



## CURATOR'S CORNER

By Emily Ruby, Curator

### Worth It: Custom Couture for the Gilded Age

A lady in the late 19th or early 20th century had not truly “made it” in society until she owned a Worth gown. Charles Frederick Worth dressed the women of the Gilded Age from his Parisian studio and his sons and grandsons carried on the Worth name after his death in 1895. Called the “father of haute couture,” Worth earned this reputation by being the first to design gowns that he marked with his own name. He was the first to design a seasonal collection of gowns and then employ live models to wear them in his studio rather than designing specifically to each customer’s taste. He also standardized dressmaking by designing interchangeable elements of the dress. With this system, and the use of sewing machines to do all but the detailed work, he was able to produce thousands of garments a day to provide a designer wardrobe for hundreds of women in both Europe and America.



Charles Worth acquired so much influence that the major textile mills consulted him before making their yearly run of fabrics. Many of the preferred colors and styles of dress during the latter half of the 19th century can be traced back to Worth, such as the back bustle and shorter hemlines so that the dress just cleared the ground. Worth studied paintings and historic fashion to incorporate what he learned into both modern dresses and his designs for the elaborate costume balls favored by the wealthy. Becoming the designer to the Empress Eugénie, wife of Emperor Napoleon III of France, cemented his celebrity status. References to Worth can be found in the novels of Henry James and Edith Wharton and in numerous fashion magazines of his day.

By the 1910s, Worth gowns were still sought after, but were no longer the cutting edge in fashion. A former Worth employee,



Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt II (Alice Claypoole Gwynne), 1883. (Top Left)  
One of Worth's more famous creations was worn by Alice Vanderbilt for an 1883 costume ball held by Mrs. William K. (Alva) Vanderbilt. Alice went as electricity in honor of Edison's new power station and stole the show in her battery-powered gown.

Museum of the City of New York, F2012.58.1341.

Worth gray silk dress, c. 1922 (Top Right)  
By the 1920s women's gowns no longer had crinoline, bustles, and corsets and reflected the less restrained role of women in society.

HMC Collections, 94.51.836. Photo by Liz Simpson.





**Above & Right:**

Worth afternoon gown and detail of evening gown bodice, both c. 1880

These silk gowns are both from the estate of Rosalie Spang. The red and cream gown would have been worn as a visiting dress and demonstrates the back bustle that Worth made famous, while the lavender bodice goes with a more formal evening gown. Rosalie's father Charles Frederick Spang and his father Henry started the Etna Iron Works in 1828. By the 1840s, they were making the first iron pipe west of the Alleghenies. By 1877, the company name had changed to Spang, Chalfant & Company. Rosalie died in 1932 at the age of 87, having lived much of her life in Nice, France.

RHC Collections, 94.51.326, 94.51.325 a. Photos by Liz Simpson.

Paul Poiret, became the designer women flocked to for a more natural silhouette free from corsets and bustles. The House of Worth finally closed its doors in the 1950s.

Americans who visited Worth's Parisian studio included the wealthy women of Pittsburgh. Like their contemporaries, they worshipped all things European, including fashion and architecture. An elaborate Worth ball gown might cost as much as \$10,000 and be worn only once. The many Worth gowns in collections such as the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Museum of the City of New York are a testament to the insatiable desire

American women had for the latest European high fashions. The History Center collection features some excellent examples of Worth gowns and accessories from that period. ☀