



Re-assessing Late Directoire Dress for Women in 1797-1799 Paris

Anne Bissonnette, PhD, University of Alberta, Canada

Keywords: Directoire, late 1790s, *merveilleuses*

Women's Directoire fashions have often been stereotyped to the sheer, white, short-sleeved gown with an elevated waistline and columnal silhouette. Using Paris' *Journal des Dames et des Modes (JDM)* from its inception on May 20, 1797 (middle of Year 5 of the republican calendar), to September 22, 1799 (end of Year 7), this research examines 145 fashion plates and their editorial descriptions to measure the incidence of these phenomena. It explores a series of paradigm shifts occurring in women's dress and gives a different assessment of fashion in this highly influential environment that was observed outside the city's boundaries.

Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study remarks on the propensity historians have to move from one distinct phase to another and questions the use of individual plates without their contextualization within a greater corpus. Addressing strengths and limitations of fashion plates and using examples from the *JDM*, what is normative is compared to marginal and emerging dress behaviors. In doing so, the use of fabrics in a variety of colors, stylistic elements present in a diversity of co-existing silhouettes and the emergence of body parts and contours help to define the late 1790s as a period of immense variance. In light of these findings, *JDM* plates are compared with depictions of *merveilleuses*, a minority group that often dominates the conversation about Directoire dress.

Evidence will debunk the Directoire archetype by demonstrating that the overall aesthetic of late-1790s dress is neither sheer nor monochrome. If more women are depicted with long sleeves until the end of Year 6 and the short-sleeved gown cinched below the bust reached half the fashionable women only by Year 7—the final year of the five year Directoire span—it is essential to go beyond stereotypes to understand fashion at this place and time of rapid social and political changes. This abundantly illustrated study will offer a different perspective and will bring greater nuance to address normative dress behaviors of this period of transition.

Bibliography

- Davidson, Denise Z. “Making Society ‘Legible’: People-Watching in Paris after the Revolution.” *French Historical Studies* 28, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 265-296.
- Delpierre, Madeleine. “Petite chronologie d’une révolution dans la mode.” In *Modes & Révolutions 1780-1804*, 11-18. Paris: Edition Paris-Musées, 1989.
- Jones, Jennifer. “Coquettes and Grisettes: Women Buying and Selling in Ancien Régime Paris.” In *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, eds. Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, 25–53. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996.
- Kleinert, Annemarie. *Le « Journal des dames et des modes » ou La Conquête de l'Europe Féminine (1797-1839)*. Stuttgart, Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 2001.
- Pellerin, Nicole. *Les vêtements de la liberté: abécédaire des pratiques vestimentaires françaises de 1780 à 1800*. Aix-en-Provence : Éditions Aliné, 1989.
- Ribeiro, Aileen. *Fashion in the French Revolution*. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1988.
- Roche, Daniel. “Apparences révolutionnaires ou révolution des apparences.” In *Modes & Révolutions 1780-1804*, 105-127. Paris: Edition Paris-Musées, 1989.
- Ros Altman, Sandra. *Past Patterns #038: A Partially Boned Transition Stay Drafted from the Original at the Connecticut Historical Society, circa 1793-1820*. Dayton, Ohio: Past Patterns, 2009.
- Vigarello, Georges. *Histoire de la beauté: Le corps et l'art d'embellir de la Renaissance à nos jours*. Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 2004.