

Arsenic Green
Dress, ca. 1860s.
FRC2014.07.406ABC.
Photo by Suzanne
Petersen, Bata Shoe
Museum.



THE ARSENIC GREEN DRESS

By Dr. Ingrid Mida

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In the 1860s and 1870s, the colour green was highly fashionable. This distinctive green pigment - "Scheele's Green" - was achieved with the use of arsenic. It is a lustrous green - often equated to an emerald green.

In August 2014 as I was unpacking a large donation of historic pieces from the Cleaver-Suddon Collection, I recognized the colour. I had learned about this toxic pigment from hearing Dr. Alison Matthews David talk about her research for her book *Fashion Victims*. Suspecting that this dress might contain arsenic, I tweeted her a photo on August 24, 2014 and we arranged to test it in the Ryerson University Physics Lab on September 5, 2014.



Fashion Plate La Mode (undated) Private Collection.



Testing the bodice in the
Ryerson Physics Lab.

Of course we were both thrilled to learn that the dress did in fact contain arsenic as I suspected and the dress became the subject of an article in [The Ryersonian](#) by Kathleen McGouran. Since the FRC does not have a dedicated display space, I contacted curator Elizabeth Semmelhack at the Bata Shoe Museum to offer this dress for the *Fashion Victims* exhibit. The museum already had another green dress on display but it would have to come down after a year. The dress belonging to Ryerson is presently on display at the [Bata Shoe Museum](#) after the creation of a custom mount and some conservation work.

This dress (FRC2014.07.406 A+B+C) was originally purchased in 1967 for \$15 at a vintage clothing sale by Alan Suddon for his private collection. The dress consists of three parts, a bodice, a skirt and an overskirt. Made of silk and decorated with braid and fringe, it was likely worn as late afternoon dress with a fichu or under-blouse to fill in the deep neckline. The bodice has a bust measurement of 32.5 inches and a waist measurement of 25 inches. The skirt has a slight train as was common during the period. This fashion plate from *La Mode* shows a similar dress.

If you have not yet seen the [Fashion Victims exhibition](#) at the Bata Shoe Museum, do be sure to visit. The display will be up until May 2016.

To read more about Scheele's Green, be sure to get a copy of Dr. Alison Matthews David's book: [Fashion Victims, The Dangers of Dress Past and Present](#).