

The Dirt on Clean | Laundering Fashion's Most Elaborate Creations

WOMEN'S FASHION | By [NANCY MACDONELL](#) | AUGUST 14, 2012, 4:25 PM | 2 Comments



Photograph: Carnival Film & Television for Masterpiece. Runway: Maria Valentina/MCV Photo (3). Left: "Downton Abbey" Crawley sisters in some of the series' most elaborate and hard-to-clean costumes. Right: A few of the fall's most beautiful — and least washable — dresses.

Though "Downton Abbey" is currently between seasons — Season 3, which will take the fictional Crawley family into the Jazz Age, will have its debut next month in Britain but not until January on this side of the Atlantic — its sumptuous costumes remain firmly planted in our imaginations; for many, they're reason enough to tune in. So while watching the the [Balmain fall 2012 collection](#) unfurl it was easy to embroider a line between the elaborate, mosaic-style beading that the designer Olivier Rousteing dreamed up and the exquisitely embellished clothes worn by Lady Mary and company. The obvious parallels, of course, lie in the richness of the workmanship. But there are less evident similarities between the "Downton" costumes and Rousteing's clothes, as well as those of [Erdem Moralioglu](#), who embroidered lace onto rubber; [Marios Schwab](#), who layered sequined gowns with chiffon; and [Gucci](#), where the designer Frida Giannini sent out a cocktail dress dripping with coq feathers. These creations (and many others, every season) beg the inevitable question: How are they to be cleaned? Once these individual testaments to the skills of seamstresses, embroiderers, featherers and beaders have been worn, perspired in and spilled on, what's the wearer to do?

For the Crawleys and their real-life peers the answer was: nothing much. Wealthy women of the era had ladies maids whose duties consisted chiefly of looking after their mistresses' clothes, an undertaking they were aided in by a small army of laundresses. In fact, though the staff that served the Earl of Grantham's family seems large, it's been reduced to make the story line more streamlined. In the early 20th century, Highclere Castle, the 18th-century house where "Downton Abbey" is filmed, would have had a staff that ran into the dozens, including a boot boy who spent his days cleaning the shoes of the family and any guests.

On the set of "Downton Abbey," ladies maids duties are performed by the costume designer Susannah Buxton's staff, which devotes a substantial amount of time to steaming, pressing and sponging her creations. More robust pieces are hand-laundered and laid flat to dry, just as they would have been in the early years of the 20th century, but for the most part little washing is done, especially of anything made from period fabrics, like Lady Sibyl's fabulous Ballets Russes-inspired evening trousers. "We wouldn't dare," Buxton says. "They're much too delicate." Only the nonperiod [Marks and Spencer](#) slips the actresses wear under their gowns — "a not at all authentic but they give a nice long line," Buxton says — go into the washing machine. The men's starched dress shirts get dry cleaned, but only at the Queen's dry cleaner, which is the sole establishment in London that knows how to do so. Other than that, says Buxton, "We ask [the actors] to be careful. And we drape them with sheets during meals."



Nick Briggs/ITV for Masterpiece. Lady Sibyl in evening trousers.



Carnival Film & Television for Masterpiece. The starched dress shirts worn by the men on Downton Abbey are dry cleaned at the Queen's dry cleaner in London.

The latter wasn't possible in real life, of course, but aristocratic women were trained to strictly regulate their movements, something the cast of "Downton Abbey" were schooled in by a historical adviser, whose counsel included instructions to keep a "soldier's back" and to never cross their arms or put their hands in their pockets. "And they had to learn how to walk in trains," Buxton reports. "There were a lot of heels through lace hems in the beginning."

Still, some things, namely perspiration, can't and couldn't be prevented, either on screen or in daily life. This wasn't such an issue before the World War I, when women wore so much underwear that their outer garments never touched their skin. Most underwear was made of very light linen or cotton voile — the higher up the social ladder you went, the finer the fabric — and could be hand-washed on a regular basis. Not so outer garments, which, unless they were constructed of cotton or wool (which could really only be brushed and spot-cleaned) were left as is.

"We used to joke about the filthy rich," says Jean Druessedow with a laugh. Druessedow is the director of the [Kent State University Museum](#) and a former curator at the [Metropolitan Museum's Costume Institute](#) who's had plenty of experience examining the old clothes of wealthy clotheshorses. "Collars and cuffs could be detached and cleaned and there were dust ruffles inside the hems of gowns that could also be washed and repressed. But you had to have enough help to take off the dust ruffle, clean it, repleat it with something called a goffering iron, and then reattach it to the gown. It was done as needed, not on a regular basis. And we have some dresses in the collection in which the dust ruffle was never removed and so, we assume, never cleaned."

After the war, as women's fashions got skimpier and their underwear more streamlined, there was a lot more contact between skin and clothes. Though the first commercial deodorants were developed in the late 19th century, they didn't really catch on until the 1940s, which meant that perspiration stains became an issue. Dress shields, sometimes known by the more graphic name "pit pads" helped, but "you see a lot of rotted-out armpits in 1920s gowns," says Druessedow, as well as stains from skin oils, perfume and newly popular makeup.

Dry cleaning was an option in the 1920s, albeit not a popular one. It was invented in the 1860s in Paris when a maid in the employ of a dye-works owner named Jean-Baptiste Joly spilled kerosene on a grease-spattered tablecloth; Joly noticed the cloth looked cleaner after the accident and turned his observation into what he called "nettoyage à sec" or dry cleaning. Though it seems like a mystifying process, dry cleaning is fairly straightforward: Clothes are immersed in liquid and tumbled in a machine but instead of water and detergent, dry cleaning fluid is used. However, because of the combustible nature of early dry cleaning fluids, explains Wayne Edelman of [Meurice Garment Care](#), a second-generation dry cleaner who is frequently consulted by fashion designers, "early dry cleaners were blowing up left and right. They had to be located in industrial areas." Consumer confidence in dry cleaning didn't take hold until the 1930s, when [perchloroethylene](#), still the industry standard, came into use.

Perc is an excellent cleaner but it's not a panacea. Nor are hydro-carbon solutions, which are sometimes misidentified as "organic." ("It's an absolute misnomer," says Edelman. "There's no such thing as organic dry cleaning.") They'll take care of most cleaning needs and if you go to a reputable shop that maintains its equipment and does not dump clothes indiscriminately into the machine — a practice known as "bang and hang" — you won't experience the telltale whiff of inferior dry cleaning with either method.


But for truly intricate clothing, more hands-on methods are required. Beaded pieces represent particular challenges, especially if the beads are attached with metal prongs. "Put that in the machine and it will be like flesh-eating disease," Edelman says. "The garment will destroy itself. It can't take any mechanical agitation." Instead, workers at Meurice will often have to clean beaded garments by hand, using cotton buds and spray bottles, a time-consuming process that can result in a bill for several thousand dollars. Feathered pieces should be approached with similar caution, though feathers respond well to wet cleaning, as do perspiration stains ("Clean like with like," Edelman says. "Perspiration is wet, so it needs wet cleaning."). Anything that mixes leather and fabric is problematic. When a designer recently queried Edelman about how to label a garment that combined white lined and black leather, his advice was succinct: "Don't get it dirty."


For those dedicated to old-fashioned methods, there's always soap and water, which, [maintains](#) Gwen Whiting and Lindsey Wieber Boyd of [the Laundress New York](#), can clean just about anything. "People have sent us everything from bras and saris to ball gowns and men's suits," says Whiting, who with her partner has developed an extensive line of stain removers, sweater shampoos and detergents for both darks and whites. "With a little care, it can be done." For those who prefer to D.I.Y., the pair provide videos and downloadable instructions on their Web site that outline what can be cleaned and how.


Whether you dry clean or hand-wash, the inescapable conclusion is that caring for high-maintenance clothing requires either a Department of Defense-size budget or a willingness to act as your own ladies maid. If you think that this is a profession that went the way of the goffering iron, consider this: Ladies maids may not go by that title anymore, but where there are impeccably dressed women of high social standing, their equivalents certainly exist. When Druessedow visited the apartment of Jacqueline Onassis in 1980, she describes a scene that wouldn't be out of place in "Downton Abbey": "The service corridor was lined on one side with rows of storage alcoves curtained in red-and-white check cotton," she recalls. "And across from that were rooms filled with big tables where ladies pressed and mended clothes."


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