

The Fleeting Art: Fashion and Culture in Eighteenth Century France

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*Dress is the most fleeting of the arts, a prey to the arbitrary dictates of novelty and the attacks of critics, subject to endless speculation – and quite meaningless out of historical context. It is, on the other hand, the only art that relates so closely to the narrative of our lives, both as individuals and in relation to the wider world; for clothing is simultaneously intensely personal (a reflection of our self-image) and, as fashion, it is, in the words of Louis XIV, 'the mirror of history.'*⁰

-Aileen Ribeiro

Eighteenth century France was one of the most energetic and creative periods in Western history. France saw the amalgamation of new philosophies, ideals, and inventions infiltrate into her socio-economic and artistic culture. Numerous forms of expression were created to mirror these dynamic changes and reflect the attitudes of the day. One mode of expression that became a symbol of French culture was the style of dress. What was once an exclusively upper-class convention now became a massive commercial market for the people of France. Fashions displayed the innovative climate of that time – markets, styles, trends, and philosophies toward clothing were a direct result of the changes taking place. Eighteenth century French attire reflected, both positively and negatively, the ever-evolving culture of France, and has remained an inspiration to fashion ever since.

Prior to the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, fashion within France was a non-inclusive right among the nobles of the court. *La mode* was a privilege to the elite men and women who had the resources to invest in heavy, ornate attire made from costly silks and brocades.¹ These nobles were expected to maintain a proper appearance within the monarchy, to exhibit the king's dominance and power. People believed that "mere physical proximity to the monarch – his power and supremacy established through the divine right of kings – would elevate them to a higher social level...and dress, of course, had to be appropriate to the elevation."² Both men and women dressed extravagantly – demonstrating their noble birth and social status to the masses. Elaborate clothing was not based on gender – it was based on nobility. "The theory is often advanced," state Peter McNeil and Giorgio Riello, "that for much of this time men were in fact more gorgeously appareled than women."³ This explains why both women and men wore high-heels within the court. Heels served as a mechanism for "tyrannizing rather than surrendering to the gaze" of other classes.⁴ The added height indicated that nobles were literally above

everyone else. Elevation and elongation through silhouettes created an image of grandeur and stateliness. Fashion served as a symbol of power – the more luxurious one looked, the more important he/she was.

Clothing was a very costly commodity prior to the eighteenth century. The vast majority of people had only plain clothing made from homespun materials.⁵ The production of fabrics and clothing was an arduous task - people mainly wore simple cuts and styles. Colors, too, were hard to attain and were only used on the garments of the wealthy. In general, clothing seldom changed due to the fact that it was so prohibitively expensive.⁶ People did not have the time or money to invest in such superficial commodities. Prior to industrialization, the vast majority of people were laborers who would have ruined fine clothing anyway. Fashion, therefore, was but a mere system of exclusivity among a small number of elite people.

During the seventeenth century, King Louis XIV changed the dynamics of ceremonial dress among the nobility. After building Versailles, he yearned for his power and dominance to radiate throughout the world. Louis XIV spent a large portion of the income on opulent and extravagant fashions for the nobles dwelling in Versailles.⁷ He wanted an immobile, fattened nobility that remained submersed in court frivolities and fineries. Louis XIV established the splendours of formal costume with the lavishly trimmed *grand habit* for women and the *habit a la francaise* for men.⁸ The investment in ornate court dress became a legacy of not only Louis XIV, but of France. When Louis XV, son of Louis XIV, took the throne, he made sure to maintain these court fashions. One woman, in particular, upheld these notions and highly influenced the development of fashion among the court: “Madame de Pompadour, the mistress of Louis XV, promoted taste in dress that reflected the visual arts of the period, of which she was a keen supporter.”⁹ Madame de Pompadour donned newer styles and cuts – piquing the curiosity and interest of her fellow nobles. Women began emulating her unique clothing and hair-style habits, creating a new form of fashion sense. Madame de Pompadour became, in a way, one of the first trendsetters of France.

A number of developments occurred over the seventeenth century that transformed the availability and diversity of fashion. The strength and attractiveness of new styles, worn by women such as Pompadour, inspired other nobles to attain these same fashions. The changing lines and shapes – inspired by the new delightful art of rococo – appeared in the cut of coats and dresses, and in the patterns of silks.¹⁰ As France became an industrialized nation, expanding her markets and producing more goods, fabrics and materials became more diverse and less expensive. Seamstresses, inspired by the developing artistic tastes within Europe, invented and created an immense amount of styles with the new variety of fabrics being produced and imported. The word *couturiere* was coined as a way to describe these new creators of fashion.¹¹ Their influence, combined with the rising textile production, shift-

ed the attitudes of the French toward consumption and started a “clothing revolution.”¹² Courts across Europe sought to imitate these rising trends and yearned to attain the latest French fashions.

A strong middle class surfaced within French society during this time. The rising bourgeoisie, created from the Industrial Revolution, strained to climb to a “high stratum of society,” wishing that they could “attain, or even surpass, the refined and elegant manner of their superiors.”¹³ The economic success of industrialization gave the growing middle class a spendable income. For the first time, people who were not in the court could afford luxury goods, including fashionable clothing. Having risen out of farm work and labor, the bourgeoisie – mostly merchants and business people – could now purchase elaborate clothing. By the middle of the eighteenth century, fashionable dressing was no longer the exclusive privilege of the elite but something in which men and women of the middle class could indulge.¹⁴ France became a consumer society – people purchased exorbitant amounts of clothing. All across France, wardrobes doubled in size. The continual production of diverse garments left people wanting more; they wanted to demonstrate their newfound social status to the world.

Inspiration was abound for fashion during this time period. Eighteenth century Europe was exploding with new modes of artistic intensity and feeling – creativity was limitless. People were continually searching for ways to express themselves in this new culture. The artistic inspiration of baroque and rococo manifested itself in the clothing people wore: “A perfection of form was attempted by restructuring the human body through the use of clothing and either reducing or expanding the existing shape...functional objects of everyday use such as fans, stockings, stomachers, aprons, and workbaskets became artistic creations...these embellished accessories perfected the desired appearance of the completed composition.”¹⁵ People desired to be masterpieces – moving works of art. In *Dangerous Liaisons: Fashion and Furniture in the Eighteenth Century*, Harold Koda and Andrew Bolton examine how French culture projected these new attitudes of lavishness and finesse within bourgeoisie and upper class society:

The central premise of elite social behavior was that the body was an instrument of pleasure. Interaction was conceived as a process of seduction – not necessarily a pursuit of overt sexual expression, but rather an exchange in which individuals sought to engage and delight each other with an artfully conducted repertoire of pleasing poses, gestures, expressions, and conversation.¹⁶

Clothing became an outlet for self-expression and individuality – it served to uplift and present an air of majesty within social settings.

Clothing construction and accessories were crafted to maintain this sense of grandiose appearance. The wig, for example, was an important article of

dress – through its uses, the wearer created an impression of dignity and gravity.¹⁷ Other accessories, such as hoop skirts and powder, reshaped the body and face and transformed them into elegant images. These images became the standard form of respectability between the upper and middle classes. An Englishman, by the name of Boswell, wrote of fashion’s effect on manners in *The Hypochondriak...Essays in the London Magazine*. He wrote, “...dress has a great deal of influence on the mind...every one has felt himself more disposed to decorum and propriety and courtesy and other good qualities when genteelly dress, than when in slovenly apparel.”¹⁸ Dressing fashionably became the expected norm among those who considered themselves to be high society. One’s dress became associated with one’s propriety and taste – clothes mirrored one’s refinement.

A large part of why fashion spread so quickly and was so successful among the masses was due to the introduction of commercialism. The expanded clientele for fashion garments created a need to advertise products. For the first time ever, ways of promulgating information of trends were developed.¹⁹ According to Jennifer M. Jones, author of “Repackaging Rousseau: Femininity and Fashion in Old Regime France,” “the new commercial culture...witnessed the birth of the fashion press and new forms of publicity, including business cards and window displays that challenged centuries-old practices of corporate and state control production and distribution.”²⁰ The middle class was now being updated on consumer goods – they had options on the merchandise they purchased. Forms of communication, such as pamphlets and advertisements, were used to keep people up-to-date on the freshest items and trends. Jean Donneau de Vise, an eighteenth century French journalist, created the first French fashion magazine called *Le Mecure gallant*.²¹ Donneau de Vise reported on all things haute – who was wearing what, the social scenes, and the latest styles and trends within French society.²² People could purchase these magazines and read how to keep up with the constant changes in trends. The importance of clothing and style became a great one for the bourgeoisie and upper classes – it became an addiction to constantly be in the know and ahead of the vogue. The fashion industry mirrored the changes in available resources provided for the people of France.

France became the fashion capital of the world during the 1700s. Aristocracies across the globe desired to be as fashion forward as the French had become. Foreign exports and imports of fabrics and materials reflect the expanding trade and commerce of 18th century Europe. The *commerce de luxe* became a part of France’s economic, social, and visual identity.²³ The demand for exported luxury items was high, providing the fashion business with an economic foothold. England, Spain, Austria, Portugal, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Poland, and Russia imported French clothing into their country to be worn by their nobles and kings.²⁴ When the English, for example, wanted to dress up, they would wear the *robe a la francaise* or the *polonoise* – both

French pieces.²⁵ Kings and queens ordered entire wardrobes of clothing to demonstrate how cultured and luxurious they were. King John V, of Portugal, ordered his entire wardrobe from France in 1735; the Polish King Stanislas-August Poniatowski enforced the court to don French clothing during his reign; and Tsarina Elizabeth had a reported fifteen thousand ball gowns in her wardrobe that were imported from France.²⁶ The “clothing revolution” swept like a wildfire across Europe and into the East, leaving an imprint of the cultures and standards of numerous countries.

Open markets provided France with a number of new ideas and products. Fashion, along with many other newly developed industries, gained an enormous amount of inspiration from contact with foreign nations. The importation of fabrics, particularly from the Orient, served as catalyst to new designs in French clothing. The French gained inspiration from the traditions and compositions of foreign clothing styles. For example, the *Le Mercure* magazine reported that the French were enraptured over coats imported from China with hand-painted exotic flowers on them – what resulted was the *manteaux* (or mantua), which quickly became the prevailing style all over Europe.²⁷ The soft and comfortable lines and shapes of Oriental clothing were highly desired among Europeans and became the new trend in the mid-1700s. Other region’s styles of comfortable attire were incorporated within French design as well. The English style of horse riding as a sport, for example, inspired French dressmakers to produce sportswear.²⁸ The Scientific Revolution promoted ideas on health and mobility, which reflect why the fashion industry “search(ed) for freedom of movement, for fantasy and pleasure, refined taste and relaxed clothing.”²⁹ Less constricting shapes, however designed with the same fashion sense, allowed one to move freely and remain elegant.

The rise of female influence within French culture can be seen within the fashion industry. The fashion market opened up a lot of opportunities for female artisans. Seamstresses, who normally only sewed for alteration purposes, became leading entrepreneurs that created successful fashion businesses. According to Francois de Garsault, women in the fashion industry were not known for their “work” or “profession,” but for their “talent.”³⁰ For the first time, businesswomen were being recognized for their abilities to produce fine works. One of the greatest examples of this was the career of Rose Bertin, one of the most talented fashion designers throughout Paris. Her career provides an interesting insight into the evolving attitudes toward business women: “...Bertin’s career offers a new case study for examining the role of reputation in shaping female merchant’s credit in economic and moral terms... her career exemplifies an extreme concern with professional reputation...”³¹ Female merchants were developing their professional reputations based on their business skills and products, not their gentility or moral standing (as was the case prior to the eighteenth century).

Women also had a great influence over commerce and trade. Female

domination over the creation and expansion of the fashion trade influenced the feminization of fashion. Women became exclusively associated with the industry, due to the high female clientele. The expression *esclaves de la mode* (“slaves for fashion”) was developed in response to women’s obsession with fashion.³² Many people noticed and began to fear the rise in women’s moral abandonment with shopping. Women were being far too reckless with their purses. According to Mercier, author of “*Merchandises de modes*,” 1.5 million young women were diminishing their dowries for the sake of “trimmings, ribbons, gauzes, bonnets, feathers and hats.”³³ Among the leading female spenders at this time was Marie-Antoinette. Her spending habits were outrageous – she was the leading proponent to negative views on fashion and women’s consumerism.

French men and women reacted differently to the massive consumer culture that pervaded throughout France. People responded “not only with their pocketbooks but also with lively debates over the nature of luxury, taste and *la mode*, as they tried to make sense of the burgeoning commercial culture which was producing ever more material objects...for the pleasure and delight of a growing segment...of the French populace.”³⁴ The Scientific Revolution, Enlightenment, and Age of Reason heavily influenced people’s opinions on the rise of credit spending, consumption, and gaudiness within French fashion. Growing concern over the materialistic and superficial nature of the widespread fashion industry caused many people to become critical and cynical about the business. They were worried that such frivolities were harmful physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Within science, numerous articles and essays were written on the dangerous and unhealthy nature of extravagant clothing to the body. Doctors criticized paint, powder, and luxury as destroyers of beauty and producers of illnesses ranging from damaged eyesight and headaches to the loss of tooth enamel.³⁵ Such extravagances hindered the body – it repressed mobility, clogged the pores, and stressed the muscles. Deshais-Gendron, a French doctor, studied the effects of rouge and concluded that it was “une espece de maladie endemique” (“a type of endemic malady”).³⁶ Such indulgences were seen as the literal causes of sickness and deformity. It is during this time that men and women’s apparel, which were already shifting in appearances, took on different shapes and contours as a result of health issues. Shoes, for example, were transformed and shaped to fit the foot. Scientists promoted exercise as a necessary routine for one’s health stability. Men, who were seen as more athletic in nature, were encouraged to wear more rustic styled shoes that allowed for walking, running, and sport.³⁷ Women, however, were to remain in the once-standard high-heels. These shoes immobilized women’s ability to partake in sport, reflecting their genteel and passive natures.³⁸ These rising trends in gender-based attire deeply impacted fashion and the connotations it held.

The philosophical and moral nature of the rise in luxury and fashion were discussed heavily among the thinkers of the Enlightenment. Many intellectuals were disturbed at how wasteful and superficial society had become. Women, in particular, were the main subjects of scrutiny with fashion. The editor of the *Courrier de la mode ou le journal du gout* and author of *L'Ami des femmes*, Boudier de Villemert, wrote:

The imagination of women continually nourishes itself on the details of jewels and clothing. These fill up their heads with so many colors that there is no room for objects which might better merit their attention.

Women's minds scarcely graze the surface of essential qualities and only attach themselves to the drapery.³⁹

There was growing concern over women's (and some men's) vanity as it pertained to clothing. One of the most critical writers of the time was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His work, *Emile*, examines the damaging effects fashion has on one's self. He wrote that "one can shine by one's clothing, but one can only please with one's person...the true triumph of beauty lies in shining by oneself...the love of fashion is in bad taste, because when one changes one's fashion, one's face and figure nevertheless remain the same, and that which suits one one time should suit one forever."⁴⁰ Rousseau stressed the importance of one's natural self. He, along with many others, felt that such garish attire damaged one's ability to be natural.

With the outbreak of revolution, France sought to mend her culture from the damaging effects of the *ancien regime*. Angered by the devastation of the economy, the French people ended the era of luxury and entered into a new age of conservatism. The mark of the fashion industry, however, was not erased. Fashion remained a part of French culture and European society as a whole. What was produced from fashion reflects the tumultuous and exciting times of eighteenth century France. The clothing styles, shapes, and attitudes mirror what was going on within France during that time. From artwork to science, the clothes worn were an accumulation of all the creativity that was going on. So magnificent and powerful were the original designs that they remain on a pedestal in modern fashion. Fashion designers still use the creations of eighteenth century clothing as a source of inspiration. The impact of the "clothing revolution" changed the dynamics of history and clothing forever.

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