

## Newly Discovered Documents Help to Reconstruct the Purchase of a Lost Princely Wardrobe

Corinne Thépaut-Cabasset<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract:

Passports issued for shipments made to Bavaria between 1680 and 1687 represent an exceptional case study, in which we can envisage the reconstruction of a lost 17<sup>th</sup> century-wardrobe, sent from Paris to Munich. It helps also to learn about the process and the actors who were creating and activating fashion business at that time. This short essay aims to demonstrate how important the research in archives enables dress historians to discover new patterns of knowledge to build the history of *Ancien Regime* clothing culture.

Content: En route for Munich... From Paris to Munich / Purchasing the ruler: the play for an agent at the French court / Living in style: a matter of taste and network

### En route for Munich... From Paris to Munich

Historical studies on the wardrobes of European princes at the end of the 17th century represent an ongoing challenge to the researcher, not only because of the paucity of documents, but especially because of the loss of the garments themselves.

However two separated but related archives resources offers a vivid commentary on luxury goods made in Paris in the 1680s, and is a living testimony that broadens our knowledge of fashion and of the merchants who were working in the capital at that time: French passports and the correspondence of the Bavarian Agent for the Elector in Paris.<sup>2</sup>

The passports were documents that accompanied the merchandise and which controlled every aspect of the shipment. They ensured the safe passage of the merchandise within France and beyond her borders. These administrative papers are extremely rare and they have not been systematically conserved in the archives.<sup>3</sup>

In this instance, the passports issued for shipments made to Bavaria between 1680 and 1687 represent an exceptional case study. The passports are associated with shipments that were carefully monitored and that had received duty-free export licenses granted by special permission from the King of France who signed them.

As the purchase and the shipping of costly luxury goods fell under the surveillance of the royal authorities, they required written permits from these same authorities. A list of merchandise that was inspected by the customs agents was therefore established, then certified and finally sent to the King for his signature. However, these lists did not include the monetary value of the objects enumerated and they do not even indicate a global valuation of the merchandise. The passports had to do with political or police surveillance rather than financial considerations.

While the passports were not concerned with the cost of the merchandise involved, we learn from the letters written in Paris that the exemption from paying the customs duty represented a savings of six percent on the value of the declared objects. This exemption was a royal favor that was restricted to sovereigns, those close to them or their representatives. The exemption was a gesture of good will and was a sort of international obligation, the loss of revenue being borne by the state. It was also sometimes considered as a gift from one sovereign to another. In the case where there was no "royal passport" granting duty-free status, the taxes would to be paid to the *fermiers généraux*.

Once the contents were cleared, the passport guaranteed the securing of the crates, trunks or parcels which were then fastened with lead seals and expedited either by stagecoach or by post. The crates that were sent to the Elector were, for the most part, shipped pre-paid by carriage to Strasbourg where they were received by a local correspondent, most often a banker, and from there sent on to Munich. The writer of the letters in Paris estimates the length of the trip to be 12 days.

### **Purchasing the ruler: the play for an agent at the French court**

The Munich Archives (Geheimes Staatsarchiv) conserve several volumes containing hundreds of letters from the Bavarian subject residing in Paris, Martin Mayr, who was an agent of the court of the Elector for more than fourteen consecutive years.<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 1: Elector Max Emanuel of Bavaria, portrait miniature, Paris, around 1680.  
Munich, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, acc. no. R 3990, photo no. D101037.  
Photo: Walter Haberland.

These letters tell us much about the tasks assigned to this agent and the role he hoped to play in furnishing the Elector's wardrobe. However, the appearance of the sovereign was a sort of "affair of state" that was far too important to entrust to a simple agent and it is doubtless for this reason that Max Emmanuel (fig. 1) preferred to rely upon his sister, the new Dauphine of France, Marie-Anne-Christine of Bavaria (fig. 2), who married Louis XIV's son, the Grand Dauphin, in 1680.<sup>5</sup> The orders placed by Martin Mayr would thus pass through her and through the court network. Most of the time, Mayr's role would be limited to handling the orders and arranging for the expedition of the cargo.



Fig. 2: Princess Marie-Anne-Christine of Bavaria, portrait miniature, Paris, around 1680. Munich, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, acc. no. R 3991, photo no. D101039. Photo: Walter Haberland.

Even before the arrival of the new Dauphine in France, in 1680, the *Mercure galant* reported that several outfits “of different styles” had been made in Paris and sent to Munich for the betrothed Princess as well as for her brother, the Prince-Elector.<sup>6</sup> These garments warranted the attention of Louis XIV who ordered that the greatest care be taken with them. They were so sumptuous that the chroniclers of the time – including Madame de Sévigné – recorded their impressions.<sup>7</sup>

In July of 1680, the Dauphine sent an outfit from Paris that made a great impression in Munich. Her brother, the Elector, had placed an order through his page and, according to a memo, this page was instructed to commission various articles of clothing plus a few other trifles for him and his mistress, the Countess de Praising. This order was executed according to the instructions and the taste of the Dauphine.

In October of 1680, Martin Mayr proposed sending garments replete with all of their attendant accoutrements to the Elector in order to “give an example” of everything the latest fashions from Paris could offer. In his letters, he adds that, if it might be of interest to the Elector, this type of order was being placed by other sovereigns, such as Johann-Georg III of Saxony, who was also having clothes made in Paris and sent to him.

With the arrival of the orders placed by the Elector, Mayr hopes to be able to provide “special care” and to “choose something new and beautiful that will give His Highness great satisfaction.” In 1681, Mayr hopes that the Elector will find the two vests and the four sets of ribbon trimmings “utterly beautiful and to his taste.” He points out that another set of ribbon trimming that was expedited is “one of the richest in current fashion.” He further hopes to receive the unconditional approval of the Elector and that his “very contented” patron will give him the honor of entrusting him to find “other things” for him. However, in spite of his efforts, it was to the Dauphine that the Elector entrusted the choice of his attire.

## Living in style: a matter of taste and network

Styles followed the change of season and Mayr took advantage of the arrival of the latest fashions to make suggestions for purchases to his patron. On these occasions he sent samples of matching ribbons and sought to understand the tastes of the Elector: the colors he preferred, the cut of the suit of clothes or the style of the trim. As the replenishment of royal or princely wardrobes was related to seasonal changes, it usually took place twice a year – fall and spring – except under unusual circumstances like special fêtes or dynastic events, such as the Elector’s marriage to Emperor Leopold’s daughter, Maria Antonia,<sup>8</sup> in 1685. Mayr always tried to show that he was a great connoisseur, that he could suggest up-to-the-minute fashions at any time, that he was familiar with the latest trends, the most stylish merchandise on the market, and he boasted that he worked with all of the artisans who enjoyed the best reputations, even those who supplied the *garde-robe* of Louis XIV.

The merchants in Paris engaged in the clothing industry at this time were located in the neighborhood of Les Halles or Saint-Honoré.<sup>9</sup> Those selling ribbon trim had their boutiques in the courtyard, halls and galleries of the Palais-Royal. The shop sign “à l’enseigne des quatre vents” denoted the boutique belonging to the famous merchant, Perdrigeon, who was also located there. Molière alluded to him in his play, *Les précieuses ridicules*, and it was he who furnished a good deal of the ribbons and silk stockings purchased on behalf of the Elector. Mayr also used the tailor named Lalande who was one of the most “highly reputed” makers of clothing in Paris. Other artisans, such as the cloth merchants Charlier or Gaultier, whose royal manufactories of gold and silver silk were established near Paris, were among the most highly sought-after suppliers of the day.<sup>10</sup>

While it is true that the sample cuttings originally sent by Mayr are no longer attached to the correspondence conserved in the Munich archives, there exists nonetheless an extremely interesting document that has survived from 1683. The *Memorandum of the bills from merchants who furnished jewels and clothing that His Highness the Elector of Bavaria requested Madame the Dauphine to choose for him and which were expedited by the Chevalier Operti*, comes to a total of 7,332 *livres 4 sols*, lists both the merchants and the amounts expended on the products that were furnished. Two-thirds of this amount was spent on the fabrication of clothing, silk fabrics, silk stockings, gloves, buttons, ribbons, thread, braiding and lace; the other third was for jewelry and goldwork. The passport for some or all of this merchandise is fortunately conserved in the Paris archives and it gives us descriptions that are quite detailed. However, it is possible that it only relates to a part of the merchandise that we know was invoiced as follows:

- One rose-colored suit of clothes made of a gold ground fabric brocaded with gold and silver
- one suit of clothes made of grey linen cloth trimmed with a small silver braid, the satin waistcoat trimmed with buttons
- another suit of clothes made of a silver ground fabric trimmed with gold and silver *point d’Espagne* embroidery
- five pairs of silk stockings brocaded with gold and silver
- one pair of embroidered sleeves
- one gold and silver muff
- three patch boxes
- thirteen *étuis* for scissors and toothpicks
- one snuffbox
- one small mirror
- two small flacons and one small gold box, two of which are decorated with small diamonds

Silk clothing:

- One *justaucorps*, two pairs of breeches and a waistcoat of brocaded silk
- one pair of gloves with silk fringe
- four other pairs of gloves with fringe and fine lace
- one pound of lace and gold and silver braiding
- six pieces of ribbon
- five pairs of silk stockings and different lengths of various fabrics ...

The diversity, quality and novelty of the creations that were produced and sold by French merchants are the reasons that explain the enormous success of the fashion trade in Paris at this time. As we have noted, the choice of a sovereign's wardrobe was an "affair of state" that was considered too important to entrust to a simple agent like Mayr, as faithful a subject as he may have been. The Elector of Bavaria continued to maintain intimate and privileged ties with his sister, the Dauphine, which gave him access to the network of the finest merchants, artisans and suppliers while also affording him certain other privileges and benefits, not the least of which was exemption from taxes.

---

<sup>1</sup> Research Fellow, Victoria and Albert Museum London, HERA "Fashioning the Early Modern". Marie Curie Research Fellow, Centre for Textile Research (CTR)/SAXO Institute, University of Copenhagen.

<sup>2</sup> Munich, Geheimes Staatsarchiv.

<sup>3</sup> Paris, Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Mayr (or Meyer), arrived in Paris in 1673.

<sup>5</sup> Maximilian Emmanuel of Bavaria (1662-1726). Louis dauphin de France (1661-1711). Marie-Anne-Christine of Bavaria (1660-1690).

<sup>6</sup> *The Mercure galant*, March 1680.

<sup>7</sup> Madame de Sévigné to Madame de Grignan, 24th of January 1680, *Madame de Sévigné, Correspondance*, II, Paris, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1974.

<sup>8</sup> Maria-Antonia (1669-1692).

<sup>9</sup> Nicolas de Blégny, *Le livre commode contenant les adresses de la ville de Paris, et le trésor des almanachs pour l'année bissextile 1692, avec les séances et les vacations des tribunaux, l'ordre et la discipline des exercices publics, le prix des matériaux et des ouvrages d'architecture, le tarif des nouvelles monnoyes, le départ des courriers...*, Paris, Veuve de Denis Nion, 1692. Édouard Fournier, *Le livre commode des adresses de Paris pour 1692 par Abraham du Pradel*, Paris, P. Daffis, 2 tomes, 1878.

<sup>10</sup> Corinne Thépaut-Cabasset, *L'Esprit des modes au Grand Siècle*, Paris, CTHS, 2010.