



# *Designing Women*

By KATHRYN JENSON WHITE

**A**s the Good Book says, "The fashion of the world passeth away." Applied to "fashion" in its most tangible sense, this is undeniably true. Hemlines go up, then down; colors fade from one designer collection to another; waistlines appear with startling definition only to disappear completely in the next year. Generations come, generations go, and their wardrobes generally do, too.

A group of women in Oklahoma City, however, is using the expertise of an OU fashion design professor to make sure that certain special fashions do not simply pass away. They firmly believe that in the cut of the gown, the weave of the fabric and the style of the moment, history is to be found, a history worth preserving.

These designing women, from various fashion-related businesses, are all members of the Oklahoma City Regional Fashion Group, Inc.; their interest is in saving pieces of Oklahoma history as told in garments worn by the wives of all the state's governors. One of their number is Jo Ellen Uptegraft, who heads the fashion arts, clothing and textile program in OU's School of Human Development. She and her advanced design students are major forces in the creation of what is now called "The First Ladies of Oklahoma Collection," a display of gowns currently one of the most popular attractions at Oklahoma City's Kirkpatrick Center.

"The personalities of these historically important women are evident in

their clothing choices," Uptegraff says. "Also, they all pretty much have chosen garments that reflect the state of the state during their husbands' terms of office. Their garments are unspoken statements about, especially, the state's economy during their terms."

The Fashion Group got this sewing bee in its bonnet in 1981, when members decided they wanted to do something appropriate for themselves and significant for the state. Encouraged by the organization's regional director, 1939 OU alumna Lillian Russell, and committee chair Louise Mathews, they originally decided to collect the actual gown each first lady wore to her husband's inaugural ball.

"As far as I know," Uptegraff says, "at the time we started we were the only state doing such a project. One of our directors has since provided information to the main office of the Fashion Group in New York, and they released it to other regional groups. Some other group may have picked up the idea by now."

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The women were excited by the challenge of their undertaking; initial research showed that they would need to track down and secure gowns worn by 22 different women. Although Oklahoma has had 21 governors since statehood, there have been 22 first ladies, since the 16th governor, David L. Boren, was married twice. The earliest gown sought for the collection was that of Lillian Gallup (Mrs. Charles) Haskell, whose husband took office in 1907. Interestingly, the most recent belonged to a Fashion Group member, Shirley Osborne (Mrs. Henry) Bellmon, whose husband was returned in 1987 to the governor's office he previously occupied in 1963-67.

The Oklahoma Diamond Jubilee Commission provided original funding for the search-and-preserve project, a \$35,000 grant to the Oklahoma Historical Society earmarked for the Fashion Group's undertaking. The Historical Society, in turn, agreed to make the garments a part of its permanent collections and provide exhibition space. The Fashion Group com-

mitted to providing supplementary funding as necessary — to date, more than \$7,500.

The enthusiasm with which the women conceived their idea five years ago remains strong today, even though as soon as they began the project, reality stepped in to force them to rethink their plans. Almost immediately, funding promised for the exhibition space at the Oklahoma Historical Society fell through. The Fashion Group realized that to achieve their goal, they would need to be fund raisers, creative thinkers and even, after a fashion, detectives.

"As soon as we started searching for the gowns," Uptegraff remembers, "we found that some of them had been destroyed, either because they hadn't been properly stored and cared for or because no one realized they had any historical significance. On many of the gowns we did find, the fabrics had deteriorated so that they were too delicate to put in any sort of exhibit.

"We also found that a gown might not be available to us because the governor's wife did not want to give it up, preferring to keep it in the family. Some were already in museums, and the museums weren't interested in giving them to us. So we found many reasons why we couldn't collect all the original inaugural ball gowns."





*Uptegraft works on a muslin pattern for the Edmondson gown in the construction lab in OU's Burton Hall.*



*Black glass beads over a gold colored fabric blouson created a pre-flapper gown for Mrs. J.B.A. Robertson, wife of the young state's fourth governor.*

In addition, they discovered that some administrations had not had inaugural balls at all. Obviously, no inaugural ball, no inaugural ball gown.

Undeterred by any of these obstacles, these determined women turned to Plan B. First, they arranged with the Kirkpatrick Center to display the collection. Then, Louise Mathews decided to look to the experts for advice on how best to proceed.

Since this project is a state version of the national First Ladies' Hall in the Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution, Mathews undertook a fact-finding mission there. She discovered at the national museum that all the original gowns are carefully stored away for protection and conservation. Visitors to the display see only replicas of the gowns.

According to Mathews, the general attitude espoused by those in charge of the Washington, D.C., collection is, "Do the best you can to be as authentic as possible, and then be satisfied." That practical approach suited the Oklahomans just fine.

"In the Smithsonian exhibit," Mathews explains, "there's nothing that Martha Washington ever wore. To their knowledge, the only thing on display that she ever even owned was possibly the purse that's in her hand, and they aren't even sure about that. The collection was started in 1912, so the first dress that was given to them was the second Mrs. Wilson's. From 1912, each first lady knew she was going to give her dress to the collection, so they're authentic from then on."

Mathews also visited the D.A.R.'s magnificent collection of historic gowns at their Washington, D.C., headquarters and several other important garment collections at various museums and universities across the nation. What she learned from her visits helped redefine the Fashion Group's goals. Like the Smithsonian, they would collect as many original gowns as possible and treat them as museum quality textiles should be treated. That meant storing them under the best possible conditions to ensure a long life and filling their display cases with replicas.

The Oklahoma group also decided to drop the word "inaugural" from the

Custom-made and hand-beaded in France, Mrs. Henry H. Johnston's original gown was the most expensive.



Uptegraft and Tracy Nichols, a Denver junior in fashion merchandising, prepare to cut a pattern from muslin before cutting it from the actual material.



project title. If they could obtain the formal gown worn to the ball, fine. If for some reason they could not, they would select another garment, one that best represented the woman and the times during which she was first lady.

Uptegraft, who undertook to handle all the necessary pattern drafting and sewing of the replicas, became very excited about the project at this point because she knew she would be presented with a series of complex design and construction problems to solve.

"The search for the fabrics sounded most interesting to me," she remembers. "Our intent was to replicate the garment as exactly as possible. Given the short shelf life most fabrics have, this was a major problem."

Uptegraft's Ph.D. research centered on her design and testing of a pair of slacks for men confined to wheelchairs. She has a particular interest in designing for people with special needs, but she approaches all design as a problem-solving activity.

"I'm always fascinated in seeing

what a particular fabric will do, to see what its potential is, to push it to its fullest extent," she explains. "Always when I teach graduate classes, I assign a research project in which the students pick up a piece of fabric and explore its possibilities. I think that's why I like teaching so much. I'd really rather help my students work through problems than actually design and create garments myself."

At the beginning of the project, the Fashion Group had access to five original gowns. Four are owned by the University's Stovall Museum (now the Oklahoma Museum of Natural History), which received them as part of a garment collection donated several years ago by the School of Human Development; the fifth belongs to the Five Civilized Tribes Museum in Muskogee. Deciding to begin with what they had available, the committee elected to reproduce first one of the gowns owned by the Stovall — the inaugural gown of Olive Stubblefield (Mrs. J.B.A.) Robertson, which she wore in 1919.

"The Robertson gown was the most exciting, the biggest challenge of the 11 gowns my students and I have constructed so far," Uptegraft says. "It was a beautiful dress to begin with, a two-piece gown in a pre-flapper design with a matching stole. The skirt is mid-calf length with a train in the back that falls to the ankle. The skirt and stole are of a Jacquard weave brocade in gold and black satin. The bodice has extensive beadwork."

Months of searching for an appropriate fabric proved futile, so Uptegraft and Jill Dacey, then an instructor of textile design at OU, decided to create the fabric as well as the dress. Wearing white cotton gloves to protect the fragile original, the two women traced the woven design of the cloth and silk-screened it onto a gold satin fabric with black textile ink. When they could not find pre-strung jet beads for the straps and bodice, they bought the available gold ones and spray painted them black. The finished product, obviously a work of art in itself, is remarkably like the original.





*Kay Kerr Adair  
donated material  
to make the dress for  
her mother, Grayce Breene  
(Mrs. Robert S.) Kerr.*

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The Robertson gown stands now with 16 others in artfully arranged and decorated display cases. In addition to the 12 replicas created by Uptegraft, the collection contains four originals, including a 1901 gown worn by Delphina White (Mrs. William M.) Jenkins, wife of one of Oklahoma’s territorial governors. Two other originals are a beautifully tailored green wool suit worn by Emma Mae (Mrs. Raymond) Gary at her husband’s swearing in and the sequined chiffon ball gown worn by Donna Skinner (Mrs. George) Nigh at the inaugural celebration marking Governor Nigh’s first term. When time allows, Uptegraft plans to replicate the Gary and Nigh garments and place the originals in storage. However, the Jenkins family has requested that Mrs. Jenkins’ original gown remain on display.

For Lyde Roberts (Mrs. E. W.) Marland’s gown, the display presents an original Irene, designed by famous dressmaker Adrian. While the beige lace gown with cap sleeves is from the era, it did not belong to Mrs. Marland.



*Louise Mathews, left, helps Uptegraft ready a display for exhibit. Top, Uptegraft arranges the handiwork on the mannequin inside the show case.*

An embroidered handkerchief and decorative hair comb that did belong to the former first lady add a personal touch.

The display also contains a replica not made by Uptegraft, that of the inaugural ball gown worn by Shirley Bellmon in 1987. It was replicated by her dressmaker, B.J. Lynn, at the same time the original was made.

Mathews laughs as she says, "I have to quote Mrs. Bellmon about this dress. She said, 'This is the first time I've ever made a dress or arranged to have a dress made when I thought about how it was going to look in a case as well as how it was going to look on me.' It's a lovely dress, and, of course, the most accurate replication we have. They even replicated the shoes. Mrs. Bellmon's own hairdresser, Jo Hackney, ordered the wig for the mannequin and styled it."

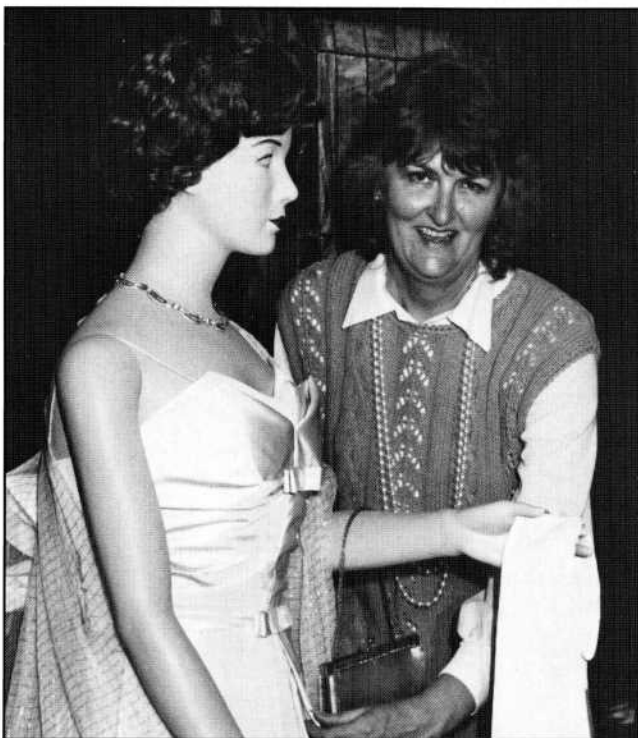
The preparation of the mannequins to wear the first ladies' dresses has been the source of the committee's

most serious difficulties to date.

"Our original intention," Uptegraft explains, "was that every mannequin would be custom designed to the measurements of the first lady. We gathered that information from pictures and conversations with friends and family members. Well, the last group of mannequins we received were modern, high-fashion figures, tall and thin. When I've designed a dress to fit this little bitty short gal, and I've made it to her exact measurements from the neck down, it's difficult to fit on a seven-foot model. We've had to seat some of the mannequins because we just didn't have enough hem length to make up the difference in heights. And we've had to pad the mannequins; not all our first ladies were shaped like the fashion models of today."

To get the replica from the original concept to the mannequin, Uptegraft and her fellow workers must go through a rather complicated series of steps. The first is, of course, research.

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*Finishing touches are made on the Edmondson gown after cutting and measuring the muslin to make the final cut, top.*

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*Before opening the exhibit, Mathews and Uptegraft compare the replica, left, to Shirley (Mrs. Henry) Bellmon's original.*



When they have access to the original, that process is fairly simple. Uptegraft dons her white cotton gloves, takes her tape measure in hand and comes up with several pages of measurements and descriptive phrases. With this information and photographs to work from, she drafts a paper pattern and uses it to make a muslin version of the garment. This she fits to a dress form shaped to the woman's measurements. Then she adjusts the paper pattern as necessary and, finally, makes the gown out of cotton fabric.

Choosing the fabric involves sending descriptions, photographs and photocopies of pieces of materials and trims to a large number of fabric companies. Soon, hundreds of fabric samples begin arriving in the mail. Uptegraft chooses a fabric she feels is closest to the original and presents it to the committee. With their approval, she places the order and picks up her scissors.

Sometimes, the search is disappointing. Uptegraft says that her least favorite assignment was a beige chiffon gown with black lace trim worn by Amy Arnold (Mrs. William) Holloway.

"I hate to say it," she admits, "but it's my least favorite because we were never able to find exactly the lace I wanted. For a while we even considered making the lace. That would have meant taking tulle, scalloping the edges and tacking on cutouts of lace roses. We ultimately settled for a similar, but not exact, ready-made lace."

At other times, the fabric the women seek seems to arrive with no difficulty. Mathews is particularly proud of the dress representing Grayce Breene (Mrs. Robert) Kerr.

"Because of the war," she explains, "Governor Kerr had no inaugural ball.

*Continued*

*Yet to be reproduced is the intricate, fragile gown worn by the first governor's wife, Lillian (Mrs. Charles) Haskell. The dress featured hand-embroidered French knots and tiny silk bows.*



Grayce Kerr's at-home dress is a very fine, 100 percent cotton eyelet, based on a picture of a dress she wore entertaining one afternoon at the mansion with her daughter, Kay Kerr Adair. Kay gave us the material from her mother's collection of 100 percent cotton fabrics, and it's almost identical to the fabric in the dress she wears in the picture."

When Uptegraft does not have access to an original to work from, she must rely on photographs and the written and oral descriptions of the first lady's friends and family. The dress of Willie Emerson (Mrs. Johnston) Murray was such an undertaking.

"We made the Murray dress from a newspaper description and photograph and got her measurements from family members," Uptegraft recalls. "The newspaper article called it a 'squaw dress,' which would get lots of negative response today, of course. The writer describes the dress as being made of charcoal gray pima cotton with five flounces put together with tiny red piping. It's a one-piece garment, and the needlecraft is exquisite. The bodice and bottom flounce are trimmed in row after row of rickrack in reds, yellow, orange and green. Mrs. Murray wore green sandals with it and finished off the costume with a striking Indian bead medallion."

Like Mrs. Kerr's dress, Mrs. Murray's is relatively simple and inexpensive. Some of the formal gowns, however, were extremely expensive as originals and are equally so as replicas.

"Probably the most expensive original," Uptegraft says, "is Mrs. Henry S. Johnston's gown. It was custom-made in France and all hand-beaded with the beautiful, many-shaded gold beads placed so they're almost touching. The actual dress is in the Stovall, and it's very, very delicate. The design of the dress is quite simple; it's just a little chemise. But right now we can't afford the beading work. It's interesting that when we compared the original to the photograph of Mrs. Johnston wearing it, we found that she had it on backward."

Also expensive—and so at the bottom of the list to replicate—is the gown of Lillian Haskell. It, too, is in storage at the Stovall and is extremely

fragile. Expensive beading is not the problem in this case. The dress is covered with all sorts of hand-embroidered French knots, cutouts and inlays, open cutwork and a large number of little silk bows. Fay Taylor, a well-known Oklahoma City fashion illustrator, has produced a lovely rendering of the gown for the display case until the Fashion Group can come up with a better solution.

The most expensive of the completed replicas is the gown of the first Mrs. Boren, the former Jana Lou Little. Again, little beads are the big cost factor. Uptegraft says the Fashion Group spent more than \$500 on beadwork on the Boren gown, a figure that does not include any of the cost of the materials. Although Uptegraft and her students do simple beading, she explains that "I don't consider beadwork a design problem—and it's certainly not a future for my students—so we hire professionals to take care of that."

Of the project now, Mathews says, "We're down to the point where it's going a little slower. It seems there aren't any really easy ones to do, what with letters and interviews and approvals from this one and that one. So far, though, no one has refused to cooperate. We had trouble getting in touch with the Turner family, and the Cruise family told us they'd had an auction sale. We've found a Cruise relative, though, who says she has some things in her attic. She doesn't have any garments, but there are pictures. I've just decided that no matter what it takes, we're going to do this. Period."

Uptegraft displays the same kind of determination. She has had to work this project into her already full teaching and research schedule, but she thinks it important enough to merit her attention.

"We don't really have a time frame for completion," she says. "We consider it an ongoing commitment. We continue to work steadily on it so that those who have contributed or want to contribute know it's a living project, but we don't want to push so hard that it looks as if we're trying to finish the project and be done with it."

"After all, there will always be another governor whose wife wears another important dress." □

## LETTERS

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and through the jungles of Cambodia to escape Soviet-financed "seminar camps," the Laotian and Vietnamese gulags.

One claim of Frost's with which there can be no argument is: "I do not remember much about Asian history." He assuredly does not. The Soviets are now moving toward the Persian Gulf through Afghanistan. They have captured Cam Rahn Bay. Actively engaged in the murderous civil war in Sri Lanka, they are quickly consolidating their hold on the strategically essential Trincomalee naval facility. With the Straits of Malacca bracketed, Soviet support for Communist guerrillas in the Philippines will be intensified.

I find nothing in Frost's presentation which reminds me of the Percy Buchanan I knew. That Percy Buchanan sought truth in his knowledge of other cultures. He could easily separate the splendor of ancient cultures from the barbarousness of temporary conquerors. It is preposterous to imply that his love of culture and learning would lead him to blindness of the dangers faced by his own culture, tradition and liberty. He did remember Asian history, and a lot more.

Joe O. Rogers, '71 B.A.  
Washington, D. C.

*Editor's Note: Alumnus Rogers, who majored in economics and philosophy at OU, is president of Rogers International Inc., a Washington, D. C., firm specializing in Asian-Pacific investments, and founder and president of the Institute for Free Enterprise Development, an organization dedicated to the promotion of democratic capitalism in less developed nations. Before entering private business, he served as U.S. Ambassador to the Asian Development Bank in Manila, Philippines. He earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in economics from Duke University.*