

## A COURT MANTUA (V&A T.592:1-15-1993)

By Jenny Lister and Joanne Hackett, V&A (with Lesley Miller)

In 2007 Joanne Hackett conserved and reconstructed a British court gown (V&A T.592:1-15-1993) [Figs. 1-4] which is now on display in the newly refurbished Fashion Gallery at the V&A. The gown is made of cream-coloured silk (*gros de tours*) brocaded in metal threads of different qualities, the silk probably being woven in Lyon in France. The silk design dates to around 1753 to 1755, while the gown and petticoat were made in Britain probably between 1755 and 1760. The cut of the ensemble is distinctive, characteristic of the form of mantua worn by women at the British court in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. The ensemble usually comprised three matching pieces: a petticoat (i.e. skirt), a gown which was worn over the petticoat, and a triangular stomacher which was pinned under the open front of the gown, across the body to hide the stays. In this case, the stomacher that arrived with the petticoat and gown was not original, and the one used on display is a reproduction made to harmonize with the gown and express the original effect.

The court mantua retained fossilized elements of the fashionable gown of the same name, worn in the late-17<sup>th</sup> century. By the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the remnants of a train had been formalized into a pleated flap from waist to hem [Figs. 3&4], and the wide hoops of fashionable dress had been adopted. The distinctive outside panels of the petticoat and the folded panels of the train distinguished the mid-century mantua from other gowns, such as the sack back or nightgown. The mantua was made of silk – as befitted its courtly usage – and was adorned with a variety of decoration, intrinsic to the fabric or applied to it, on the skirt and on the robings which ran down the front of the gown, and on the stomacher. It was accessorized with lace ruffles visible below the edge of the gown's sleeves, long gloves, lace cap and lappets on the head, jewellery, and a fan. While the form of the gown remained fairly static, certain details revealed the wearer was following fashionable taste - the cut of the sleeves (a turn-back cuff in the 1740s, flounces in the 1750s and 1760s), the choice of seasonally changing silk designs for the fabric, and the selection of new costly fashionable lace accessories. The colour white,

particularly with metal threads, was associated with brides and was used for the most formal occasions.

Most other European countries favoured the French *grand habit* for court dress.<sup>1</sup> Like the mantua, it was a late 17<sup>th</sup>-century ‘invention’ which continued in Court use through the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Its skirts were wide and worn over hoops, and it was made of silk adorned with fashionable accessories. Unlike the mantua, it comprised a rigid sleeveless bodice, worn over a petticoat, three rows of lace frills covering the upper arm [Fig. 5]. Often a fichu was worn over the shoulders and neck. Both mantua and *grand habit* wearers conformed to the etiquette of their respective courts. While British women wore mantuas at the court of St James in London, they were required to wear the *grand habit* when attending the French Court at Versailles.<sup>2</sup>

## History of mantuas

Jenny Lister

The mantua is a gown associated in particular with Britain where it changed in cut and function over a period of about a century and a half. The term seems to have come from the French *manteau*, which appears frequently in the early fashion plates in *Le Mercure Galant* at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Beginning as a fashionable gown in the late-17<sup>th</sup> century, by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century it had become formal attire worn only at court. In this later form, it was clearly distinguishable from French court dress which was the model for most other European courts. The mantua was, however, used in the Netherlands, probably popularized by the marriage of William IV with the British princess Anne in 1734.<sup>3</sup>

The mantua entered the fashionable wardrobe during the 1670s, and twenty years later it had become the main garment worn by women. In its original form, the mantua was closely modelled on the T-shaped male banyans or nightgowns imported, like so

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<sup>1</sup> *Fastes de Cour et Cérémonies Royales. Le Costume de Cour en Europe 1650-1800*, exh. cat., Château de Versailles, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> See Alexander Roslin’s portrait of the British ambassador’s wife Lady Hertford, 1765. Hunterian Museum, Glasgow University. <http://www.huntsearch.gla.ac.uk/cgi-bin/foxweb/huntsearch/DetailedResults.fwx?collection=art&searchTerm=43803>

<sup>3</sup> *Modes en miroir. La France et la Hollande au temps des Lumières*, exh. cat. Paris Musées, 2005.

many other innovations in dress, from Asia. The kimono-like robe was at first worn by women over the stays and petticoat in the privacy of the home. See, for example, the miniature version made for the doll of Lady Clapham [Figs 6-8]. The simple construction could be replicated easily by seamstresses who had previously made only undergarments in simple shapes and light-weight fabrics, and had little tailoring expertise. It was probably the first female gown to be made by women rather than men. Indeed, British dressmakers were known as mantua-makers until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, generations after mantuas had ceased to be worn. Mantuas could also be bought ready-made from ‘gown warehouses’ which were advertised frequently in the press.

The first mantuas – of which very few examples survive - were made from two lengths of wool or silk, using the full width of the fabric.<sup>4</sup> Each length ran continuously from the front hem over the shoulder, and was seamed together at the centre back, with the pattern carefully matched to form a generous fall from the neck to the train. The only extra shaping required was the addition of two rectangles to form sleeves. Extra width at the hem was achieved by the insertion of triangular gussets at each side seam. Gradually the mantua became more fitted, with the back pleated to the waist with flat stitched-down pleats, and the front bodice opening at the front to expose a triangular section of the stays, which was covered by a decorative stomacher. The main appeal of the mantua lay in the careful draping of the length of the gown from the front, over the hips, to reveal the petticoat and form an elegant ‘tail’ of pinned up drapery to be seen from the back. This was the basic garment from which all other varieties of female dress developed.

Mantuas with closely fitted bodices, worn over heavily boned stays were particularly popular with English women. Petticoats with hoops of cane or whalebone were introduced in about 1710 to support the petticoat and drapery of the mantua train and these also became widely worn despite critics such as Jonathan Swift noting that ‘a woman may hide a moderate gallant under them’[Figs 9-10].<sup>5</sup> Hoops reached their most

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<sup>4</sup> A late 17<sup>th</sup>-century example is to be found in New York and three early 18<sup>th</sup>-century in Shrewsbury (UK), New York and Los Angeles. <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/33.54a,b>  
<http://collectionsonline.lacma.org/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=record;id=67290;type=101>  
<http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/80002978>

Janet Arnold, ‘A Mantua c. 1708-09 from Clive House, Shrewsbury’, *Costume*, no. 4, 1970, pp. 26-31; Janet Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion 1660-1860*, London, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Swift, *Journal to Stella*, ed. Herbert Williams (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), Letter 34, London, 13 November 1711, Vol. II, p. 409.

extreme width in the 1740s and then passed out of use as fashions increasingly emulated classical simplicity [Figs 11-12]. They were to linger, fossilized in the court mantua, into the early-19<sup>th</sup> century.

By 1750 the mantua was worn only at court and it had evolved into a fitted bodice with a formalized, attenuated train extending no further than the hem of the petticoat [Figs 13-16]. It was accessorized with costly lace ruffles at the elbow and lace cap and lappets on the head, and as many diamonds as possible. Grand court events provided seasonal employment for thousands of craftspeople in the London dressmaking trades. Queen Charlotte particularly insisted that women bought silks made by the Spitalfields weavers in the East End of London although there is evidence that some mantuas were made of imported French silks, such as the one used in the mantua described here [Figs 1-4] The silks were often woven with metal threads that would sparkle in candlelight, according to whether they were flat threads, curly or a mixture of both (*filé, frisé, lame*). Different quantities of metal might be incorporated into these silks. Those made in Lyon came in three qualities, which varied radically in price: the price per ell of those containing large quantities could be as much as twice the annual wage of an unskilled labourer, at a time when a court gown might use 15 ells or more of fabric. A more modest silk of this type would have been considerably cheaper. A merchant's sample book in the V&A contains several samples of white silks brocaded in silver and gold, some densely, others sparingly [Fig. 17-19].

Exquisite embroidery was also seen on court dress, often depicting typically English naturalistic flowers in coloured silks [Figs 13-14]. This work was carried out by professional embroiderers. Mary Delany, an accomplished artist and embroiderer, and an astute observer of fashion, appraised the clothes worn by the 'finest ladies' at Court with a professional eye. In 1738 she described Lady Huntingdon's court dress as being 'a most laboured piece of finery, the pattern much properer for a stucco staircase than the apparel of a lady, - a mere shadow that tottered under every step she took under the load'. In 1741 she expressed envy at the Duchess of Queensberry's mantua, which was 'white satin embroidered, the bottom of the petticoat brown hills covered with all sorts of weeds, and

every breadth had an old stump of a tree... round which twined nasturtians, ivy, honeysuckles, periwinkles, convolvuses, and all sorts of twining flowers'.<sup>6</sup>

The American Richard Rush was transfixed by the sight of a thousand women in court dress at Queen Charlotte's birthday in 1818, each one seeming 'to rise out of a gilded little barricade – giving an effect so unique, so fraught with feminine grace and grandeur, that it seemed as if a curtain had risen to show a pageant in another sphere'.<sup>7</sup> British court dress was seen as a supreme example of national eccentricity, but the mantua and petticoat had an important symbolic role, reinforcing the status and longevity of court traditions in a rapidly changing world. On his accession to the throne in 1820, George IV finally removed this vestige of his father's generation by allowing women to attend court functions in dresses without hoops, in the more natural, fashionable silhouette of the day.

## **History of the V&A mantua**

Joanne Hackett

The mantua that introduces this article belongs to the mid 18<sup>th</sup>-century ceremonial version of the gown, as close examination of its fabric, its original form and subsequent reconstruction have confirmed. Its history is intriguing. It arrived in the Museum in 1993 in fifteen pieces, at which stage the independent dress historian Cally Blackman made a paper pattern of it. Fourteen years were to pass before its conservation and reconstruction became possible, thanks to the development of an important loan exhibition to the Kremlin Museums in Moscow, entitled 'Two Centuries of British Fashion from the Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum'. At this exhibition in Autumn 2008, the mantua greeted visitors in all its splendour, displayed along with other simpler gowns and silks in a theatrical setting that evoked the English countryside – green grass, beautiful floral arrangements. A blue sky with white clouds scudding across it was projected

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Delany, *Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs Delany*, ed. Lady Llanover (London, 1861-2), Vol. III, p. 302 & Vol. II, p. 417 February 1741.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rush, *A Residence at the Court of London* (first published 1833) (London, 1987), Chapter 9, p. 56.

overhead on the white vaulted ceiling of the chamber [Fig. 20].<sup>8</sup> The process of achieving this splendid position and presence for the mantua had been complex.

The gown had been found in May 1989 by Theresa Merville Crawley while clearing her grandfather's attic in Cambridge in a box labeled 'dressing up clothes'. A paper label indicated that it had once belonged to a member of the family called Mrs Colonel Clapham, who came from a prominent Welsh family. She was granddaughter of Sidney Parry (née Lewis, b. 1738), an heiress with a considerable fortune who inherited Madryn Castle on the Llyn peninsula. It seems possible that Sidney Parry was, in fact, the original wearer of the mantua, as she was of sufficient status to attend court, of sufficient wealth to own such a splendid gown, and was between 17 and 22 when the gown was made between 1755 and 1760 – in other words at an age where she might be presented at Court.

In between the 18<sup>th</sup>-century use of the garment and its arrival in the V&A, the bodice had been used for 19<sup>th</sup>-century fancy dress. The adjustments to make it fit a 19<sup>th</sup>-century body included shortening the sleeves and removing the train. The petticoat had been taken apart entirely and reassembled, using only four of the original nine panels of silk that made up the skirt. The bodice was in seven parts, as was the petticoat. The silk was crumpled and there was evidence of considerable abrasion to the metal threads throughout the entire garment.<sup>9</sup>

The conservation and reconstruction of the mantua in 2007 involved the input of many specialists. Previous curatorial records were examined and comparisons were made with two other mantuas in the Museum in order to check construction details against the pattern made by Cally Blackman in 1993 [Figs 21-22]. One other V&A mantua (T.44-1910) was so similar in construction that it could have been made by the same dressmaker. The paper pattern was then used to make a full toile of the mantua, petticoat and stomacher in unbleached cotton muslin. This allowed the positioning of the train, sleeve ruffles and petticoat panels to be tried out on a mannequin without handling of the mantua itself [Fig. 23]. This procedure underlined the extremely small size of the bodice,

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<sup>8</sup> *Two Centuries of British Fashion from the Collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, exh. cat., Moscow Kremlin Museums, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Joanne Hackett, 'She Walks in Beauty: the conservation, reconstruction, mounting and packing of an English court mantua', paper delivered at the *North American Conservation Conference*, Omnipress, 2009, pp. 65-80.

and the extremely wide skirt, and thus the need to create a custom mannequin in order to display it safely. The toile also allowed the mannequin acquired to be adjusted and padded to fit the gown perfectly.

Before the garment was reconstructed and mounted on the mannequin, the silk required conservation treatment because of previous use in at least two different centuries and a considerable time in storage. All loose gold threads were sewn down with laid couching, and the silk was humidified to remove the creases. Wherever possible the original construction holes were used to sew the panels back together. This method of working was subsequently assessed as extremely satisfactory because it had enabled a minimal amount of handling of this rare textile object, and thus protected it as far as possible against any further damage.

Support for the gown was essential. Again the paper pattern was an invaluable tool. Many layers of underpinnings were made: a stiff underskirt of cotton calico and steel boning, followed by a lighter petticoat of calico and net were covered with a silk petticoat. The bodice area was covered with cotton knit. Arms were made from silk habutae and cotton calico that were sewn to the cotton knit covering the body of the mannequin [Fig. 24]. False shift-cuffs were made from cotton lawn and then trimmed with 18<sup>th</sup>-century lace for display. They were sewn directly on to the arms of the mannequin.

## Illustrations

Figures 1-4: Court Mantua (V&A T.592:1-15-1993)



Figure 5: Portrait of Josephe-Jean Marie-Antoinette (1755 – 93 by François Hubert Drouais (1727 - 75); French; 1773. Oil on canvas. (V&A 529-1882)



Figures 6-8: Doll - Lady Clapham, seated in a toy chair; English; 1680-1700 (V&A T.846E-1974)



Figures 9-10: Mantua of silver brocaded silk, lined and faced with silk; England; 1710-1720 (V&A T.88-1978)



Figures 11-12: Mantua & petticoat of Spitalfields silk; English; mid-1730s (V&A T.9-1972)



Figures 13-14: Mantua or Court Dress of cream silk embroidered with coloured silk & silver thread; English; 1740-45 (V&A T.260-1969)



Figures 15-16: Court mantua of gown, petticoat & stomacher; red ribbed silk, embroidered with silver-thread; English; 1740-45 (V&A T.227-1970)



Figures 17-19: Samples of silk from a French merchant's sample book, 1764 (V&A T.373-1972)



Figure 20: Mantua on display in Moscow, 2008



Figure 21: Notes from the dress historian Janet Arnold on the mantua pieces that entered the museum in 1993. V&A registered nominal file 91/1678.

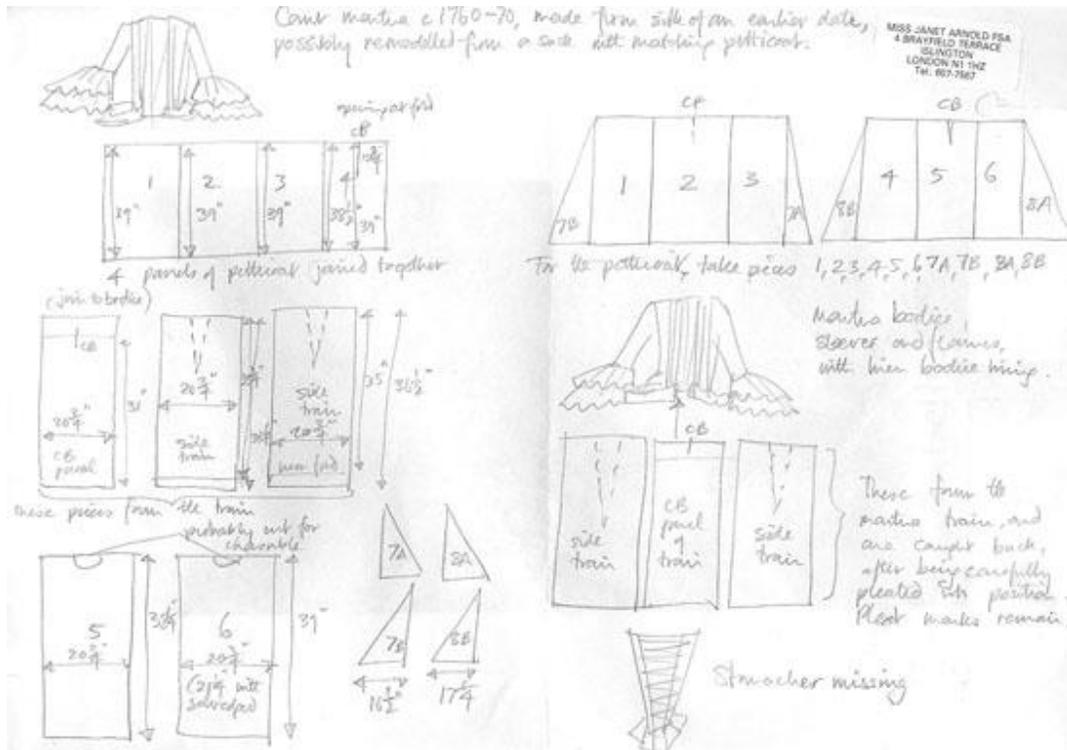
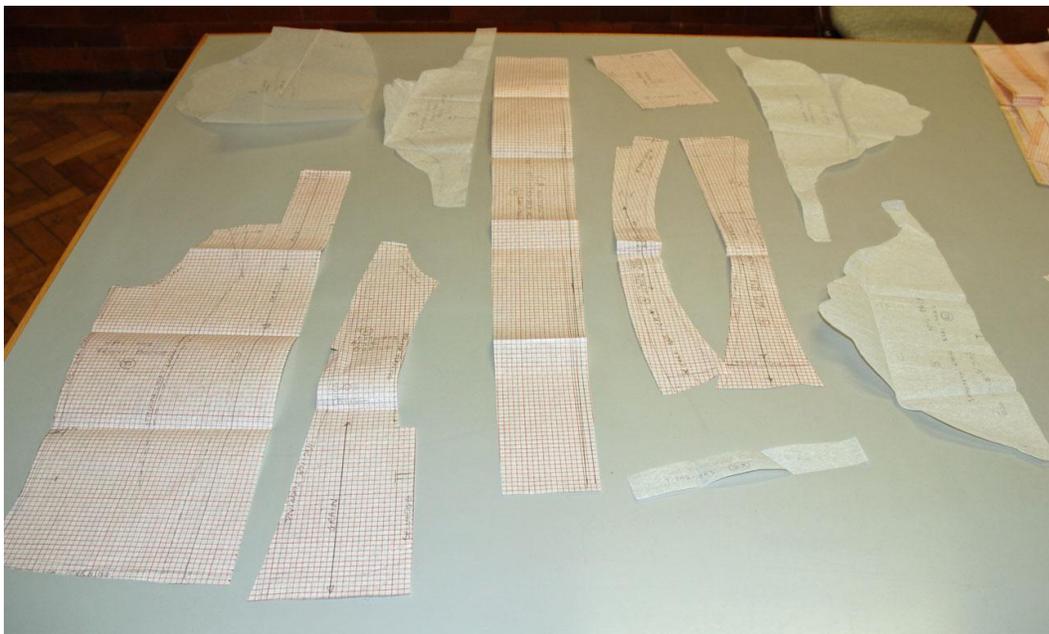


Figure 22: Pattern taken from mantua by Cally Blackman in 1993. V&A registered nominal file 91/1678



Figures 23: Toile of mantua reassembled and tested on mannequin



Figure 24: Structure on which reassembly tested and support on to which mantua was mounted



### **Further reading**

For full details of construction and conservation, see Joanne Hackett, 'She Walks in Beauty: the conservation, reconstruction, mounting and packing of an English court mantua', paper delivered at the *North American Conservation Conference*, Omnipress, 2009, pp. 65-80

Janet Arnold, 'A Mantua c. 1708-09 from Clive House, Shrewsbury', *Costume*, no. 4, 1970, pp. 26-31.

Janet Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion 1660-1860*, London, 1989.

Clare Browne, 'Mary Delany's Embroidered Court Dress'. In : *Mrs. Delany & Her Circle*, ed. Mark Laird and Alicia Weisberg-Roberts, Yale Centre for British Art and Sir John Soane's Museum , 2009

Anne Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth Century England*, Batsford, 1981.

Avril Hart & Susan North, *Fashion in Detail. The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, V&A, 1998.

Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, 'Le grand habit et la mode en France au XVIIIe siècle' in *Fastes de Cour et Cérémonies Royales. Le Costume de Cour en Europe 1650-1800*, exh. cat., Château de Versailles, 2009, pp. 222-225

Ietse Meij, 'A propos de beauté exotique: une mantua commandée en Chine', in *Modes en miroir. La France et la Hollande au temps des Lumières*, exh. cat. Paris Musées, 2004, pp. 140-49

Norah Waugh, *The Cut of Women's Clothes*, Faber, 1968