

N I G H T L I F E - Evening Wear of the 1920s and 30s

Things look different at night.

N I G H T L I F E is an exhibition that explores fashion when the sun goes down. Drawn from the fashion collection of the National Trust, N I G H T L I F E will feature many never before seen garments. The exhibition looks at embellished surfaces and moderné ideas about ornament and pattern. Set in an atmosphere of exuberant play and optimistic discovery, the exhibition will be dynamic, so get ready to come and dance. The fashion on show visually references the night sky, stars and planets, neon lights, fireworks, dreams and other after dark delights.

In the National Trust's costume collection are found exquisite examples of 1920s and 30s evening wear – many were lovingly saved by their former owners. Several dresses still reveal the proof of a good time! Movement and the friction from dancing has resulted in lost sequins and shattered silk chiffon from the weight of the glass beads. With their sumptuous fabrics and bead-work, visual attention is confidently directed onto the surface decoration, with floral bursts of embroidery, deep velvet naps, transparent chiffons and sparkling lamé.

The idea for the exhibition started after a lavish French dancing dress was viewed by curatorial staff. Upon opening the archival box and folding back the tissue, it was obvious that this dress was a supreme example of 1920s artistry. The masterful hand-crafted pattern was beaded onto nude tulle like a landscape of pearlescent flowers set amongst rivulets of sequin and glass. Even in the dim light of the storeroom the dress shone. It wasn't long before other evening dresses were selected and with them the start of an exhibition and its main theme. N I G H T L I F E *highlights* embellishment – focusing on decorative elements such as beadwork, applique and surface textures. The show will include over 35 gowns, as well as men's wear and accessories such as shoes, bags and shawls.

Evening wear often holds a special place in our repertoire of dressing. The clothes we wear at night are invested with an emotional power and expectation. They carry the hopes for the evening and then hold the memories we made during the night. Occasion dressing was far more obvious in the 20s and 30s than it is today, with many expecting to change their clothing for different times of the day and for different activities. Evening wear was once very specific and fit for purpose - with dancing dresses, dinner dresses, ball gowns, opera and theatre dresses and clothes appropriate for the cinema. Evening wear, and the fabrics used to construct their glamour, were always very different from day-wear. Sequins and shiny satins never made their way onto sober day suits for a visit to the city. The extreme social faux pas of women wearing evening wear during the day had sexual connotations. The demarcation was sharp and definite.

With the increased popularity of the dance hall, night club and cinema, more places were created to see and be seen. Melbourne saw a boom in the construction of 'palaces' of entertainment. St Kilda, together with popular locations in the city, were the places to go. Dance competitions, movie screen tests to find the next star, performances of new dance steps and Jazz created the atmosphere of modern action and romance. The Green Mill – featured in the Miss Fisher Murder Mystery TV series - and the Palais Royale at the Royal Exhibition Building were two hot city night

spots. Amongst the fun, frivolity and sex appeal, dance halls and night clubs featured in their fair share of mayhem and scandal – with ‘larrikin raids’ on cloak rooms stealing expensive coats and gloves, to very serious violence and crimeⁱ.

Urban life stimulates the speed of change in fashion. Fashions were set for dances, jazz tunes, makeup and behaviours such as smoking. These could all change as swiftly as clothing. The ‘constant friction’ between people, “rubbing shoulders”, seeing, doing and being seen, creates a visual feast, generating the conditions for self-invention. The city at night can take this to an extreme and evening wear is an exaggeration of our daytime selves. Dressing up in a costume to become an idealised self can be an act of personal expression within the bounds of conformity. Fashion is a tension between the ‘crowd and the individualⁱⁱ’ and examples in the Trust collection give us clues to how this played out locally – the conservative and safe choices are not necessarily the ones that we remember or keep as mementoes.

N I G H T L I F E is a celebration of evening wear worn by the women and men of Victoria, with many pieces made locally. It surveys the between-the-wars era of 1920s and 30s and traces the night-time fashions from a period of optimism to a time of discontent. Evening fashions capture the magic of the night in the choice of embellishments and fabrics from the depth of darkest velvet pierced with the sharp gleam of diamanté to sequined patterned confections worn to dance the night away.

ⁱ A search of TROVE newspapers using the keywords “Dance Hall” date range 1920 – 1929 and Victoria retrieves many pages of articles about ‘disturbances’, shootings, obscene behaviour, amongst more innocent mentions of new up and coming events.

ⁱⁱ Wilson, Elizabeth (1985) *Adorned in Dreams, Fashion and Modernity*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick.