Mary Molloy

St. Paul’s Extraordinary Dressmaker

Judith Jerde

THE STORY of Mary A. Molloy of St. Paul is an inspiring one. In many ways it is like that of many immigrants or immigrants’ children, full of sacrifice and dedication. It is the story of a devoted mother and wife, thoroughly Irish, strong yet soft-spoken, who through commitment to the craft of dressmaking prospered while reaching the heights of art and creativity. It is also the story of a talented and liberated woman who rose to social prominence, a trend setter who affected the society in which she lived while balancing the demands of a thriving business and a family.

The main outlines of Mary Molloy’s life, contained in such sources as censuses, city directories, and obituaries, can be told briefly. Her parents were Irish immigrants who arrived in St. Paul in the 1850s. Mary’s father, Michael O’Keefe, was initially a day laborer, but by 1885 he had become superintendent of pipes for St. Paul’s city waterworks. It is said that he and his wife, Honora, were among the first couples to be married in the old Catholic Cathedral of St. Paul, built in 1857 at Sixth and St. Peter streets. Their eldest child, Ellen, was born in 1858. Mary, the third of five children, was born around 1862.

Information on Mary’s early life is scarce, but one may assume that she took the usual courses in school for young women, which traditionally included a strong measure of sewing. It is also possible that she worked very early for an established dressmaker. A brief mention of Molloy in an 1894 newspaper article says that “She began when a mere child as apprentice to Madame Parquet.” This may be a reference to Adeline Parquet or Paquette, a Paris-born dressmaker who had a dress shop in St. Paul during the 1870s. Parquet may have given Mary Molloy her first exposure to French dress design.


Judith Jerde was formerly costume consultant in the Minnesota Historical Society’s museum collection department. She wishes especially to acknowledge the aid given her by Mary Molloy’s grandson, John Garrett of St. Paul, who provided background information on the family and many of the photographs used with this article. The author also acknowledges the aid of Linda Fagen, technical services assistant of the MHS division of archives and manuscripts, who did considerable biographical research on Mary Molloy.

DRESSMAKER Mary A. Molloy dolled up for this attractive portrait in about 1885. — Photo courtesy of Jack Garrett.
At any rate, it is clear that by the time Mary was a young adult she had developed a great deal of expertise in dressmaking. By 1879 she had begun her own dressmaking business while still living in her parents’ house at 174 (later changed to 201) Exchange Street in the Seven Corners area of St. Paul. Around 1885 she opened a shop on the other side of the block from her parents’ house. The shop was in the Forepaugh Block, a three-story brick building on the corner of Eagle and West Seventh streets. In that year (1885) Mary’s younger sister, Honora (called Nora), was working with her in the shop.¹

On July 5, 1887, Mary O’Keefe married Herbert N. Molloy. At that time Molloy was foreman for the Northern Pacific Refrigerator Car Company, which had its storage place at 288 Chestnut, on the western side of the same city block that included the Forepaugh building and the O’Keefe residence. The couple moved into an apartment in the Forepaugh block where Mary continued to run her increasingly successful and prestigious dressmaking business until her retirement in 1912. From 1895 until 1909, Herbert Molloy was in business as a “refrigerator builder” in the same building. Around 1910 he became a building contractor and supervised the construction of, among other structures, the Molloy family home at 916 Lincoln Avenue. Still standing, it is an imposing and stately home, reflecting the high quality of craftsmanship for which Molloy became known. The house continued to be the family home after the deaths of Herbert and Mary in 1924.²

On June 6, 1924, Herbert Molloy died after an illness of several weeks. Within twelve days Mary was dead, too, reportedly from bronchial pneumonia contracted while nursing her husband. Her succinct obituary reads in part: “Surviving her husband, Herbert N. Molloy, by only 12 days, Mrs. Mary A. Molloy, for many years a prominent businesswoman of St. Paul, died Wednesday morning at the family residence, 916 Lincoln Avenue.” Although the death notice mentions her “fashionable dressmaking shop,” it gives little indication of her achievements and craftsmanship, or insight into her character.³

IN ORDER to understand the depth of Mary Molloy’s accomplishments, we should understand something of the art of costume, and specifically dressmaking, in the period from 1879 to 1912. By the second half of the nineteenth century the forerunners of department stores

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⁴Mary A. Molloy obituary in St. Paul Pioneer Press, June 19, 1924, p. 18.

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HERBERT N. MOLLOY, Mary’s husband

THE MOLLOY HOME today at 916 Lincoln Avenue — Elizabeth Hall photo.
IN THE SHOP operated by Mrs. Molloy in the Forepaugh Block of St. Paul, several women workers had begun to appear on the commercial scene. Not specialty shops, they sold a variety of household goods and clothing. Some of the larger stores had dress departments which employed seamstresses and dressmakers to copy fashionable gowns brought from Paris, as well as to design and make new clothes. Their success was due in part to the fact that dresses had become too complicated to be made at home by a person of modest sewing ability. Stores were only beginning to supply ready-made clothing, and so many independent dressmakers were in business. They ranged from the exclusive designer-dressmaker with her own workroom and staff to the individual dressmaker working alone. These people performed the painstaking job of drafting patterns from scaled diagrams in women's journals and manuals. With the founding of the Butterick pattern company in 1863, paper patterns also became available.

From 1873 onward, the teaching of sewing gradually spread as a specialized element of school instruction. At that time sewing was valued as an art. Indeed, it may be one of the oldest arts. Present-day viewers marvel at the perfection of the stitches and handwork detail, the refinement of finishing technique, and the patience required to execute the work. Mary Molloy excelled in all of these areas, paid scrupulous attention to detail, and had a superlative sense of line, or silhouette.

Successful dressmakers often employed other seamstresses to work for them. Labor was cheap, and many women worked long hours for very low wages. The Molloy enterprise grew from its inception in 1879 until she employed more than twenty seamstresses in the 1890s. She had an imposing clientele, including some of
A WALKING DRESS (right) is one of more than two dozen Molloy gowns owned by the MHS. This is accession no. 8163.4. At left is a detail of the beige dress.

the most influential and moneyed women in Minnesota. We know as well that she traveled to Paris to see fashion originals at least once a year. While in Paris she purchased gowns from which she could make patterns.7

Mary Molloy created garments in great variety, from everyday dresses to formal gowns. Her dresses, including the more than twenty-five in the Minnesota Historical Society’s collection, are marked by the distinctive line of the period and by refined detail. Even the everyday dresses have exquisite tatting and lace with embroidery on them. It should be pointed out that at this time in history there was a rigid dress code that specified what was proper to wear on any occasion. Women, whether rich or poor, conformed largely to such rules. They expressed their own personalities in texture, and handwork to some degree, but the line of the garments remained the same, changing only slowly over a period of years.

Therefore, it is quite easy to note specific silhouettes of these periods of time. Mary Molloy was creating in three costume periods, as Lucy Barton delineates them in the book, *Historic Costume for the Stage: Bustle (1865-90), Fin de Siècle (end of the century, 1890-1900), and New Century (1900-14)*. In Molloy’s work the bustle, with its draperies and the cuirass structure of the bodice of the 1880s, is clearly distinguishable, as is the excessively small waist of the 1890s, with the well-rounded hips and ever growing sleeve dimension. The more fluid, supple lines developing at and after the turn of the century are also clearly visible. Molloy adhered very closely to the socially acceptable line of the periods, but within that framework she created breathtaking works of art that might easily be mistaken for French originals. Indeed, many of the Molloy gowns in the Minnesota Historical Society’s collection embody so many of the techniques of such gifted French designers as Charles Frederick Worth, Paul Poiret, Jacques Doucet, and Paquin that one might conclude she encountered them personally on one of her annual trips to Paris — or at the very least saw their latest collections.

MARY MOLLOY’S dressmaking and design are special in part because of her attention to the finishing of a gown. She used combinations of stitches to finish such things as the casements into which the boning was inserted. Using the briar stitch, or feather stitch, combined with tiny cross stitches, she began to create decorative patterns that remind one of creative stitchery that is so popular today.

Most of the seams of her gowns are encased with silk, a process in which small strips of silk are cut on the bias and delicately applied over the edges of the seams by hand, using a tiny running stitch. The stitches are visible and add to the decoration of the gown’s interior. When the garments were of particularly delicate or sheer fabric, weight was not added by encasement but instead the seams were cut close and turned or hemmed under with a very delicate stitch. Molloy used contrasting threads on the seams and boning encasements which also created a very elaborate and decorative gown interior. She was fond of lace appliqué and frequently used it to cover the main body of a garment. When she combined the appliqué and exquisite jet beading with inserts of tucks, she created very intricate patterns. All of the beading, appliqué, and tucking was done by hand. The laces she used, rarely machine-made, are found in a wide variety of patterns. Her garments frequently have lavish embroidered areas that combine satin stitches, French knots, and couching, thus creating intricate patterns through varying combinations.

Mary Molloy used fine fabrics — such as printed and plain silk, delicate lawns, lisse, silk shantung, and broché velvet — and touched them with her specialty, handwork and detail. Rarely did she use great color contrasts within a garment; they are mostly monochromatic in scheme and frequently use self fabric for cording and trim. In some examples, braid or embroidery in the same color as the garment were worked into elaborate designs and often combined with lace. The impression that emerges after studying a cross section of her gowns is one of controlled elegance and supremely good taste, in accordance with each period in which she worked.

Mary retired from dressmaking in 1912. There are
indications that she was displeased with the direction in which fashion was moving. It could also be that she sensed the approaching demise of her craft, for the ready-to-wear industry was growing rapidly, and the design of garments was once again becoming simple enough for dresses to be made at home. Molloy, however, did create a garment as late as 1916, probably her last contribution. It was her daughter Cornelia’s wedding gown, made of satin and covered with overlays and panels of handmade lace. The garment is a fine example of Mary Molloy’s work and clearly reflects the line of the period.

It has been said that the fascination of studying costume history lies in the fact that it is a study of life. Clothing reflects the social, religious, and political philosophies of society at a given point in history. Beyond Molloy’s obvious gifts as a craftswoman and designer, there lies historic significance in what she produced. Her clothing leads us to the beginning of a study of behavioral patterns of members of the upper class in Minnesota between 1880 and 1912 and tells us much about their social customs. The Molloy clothing shows a taste for international design and gives us evidence that Minnesotans were not isolated, nor were their tastes independent of what was happening in the rest of the world. Her clothing definitely has a foreign flavor to it, and yet it is adapted to our very dramatic climate. Further, her clothing tells us a great deal about the manner in which women were forced to move and sit. They were constrained by the various configurations of their apparel. Finally, we are given insight into what the wealthy wore at home, in the carriage, while shopping, and at the frequent formal occasions of these periods. The basic silhouettes were so firmly established that the influence of international designers permeated the fashions of all classes. This can be seen by a cross section of the historical record given us through the Minnesota Historical Society collection.

MARY AND HER CHILDREN (ca. 1900): from left, Helen, Bernadette, Cornelia, and Newton

What kind of a person was this Mary Molloy, who became a remarkable dressmaker from humble beginnings? As a mother and wife, she was described as warm and loving. She had four children — Newton, Helen, Bernadette, and Cornelia — and encouraged them to be creative. Helen had an art studio at 916 Lincoln in St. Paul, and Cornelia worked there as well. Bernadette was interested in the dance and at one point in her life taught dancing. It was said of Mary Molloy that she was a “very strong woman, but she never raised her voice to any-


Milia Contini, Fashion, 12 (New York, 1975); Boucher, 20,000 Years of Fashion, 9–14.
DAUGHTER Cornelia Garrett wore her wedding gown, the last dress attributed to Mrs. Molloy, in October, 1916. The MHS now owns it.

one.” As a businesswoman she is remembered as being well organized and one who always paid attention to details, whether in financial matters or in dressmaking itself. She kept abreast of the times, never staying behind them.18

Mary also is remembered for her demeanor: “She moved with such dignity, such grace, like a queen.” She had an adventuresome and liberated spirit, always driving the family’s horse and carriage and, later, the electric car. When she went to Paris annually, she went alone in an age that did not approve of such behavior, or independence, in women. In spite of all this and her humble beginnings, she and her husband rose to social prominence. They were listed in the Blue Book of the Twin Cities beginning in 1907. She gave a great deal to those around her, supporting and influencing them greatly. It was in an attempt to nurse her husband back to health that she contracted pneumonia and died on June 18, 1924. Until the end she graciously thanked people for their help. Mary Molloy is buried in Calvary Cemetery in St. Paul. She has left us a legacy of extraordinary gowns, three-dimensional artifacts from which we can learn a great deal about Minnesotans and which remain a tangible reminder of this unusually gifted, artistic woman.19

MOLLOY’S LABEL for her garments

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19 John Garrett interview, June 27, 1979; Dual City Blue Book, 1907, St. Paul section, p. 139. The Blue Book in that year contained "a selection and compilation of twelve thousand of the best families of each city." Ethel Reesburg, present during Mary Molloy’s last illness, stated: “As sick as she was... she’d murmur ‘thank you’” when Reesburg placed cold packs on her burning forehead (Reesburg interview, April 2, 1979).