

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

Dressmaking: How a clothing practice made girls in
New Zealand, 1945 to 1965

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

Dinah Vincent

2018

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.

Table of contents

Abstract.....	ii
Preface and acknowledgements	iv
List of figures	vii
Abbreviations.....	ix
Introduction: “This vital activity”	1
Chapter 1 A modern mechanism for fabrication of the self	11
Chapter 2 Dressmaking in society: “A life-long asset to every Woman”	43
Chapter 3 Dressmaking at home: “She’d never had a piece of bought clothing in her life”	67
Chapter 4 Experimenting with tools: “I sat down at the machine”	100
Chapter 5 The regulation of sewing at school: “A room in the basement has been fitted out”	136
Chapter 6 A necessary discipline: “Miss Smith made me mend every single one” ..	170
Chapter 7 The motivation to keep dressmaking: “I shook it off and made the dress up”	201
Conclusion: “The skill comes only from practice”	233
Reference lists	243
Primary sources.....	252
Interviewees.....	252
Archives New Zealand.....	252
Newspapers and magazines	254
New Zealand secondary schools.....	257
Appendices.....	259
Appendix 1: Ethics Committee approval	260
Appendix 2: Questionnaires and agreements	262
Appendix 3: Biographies of interviewees	270
Appendix 4: Archives New Zealand permission.....	285
Appendix 5: Sewing in the education system.....	287

List of figures

Figure 1. Map showing birthplaces of interviewees and locations of schools visited.	42
Figure 2. 3-In-One Oil advertisement.	45
Figure 3. Coupon calendar.	46
Figure 4. James Smith’s advertisement.	47
Figure 5. Milne & Choyce advertisement.	48
Figure 6. D.I.C. advertisement.	49
Figure 7. Ross Hymes Dressmaking Course advertisement.	51
Figure 8. Kirkcaldie & Staines advertisement.	52
Figure 9. Pattern Service, <i>NZWW</i> .	55
Figure 10. Childswear advertisement.	57
Figure 11. “Sitting correctly.” Illustration.	65
Figure 12. Betesh “Make a frock competition” advertisement.	71
Figure 13. <i>The Girl’s Own Annual</i> , 1922 edition.	73
Figure 14. “A man in a nightie!”	76
Figure 15. Alison and her sisters as children.	77
Figure 16. Singer sewing machine owned by Cheryl’s mother.	80
Figure 17. Jocelyn and her mother.	85
Figure 18. Pinking shears advertisement.	90
Figure 19. Celanese fabric advertisement.	95
Figure 20. Elna Supermatic advertisement.	102
Figure 21. Dressmaking tools.	106
Figure 22. An ideal sewing room.	110
Figure 23. Portable sewing screen.	113
Figure 24. MAC advertisement.	115
Figure 25. The Singer sewing machine used by Val’s mother.	117
Figure 26. Trims in one of the drawers of Val’s mother’s machine.	118
Figure 27. Cheryl in a dress made by her mother.	121
Figure 28. “Do it yourself.”	124
Figure 29. Husqvarna advertisement.	126
Figure 30. Milne & Choyce advertisement.	128
Figure 31. Fitting a garment at home.	130
Figure 32. A planter made from a Singer sewing machine table.	134

Figure 33. Sewing room at Wellington Girls' College, 1947.....	138
Figure 34. Instructions for a bound buttonhole.....	145
Figure 35. "The Modern's Best Friend." Drawing.....	149
Figure 36. "A day in the life of a Wellington College girl." Drawing.....	150
Figure 37. Viyella and Clydella fabric advertisement.....	153
Figure 38. Arts and Crafts projects at primary school.....	155
Figure 39. Papanui High School sewing room.....	158
Figure 40. Junior Sewing class at Epsom Girls' Grammar School, 1963.....	164
Figure 41. Senior Sewing Class at Epsom Girls Grammar School, 1963.....	164
Figure 42. "Dior fashions are at St Cuthbert's." Drawing.....	167
Figure 43. Druleigh paper pattern.....	171
Figure 44. Stitch samplers from a school exercise book.....	173
Figure 45. Cheryl's sample book.....	178
Figure 46. St Cuthbert's school tunic with visible mends.....	179
Figure 47. Sheena wearing a self-made skirt.....	180
Figure 48. Cheryl's sewing bag.....	182
Figure 49. Girls in a sewing class, undated.....	183
Figure 50. Lightning zippers advertisement.....	186
Figure 51. Instructions for a bound buttonhole. Illustration.....	187
Figure 52. Patternmaking instructions in school exercise book.....	190
Figure 53. Smocked baby gown made by Cheryl at secondary school.....	194
Figure 54. Cathie's sample book, showing collars.....	196
Figure 55. Gibraltar Board advertisement.....	203
Figure 56. Alison in a home-made dance dress.....	210
Figure 57. Singer Sewing Centre classes advertisement.....	212
Figure 58. Lynne wearing a self-made bridesmaid dress.....	215
Figure 59. Construction details on Lynne's bridesmaid dress.....	216
Figure 60. Smith & Caughey advertisement.....	218
Figure 61. Calpreta fabrics and Simplicity patterns advertisement.....	221
Figure 62. <i>Woman's Choice</i> advertisement.....	224
Figure 63. Velma and friends.....	229
Figure 64. Velma as a bridesmaid in a self-made dress.....	230
Figure 65. Velma's "shepherd smock" dress.....	231

Abbreviations

ANZ	Archives New Zealand
<i>EP</i>	<i>The Evening Post</i>
NatLib	National Library of New Zealand
<i>NZWW</i>	<i>New Zealand Woman's Weekly</i>
<i>NZH</i>	<i>New Zealand Herald</i>
<i>ODT</i>	<i>Otago Daily Times</i>
Te Papa	Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa