AGSA

Media Release
12 November 2026



Class, ambition and 19th century style: South Australia's social history uncovered in *Dressed Up*

Spanning seven decades of dramatic sartorial and social change, a new exhibition at the Art Gallery of South Australia offers a rare opportunity to encounter works from AGSA's rich collections of historical South Australian dress and photography. *Dressed Up: Fashion & Photography 1850s to 1920s* brings the craftsmanship of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century dressmakers into dialogue with photography of the period to reveal how these art forms were used to express identity, status, and ambition. Drawing on new research into AGSA's historic dress collection, the exhibition will also bring to light the stories of the makers and wearers of the garments, while contemporary First Nations works will offer important perspectives on Aboriginal experiences that were often excluded from the colonial record.

AGSA Director, Jason Smith, said, '*Dressed Up* showcases the depth and breadth of AGSA's rarely seen collections of historic dress and early South Australian photography to explore how these mediums were used in both the private and public realms, and the ways in which social and class expectations shaped self-presentation. We are especially thrilled to share new curatorial research into the makers and wearers of the garments, bringing many of these women's stories to light for the first time. Through the inclusion of contemporary First Nations artists, the exhibition also asks audiences to reflect on Aboriginal histories, offering a more complete understanding of nineteenth-century South Australia.'

From treasured family heirlooms passed down through generations, to newly acquired dresses and photographs, *Dressed Up* will feature 33 garments, including silk wedding gowns and intricately beaded evening dresses,

alongside more than 150 photographs marking significant personal moments and everyday life in the early years of the South Australian colony, established under British rule on unceded Aboriginal lands.

Alongside these objects of the past, the work of contemporary First Nations artists will offer insights into how the restrictive social policies of the colonial era shaped, and continue to shape, Aboriginal lives. The Unbound Collective will present two short films, *Domestic Waltz* and *Days of Our Lives*, exploring the history of indentured labour in South Australian colonial homes. Based at Flinders University, the South Australian collective brings together First Nations artist-academics and activists Ali Gumillya Baker, Simone Ulalka Tur, Faye Rosas Blanch and Natalie Harkin.

In addition, James Tylor's daguerreotype series *We Call This Place...Kaurna Yarta* 2020 will be featured in the exhibition. The four works on display each comprise of a framed photograph of a significant Kaurna site, with the Kaurna place name engraved over each in cursive writing. In this way, Tylor reinstates Kaurna language and the Kaurna Miyurna's cultural connection to Country.

The Hon Kyam Maher MLC, Deputy Premier and Minister for Arts, said, 'From historical photographs of the Adelaide CBD to extravagant silk ball gowns, *Dressed Up* connects us to the people and places of nineteenth-century South Australia. By uncovering the stories of the makers, wearers and photographers behind these works, while also shining a light on Aboriginal perspectives often absent from the historical record, AGSA is helping new generations connect with our state's shared history in engaging and meaningful ways.'

Dressed Up includes a range of photographic works that trace the technological advances of the period and the use of photography as a way of shaping public image. Arriving in South Australia in 1845 and initially accessible only to the wealthy, photography soon became widely available with the advent of photography prints known as *carte de visite* (calling cards), at less than half the price of traditional daguerreotype portraits. From wedding photos to family portraits alongside early photos of the state's cities and landmarks, the exhibition shows how photography was used to capture individuals and family members in pivotal moments of their lives, whether dressed up in a photographer's studio or informally at home or outdoors.

Maria Zagala, Curator of Prints, Drawings and Photographs, AGSA, commented, '*Dressed Up* demonstrates how the emerging technology of photography was enthusiastically embraced by South Australians in the late nineteenth century. A growing number of photographers travelled to regional towns throughout South Australia, working from mobile studios and moving on when the clientele dwindled. The popularity of photography studios continued into the close of the century with over a hundred operating between 1890 and 1900 in Adelaide, many of them located on Rundle Street.'

Through a variety of day, evening and wedding dresses, *Dressed Up* will explore the ways in which fashion was an artform that emerged from everyday life – clothing worn in the home, close to the body, and as a receptacle of personal and family histories.

Ingrid Goetz, Vernon-Roberts Assistant Curator of Decorative Arts & Design, AGSA, says 'The dresses on display demonstrate the skill, craftsmanship, and material knowledge of the women who lived and worked during this period, at a time when garments were often hand-sewn and reworked over time to match the latest fashions and to allow for bodily changes such as pregnancy. By looking closely at clothing we can learn about the maker and wearer, as well as the style and values of the individual and the society in which they lived. We would like to thank Dr. Jane Vernon-Roberts, whose ongoing support has enabled the research, digitisation and exhibition presentation of AGSA's historic dress collection.'

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A range of events and programs will accompany *Dressed Up* including a panel discussion on 5 March 2027, featuring the exhibition curators, colonial dress and photography specialists, and artists from the Unbound Collective. Additionally, AGSA's free activity space The Studio will transform into a fashion atelier in collaboration with acclaimed Adelaide-based costume and set designer Renate Henschke. Through hands-on activities and a vibrant workshop space filled with materials, textures, ideas and inspiration, Henschke will offer a glimpse behind the scenes of fashion and costume-making, revealing the stories, skills and material histories that lie beneath the surface of what we wear.

Dressed Up: Fashion & Photography 1850s to 1920s is on display at AGSA from 5 December 2026 to 21 March 2027, free entry.

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MEDIA CONTACTS Elisabeth Alexander | 08 7085 1618 | alexander.elisabeth@artgallery.sa.gov.au
Kate Kyratsous | 08 7085 1604 | kyratsous.kate@artgallery.sa.gov.au

KEY DATES Media Preview | Friday 4 December 2026, 11am
Exhibition Season | 5 December 2026 – 21 March 2027

IMAGES agsa.sa.gov.au/media/dressedup

Image caption: *Tartan dress, worn by Mrs Josephine Geyer*, 1860-65, cotton, silk, wood, metal, 83.0 cm (diam) (a bust circumference), 60.0 cm (diam) (a waist circumference), 55.5 cm (diam) (front length) and *Day dress, worn by Mrs Josephine Geyer*, 1860-65, cotton, wool, silk, metal, glass, 64.0 cm (diam) (waist circumference), 87.0 cm (diam) (bust circumference), 143.5 cm (front length), 147.5 cm (back length); Gifts of Miss G.J. Madigan 1937, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.