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# Wee Bonnie Garden: Design Strategies for a Multi-Generational Christening Gown

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Wee Bonnie Garden: Design Strategies for a Multi-Generational Christening Gown

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Key words: childrenswear, christening, upcycled, needlework.

### **Significance of the Scholarship**

Christening garments are worn by infants and have remained a form of religious apparel in current society. As part of another research project, the authors conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with American mothers to gain insight into the recent traditions surrounding christening apparel. The findings revealed that babies range widely in size at the age of christening and that families like to re-use gowns worn by another family member. Therefore, adaptability of garment size and garment durability are important. The physical size of babies often presents a problem when using an heirloom christening ensemble. These findings inspired the authors to develop design strategies for a more sustainable christening ensemble (gown, diaper cover, headband, and shoes) to accommodate a variety of infant sizes. Other key design considerations for long-term usability were a traditional appearance and ease of donning and doffing. This would allow the apparel to be worn by various-sized infants of multi-generations.

### **Background Literature and Artifact Analysis**

The design process began with background research of literature and material artifacts. Market research was conducted to discover existing options available to consumers (e.g., Maude Couture, 2015; McCray, 2013). Christening ensemble literature was reviewed to build awareness of existing designs (Coburn, 2004; Inspiration Books, 2005; MacPhail, 1999; Peacock, 2009; Toomer, 2004). A personally-owned, Victorian-era christening gown was studied to analyze the design and sewing methods employed. Childrenswear sizing and pattern design techniques were researched and analyzed (Aldrich, 2009; Inspiration Books, 2005). Care methods for vintage linens and lace were researched (Boorstein, 2008). Research was also conducted for heirloom construction methods (*A to Z of heirloom sewing*, 2010; Pullen, 1992) and decorative needlework processes (*A to Z of smocking*, 2001). The final gown design was influenced predominantly by Ayrshire christening gown styles (Bryson, 1989; Toomer, 2004; Swain, 2008).

### **Design Process**

A combination of new and vintage materials were selected to give a traditional look. Materials were prepared by measuring and washing vintage linens and lace using methods found in the background research. Samples were created to test the most appropriate stitching and finishing methods for the linens and lace. To implement multi-sizing in the design, all pieces of the ensemble were patterned as a size 6 month allowing for the accommodation of infant sizes newborn to 6 months. Childrenswear patterns were drafted for the gown, diaper cover, booties, and headband with considerations for the measurements and available yardage of the vintage linens and lace. The use of drawstrings as a means of adjusting size were inspired by the personally-owned Victorian christening gown. To allow neckline adjustability for the gown, a bias tape casing was sewn around the inside of the neck, which avoided disrupting the design of the collar. Then a ribbon was run through the neckline casing to make it adjustable. A waistline casing was created inside the gown when the skirt was sewn to the bodice and a ribbon was run

through the casing to create an adaptable waist. The neck and waist ribbons were concealed behind a placket for safety purposes. A conventional gathered diaper cover was maintained because the gathering better accommodates multi-sizing. The diaper cover utilized ribbons through the casings rather than elastic because this allowed for the adjustability of the design. Tiny buttons, while traditional, were not used, as the authors felt these complicated dressing the baby. The booties incorporated flexibility of sizing by utilizing ribbons ties, gathering, and accommodating both width and length. The headband was constructed of elastic encased at the base of the band and a Velcro closure to implement multi-sizing hidden beneath a fascinator-style decorative topper. The construction process employed heirloom sewing methods to add quality and durability to the ensemble. This included the usage of French seams and pin stitching. An adaptation of the French seam was used to attach the handkerchiefs to the center front panels concealing and protecting the raw edges. The sleeves were created with three layers of vintage lace. A roll and whip method was used for finishing the edges of the sleeves.

### Results and Implications

The final ensemble design allowed adjustability in the neck and waistline of the gown, the waist and legs of the diaper cover, the width and length of the booties, and the circumference of the headband. The heirloom construction methods added quality and durability to the ensemble to produce a design that will last for generations. Future implications include considerations for childrenswear apparel designers and the home sewing/patterning market.

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