

Escape and Evasion: Dresses made from maps in the Second World War

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After seeing an example in Wilson and Taylor's book *Through the Looking Glass* I have been fascinated by clothing made from 'Escape and Evasion' maps (as they were so-called) made during, and just after, the Second World War.¹ It appears that I am not alone in this, as shown by media interest when one comes up for sale and the plethora of images on the Internet. Tapping into the fashion for vintage clothing, companies are now making garments from original maps or are taking inspiration from these when designing new fabrics.² Wider interest in these intriguing garments was sparked by 'Fashion on the Ration', a 2014 exhibition at the Imperial War Museum in London, which featured a number of garments made from Escape and Evasion maps; notably a child's sun suit and a woman's underwear set. A number of museums hold examples and Worthing Museum and Art Gallery has three; a blouse on display in the costume gallery (Figure 1), a dressing gown or housecoat, seen in the 2018 temporary exhibition, 'Safe European Home' (Figure 2) and a dress (Figure 3) that is kept in the store.

The maps were the brainchild of Brigadier Norman Crockatt, for M19, a Government department he set up in 1939. M19 was responsible for military intelligence, for example parachuting intelligence officers behind enemy lines and liaising with British Prisoners of War (POWs) and their families. A crucial part of their work was to help POWs to escape enemy hands, evade recapture, navigate foreign terrain and return home.³ The maps were an important part of escape and evasion, for they were issued to service personnel, such as RAF pilots on overseas missions. Some 300,000 copies of 44 different maps were created by Edinburgh mapmakers John Bartholomew & Sons. They measured approximately 38½ x 24½ inches and were printed on both sides. They were issued in series, each pertaining to a conflict zone, such as the '44 Series' or Asiatic-Pacific Theatre, issued in 1944. Under the guidance of Christopher Hutton, another officer at M19, maps also reached POWs in prison

¹ Elizabeth Wilson and Lou Taylor, *Through the Looking Glass. A History of Dress from 1860 to the Present Day* (London: BBC Books, 1989) 115.

² See "Home Front Vintage Clothing." Vintage clothing blog. 12 April 2018 and clothing company "One Hundred Stars" which makes items from fabric printed with world maps.

³ Barbara Bond, "Great Escapes: the Story of MI9's Second World War Escape and Evasion Maps," *The British Library Online*, 9 April. 2018.

camps, and Waddington, the maker of the 'Monopoly' board game, hid both maps and real money inside the sets, which were sent to the camps. By the end of the war it is estimated that 36,000 personnel had escaped capture and whilst M19 and the maps cannot be solely responsible for helping each escapee, it is likely that the philosophy of 'escape mindedness' raised morale in the dark days of wartime.⁴

For practical reasons silk (and sometimes rayon) cloth was selected for the maps, for silk cloth folds up very small, making maps easy to conceal in pockets, or even the heels of shoes. It did not rustle; the smooth surface enabled good registration of factual print information and, unlike paper, it did not disintegrate in water. Silk maps could also be used as makeshift water filters, slings or bandages to enable escapee survival. Some maps returned home with personnel, for example, the striking bra and pants set made out of an RAF silk map of Northern Italy, which was exhibited at 'Fashion on the Ration.' Julie Summers writes that the underwear was made from a silk map 'given to Patricia Mountbatten in 1943, by a boyfriend. She asked her dressmaker to create so she would not have to spend precious coupons.'⁵

In 1945 the Government stock of unused maps was released to the network of Army Surplus Stores, where they were snapped up by a public who was hungry for new clothes. Importantly the maps were sold 'off-coupon', meaning that they did not require coupons, or points, a system that dominated shopping from the scheme's inception in 1941 until rationing ended in 1954. The allocation was reduced as the war progressed; in 1945 the 11 coupons that were required for a dress made purchases impossible for many women as the allocation shrank to just 12 coupons that year and there was very little cloth available off-coupon. Since 1943 the public, and especially women, had been strongly encouraged to be resourceful with their clothing, and to adopt the approach of 'Make-Do and Mend' by maintaining existing clothes and making new ones from a variety of household textiles. As dress historians Wilson and Taylor point out, 'women used any fabric they could lay their hands on [...]. Blankets were made into coats. [...] blackout material was made into skirts

⁴ Bond, "Great Escapes".

⁵ Julie Summers, *Fashion on the Ration: Style in the Second World War*. (London: IWM & Profile Books, 2015) 104.

and knickers and parachute silk was sometimes secretly made into underwear.’⁶ In 1945 parachute silk officially reached the public, and like the maps, it was sold off-coupon through Army Surplus stores.⁷

Notwithstanding that cloth was a premium, it seems that Escape and Evasion maps were an odd choice of fabric for civilian clothes. Given that war was recent and traumas fresh, and that some of the locations depicted in the maps held very negative associations for the public, such as the Burma Railway where 12,000 Allied personnel perished, it is possible that the maps took on additional meanings connected with both horror and memory. I feel there is an eerie sense to the clothes, as if, for some people, a sense of loss might be embedded in the cloth. With this in mind, I visited Worthing Museum to view the garments, and my findings set me thinking.

First I viewed the blouse (see Figure 1) exhibited in the costume galleries. This short-sleeved, front-buttoning blouse dates to circa 1947, and it was sewn from predominantly fine, white, silk maps of Yugoslavia, Albania and Sicily which, the Museum notes, were bought at an Army Surplus Store.⁸ Upstairs in the store, Janet Aspley (a volunteer at the Museum and PhD candidate at the University of Brighton) unwrapped the dressing gown (See figure 2). This shawl-collared, wraparound house coat has long sleeves and fastens with a press-stud.⁹ It was hand-sewn from silk maps of French Indo-China, now known as Vietnam and Laos, issued in the ‘44 Series’ that was issued in 1944. The maps are printed in shades of orange, with features such as contours, roads and railway lines, which create a semi-abstract impression of undulating terrain punctuated by tiny blue lakes. The red national border has been carefully positioned to form a horizontal line across the panels of the skirt. The silk used is supple, lustrous and weighty suggesting that this would be luxurious, if slippery to wear. Some small marks and stains, especially at the hem, suggest wear and tear and give glimpses into a ‘life’ lived by the garment.¹⁰ Importantly, the dressing gown is carefully and skilfully sewn, by hand, with very little wastage, and the skirt

⁶ Wilson and Taylor, 115.

⁷ Summers, 136,

⁸ Text panel, Worthing Museum Costume collection.

⁹ Accession notes accompanying the dressing gown, Costume Collection, Worthing Museum.

¹⁰ See object-based analysis in J. D. Prown, “Mind in Matter. An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method” *Winterthur Portfolio* 17:1 (Spring, 1982) 1-19; Ingrid Mida & Alexandra Kim, *The Dress Detective: a practical guide to object-based research in fashion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

is formed of whole maps, evenly gathered on to the waist. In addition, the seam allowances are tiny and the hem is a single turning, all of which suggests the Make-Do and Mend ethos of care with cloth. Dressing gowns or housecoats were ubiquitous home-sewing projects during Wartime and in the post-war period, from which many paper patterns survive, including many that feature shawl collars. The vogue for housecoats persisted for some time, and in the winter of 1956 my mother, Jean Vaughan (1926-1981) made a full-length, powder-blue cotton seersucker version, when she was pregnant with my elder sister.

Janet then unwrapped the dress made from maps which is kept in the store (Figure 3). The bodice of this garment uses maps from French Indo-China and Siam (now Thailand) and the skirt uses maps from South West Borneo, Sumatra and Java, also from the 44 Series. The dress has long sleeves and a full, calf-length skirt gathered onto a tight waistline, dipping in a 'V' shape at the front. The museum notes state that it is 'either an example of "make do and mend" or possibly prisoner of war work.' Whilst the former statement is likely to be true, the latter statement is not supported by evidence. It is however quite unlike the dressing gown, for whilst the styles are similar and the maps used are from the same series, the maps used in the dress maps are vibrant in colour and crisp in texture, and the Museum is unsure whether they are printed on rayon or silk. Unlike the fabric used for the soft dressing gown and the blouse, the cloth is inflexible, indicating that the original fabric dressing has not been removed. This was evidently a problem that others encountered, for a magazine advertisement at the time advises readers who wished to reuse maps for clothing to 'rub them between your hands and wash them before cutting out.'¹¹ The fact that the functional origin of the maps is not concealed and the lettering is so prominent gives a decidedly utilitarian look to the dress and the viewer cannot help but ponder the horrors experienced in Asian-Pacific theatre of war conjured by the place names.

On closer inspection of the garment some odd features were discovered. The dress appears to be inexpertly made, for there is uneven gathering of the sleeves at the armholes. The press stud fastening is applied with large stitches and the hem is extremely deep and sewn by machine. Overall, the dress looks unfinished, for the neck and sleeves have raw edges

¹¹ "A Graceful Housecoat" advertisement in c.1940s magazine. N.d. "Home Front Vintage" vintage clothing blog.

with signs of trimming, perhaps to perfect the shape of the neckline and the cuffs. The dress has clearly been tried on as there is staining from perspiration on the left armpit.

Even more odd is the fact that the maps are not matched, have no sense of 'flow' or print placement, and are actually positioned upside-down. Strangest of all, the dress appears to be inside-out or inverted, for the waist seam is quite clearly on the outside with the raw edge of the pattern pieces clearly visible. Whilst this may have been an error in sewing the bodice to the skirt, it is possible that it was intentional; as such I suggest that it was a practical work-in-progress, and was used as a 'toile' or prototype in the dressmaking process. Toiles, usually constructed from white cotton were (and still are) used to perfect the fit and style of garments before making up in the finished fabric. The practise was evidently repeated in other examples of map clothing, for another inside-out map dress can be seen on vintage clothing website, 'Home Front Vintage'.¹²

To conclude, it is evident that after the deprivations of the war years and whilst rationing was still in place, there was a strong public demand for cloth to make new clothes. As a magazine article of the period stated, 'many of us long for a new housecoat'. Under this headline it carried an illustration of a full-skirted 'graceful' version which, it reported, 'could be sewn from 12 maps.'¹³ The off-coupon supply of maps at Army Surplus Stores offered a solution to both shortages of cloth and restrictions in coupons. However, despite the shortages, the old dressmaking practice of creating a toile appears to have been maintained, and the maps thus fulfilled the same role as cheap cotton calico had done before the war.

Whilst clothing made from Escape and Evasion maps serves as a testament to the resourcefulness of home dressmakers at the end of the Second World War, one cannot help but wonder what it felt like to wear such a garment. It is possible that resourceful re-purposing of cloth was not the only motivation for wearing such items. It is possible that 'escape mindedness' and post-war patriotism were symbolic factors in choosing to wear dresses, blouses and dressing gowns made from Escape and Evasion maps.

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¹² "Home Front Vintage" vintage clothing blog.

¹³ "A Graceful Housecoat" advertisement in c. 1940s magazine. N.d. "Home Front Vintage" vintage clothing blog.

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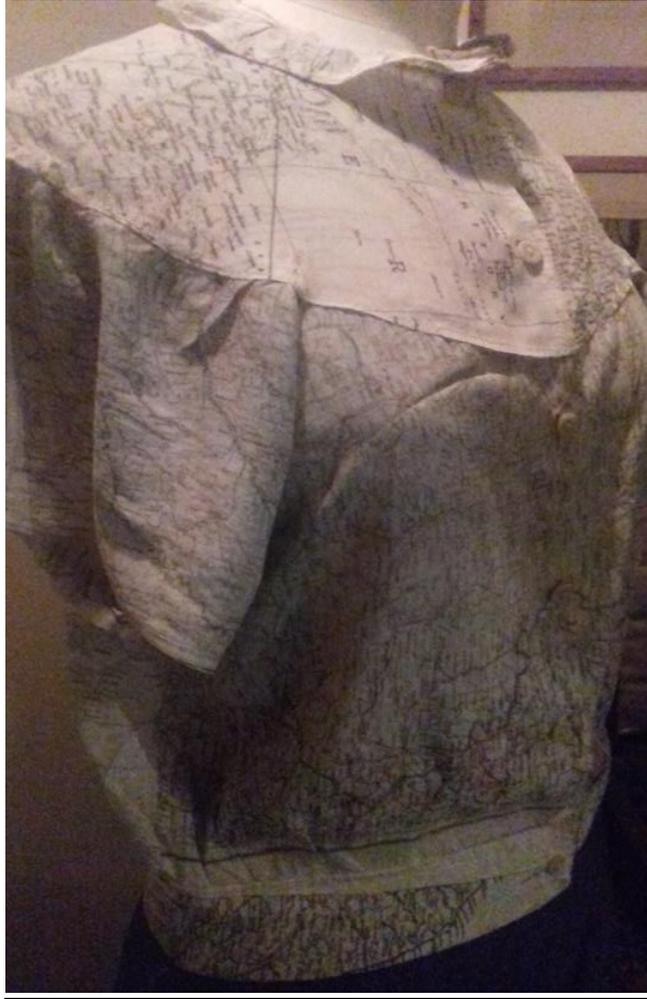


Figure 1

Blouse Ref: 2002/338, made from European maps, c. 1947, on display in costume galleries in Worthing Museum. Personal photograph by the author.



Figure 2

Dressing gown (Ref: 1971/11371) made from silk maps, shown in the exhibition 'Safe European Home', Worthing Museum (May – October 2018).

Personal photograph by the author.



Figure 3

Detail of a dress (Ref: 1981/387) made from silk or rayon maps, Worthing Museum.

Personal photograph by the author.