

## **A Study on Fashion Leader** **- with a Focus on Marie Antoinette and Her Influence** **on the 18th Century Fashion -**

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(Received Sep. 5, 2001)

### **Abstract**

*This study aims to analyze the influence which Marie Antoinette, an unfortunate queen and fashion pioneer, had upon leading the creation of fashion in the eighteenth-century.*

*In addition, this study attempts to expect some insights of fashion on the basis of analysis. Marie Antoinette created a new trend of fashion all the time through her hatred of restricting freedom, discontentment and caprice. She created the robes à l'anglaise, à la polonaise, à la levite, chemise à la reine, and so on. Also, Marie Antoinette created a giant hair style by hiring a hairdresser named Léonard. It can be believed that even though Marie Antoinette is open to censure owing to her frivolity, vanity and extravagance, she is recognized a creator of womanish, beautiful, delicate and graceful dress and ornaments.*

*Key words : Marie Antoinette, robe à l'anglaise, robe à la polonaise, robe à la levite, chemise à la reine, giant hair style.*

### **I. Introduction**

The history of fashion has been created by the fashion leaders such as the royal family and the aristocratic class. Kings and queens have created fashion from the Egyptian period to the modern age, and their influence has been great. Their representatives as fashion leaders were the Queen Elizabeth in the Renaissance period, Louis XIV, who advocated absolute sovereign power, in the baroque period, Madames Pompadour and Du Barry, the mistress to Louis XIV, Empress Josephine, Napoleon's wife in the period of empire style, and Empress Eugenie in the period of crinoline style. Queens and princesses in the modern kingdoms are also fashion leaders having an important influence upon

fashion. Nowadays, the first lady, popular stars in theater and films, and pop singers play the role of fashion leaders.

Marie Antoinette, a fashion leader in the eighteenth-century, contributed to the brilliant development of rococo styled dress and ornaments by hiring Rose Bertin as the Royal designer and Leonard as hairdresser for the first time. Her features and behavior reflected the idea of that time, and she was recognized a goddess in the age of rococo. She experienced a most miserable tragedy when she was wretchedly imprisoned due to the French Revolution, and soon was forced to the guillotine as a prisoner, becoming the focus of insulting words and hate, falling down from status of queen standing at the center of respect and affection on

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the glorious throne.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the influence which Marie Antoinette, an unfortunate queen and fashion pioneer, had upon leading the creation of fashion in the eighteenth-century.

## II. The Life of Marie Antoinette

### 1. Birth

Marie Antoinette was born a ninth daughter of Francis I, Emperor of Holy Roman Empire and Maria Theresa, archduchess of Austria and queen of Hungary-Bohemia on November 2 in 1755. Marie Antoinette in her childhood played with her brothers, sisters and friends in the gardens of Schönbrunn Palace and grew into a luxurious woman. Her personality was kind, sympathetic, merry, honest and meek, but immature, scatter-brained, insincere and idle.

### 2. Marriage

The Hapsbourgs and the Bourbons were at endless war to compete for dominance over Europe for hundreds of years. As the kings and diplomats from the two families wanted to be in peace, Chewachoele, the foreign minister of Louis XV and Kaunitz, the consultant of Maria Theresa entered into an alliance. And in order to cement this alliance between Austria and France for a long time, it would be necessary to link two royal families, the Hapsbourgs and the Bourbons with a blood tie. Therefore, the Prince and successor to the French throne, as well as a grandson of Louis XV and Marie Antoinette, Maria Theresa's daughter, got married on April 19, 1770 in Vienna and on May 16, 1770 in Versailles.

Louis XVI was incapable of leading his marital life for several years. Their unhappy marital life for seven years not only changed their characters mentally, but also had a great influence upon the history of dress, its ornaments and the world. He was a man with lack of decision, and wanted to be helped by others, dependent and dispirited owing to his timidity.

Their seven year-unhappy marital life resulted in Marie Antoinette's thoughtless pursuit of pleasure, and finally she searched for desires of dress, masquerade and gambling as its exit. Tragically she became insatiable.

### 3. Her Queen Days

Louis XVI was plain, fat and good natured. He was irresolute and too generous to his wife. Artists praised queen with all kinds of expression and form instead of him as a great monarch. They were busy representing her figure with elegant tableware, marble, terra cotta, unglazed pottery, pastel, and a brilliant ivory miniature. As her appearance and behavior were reflected there as ideal of that time as it is, a nineteen year-old queen became goddess of rococo in every aspect: lovely; noble; charming; pleasure-seeking; attractive. In this way, she was the object of endless deification, whatever she said was considered wise, what she did was considered law, and what she wanted was attained. Even her caprice set the fashion right away. All the court imitated whatever she did, with wild excitement.

Marie Antoinette hated to be controlled, and received a gift, Petit Trianon Castle from Louis XVI, where she didn't have to take a part as queen. Petit Trianon Castle was an artificial rural village constructed at a corner of enormous Versailles under the influence of Rousseau's profession, "Return to the nature! She enjoyed a simple rural life and beauty there, and put on a loose and casual wear without hat.

The Cardinal of Strasbourg de Rohan, aware that Marie Antoinette was crazy for expensive dress and ornaments, wished to improve his social status at Versailles by winning queen's favor, and was swindled by a woman calling herself the Comtesse de La Motte who offered to help him. She was a con artist. She told the cardinal that the queen wanted him to purchase a very expensive diamond necklace on her behalf without being noticed by king. Obediently the cardinal obtained the necklace and gave it to Mme La Motte, expecting the queen to pay for it. Of course, Marie Antoinette never

saw the necklace; Mme La Motte gave the diamonds to her husband, who took them to London and sold them. When the jewelers demanded payment, the Diamond Necklace Affair became public. The cardinal and Mme La Motte were arrested. The cardinal was tried and acquitted. Mme La Motte was imprisoned, publicly flogged, and branded. Eventually this affair attracted the attention of entire Europe, and a corrupt custom like trafficking of official posts, extravagance of the royal household and illegality of some peers were bitterly criticized by the world. Although Marie Antoinette was innocent in the whole affair, king and queen lost their prestige.

When the French Revolution took place in 1789, king, queen, his sisters and children were confined in the Turur Palace, and this misfortune made thoughtless Marie Antoinette wiser and more active. Again they were transferred to Temple and imprisoned in the old fort with a spire, heavy doors and walls.

#### 4. Execution

Marie Antoinette, who was sent to Conciergrie by the Seine River from the Temple Tower, was dragged into court. She was indicted on two counts: an attempted escape abroad and espionage for Austria, and sentenced to death. Wearing black mourning was prohibited for her when she walked to the guillotine, for fear that her salient black mourning might stir up people's sympathy for the execution of Louis X VI. Therefore, she wore light white dress neatly and cleanly and wore light muslin with her neck, wearing high heel satin shoes and hiding her grey hair with hat. She was dragged into the scaffold with her hands tied behind and executed with many spectators watching(Fig. 1).

### III. The Influence Which Marie Antoinette Had upon the Fashion in the Eighteenth Century



(Fig. 1) Marie Antoinette leaving the court.  
(*Marie Antoinette*, p.456)

#### I. Apparel

Louis X VI. succeeded to the French throne in 1774. The undisciplined deportment of his queen, Marie Antoinette, held somewhat in check during the old regime, now had free play. Since her taste ran to dancing, theatricals, and masked escapades, her costumes and those of her court exhibited quixotic tendencies toward absurdity and exaggeration.<sup>1)</sup>

Excessive extravagance was the most prominent trait associated with the last French queen, Marie Antoinette. Marie Antoinette preferred the title Queen of Fashion to that of Queen of France, a lady at court said.<sup>2)</sup>

Marie Antoinette started her daily life by choosing her dress. Usually it took much time for her to choose her apparel, and she indicated her various selections with pins: formal suit when she gave someone an interview; indoor garments in the afternoon; loose dress in the evening. In this way, recognizing the importance of apparel, she hired Rose Bertin as the Royal designer, who was called "the minister of mode"

<sup>1</sup> Payne Blanche, *History of Costume* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers), p.428.

<sup>2</sup> Bronwyn Cosgrave, *Costume & Fashion* (Hamlyn, 2000), p.169.

and exercised much more power to her than the Prime Minister.

In this respect, it was Marie Antoinette and her minister of mode, Miss Bertin that led the French fashion. They played a leading role in the European fashion by dressing mannequins, so called fashion dolls with current creative garments and sending them to every European country.

Rose Bertin planned and worked closely with Marie Antoinette on her wardrobe. She is largely responsible for the general style of the formal costumes of this period and the gauzy festooned trimming, caught with flowers or dainty braids and fringes, which gave the whole a delicate air. The costume in <Fig. 2> illustrates many of these features(Fig. 3), a photograph of a dress of about 1780 in the Metropolitan Museum, is probably the work of the great Rose- at least it is very much in her manner. The diminutive scale of the floral pattern, the narrow stripes, the delicate colors, and the lightness of the silk denote the final phase of the rococo style in dress.<sup>3)</sup> Miss Bertin showed her own new design to Marie Antoinette two or three times a week, discussed them with her queen and revised clothes of the previous days after consultation with Marie.

Court costume retained the hooped silhouette at its greatest expansion, and resumed a rounded contour in the back. Garlands of flowers, swags of diaphanous gauze, flutings and plastics of self fabric, intricate and ingenious silk fringes and fur, helped to give these gowns a fairy tale atmosphere(Fig. 2). One of the many portraits of Marie Antoinette, was made by Mme. Lebrun in 1775.<sup>4)</sup>

Broad, low, curved decolletage continued as a feature of court costumes into Marie Antoinette's reign. The characteristic finish of this open neckline was a band of exquisite lace. Closing were usually down center back. The smooth front



<Fig. 2> Marie Antoinette, 1775.  
(Versailles National Museum)



<Fig. 3> Robe a la Francaise, 1780.  
(Metropolitan Museum of Art)

of the dress was decorated with lace, flowers, ribbon, and jewels.<sup>5)</sup>

The fabric of the gown is used only in a tiny sleeve cap; below it is a sleeve made of ruffles

<sup>3</sup> Payne Blanche, *op. cit.*, p.437.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.428.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.418.

of lace on puffed, delicate fabric, ending with a double ruffle at the elbow. This sleeve design persisted in court costume as late as Marie Antoinette's reign.<sup>6</sup>

Marie Antoinette didn't like corsets and preferred simpler and more practical considerations to ordinary panniers.<sup>7</sup> The tendency in everyday wear was toward a narrower, closer silhouette than during mid-century, possibly due to the peasant influence promoted by Marie Antoinette. These panniers provided ideal supports for the polonaise- the overskirt draped in three great puffs over the back and sides of the petticoat (Fig. 4). Various devices were used to create this draped effect.<sup>8</sup> Marie Antoinette disliked any restraint and this liberal-mindedness had a great influence upon her fashion, which led to the fact that grand panniers disappeared and polonaise appeared. This disappearance of panier made bustle silhouette emerge around 1780.

In 1783, fashion suddenly changed from utter extravagance to extreme simplicity, and, by 1786, panniers, trains and trimming had all disappeared. There were several reasons for the change; the loss of immense fortunes, the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the country clothes of the Queen at the Petit-Trianon and the influence of English Simplicity in dress.<sup>9</sup>

Marie Antoinette began to make a rural life at Petit Trianon on a small scale and simultaneously a plain rustic costume, a thin muslin, a white apron and a big straw hat with a simple ribbon band came into vogue. Through the influence of this artificial village, the length of skirts became shorter like that of maid milking a cow in the ranch and polonaise was widely-spread. Her rural life made a new trend of casual wear showing freedom, and chemise a la-



〈Fig. 4〉 Young elegante in Polonaise dress, 1786.  
(20,000 Years of Fashion, p.303)

reine and negliges were not made of silk any longer but of delicate muslin in white and pastel tone. Habitual costumes were made of simple, comfortable and inexpensive clothes.

Her model farm, the Petite Trianon, inspired a new range of clothes. Simplicity soon became the new theme; white the *au courant colour*. Corresponding to it were the chemise a la reine and negligee, made of muslin and Indian cotton.<sup>10</sup>

The Queen's playing at farming brought about a vogue for cotton prints, sheer aprons and fichus, large simple leghorn hats combined with feathers and jewels. A very popular style, from 1781, was the chemise à la reine, worn by Marie Antoinette.<sup>11</sup>

The chemise a la reine was made of muslin fastened down the back and belted with a black ribbon. The fabric being transparent, the under-

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.419.

<sup>7</sup> Mila Contini, *Fashion* (New York: Crescent Books), p.198.

<sup>8</sup> Payne Blanche, *op. cit.*, pp.428-429.

<sup>9</sup> R. Turner Wilcox, *The Mode in Costume* (New York: Charles-Scribner's Sons), 1958, p.211.

<sup>10</sup> Bronwyn Cosgrave, *op. cit.*, p.174.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.211.

skirt and corset are of rose taffeta (evidently the gown was not quite as relaxed as it appears). The fichu is of linen gauze.<sup>12)</sup>

The style of dress which was to have the most profound influence on future developments in the Neoclassical period, was the chemise à la reine, which derived its name from the costume worn in a controversial portrait of Queen Marie-Antoinette exhibited at the Salon of 1783. (Fig. 5) The Queen wore this kind of dress when pregnant with her first child in 1778.

It is one of the minor ironies of history that this style of dress which, in a more structured form, became the famous Neoclassical Chemise as worn by famous Directoire beauties, was first made popular by Marie-Antoinette.<sup>13)</sup>

Marie Antoinette's chemise a la reine was made entirely of Indian cotton and featured complex gatherings.

Not only did the production of textiles thrive in the late 18th century, so did the techniques for dyeing and printing cloth. One of the best known printed fabrics of the time was Toile de Jouy- unbleached cotton that was printed with wood blocks or copper plates.

Motifs depicted on Toile de Jouy fabric included landscapes, floral patterns, architecture, scenes inspired by passages found in books, plays and mythology as well as leisure activities like ballooning. Marie Antoinette was a Toile de Jouy fan. She had curtains made from it and covered walls, chairs and beds with the romantic, decorative fabric. When Louis XVI granted the factory a Manufacture Royale citation in 1783, the vogue for Toile de Jouy spread through court circles and the bourgeoisie. It continues to this day.<sup>14)</sup>

Robe à la Levite was effected by a British riding suit and had become popular since Marie Antoinette wore it as a maternity dress for the first time in 1778. As she disliked wearing



⟨Fig. 5⟩ Queen Marie-Antoinette wearing a chemise a la reine, 1785.

(A History of Fashion, p.249)

corset, she decided to wear an opulent pleats skirt with a long waist and belt instead of corset, which was first introduced and popularized by her. Additionally, she succeeded to complete a rococo style by mixing a curve, overflowing ornaments and a new trend introduced from Britain on the basis of her innate refined taste(Fig. 6).

Although her creations for Marie Antoinette corresponded to the frilly Rococo style, Bertin is thought to have introduced the masculine-inspired redingote gown-originally an English style-as well as the relatively simple muslin sashed gown to the French woman's wardrobe.<sup>15)</sup> Marie Antoinette wore a simple style of dress with a blue redingote over the top(Fig. 7).

The Queen wears a red velvet robe l'anglaise trimmed with sable and a matching pouf decorated with white silk, ostrich feathers and anegret (heron) plume ; her costume is trimmed with the royal French lace(Fig. 8).

<sup>12</sup> Payne Blanche, *op. cit.*, p.439.

<sup>13</sup> Aileen Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1995), p.71.

<sup>14</sup> Bronwyn Cosgrave, *op. cit.*, pp.179-181.

<sup>15</sup> Bronwyn Cosgrave, *op. cit.*, p.170.



〈Fig. 6〉 Marie-Antoinette wearing robe la levite, 1783.  
(Versailles National Museum)



〈Fig. 7〉 Marie Antoinette wearing a blue redingote over the top, 1775.  
(Costume & Fashion, p.174)

Bertin's dress for her royal patron was based on the ancient French royal colours, white, red and black.<sup>16)</sup>

## 2. Hair Style

The second concern of Marie Antoinette's was what hair style she would wear before her daily task. The favorite hair style was then a grand style which Rose Bertin also arranged for the more fantastic atmosphere. Léonard heaped up the lock on her forehead like tower. First, hairs were erected vertically from their roots on the forehead with the help of big hairpins and solid pomade. Then the plastic world of this artist finally developed in the air 50 cm above eyes, and the replicas of fruits, garden, houses and boats were made there and everything in the world including all kinds of panoramas and landscapes with rolling sea waves could be decorated there with a variety of colors. Furthermore, all the time the event of the day was presented symbolically in order to create a variegated fashion(Fig. 9).

When King was inoculated against smallpox,



〈Fig. 8〉 Queen Marie-Antoinette wearing a red velvet robe l'anglaise, 1786.  
(The Art of Dress, p.77)

the hair style for inoculation appeared immediately, and even a hair style like sailing ship was created in commemoration of naval victory in the American Independence War(Fig. 10).

<sup>16</sup> Aileen Ribeiro, *op. cit.*, pp.75-76.

The decoration of this grand hair style caused noble women to kneel down the floor of carriage when they got in and out of carriage, and the frame of the door in castle was gradually made higher and higher so that they can entered and exited castle without stooping themselves, and even the vault of king's partition was changed into a round one. This means that Queen led this kind of fashion, which proves that she had an unsatiable appetite. By the way, this grand hair style was continuously created until King stopped its trend. It took too much time and professional skill to create this kind of grand hair style, and noble women wanted their hair untouched any combing for 10 days while middle-brow women for about three months in the worst case, which made bad smell, lice and dirty. For this reason, most noble women used a long tool like comb made of gold and ivory in order to scratch an itchy spot on their head. Their hair style began to get simpler and simpler.

### 3. Ornaments

Marie Antoinette was in the habit of wasting money on luxury, extravagant and insatiable in everything. As seen in the Diamond Necklace Affair, she was excessively addicted to expensive dress and ornamental accessories. She needed far bigger diamonds and pearls than other women had. Thus, a great number of ornaments were in vogue at that time.

The most extravagant use of ornamentation, pearls and jewels by the court marked the years 1776 to 1778, even slippers being encrusted with diamonds.<sup>17)</sup>

Queen required many more rings, hair bands, bracelets, ornamental crown, ornamental string with beads and gems for her head, ornaments for shoes and fans with painting than any other noble women in the court. Due to the terrible expenditure to purchase expensive jewelry, she was in serious debt.

Flowers were an expression of the rococo sty-



<Fig. 9> Cartoon of Woman's Hairdress of 1770's.  
(History of Costume, p.434)



<Fig. 10> Hair style representing the American Independence, 1770's.  
(History of Costume, p.435)

le. The sixteenth century was identified with a profusion of jewels and the seventeenth with lace; the eighteenth retained the lace and added flowers.

Corsages were so popular that pockets were

<sup>17</sup> R. Turner Wilcox, *op. cit.*, p.209.



often provided in the lining of the bodice or corset for small vials of water to keep the blossoms fresh. They were also worn on the shoulder and attached to ribbons round the throat.

One of the best-known drawings of Marie Antoinette's reign shows the great wedding-cake shirt of the court gown decorated from waist to hem with festoons of flowers. All in all, it was a feminine century for the ladies.<sup>18)</sup>

The democratic ideals that swept through France towards the end of the century affected every aspect of personal taste, including a preference for pure, clean air and scent as well as a disdain for strong perfumes. Marie Antoinette had already established a fashion for light scents. Violet and rose were among her personal favourites.<sup>19)</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

Marie Antoinette created a new trend of fashion all the time. In court costume, the hoop-silhouette was retained its greatest expansion.

Marie Antoinette disliked any restraint and this liberal-mindedness had a great influence upon her fashion, which led to the fact that grand panniers disappeared and polonaise appeared. This disappearance of panier made bustle silhouette emerge around 1780.

Through the influence of a rural life at Petit Trianon, the length of skirts became shorter. Her rural life made a new trend of casual wear showing freedom. Habitual costumes were made of simple, comfortable and inexpensive clothes.

A very popular style, from 1781, was the chemise la reine, worn by Marie Antoinette. Moreover, her pregnancy resulted in robe la levite without corset affected by the British riding suit.

Marie Antoinette was a Toile de Jouy fan. The vogue for Toile de Jouy spread through court circles and the bourgeoisie.

Also, she created a giant hair style by hiring a hairdresser named Léonard, and several events at that time were represented by the decoration of this grand hair style, which caused noble women to kneel down the floor of carriage.

Marie Antoinette's addiction to personal ornaments decorated by jewelry brought personal outfittings into vogue.

Marie Antoinette had established a fashion for light scents. Violet and rose were among her personal favourites.

Marie Antoinette acted as a typical representative in the eighteenth-century involved in the spirit of rococo age.

It can be believed that even though Marie Antoinette is open to censure owing to her frivolity, vanity and extravagance, she is recognized a creator of womanish, beautiful, delicate and graceful dress and ornaments.

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<sup>18</sup> Payne Blanche, *op. cit.*, p.422.

<sup>19</sup> Bronwyn Cosgrave, *op. cit.*, p.181.

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