

Patrick F. Taylor Foundation Object Project

Fact Sheet

Ready-to-Wear Clothes=Opportunity

Focusing on everyday things that changed everything, “Object Project” will use common objects and uncommon exhibition techniques to encourage visitors of all ages to discover fascinating stories behind objects and the role of innovation in American history. “Object Project” will use more than 250 objects related to and including bicycles, refrigerators, ready-to-wear clothing, and a variety of household conveniences to explore how people, innovative things, and social change shaped life as we know it. The 4,000 square foot “Object Project” is divided into four sections: Bicycles, Refrigerators, Ready-to-Wear Clothes, and Household Hits. Details on the Ready-to-Wear section are below:

Ready-to-Wear Clothes=Opportunity

By the 1890s, both men and women were able to buy off-the-rack clothing in department stores and mail-order catalogs that was mass-produced in the same styles at different price levels. Americans began to dress more alike, obscuring the differences between them.

HIGHLIGHTED OBJECTS

- **Cloth-cutting machine, 1920s**

“Object Project” features a cloth-cutting saw from the 1920s, used to cut multiple copies of garment patterns from stacks of fabric. Mass production was key to affordable ready-to-wear clothing. As early as the 1890s, electric saws had replaced long cutting knives (which had replaced scissors in the 1870s). Because lighter-weight fabrics were easier to cut, the clothing industry abandoned heavier fabrics and designers reconsidered traditional styles.

- **Cash register, 1919**

“Object Project” features a cash register from 1919 to represent changes in the way Americans bought clothing. Department stores from large urban palaces to small-town emporiums offered clothes at a variety of fixed, no-haggle prices—often on multiple floors. Many also had bargain basements selling marked-down or overstocked garments. By the 1920s, sales of ready-to-wear clothing had reached unprecedented levels—spurred by rising incomes, easy credit, and the increasing social acceptability of spending money (and accumulating debt) on consumer goods that were not absolute necessities.



- **Bathing costume, 1890s**

“Object Project” will feature a rotating selection of ready-to-wear clothes from the Museum’s permanent collection. Beginning July 1, it will display a women’s bathing costume from the 1890s—a voluminous wool garment worn with a corset—in a style that had been, with slight variations, standard beachwear for women since the 1860s. After about 1910, women began to wear them without corsets but it was not until the 1920s

that women began to abandon their “bath flannels.” At that time, knit-wear manufacturers introduced streamlined one-piece suits and women began to swim—not just bounce in the waves.

- **Celebrity paper dolls, 1930s**

“Object Project” features paper dolls of movie stars and their clothes from the 1930s, a time when ready-to-wear began to take fashion cues from Hollywood. “Now at Modest Prices,” exclaimed the Sears, Roebuck catalog in 1935: “Styles of the Stars!” In the 1930s, stars such as Jean Harlow helped popularize form-fitting styles with broad shoulders and narrow waists. New undergarments made the new look possible: form-shaping bras replaced camisoles and bandeaux and sleek panties and slips replaced bloomers.



- **Mail order catalogs, 1900s-1930s**

“Object Project” features a variety of mail order catalogs brimming with ready-to-wear clothes. A year after the U.S. Mail began Rural Free Delivery in 1896, Sears, Roebuck claimed that it was selling four ready-to-wear suits every minute. When the Parcel Post Act of 1912 authorized the post office to deliver packages weighing more than four pounds, mail-order really took off. In 1910 Sears, Roebuck mailed out 2.3 million catalogs; in 1929, more than 7 million.

ACTIVITIES

- **Try It On! Ready-to-Wear from the Museum’s Collection**

“Object Project” features two interactive dressing room mirrors which allow visitors to virtually try on ready-to-wear clothes from the 1890s to the 1980s. First, they select an outfit and pose for an image capture of their faces; then they appear on screen as a paper doll dressed in their selection. Motion tracking technology allows visitors to move about in a historically appropriate setting. Among the outfits available are: a women’s bathing costume (1890s); a men’s leisure suit (1970s); a Shirley Temple brand frock (1930s); a silk flapper dress (1920s); a boy’s sailor suit (early 1900s); a Woodstock t-shirt and jeans (1960s) and a Quinceañera or 15th birthday party dress, (2000s).

OTHER FEATURES

- **Video**

Historical still and moving images drawn from more than two dozen archival depositories highlight the mass production and volume sales that are the key characteristics of ready-to-wear from the 1890s to the 1980s. The presentation includes images that range from the factory floors at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in the early 1900s to offshore factories in the 1980s; and excerpts from films, including Charlie Chaplin’s 1916 department store comedy, *The Floorwalker*. The video production was made possible by History Channel.

- **Object Story Boards**

Within the “Object Project,” are unique “gallery boards” that use advertisements, historical photographs, and intriguing primary source materials to encourage active exploration of the history

behind selected objects on view. Among the stories that will be available in this section: *Why did garment workers strike?* (Strike broadside); *What difference did hangers make?* (Wishbone hanger); *Anyone can dress like a movie star* (paper dolls); *When did bathing become swimming?* (Bathing suit); *Something for everyone* (cash register); *Let your fingers do the shopping* (catalogs); *Who's got the button?* (Buttons).

- **Brannock devices**

Visitors using vintage foot measuring devices, invented in 1925, will be able to measure their feet and determine their ready-to-wear shoe size.

- **Hands-on Cart**

Visitors will be able to handle authentic hats and piece together the stories they hold.