



Purple velveteen jacket, ca. 1880s. Ryerson FRC2014.07.198. Photograph by Hannah Dobbie.

A CLOSE LOOK AT A LADY'S VELVETEEN JACKET FROM THE 1880s

By **Jessica Oakes**

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I have chosen to study a lady's late-nineteenth century purple velveteen jacket from the Ryerson Research Collection (FRC2014.07.198). This garment is described in the catalogue as follows: "Purple velveteen military-style womenswear bodice/jacket with standing collar, tails and overskirt sections, double-breasted with brass moulded buttons up front" and was dated to the 1880s. This jacket was likely worn with a matching or coordinating skirt which has been repurposed or lost.



One of the most striking features of this jacket is that it was designed to be worn over a bustle, which emphasized the back side of the woman wearing it. The bustle was fashionable during two periods in the later part of the nineteenth century. It was first popular during 1869-1876 and fell out of fashion for a brief time to return in popularity from about 1883-1890. Without a bustle the jacket has a lot of extra room in the rear and looks rather deflated without a bustle to fill it out. I compared several sizes of bustles from the Ryerson Collection and estimated that a bustle of around five inches would have been worn to fill in the back.

This fitted jacket has a double row of twelve $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch bronze-gold buttons that suggest military influence. The flat shank buttons have an engraved design of foliage. The front panel of the jacket is attached only by the buttons that are sewn through both the panel and the jacket front. The front panel has a center seam down the front, peaks about $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch above the neckline and tapers down to hip level.

Purple velveteen jacket, ca. 1880s. Ryerson FRC2014.07.198. Button detail. Photograph by Jessica Oakes.



Purple velveteen jacket,
ca. 1880s. Ryerson
FRC2014.07.198. Jacket
lining. Photograph by
Jessica Oakes.

The jacket fabric is either a cotton or silk velveteen, and is assumed to be cotton since that would be a less expensive option. Without a fiber test it is difficult to determine the fibre content with certainty, but cotton is a logical choice since there is other evidence that the maker was thrifty. The external shell is magenta velveteen (roughly hex colour #540052). The jacket lining is a plain weave cotton in camel brown (roughly hex colour #C19A6B). The lining extends from the bodice to the hips up but the sleeves are unlined. The edges have been clipped to reduce fraying. The front panel and collar have a different facing that appears to be a faded black lining made of a textile that feels more like silk than cotton. The lining was sewn into the seams like a second shell layer, then strips of black fabric were hand sewn with a whip stitch onto the outer edges of the seam allowance to create a boning case. These casings are found at the center back, side seam and side dart. The unlined lower hem was finished with a 2 inch turned under hem with little tucks to help such a wide rolling hem curve around the paniers and bustle overskirt.

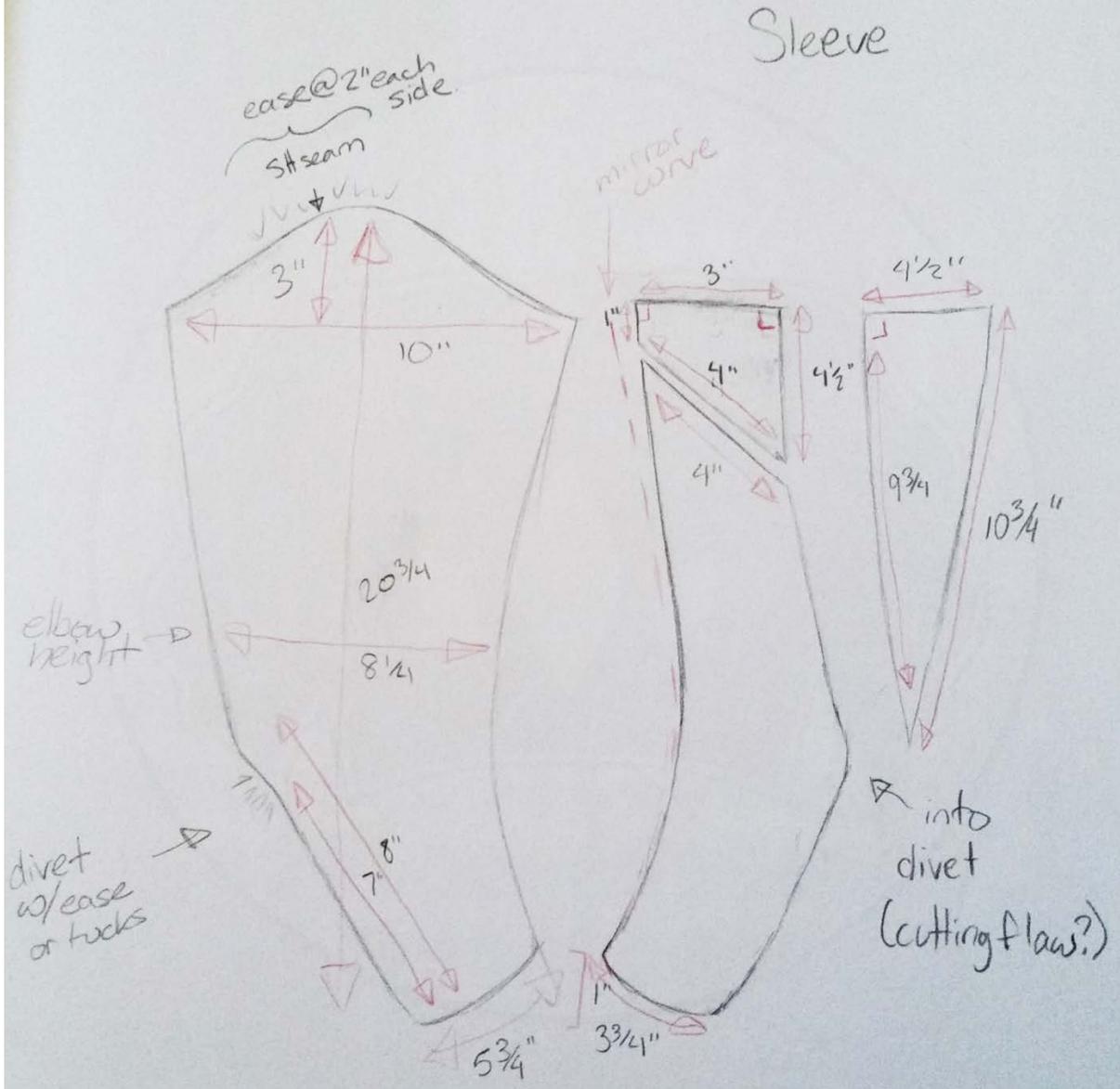
This garment was made for a woman that was very petite. When dressed on a child's mannequin, it does up quite snugly around the bust and hips leaving about 2 to 3 inches of gaping at the waist.



The jacket exhibits some damage including areas where the velveteen nap has been worn away such as the underarms, seam/hem edges, cuffs, and sleeve caps/shoulders. The most severe damage is the collar where the top edge has frayed and come apart to reveal the thick woven interfacing sandwiched inside. The boning inserts from inside the jacket lining are empty and one button is missing from the jacket front.

There are no labels in the jacket, and it is likely that the jacket was homemade, as was common at the time. Nonetheless, the jacket illustrates a complexity of construction. The sleeves are constructed with two main pieces in an arm-scythe shape with a thinner inner sleeve and a larger outer sleeve. There are two triangular gores, one long and one short, on the inside of the sleeve which may indicate that the maker was being economical in her cutting of the fabric. Another sign of thriftiness is the visible selvedge used in the center front as well as in the top portions of the over-skirt (measuring a 20 inch fabric width). This suggests that the maker took care to cut the fabric as efficiently as possible.

Purple velveteen jacket,
ca. 1880s. Ryerson
FRC2014.07.198. Collar
damage. Photograph by
Jessica Oakes.



Purple velveteen jacket, ca. 1880s. Ryerson FRC2014.07.198. Sketch of sleeve detail. Drawing by Jessica Oakes.

As I looked closer at the construction of the garment, it quickly became apparent that some of the details I thought were simple were much more complicated than expected. The jacket includes double front darts under the breasts, the outer ones being higher than the inner ones. Where I expected to see a side seam there is a dart from the armhole down to about hip height. The actual side seam is farther back where four pleats from the front and two from the back create two shorter side drapes and a large, long back drape. The back also has two princess seams, the outermost is the side seam ending at hip height with the hem and the innermost ends in a dart around hip height as well, both connect to the armhole. The side seam also lines up with the back underarm seam.

The shoulder seams are set quite farther back than expected, making the back neckline section rather short. The shoulder seams are also 6 inches long which suggest a dropped-shoulder look since most shoulder seams are 4 inches long which makes 6 inches especially long since this was such a petite woman. I suspect this is to allow movement and create a softer shoulder silhouette. The collar of the jacket appears to have a built up neckline before the mandarin collar section. The front of it sits an inch apart instead of overlapping. Inside the collar is a thick-yarned, woven interfacing.



The pleats at the side seam are 2 inches deep, the front ones being 1 ¼ inches apart and the back ones being 2 inches apart, both with the hem being 2 ¼ inches below the lowest pleats which match up front and back. The lining even gets caught up in the front pleats at the side seam. There is also a center back seam that has a complex box pleat, which looks like a complex triple pleat. This box pleat is hand stitched to the lining on the inside and took a while to deconstruct as each pleat is tucked into each other.

When I look at this garment, I think it would likely have been very constricting to wear, especially on top of a shift, a corset, a bustle, and petticoat. Although I cannot imagine wearing a bustle or corset, the shape of the garment would still work well with my figure since I am an hourglass silhouette. I would think the texture of the velveteen would be very nice to feel and would make it a very warm jacket, and thus likely worn in fall or winter in order to not be overwhelmingly hot. I love the colour and silhouette of this jacket. I also think that the design is so exceedingly lovely. The drop shoulder and shaped sleeves would be interesting to wear and possibly very comfortable.

This garment revealed many surprises that have inspired me to learn more.

This post was edited by Dr. Ingrid Mida.

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of jacket. Drawing by
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