

Clothes Maketh the Horsewoman

By Alison L. Goodrum

Throughout history, clothing has been a powerful marker of a person's identity. Clothing signals the wearer's social status, occupation, personal taste and lifestyle. Nowhere is this 'signalling' more apparent than in the equestrian world where strict regulations and mores have long-governed the dress of participants and spectators alike. The following diktat from Mrs. Power O'Donoghue's *Ladies on Horseback* (1881) bears this out:

"A plainness, amounting even to severity, is to be preferred before any outward show. Ribbons, and coloured veils, and yellow gloves, and showy flowers are alike objectionable. A gaudy 'get-up' (to make use of an expressive common-place) is highly to be condemned, and at once stamps the wearer as a person of inferior taste. Therefore avoid it".

The collection at the National Sporting Library & Museum is a fine resource for the study of equestrian dress. Along with key titles, including the seminal text of 1912 - *Riding and Driving* - by the influential author and sportswoman, Belle Beach, there are paintings, periodicals and personal papers. Together, these holdings offer up a wealth of historic voices and visions on riding and how to dress for it. The work of sporting journalists, photographers and advertising agents, equestrian artists, diarists and authors is evident. My project - under the auspices of the John H. Daniels Fellowship program - takes a sociological approach to this material, piecing together different voices in order to gain a fulsome picture of equestrian life in and around the inter-war years. My approach is an attempt to move forward existing scholarship on the history of riding attire, which has successfully recorded the changing style, color, construction and silhouette of (female) riding dress in great detail across the centuries but has rarely considered it in relation to the social identity of the wearer and the broader cultural context in which it was worn.

The Library's 'Lucy Linn archive' offers a rich seam to mine in this regard since it comprises personally-authored and personally-compiled scrapbooks (with press cuttings, letters and photographs from the 1930s and 1940s) as well as a fascinating diary-cum-memoir of a

hunting tour to Ireland in 1948. The self-generated, auto-biographical nature of these documents adds value to my study because it grants unmediated access to the thoughts, ideals, motives and behaviours of their author, offering a 'direct line' to Lucy Linn. Lucy, Mrs. Howard Linn (née McCormick Blair, 1886-1978), led an extraordinary life of privilege, parties and philanthropic service in the high society circles of Chicago and Illinois. Her accomplishments were broad-ranging and impressive: founder of the Junior League of Chicago; governing member of the city's Art Institute and, one of Chicago's first and foremost female interior designers (Linn's own bathroom was reported as having silver walls and "riotous" jungle friezes). Not surprisingly this remarkable lifestyle



Lucy Linn on Essie, 1948.

was reflected in the contents of her personal wardrobe which boasted the latest couture designs from the Parisian salons of Chanel, Vionnet, Lanvin, Balenciaga and Dior. Indeed, contemporary social commentators repeatedly described Linn in sartorial terms - as "best-dressed", "with it" and of being "in the French fashion" - so that clothing was built as a central part of her personal identity.

Fashion was just one of Linn's passions and it is clear from the archives that riding was another preoccupation. Linn was a horsewoman of repute, riding out of the Mill Creek Hunt of Illinois and the Piedmont Fox Hounds of Virginia and winning several steeplechase races, notably the Piedmont Ladies Point-to-Point of 1939 in the most dire of wet weather conditions. Known for always riding sidesaddle, photographic evidence shows Linn to be consistently immaculate - in her own words "always Absalom" - dressed in the proper, highly-prescribed kit of sober-colored habit and silk topper with veil. These unfa-



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ingly traditional modes of both riding and dressing appear to be in stark contrast to what were the seasonally changing fads of Linn's more fashionable day wardrobe and her couture eveningwear. Yet this contrast is instructive, shedding light on the full extent of the Socialite's closet during the first half of the twentieth century and, with it, revealing a multi-dimensional identity encompassing sportswoman and horse lover, fashion follower and mannequin.

It is through the private papers and personal effects held within the NSLM archives that a truly 'fleshed out' understanding of female sidesaddle and hunting dress can be acquired. My project attempts such an understanding, delving into the actuality of a particular rider's lived experiences and noting the idiosyncrasies, flourishes and adaptations of dress, subtle as they may be. For example, Linn details the St. Christopher medal she wears pinned over her heart and its protective qualities as a hunting talisman. She writes of a comedic episode in Wexford, Ireland, when her riding hat is caught in a "whippy branch". And, on the same Irish trip, she describes the struggle to launder clothing in water "full of something". These intimacies offer more than trifling details. They are a source of historic nuance that brings the horsewoman's identity to life and that, in turn, extends scholarship on what should be regarded as a complex, varied relationship between dress, sport and women.

Dr. Alison L. Goodrum is Reader in Fashion at Nottingham Trent University, England. Her research interests are in national identity, branding and rural lifestyle. She is widely published and her book 'The National Fabric' (Berg, Oxford) explores the concept of 'Britishness' in dress. Alison is leader of the 'Fields of Fashion' (FoF) research group, dedicated to the academic study of rural clothing past and present. For more details of the FoF project go to: www.wall5.org.uk.