

Fashion statement

Conrad Mansion displays garments spanning 100 years

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The Daily Inter Lake

In the late 1800s and into the turn of the century, fashion was anything but comfortable.

Stiff corsets cinched waists to tiny proportions.

Hoop skirts, those cage-like undergarments, shaped skirts into full, billowy garments that made sitting down a challenge.

Bustles enhanced backsides, while undergarment enhancements on women's front sides puffed bodices into a "pigeon breast" shape. Some breast "falsies" were loaded with actual springs.

The Conrad Mansion Museum is delving into fashion in a big way this summer with its "Celebrating 100 Years of Fashion" exhibit that features authentic garments from 1868 to 1968.

Last week Teresa Knutson, the mansion's volunteer clothing curator and exhibit creator, stepped tour guides through the collection, sharing insight the guides will tap into as they bring guests through the mansion this season.

The exhibit includes 22 mannequins showing changes in the shape of clothing worn by not only women but also men and children, though the lion's share of the collection features women's garments.

The earliest piece is a late 1860s bodice and drape worn with a wide floor-length skirt over hoop petticoats.

TERESA KNUTSON volunteer clothing curator and exhibit creator for the Conrad Mansion, places a mannequin wearing a style of dress that was popular during the time Charles Conrad first arrived in Montana. The dress is part of the mansion's "Celebrating 100 years of Fashion" exhibit this summer.



The tour links each clothing exhibit with a special time in the lives of Kalispell founder Conrad E. Conrad and his wife Alicia, who lived in the mansion. For example, the first exhibit notes that 1868 is the year Charles Conrad came to Fort Benton. “Before the 1780s fashion changed very slowly,” Knutson explained to the tour guides. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, when textile manufacturing took hold, “only the wealthy could participate in fashion,” she noted.

By the late 1800s, though, women’s fashions began showing noticeable changes every two to 10 years. “People could achieve fashionable style by what they wore underneath,” Knutson said, noting the corsets and hoop skirts as examples. By the early 1880s, “the bustle had come back in its full glory.”

Knutson’s assistant, Sarah Safford, showed illustrations of a variety of undergarment body-enhancement devices. A raccoon coat worn by the George Campbell, second husband of the Conrads’ daughter, Alicia, during his time at Yale, is included as exhibition marches into the 1920s.



A WOMEN’S wool bodice and skirt and a child’s silk taffeta dress worn in the 1880s are on display in a bedroom at the Conrad Mansion Museum. These dresses were popular when Catherine Conrad was born to Charles and Alicia Conrad in 1885. At that time the bustle “had come back in its full glory” according to museums’ volunteer clothing curator Teresa Knutson. The historic clothing display links fashions with significant dates in the Conrads’ lives.

Save the date

Visitors touring the Conrad Mansion Museum can see the “Celebrating 100 Years of Fashion” display during guided tours that begin Friday, May 15.

Special tours are planned this summer, however, to detail the unique collection of garments that spans 1868 to 1968. Curator-led tours of the historic clothing exhibit will be offered three evenings, on June 12, July 10 and Aug. 14, each one the second Friday of the month. As part of the mansion’s 40th anniversary celebration as a museum, it’s the first time the annual clothing exhibit at the mansion will be the focus of special tours.

The doors will open at 6 p.m. for light refreshments before the clothing tour begins at 6:30 p.m. A booklet containing photographs of the historic garments, taken by photographer Karen Weyer, is included in the \$30 ticket price.

Call the mansion at 755-2166 to reserve tour space. Evening group tours for organizations, clubs or other groups can be arranged by appointment.

An exquisite fringed flapper dress from the late 1920s is another show-stopper. By the 1940s, World War II rationing had restricted skirt widths to save fabric, so outfits were gussied up with creative trim and shoulder pads. The 1940s fashion also gave society girdles and bullet-shaped brassieres.

The collection ends with a 1968 unfitted A-line dress owned and once worn by mansion tour guide Cindy Conner.

“1960 was the height of the department store,” Knutson said. “Ready-made clothing was available for everyone at affordable prices. In the U.S. almost anyone could be fashionable.”

For more information about the clothing exhibit and tours, visit the mansion’s website at www.conradmansion.com.



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Photos by Aaric Bryan

BEADWORK AND FRINGE adorn this upscale “flapper” dress from the 1920s.

SARAH SAFFORD, assistant volunteer curator, places a mannequin wearing a child’s dress popular in the 1950s. The exhibit features the 1950s attire of a family dressed up for Easter Sunday

