

An Incredible Fan!

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Fashion is not just about wearing but also might be about a new way of appearing for pleasure, including the pleasure of looking at other men and women. The object in focus here, an 'Incroyable Fan' located in the Nordic Museum in Sweden, is a good example of the complexity of fashion meanings. This short essay will range a little across the channel from England to France and on to Sweden, as the cultures knew what was going on elsewhere and were becoming very symbiotic. They pirated each others' prints, and so French images were well known in England, for example. The French loved English dressing, but they created from its elements much more than the sum of its parts.

Images were on the move. An expanded understanding of fashion supported the transnational migration of fashion-related motifs into Swedish print culture in the 18th century, and the 'instabilities' of printed matter allowed motifs to travel beyond the printed paper to ceramics, fans, and other objects that participated in sociability and fashionable display. This fan is carefully decorated with one of the most famous fashion caricatures of the late 1790s: *Les Incroyables* by Carle Vernet. Together with the female counterpart, *Les Merveilleuses*, these fashionable figures are associated with the French Directoire period, 1795-1799 and the Counter-Revolution movement in which surviving members of the aristocracy and a growing number of 'nouveau riche' were drawn to exuberant appearances and an aesthetic of exaggeration.

The male figures on this paper fan are wearing very carefully styled dress; characteristic layers of clothing, large scarves, tight vests, long hair, wide hats and broad collars. The elaborated details in costumes and accessories make up the fashionable appearance of the men. Their breeches are decorated with red buttons and ribbons by the knee, they wear striped scarves and vests in contrasting colours. The man to the right wears white stockings that are red-spotted with ankle-high boots and a cylindrical top hat that is wide and sloping. The man to the left is wearing a green coat that is lined with a white and red fabric, and on his head a type of *bicorne*, which was very popular during the *Directoire* period. Compared to the printed image by Vernet, the scene on the fan is inverted, the men have changed place with each other, and brighter colours are

used; for example the coat that the man to the left is wearing is bright green, instead of green-bluish, while the other man's coat is blue instead of brown. The quiet drama of their meeting is however kept intact. Lowering his head in a gesture of greeting, the man to the right has taken off his hat, and at the same time displays his elaborate hair. The other man seems surprised and is using a looking glass in order to make a close inspection of the other man and his appearance.

The image of the two men is probably first printed on this paper fan and then hand-coloured, and here one notes that the popular print from which they are copied was sometimes also issued in monotone. The composition of Carle Vernet (1758-1836) was engraved by Darcis. The plate was announced in the *Journal de Paris* on 11 Nivôse an 5 [31 Dec 1796]. As noted in the catalogue 'Au temps des merveilles' [Carnavalet 2005 p 72] the image had 'a prodigious success' with multiple versions and copies known. There were several circular reductions engraved by Copia and by Levilly that were designed for boxes and snuff box lids, and there are larger versions in woodcut that may have reached the poorer classes of society. Under the title, the plate by Darcis had the following dialogue:

Eh! mais c'est impossible,
[je le croyais emigré.
Ah! c'est incroyable; voila La Fleur,
[mon ci-devant valet.

The political satire of the text was removed as the images were copied. For example they appeared without text in the May issue 1797 of the German magazine *Journal für Fabrik, Manufaktur, Handlung und Mode*. This journal was edited in Leipzig, but probably read also in Sweden at the time. Here we have a motif very much associated with the print medium, transposed onto a fan. Numerous surviving fans from the late 18th century exhibit the strong influence of print culture on the decoration of fans.

In the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period, dress featured as part of the visual jokes in political caricature. Respectful fashion plates and caricatures issued from the same hand of experienced illustrators: Jean-Francois Bosio (1764-1827) and Philibert Louis Debucourt (1755-1832), who deployed an extremely elegant style and fine colouring as part of the joke. In Paris the famed series by Horace Vernet, *Le Supreme Bon Ton* from *Caricatures Parisiennes* c1800 used the figure types and linear illustrative style

of the contemporary fashion periodical, but distorted the figures, poses and situations to expose the ludicrous nature of contemporary manners. H. Vernet provided 'serious' fashion plates for Pierre La Mésangère who was both the publisher of *Le journal des dames et des modes* c1810 as well as the famous caricature series *Incroyables et Merveilleuses* (1810-1818), which continued the work of his father Carle Vernet (1758-1832) from the 1790s. The paradox and collisions of exoticism and historicism of early-nineteenth-century dress is extremely well conveyed in these French images. The series *Le Bon Genre* (French periodical 1814-16) set English and French fashions side by side, subject to some distortion, in order to have a ready-made caricature which also provides fashion information and comments on national identity. Louis-Léopold Boilly's exquisite painted genre scenes of fashionable life often verge on caricature with rather too much male and female buttock revealed through the chamois leather and muslin.

It is difficult to say if *Les Incroyables* was included in the décor of this particular fan as political satire, caricature of dress or as a fashionable image. In any case the fan is a prominent object, that points to the integration of print in general, and fashion-related imagery in particular – even caricature –, into fashionable appearance.

The records of Nordic Museum propose that the fan belonged to Mrs Dorothea Otter, born Schönmeyr (1758-1798) or possibly to her sister Mrs Ulla Otter (born Schönmeyr) (1766-1842), who married the first's husband. Supposing that the first *provenance* is correct, this fan most certainly reveals the prompt importation of French fashionability into Sweden in the 1790s; Vernet's print was released in Paris in December 1796 and Mrs Otter died in 1798. Besides the scene with *Les Incroyables*, there are other ornamental elements that associate the fan with late Neoclassical aesthetics of the last years of the century; on either side of the caricatured scene are attached printed medallions in black and yellow that show *putti* playing on a scale, and the upper part of the front-side is decorated with elegant painted *guirlandes*. The backside is covered with a geometric pattern made up of gold thread embroideries on a white tulle. The accounts of the museum suggest that the fan is of Swedish production, but judging from the quality of the craftsmanship it might be a French import. The embroidered décor is very much like the trimming on women's evening gowns and accessories, with ornaments that resemble pineapples; a highly fashionable fruit at the time, and which was fashionable on court embroidery during the First Empire (*Age of Napoleon*, 104).

This lavish object demonstrates a keen interest in contemporary European dress and politics, a knowing visual joke about the act of seeing and being seen, and is an outcome of an innovative and absorbent fashion culture in Sweden at the time.

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