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Coiffures et postiches: extravagances capillaires au XVIIIe siècle
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This essay accompanied the exhibition Plein les Yeux! Le spectacle de la Mode, held for the curatorial event La cité internationale de la dentelle et de la mode de Calais (16 January to 28 April 2013). Dentelle de Calais is a registered brand (1958) that refers to the long tradition of knotted-lace making there since the early 19th century. In 2012, a scientific committee consisting of prominent French cultural historians including the prominent French medievalist Odile Blanc, led by Dr Isabelle Prassys, invited McNeil and others to write for an exhibition that explored clothing as a prosthetic device that has the ability to transform the appearance and aspirations of the human body. The inspiration for this exhibition was the Olympics taking place across the Channel, in which ‘extensions’ of the body become part of extreme mobility and sports, yet are often obscured by a focus on the ‘natural’ body. It made a strong point of connecting historical cases with current interpretation, and therefore also had implications for the understanding of contemporary gender and other politics.

The study of fashion requires a complex set of analytical tools as it relates an inter-linked social, bodily and material culture practice – as in McNeil’s essay on the nature of hairstyling and hairpieces – with broader social, psychological and cultural meanings.

McNeil was the only non-French speaker invited to participate. Text was written in English and translated. It incorporated extensive primary and pictorial research McNeil conducted in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.
Les annexes de l'histoire de la mode abondent d'explications sur le goût pour les longues, et plus tard, très hautes perçisses poussées tant par les élégants des cours européennes occidentales aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles. Les interpellations suscitées par cet engouement pour la coiffure blonde et les « coiffures » capillaires raffinées ne datent pas d'ici. Il existe une longue tradition de textes décrivant sur la mode, très communs au XVIIIe siècle, qui s'adressaient aux auteurs classiques ou aux œuvres des écrivains de cour pour décrypter des vêtements telles que le port de ces perçisses exubérantes à la cour de Louis XIV (fl. 1722). Par exemple, Guillaume François Roger Moeb publia ses Histoires des Mœurs Modernes Françaises (...) contenant tout ce qui concerne la tête des Français... Il expliquait le portage de la cheveu-

ers de la manière suivante :

On avait toujours tendance en France, suivant les modes, la couleur blanche, suivie du rosé, et le noir assez noir. Les cheveux noirs offraient quelques chocs de rose dans les lumières solaires en les dévoilant, le blanc n'était jamais sur la tête toute nue. Depuis l'introdu-

1. Boucher, Le Riche Peuplé, caricature d'un petit bourgeois, estampe, XVIIIe siècle, 30,5 x 23,3 cm © Coll. Blm
Coiffures et postiches: extravagances capillaires au XVIIIe siècle
Discover the spectacular relationship between fashion and the body, the unique metempsychosis made possible by the creativity of designers and the splendour of the materials and techniques they use. Restructured beyond its natural borders, the body becomes a spectacle in its own right; its forms and adornments are a feast to our eyes. Emblematic silhouettes, from the 16th century to present day, illustrate how the fashionable body often took on strange and extraordinary forms. In this sense fashion is about performance, a phenomenon which is not just restricted to contemporary society but is a central theme of the history of appearances, presented and examined in this publication from the Renaissance onwards.

The book is divided into four sections which illustrate the remarkable theatrical connection between body and fashion through the quest for magnificence, the highlighting of the natural silhouette or the construction of a disequilibrium of the body, all reinterpreted by the performing arts and cinema as well as fashion designers.
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PLEIN LES YEUX ! LE SPECTACLE DE LA MODE
Exhibition at the International Centre of Lace and Fashion
In Calais, from 16th January to 28th April 2013
www.cite-dentelle.fr

From 16th January 2013, the International Centre of Lace and Fashion will be presenting the exhibition “A feast for the eyes ! Spectacular fashions”. Through costumes, photos, film extracts, sketches, paintings and items of haute couture, the exhibition will show that, over the centuries, fashion has put the human body on show by stretching it beyond its normal limits. It will illustrate the continuing spectacular link between fashion and the body.

On the one hand, a body hemmed in by voluminous frameworks or corsets, and on the other, a figure magnified and metamorphosed by creators’ inventiveness, splendiferous fabrics and technical performances.

Several symbolic figures, from the 16th century through to today, remind us how the fashionable body could take on astonishing and extraordinary forms. Historical outfits and garments signed by Chanel, Christian Dior, Givenchy, Thierry Mugler and others will grace the scene alongside the mythical dresses worn in Gone With The Wind or La Reine Margot (Queen Margot).

For the film anixing industry has effectively captured the spectacular aspect of these forms to reproduce them in its big blockbusters.

THE EXHIBITION DISPLAYS:
The displays progress around five acts that illustrate this theatrical relationship between the body and fashion:

First off, a “BUFF PARTY” presents the eye-catching ruffs and other collar that had their heyday in Europe in the late 16th century. The whiteness, elegant lace and volume of these accessories sought to showcase the face which was considered to reflect a person’s soul back in these times. Note that the bother caused by wearing them inevitably made people hold their heads still and upright, reflecting the postures of the era’s social elite. Mockers and moralists alike wasted no time calling the ruff a vain piece of attire.

Next comes “GARMENTS OF LIGHT”, the luxury and magnificence of the ornaments on display. For Princes, the point was to stand out in sparkling gold and silver embroidered or woven outfits. Dressing in this way was quite a physical performance (weight, body awkwardness, bulky volume) but what mattered most was to draw attention to oneself and dazzle outlookers. This is achieved by the Renaissance dress worn by Isabelle Adjani in La Reine Margot (1994 - F. Champs), which wows viewers with its long and heavy red silk train of screen-printed interlaced motifs.

Further along we get to “CAGED BODIES”. For getting dressed has also boiled down to putting on a shell! Two trends are sought: wider hip volume or pulling in the waist. Tailors and couturiers pit their imaginations against each other to deform figures and invent spectacular outfits. The cinema has had much to do with making these cage dresses mythical – immortalising them in Gone With The Wind (1949 - V. Fleming) or Les Misérables (1955 - M. Ophuls). In stark contrast with these voluminous extensions, the corset outlines the slim waist sought after by women... and men alike! The body thus straightened and rigidified commands respect, and is adulated to still today by the order to “stand straight” that parents slap at their children.

Right in the middle of the exhibition, a “COSTUMESRY” space invites visitors to experience a change in style for themselves by trying on replicas of accessories and costumes from the 16th to the 20th centuries. These costumes have been made with the assistance of the students at “La Source”, College of Textile Creation, Performing Arts and Art Trades in Nogent-sur-Marne.

“A FASHION SHOW” rounds off the exhibition by presenting the different ways contemporary creators put the body in the spotlight. Visitors are treated to a real concentration of dress styles: shoulder pads, forms that are exuberant or close to the body, dazzling motifs... Chanel, Christian Dior, Givenchy, Jean-Paul Gaultier. Christian Lacroix, Hébert Barrère and On was too vu ... blend creativity and historical modes for spectacular figures that are truly a feast for the eyes!
The annals of fashion history are full of explanations for the taste for the long, powdered and later the very high hair worn by the west European court fashionables of the 17th and 18th centuries. It is not simply our own age that seeks understanding of such matters as a preference for the colour blonde and magnificently managed hair ‘extensions’. There is a long tradition of descriptive explanations of fashion, quite common in the eighteenth-century, generally turning to written sources such as the classics or court writers to explain such things as the wearing of long wigs at the court of Louis XIV. In 1773, for example, G.F.R. Molé published his *Histoire des Modes Françaises*, ou Révolutions du costume en France, depuis l’établissement de la Monarchie jusqu’à nos jours, contenant tout ce qui concerne la tête des Français, avec des recherches sur l’usage des Chevelures artificielles chez les Anciens. His explanation for the powdering of the hair was as follows:

*On avait toujours estimé en France, même parmi les hommes, la couleur blonde, comme la plus douce, la plus agréable. Les cheveux noirs offraient quelque chose de trop dur; les blancs annonçaient le décrépitude, ils étaient peu estimés. Depuis l’introduction de la poudre, les cheveux blancs sont venus en honneur: tout homme assez heureux pour en avoir de bonne heure, se fit une gloire de ne plus les cacher: une chevelure blanche est comptée au nombre des plus belles parures (117).*

He went on to note that all heads in France were powdered and *mastiquées* except for the monks and peasants (127). At almost the same time, Tobias George Smollett’s rather savage *Travels Through France and Italy* (1766), noted that the Frenchmen had a ridiculous fondness for hairstyling, and that the first race of French Kings were in fact distinguished by their long and dressed hair. ‘Even the peasant who drives an ass loaded with dung, wears his hair en queue, though, perhaps, he has neither shirt nor breeches’. French women’s hair, he argued, was copied from that of the ‘Hottentots’, and was surely ‘the vilest piece of sophistication that art ever produced’. (105) Note here the important suggestion that people are certainly not natural, and almost no longer human. By the 1770s hair was powdered, not only in the ‘natural’ shade of white, but also, as many portrait miniatures attest, in green, violet and light red, and as high as possible in order to be fashionable. In London, the politician Charles James Fox popularised the use of red heels accompanied by blue hair-powdered wigs when he returned from his Grand Tour in 1770.

Across the Channel, this English counterpart of the French fop was called a ‘macaroni’. The macaronis, a specific type of foppish figure who was prominent for thirty years from 1760, are best known through graphic and some painted caricature, but the public understanding of this type was also negotiated through a range of media and sites including the theatre, the masquerade, the press, popular songs and jokes, and newly designed products including mass-produced ceramics and textiles. Fashionable young men in the late 1760s and 1770s replaced the tall ‘scratch-wig’ of the older generation with elaborate hairstyles that almost matched the towering heights of the female coiffure. A tall **toupée** and a club of hair required extensive dressing with pomade and powder; the wig was garnished with a large black satin wig-bag trimmed with bows in order to protect the textile at the back of the suit. This use of a long pig-tail and wig-bag was viewed as a francophile affectation; the visual imagery for Frenchmen in popular imagery was this device, just as a Dutchman dressed in clogs and a Spaniard in lace. It was the macaronic attention to wigs that caused most consternation. As Marcia Pointon has argued, the wig can function as a sign of masculinity and masculine authority; men without their wigs or with the wig slipping are used in images to suggest disempowerment or even castration. Some obscene caricatures show a wig back to front so that the tail hangs down over the face like a floppy penis. The type of the wig dictated the visual response; effeminate excess was alarming. In popular imagery, macaroni men are tailed by hairdressers with devil like horns and hideous faces; they are mercilessly lampooned as partners in fashion crime; often skinny, effete, wizened and satanic. The cost of these wigs might have excited dismay; even a modest wig was amongst the most expensive items in a gentleman’s wardrobe. The macaroni wig was therefore doubley a sign of conspicuous consumption and fashion luxury. Although wigs were expensive, real hair could be dressed in the new manner and augmented with false, and there was a large trade in second hand and stolen wigs. The ragged looking confections on the heads of those often caricatured suggest ridiculous efforts to follow an inherently expensive fashion. The wig’s symbolism as potentially deceitful is indicated in the following incident from the diary of the young German tourist Sophie Von La Roche...
We now must shift our attention from the ‘why?’ of this hair fashion, to what it enabled. Firstly, fashion was a type of standardisation as well as individuation. Court dress was worn in conjunction with expectations regarding hairdressing and make-up. A courtly persona was about more than the garments. ‘Prestige is never far from pose,’ Vigarello notes. In a court, ‘all spontaneity is erased, and thus a secretive and calculated structure of bearing and behavior is encouraged’. The function of such court fashion was to mask nature, to erect a screen between the body and the viewer, calculated structure of bearing and behavior is encouraged’. The art historian Katie Scott, writing on 18th-century ‘image-object-space’, extends the suggestions made by Daniel Roche that the dramatic transformation of appearances in 18th century western Europe was matched by a corresponding transformation in the experience of space. Scott reconsiders the way in which we assign meanings to objects, when in the past objects often bore images on their surface and were necessarily spatial; and spaces were experienced as both images and enclosures, like clothing. The 18th century was an age that valued imitation; textiles carried imitations of other forms and textures, fur or feathers, a sensual and a commercial strategy which linked consumer goods into circuits quite different than those we experience today. Viewers were attentive to detail and read the components of their environment in connection with other parts, arts and traditions.

Some of the effect regarding hair was clearly libidinal. Petit maître types populate the substantial body of French fashion caricature, which is less well known than the contemporary English production, but just as delightful. Some of these images probably exist in a relationship to the macaroni images produced across the Channel in a deliberately crude manner by amateur print-designers. Although many of the masculine fashion caricatures are structured similarly – ageing folly, moliitude, vanity – the French libertine tradition drives the imagery towards a high degree of sexual fantasy. The wig, which is frequently the source of castration imagery in the English material or is a very limp affair indeed, is obscenely priapic in France, tapping into the older carnival and folk tradition of the phallic object – hair, club, sausage, knot. The analogy of the female body in women’s hairstyles, sometime suggested very well in English work, is taken further in the French prints [Toilette of the goddess of Taste; Miss French Lady Opera]. Oil spills from lamps into orifices, toupee and tail extend
The use of English titles for these works suggests that difference, in this case a different language, is the order of fashion. There is an important relationship between the exaggeration, fantasy and comic elements of these lampooning words and images. Both caricatures and macaroni men were concerned with the distortion of appearance, through an exaggerated or excessive depiction of that appearance on the one hand, and a self-conscious and excessive performance of that appearance on the other. A caricature of a ‘fashionable’ of this period is effectively a caricature of a caricature, and therefore a portrait of itself as a genre. This surely goes a long way towards explaining the proliferation and fascination with these images. Did these foppish men, who included prominent artists such as Richard Cosway, become their own greatest works of art? A new type of body nonetheless emerged at the end of the eighteenth century. The aristocratic body with a repertoire of courtly gestures learned from the dancing master and hairdresser was to be replaced with the ‘natural’ body that resisted vain and undeserving gesture. A new fashion ideal was created, in which ‘prosthetic’ devices, whether high-heeled shoes or tall wigs, played lesser roles for fashioning future men.

Bibliography


Possible images


A caricature of Louis XIV as a powdered poodle brings together the vanity of the powdered hair with the amplification of the upper part of the body engendered by the long wig worn in the 17th century.


I can also suggest some others.