Early 20th-century fashion was more than fabrics, cuts and embellishments; it was a window into a rapidly changing world.

In England, the Edwardian era was ending, and the country was embroiled in the first of two major wars that forever changed the European landscape and economy.

In this setting, the popular PBS series, “Downton Abbey” tells the story of the Earl of Grantham Robert Crawley, his family and the domestic servants who took care of them. The story spans 12 years of drama centered around a great English estate on the cusp of a vanishing way of life.

Though popular for intriguing storylines of scandal, love, ambition and heartbreak, Elizabeth Graham, educator and program coordinator for the Lightner Museum, says the show’s fashions tell their own fascinating tale.

A Changing Look

Historically, women have used fashion as an outward expression of their personality and mood, but Graham says fashion as a form of expression extends beyond the personal.

“Fashion can say a lot about what’s going on in a society at one time,” Graham said. “It seems frivolous and superficial, but it’s not. Fashion history is social history is political history.”

In “Downton Abbey,” the clothes worn by the women in Lord Grantham’s life reveal the most about early 20th-century history.

The leading ladies are Lord Grantham’s mother, Violet, the Dowager Countess of Grantham; his wife, Cora, the Countess of Grantham; and his daughters, Lady Mary, Lady Edith and Lady Sybil.

Together, the three generations of women, and the clothes they wear, show the shift from the Edwardian period to the “Roaring ’20s.”

“If you look at the Dowager Countess, she has a very Edwardian look to her,” Graham said.

During the Edwardian era, fashion for women in the upper classes was opulent and extravagant. Long dresses were made of heavy material with exquisite hand beading. Elaborate fur hats were popular, and heavy, expensive jewelry was worn as an outward sign of prestige and wealth. Edwardian blouses were large with puffy shoulders and long, narrow sleeves. These were worn with full-length ruffled skirts and many petticoats.

But perhaps the most notable fashion trend of the era was the S-bend corset. The S-bend was intended to promote a very feminine, “proud” posture where the pelvis was tilted forward and the bum was pushed back while the shoulders and bust were thrust forward.

“They look terribly uncomfortable,” Graham said. “You get a very unnatural curvature of the spine.”

By 1912, however, when the story of the Crawleys begins, corsets were on the way out.

In the late 1800s, suffrage movements were gaining ground, and women started rejecting corsets for clothes that allowed them to be more active.

There was a health movement going on, Graham said. Women were saying “corsets are bad for us, and they don’t allow our bodies to move naturally.”

By the 1910s, suffragette Amelia Bloomer had popularized women’s trousers through advocacy in her publication, “The Lily,” the first U.S. newspaper for women.

Early “bloomers” were loose trousers gathered at the ankles, similar to a Turkish pantaloon, topped by a short dress or skirt and vest.

The “pantsuits” allowed for more natural movement, but they were also worn by leaders of the women’s rights movement as an act of rebellion.

Though women wearing pants is a part of our ev-
The difference in the Dowager Countess’s clothes and the younger Crawley women shows the two eras clearly. The Countess of Grantham, however, bridges the two.

“The Countess of Grantham still wears a corset, but it would have been a loose corset or long corset,” Graham said.

By the end of “Downton Abbey,” the 1920s are in full swing and women’s dresses were more comfortable, straighter and shorter. Corsets were a thing of the past.

“Fashion started moving toward trousers and looser fitting boyish-looking clothes,” Graham said.

The dresses of lady’s Mary, Edith and Sybil (and eventually the Countess of Grantham) featured drop waists, heightened hemlines and straight silhouettes.

In the 1920s, women found themselves newly empowered and along with more masculine clothes, came a more masculine haircut.

By the end of the fifth season, Mary, Edith and Sybil had all traded in their long locks for fashionable bobs, which were unprecedented at the time. It was the first time in history that women wore their hair short.

Pioneered in the New York’s Greenwich Village in 1912, the look was worn by the neighborhood’s bohemians and artists.

Though the bob had some naysayers, most notably F. Scott Fitzgerald in a story “Bernice Bobs Her Hair” published in the Saturday Evening Post, by 1924, the haircut was standard among fashionable ladies.

### Dapper Gentlemen

In the 18th century, men wore colorful clothes with intricately embroidered waistcoats, frilly shirts and silk stockings. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, European royals rejected “dandy” attire for a more dignified look.

“Downton Abbey” exhibit.

Lightner Museum curator Barry Myers heard about the Dressing Downton exhibit 2½ years ago at a conference in Louisiana. When he suggested hosting the exhibit at the Lightner to his co-workers, they were reticent.

“We’re so small-staffed, we thought there’s no way,” said Jennifer Jordan, Communications Coordinator for the museum.

In the end, Meyers decided to look into it.

“Before you know, one of the museum's volunteers offered to pay the first down payment, and the ball started rolling from there,” Jordan said.

For research, museum staff saw the exhibition at different locations throughout the U.S. What they found was each venue handled the exhibit differently, which Jordan said was kind of neat because the Lightner was free to do their own thing.

To prepare for the exhibit, the museum renovated the entire ballroom gallery to replicate the 16 rooms in the fictional Downton Abbey, and they cleaned out the entire fourth floor that wraps around the ballroom.

“That’s where the staff used to live when it was the Alcazar Hotel,” Jordan said.

One of Standard Oil tycoon Henry Flagler’s luxurious hotels, the Alcazar was built in 1887 in a composite Moorish-Spanish style architecture.

In 1947, Chicago publisher Otto C. Lightner purchased the hotel to store his extensive collection of Victorian Era pieces and turned it over to the city of St. Augustine.

Though the museum currently houses three floors of Gilded Age art and artifacts, there are some pieces that public has never seen.

“The fourth floor is packed with Otto Lightner’s collection,” Jordan said. “It’s been up there gathering dust, but all these pieces that no one’s seen are being cleaned and restored. They will be part of the ‘Downton Abbey’ exhibit.”

A collection of 36 original costume pieces seen on the award-winning television series, “Downton Abbey,” the Dressing Downton exhibit began at the Biltmore Estate in February 2016 and has traveled to eight other locations in the U.S.

On its final stop of the tour, the exhibit will be on display in the Grand Ballroom Gallery at Lightner Museum through Jan. 7, 2018.

### Tour Packages:

#### Dressing Downton and General Museum Admission

Tours will be greeted by a docent and given an overview of the Lightner Museum. Group tours are self-guided and includes entry into the Dressing Downton exhibition.

**Tickets:** $20

#### Upstairs/Downstairs at the Alcazar

The history of the Lightner Museum, as well as its former splendor as the Alcazar Hotel, shows many parallels to the time period and lives of the characters of “Downton Abbey.” Guests will learn what life was like for guests and staff who visited and worked at the Alcazar Hotel during the Gilded Age in St. Augustine in a tour of areas that are typically closed to the public. Does not include entrance to the Dressing Downton exhibition.

**Tickets:** $45

#### Lightner Museum Package

Includes general admission to the Lightner Museum, the Dressing Downton exhibition, the Upstairs/Downstairs tour and Traditional English Tea at Café Alcazar. Available for groups of 10 to 50 people.

**Tickets:** $135

Museum hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily.

**Info:** lightnermuseum.org


**Taking Tea:**

**A Very British Ritual**

Since the mid-18th century, the United Kingdom has been one of the world’s greatest tea consumers.

The amber liquid is so ingrained in British culture that 20-minute breaks at work are called tea breaks, and tea is the center of its very own meal. In the U.K., “tea” is served around 4 p.m. with finger foods to ward off hunger between luncheon and dinner.

There are several types of teas in England, but generally, food is served with the tea.

Cream teas, popular in the West Country of England, features scones with clotted cream and an assortment of jams.

Afternoon tea, usually served in hotels, comes with savory snacks (tea sandwiches) and pastries, and perhaps the most confusing tea, high tea, is served with a full meal.

Though many Americans think of high tea as a ritual for the British upper class, the opposite is true.

“High tea is actually the commoner’s tea,” said Elizabeth Graham, educator and program coordinator at the Lightner Museum. “It literally means the tea is served at a high table.”

Since high tea was the working class’s dinner, it is served with meats and other hearty food.

In the late 1800s, etiquette governed everything from the method for writing letters to the way social classes interacted with each other.

Taking tea did not escape the complicated system of rules.

“If you go by the book, you can’t stir your tea and set the spoon back down on the table,” Graham said. “Set it in the saucer; that’s what it’s there for.”

In addition, the proper way to stir your tea is in a half circle — from 12 o’clock to 6 o’clock and from 6 o’clock to 12 o’clock.

“Don’t stir your tea in a full circle,” Graham said.

It is also proper to pour your milk into the tea. Do not pour the milk in first.

“In the 1800s, if someone poured their milk in first and then poured the hot tea on top of it, they were showing their low-class roots,” Graham said.

Graham said this is most likely because commoners used unglazed pottery, which meant you had to temper the liquid so the cup wouldn’t shatter.

And most importantly, if the hostess notes that your tea is cold and doesn’t offer to reheat the water, gather your belongings.

“That was an indicator that ‘we’re done here. It’s time to move on,’” Graham said. “On the other hand, if the hostess said, ‘Oh, your tea is cold, let me reheat it for you,’ that meant get comfortable, we’re going to be here a while.”

**Traditional English Tea at the Café Alcazar**

Afternoon Tea at the Café Alcazar features organic teas by Cultivate Tea & Spice Co. and an assortment of sandwiches and pastries. Ticket price includes tea service and gratuity.

**Times:** 3 and 4 p.m., Sunday–Thursday; 2 p.m. Friday and Saturday

**Tickets:** $55

**Info:** lightnermuseum.org

“You get very somber blacks, navy blue, browns — dark, dark, dark browns — you get a very monochromatic palette for men,” Graham said. “And men’s fashion kind of stayed in that rut for a really long time.”

In Lord Grantham’s time, English gentlemen wore dark suits with waistcoats made of silk and kid leather gloves. Jackets were made of silk or a wool/silk blend.

All of the fabrics were of the highest quality, but Graham notes that all material used during this time period were well-made and very tough. This was true for the upper classes as well as the working class.

Though the men of “Downton Abbey” were traditionalists, they were slowly adapting to a more informal look, so there are scenes where Lord Grantham is in a casual wool suit on an outing.

“When you see the Earl of Grantham out hunting, he’s still wearing durable fabrics,” Graham said. “Wool is very durable.”

During the early 1900s, hats were still common for men. A panama hat might be worn at a summer outdoor sporting event, while a top hat was appropriate for formal wear. Everyday styles included the derby and newsboy hats.

With a wardrobe limited in style and color, hats were how men showed the world their personal style, and a gentleman’s hat became his identity.

**Form and Function**

In “Downton Abbey,” the drama downstairs is as intriguing as the exploits of the rich.

With butler Mr. Carson and housekeeper Mrs. Hughes in charge of a host of underbutlers, footmen, valets, lady’s maids, housemaids and kitchen maids, the viewer is shown a class system in the servant’s quarters that’s every bit as delicate as the class system of the elite.

In this last era of the great manor houses in England, servants wore uniforms that were expected to be clean and pressed. They were very dark, very plain and very utilitarian.

Women’s uniforms were dark-colored dresses with long sleeves that were cut well below the knee, and aprons were worn to protect their clothing.

Butlers wore a formal black suit with a waistcoat and jackets with tails. Cooks and other servants also wore dark dresses and suits.

In their free time, however … well, there wasn’t much difference.

“If they went out in public for a fun day, they probably would have been wearing something similar to what they wore to work,” Graham said. “They might add a piece of jewelry they inherited from a family member, but they would be wearing dark woolens and linens.”

Though cotton gained in popularity in the 19th century, it was seen as a low-class fabric. Linen and wool were the basics, and since wool was a British material, it was inexpensive.

During this time, clothes lasted a long time. In addition to using durable fabrics, women made a lot of their own clothes and mended them when they were torn or frayed.

And though the upper crust rarely wore a dress more than once, the working class probably only had two or three outfits they wore when they were off duty.

“That was just the nature of the time,” Graham said. “They didn’t have a need for 18 different outfits.”