

Dressed Lives: Memory and Identity in the Grainger Wardrobe

Clothing is not merely a tool to cover the body, it is also a social symbol that conveys customs and personality, representing group belonging and values. Our exhibition invites visitors to re-examine the composer Percy Grainger and his wife Ella Grainger through the unique perspective of clothing, and to reflect on the relationship between clothing, cultural memory, and identity.

Our exhibition shows outfits from different contexts: Ella Grainger's traditional Swedish costume; a dress that reflects American fashion of the 1950s, and a towel suit jointly created by Percy Grainger and Ella Grainger. From national traditions to modern fashion, and then to experimental creations that integrate personal interests and cultural memories, these garments together form a nuanced and multi-dimensional portrayal of the Grainger couple's personal image. This is particularly the case for the towel clothes, which not only respond to the tradition of bright colors in Nordic clothing, but also reflects the couple's shared aesthetic taste and close relationship.

By engaging with these three stylistically distinct costumes, we can observe how cultural memory shapes individual aesthetic sensibilities, in turn informing personal identity and creative expression, revealing the multiple meanings that clothing can carry.

Curated by Feifei Cheng, Jiaqi Jin and Wenxi Bu

Case 1

Ella Grainger (née Ström)
Percy Grainger

Towel clothes

c. 1934 towelling, cotton, rope, metal, plastic, wood

04.5372, 04.5379, 04.5374, 01.3351

These clothes were jointly designed by Percy Grainger and his wife Ella Grainger and constructed by Ella. The outfit, which includes both machine and hand sewing, consists of four parts: vest, shirt, short and leggings. Each element of the outfit is made of different coloured and textured towels, featuring highly saturated colors such as red, blue and yellow. This choice of highly coloured material possibly reflects the couple's interest in incorporating the bright colours found in traditional Nordic costume. This outfit is not merely everyday wear, but a collaborative creation that integrates the cultural memories of the Grainger couple.

Unknown maker

Boots

not dated

04.5144

This pair of boots, made of fine-textured and lustrous brown leather and featuring a round toe design with detailed perforated decorations, belonged to Percy Grainger. The boots reflect Grainger's emphasis on the balance between functionality and aesthetics when choosing everyday wear.

Case 2.

Unknown maker

Hair ribbons, blouse and dress belonging to Ella Grainger

not dated

wool, cotton, silk or cotton velvet, metal (brass), braided cord

04.5310

This is a traditional Swedish dress which belonged to Ella Grainger, consisting of a dress worn with a separate bodice. Its structure and material reflect long-standing regional dressmaking traditions. This dress is made of wool and velvet, composed of vertical bands in black, red, and blue, with small repeating motifs that create a stable visual structure. The upper lining is edged with braided cord, forming a clear boundary between materials and producing a contrast in texture. This design not only reflects the visually striking use of color in Swedish clothing but also reinforces Ella's Swedish cultural identity.

Unknown maker

Scandinavia

Hand painted clogs belonging to Ella Grainger

not dated

painted leather, wood, metal

04.5116

These Scandinavian-style clogs belonged to Ella Grainger. The overall structure is composed of a shaped wooden sole and a closely fitted leather upper, fixed together by metal nails along the edge. The upper is made of painted leather, with symmetrical plant patterns decorating its surface, mainly concentrated at the toe area. The soles show little sign of wear. The contrast between the painted surface and the solid structure reflects the combination of decorative and practical aspects, highlighting the distinct craftsmanship of the Nordic region. More than just footwear, these clogs show how everyday objects can embody cultural identities.

Young Cosmopolitans, Best & Co.

New York, United States

Dress belonging to Ella Grainger

1950s

cotton, tulle, plastic

04.5683

This red dress, worn by Ella Grainger, has a fitted waist with a matching narrow belt and a layer of tulle inside the skirt to create volume. This combination of a fitted waist and full skirt was common in the 1950s. The style was disseminated through magazines and mass-produced clothing, and gradually became a familiar way of dressing for women. The dress remains in good condition and is a representative item of Ella's aesthetic sense. Compared with other garments in the exhibition, this dress sits closer to everyday wear. It shows how individual choices could overlap with broader trends.

Unknown maker

Silver kid leather evening shoes

not dated

leather

04.5105

These silver evening shoes belonged to Ella Grainger. The upper is made of silver leather, featuring a cross-over open-toe design, suitable for formal occasions. Abrasion is visible at the heel and there is slight cracking at the toe edges. These signs of wear suggest that these shoes were likely worn repeatedly, for the many social events Ella attended. Compared to other garments that remain in better condition, objects like this offer a closer sense of her everyday life. In this exhibition, this item invites a sense of how Ella may have chosen her clothing for different occasions.