodice neck line and sleeves are decorated with machine-made unbleached lace. The bodice is hooked to the skirt at the waistline. The joining of the two parts of the dress is covered by a velvet cummerbund, which also fastens with hooks and eyes.

Skirt. The skirt has a cotton inner skirt with a frill at the hem to add substance to the bottom of the dress skirt and help it stand out. It would have been worn over petticoats to produce a bell-shaped silhouette. The extremely small waist would have been achieved by tight corseting. Where the frill is joined to the body of the skirt it is decorated with rosettes of the same fine tulle which is used on the inner bodice. The stands of narrow violet velvet ribbons which connects each of the rosettes echoes the violet cummerbund around the waist.

Lace Shawl



The shawl is of high quality machine-made black lace. It is made to be folded diagonally so that the more heavily patterned corners fall one above the other in a point. The shawl is worn either around the shoulders or draped over the arms or the elbows with the point at the back. Worn in this way the shawl would cover the back of the dress from above the waist to about 50cm above the hemline. When worn to an evening event, the shawl could be raised to cover the head when leaving the carriage.

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Kid Gloves



Most ladies costumes were incomplete without gloves. Long evening gloves of silk, lace or kid were all popular. Mrs Beeton wrote that 'white kid gloves are worn by ladies at dinner parties, but should be taken off before the business of dining commences'. These gloves have an opening at the wrist. If refreshments were taken, the hands could be slipped out through this opening and the fingers of the glove turned back without tugging the entire glove from the arm. This procedure was often followed at dinner, despite Mrs Beeton's ruling.

Cape



Short capes were popular at various times throughout the Victorian period. This hip-length cape sits comfortably on the shoulders and could be worn over an evening dress without crushing the fabric. It is made from dark brown velvet and lined with lightly quilted sateen (a cotton fabric with a satin-like finish). The cape is faced with black silk and has unusual fastenings of velvet bars and black silk-covered buttons. The collar can be raised for added warmth and fastened by means of hooks and eyes. The black silk hood has been fastened to the back of the cape although originally it would have been possible to raise it to cover the head.

Muff



A muff was usually used in cold weather to keep the hands warm, even if gloves were worn. Carriages were unheated and on a winter's night ladies travelling in them needed warm clothes. Sometimes a small metal or stoneware hot water bottle called a muff warmer was carried inside the muff to keep the fingers warm. This muff has black fur on the outside and light fur inside. Rabbit fur was commonly used.

Button Hook



A buttonhook was an essential part of the dressing table equipment of the Victorian lady. Victorian dresses, gloves, boots and shoes were often fastened by long rows of small buttons. Fastening them all up could take quite a while and be difficult, particularly if the buttonholes were quite small and tight. A buttonhook made the process easier. The hook was pushed through the buttonhole and latched around the button. The button could then be tugged through the buttonhole. Such a device was particularly useful in putting on shoes and boots.

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Vinaigrette



A vinaigrette is a small container with a perforated top which is used to contain perfume. In the nineteenth century a young lady would wear a very light scent such as ottar of roses or eau de cologne - stronger perfumes were considered rather vulgar. The favoured way of wearing perfume was to soak a small sponge or piece of cotton in the scent and secure it in a perforated container. This example is made of plain silver. It could have been worn on a ribbon around the neck or at the waist.

Because ladies often wore very tight corsets to create a small waist, their restricted capacity for breathing could cause them to faint, particularly in a hot room. Smelling salts were used to revive the lady if this happened. Smelling salts were often contained in silver boxes or glass phials with decorative hinged lids, which were also known as vinaigrettes.

Ebony Glove Stretchers



During the Victorian period gloves made of kid leather (like the ones included in this box) were popular. It was fashionable for such gloves to have a tight fit, but they would shrink when they weren't being worn and become impossible to put on if not carefully looked after. This contraption was designed to keep gloves wearable. Two long prongs would slide into the fingers of the glove and pressure was then applied to stretch them.

Purse



An unaccompanied young lady might wish to carry a small amount of money with her. This little purse could only accommodate small coins such as sixpenny bits (useful for tipping) and half or full gold sovereigns. It is of fine kid skin and is lined with blue silk and covered with an abalone shell.

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Dance Card



A young lady attending a dance would always carry a dance card. Young men would approach her and request a dance. If she accepted the dance would be recorded on the card. Dances were numbered and announced by the Master of Ceremonies or the host. A young lady could measure her popularity by the number of dances recorded on her card and the speed with which the card was filled.

The card in this collection in fact consists of four thin ivory tablets enclosed between abalone shell covers. The covers are fastened with a silver catch. Such dance cards were often worn on a fine chain at the waist or on a bracelet and often a tiny silver or gold propelling pencil was also worn to fill in the card. The pencilled numbers and names could be rubbed off after the dance and be ready for the next occasion.

Whalebone Stay



Strips of whalebone (baleen) like this were used to make stays, which were inserted into corsets and other articles of clothing to stiffen them and help pull the wearers body into an upright and slim posture. In the Victorian period men as well as women sometimes wore a corset to help achieve a fashionably slender shape.

In 1881 the Rational Dress Society was founded in London. Its aims were to 'protest against the introduction of any fashion in dress that either deforms the figure, impedes the movements of the body, or in any way tends to injure the health. It protests against the wearing of tightly-fitting corsets; of high-heeled shoes; of heavily-weighted skirts, as rendering healthy exercise almost impossible; and of all tie down cloaks or other garments impeding on the movements of the arms.'

Reformers introduced the Emancipation Bodice as an alternative to corsets. This was a tight sleeveless vest, buttoning up the front, with rows of buttons along the bottom to which could be attached petticoats and skirt. However a slender figure achieved through wearing a corset continued to be popular until the First World War.