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Cora Ginsburg: The Costume Lady

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"The amount of work that goes into old garments could never be paid for today. When people lament the loss of old-time craftsmanship I remind them of the human cost."

"What do I do with my costumes? I don't do anything with them. Why not ask a stamp collector what he does with his stamps?"

"When people ask that question, I am reminded of the woman who goes to the psychiatrist and says, 'Doctor, I love pancakes.' 'Well, I don't see anything wrong with that,' says the doctor. 'I love pancakes too.' 'Oh Doctor,' the woman says, 'you've got to come over and see mine. I've got trunks and trunks full.'

"That's me!" says Cora Ginsburg. "I've got trunks and trunks full."

And so she does. Upstairs in the Benjamin Ginsburg Antiquary on New York's Madison Avenue there are racks and racks full as well—luscious-colored silk Chinese robes, 19th-century cotton garden dresses, men's waistcoats and breeches, quilted petticoats, lawn cottons, brocades—all gathered by the indefatigable Mrs. Ginsburg. As she moves along the rack each garment gets a loving touch; a sleeve is examined, a collar adjusted.

In the interior room on the main floor of the Ginsburg shop, she sits in a Chippendale side chair at a dining

Although Cora Ginsburg's favorite costumes date from the 18th century, she is not strict about what she collects as long as it is beautiful and appealing to her. At left she holds a dress made about 1820. The jacket, above, is a "curiosity" because it was made of 18th-century silk in the early 20th century.



room table. It was here in this shop, some 40 years ago, as wife of distinguished American furniture dealer Ben Ginsburg, that her appetite for costumes and textiles was first whetted. Today, she entertains a visitor amidst the cheerful bustle of an active business. Young employees rush about. A woman in her winter coat stands patiently with her shopping bag while Cora lifts up her glasses to peer at the pages of an antiquated book taken from the bag. A few flakes of old paper fall to her lap. "No, this isn't worth anything," she says, smiling gently. Another employee holds up a brightly colored Chinese silk robe, resplendent on its hanger.

"Oh, I really don't need that." She almost dismisses the garment, then reconsiders: "I'll pay \$250." The woman holding the robe nods, carefully pulls a plastic covering down over the embroidered silk, and takes it into the back room.

Cora Ginsburg smiles prettily. She believes she was simply *born* with her love of costumes. Somehow "it just happened." As she answers a visitor's questions, the young people who tend customers' needs at Benjamin Ginsburg Antiquary sit or pause intermittently between tasks to listen fondly to her reminiscences.

"When I was in college I thought I'd like to study costume. I took a course. We were asked to design a dress for a princess. They chose mine. Before that, I loved making clothes. It was a natural thing for me. I love fabrics." She is reluctant to say that her collection has a specific focus: "It's a tremendous field." She doesn't profess knowledge of Indonesian textiles, but she admits to knowing a little something about Chinese and Japanese fabrics and a good deal more about 18th-century garments.

"Really, if I like a dress or a piece of old fabric, I'll buy it without knowing too much about it. I don't like buying something for its history or nationality. I like the things to be beautiful in appearance and that's not a usual point of view these days. It just has to appeal to me."

But Mrs. Ginsburg does seem to favor 18th-century clothes and textiles. She describes this period of history as a time when there was great quality in everything. "Folksy primitive things" have their appeal, but they in no way preempt her appreciation of the truly fine garments of the 18th century; they are distinguished by sophisticated weaving and the rich colors, she says, adding: "All fabrics lose strength with time, but the older fabrics were made better."

"That clothes survive at all is a miracle," and wearing them in the current mode of the times she calls "an abomination." Nothing, she says, is worse for old costumes and fabrics than light and the air we breathe.

Once, Mrs. Ginsburg did wear something antique, but never again. "One of the first things I ever bought was an 1890s skirt of black silk in a woven pattern. I cut it up and made a dress out of it. You buy something and it looks in fabulous condition, but if you subject it to modern wear it doesn't last *at all*. That was my last fiasco of that kind."

Though she does not recommend wearing antique clothing, Mrs. Ginsburg feels that textile conservation procedures should be tempered with common sense. "I remember years ago selling a needlework picture to a mid-western museum. They were horrified when they got the piece home to find that it had not been framed in a way that reflects the best conservation practices. But it was in pristine condition just as it was made, after 175 years! Where is the logic? Unfortunately, you never really know what is going to happen until it does."

"Yes, I believe in restoring costumes. I'm not really a purist. I think we've gone overboard in conservation. For example, the Smithsonian will not touch an iron to anything. I understand that the Met does from time to time. My feeling is that a garment has been washed and ironed 20 times; another time is not going to destroy it. Cottons and linens were made to be washed and ironed. Of course, I do think things

should be taken care of and kept in air-conditioned places. On the other hand, it is undeniably true that many things have come down to us in wonderful condition, despite being stored in trunks, in hot attics, or in cold attics.

"I keep my things in trunks. You need an awful lot of room to have ideal storage. I remember when Polaire Weissman was head of the Costume Institute (at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art). She designed the most wonderful hangers: broad in the shoulders and padded in the hips. Dresses were supported all around. But they found that when they hung them up," said Cora stifling a giggle, "they rubbed against each other and wore out at the points where they stuck out anyway. So it wasn't as foolproof as they thought."

"I really like most dresses to lie flat. I think that gives the least wear and tear. But that's personal; it's not authoritative."

20th-century designers create no excitement for Cora Ginsburg, nor is she inspired by 20th-century clothes. "At the moment," she notes, "Chanel is riding high. Vionnet was a much better designer than Chanel. In fact, I think Vionnet is my favorite. Of course Worth was *the* great dressmaker of all time. He had it down to a science. There's never been anything like his gowns."

"The great mystery to me is that, in the early days, dressmakers lived in widely separated areas and yet the method of constructing garments would be universal at any particular time. I remember once buying some very pathetic country dresses up near Chatham, New York—little brown cottons with white sprigged flowers on them. They were sad; they sang of poverty and misery. But when you looked at the dresses closely they had piping along the seams. This was typical of fine dressmaking from 1815 to 1860. How did those country dressmakers know enough to do it? What was their source? There was a book called *Workwoman's Guide* published in England and there were tailors' guides in the

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1830s. Their method of putting a dress together was beautiful.

“A tremendous change took place in dressmaking from the 18th to the 19th centuries. 18th-century dresses depended for looks not on fine stitchery but on the richness of the fabric. During the 18th century, fabrics became lighter and lighter—almost flimsy—and a vogue for white developed. One sees then the change from heavy silks, generally sketchily put together—the sewing was not great—into exquisitely worked, white dresses.”

Cora Ginsburg believes that this development of fine stitchery evolved from the fine stitching technique used in men’s shirts of the 18th century. Men’s white linen shirts displayed the most exacting needlework of any 18th-century garments. The stitches were even smaller than a machine could make them, and just as regular. This technique, Cora feels, set the precedent for finely worked, white dresses of the late 19th century. Others theorize that when dressmaking stopped being a man’s occupation and became a woman’s, the sewing technique improved.

But, of course—as she is quick to point out—this fine work was not accomplished without great suffering, starvation wages, and downright poverty. “I remember a poem by Thomas Hood called ‘The Song of the Shirt.’ It goes like this: ‘Stitch, stitch, stitch in poverty, hunger, and dirt . . . I sing the song of the shirt.’ I can’t remember the middle line.

“Terrible as clothes are today, as shoddily as they are made, we have been repaid by the advances in society, by the improved conditions of the workers. The amount of work that went into old garments could never be paid for today. When people regret the loss of old-time craftsmanship, I remind them of its human cost.”

When Mrs. Ginsburg began collect-

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ing, one could buy lovely, old dresses in a New England antique shop for \$5 a piece. She remembers a dress purchased from a dealer in Tarrytown, New York for \$25. It was a printed cotton country dress “so simple it’s hard to tell just when it was made. Today it would not be worth a lot, but others that could be had then for \$3 and \$5 are now worth 20 times as much.

“When I started there was no such thing as people wearing antique dresses; there were just a few enthusiasts like me who could find things from time to time in New York shops.”

In London there was more to be had, but it was hard to find a place to buy. An English woman, Doris Langley Moore, had a marvelous collection in the '50s which she amassed in part by putting advertisements in the paper. “Things would come pouring in. She had the pick of the crop. No one was collecting then.” Some of the exquisite pieces from her collection will be the stars of an upcoming exhibition of 18th-century dresses scheduled to open at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1983.

In 1967 Christie’s started having specialty auctions of clothing and textiles. Before that, one could occasionally find antique clothes at Sotheby’s furniture sales—a piece of needlework, a dress or two. Cora Ginsburg remembers buying a few things there that later she sold to The Metropolitan Museum of Art. But with the advent of the sales at Christie’s, there were loads of things to be had. Today, she believes that the market has pretty much dried up; there just are not as many costumes and textiles available as there used to be.

For the person interested in studying costumes, she recommends two courses in textiles and costumes sponsored by New York University and The Metropolitan Museum’s Costume Institute. She points out that the Courtauld Institute in London, while one of the best

places to study, is limited because so few people—four or five—are permitted to attend each year. “But if you really want to learn, the time to do it is at an exhibition when you can see the costumes out on display.” While Mrs. Ginsburg feels that the costume exhibitions in recent years have all been good “in one way or another,” she finds—particularly with the shows at the Metropolitan, which has one of the finest collections in the country—a definite shortcoming in their lack of scholarly information. She finds the catalogues rather sketchy as well.

The Los Angeles County Museum, The Brooklyn Museum, the Museum of the City of New York, The Royal Ontario Museum and, of course, the Smithsonian all have excellent collections. Each year, usually timed to coincide with major exhibitions, the Costume Society meets as well. Based at The Metropolitan in New York, the Society welcomes members and annually publishes a journal entitled *Dress*.

The Smithsonian collection—for which Mrs. Ginsburg supplied the first 18th-century garments—emphasizes everyday clothing “which is nice because most Museums, particularly the Metropolitan, treat costumes as art; they must be elegant. In the history of costume we’ve got to include everything. The Smithsonian once produced a wonderful show contrasting elegant clothes with mass produced clothes.

“I always say: collections are not representative of what people actually wore because everyday clothes get worn out, handed down. The clothes we get I call the flops, the closet clothes, the things for special occasions, the weddings. I hardly look at a wedding dress because there are so many.”

“What do I keep? I keep what I love, and some of the things I love, I sell. I decided to try and limit what I collect by just keeping good examples of em-



For a collector of costumes, the series of French caricatures done by Chaum in the mid-19th century is irresistible. Each drawing illustrates the lengths to which people will go, the tortures they will suffer, to be in fashion—like this bosomy woman in her high-waisted dress. Hanging upstairs at the Ginsburg Antiquary, or displayed on dressmaker’s dummies, are costumes that represent only a small part of the collection put together by Cora Ginsburg over the past 40 years. It includes the simple dress, inset opposite, made about 1775 of an almost luminous pink silk. The 18th century produced fabrics of exceptional quality and remarkable richness of color that make them of particular value to Mrs. Ginsburg and other astute collectors. Opposite: An 1840s cotton with leg-of-mutton sleeves.

broidered costumes and superb examples of costumes from each decade. . . . Of course, I’ve exceeded that.” After a pause she adds, “I also keep things out of sentiment.”

As Cora Ginsburg talks, Benjamin Ginsburg Antiquary fills with customers. A person inquires about bed coverings, another about samplers. In the upstairs gallery, an employee is busy making room for a textile class scheduled to visit the next day: 17th- and 18th-century chairs are moved, candlesticks and glassware are put in corner cupboards. A visiting curator is on his knees examining the carved leg of an Empire sofa. Another employee oversees the new window display. The phone rings and the costume lady is off, leaving, for the moment, her dresses behind. ■