

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.

A highlight of the Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection is a silk brocade court mantua and petticoat dating from c1750-53.

- Originating in the mid-17th century, the mantua was a fashionable style of dress in the late 17th century. By the early 18th century it had become the accepted dress worn by ladies on formal court occasions and was retained exclusively for court wear until the accession to the throne of King George IV in 1820.
- The style of dress, with its wide skirts and train, provided a wonderful opportunity to show off fine silks and elaborate embroidery.
- The mantua on display at Kensington Palace is made of white silk brocaded in white and coloured silk.
- The dress takes the form of a bodice, the back extending into a train looped up behind to reveal a decorative petticoat worn underneath. The stylised train comprises a short tail of silk extending to the hem of the petticoat.
- It is usual for the petticoat of a court dress to be supported by a substantial hoop stiffened with whalebone.
- At the 18th-century court, the hoops developed to extraordinary size. One lady went to such astonishing 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 on display was probably worn by a member of the Flaxman or Spurrell family, both of whom lived near Norwich in Norfolk.
- In the display, the lady is accompanied by a gentleman wearing a court suit dating from about 1770. Gentlemen attending the 18th-century court would wear a suit comprising a coat, waistcoat and knee breeches, made out of the finest fashionable silks, often in vivid colours and elaborately embroidered.
- The accessories worn by the gentleman in the display include a 'chapeau bras', a hat made so flat that it could be carried neatly under the arm and not worn on the head.