

Fashion Reforming

Reforming Fashion, 1850-1914:
Politics, Health, and Art

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Strive as you will to elevate woman, nevertheless the disabilities and degradation of her dress, together with that large group of false views of the uses of her being and of her relations to man, symbolized and perpetuated by her dress, will make your striving vain.—Gerrit Smith

The Trouble with Fashion

Throughout the nineteenth century and in the early decades of the twentieth century in Europe and America the basic silhouette of women's dress went through many permutations, from tubular to hourglass and back to tubular. Emphasis could shift from the breast, shoulders, waist, and derriere, and then back again. The style of dress and accompanying silhouette was dependent not on the natural shape of the human body, but rather on various undergarments—corsets, petticoats, crinolines, bustles, and other supporting devices. Many people accepted this ever-changing litany of clothes as a natural phenomenon of an advanced society, and thus viewed it as an inevitable outward expression of progressive social values, control, and hierarchy; fashion was a sign of modernity. Yet, growing numbers of individuals began to believe that women's clothing, particularly fashionable dress, was harmful to their health. For them fashion was a symbol and major cause of women's political and economic oppression. Some considered women to be slaves to fashion (Figure 1). Because clothing often encompassed unnatural forms, some reformers also argued that fashionable dress was aesthetically unpleasing as well. Breaking women's bonds to fashion would be no simple task, for the power of fashion was tenacious and remained a force in the minds of women.

From the Age of Louis XIV to well into the twentieth century, Paris was the dominant fashion center, not only for women's fashion, but also for architecture, furniture, and all the decorative arts. It is therefore not surprising that the art of high fashion, haute couture, had its beginnings in Paris. Starting in



Fig. 1. Harper's Weekly proof etching by Thomas Nast. It is not known if this illustration was published.

the mid-nineteenth century, fashion decisions became largely the province of English-born Parisian designer Charles Frederick Worth and a coterie of like-minded producers of fine, handmade gowns and accessories in Paris and other cultural centers in the Western world. By the turn of the twentieth century, the House of Worth and others in the French haute couture were well established as the arbiters of taste in dress. While there were, of course, many dressmakers and designers throughout Europe and America, these specialists often adapted the new Paris styles. Dissemination of French fashion occurred through the channels of fashion periodicals and general women's magazines which offered illustrations and, in some cases, patterns of the latest styles (Figures 2, 3). Indeed, various news media also kept the public abreast of the latest fashions first worn by the Parisian demimondaines, actresses, and wealthy Europeans and Americans for whom fashion was important.¹

A great many women from all levels of society felt it necessary to follow the latest fashion, especially for clothing worn in the public sphere. Concern for the latest styles of dress was not an idle pastime, for it was socially important to be considered fashionable and beautiful; clothes could earn one merit in society. Indeed, as interpreted by Thorstein Veblen in 1899, the fashionably dressed woman was a major communicator of family status and wealth. Etiquette books and advice manuals reveal that being in fashion also meant wearing the correct clothing designated for specific occasions and time of day. It was important to adhere to these rules for they were necessary to achieve a place in society.²

While individuals would not necessarily wish to go against



Fig. 4. The first appearance of "crinoline." *Punch* (August 1856).



Fig. 3. Fashion plate from *Godey's Lady's Book* (December 1854).

the norms of society or, worse yet, suggest that they might have questionable morals, in the nineteenth century many women did shun fashionable clothing because they believed that it harmed their health. They argued that the amount of underclothing, the sheer weight of the clothes, and the constriction of the corset were not only harmful to women's health, but the effect did not promote beauty; in fact, many believed that the clothing was

supported and created what became the correct and ideal silhouette for her gown (Figure 5). The process of getting dressed was a time-consuming ritual. Women did not just jump out of bed, throw on a bra, slip, panty hose, pumps, and a comfortable knit dress before dashing out the door. When getting dressed, the fashionable woman first put on her stockings, which were gartered above the knee with elastic bands that could reduce circulation of the legs. She might then put on her high-cut button shoes because, once the corset was on, it then became difficult to bend down to button the shoes. The next two pieces were drawers and chemise. Drawers were knee-length or longer cotton trousers that buttoned at the waist, often left open for ease in elimination. Over the drawers she put on either a hip-length knitted vest and a short petticoat or a chemise. The next essential garment was the corset stiffened with thin strips of whalebone. If a woman tight laced she risked squeezing her intestines and internal organs. Her breathing would be restricted as well. Over this a woman put on a corset cover and then a bustle, a contraption made of coils that was tied around the waist and hung in back. Another petticoat would be worn over this. Finally, the fashionable woman would put on her gown, which might consist of a boned bodice and stiffened skirt to match. Strings or elastic might be attached inside the skirt to keep the back fullness and the bustle in place. If it were cold, the fashionable woman might wear a jacket decorated with jet beads, which could add as much as 10 pounds to her clothing. In all, her complete outfit could weigh as much as 25 pounds.

Health and beauty were not the only issues regarding women's dress. For no small number of people linked restrictive clothing to women's limited roles, and what they perceived was women's inferior political position in society. Clearly, many women in the nineteenth century could not, or chose not, to focus their lives on being fashionable. As middle-class women became more involved in the public sphere and attended college, they desired to be more active participants in roles outside of the domestic sphere. For these women being modern meant more than wearing the latest styles in dress. Indeed, in the second half of the nineteenth century increasing numbers of women were



Fig. 2. *Godey's Lady's Book*, "Godey's Fashions for October 1873."

ugly because it did not follow the natural form of the human body. For them, the body itself was ugly because fashion had destroyed its natural beauty.

Problems with fashion were evident throughout the nineteenth century. An example of a woman getting dressed in the 1880s reveals her troubling situation. The fashionable woman of 1885 reshaped her body not with diet and exercise, but with many layers of undergarments, a built-up structure that then

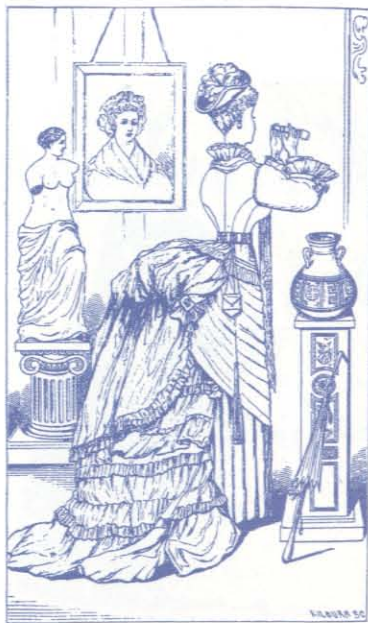


Fig. 5. In an effort to make a statement about the artificiality of fashion, dress reformers often compared a fashionably dressed woman, whose dress is supported by many layers of undergarments, with the figure of Venus. This image appears as the frontispiece to Abba Goold Woolson's *Dress-Reform: A Series of Lectures Delivered in Boston, on Dress as It Affects the Health of Women* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1874).

attending college and entering professions and businesses.

Women on many fronts sought economic and political power.³

Reform clearly was not the concern of a single group. Clothing reform was of interest to many organizations and was an international phenomenon, especially from the second half of the nineteenth century through the first decade of the twentieth century. There were many people involved in dress reform, and their persistence over a period of time attests to the continuing problem and interest in creating alternatives to fashionable women's dress. Promoters of women's clothing reform in America, Britain, and the Continent of Europe included men and women who were health or hygienic reformers, educators, feminists, physicians, artists, architects, club women, dancers, actresses, opera singers, members of communal and religious groups, and many other educated people. They all sought in some way to alter and improve contemporary styles of women's dress.⁴

In order to make fashion rational, some advocates of reform suggested altering the underpinnings of women's dress—corset, corset cover, petticoats, bustles, pads, etc. They wanted to keep the outer dress in compliance with the styles then in fashion so they devised ways to construct fashionable garments to be less restrictive and cumbersome. Other reformers began to advocate for completely new clothing styles which would not suggest an inferior role, and which would allow enough ease in movement for work and active sports. These new styles of clothing went against the norm. As such, they often were viewed as less than attractive alternatives to fashionable styles of women's dress. These new reform garments took several forms and appeared in the streets and salons of America, in Britain, and on the Continent of Europe. They include trousers, artistic "aesthetic" gowns, as well as dresses altered so that they "made fashion rational." With these altered dresses, women could wear the new rational underwear systems that replaced fashionable bulky underwear and, most of all, the corset. The new underwear offered a less obvious way to reform women's clothing.⁵

Fig. 6. Amelia Bloomer in 1851 wearing the short dress and full trousers gathered at the ankle, the style that the press soon named "the bloomer." Daguerreotype by T. W. Brown. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Ladies in Trousers

One of the first elements of fashionable dress to come under the reformers' fire was the long full skirt. Long skirts dragged on the ground, sweeping up tiny vermin and debris from the street with the wearer's every step, to be then deposited indoors. Petticoats hung heavily on the waist, cage crinolines could swing out and flip up in the wind, trains and bustles were heavy and awkwardly balanced (Figure 4). Women's skirts made walking up and down stairs treacherous and running nearly impossible.

The reformers chose a solution that they believed was both practical and modest. They did not elect to reveal women's legs, for that would have been improper—indeed, unthinkable. Rather, they chose to wear a dress made like other fashionable dresses except for its knee-length skirt worn over matching trousers. A similar style was worn by Turkish and Syrian women and had been worn on stage and for masquerade dress. Trousers, called pantalets, had also been worn under skirts by women in France in the early 1800s, and later became the fashion for young girls. Pantalets were seen on gymnasium outfits as early as 1830. Trousers also were worn by women in health sanitariums and communal societies.⁶

Although fairly restricted in use, trousers caught the attention of a young feminist, Elizabeth Smith Miller. She adopted the costume for her own everyday dress and introduced it to her cousin, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and to Stanton's friend, Amelia



WOMAN'S EMANCIPATION.

(Being a Letter addressed to Mr. Punch, with a Drawing, by a strong-minded American Woman.)



Fig. 8. Role reversal was a favored device for showing the folly of bloomers. *Punch* 2 (1851), 3.

Bloomer, editor of *The Lily*, a feminist tract devoted to temperance and women's reform. Bloomer began wearing the shortened skirt and trousers in 1851, the advantages of which she described in a *Lily* article (Figures 6, 7). The local newspaper in Seneca Falls, N.Y., *The Courier*, also commented favorably on the style worn by Mrs. Bloomer, and soon newspapers picked up the account and named the style, the "bloomer." Although coverage was widespread, Amelia Bloomer observed that "some of our editorial brethren commend us highly, while others cry out against this 'usurpation of the rights of man.'"⁷

In the 1850s commendations of the bloomer costume were indeed widespread; women in Europe, Britain, and Germany adopted a similar costume. Supporters in America noted the practicality and convenience of the new costume, as well as its health benefits. They saw moral and patriotic qualities in its simplicity. On the other hand, opponents had strong arguments for rejecting the bloomer. Some simply believed that it was bad fashion, or immoral or unpatriotic because it was based on foreign styles (Turkish). Perhaps the strongest argument used was the belief that the bloomer was incongruous with prevailing ideology regarding women's roles. There was strong antagonism toward women wearing trousers, and those who wore the bloomer in public faced harassment. Numerous cartoons played upon deep-seated fears of people regarding gender and fashion (Figure 8).⁸

In the nineteenth century, when all women wore skirts and all men wore pants, clothing inevitably came to symbolize the mutually exclusive functions men and women were expected to perform. The ideology of the century was that women belonged in the home, running the household and caring for children, while men belonged in the public sphere, running the worlds of business, politics, and commerce. Long, full skirts prevented easy, independent movement and were particularly inconvenient when worn outdoors; therefore, they appropriately symbolized

women's dependent, domestic roles. If women decided to wear pants, the assumption was that they wanted to compete with men for places of public power, which would create a problem: who would manage the home?

Eventually, bloomers became associated with the women's rights movement, an effort not wholly embraced by Americans. Indeed, feminists believed that fashionable dress was a symbol of their oppression. They shared Elizabeth Cady Stanton's opinion that a woman's dress perfectly described her condition: "her tight waist and long trailing skirts deprive her of all freedom." Yet notwithstanding the recommendations given in *The Lily* for the bloomer style, many feminists ceased wearing it after a few years because the ridicule became counterproductive to gaining rights for women. When asked why she returned to fashionable dress, Amelia Bloomer noted that she had moved to a new community and felt like donning skirts when in society, and she found the new hoop light and pleasant to wear.⁹

Not everyone ceased wearing trousers to promote women's rights. Indeed, activists in movements for women's rights, temperance, and other causes continued the effort to reform women's dress throughout the late nineteenth century. Certainly, activities continued in upstate New



Fig. 7. Elizabeth Smith Miller in "bloomer costume." From the archives of the Seneca Falls Historical Society.

York and Ohio. Indeed, there were two grassroots efforts toward dress reform that occurred in Ohio during the 1870s. One took place in South Newbury, Ohio, where in September 1870, a group of men and women organized what may have been the first society for dress reform in Ohio—The Northern Ohio Health and Dress Reform Association. Ellen Munn, an ardent



Fig. 10. The Metropolitan Gymnastic Costume. Godey's Lady's Book (January 1858).

dress reformer, noted that its object was to get rid of "unhealthy, unnatural, and inconvenient forms of dress" and to feed and clothe the human body with a view to its anatomical structure. The organizers announced its Dress Reform Picnic for "all women having courage to lay aside symbols of their servility and don the American Costume of 'trowsers' and frock." All tolerant men, and only such, also were invited. According to the magazine, Ellen Munn wore plaid baggy trousers, secured at the ankle

with ruffles embellished with lace or rickrack braid. A full knee-length jacket hung over this. The reformers celebrated the organization of the Dress Reform Association and women's suffrage every year by having a fourth of July picnic where women were expected to wear bloomers.¹⁰ The dress reform organization led to the formation of the South Newbury Woman's Suffrage and Political Club, the second oldest suffrage organization in Ohio and one of the oldest in the United States.

The first meeting of the American Free Dress League held in 1874 marked the second dress reform effort in Ohio. ("Free," for them, meant "freedom of the individual to decide on needs and styles of dress, and fiscal freedom.") The idea for this organization occurred on the last day of an anti-fashion convention held in January 1874, in Vineland, N.J. Faithful friends of

Mary Tillotson, who had organized the anti-fashion meeting, gathered at her home to discuss the possibility of forming a new organization devoted to dress reform.

Participants included D.M. (Darius) and Sophia Allen of

South Newbury, Ohio, active participants in the earlier 1870 meeting in South Newbury. To manifest their regard for equality, the organizers elected a man and a woman to share the various offices. The Allens shared the presidency. The participants planned to have their first meeting in September of that year (1874) in Painesville, Ohio, a village not far from the Allens's home in South Newbury.¹¹

The first meeting of the Free Dress League took place with members of the Ohio Press in attendance. The *Northern Ohio Journal* carried announcements of the meeting and later reported on its activities, including the resolutions offered by Mary Tillotson, the Constitution of the organization, and later the text of the speech given by Darius Allen.¹² The press was not favorably inclined toward the conveners. They admired the conservative wing made up of women like Stanton, Julia Ward Howe, Mrs. Livermore, and others, but had little regard for the more radical group "officered" by females whose zeal they thought was only equaled by their lack of personal charms. It was this radical wing of the reformers that met in Painesville.¹³ At the meeting, Tillotson's clothing, a short dress worn with bloomers, was described by one unsympathetic journalist as "aggressively ugly."

Trousers also continued to be a solution for health reformers who spread their gospel through a number of publications. They could advocate bloomers for health reasons with little public harassment. Their reasoning implied weakness, and thus was less threatening to established ideas about gender roles. Between 1856 and 1864, Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck, an energetic bloomer-wearer and water-cure physician, edited *The*

Fig. 11. The Sweet sisters in their mountaineering outfits, 1896. Photo by Theodore S. Solomans. From Shirley Sargent, *Pioneers in Petticoats: Yosemite's Early Women 1856-1900* (Los Angeles: Trans-Anglo Books, 1966).



Fig. 9. Harriet N. Austin, M.D., in the American costume of her own design with straight trouser legs. Courtesy Dansville Area Historical Society.



Fig. 12. Ladies' and Children's Bathing Costumes. *Harpers Magazine* (August 19, 1871).

Fig. 14. Gymnasium and exercise suit based on a Jenness Miller model. *Arena* 6 (1892): 643.



Fig. 15. Annie Jenness Miller's American costume. *Review of Reviews* (1893): 313.



Fig. 16. Syrian Dress. Worn by Laura Lee at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, *Arena* 8 (1893): 139.



Sibyl, a health publication primarily devoted to improving women's dress. Other health journals, such as the *Water-Cure Journal* (later the *Herald of Health*), similarly promoted sensible dress for women, and its editor, Mary Gove Nichols, also adopted the bloomer style, testifying that it brought her new health and courage. Other water-cure physicians who promoted trousers were Ellen White of the Seventh Day Adventist Water Cure in Battle Creek, Mich., and Harriet Austin (Figure 9), who adopted what she called the American Costume at James Caleb Jackson's Water Cure in Glen Haven, N.Y., in 1852.¹⁴

Sports and Exercise

In the mid-nineteenth century there was increasing interest in using exercise as a means to maintain good health. Educators and advocates of physical training believed that an indoor life was physically debilitating not only for men, but also to children and women. Indeed, Oberlin and Vassar colleges shared the philosophy of the health reformers and included hygiene, calisthenics, and sports activities in their curricula. At Vassar, in 1865, a Venus de Milo cast was even placed in the calisthenics classroom to serve as an ideal standard of natural beauty for the students.¹⁵ Whether at Vassar or Mt. Holyoke College, or in Dr. Dio Lewis' Academy of Physical Culture in Boston, women wore shortened gowns and loose trousers for calisthenics classes, much like an 1832 illustration from *Atkinson's Casket*. In 1858, noting that "gymnastic exercises among the ladies" had become "popular," *Godey's* magazine introduced the Metropolitan Gymnastic Costume, a very fashionable looking exercise costume (Figure 10). The loose bloomer

style of the gymnasium suit became linked more and more with the idea of physical activity for women, and thus became acceptable dress for a variety of sports and outdoor activities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These included mountain climbing, swimming, and bicycling (Figures 11, 12, 13).¹⁶

Bloomers in Public

Although many feminists in the 1850s ceased wearing the bloomer, they continued to support the concept of dress reform.

In the 1870s, both the National Woman Suffrage Association, headed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the American Woman Suffrage Association, led by Lucy Stone, promoted dress reform in their publications, *The Revolution* and *The Woman's Journal*. Yet it was not until the 1890s that feminists in the National Council of Women established a dress committee to recommend specific styles of reform dress for everyday or public use. Not surprisingly, the styles they chose echoed the 1850s bloomer design, which had initially been worn for exercise and by the 1890s was the acceptable style for women engaged in physical activities. The dress committee chose three styles, all of which had some type of trouser or leg covering: the Syrian costume, the gymnasium suit (Figure 14), and the American costume



Fig. 13. Bicycle costume *Delineator* (August 1894): 135.

(Figure 15). All were recommended by the committee, and speakers on dress reform at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago wore variations of garments exhibited. Laura Lee, an artist from Boston and one of the speakers, wore several versions of the Syrian costume (Figure 16).¹⁷



Fig. 18. Jaeger style combination suit. Jaros Bros. & Co., New York. Frances Stuart Parker, *Dress and How to Improve It* (1897).

Fig. 20. The improved freedom waist. Battle Creek Sanitarium Dress System (Battle Creek, MI: Sanitary and Electrical Supply System, [1890]), 41-53. Courtesy of Smith College.



Fig. 19. Cover of the Battle Creek Sanitarium Dress System (Battle Creek, MI: Sanitary and Electrical Supply System, [1890]). Courtesy of Smith College.



Reform Underwear

Many of the objections to fashionable dress were in fact directly related to abuses caused by undergarments. Remember that the fashionable woman of the 1880s wore too much underwear; it restricted her and weighed her down. It could be too hot in the summer and not warm enough in the winter. (Even the cage crinoline, that mercifully reduced the number of petticoats, allowed air to blow around a woman's legs). The corset was generally worn too tight. The many skirt layers created bulk at the waist and the weight of the clothing was unevenly distributed. If the excess bulk were removed, then a woman would not have to resort to tight-lacing which, according to many health experts, greatly damaged women's internal organs and caused disease.¹⁸

One of the first reform undergarments to be promoted in America was the "emancipation union under flannel," patented in 1868. This union suit combined a knit flannel waist (shirt) and drawers in one. The concept of a one-piece undergarment apparently was not new, for in a letter from August 1843, English author Thomas Carlyle referred to a "uniondress" as a "women's spenser and drawers all in one, which women wore in winter time."¹⁹

The "combination," as the union suit was often called, was continuously improved by various knitwear companies and reformers in America. Susan Taylor Converse of Woburn, Mass., designed an improved version in 1875 and named it the Emancipation Suit (Figure 17). Since the suit was actually a corset and corset cover in one, it reduced the number of undergarments. A gathered section across the bodice freed the breasts from compression, and sets of buttons at the waist and

hips helped suspend several layers of skirts. The Emancipation Suit also could have been purchased as two separate parts that buttoned together at the hips.²⁰

The Emancipation Suit was endorsed by the New England Women's Club, one of the earliest organizations to advocate undergarment reform. In 1873, members of the club established a dress-reform committee after an inspirational talk by author Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. The committee, headed by Abba Gould Woolson, sponsored a series of lectures by four eminent female physicians on the hazards of fashionable dress. These lectures were later published in 1874 under the title *Dress Reform*.²¹

The Emancipation Suit.

Patented August 3d, 1875.

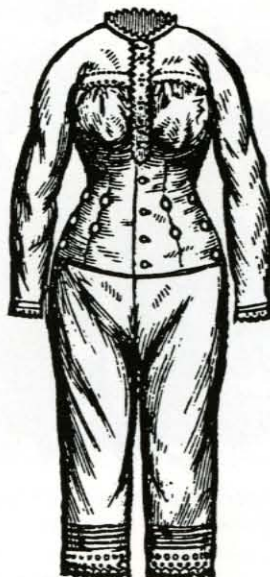


Fig. 17. The Converse "emancipation suit" as advertised in the George Frost & Company Catalog in Boston, 1876. Courtesy of Smithsonian Institution.

One of the best-known reformers of underwear was the German-born Dr. Gustav Jaeger, who in 1880 published a reform text titled *Die Normalkleidung* (Rational Clothing). Long knit underwear similar to Jaeger's knit union suits (Figure 18) were particularly popular with reformers in England after they were featured at the International Health Exhibition in 1884. This Kensington exhibition included a section on hygienic dress and featured noted architect and theatrical designer Edward Godwin as a speaker on dress reform.²²

Several individuals devoted to reform devised whole systems of underclothing that included no corset at all. In the 1890s, one of America's best-known health reformers, Dr. J. H. Kellogg, developed a dress system at the Battle Creek Sanitarium which was "practical, healthful, and artistic" (Figure 19). Kellogg stated that "any young woman who has not permanently ruined her body by badly constructed apparel can in a short time learn to stand like the Venus Genetrix." His "dress system" attempted to minimize the weight on the hips and shoulders previously emphasized in fashion. Corsets and tight bodices were discarded. Through the sanitarium women could



Fig. 21. Leglettes or a divided skirt replaced petticoats. There were several variations of the divided skirt. *Jenness Miller Monthly* 7 (November 1894): 28.



Fig. 22. Chemilette, a union garment to replace the petticoat and chemise. *Jenness Miller Monthly* 7 (November 1894): 28.

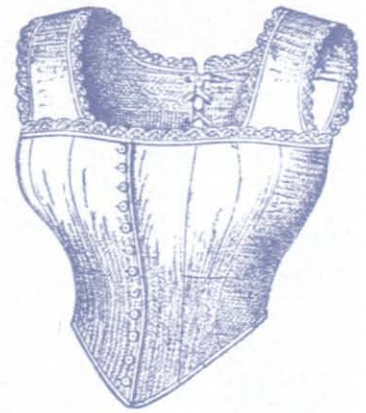


Fig. 23. "Solid Comfort Bosom Support." A model bodice with a few stays was also offered. *Jenness Miller Monthly* 7 (November 1894): 28.

order patterns or "garments made in the Dress Department." The general plan for the "system" included designs for gowns and undergarments. For the latter, women could choose from the following selections to best suit their needs for warmth and comfort: the union suit, jersey tights (worn over the union suit for extra warmth), a combination suit (instead of chemise and drawers), the Dr. Lindsay divided skirt (knitted for warmth), the "improved" divided skirt (without visible divide), skirt waists (to be sewn or buttoned to skirts), the improved Freedom waist (with two rows of buttons for attaching the dress skirt and petticoat or drawers (Figure 20), or "umbrella drawers" (a yoked skirt, divided skirt, and ruffled drawers with yoke).²³

Annie Jenness Miller, a frequent lecturer, author, and publisher on the subject of physical culture and correct dress, also devised a "dress system" to replace the fashionable chemise and drawers, corset, corset cover, and petticoats. As illustrated and described in her journal, *Dress, the Jenness Miller Magazine*, this system was similar to Kellogg's and included leglettes, chemilettes, and a model bodice (Figures 21, 22, 23). Both systems freed women from wearing heavily boned corsets and sought to distribute the weight of the underclothing and reduce bulk at the waist. While by present-day standards the number of recommended undergarments seems excessive, the systems were lighter, less restrictive, and meant to distribute the weight of clothing evenly. They also attempted to provide a selection of

undergarments for seasonal comfort. The Jenness Miller system also included a bosom support for stout women, a garment similar to a brassiere. Although not a separate undergarment, the gown form provided by Kellogg (Figure 24) and Jenness Miller (Figure 25) was essential as a foundation for the gown. The gown form not only replaced the lining of a fashionable skirt, but was so arranged "that graceful drapery [could] be formed upon it, and the weight evenly supported" by the body. It also eliminated "tie backs" around the legs and had no band at the waist. Patterns for the Jenness Miller systems could be purchased from the publisher or from various dress reform outlets across the country.²⁴

The new reform underwear "systems" of Kellogg, Jenness Miller, and others all eliminated the heavily boned corset, as well as reduced excessive bulk and weight. These undergarments could be worn without being readily noticed and were a great improvement over the more fashionable but distorting undergarments.

Fig. 24. A "gown form" foundation. Battle Creek Sanitarium Dress System (Battle Creek, MI: Sanitary and Electrical Supply System, [1890]).

Fig. 25. A "gown form" provided a foundation for the outer dress as a lining and could also be a substitute for bosom support. *Jenness Miller Monthly* 7 (November 1894): 28.





Fig. 27. W. P. Frith, *Private View at the Royal Academy*, 1881. Collection of A. C. R. Pope.



Fig. 29. Punch cartoon by George du Maurier (Volume 80, 1881). *An impartial statement of the lady of fashion vs. the aesthetic lady.*

Artistic Dress

In order to make visible the damaging effects of the corset, many authors of dress reform literature often showed the statue of Venus de Milo (Figure 5), the epitome of natural beauty, contrasted with the distorted body of a corseted woman. However, it was the proponents of artistic dress who most heartily adhered to classical ideals of beauty reflected in the Venus de Milo statue. They applied the principles of art, upon which these ideals were founded, to dress. For them the artificiality of fashionable dress—the corset, crinoline, bustle, and other disguising elements of fashion—went against nature and thus destroyed the beauty of a woman's natural form.



Fig. 26. Jane Morris in 1868. Photograph by D. G. Rossetti. Courtesy of William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow, England.

Like the health reformers, some aesthetic dress reformers saw the need to abandon and reduce the weight of women's clothing, maintaining that without good health women could not be truly beautiful.

Others objected to fashionable dress chiefly on the grounds of taste, rejecting the excessive ornamentation of Victorian design in favor of the principles of simplicity and suitability. Still others decried fashion because it encouraged women to conform to a single style of dress rather than allowing for individual expression, enhanced through the application of art principles to dress.

Artistic Dress in Europe

Among the earliest aesthetic dress reformers were those associated with the English Pre-Raphaelite painters. Three artists—William Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and John Everett Mallais—established the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848, while they were students at the Royal Academy in London. They adopted John Ruskin's precepts as the underlying philosophy for their art. Like Ruskin, they saw "true nobleness in dress," believing that:

no good historical painting ever yet existed, or ever can exist, where the dress of the people of the time are not beautiful; and had it not been for the lovely and fantastic dressing of the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, neither French nor Florentine nor Venetian art could have risen to anything like the rank it reached.²⁵

Not only in their paintings, such as Rossetti's "Day Dream" (1880) and "Veronica Veronese" (1873), and Hunt's "Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus" (1851), was period clothing evident, but also in their everyday lives, for they encouraged their wives, models, and friends to wear clothing inspired by classical, medieval, and Renaissance styles. When Jane Morris, wife of designer William Morris, was photographed in 1865, she wore a simple and loose, full-skirted dress without a corset or hoop (Figure 26).

As the Pre-Raphaelites and their devotees gained recognition in the 1860s and 1870s, the public had opportunity to see historic and aesthetic dress in paintings and on women who attended exhibitions at the Royal Academy and the Grosvenor Gallery in London. One of these exhibitions is depicted in W. P. Frith's 1881 painting "Private View at the Royal Academy," which reveals that aesthetic dresses of the 1880s used fabrics appearing soft and drapable (Figure 27). The odd colors—reds, amber yellows, peacock blue, and dull green—were considered unconventional and were sometimes chosen because they matched the interiors of homes, or because they reflected the faded colors in the Old Masters' paintings. Many of these im-



Fig. 30. *The Empire Mode*. Illustration from a Liberty & Company Catalog comparing a new Liberty style with its inspiration, a gown from the Empire period.

ported fabrics were supplied by Liberty's, the import shop on Regent Street which had been established in 1875 by Arthur Lasenby Liberty as the East India Shop. Specializing in the silks most suitable to clinging robes and draperies worn by the artistic community, Liberty's introduced "delicate pastel tints," which they called "Art Colors," to dye their imported silks.²⁶ While some Londoners admired the aesthetic look, calling the natural waistline "perfection in the eyes of man" because it was "visibly, delightfully undeformed by stays," others thought that aesthetic dress looked limp and drooping, even "sloppy," according to Jeannette Marshall, a young Londoner whose father was Rossetti's physician.²⁷

By 1880 aestheticism had become important enough to provoke interest among those in the visual, performing, and literary arts. This, in turn, increased the popularity of aesthetic dress and helped it gain acceptance within the fashionable mainstream. As the illustrator Walter Crane observed, the early medieval styles seen in paintings were "spread abroad," and in the 1870s and 1880s, "the fashionable world and stage" were seen "aping" the fashions of the "artistic cult." He was no doubt referring to the acceptance of the tea gown as fashionable dress.

Not everyone appreciated the historicism of aesthetic dress, for even Walter Crane's publisher, Routledge, asked him not to make his heroines look so much like "Pre-Raphaelite girls." (Figure 28). Mild criticism of the aesthetic style likewise appeared in George du Maurier's series of satiric *Punch* cartoons which depict women in artistic dress attending the London galleries (Figure 29). These are often used as accurate sources of artistic dress since he was acquainted with enough women involved with aesthetic circles to provide him firsthand information. Gilbert and Sullivan satirized aestheticism in the operetta *Patience*, first per-



Fig. 28. *Princess weeping over the loss of the golden ball*. Walter Crane, *The Frog Prince* (London: Routledge and Sons, 1874).

formed in 1881. While the play pokes fun at people in artistic dress (the aesthetes), it also betrays respect for some of their ideas. And by using actual Liberty textiles, the production gave publicity to the company, whose efforts to reform British taste had not ceased. Indeed, women were also encouraged to dress in an aesthetic manner by contemporary writers. Both Mary Haweis in her *Art of Decoration* (1881) and *Art of Dress* (1878), and Oscar Wilde in numerous contemporary essays (published as *Art and Decoration* in 1920) suggested that women look to nature for inspiration and apply the principles of art to their dress.²⁸

In the mid-1880s and 1890s, a more organized effort to promote rational artistic dress emerged with the growth of the Arts and Crafts movement. In 1890 a group within the arts community formed the Healthy and Artistic Dress Union to promote dress reform. Supporters included artists such as Henry Holiday, Walter Crane, G.F. Watts, and Hamo Thornycroft, as well as Arthur Lasenby Liberty, importer and founder of the hugely successful mercantile enterprise, Liberty's.

One of the most popular styles promoted by this group was "The Empire Mode" (Figure 30). The style was described in an 1893 Liberty catalog as having "(1) a quaint short waist, (2) a supple contour freed from a contorting basque or other rigidities, and (3) a graceful dignity of flowing classic draperies." Liberty clearly meant to reform



Fig. 31. *Aglaia 1894*. A Walter Crane drawing of aesthetic dress.

women's dress, for the catalog further stated that "a prominent feature of the adoption of the Empire Mode is the assurance that, so long as it holds sway, the tightly-laced corset cannot be the grim essential it has been deemed erstwhile."²⁹



Fig. 32. "Josephine," from Liberty & Company Catalog, No. 98, 1905.

In 1884 Arthur Lasenby Liberty asked reformer Edward Godwin to direct the dress department in the Liberty store, making artis-

tic dresses readily available. In its catalogs the Liberty Company offered artistic dresses which were modified to follow the conventions of modern life, but shared design elements with classical Greek clothing as reinterpreted during the Empire and Renaissance periods. Crane's designs (Figure 31) for the Healthy and Artistic Dress Union's journal, *Aglaia*, reflect these styles. The Liberty gowns were given appropriate names such as "Jacqueline," a velvet and silk crepe gown fashioned after a French 15th-century gown for indoor use, or "Josephine" (Figure 32), an Empire-style (high-waisted) evening dress, and they worked well with Liberty's soft and very drapable fabrics. Liberty gowns were well-publicized and available in their own Paris shop and other stores throughout Europe as well as New York.³⁰

Reformers in the British Arts and Crafts movement greatly influenced artists, architects, and designers in Germany and Austria where, not surprisingly, the modern design movement of the 1890s and early 1900s included artistic reform of women's dress. Henry van de Velde, who advanced the art nouveau style, also supported artistic reform in women's dress throughout the continent, especially in Germany. Not only did he write about reform dress, but he designed dresses as well. In support of a new artistic dress, Van de Velde observed that architects had finally realized that women's dress must correspond with modern interior design and architecture as a new decorative idea that immediately makes it "a piece of art." He further suggested that clothing should express a women's individuality, the exception being street wear, which would be dictated by place or appropriateness; clothing should be fit to purpose and adapt to private, general, or ceremonial spheres. In April 1900, a successful exhibition in Krefeld, Germany, which included Van de Velde's artis-



Fig. 34. Anna Muthesius wearing a reform house gown of her own design. Alfred Mohrbutter, *Das Kleid der Frau* (Darmstadt, 1904): 38.

tic dress designs, generated exhibitions of artist-designed reform dress in other cities as well, including Dresden, Leipzig, Wiesbaden, and Berlin. Reform styles designed by Koloman Moser for his wife (Figure 33) were high-waisted and full. Anna Muthesius (Figure 34) also preferred the full, high-waist style. Muthesius was an opera star, but also a dress reformer. Muthesius shared an interest in reforming the arts with her husband, the noted architect, Herman Muthesius. They were good friends of the influential Scottish modern designers—Jesse Newbury and Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Muthesius reviewed the exhibition of artistic dress that took place at Wertheim's Department Store in Berlin in 1904, and in 1903 published a small book on reform dress, *Das Eigenkleid der Frau* [*The Personal Dress of Women*] (1903).³¹

Artistic Dress America

Aesthetic dress in America was greatly influenced by the British aesthetic movement. Ideas regarding artistic styles were rapidly dispersed through various print media. Rather than being solely confined to elite circles of artists, artistic dress appeared to have a middle-class following. Indeed, American magazines did not miss the opportunity to report on aesthetic dress. An 1878 issue of the *American Agriculturist* observed that the aim of the Pre-Raphaelite style was to "have a thick waist," like the Venus

Fig. 33. A gown with matching jacket. Designed by Koloman Moser for his wife in 1905. Courtesy of the Stadt Museum, Vienna, Austria.





Fig. 35. Annie Jenness Miller frequently advertised the pattern for the Josephine gown, and a photograph of her wearing the dress often appeared in *Dress*. The style is very similar to those advertised by the Liberty & Company Jenness Miller Monthly (February 1890, 48.)

Fig. 36. Wool challis tea gown printed with peach motif, ca. 1890. Gift of the Friends of the Collection. Photograph by Anne Bissonnette.

de Medici and Venus of Milo. Furthermore, the issue reported that artists declared tight waists unartistic and vulgar because the natural beauty of the human figure is lost through the destruction of its healthy proportions.³²

Annie Jenness Miller, publisher of *Dress*, the *Jenness Miller Magazine* (1887-1898), continued as an outspoken advocate of artistic reform in women's dress. As noted previously, she advocated a system of rational underclothing, but she also stressed the need to adapt artistic principles to life and to dress in order to achieve beauty through simplicity, unity, utility, and harmony. The magazine frequently illustrated artistic dresses (Figure 35), patterns of which were available for purchase from the Jenness-Miller Publishing Company. In an article titled "Artistic Clothing," it was noted that the beautiful new gowns that had recently been presented to the English public by Liberty & Company of London were created on a purely hygienic plan and were as artistic as they were healthful, embracing all the principles of the Jenness-Miller system.³³

Annie Jenness Miller and her sister lectured exclusively throughout the United States. Owing to their efforts, dress clubs began to appear in several cities. One prominent club was the Society for the Promotion of Physical Culture and Correct Dress, an affiliate of the Chicago Women's Club. With a membership of 250 in 1892, the organization condemned the use of the corset and the "health waist." Their study committee earnestly recommended that "each member supply herself with a photograph of the Venus de Milo. . . [and] visit many times the statuary in the Galleries of the Art Institute." At the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, this Chicago club exhibited their ideas about artistic reform dress which contrasted greatly with the trouser



Fig. 37. Lavender silk crepe tea gown trimmed with smocking. Attributed to Liberty of London, ca. 1910. Kent State University Museum, gift of Robert and Melody Liberatore. Photograph by Anne Bissonnette.



styles promoted by the Nation Council of Women. On mannequins having "the proportions of Venus de Medici were shown a working dress and apron, a street suit, a reception gown, and several evening dresses." All were intended to reveal the beauty of a woman's form when unbound by a corset.³⁴

Outside of artistic circles, garments for use in the home best met the criteria for aes-

thetic reform. They included wrappers, or house gowns, especially the more formal version, the tea gown, which gained popularity as a fashionable garment in the 1870s. Taking the lead of the British, Americans designed tea gowns in a vaguely medieval or classical style that appeared to be loose fitting (Figures 36, 37, 38). Clearly, tea gowns were viewed as reform garments, for one Chicago dressmaker Kate Manvell included the words "Dress Reform Artist" in her label. Etiquette demanded that tea gowns be worn only in the home where they were appropriate when entertaining close friends. However, as noted in the *Jenness Miller Magazine*, women of the 1890s frequently wore tea gowns in public, especially at summer resorts.³⁵



Fig. 38. Navy velvet and gold silk tea gown with Renaissance style sleeves, ca. 1890. Gift of Mrs. Philip R. Peters Estate. Photograph by Anne Bissonnette.

Fig. 39. Fortuny black velvet stenciled tea gown, 1927. Gift of Mrs. Mary Jeffrey Strudwick. Photograph by Anne Bissonnette.



The Impact of Dress Reform on Fashion

Clearly, all efforts toward reforming dress had a lasting influence. The loose, Turkish-style trousers that had inspired sports enthusiasts and dress reformers not only metamorphosed as part of the archetypal gymnasium suit worn at colleges and high schools well into the mid-twentieth century, but remained quite acceptable and appropriate for hiking, biking, and many other recreational activities as well. The loose, full trouser style occasionally sees revival as fashion today. Reform underwear—knit union suits or separate tops and drawers—continued to be offered by stores and mail order catalogs. The drop seat union suit still provides a warm under layer for skiing and other winter sports.

Reform styles as fashion was not a novelty on the continent of Europe. Wertheim's Department Store in Berlin opened a dress reform department in 1903, which was run by Else Oppler-Legbaud. Oppler-Legbaud had studied with Van de Velde in Berlin. And as early as 1901, a fashion magazine published in Vienna, *Wiener Mode*, illustrated various reform style gowns along with more fashionable dress. They drew on the language of the artistic reformers, calling these dresses the "new style," "Empire Style," or "Empire Reform Style." On the continent of Europe, it is clear that for society functions women had a choice between Paris-inspired "fashion" and artistic reform gowns.

In the new century women not only became accustomed to wearing more comfortable clothing in their homes and during physical activities, but they also began seeing actresses, dancers, and opera singers wearing simpler artistically designed dresses on stage and in public. These entertainers sought out two of



Fig. 41. Jacques Doucet empire waist pink silk beaded dress, 1912-13. Gift of the Friends of the Collection.

Fig. 40. Fortuny rust color pleated silk "Delphos" dress and stenciled jacket, 1909-1949. Western Reserve Historical Society, gift of Mr. And Mrs. Maurice J. Slaughter. Photograph by Anne Bissonnette.



the most celebrated avant-garde designers in the early twentieth century, Paul Poiret and Mariano Fortuny. These designers were acquainted with the gowns created by the German and Viennese artists and architects in the early 1900s, as well as the artistic reform dress

promoted by the Liberty company.

Fortuny's Delphos dresses and Poiret's Directoire models offered to the public in 1907 were similar to other artistic styles inspired by the Greek ideal (Figures 39, 40). While these two men are often credited with freeing women from corsets, they were not the innovators. Rather, they were simply nourishing the seed that had been planted by the artistic dress reformers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁶ The Empire, high-waisted silhouette was a dominant Paris fashion between 1909 and 1915. Gowns were often constructed of layers of soft, drapable, and sometimes transparent silk fabrics, not unlike those imported and manufactured by Liberty & Company of London. The gown by Jacques Doucet (Figure 41) is typical of the style.

Endnotes

¹On the history of nineteenth-century fashion, see Caroline R. Milbank, *Couture, The Great Designers* (New York: Stewart, Tabori, & Chang, 1985), Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion, A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), and *Fashion and Eroticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), and Philippe Perrot (trans. by Richard Bienvenu) *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

²See Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of Leisure Class* (New York: Macmillan, 1899). See also Perrot, *Fashioning*, 87-112. Regarding the pervasiveness of fashion ideals see Joan Severa, *Dressed for the Photographer* (Kent, OH: KSU Press, 1995).

³See *Dress, The Jenness Miller Magazine*.

⁴Primary literature on the need to reform includes a wide variety of contemporary nineteenth and early twentieth century magazines published in Europe and America such as *The Lily*, *Sibyl*, *Arena*, *Aglaia*, *The Rational Dress Society Gazette*, *Deutsch Kunst und Dekoration*, and *Dress, The Jenness Miller Magazine*.

⁵Many reformers embraced the need for all three—trousers for sports, reform underwear for comfort and health, and artistic dress for beauty.

⁶Murray, Anne Wood, "The Bloomer and Exercise Suits," *Waffen und kostumkunde* 24 (1982): 111.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Jeannette and Robert Lauer, *Fashion Power: the Meaning of Fashion in American Society* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1981): 248-58.

⁹Russell, Frances E., "A Brief History of the American Dress Reform Movements of the Past, with Views of Representative Women," *Arena* 6 (1892): 327.

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¹¹Mary Tillotson, *History of the First thirty-five Years of the Science Costume Movement in the United States* (Vineland, NJ: Weekly Independent and Job Office, 1885), 36-37, 40.

¹²16 September 1874.

¹³*Northern Ohio Journal*, 5 September, 1874, 3.

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¹⁵Robert Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College* (Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College, 1943), 307-8, 317, 320-2; Amy Louise Reed, "Female Delicacy in the Sixties," *Century Magazine* 90 (1915): 904.

¹⁶Claudia Kidwell, *Women's Bathing Costume and Swimming Costume in the United States* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1968); Sally Sims, "The Bicycle, the Bloomer and Dress Reform in the 1890s," in *Dress in American Culture*, edited by Patricia A. Cunningham and Susan V. Lab (Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press, 1992), 97.

¹⁷Frances Russell, "Freedom in Dress for Women," *Arena* 8 (1893): 76.

¹⁸John Leighton [Luke Limner], *Madre Natura Versus the Moloch of Fashion* (London, 1842), 71-73.

¹⁹*Textile World Review* (1905), 139.

²⁰Deborah Jean Warner, "Fashion, Emancipation, Reform and the Rational Undergarment," *Dress* 4 (1978): 26-27.

²¹Stella Mary Newton, *Health, Art And Reason* (London: John Murray, 1974), 98, 102.

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Battle Creek Sanitarium Dress System* (Battle Creek, MI: Sanitary and Electric Supply Co., [1890], 7, 31, 46-53); John Kellogg, *The Influence of Dress on Producing Physical Decadence of Women* (Battle Creek, MI: Modern Medical Pub. Co, 1893).

²⁴Annie Jenness Miller, "Our Own System," *Dress, The Jenness Miller Magazine* 1 (1887): 65-68.

²⁵Lucy Crane, *Art and the Formation of Taste* (London: Macmillan, 1882), 134-5.

²⁶Elizabeth Aslin, *The Aesthetic Movement* (New York: Excalibur Books, 1969), 157; Alison Adborham, *Liberty's: A Biography of a Shop* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1975), 25.

²⁷Suzanna Shonfield, "Miss Marshall and the Cimabue Browns," *Costume* 13 (1979): 63-5; Wilkie Collins, *Women in White* (New York: Harper, 1860), 6.

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³⁰Walter Crane, "On the Progress of Taste in Dress," *Agalia* 3 (1894): 8; *Liberty Catalog* (1893), 12-20 and (1895).

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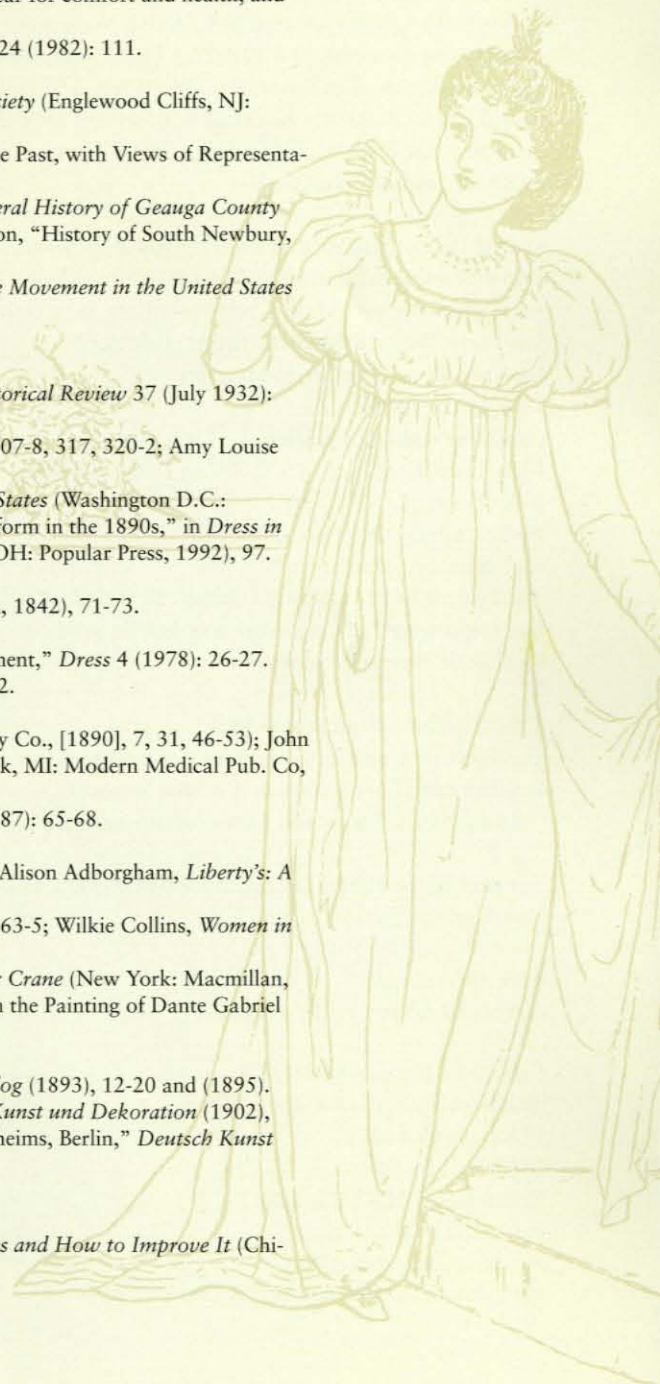
³²*American Agriculturist* (1878), 304.

³³Bastien LeFarge, "Artistic Clothing," *The Jenness Miller Magazine* 5 (1891): 353.

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³⁵LeFarge, "Artistic Clothing," 353.

³⁶Guillermo DeOsma, *Fortuny* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), 88-89, 135-37.



Dedication

This exhibition and catalog are dedicated to the memory of Otto Charles Thieme, former curator of Costume and Textiles at the Cincinnati Art Museum. His lifetime commitment to costume studies was an inspiration for us all.

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