

POMP, POLITICS, & PANIERS: ARISTOCRATIC FASHION OF 18TH CENTURY FRANCE

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Writer's comment: The assignment called me to look beyond physical clothes and accessories to find a deeper significance in fashion. I asked my little sister what I should write on, thinking navel rings or cargo pants would be fun to analyze. However, she bluntly remarked that I was not cool enough to even comprehend such modern dress. Thus, I turned to an era and style with which I was familiar. This essay on aristocratic fashion in 18th Century France stems largely from a most interesting class, History 4B, taught by Professor Kathy Stuart, to whom I owe much thanks. My appreciation also goes to my English 1 professors Anne Fleischmann and Marit MacArthur and my family, especially Jenna for her fashion tips and ballet consultation.

— *Sean Salvatin*

Instructor's comment: Sean wrote this analysis of the cultural significance of clothing for English 1: Expository Writing. The purpose was to explore the relationship between a cultural or historic moment and clothes that were fashionable among a certain group at that time. Narrowing the topic, accessing and assimilating factual information and interpreting the meaning of fashions are the substantial challenges of this assignment. Sean's extensive knowledge of 18th century French history and culture helped him perform the trenchant analysis in this paper. His command of historical fact and detail is remarkable. Notice, too, how source information is expertly cited, enabling the reader to distinguish between Sean's creative and intellectual contributions to the paper and those of the historians on whom he relied for facts. Indeed, the success of this insightful paper lies in its clear and engaging style; strong verbs and clear description make Sean's interpretations of the meanings of French 18th century fashion authoritative and convincing.

— *Anne Fleischmann, English Department*

As evening falls, the candles are lit and soon their tiny flames flood the large ballroom with illumination. The orchestra begins to play a spirited tune, causing bodies to twirl and feet to dance, further accentuating this enchanting scene at the Royal Palace of Versailles. A gallant young man stands alone by the entrance, witnessing the number of couples animated by the lively melody. After a while, his eyes turn away from that spectacle and focus on a certain mademoiselle chatting with other ladies of the court. At first glance, her extravagant gown immediately grabs his attention. He fancies that she looks like a purple star. Her box-shaped petticoat and flowing skirt and train reflect the candlelight, and the many embroidered roses appear to bloom on a meadow of purple satin. Her corset-like bodice, containing almost as many ruffles and bows as her skirt, tightly hugs her torso to give the appearance of a slim waist and a large chest. A delicate string of pearls, gracefully resting just above her bosom, draws the gentleman's gaze to the dress' low cut neckline. His eyes then travel to her pale arms emerging from the lace ruffles of her elbow-length sleeves. Her slender fingers grasp an open fan, an accessory to complement the outfit. As far as her mysterious admirer can estimate, the lady's hair must stand at least three feet in the air. Undoubtedly her pompadour headdress with its purple feathers, beads, and flowers is the crowning glory upon this visual marvel.

After his eyes had absorbed the sight of this fair mademoiselle, the young courtier stands gathering the courage to ask if she and her outfit would like to dance. Unbeknownst to him, the topic of conversation among this same lady and her friends is in fact the solitary m'sieur by the entrance. A nonchalant glance in his direction reveals to her the image of a young nobleman, an obvious equal in fashion. She admires his overall slender appearance and elegant features. First, high-heeled, square-toed shoes increase his height by at least two inches. Tight-fitting silk breeches cling to his thighs; and white stockings expose his calves, perhaps the most sensual body parts of the French male. His red vest, embroidered with silver fleur-de-lis, matches the design of his similarly tight-fitting coat. The arms of the coat, with cuffs of stiff lace, extend to the wrist. Mademoiselle cannot see the shirt of the approaching m'sieur because a lace scarf called a cravat encircles his neck and flows down the front of his vest. Nor can she see his real hair for beneath his low, feathered, three-cornered hat, is a wig of long, brown curls that fall past the shoulders and give added height to the head. As the lady is led to the dance floor by the hand of her admirer, she notices one last accessory of his outfit. At his side, an intricately decorated foil hangs, not for use as a weapon but as a fashion ornament.

The Palace of Versailles was the setting for many scenes like this fictional scenario. Here the wealthy and influential members of the French elite gathered to socialize and admire what others wore on these occasions. The garments of the hypothetical m'sieur and mademosille derive from composites of period styles pictured and described in *The History of Costume* written by Blanch Payne, Geitel Winakor, and Jane Farrell-Beck. The clothes for both men and women visually emphasized the slenderness of the body and flamboyancy of the garments. These qualities that characterized 18th Century aristocratic fashion correlated to the political ideologies and egos of the French monarchs. In other words, foreign and domestic affairs influenced the royal family's perception of themselves and French society; this in turn affected much of what the upper-class deemed as fashionably vogue.

The 18th Century began with the rule of perhaps history's largest ego. King Louis XIV reigned over France with outrageous pomp and pageantry; thus he well deserved the title, "The Sun King" (Bruckler et al. 536). As the monarch and sovereign, he symbolized France, her people, and her greatness, which he tried to exemplify in his demeanor and appearance. This Sun of France shined in an attempt to unify the country under his light. France's social stability was a major concern for him because when Louis inherited the throne, he also inherited a fragmented country divided by religious and political factions.

Louis XIV wanted to centralize France's power in the monarchy, thus threatening the practically autonomous rule of the nobility who held positions of power at the local level (Stuart 27 May 1999). Both sides in this power struggle used religion to justify their cause, and what ensued is known as the French Religious Civil War (Stuart 27 May 1999). Many of the younger aristocrats resented the king and converted from the state religion of Catholicism to Protestant Calvinism in defiance (Stuart 27 May 1999). The Roman Catholic monarchy did all they could to squelch the rebellious and heretical aristocrats.

This was the state of political division and social instability that confronted Louis XIV. He sought to consolidate all political, military, religious, and social power, to forge a united France with him as the figurehead (Stuart 27 May 1999). Thus he ushered in the age of absolutism, in which the monarch assumed the divine nature of a demigod and exercised ultimate control over the state and its people (Stuart 27 May 1999). Louis defined the theme for this movement in his blunt statement, "*L'état, c'est moi*," "I am the state" (Stuart 27 May 1999). To help bring stability and unity to French society and politics, Louis XIV made himself the national symbol of France. He then chose outfits that reflected this self-image of splendor, magnificence, power, and glory. He wore expensive furs, silks, and lace woven together with gold and silver thread to display the wealth of France. The tight-fit of his vest, breeches, and coat displayed the muscular physique and physical strength of Louis, the embodiment of France. His high-heeled shoes and tall, yet flowing wig created the illusion of height which emphasized the king's dominant status. Elaborate cuffs and cravats further highlighted symbolic parts of the monarch's body. The large cuffs aided in displaying the mighty hands of the king which he used to govern France; the cravats accentuated his royal head, used to contemplate political strategies and philosophical questions. These fashion statements soon caught on with members of the court or old aristocracy that remained loyal to the King and to the Catholic Church (Stuart 27 May 1999).

Another of Louis' expressions called for "*un roi, une loi, une foi*" - "one king, one law, one faith" (Stuart 1 June 1999). The French monarchy, under the influence of absolutism, wanted to unify the country under the cloak of Roman Catholicism. In 1685, King Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, which established religious toleration; in doing so, he mandated the practice of Catholicism and the expulsion of Huguenots, French Calvinists, who refused to convert (Bruckler et al. 541). Thus court costume began to reflect not only the glory and power of the state, but also the supremacy of the Church. Members of the royal elite were walking cathedrals; their clothes embodied the glory of their Catholic faith. Architects built ornate and gigantic churches to transform the might and glory of God into a tangible reality of stone and marble that the faithful could touch and physically enter into the presence of. Likewise, the king had similar intentions when he chose what to wear; his extravagant clothes and artificial height served to imitate the architectural grandeur of cathedrals. The visual impact of Louis XIV, like that of Notre Dame, inspired both awe and fear in the hearts of people, as well as a sense of smallness when compared to such an overbearing figure.

The Catholic hierarchy took the king's lead (or perhaps his order) and fully supported this forceful advocate of the faith. Bishop Jacques-Benigne Bossuet established the idea of the Divine Right of Kings (Stuart 27 May 1999). He wrote that "the person of kings is sacred, and to move against them is sacrilege....Majesty is the image of the greatness of God in the prince" (Bossuet 5-7). Bossuet preached that God appointed the king and bestowed him with heavenly powers (Stuart 27 May 1999). This self-image undoubtedly served to inflate Louis' ego and was reflected in the pomp of his attire and court ritual. One can easily visualize this king of France as a commanding figure in heels and a large wig, wearing ornate garments to exemplify the grandeur of his reign and of the French nation. Clothed in splendor, strength, and piety, the king sought to perpetuate the reality of his Divine Right and status as, according to Bossuet, a "[god] of flesh and blood" (Bossuet 5-7). He wore authority on his body; his clothes demanded respect and obedience to the king who wore them.

The peacock image of King Louis XIV not only affected what the nobility wore, but also how they acted. The Holy Mass and other religious services consisted of elaborately and richly dressed clerics performing sacred rituals. These rituals and ceremonies were like choreographed dances. The faithful took their cues from centuries of tradition; when to sit, when to stand, when to genuflect, when to kneel, when to respond, etc. Yet another type of ritual existed for the French elite, the pageantry and pomp of court life. At the Palace of Versailles, the actions of people in any given social situation corresponded to their dress and rank. For example, many poses were based on ballet positions, so court life could actually be likened to a rehearsed dance complete with appropriate costumes and choreography (Green 94). When talking amongst his peers, a nobleman stood with his hands on the hips in the second ballet position; his feet firmly planted slightly wider than shoulder length apart and turned out (Etiquette: Manners & Movements 1). While in the presence of a man of higher status, he brought his feet together in the third position: one foot is placed behind the other to form a right angle; the heel of the forward foot touches the back foot at the arch formed by the instep (Etiquette: Manners & Movements 1). One hand touched the sword around the gentleman's waist and he placed the other on the top of his walking stick (Etiquette: Manners & Movements 1). With such rules for refined behavior in mind, the visual function of clothes was clear: to accentuate the slender and graceful curves and straight lines of the body. The fitted breeches and stockings and snug jackets of men, which displayed the elongated legs and the elegant movements of the arms, exemplified this purpose of fashion.

The elegant movements of men similarly compared to the balletic motions of fencing (Green 94). However, women and their attire more explicitly demonstrated the connection between clothes and the associated actions of grace and civility. The bodice exaggerated the lines of the torso and curves of the breasts. To further elongate these lines, an aristocratic woman held her arms pressed against her stomach just below the chest; she delicately and deliberately placed them there, slightly to the side and crossed at the wrists (Green 101-102). If this woman did not have a particularly tiny waist, strategic arm and hand placement, combined with the choice of dress, created the illusion of slenderness (Green 102-105). Women skillfully used such delicate and graceful arm and hand movements, *port de bras* in actual ballet terms, while holding props like a fan to thus enhance their appearance by accentuating the curves and lines of their bodies. The rules of etiquette even regulated the most mundane of activities such as how a woman operated a fan. The proper technique of fanning first involved holding the fan away from one's face (Etiquette: Manners & Movements 2). Then the arm lowers and the wrist swiftly turns so that the fan points perpendicular to the ground (Etiquette: Manners & Movements 2). In a fluid motion, the wrist snaps the fan to its upright position and the arm raises (Etiquette: Manners & Movements 2). The woman then continues this rhythmic movement with the grace and dexterity as that of a bird flapping its wings. Indeed, French women considered the fan to be "the most important accessory," a weapon wielded with such skill in "'battles' of love and conversation" (Etiquette: Manners & Movements 2).

Such examples of acceptable court behavior and appearance often varied over time yet remained numerous and difficult to remember. However, do such rituals have any connection with 18th Century French politics? The director behind this aristocratic ballet was King Louis XIV himself. He placed the aristocratic class under his control, not by force but with a system of rank that appealed to their desire for honor. He gained their submission by incorporating such rules of conduct and movement in the wearing of clothes in a calculated attempt to domesticate the independent nobility (Stuart 1 June 1999, Bruckler et al. 537). Louis XIV again used fashion as an instrument of pacification by creating a limited number of fancy waistcoats called *justacorps a brevet* which only male royalty and a few nobles that the king selected could wear (Saint-Simon 5-6). All the courtier men at Versailles would do their best to impress the king so that one noble might fall out of Louis' favor and another would have the honor of wearing the coveted *justacorps a brevet* (Saint-Simon 6).

The King also wanted to keep all potential enemies close to him at the Palace of Versailles to monitor their actions. In order to enforce the nobles' loyalty and reverence merited by his divine nature, Louis XIV established a system of rewards as part of his daily routine. His day began at 8:30am with the levee ritual, the ceremonious dressing of the king (A Day with the Sun King 1). What courtier would not consider it a great privilege to shave the royal face or to assist the Officers of the Chamber and the Wardrobe by holding the king's cravat? (A Day with the Sun King 1). All in all, exactly 100 favored noblemen would enter the king's bedchamber every morning to prepare him for the day (A Day with the Sun King 1). The entire levee lasted about two hours; after all, simply undressing Louis required three people: one person to hold the king's nightcap, and two to hold the sleeves of his nightdress while he was stripped (Jantzen et al. 409). Thus, court status was determined by how close a courtier came to the king, and this included the proximity to his person and to his clothes. King Louis XIV, not wanting his Catholic nobles to revolt, structured court life, including etiquette, in an attempt to place the aristocrats under his control. What marquis could have time to even think about rebellion or Calvinist dogma when concerns of how to stand and the proper way to hold a cane occupied his mind? Also, people tended to act more subdued when in glamorous, yet uncomfortable clothes that restricted free movement. Their fancy appearance, balletic gestures, and adherence to etiquette were more conducive to compliance than dissent, especially when the French elite wore their elegant clothes with great pomp to frequent parties and ceremonious state affairs.

King Louis XIV used clothing to embody the French state in the eyes of his subjects; his main concern being domestic stability. However, another royal figure used fashion to represent the country on an international level. Towards the end of the 18th Century, nearly all foreign eyes intently watched France and its Austrian-born queen, Marie-Antoinette (Marie-Antoinette 1). This political figure gained worldwide attention for a style and flair that other European aristocrats soon adopted. She helped to popularize a towering hairdo that required hours with the hairdresser who incorporated real flowers in vases, little dolls, strings of beads, and feathers into the hair (Farrell-Beck et al. 434). These vertical hair sculptures, combined with high-heeled shoes, gave women an overbearing, dominant presence. This presence of superiority had political significance, for it enforced France's importance and influence in international relations. Foreign eyes that gazed at France saw its women as the incarnations of the country's political power and the monarchy's greatness. The extravagant appearance of women, especially their shocking hair creations, led other Europeans to believe that France had the luxury to spend time and money on flamboyant hairdos. Foreigners then reasonably inferred that such displays of self-confidence must be derived from a militarily secure and economically prosperous state. Women also used their hair as a form of political expression. One mademoiselle, to honor an American naval victory against the British in the Revolutionary War, had a replica of a battleship placed on her head which floated on a sea of blue hair (Farrell-Beck et al. 434).

Possibly in an attempt to appear more French, Marie-Antoinette wore an obtrusive hoop-like skirt that horizontally extended the hip area (Farrell-Beck et al. 426). This style, reportedly made popular by a famous French ballerina, was vogue among the courtier women at Versailles, the aristocratic peers of France's Austrian queen (Farrell-Beck et al. 410). A device called paniers, French for the baskets that hung on the sides of donkeys, created this widening effect (Farrell-Beck et al. 410-411). This garb transformed women into centaur-like creatures; the top half was human, the bottom half was more architecture than clothing. Truly, this type of skirt exaggerated a woman's hips and lower body to the extent of gross deformation. As structures, the paniers, petticoat, and skirt surrounded the female body, acting as barriers that visually protected a woman's virginity from the carnal intentions of men. Also, a male suitor who desired physical intimate relations would have found such acts nearly impossible without the lady's consent and her assistance in removing this cumbersome outfit. Thus on a political level, the paniers of French women signified to the world that France had the military and political strength as well as the piety to repel

any foreign country which tried to rape her resources or take advantage of her political position. Foreign swords would never penetrate the borders of France and Protestant seed would not contaminate the purity of the Catholic womb. A lady and country that wore paniers demanded respect for chastity and might in resisting unwanted advances.

The relationship between fashion and politics played a significant role in French society, especially in the lives of the aristocrats. The monarchy not only created legal codes, but they also set standards for dress and appearance. Louis XIV and Marie-Antoinette both used their external looks to symbolize France and to achieve political goals. Louis sought to embody the power of the Church and State in an attempt to unify his fragmented country; he also established rules of etiquette to pacify the nobles. On the other hand, Marie-Antoinette represented the political and economic strength of France in the international arena. These two royal figures wore the fabric of an entire nation on their backs, reflecting the state of French politics and society in the 18th Century. Certainly, their choice of wardrobe had the effect of a tactful political maneuver.

Yet, the glory of France was not the only design on the monarchy's dress; their inflated egos of self-righteousness and superiority were also woven into their garments. During this time of social and religious revolution, the royal family maintained such pompous attitudes to create a sense of stability in their encapsulated world at Versailles. Their extravagant dress thus shielded them from the world outside the palace, for wearing a more modest outfit would signify acceptance of their own superficial insecurities and human limitations. The grandeur and flamboyance of aristocratic fashion and the many ornate accessories served to reduce a feeling of vulnerability, which would have accompanied the realization that even the king was mortal, simply a man with a crown. With each extravagant cloak or expensive piece of jewelry they put on, a sense of strength and self-importance fortified the royal hearts that surely must have been filled with fears and uncertainties. To hide the weakness of their naked bodies, French monarchs clothed themselves in the garb of authority and the dress of glory as a testament to the power of fashion.

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