

GOING DOWNTON

An American exhibit examines parallels between early 20th-century good life, there and abroad

JoAnn Greco
20 March 2014



American 'aristocrats' may have never had it as good as the Brits did - what with the estates and the servants, and all - but the outfits now on view at Delaware's Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library are very close to those its former inhabitants, heirs to the industrialist du Pont family, would have worn in the early 20th century.

With this exclusive exhibition, 'Costumes of Downtown Abbey' (on view through 4 January 2015), Winterthur - which boasts a premiere collection of American decorative arts - is acknowledging just how fascinated Stateside viewers have been by the comings and goings of the lords and ladies across the pond, or at least as they are depicted in the hugely popular BBC series.



Divided into day, night, upstairs and downstairs wear, the exhibition sinks its teeth into more than elaborate hats and brocaded gowns. It also delves into the unique zeitgeist that sometimes placed the Lotus-eating pleasures of life on a country estate at odds with the ever-marching onslaught of modernism.

The lavishly beaded and embroidered clothes, then, offer insights into the characters' conflicting societal roles. A shocking turquoise get-up worn by one character and the so-called 'wrong' tweeds donned by another, for example, serve as visual symbols of, respectively, gender and class politics.

The 40 costumes are mostly new, sewn especially for the show and then embellished with bits of vintage lace and velvet. The curators have brought them to life via vignettes of mannequins wearing them in various settings, and they've also scattered in a few pieces from Winterthur's own collection. Amongst the latter are a man's dinner jacket and a woman's travelling case. Both were made, where else?, in England.

Find out more at the Winterthur Museum webpage



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