

The Gentling Collection at Texas Fashion Collection

by Cheryl Christian



Dressing mannequin sporting an eighteenth-century waistcoat. Texas Fashion Collection. 2018.009.026.



Richly-embroidered ivory silk vest from the Gentling collection at the Texas Fashion Collection. 2018.009.c61.



Detail of the border of a richly-embroidered ivory silk vest from the Gentling collection at the Texas Fashion Collection. 2018.009.c61.

Sometimes art collectors can overshadow their collection. Such might be the case with twin brothers, Scott and Stuart Gentling, but items in their collection have now taken on a life of their own. Artists themselves, the brothers amassed a collection of 130 works of pre-Columbian art, numerous Mexican masks, a harpsicord, and many pieces of eighteenth-century fashion.

The Gentlings displayed their collection in their home. Fritz Lanham wrote of their Fort Worth, Texas, residence in a 2002 article for the *Houston Chronicle*:

You can hardly find a bare surface in the living room of the Arlington Heights bungalow they inherited from their mother, what with huge John James Audubon prints on the wall, the Roman-era sculptural fragment, the stuffed toucan on a perch in the corner. A tail-wagging dog could do a lot of damage in this room. And on that dressing mannequin, could it be an eighteenth-century French dress coat? Tailored for a slim-shouldered monsieur? Mais oui.

Indeed, the Brothers Gentling amassed a large collection of embroidered eighteenth-century gentlemen's waistcoats which have recently been donated to the Texas Fashion Collection (TFC) at the University of North Texas in Denton, Texas. They are included among some 161 items donated. Scott Gentling favored these period pieces for props for his studio practice. Stuart Gentling, while also an artist, handled the business side of their art. In addition to using the items as references for artwork, the two loved to dress in period style, so they wore the clothing on occasion.

The Gentlings grew



Detail of richly-embroidered ivory silk vest from the Gentling collection at the Texas Fashion Collection. 2018.009.c61.

up in Fort Worth, Texas, and spent most of their lives there, having returned after studying at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. According to Scott Gentling's 2011 obituary in the *Dallas Morning News*, the two were rarely apart, working together, living together, and "often completing each other's artworks." While best known for the oversized folio *Of Birds and Texas*, they painted murals and portraits, notably of then Governor of Texas George W. Bush for the Texas State Capitol, and Jane Goodall, the primatologist who spent fifty-five years studying wild chimpanzees.

The brothers did not document their purchases. Indeed, in 2011, after Scott Gentling died, five years after his twin, the items of clothing were in danger of being passed over and discarded. They sat in an empty house. The Gentlings' sister, Suzanne Gentling, who was dealing with the estate, checked on them from time to time. "She did not know exactly what their collection included," Annette Becker, director of the TFC, reported. "She *did* know that the Gentling brothers valued them, and she wanted to make sure they were saved."

The collection came to TFC as a result of an Internet search. In desperate efforts to handle the textile collection, Suzanne Gentling typed in the keywords "Texas" and "clothing," and textile conservator Melanie Sanford's website was one of the first to pop up. After Gentling contacted her, Sanford contacted the TFC to determine its interest. The TFC jumped at the chance.

The collection had also been offered to the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET), but the MET never responded. "Larger institutions are generally not as nimble as we are," Becker commented. With a small staff and fewer administrative hurdles, the TFC was able to accept the offer quickly.

"As far as we can tell, the Gentlings started collecting in the late 1960s," Becker observed. The donation came with some correspondence, a few photographs, and fragmented information from auction houses, but there was no systematic documentation of all the garments in



Richly-embroidered velvet waistcoat from the Gentling collection at the Texas Fashion Collection. Late eighteenth century. 2018.009.022a.



Detail of pocket flap richly-embroidered with flower motif on a velvet waistcoat from the Gentling collection at the Texas Fashion Collection. Late eighteenth century. 2018.009.022a.



Detail of sleeve and buttons from richly-embroidered velvet waistcoat from the Gentling collection at the Texas Fashion Collection. Late eighteenth century. 2018.009.022a.



Richly-embroidered brown waistcoat from the Gentling collection at the Texas Fashion Collection. 2018.009.033.



Detail of embroidery with borage, rose, and pussy willows on brown waistcoat from the Gentling collection at the Texas Fashion Collection. 2018.009.033.



Detail of reverse of embroidery on brown waistcoat from the Gentling collection at the Texas Fashion Collection. 2018.009.033.



Embroidered glove from the Gentling collection at the Texas Fashion Collection. c.1630. 2018/009/010.

the fashion collection. It is difficult to pair up documentation with textile items as no photos were attached to individual documents.

"As a relatively new field in the 1960s, fashion history was not as developed as it is today," Becker said. Many collectors wore the items they acquired. That the Gentlings wore the waistcoats is a double-edged sword. "Wearing them showed that they valued the aesthetic appeal and their historical imagination," Becker commented, "but wearing them also compromised their quality." Upon examining the items, she and her staff found seams that had burst from being worn. A needle and thread were embedded in the arm of another. "That's the story with a lot of historic pieces," Becker commented. "Garments have lives before they end up in places like this. And if someone was enjoying them, they were preserved in some fashion."

The TFC will be conducting research on the items for quite some time. The pieces range from the 1770s to the 1810s. Most pieces seem to be French, but the collection does include English pieces. Other pieces are clearly not from the 1700s. Some have machine stitching in them. The collection may include costumes from historical reenactments and theater productions, such as New York City's Shakespeare in the Park. "There is still a lot of detective work to do," Becker commented.

The collection also includes some women's pieces, such as fans. They include gloves that were allegedly owned by Charles II. "From what I can tell, they spent a lot of time trying to prove that as their files include extensive research to document the gloves' provenance or history," Becker commented.

While having a small staff may make the TFC nimbler in responding to potential donors, it can slow the progress of the research. "If the collection had only five items, we could handle the work on our own," Becker said. She has asked visiting scholars to view some items and has begun a search for consultants. Fashion and industrial designer Katherine Diuguid lectured in spring 2018 and examined some of the items.

The monetary value has yet to be determined. "The Gentlings began collecting these items before most people did. The value has greatly increased

since then. “We’re fortunate that people hold the TFC in some esteem,” Becker commented. “The Gentlings had things that are unbelievable. There are items that the TFC could not afford as our budget is modest and we do not have dedicated funds for new acquisitions.”

The TFC originated in 1938 with Stanley and Edward Marcus, founders of the department store, Neiman Marcus. “So many other collections started in theatre departments and historical societies,” Becker stated. “So, it’s interesting that our collection started with an influential retailer.” In the 1960s, the Dallas Fashion Group began collecting, and in that same decade, the Dallas Museum of Fashion combined with the Neiman Marcus Collection. The collection moved to the University of North Texas in 1972. The TFC now houses nearly 20,000 items of dress and accessories.

“We don’t have a strictly historical focus like the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation or Historic Deerfield. What we have here is the history of design,” Becker stated. The collection is institutionally housed in the College of Visual Arts and works closely with students, faculty, and researchers from a variety of disciplines.

“Because of its history, the TFC doesn’t necessarily have a focus on high design, avant garde, or fashion-forward pieces,” Becker said. They do, however, have pieces from established fashion houses. The TFC is best known for its Balenciaga collection, having some 370 items. It also houses numerous Givenchy, Christian Dior, Chanel, and Oscar de la Renta. However, the collection also includes pieces with a humbler origin, such as garments by home dressmakers and designers whose names have been lost to history. Becker continued,

If an item has good design and is well-made, it is something we want to have as an example. Most of what we have recounts the history of the wealthy, but we also retell the history of the middle-class and those with a less privileged background. A favorite is a 1930s tiara made of chicken wire embellished with sequins, beads, and glitter. This person made this piece with available resources, materials that would endure. People have saved that piece, and it ended up in our collection, which is a pretty magical thing.

Until the acquisition of the Gentling collection, the oldest piece in the TFC dated to the 1790s. “We don’t have much before 1870,” Becker said. “The Gentling collection is rather a feather of a different color that we didn’t have in our cap.”



Silk waistcoat with metal thread embroidery from the Gentling collection at the Texas Fashion Collection. Late eighteenth century. 2018.009.025a.



Detail of metal thread embroidery on pocket flap of silk waistcoat from the Gentling collection at the Texas Fashion Collection. Late eighteenth century. 2018.009.025a.



Detail of metal thread embroidery on cuff of silk waistcoat from the Gentling collection at the Texas Fashion Collection. Late eighteenth century. 2018.009.025a.



Purple wool waistcoat with silk embroidery from the Gentling collection at the Texas Fashion Collection. Late eighteenth century. 2018.009.019.



Detail of cuff of purple wool waistcoat with silk embroidery from the Gentling collection at the Texas Fashion Collection. Late eighteenth century. 2018.009.025a.



Detail of front of purple wool waistcoat with silk embroidery from the Gentling collection at the Texas Fashion Collection. Late eighteenth century. 2018.009.019.

The TFC directorship has been designated by the university as a research position. Accordingly, Becker has two goals: 1) to make the collection accessible and 2) to ensure people can create research based on the offerings in the collection. She and her staff are assessing the Gentling collection, determining which pieces are appropriate for their collection.

The TFC does not collect costume, so they plan to transfer some pieces to the theatre program or give them to smaller fashion collections. They also want to decrease redundancy. “If there are ten waistcoats that show the same design elements, we must edit what enters the collection to make efficient use of our space,” Becker said. “We could share with other collections that have nothing like them, furthering the educational impact of the Gentlings’ artifacts.”

One of the pieces has been shortened at the pocket level. “It pains us to our very core,” Becker said. “We can’t display it—the garment is not in its original form. It is, however, perfect for a study collection, for it will help us examine the layers of textiles and see beneath the linings. We can see how things were made.”

The collection is housed in a space built to purpose, the first dedicated facility the collection has had. However, these are still temporary facilities, and the staff is looking for a more permanent home. Eventually, the collection, including a study collection for students and junior researchers, will have some space in the theatre building.

The TFC has an online presence, but only ten percent of the collection is currently posted to the website. View additional items at <https://tfc.unt.edu>. ■