

Factsheet

The Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection: The Court Mantua

The Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection at Kensington Palace comprises dress worn by members of the Royal Family, dress worn by officials and dignitaries undertaking ceremonial roles, such as heralds or members of the Orders of Knighthood and court dress. The collection dates from the 18th to the late 20th century. Court dress was worn by those attending the more formal assemblies and gatherings held by the king or queen. These events were a very important part of the social calendar and for many years attendance at them was vital for politicians as well as socialites.

A highlight of the Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection is a silk brocade court mantua and petticoat dating from the 1760s.

- The mantua was a fashionable style of dress in the late 17th century and by the early 18th century it had become the accepted dress worn by ladies on formal court occasions. It was retained exclusively as part of court fashion until the accession to the throne of King George IV in 1820.
- A mantua is a dress with a neat fitted bodice which extends into a train behind. It was worn with a petticoat cut really wide over the hips and supported by a whalebone hoop worn underneath.
- At the 18th century court, the hoops developed to an extraordinary size and remained exclusively a court style of dress long after the fashion moved on. This style of dress with its wide skirts and train provided a wonderful opportunity to show off fine silks and elaborate embroidery. One lady went to such lengths in 1738 that the commentator Mrs Delany declared the pattern 'much proper for a stucco staircase than the apparel of a lady'.
- The mantua stands as an epitome of power dressing, with its extraordinary and impractical construction and use of costly textiles

and trimmings. By the 1760's it would only be worn at Court, embodying the lavish, curious and exclusive world.

- On his accession in 1820, King George IV announced that ladies were no longer required to wear the cumbersome court hoop. However, the train, ostrich feather headdress and lace lappets, or a veil, remained distinctive components of court dress until as late as 1939.
- The 1920s saw changes in ladies' court dress. The elaborate trains were reduced in length and skirts became fashionably short. The last occasion ladies had to dress up in this splendid attire was in 1939. After the Second World War court occasions changed their character and this distinctive style of dress was no longer worn.

The mantua on display at Kensington Palace is made from French silk brocade, an enormously expensive fabric dated to the early 1760s. It is woven with a design of stripes and scrolling garlands in silver and trimmed with sparkling silver lace. It is believed to have belonged to Mary, Marchioness of Rockingham, who was married to Charles, 2nd Marquis of Rockingham. They were a stylish couple, cutting a dash around town, with plenty of opportunities for attending lavish court occasions such as the wedding and coronation of George III and Queen Charlotte in 1761. However, perhaps the occasion when Lady Mary was most concerned to look her most splendid was when her husband was sworn in as Prime Minister in 1765, leading curators to conclude that this was the historic event for which the dress was made. Conservation work has also revealed some minor alterations dating to the 19th century when the waist was 'nipped' in, possibly for a fancy dress party.