



Victorian Tea Gowns

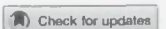
A Case of High Fashion Experimentation

ANNE BISSONNETTE

Dr. Bissonnette is an Associate Professor at the University of Alberta in Material Culture and Curatorship and the Curator of their Clothing and Textiles Collection. As Curator of the Kent State University Museum (1995–2009), she created an exhibition on tea gowns (1997) and has shared her research since (*A Separate Sphere: Dressmakers in Cincinnati's Golden Age*, *The Berg Companion to Fashion*, and *High Tea: Glorious Manifestations East and West*).

This essay observes the historical context in which tea gowns emerged within the world of high fashion in the last forty years of the nineteenth century. Evidence is presented that serves to question the current understanding dress historians and other scholars have of the tea gown as a garment loosely fitted for greater comfort and worn without a corset or other types of underpinnings such as bustles. The study examines elaborate Victorian garments that were meant to be worn at home in museum collections and in mainstream British, American, and French periodicals, and includes gowns worn before and after the "tea gown" name emerged. It proposes a different reading of the tea gown as a type of garment rooted in the fashion establishment rather than a garment conceived or essentially used to serve an anti-fashion or dress-reform agenda.

Keywords Victorian fashion, interior gown, tea gown, historicism



- 1 Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Pierre Clarac and André Ferré, vol. 2, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (Paris: Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue française, 1918; reprint, Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1954), 899. In reference to their historic characters and costumed nature, see also Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 5, *La Prisonnière* (1923), 33, 369.
- 2 For 1907 as the probable conception and start of composition of the novel, see Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 1, *Du côté de chez Swann* (1917), xli. For the ca. 1907 emergence of the "Delphos robe," see Guillermo de Osma, *Fortuny: His Life and Work* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), 86.

IN HIS 1918 BOOK *À la recherche du temps perdu*, French novelist Marcel Proust praised the garments created by Mariano Fortuny and admired their ability to recall Venice's oriental splendor, but he also deplored the "anachronism" of Fortuny's clothes that harkened back to a type of historicism at odds with modern times.¹ Around 1907, when Proust began his novel, Fortuny introduced his pleated silk "Delphos robe" (FIGURE 1) that drew inspiration from ancient Greek dress and offered a garment that not only looked but also felt different compared with Edwardian gowns of the period.² The belted Delphos clung to the body to reveal its

FIGURE 1 Mariano Fortuny (1871–1949), "Delphos robe" with gold-stenciled belt, made in Venice, Italy, and purchased in Paris, France, by Mrs. Thankmar von Münchhausen (1895–1974) in the late 1930s. Crimson pleated plain-weave silk and Murano glass beads. Speyart family, The Netherlands. Mount, photograph and montage © Anne Bissonnette 2013.



contours, yet did not constrict it. When these unstructured floor-length trained tunics were devised, by contrast, high fashion frocks worn outside the home, often made of sheer white textiles, relied on highly skilled cut and construction where layers of fabric were lined, interfaced, boned, and wired together to create a single gown, worn over a corset, that was as highly engineered as the outwardly diaphanous gown placed upon it. Some Edwardian women wore these fashion frocks to receive friends and relations in their parlors at teatime at what could be very public afternoon receptions.³ Others chose an unusual gown such as the Delphos, which also was deemed appropriate for this occasion. How can the simultaneous use of such different gowns be explained? To answer this question is quite complex as, in the decades before the Edwardian era, several factors converged to make tea gowns a popular venue for change within and outside the fashion system.

This essay investigates the lesser-known place of the Victorian tea gown and other similar interior gowns (i.e. specific attire worn at home) that preceded it. This paper will explore the historical context in which these gowns emerged within the world of high fashion and their place in women's social practices and, in particular, the social ritual of afternoon tea.⁴ The study has included an investigation of elaborate interior gowns and a specific derivative, the tea gown, in museum collections and mainstream British, American, and French periodicals. This research started in 1995, and, as such, many libraries and museum collections were accessed. Twenty-three specific artifacts chosen for a 1997 exhibition at the Kent State University Museum were key to the project and were chosen amongst about a hundred found or accessed. They were drawn from the collection of the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College, the Kent State University Museum, the Western Reserve Historical Society, The Ohio State University's Historic Costume and Textiles Collection, the Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute, and the Museum at FIT. Being able to handle and mount the garments played a pivotal role in the research. Some garments were catalogued as tea gowns, while others were not. Such assessments were questioned and led to extended inquiries in Victorian fashion periodicals and etiquette books. The current labeling of interior gowns and tea gowns in captions is thus a consequence of the research findings rather than a reflection of cataloguing entries. The printed sources accessed that were most helpful were found in the libraries at the Kent State University Museum, the Fashion Institute of Technology, the Bibliothèque des arts décoratifs, and the City of Westminster Archives Centre. The knowledge has evolved to this day in addressing the complexity of the topic. This evidence from the last four decades of the Victorian era serves to question the current understanding dress historians and other scholars have of the tea gown as an informal garment loosely fitted for greater comfort and worn without a corset, crinoline, or bustle.⁵ The findings suggest a different reading of the Victorian tea gown and its uses to end the preconceived association of home with informality of dress. They present a type of garment rooted in the fashion establishment rather than a garment conceived or essentially used to serve an anti-fashion or dress-reform agenda.⁶

I will argue that, in the last four decades of the nineteenth century, elaborate interior gowns, and the tea-gown styles that eventually emerged from this genre, were an integral part of Victorian high fashion and provided a socially acceptable format in which to push fashion forward, away from the hourglass figure and towards a silhouette that embraced a new form of historicism, an Edwardian aesthetic and lighter color palette, and a broader acceptance of exoticism. Christened as "tea gowns" in Britain in the 1870s, and described with different names in and outside the United Kingdom, these and earlier elaborate interior gowns rose to prominence within a specific colonial context and first embraced the period's love of eighteenth-century styles. Like other types of high-fashion Victorian garments, the tea gown embraced anachronism in its appropriation of stylistic features from different time periods. Moreover, the historicism at play in tea gowns was in keeping with a new infatuation for the tea ceremony in what could be a home's most artful room, the parlor. Tea—a foreign beverage that had once been extremely costly and consumed by the elite when first introduced to the West—was now readily available and affordable in the late 1800s. It was, nonetheless, controlled and treated with an outdated reverence by a hostess in a ceremony where she was the center of attention.

3 de Osma indicates that "the least venturesome only wore them as dressing gowns or when *en deshabilité*,"(6) in general they were considered suitable for receiving guests in the afternoon and were thus used as 'tea gowns.'" See de Osma, *Fortuny*, 131–32.

4 The term "interior gown" will be used in this paper to describe one of the many types of gowns that fit within the category of "undress." The term "undress" is used to describe garments worn inside the home. A wide array of terms could be used to describe a variety of interior gowns and include *robe de chambre*, morning dress, *matinée*, house dress, and wrapper. High fashion is defined in this paper as mainstream, fashionable, high-quality attire worn by the middle and upper classes. These fashions were part of the establishment and were represented in such popular late-nineteenth-century magazines as *La mode illustrée* in France, *The Queen* in Great Britain, and *Harper's Bazar* in the United States of America.

5 For lack of corset, see for example Mary Warner Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body: Aesthetic Fashion in Gilded Age America," *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 1 (February 1995): 25. For lack of corset, crinoline, and bustle, see for example Kimberly Wahl, "A Domesticated Exoticism: Fashioning Gender in Nineteenth-Century British Tea Gowns," in *Cultures of Femininity in Modern Fashion*, ed. Ilya Parkins and Elizabeth M. Sheehan (Purham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2011), 45.

6 My use of "anti-fashion" refers to clothing employed to oppose the accepted fashion system. For example, not wearing underpinnings such as corsets and bustles (when in fashion) in public settings would go against the Victorian fashion system.

7 See Patricia A. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850–1920: Politics, Health, and Art* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2003); Anna Buruma, "A clinging Liberty tea-gown instead of a magenta satin": The Colour Red in Artistic Dress by Liberty & Co., *Costume* 41, no. 1 (June 1, 2007): 105–10; Wahl, *Dressed as in a Painting: Women and British Aestheticism in an Age of Reform* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2013); Wahl, "A Domesticated Exoticism"; Robyne Erica Calvert, "Fashioning the Artist: Artistic Dress in Victorian Britain, 1848–1900," PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2012.

8 Qualifiers that indicated the levels of formality within a category included, for example, such expressions as "*demi-deshabille*" (half-undress). See 1907 quote by the Baroness d'Orchamps in Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 191.

The tea gown thus could play a performative function at teatime in a heavily codified fashion system. Tea gowns also were among the few garment types allowed to look to the East for inspiration while keeping within the confines of proper Victorian dress. Such sanctioned experimentation within a given genre allowed other more radical gowns, such as the Delphos with its historicism, exoticism, and artistic flair, to fit within the tea-gown format.

This article is not about dress reform, artistic dress, or Aestheticism—areas of research that have discussed the use of the tea gown and often have dominated the discourse and perspective on the subject.⁷ This research evolved from decades of exposure to numerous elaborate interior gowns that did not belong within the dress reform, artistic, or Aesthetic categories. Excluding loose *peignoirs*, most elaborate Victorian interior gowns found, handled, and, at times, mounted in museum collections, with stylistic features that included long sleeves, high necklines, trains, and no waistline seams, followed the stereotypical hourglass figure, aesthetic, and construction of the period. They did not have the unfitted overall silhouette seen in photographs of such individuals as the wives or female companions of Pre-Raphaelite artists. Depictions of the elaborate Victorian interior gowns observed also were found in mainstream fashion magazines not directed towards adherents of the dress-reform, artistic, or Aesthetic movements. These elaborate interior gowns were well within the confines of fashionable attire. While more needs to be said to explain the use of the tea gown as part of reform, artistic, and Aesthetic dress in light of the present findings, the focus of this study is to investigate high-fashion tea gowns for their own sake through textual, visual, and clothing artifacts. When Aestheticism is mentioned in this article, it is merely in the context of its borrowing from the world of high fashion. This paper demonstrates that, when artistic revivalist and unstructured gowns such as the Delphos came to be accepted as tea gowns in the Edwardian era, the path was cleared before their arrival by a variety of eclectic and exotic interior gowns from the preceding decades. The evidence demonstrates that a targeted study of Victorian elaborate high-fashion interior gowns and tea gowns can establish a deeper understanding of the categories of undress, half dress, and full dress that governed dress behaviors and of the variety of sartorial practices at teatime. Looking at primary sources and the experience of mounting these types of gowns leads to questions about current knowledge and may bring new insights on the connections between high fashion, alternative/experimental dress, and modernity.

The story is intricate and must address colonial trade, urbanization, domestic architecture, socialization and networking practices, and leading fashionable styles and silhouettes to uncover the roots of exoticism and historicism in the tea gown. In addition to who wore tea gowns, where, and when—why they were worn and how also must be explored. The answers changed over time, as do the features of the gowns worn at teatime. From the *robes de chambre*, interior gowns often made of wool with utilitarian patch pockets, to extravagant silk couture creations that could often be mistaken for fancy dress, the research findings suggest characteristics such as eclecticism, exoticism, and sartorial audacity that helped define fashion into the twentieth century.

Five considerations are important when exploring the origins and peculiarity of the tea gown. The first is that the term "tea gown" was first used to describe a type of elaborate interior gown which, before and after the term was used, could be found under numerous names and was broadly covered by the Victorian fashion press from the 1860s to 1901. One cannot underestimate the importance of the fashion press in shaping the visual and descriptive concepts around these gowns. The second consideration is that, unlike most garment types, the tea gown's use was in flux: while being able to remain within the category of undress from which it first emerged, it eventually ventured in appropriateness beyond this category, most often with slight modifications. As such, chronology must be factored into their study to assess their impact on fashion and mores at any given point.

The third consideration relates to the tea gown's aesthetics and the contemporary rules of decorum and requires the reader to understand the importance of the three categories of dress that ruled Victorian society—undress, half dress, and full dress—and to recognize their stylistic components. These three categories are difficult to decipher. For one, they do not represent a crescendo from least to most formal: each category had levels of formality.⁸ Undress covered a broad spectrum of garments worn at home, from the *peignoir* to the tea gown. Half dress

was fit to be worn outside the home but could be donned at home in the daytime. While long sleeves and high necklines were part of undress, three-quarter sleeves and deeper necklines could be part of half-dress garments like the reception gown, which was appropriate for late afternoon and early evening events such as private dinners. Reception gowns were the most formal in the half-dress category. Apart from the strict protocol of court, the opera was the pinnacle of full dress and required the wearing of ball gowns with the deepest décolletages.⁹ Knowledge of what to wear at different times of day and for different audiences, purposes, and settings was paramount and entailed an ability to select from a multitude of garments from each category. As the appropriateness of elaborate interior gowns and tea gowns changed, a woman would have to constantly reevaluate her sartorial choices. As such, because their use was in flux as the nineteenth century progressed, a tea gown could start to acquire stylistic features found outside of the category of undress.

The fourth point is the importance of spatial and social contexts to understand the tea gown and the Victorian ideals it embodied. A women's choice of interior gown and how it was worn was determined by where it was worn in the home, under what circumstances, and who would be present. The choice was judged by the wearer's peers and could be a reflection of her own and her family's status. Initially worn at home—and thus part of the undress category, the tea gown, however, was not worn next to the skin nor was it inevitably unfitted, informal, or risqué, because home was a public stage for men and especially women when guests were in attendance. Translated from the French term "*deshabillé*," the word "undress" can signify the removal or lack of clothes—and thus its risqué heritage—and, as a noun, after our period of study, a type of nightgown and robe. The tea gown might have become conflated with this understanding of "undress." This could have warped our understanding of the tea gown and its story.

The rise of afternoon teas in hotels and tea pavilions in the twentieth century also might have obscured the earlier importance of this event in private homes, which bring us to our final point of consideration, that the tea gown was part of a very specific type of afternoon event held typically in the front parlor. For this reception, a hostess could select her guests by invitation—and thus choose her dress from most formal (i.e. highly fitted, corseted, and bustled) when she wished to broaden her social network, to least formal (corset-free and transgressive) for designated close friends. As an interior gown, the tea gown spoke of home but had a broader outreach and variability of fit that made it unique. Five o'clock tea that followed a Victorian protocol gave the tea gown more leeway than other types of garments typically worn in the day or evening.

Keeping in mind these considerations, this paper argues that the tea gown became an accepted format for experimentation: it was steeped in the historicism of 1860s' high fashion from which it emerged and continued to be at the forefront of new modes of historicism; the foreign nature of tea and its consumption in the artistic front parlor made it appropriate for displays of exoticism. It fluctuated in use from undress to full dress late in the century, and it could be used by a hostess in an audience of her choosing where one could most easily transgress norms of appropriateness. The tea gown reflected and had an effect on high fashion, changes in society, and women's lives. It is a microcosm, a tangible expression of the late Victorian era, and a foundation for the next century.

Tea-Drinking Rituals in the Home

Tea's exotic nature and notions of gentility and good manners associated with eighteenth-century tea drinking in the home lingered into the nineteenth century, despite the decrease in the price of tea through a series of political, scientific, and commercial developments. The material and ideological Euro-American culture attached to its former scarcity nevertheless remained. Teatime in the 1800s was integrated into the practice of "calling" and became a codified late-afternoon reception. In her etiquette book *Social Customs* published in Boston in 1887, Florence Howe Hall traced the popularity of afternoon teas in England to the late 1860s, a time that coincided with the great age of sail of the 1860s and 1870s.¹⁰ In Britain, purposely built "tea

9 Catherine Join-Dieterle, Valérie Guillaume, Marie-Christine Boucher, and Sophie Derosiers, *Robes du soir: 1850–1990* (Paris: Paris-Musées, Palais Galliera, Musée de la Mode et du Costume, 1990), 26.

10 Florence Howe Hall, *Social Customs* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1887), 121.

- 11 Julie Fromer, "A Typically English Brew: Tea Drinking, Tourism, and Imperialism in Victorian England," in *Nineteenth-Century Geographies: The Transformation of Space from the Victorian Age to the American Century*, ed. Helena Michie and Ronald R. Thomas (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 106–7. For transportation revolution, see Sarah Rose, *For All the Tea in China: How England Stole the World's Favorite Drink and Changed History* (New York: Viking, 2010), 229–30.
- 12 For more on eighteenth-century tea drinking and its elitist and encoded material culture practices, see Rodris Roth, "Tea-Drinking in Eighteenth-Century America: Its Etiquette and Equipage," in *Material Life in America, 1600–1860*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988).
- 13 Clifford E. Clark Jr., "Domestic Architecture as an Index Social History: The Romantic Revival and the Cult of Domesticity in America, 1840–1870," in *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 7, no. 1 (Summer 1976): 48.
- 14 Lizabeth A. Cohen, "Embellishing a Life of Labor: An Interpretation of the Material Culture of American Working-Class Homes, 1885–1915," *Journal of American Culture* 3, no. 4 (Winter 1980): 754.
- 15 John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 176.
- 16 Wahl, "A Domesticated Exoticism," 53.
- 17 Hausfrau, "Five O'clock Tea," *The Queen, The Lady's Newspaper & Court Chronicle*, June 20, 1878, 489.
- 18 Hausfrau describes five o'clock tea as a "so-called feminine repast," but adds that it is "no uncommon sight to see individuals of the stronger sex complacently imbibing afternoon tea at their clubs, or in the drawing rooms of their friends and acquaintances." Hausfrau, "Five O'clock Tea," 489.
- 19 Howe Hall, *Social Customs*, 120.
- 20 Hausfrau explains how "the lady of the house, her daughter, or some young relative, pours out the tea," and adds that "if there are any gentlemen present, their services are put in requisition." Hausfrau, "Five O'clock Tea," 489.
- 21 For more on the etiquette of women keeping their hats and gloves on, see Rose Hartwick Thorpe, *As Others See Us, or Rules and Customs of Refined Homes and Polite Society* (Detroit, MI: F. B. Dickerson, 1890), 193–94.

clippers" that revolutionized transportation and colonial expansion to India helped democratize the custom of tea drinking and came to signify "Victorian pride in national and technological progress."¹¹ Such trade developments had lasting effects on British commerce and identity, but the greater availability of tea at different price points in Europe and America did not erase from public consciousness the beverage's origins and class-conscious codified past.¹²

The settings for afternoon teas played a part in the tea gown's development. Describing mid-Victorian American homes, historian Clifford E. Clark Jr. commented how "with an increasing number of aliens and immigrants, it was particularly important to be able to recognize differences in social status" and to have floor plans that separated private spaces from the public ones accessible to visitors.¹³ Clark postulated that the front parlor was a specially designed room that catered to the growing complexity of industrial America by providing a public space where a more formal set of social relationships that followed elaborate conventions could occur in a controlled setting. As women's sociability was conducted mostly in the home, the front parlor provided a stage for public display that "permitted controlled interaction with the outside world" and was ideal for afternoon tea.¹⁴ Cultural historian John F. Kasson also described this room as one that aimed to give visitors an "artful declaration of [their] owners' sensibility."¹⁵ A sense of whimsy in a gown made to be worn in this room was thus appropriate to the decor. Kimberly Wahl, in "A Domesticated Exoticism: Fashioning Gender in Nineteenth-Century British Tea Gowns," identified the home solely as a private space.¹⁶ I would argue that changes in domestic architecture post 1840 warrants a broader understanding of private and public spaces for the tea gown—and other elaborate interior gowns—to be better understood as a type of gown that could be viewed by a wide social network.

In 1878, an article in the British periodical *The Queen, The Lady's Newspaper & Court Chronicle* described the "five o'clock tea" hour as a necessary time for sustenance since "the dinner hour, in London especially, is at eight or half-past" and, as a result, "some sort of refreshment between lunch and [dinner] seems quite indispensable."¹⁷ This timing made it increasingly—but not exclusively—the domain of women: men could still attend, as they had done before the Industrial Revolution moved their professional occupations outside the home, but it was primarily a women's activity.¹⁸ Social tea drinking was not just about providing sustenance or social niceties but was part of Victorian networking, as much about business as pleasure. It was less costly than other elitist receptions, such as dinner parties, and could accommodate a greater number of guests. A reciprocal practice, it needed to be maintained as it played an important part in establishing one's—or one's family's—place in the world. Social tea drinking thus could serve to create both bonding social capital with friends and relatives as well as bridging social capital with those outside that circle who fell within broader business relationships.

With increasing urbanization, the custom of "calling" in person on family, friends, and acquaintances became more codified and time-consuming. A hostess would have a special card printed for the occasion of afternoon tea receptions and sent to invite guests, who, according to Howe Hall, could stay for fifteen to thirty minutes—a length of time "sufficient to meet the requirements of politeness."¹⁹ The tradition of having the hostess, rather than a staff member, pour the tea was rooted in a time when tea was precious and controlled. The attention drawn on the hostess and her good manners continued in the nineteenth century, but by then she also could ask for assistance in pouring tea to guests.²⁰ Unlike the hostess or male guests, female guests typically kept their hats and gloves on, which had an effect on the type of food served and made it easier for ladies to attend several afternoon teas on the same day (see FIGURE 2 for the hatless hostess and a male guest pouring tea).²¹ Guests would drop in and out—often leaving when the room became crowded—thus casting a wider targeted communal net that could serve to expand one's social boundaries.

How a hostess dressed in the public front parlor for greeting and entertaining those beyond the family circle at five o'clock could differ from what was worn for a private gathering amongst friends. In the past, aprons had occasionally been worn for social tea drinking, but dedicated tea attire did not come in until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Like the apron, a

FIGURE 2 Photograph from de Lasseuse, *Un Five o'clock chez Madame Ch. de Lasseuse*, *Les Modes* no. 15, March 13, 1902, 7. Paris. Kent State University Museum.



new garment, the tea gown, was linked to the home—where social tea drinking had traditionally occurred—and continued to be imbued with an air of domesticity through most of the late nineteenth century. This was epitomized by Fanny Douglas in her 1894 *The Gentlewoman's Book of Dress*: “There are two garments in particular whose very essence is eloquent of home—one, the apron, may be said to epitomize the past; the other, the tea-gown, the present.”²² The latter was different from other garments within the category of undress from which it emerged. A hostess’s gown could convey the essence of home but also provide a sense of distinction and originality appropriate to the artistic front parlor and the exotic origins of tea. This garment needed to be acceptable for public viewing by a wide array of guests of both sexes and served to secure the hostess’s place within her network. The compartmentalized home could thus be a liminal space where private and public existed. By merging both spaces, the tea gown eventually was used across the three categories of dress—undress, half dress, full dress—and helped to push fashion forward into a new century.

Antecedents of the Tea Gown, 1860s and early 1870s

Fashion showed a distinct love for historical revival styles in the mid-Victorian era when many features of 1850s and 1860s dress continued to be reminiscent of eighteenth-century rococo styles. The cage crinoline introduced in 1858 first mimicked the bell-shaped *paniers* (hoops) similar to those of the 1720s and 1730s. In the late 1860s, the silhouette created by these volumizing underpinnings was egg-shaped and trailing behind the wearer, rather than bell-shaped or an oval spreading on both sides, as seen later in the eighteenth century. The crinoline was used across all the categories of full dress, half dress, and even, in certain circumstances, undress (see interior gown in FIGURE 3). In their design, some mid-Victorian garments mimicked the eighteenth-century “mantua’s” open-robe construction through the presence or suggestion of an under-skirt layer along the center front. The outermost skirt sections of garments might be draped and referred to in this period as “*en polonoise*” and back pleats from neck to hem labeled “Watteau,” in reference to styles and the artist from the previous century.²³ Caps,

22 Fanny Douglas, *The Gentlewoman's Book of Dress* (London: Henry and Co., [1894]), 48.

23 In the eighteenth century, the back pleats were not called “Watteau,” and the term “*polonoise*” did not refer to the same stylistic feature as in the nineteenth-century. For use of the word “*polonoise*” in the eighteenth century, see Kendra Van Cleave and Brooke Welborn, “Very Much the Taste and Various are the Makes: Reconsidering the Late Eighteenth-Century Robe à la Polonoise,” *Dress* 39, no. 1 (2013): 1–24.

24 See, for example, the description of the gowns in the half-dress category in FIGURE 4 where the left figure is a "Pardessus Watteau" (Watteau overcoat) and the right figure has a "polonaise relevée en pouf" (polonaise [style overskirt] draped en pouf). *Les modes Parisiennes*, July 20, 1872, 338.

FIGURE 3 François Claudius Compte-Calix (1813-1880) and E. Bracquet, "Robes de M.^{on} Gagelin . . ." *Les Modes Parisiennes* (1865), plate 1145. Paris. Kent State University Museum.



hats, and hairstyles that drew inspiration from the eighteenth century also were popular into the 1870s (FIGURE 4).²⁴ This form of fashion historicism that borrowed from the eighteenth century (FIGURE 5), not surprisingly, later impacted the tea gown.

One garment the nineteenth century did not retain from the eighteenth was the upper-body-modifying "stays," the undergarment stiffened with whalebone all over its surface that compressed and elevated the breasts and molded the upper body into a cone from the underarm to the waist. By the late 1860s and into the 1870s, the cut and construction of women's corsets improved to mold the breasts, waist, and hips into an idealized hourglass silhouette. The Victorian corset was a spectacular technical achievement, and the garments that carefully delineated it also were the beneficiaries of advanced engineering skills. The corset of this period transformed the wearer. Victorian etiquette writer Fanny Douglas saw this advancement in cut and construction as a mark of progress.

FIGURE 4 François Claudius Compté-Calix (1813–1880) and A. Carroche, "Toilettes de la M.^on Gagelin . . .," *Les Modes Parisiennes*, July 20, 1872, plate 1499. Paris. Kent State University Museum.



FIGURE 5 *Robe à la française*, probably from France, 1775–mid-1780s. Ivory brocaded silk. Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection, Department of Human Ecology, University of Alberta, 2014.1:1A,B. Mount, photograph and montage © Anne Bissonnette 2014.



- 25 Douglas, *The Gentlewoman's Book of Dress*, 8–9.
- 26 For Watteau-back-pleated undress gowns that molded the figure in the 1860s and early 1870s, see the front-opened and belted below the Watteau back “*Robe de chambre/Peignoir Louis XV cachemire blanc*” in *Les Modes Parisiennes* no. 892, March 31, 1860, plate 892 (caption p. 146); the “*Robe de chambre de cachemire blanc . . . dos à la forme Louis XV, le devant . . . plus ajusté*” in *Les Modes Parisiennes* no. 1128, October 8, 1864, plate 1128 (caption p. 482); the “*toilette de chambre*” that was a combination of a short jacket (*casaque*) described as having large Watteau pleats in back and worn over a belted garment (with fashionable volumizing underpinnings) that opened at the center front to convey proper fit at the torso in *Le Moniteur de la Mode* no. 2, November 1869, 373; and the belted-below-the-Watteau-back “*Robe de chambre*” (with fashionable volumizing underpinnings) in *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, January 1873, 88. For Watteau-back-pleated half-dress shorter gowns that molded the figure in the 1870s, see the belted below the “*forme Watteau*” of the woman on the left in “*Deux toilettes de courses*” (worn over a skirt with volumizing underpinnings) in *Le Moniteur de la Mode* no. 3, May 1870, 172; the similarly belted woman on the left in FIGURE 4 from 1872; and the fitted “*suit with Watteau Over Dress*” in *Harper's Bazar* 5, no. 6, February 10, 1872, 100.
- 27 Emily H. May, “Every-Day Dresses, Garments, Etc.,” *Peterson's Magazine* 68, no. 3, September 1875, 212.
- 28 The earliest labeled tea gowns found thus far by the author are dated 1878 (see FIGURES 10 and 11). This date could change as research progresses.

There are artistic people who rave about the beauty of the Greek attire. It is indeed admirable in a statue or a picture, but what must it have been to wear! . . . The real truth of the matter is, that our ancestresses wore these shapeless and senseless garments because they knew no better. They did not know how to cut out a jacket then; it is a product of the highest civilization, and we should be thankful for it.²⁵

Eighteenth-century indicators of class that continued in the nineteenth century included the quality and up-to-date nature of the fabrics in one's clothes, the presence of trimming and surface decorations in synch with fashion, and the obtainment of the latest dress styles. However, with the advancement of cut and construction in the 1860s, the skills of tailors and seamstresses to mold the idealized hourglass-corseted figure were increasingly prized and monitored in a wide array of garments.

The concept of “fit” and its “civilizing” effect was at play in the Victorian understanding of respectability in relation to full, half, and undress. Unlike full and half dress, which could be worn in the day or evening inside and outside the home and where fit was *de rigueur*, “undress” clothing worn in the domestic setting covered a broad spectrum of garments from loose *peignoirs* worn privately in one's bedroom, boudoir, or in the company of close friends, to fitted garments deemed appropriate to host business relations and new acquaintances in the most public part of one's home. The wearing of an interior gown with a cage crinoline (FIGURE 3), which likely entailed the wearing of a corset, could generate the fit and fashion silhouette of the period and make it acceptable for exposure to the public in one's front parlor. Certain garments in the undress category could be as fitted as those in half dress and full dress and thus required the wearing of corsetry, cage crinolines, and, later on, bustles. Women who strove for social advancement had to navigate the complexity of a fashion system that required great discernment about fit in addition to an extensive wardrobe. Each category of dress had ascendant levels of formality and was composed of a multitude of garments for a variety of uses. Deciding what to wear and how to wear it (i.e., more or less fitted) was a complicated affair. Dress practices evolved, and, as in the case of the tea gown, a type of garment that could entail a high level of fit comparable to half dress and full dress could migrate more easily across categories in time.

Elaborate Interior Gowns of the 1870s

Before the first use of the term “tea gown”—and long after the nomenclature was introduced, garments that belonged to the category of undress with many of the same features as the tea gown were described in high fashion periodicals as interior gowns, wrappers, morning gowns, and many French terms that conveyed the same type of garment (*robe de chambre*, *matinée*, etc.). For example, a “Watteau wrapper” (FIGURE 6) was featured in an illustration of everyday dresses in the middle-class American publication *Peterson's Magazine* of 1875. It featured the fitted silhouette and eighteenth-century-inspired Watteau back pleats of the *robe à la française* (FIGURE 5) that had appeared in undress and half dress gowns in the 1860s and early 1870s.²⁶ The caption of the 1875 “Watteau wrapper” described it as “cut all in one from the neck”—as the *robe à la française* had been, and the gown's fit was defined as being “Princess shape, cut into the figure, but not quite tight.”²⁷ The inclusion of this “all in one” information in the article indicates that it was not a bodice sewn at the waist to a skirt portion but instead a gown made of several shoulder-to-hem panels that defined the “princess” cut, which had emerged from 1860s advancements in garment construction.

The specifically labeled “tea gowns,” introduced in 1878, shared features of the 1860s to mid-1870s interior gowns.²⁸ The “Watteau wrapper” in FIGURE 6 illustrates several characteristics that would be seen in the tea gown. Like the Watteau wrapper, tea gowns had high necklines, long sleeves, and back trains. They often were made of woolen fabrics and had distinctive patch pockets, as in FIGURE 6. The cut of the tea gown also followed earlier styles of interior gowns, particularly in their use of the princess cut. But despite the fact that the “Watteau wrapper” could “cut into the figure” (i.e. mold the torso well), the editor mentioned

FIGURE 6 "Watteau wrapper ... of cashmere, either gray ... or a pretty solid blue" in *Peterson's Magazine* 68, no. 3, September 1875, 211–12. Philadelphia. Kent State University Museum.



that it might have a slightly looser fit. This would place this gown in the undress category's broad spectrum of fit. If all tea gowns were originally interior gowns, ultimately, not all interior gowns could be deemed appropriate for a reception such as afternoon tea that could include a wide array of guests of both genders beyond one's close friends. Loose fit and loose morals were intimately connected and not considered appropriate outside one's most inner sanctum, such as the boudoir. This Victorian mindset needed to be factored in when choosing a gown for public wear.

The 1870s was a transitional time that witnessed the metamorphosis of interior gowns into extremely elaborate fashionable garments that became a type of gown on their own.²⁹ James McNeill Whistler, for instance, depicted Mrs. Frances Leyland in a highly sophisticated interior gown (FIGURE 7) in the first half of the 1870s, likely between 1872 and 1874.³⁰ Whistler designed a variety of styles in preparation for the Leyland portrait where he wished the dress and the room's interior to act as an ensemble.³¹ The portrait and the drawings showed gowns with a Watteau back and a draped overskirt inspired by what the period called a *polonaise*. The drawings also featured a loosely crossed fichu front of the late eighteenth century and other historicized features such as the *chêrusque* collar (a type of starched and raised opened ruff worn in the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries), which can be seen in the Leyland gown. The loose center-back section and draped front overskirt depicted in the portrait were akin to the shorter fashionable walking (half dress) ensemble on the left of FIGURE 4 from 1872. In the same way that most discussions on depictions of elaborate interior gowns and tea gowns have focused on anti-fashion use, Grace Galassi described how Whistler's creation "differs

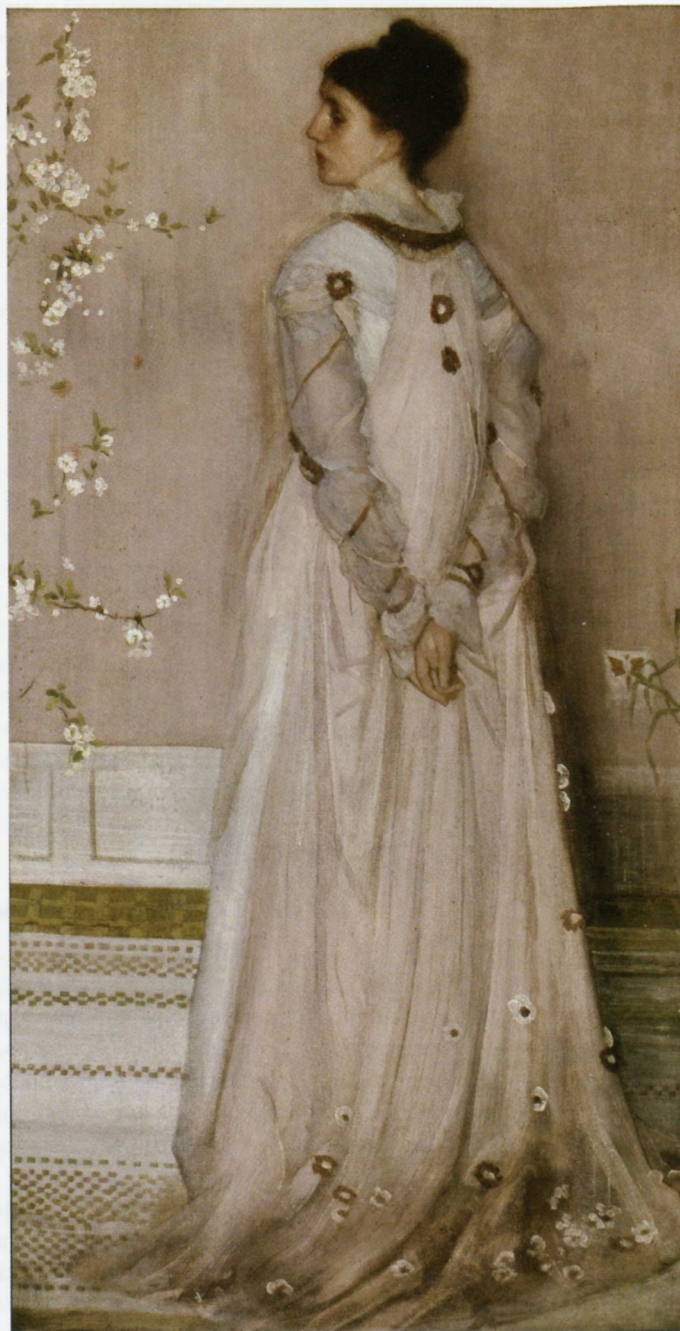
29 For more information on this transformation, see Anne Bissonnette, "The 1870s Transformation of the *Robe de Chambre*," in *A Separate Sphere: Dressmakers in Cincinnati's Golden Age, 1877–1922*, ed. Cynthia Amnéus (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2003), 169–73.

30 For beginning and end range of the portrait, November 3, 1871 (first mention of the portrait) to June 1874 (date it was first exhibited), see "Whistler and Aesthetic Dress: Mrs. Frances Leylan," in Margaret F. MacDonald, Susan Grace Galassi, Aileen Ribeiro, and Patricia de Montfort, *Whistler, Women & Fashion* (New Haven: Frick Collection, New York, in association with Yale University Press, 2003), 101. The authors also mentioned how the style of the dress was still in flux in the spring of 1872. See Grace Galassi, "Whistler and Aesthetic Dress: Mrs. Frances Leylan," 102.

31 Grace Galassi, "Whistler and Aesthetic Dress: Mrs. Frances Leylan," see 105–9, 111.

- 32 Grace Galassi, "Whistler and Aesthetic Dress: Mrs. Frances Leylan," 95.
- 33 Grace Galassi, "Whistler and Aesthetic Dress: Mrs. Frances Leylan," 95.
- 34 See note 26. For an 1872 "robe de chambre" similarly composed of a Watteau-pleated belted dress shorter in front and longer in back, draped at the sides, and worn over an exposed skirt (but worn over volumizing underpinnings), see *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, March 1872, 163, reprinted in Jacqueline Beaudoin-Ross, *Formes et modes: Le costume à Montréal au XIXe siècle* (Montréal: Musée McCord d'Histoire Canadienne, 1992), 76.

FIGURE 7 James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), *Symphony in Flesh Color and Pink: Portrait of Mrs. Frances Leyland*, 1871–1874. Oil on canvas. The Frick Collection, Henry Clay Frick Bequest, 1916.1.133. Copyright The Frick Collection.



from the dominant fashions of the time in Victorian England.³² She classified the gown as fitting "somewhere between the earlier Pre-Raphaelite artistic dresses and the later modes of aesthetic attire," probably because of the artist's involvement in the Aesthetic movement.³³ But what Grace Galassi may see as unconventional dresses in the Whistler drawings and the Leyland portrait might be reassessed as conventional when observing the design of interior gowns of the 1860s and early 1870s.³⁴ This aesthete painter evidently borrowed from high fashion in his quest for artistic beauty and refined taste as most of the features of the Leyland portrait dress—an elaborate interior gown—are part of high fashion, with the exception of

the diagonal gold cords on the sleeves that have not been found elsewhere in the research thus far. A feature that could add some unconventionality is the possibility that the gown might have been worn without much volumizing underpinnings (cage crinoline, bustle, or petticoats). However, the fashionable silhouette was beginning to narrow in 1874, which might have affected the way the Leyland gown is worn.

When the fashionable silhouette narrowed between 1874 and 1882 to form what was called the "cuirass body," decorative trim, lace, and fashion fabrics used in half dress and full dress were increasingly used on elaborate interior gowns. A "Morning Dress" of Parisian origin from *Harper's Bazar* in 1876 adhered to the new silhouette with no apparent volumizing underpinnings (FIGURE 8). It was described as made of "white flowered brocade" similar in design and scale to the small floral sprays of FIGURES 4 (left) and 9 and reminiscent of eighteenth-century textile design (FIGURE 5). FIGURE 8 featured a high neckline, long sleeves, a patch pocket with pink bows, a long train, and, in front, a simulation of eighteenth-century-inspired open-robe construction, exposing what was described as a blue silk under-layer or petticoat at center front and hem. The bodice might be carefully fitted as it would have been in the eighteenth century (FIGURE 5), but we cannot confidently assess the fit and whether the back draping depicted is truly composed of Watteau pleats, as in the case of the eighteenth-century *robe à la française*. This combination of structured and unstructured likely was popular at the time, conveying an artistic *cachet*, but that did not exclude proper fit. In some cases, the Watteau pleats could be lowered or stitched down to a fitted lining all the way to the waist level to increase silhouette definition, as in the case of an elaborate interior gown of brocaded floral silk that can accommodate the bustle of the era (FIGURE 9).

FIGURE 8 "Morning Dress . . . with pale blue silk in front . . . white flowered brocade . . . and pink bows," "Toilettes at the Centennial," *Harper's Bazar*, October 21, 1876, 681. New York. Kent State University Museum.



Fig. 2.—MORNING DRESS.

35 Douglas, *The Gentlewoman's Book of Dress*, 52. Similar advice is given in "Tea-gowns et robes d'intérieur," *Fémina* no. 18, October 15, 1901, 342.

FIGURE 9 Selina Cadwallader (active 1870–1886), Interior Gown/Tea Gown, 1872–1884. Black brocaded silk. Cincinnati Art Museum, Bequest of Katherine V. Gano Estate, 1945-53. Photography by Tony Walsh © Cincinnati Art Museum.



Because elaborate interior gowns labeled as “tea gowns” emerged in 1878 during the pre-eminence of the narrow-skirted “cuirass” silhouette, the possibility that bustles and volumizing underpinnings could nevertheless be worn with them—and corsets, consequently, might not have been readily understood by twentieth- and twenty-first-century historians. This narrow silhouette might have confused researchers into thinking that tea gowns—and elaborate interior gowns—were inevitably worn without the fashionable cage crinolines of various shapes that were popular before and after the cuirass silhouette. Additionally, since “tea gowns” first were meant to be worn in the home, present-day authors might have mistaken them for informal dress and, by extension, devoid of corsets and underpinnings. Such misconceptions have obscured the importance of fit and fashion and the public nature of afternoon teas in the late nineteenth century.

Victorian Tea Gowns 1878–1901

A hostess could wear the same type of garments as her guests at teatime (i.e. half dress) or could don a special interior gown that occupied a liminal space between private and public display. Her choice of dress depended on her personality and prominence, who she received, and the circumstances. Most likely, dress practices varied considerably among hostesses, as demonstrated by Mrs. Douglas’ 1894 remonstrance regarding the choice of too splendid a gown when receiving guests, which could apply to an “At-Home” tea:

A Lady on her day at home should not err by too much magnificence. There are few whose acquaintances are all amongst the rich and prosperous. The “poor relation” is an unfortunate institution. Consideration for her guests should be stronger with her than the desire to display the radiance of some Parisian confection; and it is a good old-fashioned rule that a hostess should outshine none of her guests. In the houses of her friends she may do them honour by the splendour and brilliancy of her raiment; but at home her dress should be quiet, and have nothing so unduly rich about it as to make the most modestly attired caller feel ill at ease.³⁵

In addition to the growing popularity of afternoon tea amongst the middle and upper classes, this call for consideration to hostesses to “tone it down” corroborates with the range of gowns found in museum collections. When a researcher is looking for tea gowns in museum collections, the “all in one” elaborate silk Watteau-back gowns stand out because they tend to have more theatrical appeal. Nonetheless, tea gowns in museum collections come in a variety of colors, fabrics, and styles, including some wool gowns with plain back construction that tend to look more demure. If many Watteau-back gowns were found in museums, this might have to do with collecting practices of institutions that seek items based primarily on the aesthetic appeal of an artifact.

The earliest specifically labeled “tea gowns” found to date are depicted in an April 27, 1878, issue of the English publication *The Queen, The Lady's Newspaper & Court Chronicle*. Four tea gowns are depicted in fashion plates in this issue.³⁶ They all have high necklines, long sleeves, the impression of having an underdress, an “all in one” overdress with shoulder-to-hem panels, patch pockets with bows, and long trains. They show an abundance of lace and ribbon trim and a light color palette reminiscent of rococo taste: two are pink, and the others are white. One of the tea gowns has a blue front section with bows.³⁷ This color palette also was present in some undress gowns of the 1860s and early 1870s listed in note 26.

One of the fashion plates in this issue (FIGURE 10) depicts two “tea gowns” in the center and an “Indoor Costume” pictured from the front (far left) and back (far right). This plate allows a comparison between gowns worn at home during the day (and thus part of the undress category). Of the three gowns, the two light-colored gowns at the center are labeled “tea gowns” and are made of “pink faille and pink cashmere.”³⁸ The navy-blue interior gown on the far right and left is labeled not as a tea gown, but rather as an “Indoor Costume.” Apart from the pink coloring of the main fabrics and the trimming of white lace and pink ribbons, the tea gowns’ stylistic features in this plate differ little from those of the blue “Indoor Costume.” All three are described as predominantly made of cashmere wool and composed of a trained “overdress” that has a pocket decorated with a bow and a single center-front decorative area called “tablier” (i.e. apron) below the waist and a “waistcoat” above the waist.³⁹ These features are present in two other tea gowns in that issue of *The Queen* and denote garments that are far from utilitarian housedresses. What distinguish the tea gowns from the “Indoor Costume” are the light colors and abundance of white lace—important markers of the tea gowns in that issue, which is the

36 *The Queen, The Lady's Newspaper & Court Chronicle*, April 27, 1878.

37 The third and fourth tea gowns in this issue are on pages 308 and 309.

38 The adult gowns at both extremities of the fashion plate (FIGURE 10) are labeled “Figs. 1 and 5, Indoor Costume.” They are described as “navy blue faille and cashmere,” but are further described and understood as being predominantly of cashmere wool with silk accents. The caption indicates clearly “Fig. 1 front” and “the back of the dress is illustrated in Fig. 5.” As a result, these figures are understood as illustrating a single interior gown in the category of undress. The women in lighter garments in the middle of the plate are labeled as “Figs. 2 and 3, Tea gown.” The caption does not describe these two garments as being a front and back of one garment, and they appear to be of different colors. As such, they are understood to be two different gowns, but the possibility exists that they are the same gown that is predominantly of pink cashmere with pink silk accents.

39 *The Queen, The Lady's Newspaper*, April 27, 1878, 304.

FIGURE 10 L. Charon, “Spring Dresses for Day Wear” (far left and far right described as “Indoor Costume” and, in the center as “Tea Gown”), *The Queen, The Lady's Newspaper & Court Chronicle* 63, no. 1653, April 27, 1878, 304. London. Kent State University Museum.



40 *The Queen, The Lady's Newspaper*,
April 27, 1878, 308.

earliest evidence found thus far with the “tea gown” vocabulary. While this aesthetic broadened over time to include the darker and more saturated Victorian color palette, light colors and the use of lace remained a part of a distinct tea gown subset throughout the late Victorian era.

A close examination of the waist delineation of the four tea gowns found in the entire April 27, 1878 issue of *The Queen* reveals a possibility that, despite their Victorian hourglass silhouettes, there might be variability in their waist cinching. In FIGURE 10, the waist of the second tea gown from the left is not as cinched as that of the woman in an “Indoor Costume” next to her. However, the other tea gown (seen from the back) appears as cinched as that of the “Indoor Costume.” Nonetheless, both the “Indoor Costume” and the tea gown on the left are shown with high-fashion drapery below the buttocks, characteristic of the narrow “cuiress” silhouette of half dress and full dress of the period. The bodice, waist, and hips of all the adult gowns depicted in FIGURE 10 and the other two tea gowns that appear later in the issue conform to fashion. That only one tea gown appears to have a relaxed-waist cinching suggests that a lesser degree of waist cinching could have been an option but not a compulsory trait. As stated previously, where the gown was worn and who the audience was might have determined the degree of fit.

Based on the four specifically labeled “tea gowns” in the 1878 issue of *The Queen*, the presence of Watteau-back pleats was also an option but not a tea gown’s necessary attribute. Another closely fitted gown in another plate in this issue, an “afternoon tea gown” (seen from both front and back) has a Shirred waistcoat and tablier and is similarly cut to the two tea gowns in FIGURE 10 without Watteau pleats.⁴⁰ Also in the same issue is a fitted “Louis XV tea gown” (seen from both front and back) made of surah, a soft and pliable twilled silk satin, trimmed with “coloured bows” and featuring stitched-to-the-waist “Watteau plait” (FIGURE 11). As stated earlier (and included in note 26), other interior gowns had “Louis XV” references in their descriptions, and numerous elaborate interior gowns with Watteau-back pleats can be found in the 1860s and early 1870s—many of which are belted under the back pleats for increased silhouette definition. Watteau backs also are seen in half-dress gowns, similar belting (FIGURE 4). Highly defined fashionable silhouettes in three out of the four tea gowns, with stitched-down Watteau-back pleats in one case, and the use of belts are further evidence that suggests the importance of the stereotypical hourglass silhouette in early tea gowns and some of their predecessors. What was imperative in the tea-gown format, according to those pieces depicted in *The Queen*, was the defined hourglass silhouette made possible by the “all in one” construction, in addition to the high neckline, long sleeves, and pocketed “overdress” structure with its “waistcoat” and “tablier.”

FIGURE 11 L. Dumont, “No. 20. The Louis XV. Tea Gown” (textual background removed), *The Queen, The Lady's Newspaper & Court Chronicle* 63, no. 1653, April 27, 1878, 309. London. Kent State University Museum.



The four “tea gowns” in *The Queen* are very similar stylistically to 1860s and 1870s elaborate interior gowns (see FIGURES 6 and 8, for instance), and, consequently, these findings suggest that the tea-gown style was not new, even if the name was. The fact that this style of gown was labeled as such by a British periodical in 1878 is likely informed by the economic and nationalistic context of the period (i.e. the love affair between Britain and tea fueled by shipping advancements, international trade, and imperialism). The many names ascribed to the “tea gown” style will continue to be used—in and outside of the English-speaking world. The origins and the taxonomy of the tea gown will be questioned in the nineteenth and early twentieth century by authors writing for fashion publications.

41 Cited in Jane Pettigrew, *A Social History of Tea* (London: National Trust, 2001), 120–21.

42 *As Other See Us*, 193.

A Foundation for the New Century

The strong historicism of Victorian tea gowns, their acceptance of the high-fashion silhouette and fit, and their acceptance in all three categories of dress by the late nineteenth century were key to their continued success and ability to impact twentieth-century dress. By the Edwardian era, the white lingerie dress became a major component of Edwardian fashion, and the tea gown might have paved the way for this aesthetic as it emerged from the category of undress, and one version, like the lingerie dress, used a lighter color palette, lace, and ribbons as well as draped, diaphanous, and looser fabric sections for some of its main features.

Apparent in many Victorian tea gowns (but not in all of them) was a fondness for eighteenth-century aesthetics in structural features and colors (white and pastels in particular), use of both brocaded floral silks and fabrics with a soft drape, and an abundant use of lace and ribbon trims (FIGURES 12 and 13). The upcoming Edwardian preference for softer fabrics and lace is foreshadowed in an 1890 issue of *Beauty & Fashion*.

The first important item with a hostess in regard to afternoon tea is the selection of a becoming gown. The tea will taste sweeter, and the cups will look prettier, if she is robed in some gauze-like fabric of artistic make, and a dainty tea-gown is just as much consequence to her as the beverage itself, and adds considerably to her good humour. If she knows that she is well-clad, and that the pretty, flimsy lace and soft silk will bear the closest inspection of her particular friends, there is sure to be a charming air of satisfaction pervading her whole conversation, and her manner will be more than usually affable and gracious.⁴¹

The tea gown can be seen as a remarkable chameleon garment that could adapt to different settings and levels of formality and incorporate different construction approaches in the same garment—what French high fashion traditionally describes as *frou*, when dealing with softer draped fabrics, and *tailleur* for more structured garments. An interior gown from 1884 (FIGURE 13) is a good example of this: it had a soft cascade of lace at the center-front section flanked by two draped panels (*frou*), but the main overdress of embroidered silk faille had a highly fitted and structured silhouette (*tailleur*). Meant to be worn with the second-phase bustle of the era, it was appropriate for a formal afternoon tea in mixed company, and its style and Japanese flowers made it quite artistic, to fit the front parlor.

Afternoon tea also could be a setting for more intimate gatherings and changing sexual mores. An 1890 writer advised her readers that “there is little difference now between a five o’clock tea and a reception, except that all calling acquaintances are expected on a reception day, while a five o’clock is limited to those invited by card.”⁴² By casting a broad social net at teatime, a middle- or upper-class hostess could, in today’s parlance, “go big” and receive a wide array of guests of both sexes in her front parlor for afternoon tea. On the other hand, she could invite a selected few. A more intimate gathering would allow her to be quite “artistic” or daring in her choice of gown. She could experiment with a looser-fit gown from the undress spectrum. The ability to be audacious within the tea-gown format was endorsed in this 1887 description:

This is the day of the tea-gowns. The word to old-fashioned people is synonymous with curl-papers, slippers-down-at-heels, and a wicked novel under the sofa-pillow à la Lydia Languishe. Now-a-days no one troubles to hide her little vices

43 *The Household Magazine*, December 1887, 13.

FIGURE 12 Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret (1852–1929), *Petit Concert*, France, 1883. © Ary Jan Gallery, Paris.



under the sofa-pillow, or any where [sic] else. Sappho, in velum and gold, lies on the boudoir table beside a very innocent-looking cigarette box; and the owner of these things, in a rich silken wrapper, suggestive rather of gorgeous Cleopatra waiting a visit from Anthony than anything like *déshabillé*, puts a pair of perfect little slippers on the fender, and is quite happy. She is corsetless, and comfortable enough to go to sleep; and dressed enough to receive visitors. That is the miracle worked by the tea-gown, and the secret of its safe and fast position.⁴³

This passage described the tea gown as a fashionable and innovative style worn by a progressive woman. The silken gown she wears—described concurrently as a tea gown and a wrapper—may be exotic and/or a tool of seduction rather than an old-fashioned *déshabillé* style. To be corsetless in one's boudoir was not daring, but to receive strangers or male visitors

FIGURE 13 Léon Sault, "5. Toilette d'intérieur... déshabillé très élégant. Robe forme princesse... en faille, brodée de fleurs japonaises" (Interior gown... very elegant deshabile. Princess form dress... in faille embroidered with Japanese flowers) (textual background removed), "High-Life," *L'Aquarelle-Mode* no. 21, May 25, 1884, 2. Paris. Kent State University Museum.



in that room while dressed in this manner was. The boudoir was appropriate for loose and corsetless attire and, as such, it might have been another domestic space to experiment with looser garments to be worn in public. The sense of intimacy conveyed in some laced-trim and light-colored interior gowns might have borrowed from a boudoir aesthetic. The loose back pleats and/or draped center-front areas could have been another daring parallel to the looseness seen in lingerie. In this way, the tea-gown format might have hinted to the bedroom when on display at the front of the house. It could have played on this aesthetic to push the progressive acceptance of looser garments in a public sphere. The tea gown's liminal nature between private and public probably played a part in its own development and ability to push commonly accepted boundaries.

- 44 Not all Victorian day and evening garments are boned at the seams, and, similarly, this feature is not seen in all Victorian tea gowns.
- 45 Douglas, *The Gentlewoman's Book of Dress*, 37.
- 46 Douglas, *The Gentlewoman's Book of Dress*, 52. In 1901, Sybill de Lancey also describes "the affinities that link the interior gown and the dinner gown" and how "astute one who could see at times the difference between one and the other" ("*Les affinités qui rapprochent la robe d'intérieur de la robe de diner ... bien fin qui pourrait voir parfois la différence de l'une à l'autre*"). de Lancey, "La mode et les modes," *Les Modes*, no. 2, February 1901, 14.

Until the end of the nineteenth century, fashion periodicals continued to include tea gowns in their pages and showed models that were designed to make visible a tight fit (sometimes under a looser structure) to conform to the changing fashionable silhouette. The importance of fit is demonstrated by the tea gowns in museum collections that have been examined during the course of this research. Many have draped front and back sections that appear loose and unstructured, but the outermost fashion fabric is anchored to a sturdy cotton lining similar in cut to day and evening wear and, at times, similarly boned at the seams.⁴⁴ While fitted linings do not rule out corsetlessness, the presence of boning nevertheless suggests the importance of obtaining the ideal silhouette through this mode of construction. The experience of mounting numerous elaborate interior gowns for exhibition allows for awareness of the proportions of the wearers and their bust-waist-hip ratio. I have found that most of these gowns were meant to be worn with corsetry in accordance with the Victorian ideal. The possibility exists that the corset might not have been as tightly laced and that the presence of popular looser elements such as the Watteau-back pleats was the first stage towards a greater acceptance of looser fashions that emerged in the twentieth century.

Regardless of the possible reasons for its success, the tea gown and the elaborate interior gown thrived in the late Victorian era. The tea gown had other sources of inspiration beyond the eighteenth-century rococo. In FIGURE 13, the caption for the gown indicates that the fabric was embroidered with large Japanese flowers, which illustrates another route taken by the tea gown—that of exoticism. Mrs. Douglas reminded her readers that "Japanese and Chinese patterns are, as a rule, too *bizarre* for us quiet Occidentals. Only in tea-gowns and morning-gowns can they be freely indulged in."⁴⁵ Oriental influences can be seen in how Japanese fabrics were used in the making of tea gowns (FIGURE 14), how the asymmetrical closures could be applied to an interior gown's fashionable bustled silhouette (FIGURE 15), and how the linear nature of the kimono could be adapted for bustle use (FIGURES 16 and 17). Gowns of more subtle Japanese motifs and looser panels nevertheless adhered to the Victorian hourglass silhouette (FIGURES 18 and 19).

As the new century began, the appropriateness of the tea gown remained in flux. In 1894, Mrs. Douglas informed her readers that "for home dinner-gown the tea-gown is perfection in winter: but care must be taken not to overdo the use of it."⁴⁶ The tea gown was thus viewed

FIGURE 14 Interior gown/tea gown, ca. 1874–1883. Pink taffeta and light blue Japanese *obi* fabric insets. The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, 80.01.04. Mount and photographs © Anne Bissonnette 1997.



FIGURE 15 E. Prével (dess.) and Lemaire-Gauchard, asymmetrical closure on a bustled "toilettes d'intérieur," *Le Moniteur de la Mode* no. 44, October 30, 1886, 595. Paris. Kent State University Museum.



FIGURES 16 and 17 Front and back views of a loose overdress on a bustled and fitted "Toilette d'intérieur—Robe Watteau . . ." *Le Moniteur de la Mode* no. 52, December 25, 1886, 615 (right), and plate "L. N. 547" (left). Paris. Kent State University Museum.



- 47 Howe Hall, *Social Customs*, 126.
 48 See, for instance, a woman in full evening dress in an engraving labeled "Five O'clock Tea" in *Peterson Magazine*, 86, no. 5, November 1884, 460. This situation also is described in the 1890 etiquette book *As Others See Us*, 193–94.
 49 *Fémína*, no. 18, October 15, 1901, 14.

FIGURE 18 (above) and 19 (below) Tea gowns, probably from the US, 1890s. Wool challis, printed with Japanese-inspired naturalistic peaches and peach blossoms on a purple ground. At the top is a center front panel in red/yellow iridescent silk. Below is a gown with purple velveteen accents. The Ohio State University, Historic Costume and Textiles Collection: left: P-N1W-5; right: 1987.191.1. Mounts and photographs © Anne Bissonnette 1997.



as "half dress" for some but could be worn concurrently as undress by others. A few stylistic changes helped to make the tea gown a proper reception gown: slightly shorter sleeves and deeper necklines. In Howe Hall's *Social Custom* from 1887, the author described the proper dress of a hostess at teatime and confirmed that half-dress use (i.e. demi-toilet) with its deeper neckline was permissible: "For a reception the hostess usually wears a handsome demi-toilet, silk, satin, or velvet, made with a train, and cut down at the throat if the wearer chooses. But she never wears full evening dress, as this would be in very bad taste."⁴⁷ Despite Howe Hall's advice, evidence was found that confirms her worst fears and points to full-dress attire being worn at teatime in 1884.⁴⁸ By 1901, the French periodical *Fémína* described "dressy" daytime interior gowns worn for intimate evenings and at the theater.⁴⁹ Where to don a tea gown or an elaborate interior gown and what to wear at teatime were evolving. In consequence, the tea gown adapted, and its appropriateness did not move from one category to another but eventually broadened to all categories. Hostesses eventually could select from tea-gown styles that were part of undress, half dress, and full dress. By the end of the Victorian era in 1901, tea-gown use could run the gamut from being worn to an intimate event, a formal reception in the home, or the theater. This had a profound effect on the tea gown and its evolution in the Edwardian era and beyond.

The Tea Gown, Aestheticism, and the Rise of a New Historicized Silhouette

Not everyone had the same esteem as Mrs. Douglas for the civilizing power of cut and the marvel of Victorian corsetry. Many tried to dislodge the corset's strong hold on fashion and obtained a certain amount of success. To do so, they often borrowed from a type of garment that was part of high fashion and had been widely accepted by the average Victorian public, the

FIGURE 20 George du Maurier (1834–1896), “An Impartial Statement in Black and White,” *Punch* 80, 1881. London. © Punch Limited.



50 See the three figures in various degree of “ÆSTHETIC” modes: the first in shapeless “Ancient Greek Costume,” the second in highly cinched “Neo-Greek Costume,” and the third in a gown not as highly cinched but similar to FIGURE 20 entitled “Early English Costume” in *Harper’s Bazar* 14, no. 47, November 19, 1881, 749.

tea gown. Its sanctioned historicism, exoticism, and artistic flair are no doubt why both dress reformers and Aesthetes appropriated it for their own use. In the case of Aesthetes, we might even say that they managed to develop their own stereotypical style of elaborate interior gown and make it into a recognizable fashion that became codified by satirists such as George du Maurier.

In “An Impartial Statement in Black and White” (FIGURE 20) from 1881, the artist practically covers the full spectrum of late-nineteenth-century cinching alternatives: from the absence of proper silhouette definition in Aestheticism created by omitting the corset completely, as seen on the problematic first “ÆSTHETIC LADY” (far left) in a high-waisted historically eclectic gown, to the excessive silhouette tight-lacing could produce on the third individual from the left described as a “WOMAN OF FASHION.” The happy middle ground is where the tenacious Victorian rule of proper form dominates and is present in both remaining (ideal) figures: the second woman from the left, described as a “WOMAN OF FASHION,” and the fourth and last individual, an “ÆSTHETIC LADY.” The message was clear: one could be both a woman of fashion and an adherent of Aestheticism providing one did not stray from the proper silhouette. Between the two ideal figures, there also might be a variability of waist cinching that was seen as acceptable. The Aesthetic individual on the right might still be wearing a kind of corset that molds her body into a respectable alternative: she has both proper posture and appropriate waist definition. A stereotypical silk damask Aesthetic tea gown from the Allen Memorial Art Museum—now part of the Kent State University Museum’s (FIGURE 21) collection—may demonstrate the fashionable aspect of Aestheticism. After mounting this artifact, I concluded that despite its stylistic similarity to the gown worn by the “ÆSTHETIC LADY” on the far right of du Maurier’s print, it was more than likely worn with tight-laced corsetry and thus was akin to the hyper-corseted “WOMAN OF FASHION.” An 1881 spread in *Harper’s Bazar* is further evidence that suggests a presence of Aestheticism far from the realm of dress reform and confirms it as a popular fashion phenomenon.⁵⁰

The hourglass silhouette with its focus on the waist was eventually superseded by the rise of another revivalist mode, the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century neoclassical silhouette, which obscured the corset’s presence and conquered the hourglass silhouette’s strong hold

FIGURE 21 Aesthetic tea gown, probably from the US, ca. 1877–1883 (altered). Red silk damask, black silk crepe, ecru machine-made lace. Kent State University Museum, transferred from the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio. Gift of Margaret R. Schauffler, Oberlin College Class of 1918, 1949; 1995.17.590. Mount and photographs © Anne Bissonnette 1997, courtesy of the Kent State University Museum.



FIGURE 22 Detail of a page entitled “Deux Toilettes d’Été de la maison GIRAUD, 9, rue de Castiglione.” The gown shown here is captioned “Robe empire en crêpe de Chine bleu pâle. Corset de velours bleu turquoise bordé de paillettes d’argent. Double gallon au bas de la jupe. Créations de la Maison GIRAUD, 9, rue de Castiglione, Paris,” *Fémina* no. 34, June 15, 1902, supplément 7. Paris. Bibliothèque des Arts Décoratifs.



on the Victorian psyche. The high-waisted “Empire” waistline was made popular by Aesthetic dress, as exemplified by du Maurier’s “Aesthetic Lady” of 1881 with her high-waisted historically eclectic gown (FIGURE 20, far left). The earliest depiction of a high-waisted high-fashion gown found to date is a Worth 1892 “‘Empire’ dress for a young woman.”⁵¹ An article by Sybil de Lancey in a 1901 issue of *Les Modes* mentioned two absolute nineteenth-century innovations: the tailored suit and the interior gown, both of which were assumed by her readers to be British in origin.⁵² For the latter, she suggested a revival of French styles and mentioned the Empire’s floating tunics with soft pleats that are “the model of today’s interior gown.”⁵³ In the world of high fashion, it might be that the “Empire” interior gown was but a new mode of historicism that was most appropriate for teatime, as depicted in FIGURE 22. Future study may reveal more about how “Empire” gowns were used as Aestheticism faded from view during the Edwardian era, but the tea gown’s popularity remained.

Conclusion

A type of garment that once spoke of home, though often in a grand way, ventured outside its boundaries by the end of the Victorian era. Emerging from the category of undress, the high-necked, long-sleeved, patch-pocketed, and trained late 1870s Victorian tea gown that followed the fashionable silhouette and historical revivalist trends of its time became a focus of attention in the front parlor and progressively gained in magnificence. Watteau-back pleats were often (but not always) present, and such loose elements could convey a hostess’s artistic sensibilities appropriate to her decor. Loose back pleats often stitched to the bodice and the “all in one” construction using the princess cut that emerged in the 1860s allowed a close fit of the torso and thereby made the silhouette appropriate for formal home use. From its inception, the possibility exists that cinching the waist of some gowns was present but was not always to the ideal level of high-fashion styles, allowing this type of gown to be used in a greater variety of settings: highly fitted for formal events and less so for informal gatherings with close friends. This variability is in line with the broad spectrum of fit seen in the category of undress. The tea gown followed the stylistic path of the elaborate 1860s and early 1870s interior gowns, which were laden with historicism and exotic influences, before being labeled as “tea gowns” in Britain during an era of imperial expansion. Made of wool or silk from its inception—1878 in the earliest source found thus far—the tea gown became a darling of the fashion press that continued to call similar gowns under a variety of names but put them squarely within the realm of interior gowns until the end of the Victorian era and beyond.

All tea gowns were interior gowns at first, but not all interior gowns were fit to be worn by a hostess for afternoon tea before a mixed-gendered audience that went beyond family and close friends. With industrialization and rapid urbanization, the mid-nineteenth-century rise of the front parlor as a public space within a domestic setting provided a “more controlled social environment and a more formal set of relationships.”⁵⁴ The custom of serving tea had been a sign of hospitality and politeness in the eighteenth century, but the practice was also class conscious and entailed a network of reciprocity that was embraced when newly structured afternoon teas became popular in the 1860s.⁵⁵ As a ritualized event, the late-nineteenth-century tea could take on added meaning for its ability to distinguish “those familiar with genteel tradition from the uninitiated,” as it did back in the eighteenth century.⁵⁶ The practice of hosting afternoon tea in the front parlor spread to the middle and upper classes and helped a hostess broaden her and her family’s social network beyond family and friends. The tea gown played an important part in this ritual. The formality involved in this event made a properly fitted gown compulsory, which is supported by the form-fitting nature of many surviving interior gowns (FIGURES 9, 14, 18, 19, and 21). Therefore, a special kind of formal undress could be worn by a hostess to fit the tenacious Victorian rule of proper form but was allowed to be whimsical, as it echoed its domestic setting and the exotic nature of tea. In so doing, the tea gown lent itself to greater experimentation from within the fashion system.

We must reassess the defining attributes of the tea gown and what has been said about it. Was the tea gown loose and worn without a corset or fitted and worn with a corset? The answer

51 “Young woman” could be a euphemism for a dress accommodating pregnancy even if this is not conveyed visually. Elizabeth Ann Coleman, *The Opulent Era: Fashions of Worth, Doucet and Pingat* (New York: Brooklyn Museum in association with Thames and Hudson, 1989), 147.

52 de Lancey, “La mode et les modes,” 10.

53 “... pour la robe d’intérieur, renouveau bien plutôt—et renouveau vraiment français—de temps charmants imprégnés d’élégance: de l’Empire, dont les tuniques flottantes et les plis souples sont le modèle de la robe d’intérieur d’aujourd’hui...” de Lancey, “La mode et les modes,” 10.

54 Clark, “Domestic Architecture as an Index Social History,” 52.

55 For eighteenth-century practices, see Roth, “Tea-Drinking in Eighteenth-Century America,” 439.

56 Roth, “Tea-Drinking in Eighteenth-Century America,” 439.

- 57 Wahl, "A Domesticated Exoticism", 45. See also "afternoon tea gowns were designed to allow the female body a freedom that more formal Victorian dress did not [have]" in Pettigrew, *A Social History of Tea*, 121.
- 58 The quote is from Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), 94–101.

to this conundrum depends on the date, the location of the event, the company present, and the reason for the gown's use—rather than the nature of the gown itself. The tea gown had a flexibility of use. While some tea-gown enthusiasts could be corsetless in the privacy of their boudoir in the late nineteenth century, fashion periodicals in the early years of the twentieth century continue to feature tea gowns that followed the tightly corseted silhouette of the times. Since the tea gown first emerged from the category of undress and because, from its inception, one out of four examples appears less heavily cinched at the waist, different levels of fit were likely permissible. As interior gowns worn in a changing domestic architectural landscape, the tea gown occupied a liminal space between private and public.

The appearance of looseness through the presence of draped elements does not mean that tea gowns were loose or shapeless and thus beyond the realm of proper Victorian high fashion. Confusion about the use and design of the tea gown may rest in our contemporary inability to view interior gowns as highly fashionable and highly fitted gowns that were an integral part of the fashion system. With the evidence presented in this paper, the current notion that "the original function of the tea gown was to facilitate comfort" as well as the belief that it "did not require corsets, crinolines, or bustles" should be re-examined within a high fashion context.⁵⁷ How those who wanted to reform fashion—or wanted to do away with it—used tea gowns might differ from what these garments were originally designed for. As a Victorian genre with a purpose to serve, the tea gown was socially acceptable, but, by using "the master's tools to dismantle the master's house," they could be a way to effect change.⁵⁸ Despite their multiplicity of uses, I am still doubtful that a tea gown worn at the theater in 1901 would entail corsetlessness. As such, dress historians should look outside of corsetlessness for the Victorian tea gown's specificity.

Studying the eclectic and exotic Victorian tea gown helps to understand how twentieth-century fashion broke free from the Victorian mode. The story of the tea gown is one of sanctioned experimentation, rising popularity, continual stylistic changes, and adaptation of use. Entrenched in the revivalist trends of the 1860s and 1870s and at times rather audacious, this often-public garment first embraced a lighter color palette, an array of supple and diaphanous fabrics, and an abundance of lace and ribbons that well might have anticipated Edwardian taste. The rise of the anachronistic high-waisted "Empire" silhouette and its progressive acceptance into the mainstream by 1910 might have been eased by the decade-long presence of this silhouette in high-fashion tea gowns that had long been entrenched in historicism. The "Empire" columnar silhouette that ushered in modernity of dress was indeed an historic form. If one of the major trends of the twentieth century before 1914 was a new orientalism in fashion, this might be a source of the Victorian tea gown's continued success since it had always embraced exoticism. Marcel Proust might have admired the oriental feeling of Fortuny's creations yet deplored the designer's "costumed" feel of some of his garments, but it was through such appropriations of past and foreign dress that fashion moved away from Victorian sensibilities and physical constraint and into a new paradigm.