

The Reconstruction and Presentation of a French Court Dress

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Abstract:

In 1996 the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum acquired twenty single pieces of embroidered satin that seemed to be the parts of a complete dress. Careful examination and documentation showed that the dress had originally been made as a robe à la française around 1780 and altered a few years later to a robe à l'anglaise. The last modification had been carried out in the late nineteenth century. The second stage, the shape of the robe à l'anglaise, could be reconstructed completely. Today it is quite a sensational costume because it seems to be the only French court gown in this particular shape that has survived. A small exhibition was created around this extraordinary dress. One part consisted of the history and the reconstruction of the court dress. The second section was about professional embroidery on garments in the late eighteenth century and how these were produced.

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Reconstruction of the Court Dress

In 1996 the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum acquired the Lillian Williams costume collection of over 800 garments and accessories. This included twenty single pieces of embroidered satin that seemed to be the parts of a complete dress. As the delicate embroidery is of extraordinary quality, there was a strong wish to present a complete dress to the public, if possible. In the end it was actually feasible to reconstruct the gown. The practical work was carried out by textile conservator Charlotte Holzer who worked on this project for one year. It was financed by the Bauer'sche Barockstiftung in Munich, a private foundation that supports projects connected to the Baroque period. And a small exhibition (called a "studio exhibition" in our museum) was created around this dress.

The first step in reconstructing the gown was careful examination of the individual parts and taking the exact pattern of the whole garment. All stitch-holes, pleats and folds were marked in these drawings. This was the only way to differentiate between the three stages that the dress had gone through. There is an embroidered scattered flower design with a regular repeat on the whole garment. By tracing this pattern it was possible to find the original position of every single piece of the altered dress. When the pattern was finished, the conservator cut the pieces from a simple cotton fabric and made them up using the same sewing techniques as in the original dress. This exact reconstruction proved enormously helpful for understanding all the details in the dress and especially how the various alterations had been carried out. The result of the examinations, followed by frequent discussions and further research, was that the dress had been remodeled a few years after its creation. The last modification had been carried out in the late nineteenth century for fancy dress, before it had been unpicked and stored somewhere.

It was the second stage of the gown that could be reconstructed completely, and it turned out to be quite sensational (Figure 1). Our research has revealed that the dress had originally been created as a *robe à la française* or sack-back gown around 1780. At that time this type of garment was typically worn at festive events, while in daily life fashion had moved on towards other styles. So late eighteenth-century sack-back gowns were often connected to special occasions. This explains why so many of them have survived in museums and collections.



Figure 1: Court dress, France, ca. 1780-1790, front view. Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich, inv. no. 96/135.1 © Bayerisches Nationalmuseum München.

Originally the dress in the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, with its dainty embroidery in a scattered flower design on the cream-colored satin ground may have resembled a French gown in the collection of the Victorian and Albert Museum in London (inv. no T.180&A-1965). In 1780 Queen Marie-Antoinette introduced the so-called *robe parée* (which had existed before) as court dress in France. The special features of the *robe parée* are the use of plain fabrics like satin or taffeta and elaborate embroideries at the open front of the gown and on the petticoat. The only difference of this gown to the dress in Munich is that there is no stomacher, which was out of fashion by this time. However the stomacher was still suitable for formal court wear. From about 1787 the *robe parée* as court dress took on the form of a *robe à l'anglaise*, that is, an open gown with fitted back. It still had a long stomacher, which was completely old-fashioned by this time. This was the shape that the court dress in Munich had been altered to and that we were able to reconstruct. There is another rather interesting detail in the original garment: it is a vertical dart at the top of the petticoat, which ends in an open fold and creates a dome-shape (Figure 2). This is an alteration that belongs to the stage of the *robe à l'anglaise*. This detail can be found in contemporary depictions as well.¹



Figure 2: Dart in the center front of the petticoat © Bayerisches Nationalmuseum München.

Mounting the Dress

When mounting an eighteenth-century dress we tend to put a lot of material under the skirt to make it appear creaseless. Looking at portraits, it becomes clear that this was apparently not the desired effect, at least in the late eighteenth century.² We tried to create the same effect on the original garment. So the reconstructed gown has been mounted with a slightly collapsing petticoat (Figure 1) The long stomacher identifies it as a court dress. An attached lace ruffle would have been the only decoration of the straight sleeve.

The mount for the court dress was made in a special way. The exact pattern of the gown was used to sew a torso from synthetic felt, which is a little smaller than the dress (Figure 3). This was put on a wooden construction. Charlotte Holzer made two side-hoops after the shape of original ones in our collection. It was only in the end that we found out that they did not give enough support at the top so the conservator placed two hoop segments there. This means the original dress may have been worn with a complete short hoop petticoat. In the end the mount was covered with cotton fabrics. A cotton petticoat completes it to give support to the original garment.



Figure 3: Mount of the court dress during its construction, showing the felt torso and the support for the skirt © Bayerisches Nationalmuseum München.

For the neck and décolleté area a new method was applied. This part was first shaped from strips of paper covered with an adhesive. However we wanted to create a very even surface and something like a standard model that we could use again and again when exhibiting eighteenth-century women's dress. So we started a joint project with the Technical University of Deggendorf led by Professor Jörg Maxzin. He scanned our paper model and altered it digitally to make it more symmetrical. He also rendered it more elegant by reducing the size of the neck. Then the students transformed this model and created an even surface. The idea is that this digital model will be adapted in size later for exhibiting other 18th-century dresses. As we knew that this particular piece would fit perfectly on our mount, it was printed on a 3D printer and put on the mount (Figure 4).



Figure 4: 3D-printed décolleté © Bayerisches Nationalmuseum München.

The result of the reconstruction work proves rather satisfying in finding the right shape of the second stage of the dress, the robe à l'anglaise (Figure 5). The torso with the lovely curved back is nicely molded by the felt mount. It is quite a sensational costume now because it seems to be the only French court gown in this particular shape that has survived. There is another rather famous robe parée in the collection of the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto (inv. no. 925.18.3A-B). Although it is more spectacular than the dress in Munich and additionally provided with a court train, it may have looked similar originally. As the gown was altered in the nineteenth century, the original shape of the bodice is not clear.

The Studio Exhibition

A small exhibition was created around the extraordinary dress in the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum. It is entitled "Mode aus dem Rahmen", which means "Fashion out of the Frame". The show was divided in two sections. One part consisted of the reconstruction of the court dress so the visitors are able to look behind the scene (Figure 6). It presented the copy of the dress in cotton fabric. The pattern diagram and life-size pattern pieces of the bodice demonstrated the different stages that the dress had gone through. Additionally some photographs showed the conservator's work. This installation has proved to be rather popular among the visitors because they really like learning about the reconstruction of the dress and all the work that is involved when mounting garments.

The second part of the exhibition told about professional embroideries on dress in the late eighteenth century and how these were produced (Figure 7). So a selection of men's coats and waistcoats demonstrated the great variety of embroidery motifs and techniques that had existed in the late eighteenth century. The mounts for these clothes were also done with felt, in the same way as for the court dress. To make visitors realize that all these garments had been produced on embroidery frames (hence the title of the exhibition) before they were cut and made up, some panels of embroidered, uncut waistcoats were presented in the exhibition. The whole collection of weaving and embroidery samples of the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum is still stored on "original" wooden museum frames from around 1900. We did not want to disperse this historic ensemble but exhibited these embroideries on their old mounts.

There were several enlarged reproductions of fashion engravings that showed how these clothes had been worn and what a fully dressed person would have looked like in them with

all accessories. And of course some text panels explained the different sections of the show, like, for example, the embroidery process. It was a very conventional exhibition but the visitors appreciated it. A small catalogue was produced by Christian Baur, who runs the museum's shop.³



Figure 5: Back view of the court dress © Bayerisches Nationalmuseum München.



Figure 6: Section in the exhibition presenting the reconstruction and conservation of the court dress © Bayerisches Nationalmuseum München.



Figure 7: Panels for waistcoats and embroidered garments in the exhibition © Bayerisches Nationalmuseum München.

Conclusion

The small exhibition combined two topics: the history and reconstruction of the court gown and professional embroidery on dress in the late eighteenth century. The garments were presented on neutral mounts that showed the historic silhouette with the appropriate posture of someone in the late eighteenth century. Large reproductions of fashion engravings from the time illustrated what a complete outfit would have looked like on a person. Although small in size, it was a very popular exhibition.

¹ Jean-Michel Moreau le Jeune, *Les Adieux, 1777*; *Galerie des Modes et Costumes Français, 1er Cahier de Grandes Robes d'Etiquette de la Cour de France, 1787*, pl. 000 360.

² Alexander Roslin, *Maria Feodorovna, 1777*; Johann Friedrich August Tischbein, *Princess Saltykova, 1780s*, St Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum.

³ Johannes Pietsch, *Mode aus dem Rahmen: Kostbar bestickte Kleidung des späten 18. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, 2014). To be ordered at: team@museumsladen-bnm.de.