

A Century of Style

Discovering who we were through What We Wore

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What We Wore: 100 Years at the University of Alberta as Told Through Clothing

30 January–8 March

Wednesday through Saturday, 12pm–5pm
Gallery A, Telus Centre

From the most eccentric fine arts student to the grungiest pre-midterm undergrad, clothing-wise, you can pretty much get away with anything at the U of A. Many students use their time at university to wear their souls on their sleeves before entry into a workforce that demands a more standardized look. Therefore, what's worn reveals a lot about the student body.

If you can tell a person's major, or even where they live, from what they're wearing, just imagine what a 100 years of university fashion can tell us about our past. The University of Alberta Museums and the Department of Human Ecology is exploring just that, while simultaneously celebrating the Centennial by putting on an exhibit that unlocks a century's worth of stories told not in text, but in textiles.

Through 36 garments and other accessories, Lucie Heins, curator of the What We Wore: 100 Years at the University of Alberta as Told Through Clothing exhibit, has put together a display that tells the tales of university life over the years, while proving that campus was not always the sea of jeans and hoodies it is today.

"In fact, in the first years of the university, both students and professors wore the black academic gown as part of their uniform," Heins explains. "So if you were a student, you would be wearing a black academic gown to class. In the teens, they did away with that; only senior students—those who were in their last year—wore the academic gown until 1920."

Hogwarts-style fashion wasn't the only trend to sweep across campus. During World Wars I and II, military uniforms became a standard sight since the U of A held compulsory training sessions throughout the war years and even in between.

"Certainly during those wars, the landscape of the campus changed because it looked more like a military training camp," Heins says. "You had all these male students who were usually dressed in their military uniforms because they didn't have enough time to change out of their regular clothes into their military uniforms to get to their training session."

Both students and faculty were encouraged to enlist immediately in World War I. Entire groups, such as the 1914 provincial championship rugby team, enlisted and died together. Conversely, in World War II, it was advised that students graduate before they enlisted. That time around, women requested to

participate in their own training sessions.

"They didn't have to put in as many hours as the male students," Heins notes. "They did learn to march and various other aspects of training, but they did not have a uniform. They would just wear whatever they wore to class and loafers. Sometimes, they were permitted to wear slacks if their training required them to crawl on the ground."

Military dress and academic gowns are only two of the categories that make up the collection, and while the black gowns are now only donned at convocation, what the exhibit makes clear is that there are far more similarities than differences. Heins is quick to point out that there are themes, like sports, extracurricular activities, and welcome-week antics that reoccur no matter what the decade. For instance, in the past 100 years, U of A students have never passed up the chance to party.

"At the beginning of the university's history we had what was called 'Conversaziones,' and this was an opportunity for the university to showcase itself to distinguished guests in Edmonton and Alberta. These were very formal, so you had students wearing Edwardian dresses. It would take [the women] all day to get ready and put their hair up in elaborate hairdos; of course, they would wear the long gloves. The men would wear tuxedos. They would have extra collars they would bring with them because if their collar wilted, then they needed to replace that."

Beyond the main themes that link our present with our past, there are some special pieces worn by some very special people, including the gown Lois Hole wore during her time as Chancellor. In addition, the academic gown of Myer Horowitz is on display, which also happens to be a personal favourite of Heins.

"It's a green and gold gown, really reflecting the university colours. The reason he chose to have his gown [green and gold], as I understand it, is that he was a graduate of the U of A. So apparently, presidents of the university usually chose the colours of the university that they graduated from [for their gown's colours]."

You can see Horowitz's gown, among others, until 8 March, Wednesdays through Saturdays in Gallery A of the Telus Building. And don't worry about your own generation being under-represented: Heins was careful to incorporate every decade, including the 2000s, as the most recent pieces include a 2004 Students' Union polo shirt and a 2000 Week of Welcome volunteer T-shirt. So don't trash those WoW tees just yet—they serve as little pieces of U of A history hanging right there in your closets.

