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Professor Mary Margaret Benson
Nicholson Library
Linfield College
900 S.E. Baker Street
McMinnville, OR 97128

Dear Professor Benson,

Attached please find a proposal for the JASNA 2010 Oregon and Southwest Washington AGM. Titled "From Catherine to Catherine, or, Becoming a Historic Clothing Expert in Thirty Minutes or Less," this session is designed to help participants become more familiar with the changes in fashion that Jane Austen would have experienced during her adult years. Through images of extant clothing, fashion plates, and fashion magazines, we will explore the details that date the clothing. By the end of the session, participants may be able to help solve a historical mystery.

Equipment needed:

I will bring a laptop and projector, but request a projection screen and a stand for the projector.

Speaker biography:

Hope Greenberg holds an MA in History from the University of Vermont. She studies historic clothing, as well as recreating and wearing it, focusing on the evolution of fashion as well as the language that describes it. She presented "Fashion in Jane Austen's World" at the June 2009 meeting of JASNA-VT. She is currently a Humanities Computing Specialist at the University of Vermont where she provides advanced technology consulting in teaching, scholarly communication, and digitally mediated historic research.

Sincerely,

Hope Greenberg

From Catherine to Catherine, or, Becoming a Historic Clothing Expert in Thirty Minutes or Less

The Miss Morland whom the world met in 1818 would have dressed quite differently from the Miss Morland created by Austen almost twenty years before. Though both Catherines would have worn muslin, eyes less discerning than Mr. Tilney's could have distinguished which was which. Can we modern readers do the same?

Jane Austen wrote that she hated to describe clothing details, yet her letters and novels have enough references to tantalize clothing historians. She continued her abbreviated description with "I dare say you will be able to guess what it is like." Cassandra, to whom the letter was written, may have been able to guess. For us, at a distance of two hundred years, that is no simple task. Contemporary fashion magazines provide some clues, but clothing and the terms used to describe it changes. A bonnet in 1800 bears little resemblance to a bonnet of 1818, while a cloak of 1798 has more in common with a shawl of 1818 than a cloak of 1750.

What of Austen herself? Though she wrote of clothing, did she dress fashionably? To Martha Lloyd, in September 1814, Austen wrote: "I am amused by the present style of female dress. It seems a more marked change than one has lately seen." The "marked change" that Austen saw is barely negligible to modern eyes. Nor was Austen simply aware of fashion changes. She also described her efforts to keep up with the latest styles.

This awareness of fashion and her efforts to dress fashionably, presents us with a fashion mystery. A woman in an unidentified watercolour done by James Stanier Clarke, the Prince Regent's librarian, has been tentatively identified as Jane Austen. She wears a trained muslin gown, a long lace-trimmed cloak, and a soft, full bonnet decorated with feathers. Austen and Clarke met in 1815. Would the woman whose letters were filled with clothing references, who shopped in London's fashion warehouses, and who, on more than one occasion, mentioned altering her gowns to the latest mode, wear an up to date ensemble to Carlton House? Does this image represent a fashionable woman of 1815?

Drawing from several hundred images as well as Austen's letters and novels, this presentation will explore the subtle and not so subtle differences that chart the evolution of British women's clothing between the late 1790s and 1818. Samples of modern fabrics that approximate early 19th century muslins will also be on hand for those who would like to see and touch. By the end of the session, participants will test their knowledge of the fashion details that would have been obvious to Jane Austen and, perhaps, help solve the mystery of the Clarke portrait. While this session may irrevocably ruin participants' ability to watch Austen film adaptations with equanimity, they, like Henry Tilney, will be able to determine at a glance which Catherine Morland belongs when.

Hope Greenberg