

*Constant Shopper*

# Beautiful Antique Clothes Increasingly Harder to Find

By Cindy Frenkel

You're searching through your closet for something festive to wear for the holidays, and nothing excites you—not even the idea of buying something new, so consider this: buy something old. I've always loved old clothing—not worn flannel shirts to wear on a rainy Sunday (even though they're great), but the kind of clothing that isn't made today. An Edwardian blouse of the sheerest lawn with handmade lace, and the tiniest mother-of-pearl buttons. Or a Jean Harlow evening gown of bias-cut silk velvet.

As beautiful antique clothing becomes increasingly difficult to find, 1940's and 50's clothing has come into vogue, but even now, very good pieces from three and four decades ago are getting hard to come by. Many stores carry clothing from the 40's and 50's, but most of it is unexceptional and overpriced. Unless you find something unusual in excellent condition, like a designer suit with the label still in it, there's no reason you should pay a high price for a vintage piece that's equivalent to something new. Some things, though, are worth a hefty price tag; Victorian and Edwardian pieces are one of a kind and often have an enormous amount of handwork that would be cost-prohibitive to replicate today. Prices for such clothing vary depending on how much the store originally paid, and if they've had it restored. These clothes were in style 80 or 90 years ago, and they're still desirable, their beauty timeless.

Without leaving the city, it's hard to find a bargain; it takes either a great deal of searching or luck (a woman I know found a nice 40's jacket at Canal Jean for \$15 last year). And remember, friends and relatives might not be using good clothes they've saved over the years. Although antique clothing is expensive, there are ways to achieve an old-fashioned feel without buying an entire outfit; an antique lace collar, for example, will completely transform the look of a dress. If you already have a piece of antique clothing that's in need of restoration, Deborah Jackson (718-596-9143) is one of the best in the business. She has worked with the Brooklyn Museum and now works with Victoria Falls.

"The details of these things go on and on," Jana Starr told me as I admired a handmade blouse of white lawn with art nouveau embroidery; it had a high neck, and Irish lace on the collar and yoke, with the smallest mother-of-pearl buttons on the cuffs (\$215). At Jana Starr-Jean Hoffman Antiques (236 East 80th St. between Second and Third Avenues, 861-8256), there's an enormous selection of antique clothing including Victorian and Edwardian whites, hand-beaded dresses from the 1920's, printed chiffons from the 20's and 30's, and velvets from the 30's and 40's. Chiffon dresses are about \$150, beaded dresses run from \$250 to \$800, and Vic-

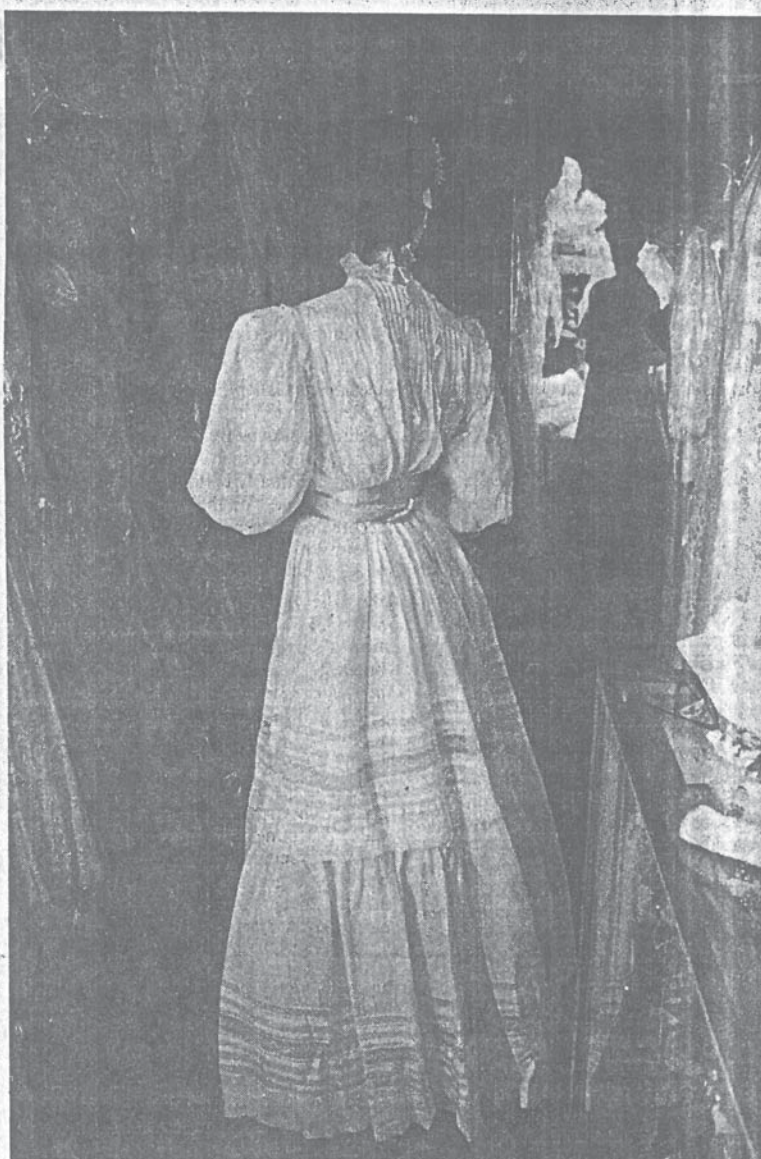
torian and Edwardian lace blouses run about \$175. There are boxes of lace collars labelled "Large" and "Small"; these generally range from about \$45 to \$65 (although they get much higher or go as low as \$18). Men's Victorian vests are around \$65, and are white with pale colors brocaded into them; they're equally suitable for women, and a less costly alternative to an antique blouse.

Jana told me, "A woman I know who travels in very social circles and can afford to wear anything she pleases buys a lot of antique clothing. In the middle of the winter she'll enter a reception wearing a white voile, turn of the century, high-collared blouse adorned with handmade lace. No matter how many women are there—or how much they're baring—men flock around her because she looks so unique and feminine."

Here you'll see boxes of beaded dresses since the selection is too big to hang in their small quarters. There's a black Edwardian dress with hand-beaded net overlay on black satin and a 1920's white velvet dress with silver hand-beading in a geometric design; both are \$395. A 1950's iridescent blue taffeta dress is sleeveless and has horizontal pleating; it's \$125. Paisley shawls start at \$200, and a red velvet cape from the 20's is \$300. They also stock old laces and similar fabrics, so things can be made larger. They won't do alterations or repairs, but will refer you to someone who can, and they will reduce the price if something's slightly torn or defective.

In SoHo, at Victoria Falls (451 Broadway, between Prince and Houston, 254-2433) there's mostly new clothing with an Edwardian feel, and a small selection of white or ecru garden party dresses from the 1890's to the 1930's. Prices are quite high here, but everything's lovely and in excellent condition (clothing is restored downstairs). Antique dresses start at \$350 and go up to \$3,000 (although that's atypical). Turn of the century blouses range from \$185 to \$500. Eighteenth-century buttons made into earrings by Once Again are here; they range from \$40 to \$100.

At Harriet Love (412 West Broadway, between Prince and Spring Streets, 966-2280) you'll find vintage clothing that's certain to have two qualities: it's in excellent condition, and has great style. In 1965 Ms. Love opened the shop stocked mostly with Victorian clothing, and now you'll find top of the line pieces from the 1940's and some from the 50's (as well as new pieces). The small, impeccable stock is always changing, but here is what I saw and liked: a funny black cashmere cardigan with applied padded white leather vegetables from the early 50's (\$135); a black rayon crepe dress appliqued with daisies (\$140); a late 30's pumpkin crepe bolero with black bugle beads in a beautiful wavy design (\$165) in a small size.



Victorian dresses at Jana Starr-Jean Hoffman Antiques.

Lynn Testa

There was also a black crepe 1940's jacket with a sequined floral motif and jet buttons; it's \$145. (If it were made by a designer today, it would be around \$750.) There are no alterations here, but they will refer you to someone.

FDR Drive has two stores: the men's at 80 Thompson Street (between Spring and Broome, 334-0170) and the women's at 109 Thompson (between Spring and Prince, 966-4827). Both have old clothing, as well as new clothing that's made out of old fabric. Costume designers for movies go to FDR; clothing from here was used in "Zelig" and "The Cotton Club." At the men's store, there's a good selection of Edwardian vests; most are black but a few have patterns on black; they're generally \$125. (I admired a black velvet vest with silver applique dots painted on.) Rayon ties from the 1940's in wild colors are \$25. Evening scarves in excellent condition, silk or rayon, run \$75. Some are white and dressy, others have bold patterns. At their women's store, you'll find a small selection of cotton or silk chiffons from the 20's and 30's; these start at \$175.

Great velvet dresses—usually from the 30's—start at \$200 and can go up to \$500. One I admired was from the 20's; it had silver hand-beading in a geometric design on black velvet.

Liza's Place (132 Thompson between Prince and Houston, 477-6027 or 966-1662) has an extensive collection of striking party dresses from the 20's. Liza is very difficult to reach, so call before coming. Prices are high so it's good to know that Liza's very flexible about them. Dresses range from \$150 to \$1,600 (for a Schiaparelli from the 20's, of black silk georgette with jet beads). I also noted an original Lanvin and Balenciaga. White Edwardian and Victorian dresses run \$300 to \$400 (also look at Opal White Design Resources across the street). The prettiest dress I saw was here; a black handmade lace bodice with openwork so large it was like looking through a cobweb; it had a v-neck, bell sleeves, and a flowing black velvet skirt (\$650). For \$250, there's a machine-made pink lace dress from the 30's that's ultra-pretty. A 1930's black silk velveteen (\$300) was simple and fitted; it made me think of Morticia Addams.