

[Opening Didactic]

[White]

The Art of High Style: Minnesota Couture 1880–1914

Twin Cities couture—high-end, hand-sewn, custom-made clothing—emerged during a transitional period in elite cosmopolitan fashion worldwide. In the late 1860s, when designers like Paris-based Charles Frederick Worth began “signing” dresses with sewn-in labels, the modern luxury brand was born. But by the 1910s, even very wealthy consumers turned increasingly to department store ready-to-wear apparel.

Local couture ascended during a pivotal moment for Minnesota, which became a state in 1858 amid coercive and fiercely contested treaty negotiations with the Dakota and Ojibwe nations. Abundant natural resources extracted through milling and mining, along with innovations in rail transportation, enriched early settlers and industrial tycoons. Wealthy white settlers sought elegant dress to reflect their new status. The Minnesota couturieres featured in this exhibition, with connections to Paris and other fashion centers, furnished this clientele with styles that kept in step with tastemakers around the globe.

[Quotation for wall]

[Vinyl color – determined by Bill Skodje]

“[Mme. Boyd’s] garments are carried out with the painstaking care of a real artist. . . . In order to keep herself in touch with the latest whims and fancies of the ever-changing fashions of Europe, Mme. Boyd goes abroad twice a year, for the demands of the growing wealth and social prominence in the empire of which Minneapolis is the center require that our styles shall come to us first hand from the very heart of fashion’s citadels—gay Paris, Berlin and London.”

—*The Minneapolis Journal*, March 31, 1910

[Dressmaker Overview Panel]

[White]

The Couturiere's Craft

Minnesota's elite fashion industry flourished during the era of the "New Woman," a feminist ideal promoting white middle- and upper-class women's social and professional engagement. By 1900, Minnesota led the nation in women working outside the home; couturieres and their seamstresses were part of this movement.

Couture fashion was—and still is—incredibly labor intensive. Custom garments were made to suit a client's individual specifications for fit, fabric, and trim. Before final stitches were laid, precise measurements and multiple fittings were required. Hand needlework predominated machine sewing. And from 1880 to the early 1900s, the fashionably exaggerated silhouettes could only be achieved with precisely tailored garments supported by stiff understructures like corsets and bustles. In this period, the couturiere made more than clothing: she painstakingly crafted an ideal body type.