‘A DEBATE BETWEEN SILK AND CLOTH’[1] : THE INFLUENCE OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION ON MEN’S FASHION OBSERVED IN PORTRAIT MINIATURES

SEPTEMBER 23, 2024

Portrait miniatures can be a valuable source to the field of fashion history. Sitters are often depicted wearing more quotidian dress than that worn for larger oil portraits, and represent a slightly broader cross-section of society. While I am not a fashion historian, the portrait miniature was in its heyday when revolution erupted in France at the end of the eighteenth century, and French and British miniatures from the period clearly reflect the significant changes in fashion and culture that took place.

Men’s dress in the mid-to-late eighteenth-century portraits consisted (broadly speaking) of knee-breeches with stockings, a coat, waistcoat, shirt with frilled jabot, stock, and a curled, powdered wig. The degree of decoration and luxuriousness of fabric generally increased the higher up the social scale. Earlier in the century, the preference (especially in France) was for colour and pattern, and as much embroidery and silk as you could afford – see figures 1 and 2 for a British and French example.

Fig. 1 [left] JOHN SMART (1741-1811) Portrait miniature of Sir Rowland Winn, 5th Bt (1739-1785), Bt., wearing a pink silk frock coat with lilac lining trimmed with gold, a blue waistcoat embroidered with gold and a black silk solitaire ribbon tied at the back of his powdered wig; dated 1767 – previously sold by The Limner Company

Fig. 2 [right] JEAN DANIEL WELPER (1729-1780) Portrait miniature of Louis, duc de Bourgogne, dauphin of France (1729–1765), wearing brown coat with gold brocade, blue sash and red ribbon of the Saint-Esprit; circa 1760 – for sale with The Limner Company

In England, the fashion was beginning to turn towards more sober colours and utilitarian fabrics, inspired by outdoor pursuits. In figures 3 and 4, the sitters wear darker coloured coats, offset by brightly decorated waistcoats. Eye-catching waistcoats became a mainstay in men's fashion in the 1780s - the last vestige of florid styles from earlier in the century - which stood as a focal point against the new, plainer coats and breeches. Stripes were a particularly popular pattern, especially in France where Louis-Sébastien Mercier wrote in his Tableau de Paris (1787) that the king's zebra was a source of inspiration: 'coats and waistcoats imitate the handsome creature's markings as closely as they can.'[2]

Fig. 3 [left] JOHN SMART (1742-1811) Portrait miniature of a Gentleman, believed to be Chevalier de Luetch, wearing a blue coat, a richly decorated ochre waistcoat with scarlet lining and edging, white stock and frilled lace cravat; 1764 – for sale with The Limner Company

Fig. 4 [right] Attributed to THOMAS DAY (c.1732-1807?) Portrait miniature of a Gentleman wearing a brown coat, a pink and white striped waistcoat, frilled cravat, his hair worn en queue; circa 1780 – for sale with The Limner Company

In May 1789, the Estates-General was summoned for the first time in 150 years. It was to be one of the most significant events leading to the Revolution and dress played an important role.[3] The assembly consisted of representatives from the three estates (social classes), and each was expected to dress according to specific rules for their estate. The dress regulations harked back to archaic sumptuary laws that had long since been abolished and sparked anger. The Clergy, the First Estate, wore 'ecclesiastical robes, some scarlet with ornate lace'. The aristocracy, the Second Estate, 'were entitled to wear suits of black silk decorate with gold braid, white stockings, feathered hats and swords'. The Third Estate, which represented the other 97% of the population, where required to wear 'suits of plain black cloth, cravats made of muslin instead of lace, and

black stockings'.

Violent revolution broke out in July the same year and almost from the outset, revolutionaries could be recognised by their dress: the earliest and most widely-worn sign of support was a rosette made of ribbon in the colours blue, white and red, known was the revolutionary cockade.[4][5] (Indeed, it became dangerous not to wear one as it was decreed that anyone without a cockade should be deemed a counter-revolutionary.) This combination of colours, the tricolore, came to be adopted across fashion by some in a show of patriotism. A study of French portrait miniatures from the period (for example those in the Tansey Miniatures Collection), shows numerous men's and women's outfits seemingly assembled to incorporate the tricolore.

Factions at both ends of the political scale came to be defined by their manner of dress: the revolutionary sansculottes (those 'without breeches'), and the dandyish, counter-revolutionary muscadins (the 'perfumed ones'). The militant revolutionaries, the sansculottes, earned their name by doing away with the breeches (culottes) of the Ancien Régime in favour of long-trousers (pantalons) in the style of sailors. As well as long trousers, the sansculottes often wore a carmagnole[6], a short, boxy jacket worn by peasants and named after the north-west Italian town of Carmagnola. They wore sabots, a type of wooden clog or heavy leather shoe with a wood sole which was considered a work shoe associated with the lower classes in France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Italy in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. Revolutionaries also adopted more symbolic elements of clothing such as the bonnet rouge derived from the Phrygian cap or red cap of liberty, the felt cap worn by emancipated slaves of ancient Rome and an attribute of Libertas, the Roman goddess of liberty.

Fig. 5 JEAN-MARIE RIBOU (1744–1817) Portrait miniature of a Gentleman with headscarf with white, red and blue pattern; c.1793 – Tansey Miniatures Collection Versailles

The sitter depicted in figure 5 may be wearing a headscarf emulating the Phrygian cap and likely a revolutionary. He also appears slightly unkempt, a style that was deliberately used by some to demonstrate a departure from the highly groomed court style of the Ancien Régime. This portrait also demonstrates how wigs and hair powder were rejected in favour of natural hair. While wigs and powdered hair were not the preserve of aristocrats (Robespierre wore a powdered wig), they were associated with the trappings of the Ancien Régime (see figures 2 and 6) and many revolutionaries preferred to wear their hair naturally; hence both gradually went out of fashion. Not only was natural hair considered more democratic, it echoed what was happening in England[7], where a tax on hair powder was introduced in 1795.

Fig. 6 JEAN-URBAIN GUÉRIN (1760-1836) Portrait miniature of George-Fréderic Bapst (1756-1826), crown jeweller, en buste, in profile to the left, in coat, waistcoat and frilled cravat, powdered hair en queue, painted in brown camaïeu heightened with white on a dark-blue ground; circa 1785 – for sale with The Limner Company

At the other end of both the political and sartorial spectrum were the Incroyables, and their female counterparts the Merveilleuses. They belonged to a royalist movement that emerged with the Thermidorean Reaction. Many were from aristocratic or wealthy backgrounds and their appearance signified their allegiance to the Ancient Régime: breeches, green jackets or waistcoats (green was a colour associated with the late king's brother), tricorn hats, swords, silks and embroideries.

What made them quite so 'incredible' was the extremity of their look - think punk-dandy: stocks or cravats wound so high that they covered their entire neck, chin and jaw, oversized monocles, large hoop earrings, walking canes. The Incroyables wore their hair à la chien: the back and top cut short and the sides worn long (often shoulder-length) falling over their ears. Some shaved the back altogether or combed it up and fastened it with a comb to imitate the hairstyles of those condemned to the guillotine, others braided their hair. Figure 7 shows a gentleman wearing the high stock or cravat, braided hair and hoop earrings associated with the Incroyables.

Fig. 7 UNKNOWN Portrait in Profile of a Young Man, n.d. Watercolor on ivory portrait in metal locket with glass lenses, Image (sight): 2 x 2 in. (5.1 x 5.1 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Museum Collection Fund, 25.905 (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, 25.905_bw_SL1.jpg)

Perhaps the most bizarre of their affectations was the hunched posture, which some tailors catered for with special coats pleated to enhance the effect. They frequently affected a lisp, which historians variously claim was to avoid the letter ‘R’ for Revolution, or because a ‘posh’ French accent skipped over the sound.

Mainstream men’s fashion adapted gradually towards a more practical and less ostentatious style. The changes are quite apparent when we compare portrait miniatures of the early nineteenth century, such as the examples of figures 8 and 9, to figures 1-7.

Fig. 8 JEAN-BAPTISTE JACQUES AUGUSTIN (1759-1832) Portrait miniature of Anne-Ferdinand-Louis de Berthier, Comte de Sauvigny (1782-1864), wearing blue coat with brass buttons, ochre waistcoat and white stock; 1805 – recently sold by The Limner Company

Interestingly the above sitter, Comte de Sauvigny, was a member of the les Ultraroyalistes, a political movement said to be ‘more royalist than the king’, yet his attire shows the lasting influence of the revolution on fashion and culture. Embroidery and embellishment of any kind had been more or less left behind in men’s fashion by the turn of the century, in favour of a more sober colours and a utilitarian fit - perhaps epitomised in the frock coat. The frock coat was an understated garment, usually blue or neutral in colour, made from woollen cloth or linen and derived from working dress. It had been adopted by English gentlemen as it was practical for country pursuits. Anna Reynolds describes the French version: ‘known as a frac, was more decorative and tight-fitting, often made of silk’.[8] Both these gentlemen appear to be wearing a version of the frac or frock coat as well as tied cravats, also perhaps in the English style.[9]

Fig. 9 JEAN FRANCOIS HUET VILLIERS (1772-1813) Portrait miniature of a Gentleman, c.1805 – for sale with The Limner Company

Both sitters' natural, unpowdered hair is worn in a short crop in a tousled style à la Titus. This classically-inspired look was part of a larger interest in classicism, brought about by the Revolution which idealised the political 'democracies' of antiquity, and later by Napoleon's occupation of Naples and the excavations of ancient ruins. This classical interest is also reflected in the circular format of figure 8, which emulated ancient Roman portraits, and became popular in French miniature painting.

Fashion historians note that styles had been beginning to turn plainer in the 1780s, but that the events of the revolution accelerated these changes. Fashion certainly gained an unprecedented political charge and even became dangerous, with those dressing in Ancien Régime style of clothing at risk of being deemed counter-revolutionary. It's also interesting to observe the influence of English sporting clothing at this time. Perhaps in search of less ostentatious modes of dress, the French found the inspiration they were looking for in this English style.

Simplicity had arrived with force, and, although quality of tailoring and fabric was still of the utmost importance, men's fashion would continue on a sombre trajectory throughout the nineteenth century.

[1] Honoré de Balzac, taken from Lévy, C. (ed.), Oeuvres completes de H. de Balzac (Paris), 1869-76, xx (1870), p.492, as quoted in Reynolds, R., Style and Society: Dressing the Georgians (Royal Collection Trust), 2023, p.316

[2] Ribeiro, A., Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe, 1715-1789 (Yale University Press, New Haven & London), revised edition 2002, p. 208

[3] Reynolds, A., Style & Society: Dressing the Georgians (Royal Collection Trust), 2023, p.315. All the quotations in this paragraph are taken from this source.

[4] Surviving examples, along with other garments from the period can be viewed online here: https://unframed.lacma.org/2016/08/03/french-revolutionary-fashion

[5] Blue and red were the traditional Parisian colours, and white was added (the colour of the Bourbons) initially to indicate loyalty to the sovereign, thereby making the colour combination a national symbol. Later, this trio of colours assumed additional symbolism including representing the three estates and the revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

[6] ‘La Carmagnole’ is also the title of a French Revolutionary song and dance.

[7] Fashions travelled in both directions across the channel at this time. For example: the redingote (‘riding coat’ with a French accent) and the robe a l’anglaise.

[8] Reynolds, p.122

[9] See Reynolds. p.112.