



# WANDERING WARDROBE



## CLOTHING AS EXPRESSION & PERFORMANCE: CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

Lesson engages in object-based analysis of a Mourning Cape, highlighting how the design choices reflect the contextual and historical background of the garment. The activity asks students to consider how clothing is used to create a fashionable, social or performative personal expression.

**Associated garment:** 1890s Capelet

**Associated web page:** [onstead.unt.edu/capelet](http://onstead.unt.edu/capelet)

**Subject Areas:** Theatre, Visual Arts

**Grades:** Adaptable for any grade

**Topics/Themes:** Fashion History, Costume Design, Social History

**Set-up:** Place the display box with garment on a table where students can gather around and see easily; remind students not to touch

**Materials:** Capelet, projector & screen, Drawing/Illustration supplies

**Note:** This lesson is set up to take 1-4 class periods.

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## GOALS

Students will be able to:

- Recognize and describe design elements in clothing
- Design a garment using color that expresses an emotion
- Explain artistic choices related to their design: color, shape or “silhouette”, embellishment

## TERMINOLOGY

- **Mourning Dress:** Garments worn during periods of mourning the loss of a family member, leader in society, or monarchy. Began as part of royal court protocol in the Middle Ages and became popular with the middle classes in the 1800s, declining in popularity around World War I. Social protocols dictated the wear, color, embellishment, and details of these garments. (Taylor, 1983)
- **Conceptual Art:** Work that places emphasis on the idea, or concept, behind the work. The materials, shape, color, and other artistic choices communicate the concept. ([Tate Museum](https://www.tate.org.uk/learn/primary-resources/articles/conceptual-art))

- **Functional Design:** Objects designed for a specific function or purpose.

## DAY 1: OBSERVATION USING ARTFUL THINKING (SEE, THINK, WONDER) / CONTEXT DISCUSSION

Give each student a chance to look up at the garment up close. Encourage them to take notes or write down observations or questions about the garment:

- **See:** Either looking directly at the garment or projecting images of the capelet and its details, ask students to share their observations of what they see, and what they notice while looking at the garment. Ask students to identify colors, materials, and design elements. Other questions include: Can you see where the fabric is cut and sewn together? How do you think it was made? Do you see any tears, fraying, or staining? What activities do you think caused this?
- **Wonder:** Have students discuss or write down (in pairs or as a group) what questions they have about the garment.
- **Think:** Have students discuss (in pairs or as a group) one of the questions they have, or ask one of the following: What does the color represent in this capelet? Why would someone decorate a garment this way? What kind of person might wear this coat, what are they trying to say about themselves by wearing this coat? What is the shape of this garment? What would it look like if it were put on a person? Additionally, students can be asked to think about the person wearing the piece, the time it would have been worn, who would have made it, or the activities people would have performed while wearing it.

Share the contextual and historic background of the garment:

- **Mourning Dress**  
This capelet was made around the 1890's. This garment was likely originally created to be worn during the prescribed mourning period for women; deaths requiring a mourning period included husbands, aristocracy, and close family members. These garments followed a societal code of etiquette dictating use of all black materials, modest silhouette (the shape of the garment), and minimal embellishment. This code of dress was strictly adhered to by all and could put financial strain on less-affluent families. (Taylor, 1983; [MAAS Museum Article](#))
  - Additional Examples: [2.1.1 Supporting document: Mourning dress examples](#)
- **Social Context/Influences**  
The practice of dressing in specific clothing for a Mourning period began in Europe during the Middle Ages as part of court protocols. Wealthy merchant families adopted these practices by 1700. By the 1800s it had become important to all of Western society. Both wealthy and poor families spent money on these clothes to maintain respectability. Smart clothing manufacturers took advantage of this, producing options for a variety of price points. Additionally, marketing encouraged the importance of proper accessories

including “in memoriam” jewelry. Wealthy widows followed the fashions from Paris and spent money purchasing new garments each season or re-working old ones. The specific prescribed period of mourning shifted through the years, but generally widows were required to spend much more time in mourning than men. Generally, women spent about 2- 2.5 years in mourning for a husband or close family member, going through several prescribed phases, each with slightly less restrictive options for garment material and color choice. Men spent from 3-6 months in mourning, with a black band across the arm being the singular change in dress to indicate mourning. (Taylor, 1983, [National Museum of Funeral History](#))

The dictates of dress for women in mourning were very specific, with color and material details unique to each phase of mourning. Quoted from a 1872 Ladies Etiquette book ([2.1.2 Supporting document: Etiquette Manual](#)):

“For deep mourning, the dress should be of bombazine, Parramatta cloth, delaine, barege, or merino, made up over black lining. The only appropriate trimming is a deep fold, either of the same material or of crape. The shawl or cloak must be of plain black, without border or trimming, unless a fold of crape be put on the cloak; the bonnet should be of crape, made perfectly plain, with crape facings, unless the widow's cap be worn, and a deep crape veil should be thrown over both face and bonnet. Black crape collar and sleeves, and black boots and gloves.” (Hartley 1872, p. 32)

- **Materials and Embellishment Significance**

The detailed beadwork and delicate fringe overlay indicate this garment was expensive to make and most likely owned by a more affluent person. Additionally, careful analysis reveals the neckline has been rolled and stitched down to make it shorter. (Note the beading remaining on the inside of the garment at back of neck.) This could have been to modify the garment for general wear after the mourning period was complete, as a hand-me-down to fit another family member, or an alteration when a less-affluent person purchased it as a second-hand garment.

Introduce Design Activity:

- Have students think about different life events like Birthdays, Weddings, Funerals, Graduations, Sporting Events, or maybe different occupations, social settings, or locations; are there certain social expectations of the clothes you should wear to these events? Is there a “uniform” for any of these? Do the garments and objects used to create this uniform ever become fashionable objects regardless of their functionality? Do clothes meant to convey meaning become adopted and fashionable by others? ([2.1.3 Supporting document: Fashion As Performance \(article\)](#), [VOGUE Thom Brown Collection](#))
- Using the handout, ask each student to list 4 events, settings, or situations that they think could use a newly designed look.

- Underneath the 4 events, settings, or situations, ask student to write down every word that could describe it. Prompt them by suggesting them to think about environment, sounds, feel, emotion, color, etc.

## DAY 2: CONCEPTUAL DESIGN ACTIVITY

Refresh material covered in the previous class, and discuss these ways to approach executing the ideas”

- **Conceptual Art:** Work that places emphasis on the idea, or concept, behind the work. The materials, shape, color, and other artistic choices communicate the concept. ([Tate Museum](#))
- **Functional design:** Discuss the varying importance of functionality based on these conceptual needs.
- **Conceptual design:** Fashion can be designed in a conceptual way as well. ([Example](#)) Discuss how clothing can be used to communication life events, emotions, or social standing. [Berg – Dress & Social Identity](#). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Bauhaus art school focused on blending art and craft to create both aesthetically appealing and functional objects. ([Bauhaus](#)) Some examples of product design that elegantly merges function and appearance can be found here: [Scientific American](#).

Design activity:

- Have students review their word lists from the previous class and use the croquis sketch out garment or accessory ideas that could express the words written.
- After giving students time to develop their ideas, have students choose one to develop further. If time allows, have them give a short presentation of their idea and preliminary sketches to either you individually or to the class. Ask them to share what they are designing, if it is mostly functional or conceptual, and how the garment would be worn.

## DAY 3-4: DESIGN ACTIVITY

Students will take their idea and develop it further:

- Have students use the Paper Doll pattern ([2.1.4 Making document: Paper doll pattern](#)) to cut a figure out of cardboard or cardstock that will wear their paper garments. They can use the traditional tab method, or simply glue the garment they make to the figure.
- Have students develop their design in paper. Have them color, embellish, texturize, pleat, or shape the paper if they would like.
- Encourage students to experiment with the details of color tone proportion, lines, and shape or silhouette to best communicate the activity, environment, or mood they are expressing with their design idea.
- At the end of the final class day, allow time for students to share their final project. This can be through presentation, or having students walk through the classroom to see what their classmates’ work.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Victoria & Albert Museum Mourning Reading List](#)

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hartley, Florence. *The Ladies Book of Etiquette and Manual of Politeness*. Boston: Lee and Shepard

Publishers, 1872.

Taylor, Lou. *Mourning Dress: A Costume and Social History*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1983.

(Support File 2.1.2\_LouTaylor)

## MATERIALS

- Cardboard/Cardstock
- Pens, Paint, Glitter, etc.
- Multi-colored Construction Paper
- Glue