

French and English fashions from the Revolution to the First Empire

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This paper was presented at the conference as a fully illustrated lecture. Unfortunately, it is not practicable to reproduce the relevant illustrations here in the conference proceedings. We nevertheless believe that the following commentary will do much to stimulate the mind's eye to supply the want of images on the page.

The 1780s

When the chemise dress was first seen in a painting exhibited in Paris in 1783 there was scandal. The public were used to their aristocracy with huge powdered wigs and highly decorated silk outfits. The flowing, single-layer, white muslin chemise dress was a revolution in fashion. Looseness in dress had historically been equated with a looseness of morals. And this was the Queen of France! Loose white dresses were only worn by small children or as the first layer of clothing to protect the outer garments from the body's sweat and flakes of skin. Here was the Queen painted in her under-clothes. *Scandal!*

Just as the Queen realised that maybe she had gone too far, the fashionable French ladies also took up this style. But not many in England.

Earlier in the 18th century in England there had been a consensus of opinion on the appropriate clothing for the older woman. The more mature woman should abandon the fripperies of fashion. So, low décolletage, bright colours and over-indulgence in feather and flower trimmings had to be stopped.

Lady Jane Coke remarked (in a letter between 1747 and 1758):

There is not such a thing as a decent old woman left. Everybody curls their hair, shews their neck and wears pink.

(The dawn of middle age at this time was considered to be around 30.)

Around the time of the French Revolution, England was in the middle of the Industrial Revolution. Changes in fashion in England were mostly due to improvements in technology with innovation in the fabric printing and dyeing industry. Coloured printed cottons became cheap and plentiful. Silk was now out as a fashion fabric; cotton was in. This change took hold very quickly due to the practicality of the fabric. The English were well known for their cleanliness. And cotton washed well. It was commented upon by overseas visitors that however scruffy and unkempt a man looked, his undershirt was always clean.

Muslin had been an expensive luxury fabric imported from the East. However, after 1785 the price and availability of muslin fell so much that anyone in England could afford it. First, new machines were invented and factories moved into the towns. Secondly, a powder for bleaching fabric was produced. This was a faster and more convenient method than the old ways of prolonged exposure to the sun or boiling with ashes then sour milk. So, from the 1780s white muslin was made into bonnets, kerchiefs, aprons and chemise dresses.

English ladies loved designs based upon their side-saddle riding habits. These outfits were smart, warm and easy to move around in. Fitted wool jackets with separate skirts and petticoat were worn for over 30 years. The fullness at the side and back was padded out with oval bum pads, and corsets underneath pushed the bust upwards and outwards. A muslin scarf was tucked in at the neckline, thereby emphasising the chest. This unique body shape with exaggerated bust and bum was inevitably hilariously satirised.

Known as the 'English Style', this fashion swept through Europe and everyone incorporated it into their wardrobes. They admired the understated elegance and the use of high-quality English cloth and increasingly high standards of tailoring. It even penetrated into Paris, which had been the centre of the European fashionable world. Madame de la Tour du Pin recalled that in 1787:

It was very fashionable ... for the ladies to wear very elegant riding dress, the skirt slightly shorter than that normally used for riding. It was essential that this dress, including the hat, should come from London, the vogue for English fashions being just then at the height of extravagance. As a result I looked quite English.

As for men, in the mid-eighteenth century the fashion-conscious male had been a 'Macaroni' (a term first used in England in 1764 and derived from the Italian dish introduced by men returning from the Grand Tour.) The term soon, however, became derogatory, as the general population saw Macaronis as fashion victims. Some also felt it to be unpatriotic to copy foreign fashions. Indeed, such effeminacy was seen as a threat to the nation's security. For in such perilous times how could the country be defended by people such as these? So, men started to adopt the English country gentleman look, as though they had just got down from a horse. Fashionable day breeches

were of tan and beige so at a distance in town or countryside men looked half naked.

About 1786 the sword disappeared – though it continued to be worn with Court dress for very many years. The tricorne also ceased to be worn, as the English top hat was invented.

At English balls men's dress was very simple. The well-dressed man wore a new coat for every ball, but always in a dull-coloured plain cloth, worn with black breeches and silk stockings. The country squire look was so fashionable that even spurs and boots were seen at balls.

(Whilst talking of balls, there is a Highland dance called *Seann Truibhas*, which translates as "old pants". It commemorates the repealing in 1782 of the Disarming Act of 1746, which had prevented the Scots from wearing kilts. This dance has lots of leg shakes that denote shaking off breeches to wear the kilt again. And, of course, for Highland men this meant tartan. The importance of this is that little tartan hats, tartan dress trimmings and tartan stockings would become fashionable in France after Napoleon had set up his Empire.)

Parisian men copied Englishmen's riding clothes. In admiration they wore striped stockings and even allowed English words to enter the French language. The best-known example is the riding coat, which became the 'redingote'. A major difference between the French and English, though, was that Englishmen wore their hats on their heads, whereas the French carried them under the arm so as not to spoil the hair-do.

The 1790s

In the 1790s England was in the middle of war with France, so in theory the fashionable were cut off from Paris, the centre of European fashion. In actual fact, however, French fashions were available all over London, and from there they were transported to all parts of the UK. *Émigrés* from the revolution were selling off unwanted items of dress. Because their clients had left, dressmakers and hairdressers and corset-makers also left Paris to make a living elsewhere. Moreover, many French fashion industry workers opened shops and warehouses in London and kept them stocked with fashionable goods regularly imported from back home. At the same time, those aristocrats still living in Paris were selling off their extravagancies as an egalitarian gesture, while English traders still travelled overseas to purchase them.

After 1790, both wigs and powder were becoming more and more old-fashioned, reserved for older more conservative men and for ladies being presented at court. The last straw occurred in 1795 when the Tory Prime Minister Pitt put a tax on hair powder. Those that did pay their one guinea for the licence to wear powder raised the sum of £210,136 in the first year. They were known as guinea pigs. By 1800 the fashion for wigs and for powder was dead. In France the

association of powdered wigs with the aristocracy caused the fashion for both to evaporate during the Terror of 1793.

After 1795, due to the influx of French people, Revolutionary classically-styled high-waisted dresses were adopted by fashionable ladies in England. Nevertheless, the English did it their way and the dresses were much fuller all round. English ladies did not wear the skimpy, often sleeveless dresses of their enemies in France.

Also from about 1795 fashionable English women discarded their traditional white cap in favour of *bandeaux*, in imitation of classical statues. The *bandeau* according to the April 1794 edition of 'The Gallery of Fashion' was:

three yards of white satin, formed into a *bandeau*, turned up behind, and mixed in easy fold with the curls.

Feathers were fashionable, and for Court were mandatory. Few Englishwomen followed the French route of having their hair cut short with ringlets, then into short curls, then even shorter, a couple of inches all over, copying the hairstyle of Napoleon himself. This was going too far for the sensitivities of English ladies.

For men in the 1790s modern country styles took over completely from previous 18th-century dress. Buckles, ruffles and hair powder were out; pantaloons, cropped and unruly hair, and shoe-laces came in. Around 1793 to 1795 breeches became longer, reaching to the calf and were of leather or knitted silk or wool. Breeches of buckskin, once worn only by servants or ruffians, were now part of the more countrified, relaxed, style of dress. Braces came into general use just before 1790, to help cultivate the 'no-wrinkle' look.

The fashion for wearing clothes that showed your political alignment was usual in France at this time, but it also occurred in England. If a man supported the Tories he would wear a powdered wig and a scarlet waistcoat. If he sympathised with the Whigs and Fox, he wore a yellow waistcoat and carried a large red-fox muff. These waistcoats were very short and cut straight across the waist. They were known as Newmarket waistcoats being originally favoured by the racing fraternity.

The double-breasted riding coat sported an orgy of large revers, sometimes contrastingly coloured and sometimes in two fabrics. The long coat was cut away to be very short at the front revealing the waistcoat. Coats for men and women could be right- or left-hand buttoned, depending upon the whim of the tailor. The watch was carried in the trouser pocket with the chain and fob dangling. A German visitor (Dr Frederick Augustus Wenderborn) got rather concerned about the range of modes and vogues in dress in England in 1791, because it made such demands on his wardrobe. He wrote:

In former times, people of some consequence and

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fortune thought themselves to appear very decently, if they had every year a new suit of cloaths but at present three or more are annually required by a man in the middling station of life, who wishes to make what is called only a decent appearance. Besides the fashions alter in these days so much, that a man can hardly wear a coat two months before it is out of fashion. No wonder, therefore, that the clothiers find that the demand of their manufactures has increased, and they can even raise the price of them without exciting murmur. These frequent changes of fashion, in regard to dress and furniture, are a great support of British manufactures.

After the execution of the King in January 1793 Paris was closed to anyone with English sympathies. So, fashions in the two countries diverged. It became dangerous to be seen in the streets of Paris in rich clothes. Extreme fashions developed as the outward show of political sympathies (and because people were still obsessed with fashion). Motifs of the revolution included shoe buckles in the form of the towers of the Bastille, tricolour hat decorations in wool, not silk, and semi-precious jewellery (since patriotic women had given their real jewels to the government).

All sorts of strange fashions developed for men. In the 1790s the Incroyables dressed in oversized coats and oversized cravats. When out at a public dance, the Muscadins who were political activists, were allocated a separate changing room so that their skin-tight flesh-coloured breeches could be changed several times during the evening. And a new shocking habit developed 'of men indecently keeping their hands in their breeches pockets'. With such tight breeches, bulges in pockets did indeed look indecent. Hair was short and (to us) more natural looking. At one point it was so politically suspect to appear elegant that even cleanliness was felt to be counter-revolutionary.

The Third Estate, the bourgeois, wore the English style of dress. No plumes, no lace, no sword and a plain suit for men and women of black or dark blue coats and immaculate white linen – the style promoted by Beau Brummell. Women's clothes had reduced fabric in them and were known by names such as 'the egalitarian'.

When life settled down again in Paris, aristocratic émigrés returned from England. They brought English fashions back such as Riding Suits, English-style jackets and skirts and velvet jockey caps. These were worn alternately with whatever was politically expedient at the time – turbans, oversized white peasant bonnets or whatever.

At Court, however, dress was very different. When Josephine and her friends first went to Milan, in 1796, the locals were shocked.

The arrangement of their hair is a scandal – sown with flowers and feathers, and the whole crowned with little military helmets from which locks of untidy hair escape...arms, bosoms, shoulders...all are uncovered. They even have the effrontery to dress in tunics revealing legs and thighs barely covered by flesh-coloured tights. Their manners match their clothes:

arrogant talk, provocative looks and meat eaten on Fridays.

However, the Milanese ladies were soon outdoing the French in daring French manners.

Hair styles changed continually. At one time blond wigs were popular. Then blue or violet ones were worn. The press condemned this practice. The *Journal de Paris* reminded its readers that the wigs were made from the hair of people who had been taken to the guillotine: victims' hair was cropped just before they entered the death cart.

The early 1800s

In France the materials used for dresses for the day and for the evening were similar. Bonaparte liked Josephine to dress in white – so this became the women's court uniform. However, other colours were acceptable. When one of his sisters was pregnant she went to a ball in black velvet. To one ball Josephine wore a dress of pink rose petals; each petal with a diamond in it.

In the intervals between fighting, the English rushed back to France to see what was happening. They were always astonished at the fashions that had emerged. In 1802 'the gross display of bosom' was deplored. Fanny Burney was warned by her French dressmaker that she would be stared at in the streets if she continued to wear her 6 petticoats and her old-fashioned corset.

French fashions continued to filter into England. By 1800 English dresses were made in one piece instead of being a gown and petticoat. Jane Austen described a dinner party she attended in a country house in January 1801. The hostess, the wife of a Colonel,

was at once expensively and nakedly dress'd; we have had the satisfaction of estimating her Lace and Muslin; she said too little to afford us much other amusement.

In 1802 a day dress was described as being in two layers. The top dress was of broderie anglaise with an underdress of pink satin, worn with a matching hat with tufts of rose-pink feathers. As usual with high fashion, classical imitation fashion was ridiculed: 'The Mirror of Graces' by 'a lady of distinction' (1811) comments:

to wear gossamer dresses, with bare necks and naked arms in a hard frost has been the mode in this country... [This causes the young to] lay themselves open to the untimely ravages of rheumatisms, palsies, consumption and death.

The English, always a practical nation, were the first to wear the Pelisse (the coat-dress).

For the ordinary Frenchman in the early 1800s fashions still came from England. Men now wore trousers during the day. These trousers had been part of boys' outfits that had been specially designed for them in 1770. Having stopped wearing little white dresses at about 4 or 5, boys were 'breeched' – put into loose ankle-length trousers buttoned to their shirt

(called a skeleton suit). These were similar to the ones traditionally worn by sailors, that is, sailor suits. Peasants wore trousers; everyone was equal; therefore all men should wear trousers. And, over 200 years later, sailor suits are still sometimes worn by children.

Beau Brummell in England invented the under-foot stirrup so that there would be no creases. Trousers were not, however, allowed at balls nor at Court for very many years to come.

1804-14: The First Empire

French fashions were now no longer influenced by the English. Napoleon decided that new fashions must be developed in all aspects of art to reflect the new politics. He asked artists to design new revolutionary clothes. And he set up new fashion magazines to promote his novel clothing trends. Napoleon saw himself as the King of the Empire and the Coronation clothes in 1804 were specially designed to reflect this fact. The whole family were decked out in outfits devised by the Court painter, Isabey, and made by Leroy, to be luxurious and symbolic. Visual extravagance at Court was now essential. Clothes must be rich, sumptuous, of more luxurious fabrics and heavily embroidered.

European history influenced French Court designers and also Josephine, who led the fashionable classes. The Bayeux Tapestry was exhibited in Paris in 1803. Influenced by this, designers and dress-makers incorporated medieval elements such as slashed and puffed sleeves, large amounts of embroidery, and velvet. The jewelled band worn low over the forehead was derived from a painting by Leonardo da Vinci. Josephine however favoured the distinctly later styles of Elizabeth I. So, after 1804 there were square necklines as well as the ruff, trimmings of ermine, little hats trimmed with an ostrich feather and long delicate veils. Scotland was an additional influence, as Scottish paintings and poems were loved by Napoleon and Josephine. Thus, dresses could also have tartan trims and decorations, and little hats were sometimes of tartan.

Men in France were very fashion-conscious, and creases in clothes would not do. Men of all shapes and

sizes wore corsets under their shirts. Crumpled cravats were out and men left heaps of them on the floors of their dressing-rooms before the perfect, uncreased, tie had been successfully made. And if the figure was not perfect, then falsies were worn to make chests and shoulders look more manly and to improve the fit of the tailored garment. False calves, false bums and shoulder padding were in.

Fashions at balls now diverged between the two countries. In England men wore tailcoats in plain dark blue or black – a fashion that has led to the formal black suit of the 19th and 20th centuries. In complete contrast, in France court balls were often held in historic-style dress, based on a particular incident. Bonaparte insisted that clothing was always to be bright and glittering. Ball gowns in France were ankle-length; in England trains were still worn. Europe preferred the English style.

War with France promoted some useful innovations. For example, in 1806 Napoleon proclaimed his intention of going to war with any European country that traded with England. Raw silk from the Continent was now no longer able to reach England to be made into silk sewing thread, used to sew all clothes and also essential for cotton-weaving looms. The brothers Clark of Paisley, Scotland, had the solution—they developed a smooth cotton thread, and the UK continued to weave and sew.

Bibliography

This paper is based upon considerable research in many books, papers, art images and contemporary satires. Those who wish further details of sources are welcome to contact the author, who may be able to locate their origin. The images used to illustrate the original lecture can be consulted by arrangement.

The following is a publication in English concerned specifically with this period:

Aileen Ribeiro, *Fashion in the French Revolution* (Batsford, London, 1988). ISBN: 0 7134 5352 4.

This has a comprehensive and detailed text illustrated with 98 images.