

Fashioning the Self: The Symbolic Nature of Dress in Eighteenth-Century France

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On July 17, 1789, Louis XVI appeared before a crowd at the Hôtel de Ville in Paris with a tricolored cockade, *cocarde tricolore*, which had been given to him by the mayor of the city. This act received mixed reviews from the people of France; some appreciated the gesture, while others, including Marie-Antoinette who stated, "I did not think that I had married a commoner," were more disapproving. Regardless of the varying opinions, Louis' decision to associate himself, and therefore the monarchy, with the cockade cemented the small ornament as a national symbol of France.¹ The influence granted to this seemingly minor event is profound; while the cockade is composed of mere fabric, the meaning behind it is what gives it such potency. However, the tricolor cockade is just one example of the powerful effects of fashion during eighteenth-century France. Dress in France from 1770-1800 featured rapid changes in style which were symptomatic of greater shifts that were occurring in society. While fashion has been used for centuries to display markers of identity or ideology, it became a particularly powerful symbol of identification during years surrounding the French Revolution.

The ideas that fashion conveys meaning and is subject to certain historical influences have been well established by scholars. The symbolic nature of clothing can be divided into two larger categories, namely the symbolic function of dress in society and its role in defining individual identity.²

¹ Richard Wrigley, *The Politics of Appearances: Representations of Dress in Eighteenth Century France* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 99.

² The following scholars discuss the impact of fashion within society: Madeleine Delpierre, *Dress in France in the Eighteenth Century*, trans. Caroline Beamish (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Aileen

Furthermore, both of these categories are informed by the historical and cultural context of the period; therefore, throughout this research project, maintaining a clear grasp of the social and political narratives within eighteenth-century France has been of the utmost importance. For an understanding of French fashion and its changes throughout history, Aileen Ribeiro and Madeleine Delpierre are particularly useful. Both authors are influential to the research of this topic because they not only explain the changes in fashion during the eighteenth-century, but they also describe them. In addition to the importance of description, the authors also make contributions to the interpretation of eighteenth-century clothing within the context of the contemporary society and culture. For more specific periods of fashion, Richard Wrigley engages in important discussions of revolutionary era France. Wrigley's work has been critical to

Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress: Fashion in England and France 1750 to 1820* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Wrigley, *The Politics of Appearances*. Works that explore fashion and personal identity include: E. Claire Cage, "The Sartorial Self: Neoclassical Fashion and Gender Identity in France, 1797-1804," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 42, no. 2 (2009): 193-215, doi: 10.1353/ecs.0.0039; Lynn Festa, "Personal Effects: Wigs and Possessive Individualism in the Long Eighteenth Century," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 29, no. 2 (2005): 47-90, doi:10.1215/00982601-29-2-47; Nina Rattner Gelbart, "The Blonding of Charlotte Corday," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38, no. 1 (2004): 201-21, doi:10.1353/ecs.2004.0058; Desmond Hosford, "The Queen's Hair: Marie-Antoinette, Politics, and DNA," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38, no. 1 (2004): 183-200, doi:10.1353/ecs.2004.0060; Caroline Weber, *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution* (New York: H. Holt, 2006).

the furthering of my research for its in-depth and historically relevant analysis of dress during the French Revolution. This is of particular importance because contemporary economic, social, and political events are significant when investigating the meanings behind clothing in eighteenth-century France. Fashion is a canvas onto which the values of the culture are painted. Therefore, clothing has an important function within society as an indicator of public opinion and as a system of representation for important historical events.

In the vein of Ribeiro, Delpierre, and Wrigley, the style of analysis presented in this project is an extension of previous scholars' research. In the following pages, I aim to substantiate and corroborate the claims that fashion is symbolic and has a social meaning. While one of the primary purposes of this article is to illustrate the symbolic quality inherent in eighteenth-century French fashion, this project is also intended to demonstrate the significance of sartorial analysis to historical interpretation. Primary resources are of utmost importance to effective historical research, and current historical research is dominated by written documents. While written documents are often crucial to research projects, an analysis of clothing and images of clothing can offer equally interesting and enlightening results. Although clothing and fashion analysis may be more suitable for certain topics than others, it should still be recognized as a viable research subject, and students of history should be open to including it their historical investigations.

Unlike written documents, which often include detailed facts and information, the meaning of visual documents, such as paintings, is often more elusive. Therefore, it is important to state that this type of research is by nature interpretive and relies heavily on the analysis of images from France during the late-eighteenth century.

However, the field of semiotics serves as a guide and a fundamental approach to the study of the historical influences inherent in French fashion. For the purposes of this project, semiotics serves as a theoretical, rather than methodological, framework through which fashion can be examined. I chose to use semiotics because it gives credence to the study of the symbolic nature of eighteenth-century fashion. For this research, it will function primarily as a conceptual lens for historical interpretation and as a foundation on which sartorial analyses may be built. In its most basic definition, semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and the meanings they may communicate. Within semiotics, signs are composed of two parts: a signifier and a signified; the signifier is the image, word, or object and the signified is the concept to which it is attached. This basic approach can be used in a variety of disciplines to study many different aspects of culture, including advertisements, gestures, language, and, in the case of this project, fashion.³ For instance, in *Les Adieux*⁴ (Figure 1) the elaborate and heavily ornamented dress of the woman clearly represents her status, power, and wealth within society; while, in *Le chanteur Chénard en sans-culotte*⁵ (Figure 2) the wardrobe of the man, which consists of anti-aristocratic long pants, symbolizes the ideal citizen during the French Revolution.

With respect to clothing, semiotics can be used to uncover patterns in culture and systems of cultural change.⁶ Furthermore,

³ Arthur Asa Berger, *Signs in Contemporary Culture: An Introduction to Semiotics*, (New York: Longman, 1984).

⁴ Jean-Michel Moreau le Jeune, *Les Adieux*.

⁵ Louis Leopold Boilly, *Le chanteur Chénard en sans-culotte*, 1792.

⁶ Diana Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000).

the different aspects of fashion, including clothing, hairstyles, and jewelry, can interact in interesting ways to reveal additional cultural meanings. Using semiotics to study eighteenth-century French fashion not only helps to explain the meaning behind clothing choices, but it also serves as a method of attaining a greater understanding of the society and its culture. While semiotics can at times appear to be too broad, it is important to note that signs are always interpreted within the cultural narratives from which they originated. Therefore, historical events and philosophical and social ideas that were influential in France during the eighteenth-century will be taken into account during the course of this research project as an aid for the analysis of the period's fashion.

Clothing is one of the most powerful forms of symbolic display precisely because of its association with the body. With dress, there comes the idea that choosing which clothes to wear is a voluntary act and, therefore, signifies a deliberate meaning.⁷ Clothing provides an outlet where an individual's beliefs and values can be easily communicated and displayed in an illustrative manner; in this case, fashion can be thought of as a visual text. While it is true that many individuals do not consciously choose clothing that will communicate a specific message, fashion still articulates an idea whether the wearer intends it to or not. Through clothing, societal values are perpetuated and represented with or without the conscious acceptance of the individuals who wear them. Fashion is also particularly useful in transmitting meaning in cultures and societies where education is not prevalent in every class. This was certainly the case in

revolutionary France as not all of the citizens were literate; therefore, specific aspects of fashion made it easy for individuals to understand and place others within a certain social or political background.

As a result of the constant changes and shifts in style, analyzing dress allows one to interpret the effects of current events and new ideas as they occur and from a different perspective than what is given in other primary documents. For the purposes of this article, my research begins during the 1770s; I chose to start at this time rather than in the 1780s because it was during this decade that France witnessed the introduction of an individual who would have a profound impact on court fashion, namely Marie-Antoinette. The 1770s and early 1780s were characterized by elaborate and heavily decorated gowns, which culminated in the court dress *à la français* (the dress in *Les Adieux* is an example of this style). That this style of dressing was only followed by the aristocratic class is clear for at least two reasons; first, the dresses that were worn in Versailles were far too expensive for the majority of France, and second, they were extremely impractical. The dresses that the women of the court wore made it virtually impossible for them to bend over, the extensive panniers required women to enter doors sideways, and even the act of crossing one's legs was considered difficult.⁸

Getting dressed for the day took hours in the morning and required the assistance of at least one other person, which was a luxury most women could not afford; however, for wealthy women being elegant required them to "show that a great number of people have worked to produce the effect."⁹ The fact

⁷ Katrina Navickas, "That sash will hang you': Political Clothing and Adornment in England, 1780-1840," *Journal of British Studies* 49, no. 3 (2010): 541.

⁸ Ribeiro, 54.

⁹ Mary D. Sheriff, "The Portrait of the Queen," cited in *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen*, ed. Dena Goodman (New York: Taylor & Francis Books, 2003), 49.

that fashion in the 1770s was difficult for the majority of French women to follow was one of the style's main purposes. Dressing in the fashions of the 1770s and 1780s clearly demonstrated the status of the individual to the general public. Portraits and drawings that feature women in ornate gowns show not only their wealth but also their power within society. One of the aspects of court life that revolutionaries took issue with was the extravagance of their fashion; it revealed an aristocracy that was out of touch and separated from French society. The frivolity of this period of fashion aside, dress during this time was used to communicate other messages in addition to displaying the status of the wearer.

During the French Revolution, fashion was used to convey specific meanings to others that spoke of current events; however, the practice of utilizing clothing and accessories in response to recent political and social events was documented in France before the Revolution began often to very absurd effects. For instance in 1779, French victory in the Battle of Ouessant led to a hairstyle known as *à la Belle-Poule* in which a model of one of the ships involved, the *Belle-Poule*, was added on top of the already towering wigs of elite women (Figure 3). In the same year, the capture of the island Grenada by *compte d'Estaing* inspired the hat *à la Grenade* replete with pomegranates. Breakthroughs in society were also celebrated with new hat styles including *à la Montgolfier* in honor of the first balloon flight by the Montgolfier brothers in 1783 and the hat *à la Blanchard* or *au demi-ballon* for the invention of the parachute. Furthermore, Beaumarchais' *Mariage de Figaro* and *Tarare* inspired many different styles of jackets and hats.¹⁰ The fact that clothing, accessories, and hairstyles were created in reference to current events shows

¹⁰ Delpierre, 117-118.

that fashion was not exclusively considered in sartorial terms; men and women understood that clothing could be used to engage in a public dialogue about political and social occurrences.

Just from this short list of hair and hat styles one can begin to understand the importance of these aspects of fashion to the French in the 1770s and early 1780s. While existing simultaneously in the private and public sphere, as a result of its connection to and extension from the body, hair takes on strong cultural and symbolic meaning. Because of this dual state, hair "has so often been thought of as containing the essence of individuality and personhood."¹¹ Perhaps owing to its inherent malleability, hair can easily be used to assert a sense of identity; easier to change than clothing and just as noticeable, hairstyles can be used by women to construct their individuality or image. Hairstyles are often symbolic in nature; they can be used to assert power or control, rebel against society, or portray ideologies. In accordance with fashion, hair during this period was covered by wigs and heavily powdered; during the Revolution powdered hair became a distinct symbol of aristocracy, and those who dressed their hair in such a way were often deemed counter-revolutionaries. Conversely, early in the Revolution, an individual with unpowdered hair was considered to be a revolutionary regardless if they were or not. For instance, in 1791, Monsieur de La Fayette noted an "individual wearing his own unpowdered hair (filthy hallmark of a reviled sect)." That a hairstyle was judged to be enough information to label a man as belonging to a revolutionary sect, likely the Jacobins, speaks to the significances afforded to hair and the messages it could convey.¹²

¹¹ Angela Rosenthal, "Raising Hair," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 2.

¹² Wrigley, 233.

In the years just before the Revolution, fashion in France began to shift from intricate and elaborately designed gowns to simpler dresses and lower hairstyles. One of the more popular of these new styles was the dress *en chemise* which consisted of a sheer, muslin dress that was worn without the wide panniers that had characterized previous years of fashion (Figure 4). Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau was often associated with the trend toward simplicity in dress that occurred on the eve of the Revolution. Rousseau's attitudes regarding clothing stemmed from his idea of the conflict between the "external vestimentary presentation and inner moral self." For Rousseau, the practical nature of clothing had been overshadowed by trivial fashions that seemed to be growing increasingly frivolous. Therefore, clothing was erroneously being used as a disguise or as a way for individuals to conceal their true character from others. Instead of the heavily stylized fashions that flourished during the 1770s, Rousseau recommended individuals to adopt simple clothing that facilitated "the body's capacity to express truly natural feelings."¹³

Rousseau's philosophy of dress influenced fashion during the late 1780s and into the Revolution; his suggestions for simplicity in fashion inspired participants of the Revolution to develop these ideas. For example, committees considered the notion of implementing a national uniform. As one such committee, the Société Populaire et Républicaine des Arts published the book *Considérations sur la nécessité de changer le costume français*, which provided suggestions on ways French fashion may be improved. Société Populaire et Républicaine des Arts recommended that clothing be hygienic and safe for the wearer because many people considered constricting boned corsets to be harmful to women, if not a type

¹³ Ibid., 230.

of torture device. Clothing should be loose enough to allow for freedom of movement and the birth of healthy children. It should comply with the ideology of equality and, therefore, be the same for all individuals regardless of wealth or status. Lastly, clothing should show the shape of the body and refrain from concealing its beauty. While many of these recommendations were reflected in subsequent fashions, the French never executed a plan for a national uniform except for their military.¹⁴

Although clothing during the French Revolution was simple compared to previous years, it carried with it a great deal of symbolism and meaning. One of the most important aspects of revolutionary fashion was the cockade. Cockades were most commonly made from fabric or ribbon and came in a variety of different colors and combinations. Cockades had been used as decoration on clothing and hats throughout the eighteenth-century and were not a novel invention, but with the advent of the Revolution they took on a greater importance. The most significant style of cockade during the French Revolution was the tricolored (Figure 5), which became a national symbol of France as I mentioned in the opening of this article. The national, tricolored cockade was composed of white, blue, and red; white had represented aristocracy or monarchy for many years, while the red and blue were the colors of Paris. Together, they symbolized France united under the new Republican ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Although it was considered a national symbol, the tricolor cockade was not universally worn; revolutionary fashion would not prove to be so simple.

Perhaps the most common controversy concerning cockades involves color. Wearing an all-white cockade during the Revolution represented support of the

¹⁴ Delpierre, 122.

monarchy; such individuals were often criticized as being counterrevolutionaries or royalists. The friction that existed over the issue of cockades is evidenced by the laws that were created to regulate their usage. As early as 1790, Louis XVI issued a proclamation that forbade individuals from wearing all cockades other than the national tricolor cockade; later in 1792, it was made mandatory that all citizens wear the tricolor cockade. With more and more people wearing cockades, confusion erupted over the problem of where an individual should place their cockade. Partially covering a cockade with one's scarf or a ribbon led to suspicion; police reported that "people want to place it on the right, on the left, on the front, behind, and this frivolous question, which is not yet decided on, has already caused violent brawls."¹⁵ Eventually, the National Guard requested that people wear their cockade in such a way that everyone could clearly see one another's. While this type of paranoia is characteristic of the French Revolution, the fact that such a degree of hysteria surrounded this sartorial decoration is testament to its use as a powerful symbol of ideology.

The liberty cap (Figure 6), or *bonnet rouge*, was another article of clothing that was symbolically important during the French Revolution primarily due to its association with the radical group the *sans-culottes*. The red liberty cap was often linked to the Phrygian cap of Roman and Greek origins, a factor that may have been appealing the French revolutionaries who admired the Republican ideals of these past societies. Not surprising given its name, the red cap of liberty used during the Revolution was designed to represent liberty, equality, and solidarity among the French people. It is most often connected to the image of the *sans-culottes*, which translates as 'without breeches,' whose uniform consisted of the

bonnet rouge, a short jacket, and long pants.¹⁶ The wearing of long trousers is what initially garnered the group their name because they refused to wear the breeches worn by aristocrats and instead favored the commoner's pants. One of the most interesting aspects of *sans-culottes* history is the way their name came about. The name was originally intended to insult the group who donned peasant clothing; however, instead of attacking their social position or ideology, detractors chose to mock their choice in clothing. Out of all the ways the radical *sans-culottes* could have been scorned by their opposition, an article of clothing was one of the most noticeable and, therefore, powerful methods of categorizing them as revolutionaries.

The notion of 'fashion' indicates a move away from clothing as a necessity to clothing as a presentation of identity. In eighteenth-century France, fashion operated within a symbolic public sphere. Changes in styles and attitudes toward dress were symptomatic of broader shifts in society; this is particularly true during an age in France when clothing often represented a philosophical divide. In this case, clothing was an effective way to impart a personal self-representation to the public. It showed a sense of identity and self-fashioning that spoke not only of societal ideals but also of individual desires. Due to its significance during this period of time, fashion should be regarded as an important method of historical analysis for revolutionary France.

¹⁵ Wrigley, 108.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 215.



Figure 1. Jean-Michel Moreau le Jeune, *Les Adieux*.

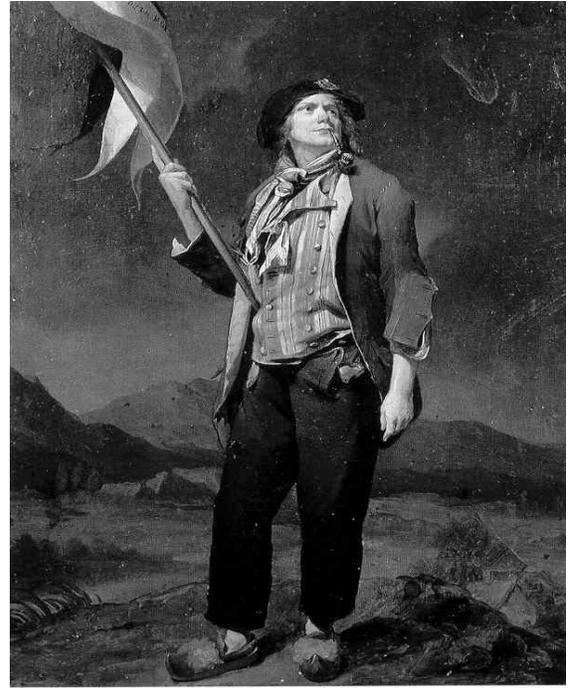


Figure 2. Louis Leopold Boilly, *Le chanteur Chénard en sans-culotte*, 1792.



Figure 3. à la Belle-Poule hairstyle



Figure 4. Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Marie-Antoinette en chemise*, 1783.



Figure 5. Shoes decorated with tricolor cockades



Figure 6. Red cap of liberty