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Anne Marie Eveline Bissonnette
University of Alberta, anne.bissonnette@ualberta.ca

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Understanding the Gaps: Four Archetypes of 1790s Gowns

Anne Bissonnette, University of Alberta, Canada

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This research is a component of a larger project that looks at a particular moment of transition in the history of fashion, the 1790s in Europe and America, asking how, in an age imbued with idealism, fashion's visual rhetoric could reflect and effect changes in society. In order to analyze Euro-American dress of this period, the first step was to find, identify and carefully examine surviving gowns to reassess the stereotypical understanding of this complex decade that marked the beginning of modernity in dress.

During my doctoral field research I noted a paucity of surviving 1790s dress artifacts in collections in comparison with the decades before and after. Identifying Euro-American 1790s styles remains problematic to this day as most specialized authors who write about late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century fashion seamlessly move from the conventional eighteenth-century women's silhouette to the neoclassical one. In other words, from conical stays (a heavily boned corset) compressing the breasts, delineating a narrow waist and worn with voluminous underskirts that obscure the lower limbs, to a new archetype delineating individual breasts with below-the-bust cinching and worn with underskirts that allow greater lower body definition. This paper addresses the gap between these silhouettes and isolates four different archetypes of gowns worn in the 1790s. The research is drawn from the examination of surviving 1790s gowns in France, England, Scotland and the United States of America.

A micro-level analysis, the research provides a base from which to apply a more theorized macro-level analysis that will observe the interactions of dress within the political, philosophical, artistic and economic changes taking place in society. To make sense of the artifacts and understand how they might have been worn, the research addresses another gap, the interruption in the production of fashion plates during France's 1793-94 "Reign of Terror," which deprived the country of possible stylistic leadership and, more importantly, amplified divergent modes of fashionable dress outside that country's boundaries.

In addition to its wide-ranging and systematic empirical approach to primary sources, the study uses a pattern research experiential learning component following Betty Kirke's (1991) innovative approach for her seminal book on Madeleine Vionnet (1876-1875) and comparable to methods used in experimental archeology. Knowledge of cut and construction is of prime importance in the proposed study. The research also draws from the methods of Janet Arnold's (1972) *Patterns of Fashion I: Englishwomen's dresses and their construction c.1660-1860*, which selects museum artifacts—most of them without provenance—and extracts from them patterns representative of changing silhouettes. Norah Waugh's corpus also draws knowledge from such artifacts and is helpful to the study's methodology. In addition to observing the structure of garments, invaluable excerpts on dressmaking or fashion-related texts accompany the work of both authors to reveal changes in vocabulary over time, while also showing the need

for more research on terminology. Questions regarding production and craftsmanship arose, as do practical issues about the wearing of clothing.

Few scholars have taken a research path towards structural investigation of 1790s dress, but David E. Lazaro and Patricia Campbell Warner (2004) did look at one evolving eighteenth-century archetype in "All-Over Pleated Bodice: Dressmaking in Transition, 1780-1805." It is a detailed study that identifies one archetype found in museum collections, but a broader look was necessary to explain the variety of 1790s artifacts encountered, which have yet to be investigated structurally and culturally. By paying close attention to the materiality and structure of dresses, this project will allow future investigations regarding the diversity, specificity and meaning of 1790s fashions in coming years.

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