

Fashion Prints in the Age of Louis XIV: Interpreting the Art of Elegance

Review Number: 1795

Publish date: Thursday, 9 July, 2015

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ISBN: 9780896728578

Date of Publication: 2014

Price: £39.50

Pages: 320pp.

Publisher: Texas Tech University

Publisher url: <http://ttupress.org/books/fashion-prints-in-the-age-of-louis-xiv>

Place of Publication: Lubbock, TX

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Fashion Prints in the Age of Louis XIV. Interpreting the Art of Elegance is the record of a symposium held in 2005, sparked by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA)'s acquisition of a bound album of 190 hand-colored French fashion plates published between approximately 1670 and 1695. Taken together, its 14 essays are the first sustained analysis of a print form produced by the thousands in France at the end of the 17th century, beginning allegedly with Jean Dieu de Saint-Jean around 1670 but quickly zealously followed by his competitors in Paris's rue Saint-Jacques. To give but one example that helps us to imagine the tremendous impact of these representations at the turn of the 18th century, in 1693, Donneau de Visé, an interested chronicler of fashion and publisher of the *Mercure galant*, announced to his readers that the print dealer and publisher Nicolas Langlois had for sale some 900 fashion prints representing 'clothing from the court and other parts of the world [...] disposed in such a way that one can view with great pleasure the changes in clothing and fashion for the past few years'.⁽¹⁾ In 1701 Langlois's post-death inventory further confirmed these seemingly excessive numbers. Amidst his rich stock remained over 6,800 unpainted and 500 illuminated fashion prints by the Arnoult, Bonnat, Joullain and other publishing families.⁽²⁾ While appearing to be endlessly variable, in fact these prints were remarkably consistent on a formal level with one or two figures in a vertical frame standing close to the picture plane, their bodies disposed in such a way as to maximize the visibility of the depicted dress. Backgrounds could be *cabinets*, gardens and even boutiques but in the fashion print's quintessential form figures were depicted against an almost entirely empty ground in which a horizon line was the only spatial marker. Below each figure legends named the represented subject, either as generalized categories such as 'Dame de Qualité' or specific individuals at court – though names were often assigned arbitrarily and were a marketing tactic as much as reliable information. Measuring a standardized 14 ¼ by 9 ½ inches, these prints could be collected in groups, easily fitted into a collector's portfolio or, as with LACMA's examples, bound together.

The contributors to *Fashion Prints in the Age of Louis XIV* regularly underscore that when historians have discussed 17th-century fashion prints it has typically been a means of more or less transparently illustrating historical costume rather than taking them as representations. This is not to say that they are of no value to the costume historian but that their conventions, tactics and omissions are as indicative of a history of figural

representation as they are a history of fashion. In this, the present volume takes up the longstanding methodological call of Daniel Roche's path-breaking *La culture des apparences: une histoire du vêtement (XVII^e–XVIII^e siècle)*; another touchstone underlying the volume and regularly cited throughout for its historical frame is Marianne Grivel's foundational study of the 17th-century Parisian print market, *Le commerce de l'estampe au XVII^e siècle*.⁽³⁾ But the sheer number of examples of 17th-century fashion prints and the fact that they were never intended as fine art has largely deterred detailed analysis by art historians. In their introduction Kathryn Norberg and Sandra Rosenbaum cite two notable exceptions to this: John Nevinson's *Origin and Early History of the Fashion Plate* and Raymond Gaudriault's *Répertoire de la gravure de mode française des origines à 1815*.⁽⁴⁾ The first of these is fast-paced and sweeping while the second is a partial *catalogue raisonné* that necessarily fragments information and interpretation. In her opening essay, 'The fashion print: an ambiguous object', Françoise Tétart-Vittu outlines the limitations of both earlier efforts, though they should perhaps be seen slightly more sympathetically and are of continued relevance even in light of this new volume. Shorter studies of individual makers, prints or subjects that do not deeply question the phenomenon as a whole are cited in the very helpful select (but relatively comprehensive) bibliography. The editors have also responsibly included recent work that has appeared in the delay between the LACMA symposium and its publication. Key among these are Pascale Clugny's important analyses of the preparatory drawings for fashion plates discovered in the course of cataloguing and publishing the Bibliothèque nationale's collection of 17th-century drawings.

The essays comprising *Fashion Prints in the Age of Louis XIV* vary widely in terms of their length, detail and formation of concrete arguments. While all are symposium proceedings or records of performances held in relation to the symposium some authors appear to have submitted their speaking notes while others have filled out their contributions as veritable essays that produce nuanced studies of the genre in question. To this reviewer's mind, four essays in particular should be highlighted as important steps forward in the study of the prints in particular: Kathleen Nicholson's 'Fashioning fashionability', Norberg's 'Louis XIV: king of fashion?', Paula Rea Radisich's 'The *Cris de Paris* in the LACMA *Recueil de modes*' and Mary Schoeser's 'Oriental connections: merchant adventurers and the transmission of cultural concepts.'

Nicolson develops the relationship between social identity, conventional forms of court portraiture and fashion prints. Historians have assumed that by citing members of court in the captions to their prints publishers took advantage of an already established celebrity in order to market their wares. Nicolson argues that for women in particular celebrity could cut both ways, however, with the prints producing identities that did not exit before and that escaped oil portrait conventions and the prints made and circulated after oil portraits. According to Nicolson the 'very deficiencies [of fashion prints] as portraits' (above all their general lack of concern with verisimilitude or specific physiognomies to which, after all, the printmakers often had little to no access) effectively abstracted likenesses thereby allowing individuals to be absorbed into a world of fashion. This is a stimulating proposition that is relevant not only to the study of the prints at hand but also to how we understand the role of verisimilitude in portraiture and the multiple roles of portraiture in the public sphere. Fashion prints as a form of contemporary history subject is a leitmotif that could be developed in order to suggest the ways in which these seemingly unassuming objects forged national identity around court culture even as they flirted directly with rising urban commodity culture. It also allows us to think across high and low, between the court and the street.⁽⁵⁾ These themes are further explored in Norberg's essay with her focus on Louis XIV and his representation in promoting (wittingly or not) 'la mode, an abstract, ephemeral, and destabilizing force that created changes in clothing, art and ideas'.⁽⁶⁾ She positions the régime's emphasis on continuity and stasis against the fashion print's values of novelty suggesting that – consistent with Nicolson's wider claims of the genre – publishers often made Louis XIV more fashionable than he was said to be in life, transposing the individual body into the signs of fashion, or, in the case of the king, the historical into the contemporary.

Many contributors address the question of the LACMA volume as a compendium or *recueil* bringing together heterogeneous representations that, nonetheless, fall within a continuum of representation governed by concerns of documenting and categorizing costume. Radisich's essay does this with particular nuance, however, and is an important addition to our still evolving understanding of the *recueil* as a crucial form

throughout Europe in the early modern period.⁽⁷⁾ Of the 190 prints in the LACMA volume 123 could be termed fashion prints, 35 theater subjects, 25 *cris de Paris*, six peasants and one scatological : what brought these all under one roof? Radisich takes as her point of departure the pre-existing genre of the *cris* (allegedly born of Annibale Carracci) but does so in order to ask how the categories for representation shifted in 17th-century France in order to accommodate and generate the fashion print. This also prompts the question of audience and she cites a well-known letter by Dezallier d'Argenville published in the *Mercure de France* in 1727 that suggests a *recueil* like LACMA's could be created not only with 'fashion' in mind (at its most literal as a series of patterns to be emulated) but also as a means of compiling information on par with the study of natural or cultural history. In this regard, Schoeser's contribution does a particularly convincing job of reinvesting articles of late 17th-century clothing as depicted in fashion prints with exotic connotations in order to tie them to contemporary debates about foreign influence and its rapid domestication. Staying close to the prints under examination she articulates how they could operate not just as means of promoting particular dress but also triggered questions of economic and nationalistic import.

Nicolson and Radisich's essays come in the publication's first section dedicated to the fashion print alone. They are joined by Tétart-Vittu's essay, already mentioned, in which she points to methodological problems in studying these objects and reiterates, above all, Roche's warning about taking them as transparent illustrations. She also is the first of several authors to note the internal logic of bound volumes of such prints, their 'sitters' typically arranged hierarchically, from the king and court down the social ladder. Her assertion that the primary audience for fashion plates were artists who collected them as source material could be contested and seems to simplify the problem. While artists surely did gather these prints their sheer number, regular illumination and binding in fine leather all suggest that the audience was wider – and (even allowing for the disproportionate survival rate of these more costly versions) leaned, in fact, toward *amateurs* like Dezallier.

The editors, Radisich, Marcia Reed and (later in the volume) Sandra L. Rosenbaum begin to list examples of *recueils* comparable to LACMA's. While an exhaustive list would be impossible, an attempt to begin a catalogue of extant albums of late 17th-century fashion prints would have been an extremely useful addition to the present volume and a productive means of providing context. There is no doubt that LACMA's acquisition is a rare and remarkable object but it is one among a number that would include those in the Clark Art Institute, the bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, the bibliothèque de l'Opéra and the Petit Palais's Dutuit collection. Meanwhile, though dis-bound and individually matted, the large groups of fashion prints in the Bibliothèque nationale (particularly its Smith-Lessoeuf collection) and the Morgan Library and Museum can still be understood and studied as groups rather than individual sheets.

A number of issues about the prints themselves, the fundamental prompt for the symposium and this publication, still remain to be addressed. One basic question left almost entirely unanswered here or elsewhere in existing literature is why, following the tremendous explosion of this very specific kind of image, the form suddenly died out in the first decade of the 18th century, not properly to return until the mid-1770s – at which point, in dialogue with fashion journalism, the fashion print regenerated into the better-trodden territory of its 19th-century iterations. The evident lack of fashion plate innovation in the first three quarters of the 18th century was, in fact, a problem lamented in 1725 by Antoine de La Roque, editor of the *Mercure de France*, who began an interesting but largely unsuccessful attempt to revitalize the genre. What forces contributed to this decline, especially when the print world as a whole was wildly expanding through the very terms of novelty and urban consumption so closely tied to fashion prints? One way to answer this might be to develop our understanding of text and image, something already begun by several of these authors – and, elsewhere, notably in studies by Joan DeJean – not only by Donneau and La Roque themselves but also the advertisements placed in their journals.⁽⁸⁾ Reed Benhamou's work on the subject is a notable, unfortunate omission from the select bibliography and might have led the volume's contributors to these questions.⁽⁹⁾

Another consideration (addressed subtly by Nicolson and Norberg but in limited scope) is the impact of this enormous body of visual material on what would be considered 'fine art'. Surely the relationship between

these prints and contemporary portraiture and genre painting was mutually informative but how and in what ways can we identify their overlap? Even if we stay within the realm of print culture, how to distinguish a line between single-figure fashion prints and, for example, the figures printed after Bérain, Gillot, Callot or (most importantly to subsequent art history) Antoine Watteau? Radisich takes this as a point of departure in her essay – and has developed it at greater length elsewhere in relation to Chardin ([10](#)) – but it might still be expanded and seems to be a crucial part of integrating these works with the existing literature on 17th- and 18th-century visual culture. At its most basic we might ask: what is the role of the single-figure print in 1700?

The book's second part steps back in order to address historical context through literature, diaries and correspondence in essays by William Ray, Malina Stefanovska, Norberg and Schoeser (addressed above) that wisely take on the concept of 'fashionability' broadly rather than in its individual iterations of specific items. Unfortunately, at times they veer away from the prints as the main object of study. Essays in the book's final section, 'The fashion print as a historical resource', adopt very focused lenses: two of these record historical reenactments and performances from the 2005 symposium (Michael J. Hackett and Emma Lewis) and two return with fresh eyes to the methodological limitations of the fashion print as source in recreating or restoring historical costume (Maxwell Barr works from a Henri Bonnard print to produce a costume from scratch and in a jointly authored report, Catherine McLean, Susan Ranate Schmalz and Rosenbaum relay the travails of a late 17th-century mantua in LACMA's collection that was greatly modified in the 19th century only to be returned, in part, to its 17th-century form by conservators over the course of several campaigns beginning in 1989). Conservator Soko Furuhashi's pragmatic technical study of LACMA's album confirms a number of things we might already suspect for an album of late 17th-century illuminated prints, but her study of pigments used by the illuminators is particularly useful because detailed pigment analysis for this kind of mid-market print has remained relatively limited. She confirms that less expensive and, at times, newly available pigments such as blue verditer that were too coarse for painters in oil were favored by illuminators. Admitting the limited value of watermarks in precise dating, Furuhashi prudently cautions that the binding date of 1703–4 cited repeatedly by the editors and contributors is based only on the watermarks of endpapers that could and probably did sit in stock before being employed. The seemingly precise dates 1703–4 should, then, be modified to a *terminus post quem* for the binding and it is safest to describe LACMA's late 17th-century fashion prints as bound in the first decades of the 18th century.

By providing a finite object of study and the scholarly and financial support of symposium and publication, LACMA's acquisition has resulted in an important step forward in addressing an enormous – even paralytically large – body of visual material that has stayed too long unintegrated with our understanding of art and culture at the turn of the 18th century. Combined with the availability of all 190 prints in color on LACMA's website, the contributions in *Fashion Prints in the Age of Louis XIV* will hopefully prompt additional, more sustained engagement with this important genre of print and its relevance for fashion and art history.

Notes

1. Ce recueil est disposé par année, avec les habillements des cours et les portraits des souverains [...] de l'Europe et d'autres parties du monde, en sorte que l'on y peut voir avec plaisir les changements d'habits et de modes depuis plusieurs années.' Norberg and Rosenbaum in *Fashion Prints*, pp. xxiv–xxv, xxx–xxxii. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Tétart-Vittu in *Fashion Prints*, p. 11. She cites Grivel, *Le commerce d'estampes* but it has not been possible based on her citation to confirm these numbers. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Daniel Roche, *La culture des apparences: une histoire du vêtement (XVII^e–XVIII^e siècle)* (Paris, 1989); Marianne Grivel, *Le commerce de l'estampe au XVII^e siècle* (Paris, 1986). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. John Nevinson, *Origin and Early History of the Fashion Plate* (Washington, DC, 1967); Raymond Gaudriault, *Répertoire de la gravure de mode française des origines à 1815* (Paris, 1988). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Nicolson's citation of Véronique Meyer's work on engravings after oil portraits in *Visages du Grand Siècle: le portrait français sous le règne de Louis XIV, 1660–1715*, exh. cat., musée des Beaux-Arts,

Natnes and musée des Augustins, Toulouse (Paris, 1997) helps to set up a productive juxtaposition.

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6. Norberg in *Fashion Prints*, p. 135.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. One significant bibliographical addition should be made: Jean-Gérald Castex, 'D'un mot et de ses usages: le recueil gravé' in *À l'origin du livre d'art: les recueils d'estampes comme entreprise éditoriale en Europe, XVI^e–XVIII^e siècles*, ed. Cordélia Hattori, Estelle Leutrat and Véronique Meyer (Milan, 2010).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. To the articles by DeJean given in the select bibliography should be added Joan DeJean, 'Shops of gold: advertising luxury in seventeenth-century Paris', *Luxury*, 1, 1 (September 2014), pp. 22–46. My own attempt to address the lacuna between 1700 and the 1770s will appear as 'The state of the fashion plate, circa 1727: historicizing fashion between "dressed prints" and Dezallier's recueils' in *Objectifying Prints*, ed. Suzanne Karr Schmidt and Ed Wouk (Ashgate, forthcoming).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Reed Benhamou, 'Clothing in the Age of Watteau', in *Antoine Watteau: Perspectives on the Artist and his Time*, ed. Mary Sheriff (Newark, DE, 2006); and, especially, Reed Benhamou, 'Fashion in the *Mercure*: from human foible to female failing', *American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 31, 1 1 (Fall 1997), 27–43.[Back to \(19\)](#)
10. Paula Rea Radisich, *Pastiche, Fashion and Galanterie in Chardin's Genre Subjects: Looking Smart* (Newark, DE, 2013).[Back to \(10\)](#)

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