

## REVIEW



This pair of cocktail dresses dates from the mid-1920s. The green dress was designed by Jean Philippe Worth of the House of Worth and was worn by Sarah Sedgwick Hazard Knapp, of Syracuse. The other is an oyster silk georgette dress trimmed with white seed beads in an art deco pattern. (David Lassman / dlassman@syracuse.com)

## OHA show traces history, culture of cocktail dress

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It's five o'clock somewhere. That bewitching hour when the clink of glasses and muffled conversations mark the end of the work day and the beginning of, well, whatever.

It used to be a time for pretty dresses and fancy drinks. Today, the cocktail hour has morphed into happy hour, but an engaging exhibition on view at the Onondaga Historical Association suggests the tradition has not entirely disappeared.

### CURATOR JEFFREY MAYER

The show, "Fashion After Five: The Clothes and Culture of the Cocktail Hour — 1920s to 1990s," traces the evolution of the cocktail dress and the culture that influenced it. It was curated by Jeffrey Mayer, associate professor of fashion, fashion history and textiles at Syracuse University, and features dresses from the Sue Ann Genet Costume Collection at Syracuse University and the Onondaga Historical Association.

Mayer is the creative mind behind two delightful costume exhibitions featured at the Everson Museum of Art: "Marie Antoinette: Styling the 18th Century Superstar," and the most recent "An American Look: Fashion, Decorative Arts & Gustav Stickley." This show, although smaller than the previous shows, has the trademark Mayer flair and doesn't fail to deliver on both entertainment and information. It runs through June 15.

The exhibition is organized by decade, beginning with the 1920s, but I found the flow from decade to decade to be a little discontinuous. I had to retrace my footsteps and bounced from one side of the gallery to the other to follow a consecutive sequencing of the decades. It's easy to figure out, but awkward.

### EVENING ON THE TOWN

The show opens with a pair of mannequins primed for an evening on the town; one dressed in a stunning black silk georgette dress and the other in a black gold and orange lame cape. One is perched on a marble-topped dresser, a coffee cup in hand and a silver art deco tea set beside her.

As you move to your right into the main gallery, you'll see another pair of manne-

quins dressed in the easy elegance of the shift dress. The bottle green and silver lame dress worn by one is by the storied couture house, Charles Worth, and was worn by Syracusan Sarah Sedgwick Hazard Knapp in the mid-1920s. The dress, which is in pristine condition, belongs to OHA.

The wall text provides cultural context, stating the start of Prohibition in 1920 was a catalyst for "the beginnings of the private cocktail party ... with the new social practice of men and women drinking together."

As you move through the exhibition, you'll see an apple green floor-length cocktail dress apropos of the glamorous 1930s screen siren Jean Harlow and be introduced to the concept of the multi-faceted "little black dress" first conceived of by Coco Chanel in the 1920s, but re-invented by ladies of the 1940s for its versatility in a war-strapped economy.

The 1950s were the heyday of the cocktail dress, so-named by Christian Dior. These dresses were short and less formal, although there still was a place in a girl's closet for a fancy ball gown.

### SHEATH DRESSES

By the 1960s and into the early 1970s, the cocktail party had gone the way of the big band and so had the full-skirted cocktail dress. What we see in the 1960s are sheath dresses reminiscent of the shift dresses from the 1920s with a circa 1965 pink sequin sleeveless mini dress labeled "Larry Aldrich" and looking as if it had been borrowed from Twiggy's closet.

The 1970s ushered in the discotheques and Studio 54 with a black jersey one-shoulder Grecian evening dress by Halston capturing the tone of those times and the bubble-gum pink strapless ruche dress by "Victor Costa" representing the excesses of the 1980s and the extravaganzas portrayed by the iconic television series "Dynasty."

An ensemble of black outfits represents the 1990s with a leather bustier and full-length skirt (labeled "Neiman Marcus") riffing on Madonna's daring stage costumes of the same period. The show winds down with a gaggle of little black dresses designed by students from SU's Fashion Design Class of 2015, which shine a contemporary light on a timeless tradition.

*Katherine Rushworth was director of the Michael C. Rockefeller Arts Center at State University College at Fredonia.*