Housed within the walls of Mount Mary University is a collection unlike any other in the state — one filled with couture garments, designer illustrations and fashionable artifacts. Known formally as the Historic Costume Collection, it boasts nearly 10,000 items, with garments dating back to the late 1800s. Each piece is carefully preserved and stored on campus in one of two climate- and light-controlled spaces.

The collection’s beginnings coincide with the inception of the university’s fashion department, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. Together with a team of local fashion aficionados (think retailers, manufacturers and editors), Sister Aloyse Hessburg founded Mount Mary University’s full-time, four-year fashion program in 1965. Hessburg was named program director, and her primary job duty — developing the program’s curriculum — required frequent trips to New York City. The opportunity led her to meet Charles John Kleibacker, an American fashion designer known for his complex gown designs.

The unlikely pair formed a quick friendship, and it was Kleibacker who encouraged Hessburg to begin a historic costume collection. “At that point, in the 1960s, they started collecting items of contemporary interest as well as historic interest,” explains Barbara Armstrong, dean of the Mount Mary University School of Arts and Design and the School of Business. “From there, it’s been the generosity of a number...
According to Armstrong, the collection’s educational value extends beyond the fashion classroom, and students studying subjects like sociology or anthropology may also benefit from the story it tells. “Our collection really chronicles the lives of women,” says Armstrong. “Contemporary fashion is really a vision of culture. Like in the Victorian era, for example — when women’s lives were restricted, so were their hemlines.”

The university hopes to eventually share this value with others. It purchased PastPerfect, a software used by museums to catalog their collections, last summer as its initial step toward doing so. “That database will allow us, in the future, to share our collection digitally,” explains Armstrong. “That’s one of our goals — where scholars or other institutions or individuals who may be interested in a technique someone was famous for can use the garment to learn from.”

According to Armstrong, the collection’s sheer size, which currently tests its space limitations. “We are now in a situation of abundance,” Armstrong explains. “We’ve maxed out on what we can actually store.” The department is now turning its focus to editing the existing collection, removing duplicates and other unnecessary items and sending them to auctions.

Sarah Eichhorn, whose titles include assistant professor, fashion department co-chair and Fashion Boot Camp codirector, says the collection has proven to be a valuable teaching tool. “The beauty of having this collection is that it’s not just on a screen,” she says. “We can view the pieces and learn from them hands-on.” As the university’s costume history class professor, Eichhorn often uses garments from the collection to explain construction and tailoring techniques of the past. “When we feel there’s a need for an educational resource for our students, a garment they can learn from, we have made the decision to purchase garments for our collection to enhance it and to diversify it,” she says.

In the meantime, the department continues to partner with local and regional museums, most recently lending 13 outfits to the Milwaukee Art Museum for its “Inspiring Beauty: 50 Years of Ebony Fashion Fair” exhibit. Loaning items from the collection is just as regulated as the acquisition process. “It’s a transaction that is very formal,” says Armstrong. “We don’t let the garments just walk out the door. They’re heavily insured and need to be handled properly.

“We’re really proud of it (the collection), and it’s a great differentiator for our program,” she continues. “I don’t believe there are any other collections in Wisconsin or in the region that come close to what we have. It’s a great resource for our students — they simply aren’t going to get this elsewhere.”

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