Fashion Plates

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Girl in a Swing, by Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), French. Detail of leaf 76 from Figures de différentes caracères (Paris, n.d.), Etching, 8\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 6\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 28.100 (2)

From the first quarter of the eighteenth century, this young girl in a swing is either a servant or is dressed for a lower-middle-class morning, since her cap proclaims her social status. The square-backed stiffened bodice and the clumsy high-heeled shoes show her closer to seventeenth-century fashion than to the normal, kerchief-covered shoulders of the 1780s.

Man of Quality in a Scarlet Cloak, by Jean Mariette (1694-1774), French. About 1700. Etching, 12 x 7\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 49.50.395

This fashion plate from the very beginning of the eighteenth century shows an evolving style. The large and inconvenient sleeve, long and curled hair, and three-cornered reduction of the large-brimmed cavalier’s hat are all modifications of seventeenth-century fashions that are combined with eighteenth-century details. This man of quality would have trouble reaching for his sword in any case; it would be even more difficult if he wore the long fur-lined sleeves of ancient China, Rome, and medieval Russia. His muff could be instantly discarded and is also fashionable, as is his habit of taking snuff. This plate is simple reportage of what the latest fashion is; it is not really a design, although a good tailor or seamstress could almost follow it to make such an outfit.

Although one of the plates in a set called the Monument du Costume, this picture of a chattering lobby full of opera-goers tells a great deal more than the latest styles. A social comedy is taking place in which lovers and husbands play their parts with elegant gestures, snuff-taking, and monocles. The sleeve and wrist fashions of both men and women lent themselves to a graceful language of hands, part of a national tendency to gesture.
Fashion drawings are occasionally very close to caricatures in their exaggeration. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English artists made thousands of caricatures of royal, political, and topical subjects; their comments on fashions give an immediate impression of what the fashion trends of their times were. This unidentified satirist’s use of the word “embarrassed” is especially telling, since many women’s styles, when misused or overdone, really embarrass other people. The last verse of a poem published in the London Magazine in 1777 gives some advice to the unwary gentleman:

Thus finish’d in taste, while on Chloe you gaze
You make the dear charmer for life;
But never undress her—for, out of her stays
You’ll find you have lost half your wife.

Les Bouquets ou La Fête de la Grand-Maman, by Philibert-Louis Debucourt (1755-1832), French. 1788. Intaglio color print, 15 x 11⅛ inches. Gift of Mrs. Leon Daley, 64.552.2

Recording the look of the French bourgeois of the 1780s and ’90s was the great success of Debucourt. His elaborate colorprinting technique, akin to mezzotinting, enabled him to display all the seductiveness of pale satin skirts shimmering through black lace shawls, little-girl ribbon sashes, transparent neckerchiefs that come adrift over bare breasts. Boys wearing shoulder curls, long-skirted coats, and fitted silk suits with lace cuffs, even when taking grandmother a bouquet, now seem inappropriately dressed. Grandmother, although it is her birthday, has been knitting a child’s stocking.

The French Revolutionary interest in the Noble Savage, when added to downright fear of being recognized as an aristocrat, led to simplification of the elaborate, overdecorated styles of the French court. The great English designers the brothers Adam had traveled and reported on classical archaeology. Excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum from the 1750s onward interested designers and artists like Piranesi. Henry Moses may not have expected any English family to go quite this far in adapting the costume and decorative art suitable to the hot sunny climate of Greece: he is simply cramming into this fashion plate everything he can think of in a classical guise—except the man.

Incroyable, by Horace Vernet (1789-1863), French. Plate 14 from Les Incroyables et les Merveilleuses de 1814 (Paris, about 1815). Etching by Gatine, hand colored, 14½ x 9¼ inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 24.18

The simplification of fussy eighteenth-century styles was not necessarily linked with a desire for comfort. This man may be practically and comfortably dressed in his leather breeches and gaiters, but his ill-fitting coat, high stiff vest collar, and cravat make present-day relaxed Americans inspire to contemplate. His umbrella, his gloves, and the stripe in his silk vest are a matched green. His social status (post-Revolutionary) is not immediately recognizable, as was that of the Man of Quality in the picture on page 141; his enormous watch chain and key are vulgarly ostentatious, and the telescope protruding from his pocket suggests that he is watching horses.

This ball gown, shown front and back, is a good example of the fashion of shape and line. The details are important but subservient, unlike those of many eighteenth-century ball gowns in which the ribbons and lace blurred the outline. Here in 1836 is displayed the bell-shaped skirt, the tiny waist, and the large sleeves of the period. The feet in their flat slippers are shown below the bouffant skirt worn over petticoats.


In Paris today, just as in 1824, one finds the girls who work, especially those in the fashion trades, often more beautifully dressed and up to the minute than the wealthy customers who can afford to wear what they please whether it is suitable or not. The elegance of this simple dress covered by the long practical black apron makes the most of the charm of this wigmaker, who displays false curls on a ribbon like the ones she herself is wearing.

Pretending to be a street scene, this is really a fashion poster. Fashion models are often shown in a famous as well as attractive setting, like Rockefeller Center, Central Park, or even the Museum itself. London fashions for the winter of 1843-1844 are shown in front of the Horse Guards with a view of Nelson’s Column (finished later that same year) being erected in the background. The exaggerated and unnatural poses of several of the figures were drawn to display the way the clothing was made, not to start a trend in posture or the poses of models. Although B. Read & Co. published these fashions in London, they also were publishing them for “Broad Way, New York, America.”


Just how important the fabric manufacturer is in the creation of fashion is often forgotten by the casual shopper. The invention of the cotton gin and the development of spinning and weaving machines in the Industrial Revolution helped to make cotton dresses cheap and popular. This picture is a suggestion by a French textile firm for the use of the fabric they were manufacturing in 1865. The cotton skirt is supported from underneath by so large a hoop that one wonders whether the lady with the lilacs ever entered the gazebo.


Not a fashion plate, this etching of Englishwomen pretending to watch the harbor traffic from the canted deck of H.M.S. Calcutta shows the fashions of 1876 in detail. Bustles, tucks, ruffles, pleats, and ribbons contribute to a style with emphasis on the rear of the lady’s figure. Restricted by costumes like this, women were better at watching than at actually participating, and were required to sit bolt upright on the edges of armless chairs. It is no coincidence that the circular upholstered bench or ottoman reached the height of its importance at this period. The Calcutta ladies are more appropriately dressed for indoors in cities, just as the fashionably classical lady in Henry Moses’s chilly English interior (on page 144), with her transparent loose gown worn over almost no underwear, is appropriately dressed for outdoors in the country in some distant and hot climate.

Girl in a Plush Cape. Unknown artist, about 1890. Pen and wash drawing heightened with white, 15¾ x 9¾ inches. The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 53.664.45

Which fashion artist first thought of using an exotic-looking model instead of the standard vacuous pretty one is not known, but it seems to be a twentieth-century idea, and in part an outcome of the use of photography, which has changed the course of fashion illustration. The embroidered fur-trimmed plush cape with its moiré ribbon pussy-cat bow and the rustling silk skirt worn by this innocuous young model contribute their textures to another fashion of shape and outline.
Harder to date to the decade within the twentieth century by fashion than most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prints, this hand-colored lithograph of a 1910 couple dancing the galop shows the almost three-hundred-year survival and development of an idea. When, in the seventeenth century, doublet and hose with cloak were no longer the style and gentlemen found themselves trying to ride horseback in long-skirted coats, tailors solved the problem by splitting the skirt to the waist at the back. Cut away at the front in the eighteenth century, the “tailcoat” survived, and is still worn today for extremely formal occasions by dancers, diners, musicians, and waiters, none of whom is expected to ride horseback on his way home.

**Fashion plate, by Jules David (1868-1892), French. 1891. Watercolor, 11 ¾ x 9 inches. The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 51.578.3**

Robert Benchley remembered his Little Lord Fauntleroy suit with horror as well as humor; these French children in their less pretentious Foreign Legion and sailor costumes probably had fewer complexes than the generation of rugged non-Scottish boys made to wear the kilt. Aside from play costumes—cowboy, Indian, and space suits—children’s clothing today is apt to follow the fashion of comfort and easy maintenance.
A major work of art, this photograph taken at Auteuil in 1911 tells more about how it was to wear this clothing than any fashion drawing could or would. Any occasion that women attend in order to be seen, and that includes a great deal of time in which to do nothing but look and perhaps flirt, will find them making elaborate plans ahead of time. Today's “all-purpose” dress, designed for a day at the office, a cocktail party, and a theater engagement, when compared to an anachronism like a tea gown, for instance, is shown up for what it is, a poor woman's garment – that is, poor in time, if not in servants, space, or finances.
La Toilette Délicieuse, by George Barbier (born 1882), French. 1921. Etching with aquatint, hand colored, 6½ x 4¾ inches. The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 60.628.1

At just what moment the fashion show as we know it today was born is not clear, but it is a natural outcome of a vendeuse showing a customer the possibilities with a live model instead of with a drawing and a bolt of cloth. A style that looks hilarious only to the children—not the grandchildren—of those who wore it, this Siren Suit of 1921 is nevertheless partly inspired by the eighteenth century: the floating side panels are reminiscent of panniers, and the shoes with buckles, the tricorn hat of the client, and the adapted Adam style of the architectural background all show twentieth-century impressions of earlier fashion.

Footbridge, Fifth Avenue, by Martin Lewis (1883-1962), American. 1928. Etching, 9¼ x 11¾ inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 29.7.2

The Fifth Avenue look of 1928 shows short skirts, cloche hats, and waistlines not always successfully kept low on the hips. Stockings, then as now almost totally visible, had stopped being embroidered and colored, and had settled down to varieties of “flesh color.” When legs were again visible after their eclipse in the thirties, the war, which predicated short skirts, made the newly developed nylon stocking at the same time the only kind any woman wanted to wear and the most difficult to buy. The current interest in stockings is obviously due, once again, to their almost complete exposure.