

# THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

## 250 YEARS OF COSTUME

1690



Women's clothing has undergone some interesting changes in the past 250 years. The basic shape of garments expands and contracts producing an ever changing silhouette.

As the 18th century began, women were dressing in a more comfortable manner than they had for many years. The basic dress form, the manteau, first appeared in the 1680's as a very loose garment for informal wear. It was pleated front and back at the shoulders and was held by a sash at the waist.

By 1700 the manteau had acquired more styling but still retained the soft, draped look. The neckline was square, and the sleeves were wide, straight, and about three-quarter length. The dress itself was shaped like a long robe, opening down the center front. The skirt was draped from center front, across the sides of the dress and secured center back at waist level. A full skirt was worn underneath. The under skirt hung straight and full, being only slightly wider at the hemline than at the hips.

About 1720 the manteau developed into the more stylized sacque. Its cut was similar to the manteau's, except that it hung in a straight line, pleated at the shoulders front and back. The front seam was sometimes open, and sometimes closed. The cuffs on the sleeves now extended above the elbow. The sacque was worn over a hooped petticoat which gave it a full, triangular shape.

The basic sacque form dominated dress design until 1775, with the skirt supplying the element of intermediate change. About 1735 the skirt flattened front and back, and its round shape became oval. Skirts continued to expand in volume until 1760, with most of the fullness added at the sides. This gave the skirt an almost rectangular shape.

By 1760 the front of the bodice was well fitted, while the back of the dress still hung in pleats straight to the hem.

1660



1710



1720-



1740-50

1760

1780



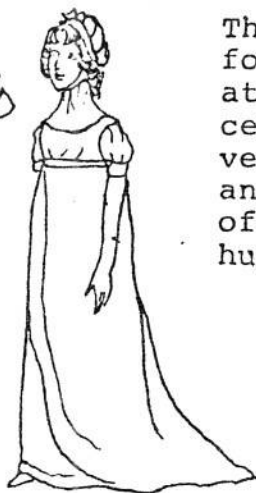
During the last quarter of the 18th century the dress silhouette began to change again. By 1780 the back pleats of the dress were eliminated, the bodice was well fitted, and the sleeves were cut straight and tight. The skirt had deflated and now hung in full, soft folds.

By 1790 a new style developed called the "round robe." This garment was high-waisted and fastened in the front. The skirt was still quite full, being gathered in the front and pleated in the back. A small pad was worn in the center of the back to keep the fullness from "caving in" at the small of the back.

1795

The American and French revolutions created enthusiasm for the democratic society of ancient Greece. This attitude was reflected in the clothing of the early 19th century. By 1800 the silhouette had collapsed to a vertical line. Short straight sleeves, low neck lines and a waist level just under the bust were characteristics of the new style gown. Skirts had no fullness but rather hung close to the body revealing it's form.

1800



By 1815 the dress was developing a more solid form. Petticoats were again being worn to give the dress a fuller shape. The waist, although still high, had started to ease back down toward a more natural position. Still short and now quite puffed, the sleeves were often worn with a longer sleeve underneath. The skirt shortened to ankle length and was embellished with heavy, three-dimensional decoration around the lower third.

1820

By 1825 the dress acquired the shape of two triangles with the top one inverted. Wide shoulders were completely covered by a large collar. Sleeves were tight below the elbow and quite large above it. The skirt had no fullness across the front, but instead was gathered around the sides and back. Skirts acquired more fullness until, by 1830, they were bell-shaped and worn slightly above the ankles. The upper sleeves had also expanded to the point where they needed support pads.

1830





1835

By 1835 hems brushed the floor. Skirts expanded and were supported by a circular, hooped petticoat called a crinoline. The fullness of the sleeves shifted from shoulder level to just above the elbow, and this created a sloped shoulder look that lasted until about 1860.



1845

By 1850 the lower bodice seamline terminated in angular points front and back, just below the natural waist line. Sleeves flared out straight and wide at the cuffs with an under sleeve often being worn. The look was reminiscent of the 1660's.



1860

The huge round skirt reached its peak in the early 1860's. By 1865 the fullness of the skirt was moving toward the back of the dress. The bodice seamline was now straight, at a point just above the natural waistline.



1870

By 1869 bustles, or petticoats with flounced backs, replaced the crinoline. The dress was now composed of an under- and over-skirt. Often open at the front, the over-skirt was always looped up at the sides as it had been at the beginning of the 18th century. In the early 1870's bodices were often lengthened to include the over skirt.



1880

In 1875 there was a distinct change in style as dress design took on a more compact look. The bodice became longer and fit tightly across the hips. This forced the fullness of the skirt lower and toward the back of the dress. By 1880 the silhouette was vertical with fullness at the back of the dress. The skirt was tightly draped, often including pleats and a train.

1890



The sewing machine had been in general use since the 1860's. Gradually the idea of "ready to wear" clothing had gained respectability. This led to the rise of numerous dress factories, employing thousands of young women workers. As the 19th century drew to a close, women were taking on new roles in society that often included employment outside the home. This led to the development of several different styles of clothing in the 1890's.

1890 clothing had a very trim "tailored" look. The skirt was one length and hung in a smooth line from the waist, totally unsupported except by petticoats. Bodices were more detailed: being heavily boned to give a molded, uncluttered look. Sleeves were long, straight and narrow with a slight puffing top of the shoulder.

1895



Another popular style was the "watteau back" tea gown. These gowns were made of soft fabrics with loose hanging sleeves. The bodice was unboned and had back pleats from the collar to the hem, much like the sacque dress of 1770.

Separate blouses and skirts became acceptable for informal day wear, and were extremely popular with the working women. Blouses were very soft and totally without boning; they had high collars and ruffles down the front. By 1895 the collars were high enough that they needed boning to keep them upright. Sleeves reverted to the full shape popular during the 1830's. Skirts fit smoothly across the front with gathers adding fullness at the sides and back. They were worn with ruffled petticoats to provide fullness at the hem.



1903

By 1900 the silhouette had softened, and the body was corseted to produce the famous "S-curve." The upper body was thrown forward while the lower body was thrust backward. Skirts hung in straight folds to knee level and then gently flared out. Soft, white, "clingy" fabrics were popular again as they had been in 1800. Embroidery was used on borders and trim. Ribbons, ruffles and lace were abundant.





1910

By 1910 the silhouette became much straighter and very reminiscent of the turn of the 19th century. Necklines were much lower and often square. Sleeves were short and straight. The waistline rose up under the bust. The skirt acquired several layers but hung in straight, soft, draped folds. This silhouette appearance continued popularity until the outbreak of World War I. The waistline returned to its natural position by 1916. Skirts were shortened to mid-calf length, and flared at the hem.

Hemlines continued to rise throughout the 1920's until they reached the point just below the knees. Waistlines, meanwhile, continued to drop, stopping at the hips, or in many instances disappearing altogether. Dresses were either sleeveless or had wrist-length, fitted sleeves. Skirts were often pleated or of many fabric layers all of different lengths. No matter how the surface was treated, there was no variance in the flat-chested, pencil straight, silhouette. In the years since 1930 the dress silhouette has continued to expand and contract, repeating the pattern of change that had become established during the previous 250 years' history of women's costume.

1916



1926



1928

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Over the years a number of different period catalogues have been reproduced and provide excellent references. Some of these include:

Sears Roebuck & Co. (1902, 1908, 1930's)

Montgomery Ward & Co. (1894-5)

Marshall Field & Co. (1896)

Lord & Taylor (1881)

If you can find them, some of the best reference sources are the period publications such as Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine; Peterson's Magazine; Harper's Bazar; Ladies Home Journal; etc. These will give information regarding style, cut, patterns, accessories, and how worn.

Most of the sources given will give good general information. The areas that are weakest for reference are shoes, gloves, hats and other accessories. Children's and men's clothing is also limited.