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A stylish legacy

Collection of vintage clothes offers unique opportunity for hands-on study

It began with a simple question on an early spring day in 2001.

Bob Beshere, a theatre arts major, stopped by my office to say that a family friend was preparing to close a house. Would I be interested in any old clothes? My answer was no different from that of any other costume designer that I know. I simply said, "Yes!"

Months later, Bob and I went to meet Paula Vaughan Mazursky at a small home off Augusta Street in Greenville. She and her brother had set aside an amazing gift for the Department of Theatre Arts at Furman. We filled two cars with dresses, coats, hats, boxes of lingerie, tops, aprons, purses and a riding ensemble complete with boots. The clothes had belonged to the donors' aunt, Paula Vaughan, a 1937 graduate of Greenville Woman's College who served as secretary to five successive mayors of Greenville.

While we loaded the cars, individual pieces would catch our eye, demanding that we stop and admire a sassy hat or softly stroke the pelt of a red fox stole. But not until everything had been transferred did I begin to fully appreciate the significance of this donation.

Most donations to the theatre program are typically only 10 to 20 years old and are wearable articles of clothing that are simply no longer fashionable. The Vaughan collection is much more significant, because it represents the taste of Paula Vaughan over the course of seven decades — and offers a parade of 20th-century styles. The earliest item is a floral silk chiffon dress dating from the 1920s, and the most recent is a dress from the mid to late 1980s. In between are an evening gown in a vivid orange silk from the late '30s, homemade day dresses from the early '40s, a cocktail dress from the '50s, and much more.

Most people save clothing for specific or sentimental reasons. Traditional occasions, such as a wedding, christening, first day of school or prom, often inspire us to preserve the memories by preserving the garment. Sometimes the cost of an item will also influence us to continue to store it long after we have ceased wearing it.

This collection suggests that other forces were at work. While it has no wedding gown and no formal gowns from the



For theatre arts students like Kelly Criss (left) and Mariette Booth, the Vaughan collection will help research become tangible in the classroom.

1960s on, it does include several exquisite nightgowns from the 1930s that show virtually no signs of use. Some of the dresses clearly were worn regularly, and the hats and purses tend to be practical rather than exotic or overly formal. So this collection includes a wide range of garments that people rarely save, let alone donate.

It also features the typical fashions of the middle class. While fashion history tends to focus on clothing designed for the upper classes, few plays are about characters that are both wealthy and fashionable. Teaching students to extrapolate what the middle class wore from haute couture sources is challenging. With this collection, we have actual items that can be linked to the original high fashion design. As a result, research will transform itself into the tangible in our classrooms.

Hats, purses, aprons, handkerchiefs, bed jackets and nightgowns can be priceless tools that help a costume designer visually define a character. But few scholarly texts focus on these items, and little information can be found on them in period sources.

Clearly, then, the Vaughan collection offers a unique opportunity for hands-on study. Providing actual samples of period fabrics is nearly impossible, but now we can give our students the chance to study and compare early synthetic fabrics. We also have a commercially purchased dress and a homemade dress from the same

period, giving us direct evidence of period construction techniques.

While studying the collection, I discovered an intriguing mystery. It is unusual to own more than one copy of a given dress. Jeans and T-shirts aside, most of us seldom repeat a design more than once, and even then we vary the color. So I was astonished to find that we have five dresses made from the same home sewing pattern. All five are made from a synthetic fiber, and all are blue (in varying shades) and white! Each dress features subtle variations in the collar and the trimmings, but all five have the same type of pleats in the front of the skirt.

Paula Vaughan began working for the mayor of Greenville in 1943, and these five dresses clearly speak to the impact of World War II. The fabric restrictions, the stress placed on redoing and making do, and the fashion for the practical are all embodied in these dresses.

We may never know why these clothes have been preserved, or what meaning Miss Vaughan placed on them. They reveal the ravages of time in their fragile and discolored fibers, missing buttons and lost belts. But as we examine and study them, history comes alive and reminds us that a spirit can live on in the simple things we leave behind.

— Kathleen Gossman
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