

For centuries there had been an understanding that clothes worn at court should be special and expensive. The high costs for dressing according to the strict codes served as an entry ticket to court in the 18th century. Only the wealthy elite could afford the elaborate silk garments decorated with exquisite embroidery, delicate lace and precious jewellery.

Courtiers also needed to have a number of these garments as not to offend the monarch, and to keep up with the rest of the glittering circle. Other courtiers, equally intent on attracting royal attention, could be viciously critical of their competition at court.

The court dress worn by women originated in the 1670s, at the court of Louis XIV in Versailles. Known as grand habit or 'stiff-bodied gown', it comprised a heavily boned, pointed bodice with off-the-shoulder neckline and short sleeves, a hooped skirt and a train (Image 1).

In England, this heavy and uncomfortable costume was only worn at the most special occasions such as royal weddings. By the early 18th century, the grand habit evolved into the mantua and petticoat, which continued to be worn at court right up until Queen Charlotte's death in 1818 - long after it became unfashionable in wider society.

The formal mantua started as a loose gown opened at the front with a decorated stomacher that covered the centre front of the bodice. At the back, the train was draped to show the petticoat (underskirt). As the century progressed, the bodice became more fitted and the train narrower and less visible. Everything was made of heavy silks like brocades and damasks and was further decorated with rich embroidery.

From the 1750s, the mantua became increasingly outdated and so another style of 'full dress' was also accepted for informal court occasions. This was the *sacque or robe à la Française*, an opened gown with double pleats falling from the shoulders at the back and a wide petticoat exposed at the front, although the latter not as wide as the mantua. Like the mantua, the *robe à la Française* was also highly decorated with ribbons, bows, lace and other trimmings (Image 2).

The petticoat was supported by a structure called a hoop, which was stiffened with whalebone. This piece of underwear was also worn in fashionable wear (outside court) until about the 1780s, when the simpler, neo-classical style, with its raised waistline started to emerge.

Throughout the century, the hoop changed into different forms - squared ('English hoop') fan-shaped ('French hoop') and bell-shaped. At court, it was quite narrow at the sides but extremely wide at the front, sometimes reaching two metres. This presented the wearer with many challenges. Doorways, for example. Women had to turn sideways to enter or leave a room. Also, to keep a perfect deportment while wearing this exhausting garment, the wearer usually took lessons by a dance master, who taught them not only how to dance but also how to curtsy, walk backwards, make elegant gestures with arms and hands and even how to move a fan gracefully.

Another issue with the hoop was its weight, which could add a couple of kilos to the whole ensemble. In 1787 Jane Austen's sister-in-law, Eliza, complained 'how such a meagre creature as I am, can support so much fatigue ... for I only stood from two to four in the Drawing Room, and of course loaded with a great hoop of no inconsiderable weight.' Sitting down was out of the question, of course, as it was forbidden in the presence of the monarch.

The 'royal court' refers to the extended household of a monarch and can include thousands of individuals. It was made up of lower status royal servants and high ranking 'courtiers', ladies- and gentlemen-in-waiting who served the king and queen.

The exaggerated dimensions of the court mantua provided a perfect flat canvas on which the wearer would display her wealth and good taste. In the 18th century, textiles and their decorations were the most valuable elements of a gown, and wearing fine silk or rich embroidery was highly praised. The best silks came from Lyon in France and Spitalfields in East London. At court guests were encouraged to wear British materials and both Queen Caroline and Queen Charlotte often used fabrics produced nationally. This promotion was not always successful; matters of taste seemed to be more important than patriotism, and many courtiers purchased French textiles without hesitation.

An exquisite example of court dress is the Rockingham mantua from c1760-5 (Image 3). It comprises a fitted bodice, stomacher, narrow train draped at the waist and wide matching petticoat. It is made of French silk satin brocaded in silver thread with a design of narrow stripes and a vertical undulating ribbon of leaves and floral sprays. It is further trimmed with a delicate silver lace, also used on the stomacher. In total it consumed 14 metres of fabric, which would have cost over £10,000 in today's money. It was probably worn by Mary, Marchioness of Rockingham, wife of British Prime Minister Charles Watson-Wentworth, 2nd Marquess of Rockingham.

Court dress is a skilful blend of splendid decoration, formality, tradition and fashion. Although impractical and old-fashioned, it provided one of the most effective means to display wealth, status and taste – three vital qualities for those attending court in the 18th century.

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Augusta of Saxe-Gotha, Princess of Wales, by Charles Philips, c1736.
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The Rockingham mantua, c1760-5.
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