Abstract

This thesis looks at domestic dressmaking to understand what the practice meant for practitioners beyond making garments. It focuses on New Zealand girls in the period from 1945 to 1965, when dressmaking was understood as a universal part of the female experience at home and school. Despite this assumption of ubiquity, little work has been done to document how dressmaking happened in homes and in schools and, more importantly, how it affected girls. The critical framework combines feminist historical and sociological thinking — including Bourdieu’s theories of habitus and cultural reproduction — with fashion studies, cultural studies, material culture and object studies. The methodology reflects this interdisciplinary approach by layering personal recollections gathered in 15 oral history interviews, with documentary evidence, image research, and object studies.

This thesis argues that dressmaking offers a new lens through which to view female experience in New Zealand at that time. Dressmaking not only shaped appearance: it affected the allocation of space and time within households; it established and reinforced shopping behaviours; it created inter-generational bonds as women shared their skills within family groups; it maintained relationships within extended family groups as a source of hand-me-down clothing; and it offered the possibility of paid employment either within or outside the home. Beyond the home, dressmaking was part of girls’ school experience, used to prepare them for a prescribed femininity, but perceived as second-rate subject because of the strong association with domesticity. Dressmaking also offered girls and women a means of engaging with change — in fashions, fabrics, patterns, and tools. Memory, place, objects, and people combined to influence dressmaking practice. For some, dressmaking became ingrained as part of their identity and can be understood as habitus. The thesis shows how dressmaking shaped girls’ identities as much as dressmaking was used to shape garments.
Preface and acknowledgements

I have completed this thesis as a part-time student over seven years. The work is mine, but I could not have completed it without support and encouragement from many others.

First, I thank my supervisors. Dr Bronwyn Labrum has been engaged with the research since hearing the unformed idea at an afternoon tea gathering of textile enthusiasts. Thank you for your enthusiasm for and belief in the topic. I am grateful that you stayed with me, even after taking up a senior role at Te Papa Tongarewa.

Dr Caroline Campbell has given me insightful and detailed responses to every draft. I value the different perspective you have brought to the topic.

Dr Vicki Karaminas joined the supervision team towards completion and provided a fresh set of eyes, as well as a determined push to the finish line.

Dr Amanda Bill was co-supervisor for the early stage of my enrolment. Her penetrating questions helped me shape the idea towards confirmation.

Interviews with women who grew up in New Zealand in the middle of the twentieth century are central to this research. Fifteen women agreed to be interviewed, all of whom were generous with their time. Several were kind enough to give me objects, including patterns, books, and garments. I could not have done this work without you, and I am very grateful to you for sharing your experiences and memories with me.

I acknowledge the expertise and help of staff at Massey University Library, National Library, Archives New Zealand, The Hocken Library and the New Zealand Council for Education Research.

I also visited schools to review yearbooks and collections of ephemera. I thank the women who made these visits so fruitful for me: Phyllis Bennett, librarian at Papanui High School, Christchurch; Christine Black, archivist at Epsom Girls’ Grammar School, Auckland; Jenny Carroll, librarian at Wellington Girls’ College, Wellington;
Glenys Griffiths, archivist at St Cuthbert’s College, Auckland; Maria Thompson, librarian at Wairarapa College, Masterton.

I acknowledge the members of the Costume and Textile Association of New Zealand who were an attentive audience for presentations and articles about my preliminary findings, and also yielded several interview subjects.

Finally, I must thank my friends and family for their patience, tolerance, and support throughout this work. To my partner Alan and my daughters Olivia and Alice: you all know far too much about dressmaking.
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Abbreviations

ANZ        Archives New Zealand

EP         The Evening Post

NatLib     National Library of New Zealand

NZWW       New Zealand Woman’s Weekly

NZH        New Zealand Herald

ODT        Otago Daily Times

Te Papa    Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa