

*Nineteenth-Century
Costume
Treasures*



Silk-Satin Dress, 1815-1820



This bronze-colored dress came from the estate of S. McClean Rhea (1855-1925) and his wife Sarah Rhodes Rhea (1855-1926) of Mercersburg, PA. The Rhea brothers operated a clothing and dry goods shop in Mercersburg in the early twentieth century. This high-fashion Empire dress represents beautifully the neo-Classical fashion extreme that characterized women's dresses commencing in the late 1790s. It was only during the 1820s that the waist seam began to drop progressively from just below the bust towards the natural waist in an evolution that would culminate in the opposite extreme in the early 1840s. Although it is not the case with this dress, quite often the long sleeves were lightly basted into the armscye to allow for easy removal, thus transforming a day dress into a short-sleeved evening gown. The triangular sleeve tabs, the most interesting feature of an otherwise simple and understated dress, are an example of the Gothic influences that entered the fashion lexicon in the wake of Walter Scott's wildly popular historical novels.

S2003-02-001 Gift



Two hand-colored fashion plates from the French journal *Costume Parisien* dated 1818 show the importance of decorative effects on the upper sleeves. Also note that skirts are slightly gored and that the hems are starting to be held out by more petticoats than earlier in the century, creating a definite A-line effect. Both plates clearly show that the sleeves extend to the wearer's knuckles, which is the case with the bronze silk-satin dress. The above caption translates as follows: "Dress of merino trimmed with narrow bands of velvet. Satin hat." The caption below reads: "Hat of Gros de Naples. Spencer of Levantine."



Close-up of decorative triangular tabs and trim on sleeve.



Brown Silk Dress, 1825



In its present incarnation, the simple lines of this silk taffeta dress follow the silhouette of 1820s fashions, but dispense entirely with the trims that were prevalent at that time, particularly on the skirts and bodice fronts. The very simplicity of the garment suggests a woman of conservative tastes, and potentially even of Quaker background. The dress, which could originally date to the 1790s, underwent a major alteration in which the center back closure was changed to one in the center front, perhaps to facilitate nursing a child. In addition, the hem was lowered and faced, most likely to accommodate either the increasing number of petticoats worn during the 1820s and 1830s or a different, taller wearer, or both. The bodice is fitted with single bust darts, and both the sleeves and bodice fronts have been cut on the bias and consequently pieced. The illusion of curved side back pieces is created through lines of silk chain stitching on the bodice back. The shoulders, armholes, neckline and waistline of the bodice are all self-fabric piped.

*S2004-01-018 Thompson
Reproduction chemisette*



Rectangular paisley scarf, early 1820s, draw loom woven. This scarf, most likely a treasured European import, came from Pittsburgh, PA, according to family history. The lean, columnar lines of Empire fashions made such stoles very popular since their long drape echoed the shape of contemporary women's dresses. As is the common fate for nineteenth-century paisley pieces, the original function of the scarf was lost at some point, and it had been donated to the Fashion Archives as a table runner.

S1982-07-047 Nickles

Day cap, 1820-1825, of sheer cotton lawn, from Chambersburg, PA. The cap was designed to frame the wearer's face with soft, feminine frills, in this case, a triple frill. Fashionable hairstyles determine the evolution of fashionable headgear; the crown of the cap is shaped to accommodate the loops and rolls of hair that were positioned high on the back of the head at that time. This cap was clearly a favorite item: several period repairs are evident on the stress points under the jaw and chin.

S1989-37-002 Yoh

Top left: *Hand-colored fashion plate for a morning dress from the February 1, 1824, issue of The Ladies' Pocket Magazine, a London-based magazine. The cap depicted in the plate is very similar to the one from Chambersburg. The descriptive text accompanying the illustration specifies that the cap "is in the Parisian style," illustrating that the French capital's influence extended into small Pennsylvania towns.* Bottom left: *Close-up showing the chain-stitching that creates the illusion of side back seams.*



Silk Taffeta Transformation Dress, 1855-1857

“Dresses with low bodices [bodices] and pelerines [small capes] are now very much in vogue. This is a very useful and economical way of making a dress, as it can be worn either for morning or evening toilet. The pelerine should be made of the same material as the dress, for morning wear; and one of black net, trimmed with black velvet, or of white lace, for evening. The sleeves should be made demi-long—that is to say, just coming below the elbow.”

Peterson’s Magazine, February 1861

“Low bodices are very desirable for summer, with capes of the same material as the dress.”

Peterson’s Magazine, July 1861



Hand-colored fashion plate from Godey’s Lady’s Book, October 1859. The second figure from the right wears a transformation silk dress, painted purple in this copy: “Carriage or dinner-dress of peach-colored taffeta, reps, or corded with black; the upper skirt and bërthe [sic] are edged with a very rich fleece and chenille fringe. The corsage itself is low, and the long sleeves can be removed from the deep jockey, so as to form an elegant and appropriate dinner-dress.” Note that Godey’s painters did not always use the colors specified in the text.

A warp-printed pattern consisting of green roses is combined with abstract arabesques and narrow striped bands to create a rich and subtle effect. This Hagerstown, MD, dress is an excellent example of a careful design that allowed maximal use of the dress through clever transformations, another characteristic of better nineteenth-century gowns. Worn with the pelerine and the full pagoda sleeves, it was a fine day dress. The pagoda sleeves were sewn to a narrow band and lightly basted into the armscye for easy removal. Thus, without the long sleeves and the pelerine, the dress becomes an evening gown (*see left*). In addition, the combination of long sleeves and a low neckline was also acceptable for dinner and evening parties. Worn with the pagoda sleeves and a chemisette during warmer months, the dress could function as a fine summer dress. Like an evening gown, the bodice fastens in the center back with hooks and eyes. The skirt is lined with white tarlatan, faced at the hem with glazed green cotton, and then further protected with a wool hem braid. White silk faces the pagoda sleeves and white silk box-pleated ribbon trims the inside edge, a standard finishing practice for the large sleeve openings of the 1850s.

S2008-08-003 Young

Shown with pagoda undersleeves, 1855-1860, S1981-14-143 Boher-Hosfeld. Embroidered collar, mid-1850s, S1983-47-024 Lynch. Hair Comb, 1850s-1860s, hand-carved horn dyed to resemble tortoise shell, S1998-01-022 Anonymous.



Silk Evening Dress, 1865-1867

“Skirts are all made with a train and very full at the hem, the fullness, however, decreasing at the hips.”

Godey’s Lady’s Book, February 1866

“Crinoline is far from being abandoned, but is by no means carried to the same excess in Paris as in this country. For evening wear, unless very many stiff skirts are worn, large hoops are required to sustain gracefully the long trains and fully-trimmed skirts.”

Godey’s Lady’s Book, July 1866

“Long trains, for the house, are still worn; in fact, they are larger than ever. Nothing can be more graceful than this style of dress; but in small crowded rooms they are difficult to manage.”

Peterson’s Magazine, January 1867

“Evening dresses of silk are made perfectly plain in front and at the sides, and are gathered in at the back in a bunch, instead of the large, flat fold so long worn.”

Peterson’s Magazine, June 1867

“For street dresses, the skirt must be short; and for the house, particularly afternoon or evening dresses, it is just as necessary that the skirt should be long, for evening wear, very long. Crinoline must be small, some even wear none at all; but with a long dress it is almost indispensable, for not one woman in a thousand knows how to wear yards of silk or muslin around her feet gracefully; it is like going about in a perpetual riding habit.”

Peterson’s Magazine, November 1867

This blue evening or dinner dress with a low square neck is trimmed with dyed-to-match silk-satin ruching on the bodice and features two-piece coat sleeves. The silk and silk-satin are also combined to form a bow trimmed with gold silk fringe on the lower right skirt front. This bow was definitely an afterthought: it covers a large coffee or tea stain. Hoops in an exaggerated elliptical shape were still essential for a fashionable silhouette. The skirt is a classic example of the construction techniques in use during the mid-1860s: the center front panel fits smoothly into the waistband, and the skirt is cut with gores in order to create the curves that allow the skirt and train to drape gracefully. In addition, the pleats at the skirt’s sides transition to deep gauging, known as cartridge pleating today, at the center back. It is interesting to note that this expensive silk skirt features the expected

matching wool hem braid and a hem facing of brown glazed cotton, but it is otherwise entirely unlined. S1982-64-281 Wm. Penn



To make her dress more suitable for daytime wear, this young lady from Wellingborough, England, filled in the neckline with a white chemisette, an option that the wearer of the blue dress may also have exercised. It is even possible that her dress is another transformation gown: the striped pieces passing over the shoulder may be removable, as is the case for the long sleeve underneath the puff at the upper arm. Removing those sections would create a low-necked evening dress with short puffed sleeves. However, without the original gown, one cannot tell for certain. Twists of hair paralleling the front center part became a very popular hairstyle as of 1864; in this instance, one might say that the adoption of fashion extremes can be an unfortunate, even unflattering, decision.



Basque Wedding Dress, 1873

“Many flounces, ruffling, puffings, and quillings, are still worn as a rule, though a simpler style is adopted by many who are tired of excessive trimming”

Peterson's Magazine, March 1873

“We predict that dress-skirts, for both in and out-door wear, will be made perfectly plain; that is, without flounces, bands, or piping. Of course, this style of skirt will bring the basque again into vogue. . . .”

Peterson's Magazine, April 1873

“Skirts with or without over-skirts, are equally fashionable, and very much trimmed costumes, as well as those severely plain, are equally worn.”

Peterson's Magazine, January 1874

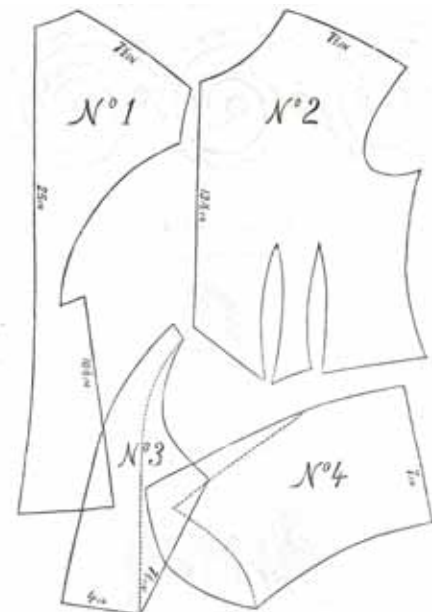
Ellen Sawyer of Allegany County, New York, wore this brilliant plaid dress for her wedding to Philetus Cartwright (1838-1918) of Genessee, Allegany County, New York, in 1873. She was his second wife, the first having died in childbirth. This marriage did not last either: Ellen died in 1875, perhaps due to complications from birth of her only son in November 1874, and Cartwright married his third wife shortly thereafter. The bodice and skirt provide an excellent example of the bold and brilliant colors that characterize Victorian fashion. The basque bodice and pagoda sleeves of the 1850s returned in the early 1870s in a modified, less exaggerated, form that was worn with a bustle. The white bridal gown was every young Victorian bride's dream, but frugality and practicality often led young women to select fabric which could be easily reused as a best dress after the wedding. Although Ellen's dress is fashionable, it has its conservative aspects. The bodice is of a common and popular type for 1873, and this one is beautifully made. The skirt is constructed to fit over a fashionable bustle, but completely lacks the overskirt that had characterized stylish skirts since the late 1860s and would continue to hold sway for several years still. Instead, in its uncluttered lines and bold velvet appliqués, the skirt owes more to the aesthetics of the mid-1860s than it does to the frilly frou-frou and layers that are the hallmark of the 1870s overall. As the citations above indicate, not everyone embraced this aspect of 1873 fashions, and Ellen was clearly one of them.

S2005-03-001 Bottoms-Steesy

Shown with collar, embroidered motifs on net, S1981-11-029 Edwards

Reproduction undersleeves

The April 1873 issue of Peterson's Magazine featured a miniaturized pattern for a basque bodice very similar to Ellen's. The description states: “We take pleasure in laying before our readers a very neat and tasty Basque Waist, as will be seen by the accompanying engraving. It is easily constructed, and we think will amply repay any one for making it up. It is appropriate for this season of the year.”





Silk Faille Dress, 1887-1889



Sara in a fashionable hat during the late 1870s-early 1880s.

Sara Rees Boher *née* Hogan (ca. 1852-1917) owned this lovely dress. The bodice fastens in the center front with plain brown mother-of-pearl buttons which are subsequently concealed by a gathered inset at the bodice top and the asymmetrical closure with the large 1.5-inch figured buttons. The skirt features the long asymmetrical drapery typical of the last years of the bustle era. For an interesting design element, the back drapery of the skirt hooks into a discreet thread eye on the lower bodice back. Both skirt and bodice are trimmed with dark blue-black velvet and black glass beads. Such combinations of rich textures—shining silk, glittering black glass or jet, and somber velvet—form another key characteristic of women's fashions the 1880s.

S1981-14-069 Boher-Hosfeld





Silk Faille and Brocade Dress, 1892-1893



Mrs. Charles Clink of Fredericktown, OH, signed the back of her ca. 1892 cabinet card portrait. Her dress resembles the London-tailored gown, once again illustrating that fashion did not limit itself to world or state capitals.

Butterick published a similar bodice pattern in the May 1893 issue of The Delineator. It is described as being “disposed with becoming fullness across the bust by gathers at the arms’-eyes.” The description also specifies one aspect of Sarah Glover’s dress: “The waist is worn under the skirt” and further suggests that it be accompanied by “an Empire or bell skirt” (p. 473). The same bodice illustrated in another fabric in the same issue is also described as having sleeves of “Empire puffs” (p. 455).



The tailoring firm that made this silk faille dress sewed its label into the bodice: Russell & Allen, Old Bond St., London. The dress belonged to Sarah Eyre Glover *née* Blair (1861-1929) of Richmond, VA. It is an excellent example of the Empire styles that reappeared briefly at the beginning of the 1890s. Some of these Empire reinterpretations were what modern readers would define as true Empire fashions with the waistline set just below the wearer’s bust. Others, such as this one, were still considered to be Empire styles due to the bustline emphasis created by the band of contrasting fabric draped across the bosom. The March 1893 issue of *The Delineator* featured two pages of dress patterns in the “Empire Style, or with Empire attributes, which are representative of the effects so very fashionable at the present time,” demonstrating the broad interest in this historical revival.

The large double-puff three-quarter length sleeves on this dress illustrate the fullness that appeared on both the upper and lower arm when women’s sleeves were beginning to expand. Most of the skirt’s fullness is located in the back; three sets of inner tape ties at approximately the wearer’s high hip, *derrière* and knees allow it to be adjusted. Typical skirts of the 1890s, such as this one, were rather simple when contrasted to the elaborately draped and trimmed skirts of the 1870s and 1880s. However, the simple lines hide complex internal workings: like others of this kind, this skirt is entirely interlined with crinoline, a blend of linen and horsehair, for stiffening. It is also fully lined, and has an additional dust ruffle sewn inside at the hemline. As a result, it is very heavy.

S2010-01-001 Glover, replacement sleeve frills

