

EXPLORING FASHION:
A LENS TO VIEW OUR WORLD

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While fashion may seem to be simply the passing fancy of a certain time, it is much more than that; Fashion is a very clear form of self-expression. It has distinguished people from one another as well as united them. Fashion can be altered by many small things such as the wearer's mood, but it can also be majorly influenced by personal ideals and political beliefs. When looking at fashion from the past few centuries, the turn of the nineteenth century had styles widely different than those just a lifetime before or after. What caused this great change? The rapidly changing fashions of this era were a direct effect of the French and American Revolutions and people's exploration of new political ideas and the open, free exchange of those ideas.

Pre-French Revolution Fashion

Clothing was not mass produced until the 1920s¹, so articles of clothing during the 1700s were made mostly by the wearers themselves or, in the case of more wealthy people, custom made by professionals for the individual customers.² During the late 1700s, dresses were called mantuas, so professional seamstresses were called mantua makers. Although most of the time mantua makers made the whole dress, they would sometimes fit and baste the dress then let a more inexpensive seamstress or the customer herself sew the dress together. Sometimes, skilled seamstresses could copy professionally-made gowns at home to avoid the expense of a mantua

¹ NIST Virtual Museum, National Institute of Standards and Technology, "Short History of Ready-Made Clothing, Standardization of Women's Clothing Sizes," Accessed February 10, 2016, <http://museum.nist.gov/exhibits/apparel/history.htm>.

² Ann Buermann Wass and Michelle Webb Fandrich, *Clothing Through American History: The Federal Era through Antebellum, 1786-1860* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010), 9.

maker.³ Boned corsets, called stays, were also worn during the 1700s and made by professionals as well. Stays however were usually made by men because of the strength needed to cut the bones and work with the stiff fabrics used such as leather and tightly-woven canvas.⁴ It is interesting to note that stays at this time were worn for shape and posture, not for waist restriction as in later years.⁵

There was a significant cultural exchange between France and other countries during this time, primarily England and America, as France was considered the heart of fashion, much like it is today.⁶ Because of trade restrictions, the distance between the countries, and the fact that fashions usually had to become popular in England first, French styles were often two years old when they caught on in America.⁷ American women did have access to imported goods, but many women had direct oversea connections and were sent the newest fashions. Throughout the turn of the century, diplomatic connections were used to avoid trade restrictions, as ships on diplomatic business were recognized as neutral by combatants.⁸ Among the items brought back from Europe were French fashion plates, hand-colored prints that illustrated the latest fashions.⁹

Although America borrowed its fashion from Europe, Americans were known for dressing in their own neat, clean-cut, practical way rather than what many perceived to be the

³ Ibid, 205.

⁴ Ann Buermann Wass and Michelle Webb Fandrich, *Clothing Through American History: The Federal Era through Antebellum, 1786-1860* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010), 112-113.

⁵ Ibid, 73.

⁶ Joan E. DeJean, *The Essence of Style: How the French Invented High Fashion, Fine Food, Chic Cafés, Style, Sophistication, and Glamour* (New York: Free Press, 2005).

⁷ Ann Buermann Wass and Michelle Webb Fandrich, *Clothing Through American History: The Federal Era through Antebellum, 1786-1860* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010), 57.

⁸ Ann Buermann Wass and Michelle Webb Fandrich, *Clothing Through American History: The Federal Era through Antebellum, 1786-1860* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010), 114.

⁹ Meredith Wright, *Everyday Dress of Rural America 1783-1800: With Instructions and Patterns* (New York: Dover, 1992), 7.

fussy and frivolous ways of the French.¹⁰ The American political ideal of equality, nurtured and grown by the recent revolution, extended to their dress. American travelers to Europe frequently commented on how American dress differed very little between social classes compared to the European monarchies. One woman claimed that you could not tell whether she or her servant was the mistress of the house.¹¹

In contrast, French fashion served to distinguish social classes during this time. French nobles wore grand gowns to court, heavily embellished and made with the finest fabrics. Over time, the fashions became exceedingly extravagant. Just before the French Revolution court panniers, very wide structured underskirts, stuck up to three feet out from each hip and the trains on these dresses were also quite long (See Appendix I). As the rich dressed grander, the condition of the poor grew worse and they struggled each day just to stay warm.¹²

French Changes

Just before the French Revolution, Rosseauism took root in France. This movement stressed that civilization was corrupt and true virtue could only be found in the rural, pastoral life.¹³ This movement aided in starting the revolution but, ironically enough, also caught on with the aristocracy and the simple milkmaid-style chemise dress made its debut on Marie Antoinette

¹⁰ Meredith Wright, *Everyday Dress of Rural America 1783-1800: With Instructions and Patterns* (New York: Dover, 1992), 9.

¹¹ Ann Buermann Wass and Michelle Webb Fandrich, *Clothing Through American History: The Federal Era through Antebellum, 1786-1860* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010), 29.

¹² Helen Ingersoll, "Costumes in the Time of Napoleon," *The Monthly Illustrator* 5, no. 16 (1895): 150, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25582092>.

¹³ James Lavender, *Taste and Fashion - From the French Revolution to the Present Day* (Alcester, United Kingdom: Read Books Ltd, 1945), Chapter 1.

herself in the 1780s.¹⁴ Because of this exploration of simpler ideas, there weren't many portraits painted during this time so historians aren't certain exactly how many people took part in the fashion of the Rosseauism movement. It is also not clear whether the chemise dresses became popular in America as well as in Europe.¹⁵

The greatest change in fashion and political ideas during this era came with the French Revolution and its aftermath. In fact, some historians say that the impact on women's fashion was the most "immediate" and "noticeable" effect of the French Revolution.¹⁶ Among the causes of the revolution, there are a few that influenced fashion in a very evident and extreme way: the middle class' frustration with being excluded from power, peasants' awareness of the great difference between their quality of life compared to the nobility, the resurgence of classicalism and philosophy, and the fact that people no longer saw the monarchy as being divinely ordained.¹⁷ Near the end of the old French Monarchy, Marie Antoinette, while trying to break the barrier between the monarchy and the people, only succeeded in insulting the people further. She appeared before the starving French people wearing a wig powdered with flour. She also had a portrait painted called '*la Reine en Gaulle*' (See Appendix II). Marie Antoinette is depicted in a plain, simple dress with a vase of flowers to show her unity with the people's simple, pastoral

¹⁴ Ann Buermann Wass and Michelle Webb Fandrich, *Clothing Through American History: The Federal Era through Antebellum, 1786-1860* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010), 62.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Helen Ingersoll, "Costumes in the Time of Napoleon," *The Monthly Illustrator* 5, no. 16 (1895): 250, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25582092>.

¹⁷ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "French Revolution", accessed January 28, 2016, <http://www.britannica.com/event/French-Revolution>.

ideas but most of the French were disgusted by the painting and thought her gown was insultingly immodest.¹⁸

When the French Revolution began in 1789 it became dangerous to dress like the nobles of the old regime. Often it was merely one's garments that saved them from an encounter with the guillotine.¹⁹ Revolutionaries developed their own style of dress based on those of Ancient Rome and Greece. Classical educations were quite popular at this time as well as the republican spirit of Ancient Rome. Revolutionaries went so far as to wear Greek and Roman designs and women began to dress like Greek and Roman statues.^{20 21} Although most of these statue-inspired dresses were white, some were embellished with bright colors.²² Even though it was the stereotypical fashion of the revolutionaries, these extreme classical outfits were worn mostly at festivals and on the stage for much of the revolution. They were quite extreme and many were even more revealing than the dress of Marie Antoinette in '*la Reine en Gaule*' (See Appendix III).

After the Revolution, the French longed for fashion but no one wanted to go back to the extreme silhouette and powdered wigs of the aristocracy.²³ Many different designs were tested and the pupils of the painter Jacques Louis David convinced their female friends to wear

¹⁸ James Perman Eglinton and George Harinck, *Neo-Calvinism and the French Revolution* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 84.

¹⁹ Ann Buermann Wass and Michelle Webb Fandrich, *Clothing Through American History: The Federal Era through Antebellum, 1786-1860* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010), 64.

²⁰ James Laver, *Taste and Fashion: From the French Revolution to the Present Day* (G. G. Harrap Limited, 1945), Chapter I.

²¹ Ann Buermann Wass and Michelle Webb Fandrich, *Clothing Through American History: The Federal Era through Antebellum, 1786-1860* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010), 42.

²² *Ibid*, 64.

²³ Helen Ingersoll, "Costumes in the Time of Napoleon," *The Monthly Illustrator* 5, no. 16 (1895): 251, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25582092>.

new fashions which kept with the familiar Greek and Roman theme and republican ideals, but had very high waists so that belts were worn under the armpits.²⁴

The turn of the 19th Century was often viewed as immodest and scandalous, for the dresses showed off and clung to the figure so well, some people believed women wet their dresses so they would cling more.²⁵ Shawls were also worn in France to further accentuate the figure when draped properly. This was a trend also present in America, but American clothing was not nearly as immodest as it was in France, in fact, there was an evident lack in morality in France that was not present in America. Although both revolutionary France and America shared similar political ideals, the scale of social violence in the French Revolution was far greater. Fashion reflected this terror and continued, at least for a time, to become increasingly revealing. Skin-toned chemises were worn under sheer dresses, skimpy sandals and toe rings were displayed by dresses with side slits, and short sleeves were fashionable. It was not just clergymen preaching against this scandalous fashion, but physicians as well. Many girls died of cold because of the skin exposed and many women ate more to stay warm rather than put on more clothing and appear less fashionable.²⁶ In America, the slim silhouette caught on but thicker

²⁴ Helen Ingersoll, "Costumes in the Time of Napoleon," *The Monthly Illustrator* 5, no. 16 (1895): 251, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25582092>

²⁵ Ann Buermann Wass and Michelle Webb Fandrich, *Clothing Through American History: The Federal Era through Antebellum, 1786-1860* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010), 72.

²⁶ Helen Ingersoll, "Costumes in the Time of Napoleon," *The Monthly Illustrator* 5, no. 16 (1895): 252, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25582092>

fabrics were more common and short sleeves never became popular²⁷ as described in a letter of Eliza Bowne from New York in 1803: “Long sleeves are very much worn, made like mitts...”²⁸

Post-French Revolution

By the end of the French Revolution, clothing did not differ between classes and occupations much anymore.²⁹ The old regime along with its class distinctions was also gone after the Revolution and in its wake remained a society in which the bourgeoisie, or middle class, held most of the power.³⁰ The slender, high-waisted silhouette was widespread and the word ‘dress’ was replacing ‘gown’ to describe the women’s garments which were so different than those worn just a generation before.³¹ This was certainly a new era.

When Napoleon Bonaparte rose to power in 1799 he influenced more changes in fashion, but these were less drastic than those that occurred during and directly after the Revolution. Wealthier women, who were the main trend-setters of the time, began to wear more clothing and Napoleon encouraged grand clothing at court. These women also stopped wearing dresses with trains because Napoleon was a fast walker and didn’t like looking at the wasted space taken up by the long, useless lengths of fabric. His Egyptian campaign of 1798-1799 also influenced both

²⁷ Ann Buermann Wass and Michelle Webb Fandrich, *Clothing Through American History: The Federal Era through Antebellum, 1786-1860* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010), 67.

²⁸ Alice Morse Earle, “The Fashions of the Nineteenth Century,” *The Chautauquan* 21, no. 2 (1895) : 133.

²⁹ Ann Buermann Wass and Michelle Webb Fandrich, *Clothing Through American History: The Federal Era through Antebellum, 1786-1860* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010), 110.

³⁰ Gary Kates, *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and New Controversies* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 17.

³¹ Ann Buermann Wass and Michelle Webb Fandrich, *Clothing Through American History: The Federal Era through Antebellum, 1786-1860* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010), 66.

military and civilian fashion. There are mentions in letters and the like of Egyptian warrior-inspired cloaks and headdresses.

After Napoleon was removed from power, fashion seemed to separate itself once and for all from its Revolutionary style. Starting around 1815, women exchanged their white, pastel dresses for dark, richly colored ones as well as dresses that were more naturally shaped.³² During this period, women started to wear more clothing, the silhouette of skirts began to fill out again, and the waistlines dropped.³³ This transition wasn't always very smooth, as demonstrated in an engraving of Dolly Madison (ca. 1815) which shows her in a gown with an empire waist, full skirt, and high neckline (See Appendix IV).³⁴ From this point onward, dresses continued a trend of gradually increasing silhouettes until the well-known hoop skirts of the American Civil War Era.

From the luxurious and indulgent fashion of the French aristocracy to the pastoral fashions of the Rosseauism movement to the skimpy Greek and Roman inspired ensembles of the Revolutionaries, fashion went through some extreme changes during the periods leading up to and following the French Revolution. These changes were a result of the rapidly changing political ideas during this time as well as the exchanging of those ideas with other countries. Fashion was used as a way of expressing political beliefs and uniting a group such as the French Revolutionaries, or splitting people apart such as the fashions of the French Aristocracy versus

³² Helen Ingersoll, "Costumes in the Time of Napoleon," *The Monthly Illustrator* 5, no. 16 (1895): 253-254, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25582092>

³³ Ann Buermann Wass and Michelle Webb Fandrich, *Clothing Through American History: The Federal Era through Antebellum, 1786-1860* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010), 70.

³⁴ Evelyn Marie Stuart, "Fashion Art of Today and Yesterday," *Fine Arts Journal*, 32(2), [The Frick Collection, Thomas J. Watson Library, The Metropolitan Museum of Art]: 78-84, doi:10.2307/25603472, 79.

the clothing of the poorer classes. Fashion is so much more than just a collection of random clothing articles or the passing fancy of a certain time, it is a reflection of the feelings and ideals of people from all different eras: a lens through which we can view the world and history.

Appendix I



In the painting above, Marie Antoinette is shown in a grand, richly adorned gown. It was these types of extravagant displays that fueled the revolution.

Dagoty, Jean-Baptiste Gautier. *Marie Antoinette*. 1775. National Museum of the Castle, Versailles.
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gautier-Dagoty_-_Marie-Antoinette,_1775.jpg>.

Appendix II



Here Marie Antoinette is shown in her controversial chemise dress in an attempt to display herself in a way supportive of Rousseauism.

Vigée-Lebrun, Elisabeth. *Marie Antoinette*. 1783. Oil on Canvas. Galeries Nationales Du Grand Palais, Paris. *National Gallery of Art*. 14 Feb. 2016. <<http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/art-object-page.46065.html>>.

Appendix III



Lady Liberty is depicted above in a yellow Greek-style garment and a Phrygian cap among revolutionaries during the Paris uprising known as The Three Glorious Days.

Delacroix, Eugene. *La Liberté Guidant Le Peuple*. 1831. The Louvre, Paris. Web. 14 Feb. 2016.
<<http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/july-28-liberty-leading-people>>.

Appendix IV

The transition from Revolutionary fashion to the fashion of the next era wasn't always smooth and harmonious, as depicted in the engraving above of Dolley Madison.

Prud'homme, John Frances Eugene. *Portrait of Dolley Madison*. 1800-1892. Engraving. Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Earle, Alice Morse. "The Fashions of the Nineteenth Century." *The Chautauquan* 21, no. 2 (1895) : 113.

This article included an excerpt of a letter from Miss Elisa Bowne to her mother during a visit to New York in 1803. It offered a teenager's opinion to the fashion of the time, something that other articles and books could not do.

Wass, Ann Buermann., and Michelle Webb. Fandrich. *Clothing through American History: The Federal Era through Antebellum, 1786-1860*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2010.

This book included many excerpts from historical letters and images of various works of art from the mid eighteenth century to the mid nineteenth century.

Secondary Sources

DeJean, Joan E. *The Essence of Style: How the French Invented High Fashion, Fine Food, Chic Cafés, Style, Sophistication, and Glamour*. New York: Free Press, 2005.

This book discussed France as a great leader in culture. It also discussed the idea of France as being the fashion capitol of the world.

Eglinton, James Perman, and G. Harinck. *Neo-Calvinism and the French Revolution*. Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014.

This book began with a section about the events leading up to the French Revolution that included a lot of information about Marie Antoinette. This book had information about her many scandals and social faux pas.

"French Revolution | Causes, Facts, & Summary." Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Accessed January 28, 2016. <http://www.britannica.com/event/French-Revolution>.

This website article gave a good overview of the politics of the French Revolution. By reading about the events and ideals of revolutionaries, parallels could be made between them and the changes in dress.

Ingersoll, Helen. "Costumes in the Time of Napoleon." *The Monthly Illustrator* 5, no. 6 (1895): 150-254. Accessed December 10, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25582092>.

This journal article discussed in-depth the fashion during the French Revolution through the rule of Napoleon and into the Restoration Period. It discussed fashion in relation to the events and politics of the time.

Kates, Gary. *The French Revolution Recent Debates and New Controversies*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

This book focused on the politics of the French Revolution. I used the information pertaining to class distinctions and the rise of the bourgeoisie.

Laver, James. *Taste and Fashion, from the French Revolution to the Present Day*. London: G.G. Harrap and, 1945.

This book had a good description of Rousseauism and its effect on everyday life and fashion.

"Short History of Ready-Made Clothing, Standardization of Women's Clothing Sizes." NIST Virtual Museum, National Institute of Standards and Technology. Accessed February 10, 2016. <http://museum.nist.gov/exhibits/apparel/history.htm>.

This article helped me understand the history of the clothing industry, specifically when the mass-production of clothing began and how.

Stuart, Evelyn Marie. "Fashion Art of Today and Yesterday." *Fine Arts Journal* 32, no. 2 (1915): 78-80.

This journal article discussed fashion in relation to proportion and how the proportion of outfits changed as hairstyles and undergarments changed. It was quite interesting, as proportion is not something generally discussed.

Wass, Ann Buermann., and Michelle Webb. Fandrich. *Clothing through American History: The Federal Era through Antebellum, 1786-1860*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2010.

This book included many excerpts from historical letters and images of various works of art from the mid eighteenth century to the mid nineteenth century.

Wright, Merideth. *Everyday Dress of Rural America 1783-1800: With Instructions and Patterns*. New York: Dover, 1992.

This book gave great insight and detail into the fashion of America during the time of the French Revolution. I was able to compare and contrast the fashions between France and America by using the detailed information in this book.