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# RECURRING ROMANTICISMS IN DRESS IN THE 18th, 20th AND 21st CENTURIES

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During the global pandemic I have longed for simpler times, romanticizing what it was like to live in the past, which naturally drew me to this beautiful c. 1917 dress (see fig. 1). I dream of a beautiful young woman roaming carelessly amidst nature, eating fresh produce and baked goods and what we would call in the twenty-first century as living a slow life. My dream was quickly cut short when I began to analyze not only the dress but the decade it belongs to. This was a time of great unrest, power struggles and warfare. As well, romanticizing the past does not take into account the colonialist context in which these ideals were formed. Through this blog post I will be analyzing this early twentieth-century dress, its historical context and how in 2020 we are still using romantic dress to escape reality.



**Fig. 3.** Faded, bright and light pink roses as well as fern prays on the skirt of the dress.

Toronto Metropolitan University holds this cream muslin long sleeve ankle-length day dress in their [Fashion Research Collection](#). I used Ingrid Mida's Object-based research to analyze the dress (Mida, 2018). The dress has no labels or further supporting documents. This is a hyper-feminine dress that was to be worn in the day-time due to its casual nature. The ankle length dress is made a of a fine natural cream muslin in a tabby weave which has yellowed over time. The material is see-through and has machine printed bright and light pink roses as well as fern sprays which have slightly faded (see fig. 2). The dress is machine sewn from the waist down. However, the clasps and buttons at the front of the dress, as well as the stitching around the bodice and sleeves are hand sewn and rather messy (see fig. 3). The bodice is also lined with tulle. Material falls at the back of the dress creating two beautiful ruffles. The trimming of the dress is machine done with a pink silk satin weave. Machine lace with beautiful flower detailing appears on both sleeves and as a layered sailor collar (see fig.4). The waist measures 23 inches, waist to hem measures 30 inches and the sleeve length measures 18 inches. The dress is missing a sash that would further emphasize the waist. While the dress is able to be handled without further damage there are large sweat stains under the arms (see fig. 5) and miscellaneous brown stain on the bodice (see fig. 6). As well, some of the trim has come undone and there is fraying on the two draped pieces of fabric at the back of the dress (see fig. 7).



**Fig. 4.** Handsewn stitching, clasps and button on the front bodice of the dress.

During the analysis, I discovered the size of the dress almost aligns perfectly with my size. While I will never know the wearer, having these details allows me to connect with this dress on a personal level. This feeling creates a bond with someone I never met. While I do not know what it was like to live through a world war, I am currently living through a global pandemic. I can turn to this dress and have it offer me a form of romanticized escapism which it may have also offered the wearer. Given the miscellaneous brown stains, large sweat stains under the arms, frayed hems and undone trimmings, I believe this dress was well loved and worn. While the wear may have naturally appeared over the last 100 years, perhaps it was worn more often than normal because of the war or maybe was used as a costume in later periods. Considering this dress is half machine-sewn and half hand-sewn with no labels, it may have been purchased and altered at home or homemade by a skilled dressmaker with the use of a sewing machine. When beginning my research, I had the expectation I would find period sources of dresses that looked exactly like this, but I soon came to discover that was not the case. It is important to remember that while industrialization changed the fashion industry forever, homemade clothing was still very popular at this time. Cotton and machine lace were more affordable so naturally lingerie dresses, which I would classify this dress to be, were popular to make at home using paper patterns (Oakes). This allowed customization and individuality. The lingerie dress was also easier to clean than previous heavy fabrics, making it both economical and practical (Oakes). While I did not find any very similar designs, *Vogue* was an important aspect of my research as it gave insight into what the current trend amongst Europeans, specifically the French were. Americans closely followed and copied these trends (Idacavage). Perhaps this dress was a French design easily copied via patterns. While we will never know for sure, this dress is a perfect example of the cycle of trends.



**Fig. 5.** Machine lace with floral trimmings used on the sleeve and sailor collar.



**Fig. 6.** Large sweat stain under the arm.



**Fig. 7.** Miscellaneous brown stain on the bodice.



**Fig. 8.** Fraying on the draped ruffles at the back of the dress.

BOUÉ SEURS PROVE, TWICE OVER, THAT THEIR LINGERIE FROCKS ARE AS NO OTHER LINGERIE FROCKS, AND ADD THAT THE CHARM OF AN EVENING GOWN IS ITS MYSTERY



There are two kinds of lingerie frocks: the Lingerie frock and the Boué Soeurs frock. To look at the one above—“Rosa” is its name—is to realize that for just lingerie frocks don't have quaint little capes, neither do they have huge flimsy bows of pink taffeta at the back. And, to mark it as a Boué Soeurs frock, it has wreaths of tiny satin, forget-me-nots around its waist and above the embroidered wreaths on its skirt, for so are they satin flowers on a lingerie frock is to see. “Boué Soeurs” writes all over it.

“Sphinx” is the name of this inscrutable gown made of shimmering cloth of gold, which glows mysteriously through a cloud of filmy black tulle flecked with strange blossoms of gold and silver embroidery. Impenetrable black velvet is smothered darkly about the hips to make the girdle, a golden rose shines on the bodice, and a black silk ornament, like some mystic sign, hangs from the skirt. How do those slim, rhinestone-crowned, black velvet hands support all this wealth of gold, that is the secret of the “Sphinx”.

“La Patrie” is the name of this white embroidered lingerie frock, but only when its summer walks away from us can we see the reason why. From the front it is a frilly white gown, with its sleeves and the sides of its bodice of gay red taffeta, but in back a cluster of blue flowers takes up its position in the middle of the flaring red bow, and the color scheme of the frock becomes the beloved color scheme of the French flag.

**Fig. 9.** “Fashion: Boué Soeurs Prove, Twice Over, that their Lingerie Frocks are as no Other Lingerie Frocks.” *Vogue*, vol. 47, no. 8, Apr 15, 1916, pp. 43. ProQuest, <http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=https://www-proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/docview/904295543?accountid=13631>.

**Fig. 10.** Leyendecker, Frank. “Eighteenth-Century Vogue Girl,” *Vogue's New World: American Fashionability and the Politics of Style*, 1911, [journals-scholarsportal-info.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/pdf/1362704x/v10i1-2/13\\_vnwafatpos.xml](http://journals-scholarsportal-info.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/pdf/1362704x/v10i1-2/13_vnwafatpos.xml).

### THE LINGERIE DRESS AND 18TH CENTURY INFLUENCE

The lingerie dress was created by the famous French designer sisters under their clothing label called Boué Soeurs. They were known for their romantic, pretty and delicate dresses in the 19th and 20th century that resembled the 18th century rococo style (Dorogova) (see fig. 8). The lingerie dress is a lightweight cotton dress in a white or off-white colour and can feature embroidery, lace, pin tucks and other delicate detailing (Oakes). They were mostly worn by younger women in the summer for the day or sometimes at night for informal gatherings (Oakes). Lingerie dresses became popular in the beginning of the 20th century and Boué Soeurs continued to make lingerie dresses throughout the war after a short try at making the grey, blue and black war crinolines which were also popular at the time (Dorogova). Their dresses embodied the glorious French culture of the past. Not only did Boué Soeurs dresses draw inspiration from the past but *Vogue* did as well. A perfect example of this is the 1911 *Vogue* girl created by Frank Leyendecker which was reproduced February 1, 1917 (David, 27) (see fig. 9). She is highly feminine and 18th century rococo-inspired yet in a candy-box which places her within the American context (David, 27). Considering both Boué Soeurs and *Vogue* drew inspiration from 18th century France it is no surprise that this c.1917 dress has rococo influence.





**Fig. 11.** Met Museum. "Engageantes, European," *Met Museum, 18th Century*, [www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/101626](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/101626).

This dress is hyper-feminine, light, airy and heavily influenced by the past. Romanticism often looks to the past for this feeling of nostalgia. The stylistic romanticism as well as the colour palette seem to be influenced by eighteenth-century Rococo. Engageantes, which were very popular in the eighteenth century, were detachable lace cuffs which could be attached to a quarter length sleeve (Edwards, 46) (see fig. 10). The sleeves on the dress from c.1917 replicate these engageantes from the eighteenth century, however they are not detachable. Another stylistic similarity is decorative swags from the eighteenth-century robe à la polonaise. This style of gown used displayed or hidden drawstrings to cinch the gown up in decorative swags at the back of the dress (Edwards, 46) (see fig. 11). While this technique of retroussée was often quite elaborate, the c.1917 dress seems to replicate this style in a more modern and simplistic way. The ruffles drape beautifully, adding slight volume to the back and sides (see fig. 1). Originating in the middle class, the robe à la polonaise came to represent a romanticized version of a shepherdess to the elite and fashionable women (Edwards, 46). The robe à la polonaise was seen as a carefree, light, relaxed and rustic way of dress (Edwards, 46). When I look at the c.1917 dress that same imaginary reveals itself in my mind. The c.1917 dress may also have taken influence from the gaulle dress developed in the late eighteenth century. Marie Antoinette introduced the gaulle dress as she developed her whimsical farm in Versailles (Edwards, 49) (see fig. 12). This narrative furthers the ideas of romanticizing the past and escapism through clothing. The gaulle could be described as a dress that emphasized the contours of the body with unstructured layers of cotton or muslin (Edwards, 49). As well, the waist was emphasized by a simple sash. This description could also be used to describe the c.1917 dress. The similarities this dress has to eighteenth-century France furthers my belief that this dress was used to portray a romanticized way of not only an extravagant life but a dreamy rural life. This includes having the property, free time and privilege to only participate in activities you enjoy.



**Fig. 12.** Met Museum. "Robe à La Polonoise, British," *Met Musuem*, c.1780, [www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/80843](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/80843).



**Fig.13.** Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun. "Marie Antoinette En Chemise," *Racked*, 1783, [www.racked.com/2018/1/10/16854076/marie-antoinette-dress-slave-trade-chemise-a-la-reine](http://www.racked.com/2018/1/10/16854076/marie-antoinette-dress-slave-trade-chemise-a-la-reine).



**Fig.14.** Raymond de la Nézière. "Is the Secret Well Kept?," *French Fashion Women and the First World War*, 1915.

**Fig. 15.** Private Collection. "Two Hearts United' Hand-Colored Photographic Postcard," *French Fashion Women and The First World War* 1914/1918.



### DRESS, GENDER AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Historically, this dress is estimated to be from the year 1917 which was in the middle of the First World War. The "Great War" created ever more the to reason to use clothing as a form of escapism. In *French Women, Fashion and the War*, Bass-Krueger discusses how fashion was a source of anxiety as it related to gender in wartime (170). Women were told to consume fashion and look elegant as their patriotic female duty and yet they were also shamed for being frivolous. (Bass-Krueger, 178). When examining French caricature during the war there was a stark difference in dress from the frivolous women and the 'ideal' women. Figure 13 displays four fashionable women in their crinoline dresses gossiping while a model wartime family is in the back (Bass-Krueger, 190). Figure 14 depicts the "good" women who patiently waited for her husband to come home, continually writing and dreaming about him (Bass-Krueger, 190). The c. 1917 dress resembles more of the 'ideal' woman's dress rather than the frivolous women in fashionable crinoline. However, according to *Vogue* in both [1914](#) and [1917](#) the lingerie dress was quite fashionable. While the reason for wearing this dress may have been out of a desire to display virtue, wanting to participate in the latest fashion trend or simply for personal enjoyment, the dress is surely filled with romanticism.





**Fig. 16.** Screenshot taken from [Matilda Djerf's Instagram](#) 2020. She is baking scones at a cottage during the pandemic.



**Fig. 17.** Screenshot taken from [Kihmberlie's Instagram](#) 2020. She is having a cottagecore photoshoot. Click on the link to read her caption about the lack of diversity in the trend and what needs to change

### **ESCAPISM AND THE COTTAGECORE TREND**

Interestingly, Marie Antoinette adapted the gaulle style of dress during the French Revolution as she escaped to her palace outside of Versailles, furthering the romantic narrative. In the early twentieth century and during the "Great War", Eurocentric fashion drew inspiration from a romanticized and aristocratic eighteenth century - before many nobles were guillotined. In both cases, during times of crisis, fashion was used as a form of escaping into an idealized past. The world is currently facing a global pandemic and during this time, [cottagecore](#) has become an immersive trend.

The cottagecore aesthetic is used as a much-needed escape during these times. It involves looking and living as if you were in a pastoral painting (Pardilla). The fashion includes floral print, flowy dresses and puffy sleeves (Pardilla). It often displays white bodies that have the land and leisure time to mentally and physically escape during the pandemic (see fig. 15). It is a way of life that involves baking, gardening, reading, embroidery, knitting, pressing flowers, and being one with nature. During times of uncertainty it is comforting to be away from technology and look back to a simpler time. However, while this trend romanticizes the past, it has a vision of domestic bliss without being stuck in the traditional binary framework (Slone). The individuals that participate have the power to choose if they want to bake, embroider, dress hyper-feminine, etc. rather than having these traditionally 'female' activities and aesthetic be forced upon them. This is something the wearer of the c.1917 dress may not have had. While romanticism often involves a sense of nostalgia it is important to note that this imagery is based in colonialism and colonial dress. Both in the eighteenth and twentieth century, only the colonizers and those in power had the money and privilege to dress this way and portray the 'ideal' life. There is currently a movement within the cottagecore community calling out the fact it is a colonist fantasy. Kihmberlie is one of many black women that comment on the whitewashed aesthetic of the trend and advocates for more diversity (see fig. 16). Although living a slow simple life wearing breathable flowing clothing and being in nature may ease individuals anxiety during times of crisis, we must recognize the privilege that is associated with it.



**Fig. 18.** Top Row: [Zimmerman](#)  
 Bottom Row: first two are [Ulla Johnson](#) and last two are [Sleeper](#)

### CREATIVE COMPONENT

For the creative component, I compiled eight designer dresses that evoke the same emotions as the c.1917 dress (see fig.17). They are romantic, nostalgic, feminine, and airy. As well, they could fall under Oakes' definition of a lingerie dress. While they may not be identical, each dress shares a component similar to the c.1917 dress. The first dress on the top row is most similar with the angle of the sleeves and ruffles of the skirt. The following three dresses on the top row emphasize the waist and have detailing around the neck. The first two dresses in the bottom row have the skirts fall in a similar way. And finally, the last two dresses in the bottom row are the most simplistic but they cinch the waist and the white thin material and puffed sleeves help to create the romantic style. These dresses which can all be bought in 2020, demonstrate that whimsical hyper-feminine dresses are very much still popular in 2020. Through this creative process I realized that where an individual may wear these modern day lingerie dresses has changed. In 1917 the dress would have been worn as a day dress due to its casual nature. In 2020 I would only ever wear the first 6 dresses to a very fancy such as a holiday part, wedding, engagement party, anniversary etc. The last two are technically pyjamas you can wear in public, however I would probably still only wear them in private. It is interesting to note the change in what is considered casual dress over the last 100 years.

### CONCLUSION

In the late eighteenth century, early twentieth century and now the early twenty-first century we have used romantic dresses as a form of escaping national and global crises. This c.1917 dress is full of rich history and heavily influenced by eighteenth-century court. While it estimated to have been made during the first world war, the calming romantic emotions it evokes and the style of dress can still be recognized in 2020. However it is necessary we acknowledge the colonialism rooted in this Eurocentric aesthetic ideal.

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