

Darnell's dress collection lives on

EIGHTY years ago, a young and flamboyant American Quaker with a penchant for extravagant clothing began collecting gowns for her attic dress-up box.

Although Doris Darnell's clothing passion was frowned upon by her modest Quaker fellows, news of her hobby spread and her collection grew with donations from friends and strangers.

Today, the collection features 3000 items spanning three centuries, from prairie dresses to the couture designs of French fashion houses like Chanel and Dior.

It is priceless.

Priceless, because it features thousands of designer gowns and invaluable because of the story each item holds.

There's the story of Betty Jackson, who, on a balmy evening in 1930, wore a daring evening gown with a plunging backline which became the target of rascals who put ice cubes down her back.

Or the story of the talented seamstress Kate Ludwig, who, in 1912, created herself the perfect wedding dress, only to receive a letter from her fiancé the day before the wedding, informing her that he had married someone else.

Before she passed away in 2006, Darnell bestowed the collection, her life's work, on her god-daughter, Charlotte Smith.

It arrived at Smith's Blue Mountains home in 2004, in the form of 70 boxes weighing 1200kg.

"It took me a long time to realise what I had. It took me three months to unpack," says Smith.

A friend lent her a big space so she could begin the mammoth task of placing the dresses in chronological order.

And then she found her god-mother's notes — there was a story to accompany every dress.

"What it is, is a sort of little, tiny, mini memoir of each of these women."

The memoirs differ between tales of happiness, stories of romance and moments of heartache, but what each has in common is a dress,



GRAND DESIGN: Charlotte Smith with part of the Darnell Collection, which visited Bendigo Art Gallery last year.

marking a significant moment in its owner's life.

"When I was telling people about this incredible clothing collection... my friends or people I'd speak to would say 'oh, that reminds me of a story of something I wore'," says Smith.

"So every time I would come out with what I was doing or what I'd inherited, the word 'story' would come in."

And so Smith's first book *Dreaming of Dior* was born.

Aside from being visually appealing, with detailed sketches that bring each dress to life, the book weaves together the stories of women.

Whether they lived in the prudish and modest 18th century or the swinging 1960s, their stories carry the same themes.

"I'm hoping when people finish reading the book they will be gently informed about how women's roles have changed for the past 120, 130, 140 years.

"It's not right there, the facts,

dates, figures, but just the way women sort of treasured things or what was important in their lives, say someone in the 1860s, people will really realise how we've changed and how we're adapting."

With her knowledge of antique furniture (she owned an antique store when she inherited the collection), Smith was able to "really visualise what these people were doing at the time", working with illustrator Grant Cowan to paint the women into an appropriate pose, in their historical context.

Smith says that when it came to writing, some names were changed, because just like the gowns — each dress in the collection was donated to Darnell and never purchased — the stories were "given in love and in trust", a Quaker saying which Smith repeats throughout the book.

"Some of the stories I felt were quite intimate and personal and obviously, the person, when they handed the dress to Doris, my godmother, they probably did it over a cup of tea and talked about a

few things that maybe their families didn't even know about."

Of the 3000 pieces in the collection, Smith selected 140 dresses for the book.

Although Darnell never lived to see the book, her husband Howard (their love story is chronicled, by dress, within the book) has received a copy.

"He was so thrilled to get the book because for him, the book represents a lifetime," says Smith.

The collection is now based at the ESMOD fashion design institute in Sydney, where Smith works as a curator and lecturer.

She is continuously adding to the collection, and still receives generous donations, with a recent box of 1950s gowns delivered.

"I was very touched when this woman delivered her clothing that she'd kept for 50 years. I thought that was very special that she would sort of choose me.

"I know everything is worth money these days and I feel privileged that (donors) would



United States
Crinoline evening dress (detail)
(c1850s)
Silk
The Darnell Collection at ESMOD



Unknown designer, France
Trousseau dress (1881)
silk, lace, velvet
The Darnell Collection at ESMOD

rather know that it goes somewhere, and they don't get any money, but their story lives on."

— AAP

■ *Dreaming of Dior* by Charlotte Smith, published by HarperCollins, is available now. RRP: \$35.

Fashionistas flock to Chadstone's facelift



NOW OPEN: The extension of Chadstone Shopping Centre includes 165 new stores. Picture: JOE ARMAO

by Matthew Dunckley, AFR

MORE than 5000 people queued outside Melbourne's monolithic Chadstone Shopping Centre on Wednesday just for the opportunity to be the first through the doors following the completion of a five-year, \$280 million facelift to Australia's most valuable retail property.

The hopeful horde was attracted by publicity, a slew of brand-new luxury shops and the prospect of a \$100 voucher for the first 100 shoppers.

Centre manager Stephen deWaele said some particularly keen shoppers had arrived to queue at midnight and were given their shopping vouchers in an effort to disperse the crowd for safety reasons.

"They were given out when people arrived, mainly to manage the process so we didn't have any door-buster-style chaos," he said.

The extension, which has taken five years, lifts the centre's total floor space to 175,600 square metres, meaning it overtakes a South African mall as the largest centre in the southern hemisphere.

Tenants in the new wing include Burberry, Chanel, Coach, Gucci, Hugo Boss, Jimmy Choo, Omega, Ralph Lauren and Australia's first Miu Miu.

In all, Mr deWaele said the centre had added 165 new stores, all tenanted over the past 12 months, despite the economic downturn taking its toll on consumers.

While the leasing process had taken a little longer than usual, he said that was more due to the

exacting requirements of the new tenants and their international nature than economic conditions.

"In terms of the process, it was a bit longer than usual," he said.

"They have a very disciplined approach internationally that just takes a little bit of extra time."

Mr deWaele said the centre's owners had looked beyond the immediate and short-term issues in the economy in approaching the development and the new tenants had the same philosophy.

"It is a tough time but it was helped by the fact that people were on the journey with us. Certainly the luxury brands take a long-term view," he said.

The centre turned over more than \$1 billion last year, an Australian record, and attracts 17 million visitors every year.