

Paisley Dress, ca. 1850s. Ryerson
FRC2014.07.196A. Photograph by
Hannah Dobbie, 2016.



A CHILD'S PAISLEY DRESS FROM THE 1850S

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The following children's short story "Frankie's Party Dress" by Pam Johnston is a creative interpretation of an object analysis exercise.

This story is based on a child's paisley dress in the Ryerson Fashion Research Collection (FRC2014.07.196) dated to the 1850s. The dress was donated by Katherine Cleaver in 2014 as part of the Suddon-Cleaver Collection. The dress originally had a matching cape, but at some point before the transfer, the cape was lost.

Pam Johnston was inspired by her object analysis to create a fictional story about a making and initial wearing of a new dress in the mid-19th century. This story is told in the voice of a little girl named Frankie (Frances), only 3.5 years old. Although one might argue that a very young child would not notice such subtle details of cut and construction, I have known a couple very precocious children that noticed everything. And while it is also more likely that the dress was cut down from a larger garment instead of being made from a new bolt of cloth, I think Pam's charming story serves to show how an object-based analysis might be used to creative ends.



Sketch of Paisley Dress,
ca. 1850s. Ryerson
FRC2014.07.196A. By
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FRANKIE'S PARTY DRESS

Mother is going to make me a new dress! This morning, Mother tied the ribbons of her bonnet beneath her chin, made sure my little straw hat was secure, and took my hand to walk across town to Mr. Whitely's General Store. Mrs. Whitely had told mother that some new fabrics had just arrived at the shop from Britain.

Yesterday, my flat, black ankle-boots got muddy squishing in the rain-softened road, but today my boots, eyelet-trimmed drawers and white stockings stayed clean. The dirt road was firmly packed, the sun glowed bright and the breeze was fresh this late-summer morning. Soon it would be September, and Aunt Martha, Uncle Peter and Cousin Sarah would be moving West. I would miss my cousin Sarah, one of the only girls close to my age whom I had loved for as long as I could remember.

A brass bell tinkled as Mother swung the door open at Mr. Whitely's. The leather soles of my boots made a stiff padding sound on the general store's hardwood floors. Mother was wearing a low heeled boot which announced her presence with staccato-like steps (Severa 1995, 103). Mrs. Whitely greeted us warmly and immediately set to pulling the newest fabrics from their neat stack on the shelf. She smiled from behind the counter as she spread brightly coloured cotton calicos from Lancashire and fine worsted wool plaids and prints from West Yorkshire for us to see.



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Photograph by Pam
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Even standing on my tip-toes, I could not see the top of the counter, so mother hoisted me up on a bent knee so I could see some fabrics made especially for little girls and boys my age. **They were printed with patterns of tiny dots, triangles, stars, toy boats and balls** (Severa 1995, 108). While mother rubbed the material between her fingers and thumb, and stretched out lengths to examine the patterns and quality, my eyes wandered to other fabrics still stacked on the shelf behind the counter. One pattern seemed to jump out at me.

The fabric looked very familiar. Its pattern was bit like the swirling tear-drop shapes I had seen so often on the shawls many ladies in town wore. Mother and all the grand ladies wore those big shawls folded in a triangle shape, draped around their shoulders. They think these shawls are very special (Hiner 81-2), though I overheard Mother telling Aunt Martha that Mrs. Field's shawl is even more special because it is made from soft goat hair, comes all the way from India, and cost Mr. Field a lot of money. I loved to lean on Mother's shoulder when she wore that shawl. It felt so soft! Sometimes I would gently pull the fringes through my fingers, or pick up a corner in my hand. **The fabric was smooth like silk, but slightly downy too, and hung heavily on my hand.**

I had seen those same swirly sprigs and curled teardrops, in various sizes, on fabrics that covered cushioned chairs and dressed windows at Aunt Martha's house, and our neighbour Rosa's (Rossbach 10-11). **Dresses made up in calicoes or worsted wools, block- or roller printed since well before I was born in 1849, were decorated with those same motifs** (Johnston 104).



Paisley Shawl, Wool,
ca. 1850. Met CI
2009.300.2962. Brooklyn
Museum Costume
Collection at The
Metropolitan Museum
of Art. Gift of Celeste H.
Chasmer, 1921.

Despite its familiarity, somehow I knew the pattern was special, as if those who wore it were particularly respectable or rich or worldly (Hiner 82, 86). **Though the fabric was not designed especially for little girls, I wanted to be like the grown ladies, and to be seen as special and smart.**

I turned to Mother and whispered in her ear that I would like to see the fabric with the red and pink swirly branches on it. Mother searched the shelf with her eyes until she found the fabric and, when she did, a smile spread from her lips to her eyes. She seemed to approve, and accordingly asked Mrs. Whitely for a closer look.

The fabric was creamy white, like freshly shorn sheep, with alternating dense and sparse bands of pattern printed in stripes. A purple-red colour dominated the fabric, but as I looked closely, I saw that dusty rose, marigold, periwinkle blue, maroon, olive green and bright red interlaced the purple-red outlines. The motifs in one band looked like fans of leaves and grasses crawling up over each other in waves, while the other band depicted heads of grain and cut flowers reaching upwards and outwards, vine-like. Mother unrolled a few feet of cloth as I reached my fingers out to touch it. **It was thin and smooth with a slight nap that was at the same time mildly scratchy.**

"This is a fine worsted wool," Mrs. Whitely informed us. "It should be good to keep little Frankie warm in the fall. And if you line it with cotton muslin, it will be comfortable."



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Mother agreed. She and Mrs. Whitely discussed the dress Mother was envisioning and Mrs. Whitely offered some pattern-making and construction advice. **She then cut two and a half yards each of the Paisley wool and cotton muslin and a length of narrow cord, and found five small metal hooks for closure at the back.** Mother had some cream coloured thread left at home from a dress she had made for me at the beginning of the summer, so, having all we needed, Mother paid Mrs. Whitely, and took my hand as we strode out the tinkling door of Mr. Whitely's General Store.

By Friday morning the dress was complete and it was time for the final fitting. Mother slipped the dress over my head, over my cotton bodice, drawers, and starched petticoats, closed the back with hooks and hand-stitched eyes, and spun me around to look in the mirror.

I squealed with delight, jumping and spinning to experience a transformed me in this new dress. I loved how the skirt puffed out over my petticoats, ending at just the right spot below my knees, and how it swished around my thighs when I spun. I could run and jump freely in the full skirt; the cotton lining felt soft on my neck and arms; the puffed sleeves made me feel like a butterfly with wings; and the high belted waist and pleated bodice made me feel like I belonged among the other girls my age (Severa 1995, 128). Then mother surprised me with another part of the outfit she had kept secret. She came from behind me and wrapped a matching collared cape, trimmed with black velvet ribbon, around my shoulders. Oh, how perfect!

After what seemed like only moments of dancing and spinning in my new outfit, Mother told me that was enough, and made me change back into my everyday clothes. This dress would be for special occasions and Sunday best only. The good news was there was a special occasion tomorrow night and I could wear my new dress for the first time. I would be transformed into a lovely flowering, butterfly-winged creature, frolicking about with cousins and friends.

AFTERWARD

Frankie's mother saved the dress and cape to give Frankie when she was married. Frankie then dressed her first daughter in the dress, and it continued to be passed down from generation to generation until it was finally recognized as an important piece of material culture by the late Alan Suddon, a former fine arts librarian at the Toronto Reference Library, who added it to his collection. When Mr. Suddon passed on, Professor Emeritus Katherine Cleaver acquired his collection, and she later donated some of the collection to Ryerson.

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