

The French Rococo Period: Robe à la Française

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Introduction

The robe à la française is a product cultivated from wealth and appreciation for complex, ornamental designs. The robe à la française is a gown that was favored during the rococo period of the eighteenth century in France. This garment was made from rich textiles with heavy embellishment, which made the gown usually only worn by wealthy women. The robe à la française featured a low-cut square neckline, a bodice that was shaped and snug in the front and loose in the back, a stomacher at the front closing, complete with box pleats on the back neckline, falling from the shoulder to the hem. Popularized by Marie Antoinette, many women of status followed suit and this dress became a feminist symbol in the face of a patriarchal society. The robe à la française was a pivotal garment in fashion and politics during the rococo period in France.

Historical Background

The rococo period in France boasts many unique characteristics; including intricate architecture and interior design, decorative arts, beautiful garments and textiles, strife between French citizens and their royalty, broadening of technologies and economics, and notably, Marie Antoinette's reign as Queen. The rococo period emerged from France during the 1720s and 1730s following the Baroque era; beginning mostly as an interior design style, rococo blossomed into many different forms of interpretation. Baroque styles leaned into large, lavish ornamentation, deep colors, free-flowing lines, and curved forms, whereas the rococo era featured smaller and more delicate designs, s-shaped curves and c-shaped curves, scrollwork, and pastel colors. Rococo was more inspired by nature, classical themes, and the cultures of China and Japan. Rococo styles circulated throughout Europe after gaining popularity in France. In the course of this significant era, the robe à la française emerged in the fashion world.

Decadent and luxurious, the robe à la française sparked the interest of many women throughout France and Europe. However, sumptuary laws determined what could and could not be worn and by whom. “Clothing and personal embellishments indicated gender and social status, and accessibility based simply on finances could upset established distinctions.” (De Vries, 2011). The robe à la française was not accessible to many groups of people during the eighteenth century. This garment, and luxurious garments alike, were only allowed to be worn by people of a wealthy and/or royal status. Sumptuary laws were also more restrictive towards women than men; there were very few options to choose from that remained favorable in the eyes of the law. The robe à la française began to break these laws by showing off more skin and being less modest than most garments of this time. Women who strived to be individualistic and independent tended to be attracted to the robe à la française.

Marie Antoinette was not only the Queen of France from 1774 to 1793, she was also an individual who adorned her body in the most opulent, lavish garments. Marie Antoinette was heavily criticized as a person while being the Queen of France, due to her neglect to her citizens and instead indulging herself in the finest ways of living. She attended affluent parties, wore fabulous clothing and gowns, spoiled herself to a sumptuous way of living, and spoke for herself rather than hiding behind the king. Flores notes “Through fashion, Marie Antoinette created a narrative program that expressed both her wish for recognition and her need for independence.” (Flores, 2013). She demonstrated her passions and what she believed in as a woman, and politically, through her clothing. Marie Antoinette caused heavy conflicts amongst the French public when it came to fashion. Her notorious portrait painted by Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun resulted in uproar because she was depicted in a chemise à la reine, a garment that came close to the undergarments the women of the 1700s wore, the ‘chemise.’ Although publicly unpopular,

Marie Antoinette influenced the fashion world in several ways by being unapologetically herself. She often wore an eye-catching robe à la française, with help from her staff to dress her.

A Closer Look at the Robe à la Française

The robe à la française had a number of layers and pieces in order to give the gown its unique look and structural foundation. This gown was often made up of silks and cottons. The bodice was fitted in the front and prominently displayed the woman's breasts with the square neckline; a stomacher was placed at the front opening to hide the ties on the bodice and to ultimately add decoration. The arm was encircled by multiple layers of lace and ruffles, known as engageantes, around the lower arm, with tight sleeves extending from the shoulders to the elbows. The robe à la française had an outer skirt composed of a matching fabric, typically satin or silk, that was left open at the front to display a petticoat with ruffles. Similar to the stomacher, the petticoat was adorned with numerous bows, flowers, lace, and other decorative elements arranged in layers. Eschelles were ribbon decorations used all over the dress. Through the use of panniers, or hoops that give a skirt shape, the robe à la française's skirts grew wider throughout the century. Panniers were created from padding and hoops of varying materials such as cane, baleen, or metal. "When the back fullness was formed into box pleats at the neckline, falling freely from there to the floor, the gown is referred to as a *robe à la française*." (Payne, 1965). The back of the dress is known as a Watteau back, which is to be loose and pleated. The robe à la française came to fruition after inspiration from the "loose negligee sacque dress of the earlier part of the century, which was pleated from the shoulders at the front at the back." (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2023). The Metropolitan Museum of Art holds a beautiful and intricate robe à la française, circa 1760-1770, as pictured in Figure 1. The front features the iconic square neckline lined with frills, along with decorative bows falling down into a stomacher and wide pannier.

The floral brocade fabric appears to be heavy and made of quality materials. There is decorative pleating adorning the petticoat and a dramatic drape over the pannier. This robe à la française looks as though it has not yet stepped out of the eighteenth century, due to pristine preservation.

Modern Representations

A modern take on the French rococo style is decadently displayed through the eyes of Sofia Coppola in her 2006 film *Marie Antoinette*. Coppola's film follows Marie Antoinette on her exhausting journey of becoming the Queen of France. Within her film, Coppola captured historical costume fantastically. The reproductions of a robe à la française are beautifully crafted and generally historically accurate. Of course, not everything is absolutely historically accurate within the movie. However, Coppola and her design team definitely hit the mark. In Figure 2, actress Kirsten Dunst, as Marie Antoinette, is pictured wearing the modern reproduction of the robe à la française. This gown appears to be made with high-quality luxury fabric and is adorned with lace and frills. There is a pannier to provide support along with a stomacher. The several robe à la françaises pictured throughout the film were executed with respect to the French rococo period and upheld the significance the garment was meant to exhibit. Diamond goes into describing the third-wave feminist movement that occurred about a decade prior to the making of this film, and how it impacted it. "For the third-wave feminists, fashion functioned not only as a means to adorn themselves for purposes of attracting a mate, but as a masquerade for their own and their friends' entertainment, and as an affirmation of their feminine power." (Diamond, 2011). You can see the contribution of this feminist movement in *Marie Antoinette* through the riot-girl soundtrack and small rebellious details throughout the film. Women during third-wave feminism began using fashion as power. "The confluence of fashion and identity, a constant theme of third-wave feminist thought, is directly addressed in the books as well as in Coppolas

film.” (Ferriss and Young, 2010). As a self-empowerment tool, Coppola demonstrates Marie Antoinette’s feelings about the world through the lens of a post third-wave feminist vision. Marie Antoinette, as Coppola’s character, sought civil resistance against the patriarchy through spending on lavish clothing. She was a feminist during her time because she believed that women should be equal to men in all aspects of life. Clothing can be an effective method of civil disobedience.

Whereas Coppola’s vision of the robe à la française was precise and appears to be historically accurate, Jeremy Scott reimagined the gown for his collection for Moschino’s A/W 2020 runway. Scott’s designs feature traditional-leaning bodices with modern fabrics and details; the more exaggerated element is the skirt. Scott shortened the dress into a mini-dress, complete with a short, yet very wide, pannier. Even with varying designs and new-age textiles and ornamental details, it is very prevalent that this line was inspired by Marie Antoinette’s fashion during the rococo era. Figure 3 reveals a structured long sleeve bodice that has a square-shaped neckline and is made out of denim. Fit with buttons you would find on a jean jacket, the bodice embodies a contemporary vision of the robe à la française. The skirt portion of the dress has been miniaturized. However, the pannier displayed is historically accurate; it is extremely wide and gives the model the shape that was popular in the eighteenth century. Fulfilled with ornamental designs and exaggerated whimsy, Scott’s version of the robe à la française is definitely modernized, with due respect to the garment’s history.

Conclusion

Following the baroque period, the rococo era in France narrowed in on themes of nature and whimsy. Rococo style encapsulates all things delicate, ornamental, and extravagant. Through the rococo period, the robe à la française emerged and became fashionable with wealthy women.

This lavish garment would make any eighteenth-century woman stand out in a crowd with exaggerated hips and luxurious textiles draped with lace and decorum. This garment has a rich history amongst wealthy individuals in Europe; partially becoming popularized due to French queen, Marie Antoinette. The ties between the robe à la française and feminism can be seen throughout this period, and later on in modern representations. The robe à la française represents nothing but wealth, creative high-fashion, individualism, and a unique imagination.

Figures



Figure 1; Robe à la française circa 1760-1770, Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection at
The Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute



Figure 2; Kirsten Dunst as Marie Antoinette filming for Sofia Coppola's film *Marie Antoinette*, 2006.



Figure 3; Deirdre Fírinne wearing Jeremy Scott for Moschino, A/W 2020.

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