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### Naming a Woman's Gown dating to about 1775 - 85<sup>1</sup>

A gown made of silk with a pattern of irregular vertical stripes in pastel green, shades of purple, black, and white on a cream-coloured ground, belongs to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (T.96-1972). The silk is dense, tabby-woven, and has a glazed surface. Because of its high lustre it would have been called lustring or lustring in English in the eighteenth century. Such silks had been produced in England since the late seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup> The gown's fitted bodice closes edge to edge at the centre front. The wide, rounded neckline, the three-quarter length sleeves, and the lower ends of the bodice front are decorated with ruffles made from the outer fabric. A pleated skirt that is open in the front is sewn to the bodice. The skirt can be gathered up by two long silk loops that correspond to two buttons at the back of the bodice. Originally a petticoat of the same fabric would have been worn underneath the gown. Of this petticoat only one panel survives, having been converted into an apron in about 1830 (T.96A-1972). A gown with the skirt gathered up by drawstrings or loops like this one, is today usually referred to as a *polonaise* or *robe à la polonaise*. So, in all published accounts, this gown has been called a *polonaise*.<sup>3</sup>

This gown, however, serves as a good example of just how complicated it is to find out what a piece of clothing in a certain cut was called at the time of its creation. Usually eighteenth-century garments enter a museum's collection as more or less anonymous objects without exact information on their provenance, let alone with a piece of paper attached telling the curator what the wearer called such a garment. Today we tend to rely on the terminology in existing books on dress history, which can sometimes lead to erroneous assumptions. In the case of this gown we are lucky because the fast-changing fashions in the 1770s and 1780s were accompanied by the founding of fashion journals in which the cut and name were shown. In this respect French magazines provide us with the most detailed information. One of the earliest publications of this type was the *Gallerie des Modes et Costumes Français*, a series of fashion plates that were issued irregularly between 1778 and 1787. The first real French fashion journal, that is a magazine with full text that appeared twice a month, was the *Cabinet des Modes*, published from November 1785 on. Others followed soon in different countries. They are precious sources because they show the fashions in engravings and also describe them in the

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<sup>2</sup> Florence M. Montgomery, *Textiles in America. 1650-1870* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), pp. 283-285.

<sup>3</sup> *Two Centuries of British Fashion From the Collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London (Moscow: Kremlin Museums, 2009), Cat. 9, p. 77; <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O110099/robe/> 2011-02-06.

text, thus communicating to all readers the clothing terms used at the time. Nonetheless, it takes a great deal of detective work to relate the garments in the pictures to the terminology used in the text. Fashion journals do not really explain the shape and cut of a gown. Only comparing the details shown in the engravings to the names given to them there, makes it possible to come to a conclusion about the cut and the look of a specific fashion and its name. In this context a surviving historic garment represents a primary source from the past, which can be read and analysed just like a text or a picture. This analysis requires special knowledge of the cut of historic dress and of the techniques of textile and garment manufacturing as well as of dress and textile history. By comparing the results of such technical research to written and pictorial sources we can gain a more complex view on historic dress. This article now proposes that this gown is not a *polonaise* or *robe à la polonaise*, as previously published, but rather a *robe à l'anglaise retroussée*. It introduces the characteristics of the *robe à l'anglaise* and reveals the details of this gown's cut and alterations.

The *robe à l'anglaise* originated in France in the 1770s. At this time the French admired English styles that were simpler and more comfortable than their own fashions. Indeed, the *Cabinet des Modes* changed its title to the *Magasin des Modes Nouvelles Françaises et Anglaises* in November 1786, acknowledging the importance of English styles to French fashion. The English gown with the back pleats sewn to the bodice from the neckline down to the waist had been known to the French as *robe ajustée* or *robe à l'anglaise* for a long time (fig. 1). About 1775 this dress type was transformed in France by placing seams instead of pleats at the back and providing the skirt with a train (fig. 2). The *Gallerie des Modes et Costumes Français* explained this shape in great detail in 1778 along with an engraving, which might indicate that the *robe à l'anglaise* was quite new then (fig. 3). It was considered very elegant because its curvaceous seams enhanced the beauty of a slender waist and it became the most popular gown during the 1780s. Even in Britain women adopted this French version of the English gown and seem to have been rather fond of the looped-up skirts.<sup>4</sup>

The construction of the V&A gown is informative. As the bodice closes edge to edge at the centre front there is no need for a stomacher. This was a feature introduced in the 1770s. There are no traces of any former hooks and eyes or lacing, so originally the front parts were probably pinned together, with the right side slightly overlapping the left one. This deduction is supported by the fact that the ruffles around the neckline do not quite reach the centre front. The lower end of the bodice front curves down towards the centre. The side seams of the bodice are placed towards the back. The tight-fitting back is cut from two pieces with a centre back seam. The waistline ends in a point at the centre

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<sup>4</sup> Aileen Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress: Fashion in England and France 1750 to 1820* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 66.

back. The three-quarter-length sleeves are provided with narrow cuffs, which were made as extra parts from strips of the outer fabric gathered into ruffles and then sewn onto the sleeves. The modest decoration around the neckline consists of a narrow strip of box-pleated outer fabric with the edges pinked in scallop shapes. A similar decoration, but even narrower, is applied to the lower front of the bodice. Stitch marks and the remains of former pleating on the bodice fronts indicate that the original shape of the dress was a sack-back gown worn with a stomacher. It was very common to alter dresses in the eighteenth century, as they were made from long panels of precious fabric. The bodice and the sleeves are lined with a fine linen fabric, which shows no former stitch marks. So this was probably a new lining put in at the time of the alteration of the dress. At the centre back two vertical strips of whalebone are inserted between the lining and the outer fabric. At waist level a small linen tape was sewn to the lining at the centre back. This tape can be tied around the waist so that the gown fits closely at the back, achieving the desired slender silhouette. There is an underarm lining (possibly performing the function of a dress shield) on each side made from a double layer of a coarse linen fabric. It is sewn onto the lining and may date from the time when the dress was altered.

The skirt is cut straight from five panels of fabric: one at each side of the front and three at the back. The skirt is gathered at the top into cartridge pleats and sewn onto the bodice from the outside so it looks like a tiny ruffle, which gives a pretty effect. However this is remarkable because the usual way would have been to stitch the skirt to the bodice from the inside. There is an opening in both of the skirt's side seams and the matching petticoat would have had the same. These openings were important because through them the wearer could reach the pockets that were tied around her waist (fig. 4). The skirt's front opening is straight, only slightly rounded towards the bottom and ending at an angle. There is a wide facing around the hem, made from white *sarcenet*, a thin silk fabric of plain weave.<sup>5</sup> Two loops, made of green silk cord, are sewn to the lining of the bodice at the lower ends of the side seams. They can be attached to two buttons sewn on at the same place on the outside, and thus used to gather up the skirt.

Simple gowns like this made from light-weight fabrics were intended for everyday wear in the summer and for informal occasions. They were worn by middle-class women, a fact that is proven by the famous album of Barbara Johnson, now also in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum.<sup>6</sup> Barbara Johnson was a single lady from a well-off clerical family. She had several gowns made, called *negligees*, in the late 1760s and 1770s from striped lustrings that resemble the fabric of the gown

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<sup>5</sup> See Florence M. Montgomery, *Textiles in America. 1650-1870* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), p. 339.

<sup>6</sup> London, Victoria and Albert Museum, T.219-1973.

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O140029/album/> 2012-02-06.

shown here, which suggests a similar date for the original sack-back dress from which the current gown is made.<sup>7</sup> The small ruffles at the cuffs appeared in Britain by 1775, so apparently did the *robe à l'anglaise*.<sup>8</sup> There is no decoration along the fronts of the skirt, which may indicate that the dress was altered into its current shape around 1780 to 1785.

There is a rather similar gown with matching petticoat made from a striped lustring fabric in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, which was given by the same donor in the same year.<sup>9</sup> It is an English-type gown with fitted back. It, too, has been transformed from an earlier garment.<sup>10</sup> The sleeve decorations look very similar to the dress described above. The skirt can also be looped up. Another quite similar dress made from a glazed taffeta with a design of coloured vertical stripes on a cream-coloured ground can be found in the collection of the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin. The gown was made in France around 1780 to 1786.<sup>11</sup> It is a variant of the *robe à l'anglaise* because the two centre back panels run from the neckline to the hem without waist seam. This style was called in French a *fourreau à l'anglaise* or *robe en fourreau*. In all of these dresses we can observe a taste for the simpler, more comfortable fashions of the 1770s and 1780s that made English styles so popular in France and the rest of Europe.

The careful study of the lustring dress in the Victoria and Albert Museum has revealed that its former attribution as a polonaise gown cannot be sustained because the existing documentary and visual evidence does not use this term for this style of gown. Reattribution of the gown as a *robe à l'anglaise retournée* has only been possible through detailed technical research on extant garments, a method that is still quite new in the discipline of dress history.<sup>12</sup> This case study shows that the importance of this method should not be underestimated. The rich information from surviving clothes married to careful consultation of the written and pictorial primary sources broadens our view on historic dress. In some cases it can even change our perception of the past as handed down to us from former generations of scholars.

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<sup>7</sup> Natalie Rothstein (ed.), *Barbara Johnson's Album of Fashions and Fabrics* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Madeleine Ginsburgh, *Barbara Johnson and Fashion*, in: Natalie Rothstein (ed.), *Barbara Johnson's Album of Fashions and Fabrics* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> Gown and petticoat, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, T. 92&A-1972.  
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O74098/gown-and-petticoat/> 2011-02-06.

<sup>10</sup> Avril Hart and Susan North, *Historic Dress in Detail* (London: V&A Publications, 1998), pp. 94-95.

<sup>11</sup> Robe, Kunstgewerbemuseum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2003, KR 11a-b, see Kulturstiftung der Länder (ed.), *Die Sammlung Kamer/Ruf. Mode im Kunstgewerbemuseum* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen, 2005), pp. 42-43.

<sup>12</sup> For technical research on eighteenth-century dress cf. Norah Waugh, *The Cut of Women's Clothes 1600-1930* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1968); Ellen Andersen, *Moden i 1700-årene: Danske Dragter* (Copenhagen: Nationalmuseet, 1977); Janet Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion 1: Englishwomen's Dresses and Their Construction* (New York: Macmillan/Drama Book Publishers, 1985); Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).