

## Ladies: Evening Wear 1800-1819

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Fashion reigned supreme over all the civilized countries on both sides of the Atlantic, overcoming geographical and even political restrictions. Monthly magazines, popular in the US as well as England, replaced the fashion dolls with extensive wardrobes that traveled in the previous century.

During the first Consulate and the Empire, France was possessed with a pseudo-classic mania in women's dress. Clinging draperies and Greek and Roman hair-dressing were carried to an extreme which was not noticeable in England or America, although followed in both countries to some extent. Numerous portraits of the day record fashionable costumes and illustrate the customary accessories and styles of hair-dressing. Between 1800-1810, "we see that the short waists which came into vogue at the close of the eighteenth century were worn for at least ten years of the nineteenth century. The very narrow skirts of very soft, sheer, clinging materials, were worn by the ultra-fashionable and the subject of many a satire.

After about 1800 there were a good many varieties of length to choose from. Formal dresses continued to have trains and touched the floor in front. Many others, both for day and evening wear, were also long; but an ankle length was increasingly popular and before the period ended many young women danced in still shorter skirts. Around 1808-9, skirts rose to ankle length exposing the feet and fashion notes for the year 1813 include an even shorter dress, really calf-length, worn with high gaiters.

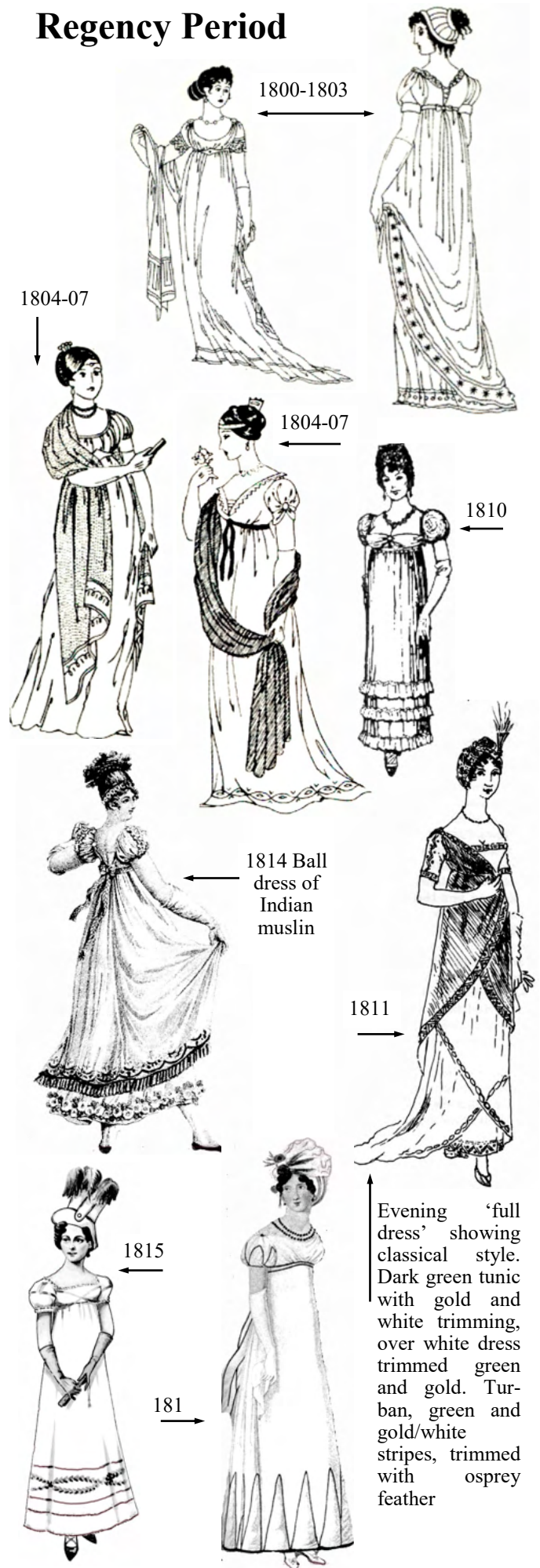
The tunic or over-dress, covering in part both body and legs, was a classical touch which survived throughout the period. The robe or court mantle was in reality a train attached to the dress at the high waist and was often made in a rich brocade, velvet or silk and worn over a gown of delicate muslin or gauze. These fabrics, as well as all-over lace, were primarily worn in Napoleon's court. The average woman wore printed linen, sprigged muslin, flowered chintz, checked linen or cotton, and tiny-figured calico in summer. Fine or coarse cloth, from cashmere to linsey-woolsey was worn in winter. Other suitable fabrics for this period are taffeta in plain, striped and check, brocades, chintz, silk in small floral designs, sprigged muslin, velvet, moire, lace, wild silk, chiffon, and organza with metal thread. Striped designs were very popular, hence "Regency stripes."

Up until 1810, women's dresses were primarily light-colored. A great many were white, with touches of color, perhaps, in sash and hair-ribbons. Such accents were often strong, including black embroidered edges and the bright colors found in oriental designs, usually on scarves. White embroidered with metallic threads, either silver or gold, was popular throughout the period. However, with the return of more sumptuous materials in 1810, heavier colors came back: black, Pompeian red, various shades of green (especially a very bright tone), strong yellow, violet, lilac, heliotrope (purple-blue), and "King's blue." These colors were particularly popular for daywear and outerwear. For muslin dresses, the pastel shades and white held their own.

Throughout the period the classical influence was strong, especially dots, circles, squares, lozenges, and small sprigs. There is some hint of the Persian palm and exotic birds, but the more ostentatious Roman versions overshadowed the more delicate Greek designs. After about 1810, the antique [Greek] began to be combined with Renaissance features.

Women's dress after 1800 re-introduced the un-Greek trimmings of ruffles, shirrings, puffs, and flounces, applying them to hats, necks, and the lower portion of skirts. The materials were lace, fluted or pleated cambric, or the material of the dress.

## Regency Period



**Structure of the Empire Dress:** The cut of the dresses to which the name ‘Grecian’ is given is sufficiently indicated by the mention of the garment which furnished the earliest model—viz. the English chemise. Although this resembled the usual female garment that still bears that name, it was both longer and wider, and, further, in addition to the draw-string at the neck, had another below the breast, by means of which it could be pulled in and draped at will. This was the style worn throughout the whole time of the republic. The only changes made in it were that the neck became lower and lower, and the waist, as indicated by the draw-string, came closer and closer up to the breast. The sleeves were shortened—occasionally, indeed, there were none—but the train grew longer and longer.

This dress, which in its way was nearly perfect, change its appearance entirely when, about the year 1800, a bodice (*le corsage*) was added, to which the dress [skirt] was sewn. The [skirt] was still wide at the top and had therefore to be arranged in large pleats. This bodice was as short as it could possibly be, and very low in front. It was laced sometimes in front and sometimes at the back; the lacing was hidden under a piece of the material. The bodice was very similar in cut. It consisted either of two similar pieces, a back and a front, sewn together at the sides, or of a front piece cut very wide so as to go far [towards the] back and a very small, almost square, back piece. It made no difference to the cut whether the bodice was laced in front or at the back.

With the reintroduction of the separate bodice sewn on to the [skirt] the [skirt] was soon made so as to have fewer folds. There were put as far as possible at the back, and this gave the whole [skirt] an entirely different appearance. Fashion soon dictated a [skirt] without any folds, and by the year 1807 [skirts] were so tight that it was almost impossible for the wearer to walk in them. They had to be so close-fitting that the outlines of the figure were clearly seen. For this reason only one very thin petticoat was worn, and even this was sometimes left off. These dresses went by the name of *robes en caleçon*.

The width of the skirt at the foot rarely exceeded 250 cm [98.5", 2-3/4 yds. ] The skirt was in two pieces, a front and a back; a third piece was sewn in diagonally as a lateral gusset. If even this did not give the required width two smaller gussets taken from the top of the sides of the front piece were inserted. The front was sewn to the bodice quite smoothly while the back piece was disposed in pleats on each side of the slit. The width thus lost at the top of the skirt was regained by the insertion of a gusset rounded at the top. From the year 1809 onward, the back piece had only from 4-6 close-set pleats, about 2 cm [3/4"] in depth, and the upper breadth of the back piece had to be correspondingly diminished. This was done by cutting gussets out of the top and inserting them upside-down at the foot. For dresses with trains the cut was the same, as the train was merely a prolongation of the back piece.

In the case of dresses whose back piece was pleated the back of the bodice was about 10 cm [4"] broader than was necessary; to it the pleated portion of the back [skirt] was sewn. This part was provided with a draw-string by which the waist of the bodice could be contracted, independently of the lacing arrangement inside. There were two similar draw-strings at the neck of the bodice, one passing from the shoulder to the back and the other to the front. The sleeves of these dresses were pleated at the top in front; the seam was under the arm.

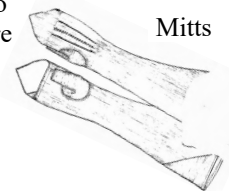
These tight [skirts] without folds remained unchanged and were fashionable till after the year 1820. The bodice was short, but it went considerable modifications. In particular after 1812 it was made higher for daywear, although the wide, low-necked style was worn at dances and on other festive occasions.

Since the introduction into France of English fashion about the year 1790 there were many varieties of trimming, but all of them were simple. Only the foot of the evening [skirt] was trimmed. Later the front of the [skirt] was also ornamented.

The commonest trimming was thin cord or narrow braid. On ball dresses artificial flowers were frequently used. About 1805 lace began to be employed, and not long afterward embroidery. From 1810 onward the material of the [skirt] itself was used for the trimming in the form of frills, thin rolls, and diagonal strips. In most cases the trimming was of the same color as the [skirt]. Exceptions to this rule were rare until about 1812.

The reappearance of the bodice was accompanied by that of overdresses made in the Grecian style. They bore the name of ‘tunic.’ The close-fronted [skirt] worn with them was now called the ‘dress.’ Speaking generally, the tunic had the same cut as the dress, the chief difference being that it was open in front. A touch of the antique [pseudo-Greek] was highly prized.

**Gloves:** Always worn, long, glacé [glossy or highly polished cloth or leather], white, non-wrinkled. At first to an inch from the short sleeve, gradually lower. Occasionally the tops were ornamented. The backs, too were sometimes embroidered. Ladies wore kid or silk mitts, (i.e. half-fingered gloves) throughout the period.



**Fans:** Small fans of the ordinary folding type although occasionally a folding wheel fan appeared.

**Jewelry:** Necklaces of pearls, diamonds, or other stones, at first copied from the Greek, later even more delicate, finally became heavier under the influence of Imperial ostentation. With bare arms, bracelets were favorites. Earrings again in style, copied from the Greek or Roman models. (also see Headresses: Turbans)

"From 1800 onwards, a slightly different type of curtsy was used because of the high-waisted dress with the narrow skirt. The long line from waist to instep was broken ungracefully if the front knee was bent in the usual way. The curtsy was therefore taken stepping back and bending the back knee, which left the extended to its full length with the toe pointed. The dress then clung to the thigh and kept its straight line. The hands could either be held out to the side or the fan could be clasped to the bosom. If a small train was worn, it usually had a loop which fit on to the little finger of the left hand while the right hand held the fan. If the dress had a reasonable amount of fullness, then it was picked up with both hands at the front and the curtsy was made as before."

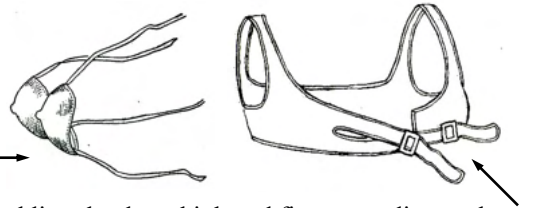


**Chemise:** Still worn by modest ladies under the corset and tucked into the drawers. Same silhouette as empire dress, using drawstrings to adjust at the neck and under the bust. Can add a little lace or ruffling around the neck.

**Corsets:** Worn under clinging dresses by the not-so-slim and not-so-young, became longer from about 1800 till 1811. The long and close-fitting stays, though not as stiff and unyielding as their predecessors of the eighteenth century, prevented the untidy negligee appearance the high-waisted gowns would have had without them. They went down the hips, instead of ending, as previously, just below the waist at a point or with tabs. They also went up high enough to push up the bust. Well-stiffened with whalebone, they now began to have rounded cup-shaped bust sections inserted in them instead of imposing on the bosom the flatness or the pushed-up look that had previously prevailed. There were other gussets below the waist to give curves to the hips. The Divorce Corset, which separated the breasts, appeared in 1816. It was achieved by means of a padded triangle of iron or steel which was inserted into the center front of the corset with the point upwards. As the bodices grew longer, the stays grew shorter until 1819 or 1820 when the first French corset in two pieces and laced up the back came into fashion.



False breasts of papier mâché covered with linen pasted on; held together in the front and tied in the back with linen tapes. These false breasts seemed to be widely used, much as the brassières of today are used to raise the breasts.



Corselet or brassière of heavy linen, closing at side front with two gold buckles, holding the dress high and firm according to the fashion.

**Drawers:** Came into fashion about 1806 from menswear, therefore very shocking and worn by “loose women.” Like breeches, they were attached to a wide waistband that laced in the back and the legs were tubular or were gathered just below the knee. [See drawing with corset above]

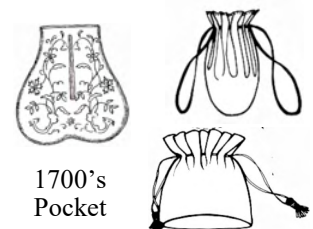


**Pantalettes:** Feminization of ‘pantaloon.’ Differing from drawers, pantalettes extended down the leg to just below the calf where it was bordered with lace and trimmed with 4 or 5 rows of tucks. They were intended to be seen.

**Petticoat:** Omitted by the daring, however in 1807, there was advertised a ‘patent elastic Spanish lamb’s wool invisible petticoats, drawers, waistcoats, all in one.’ The ‘invisible petticoats’ were woven in the stocking loom and drawn over the legs so that when walking you were obliged to take short and mincing steps. Elastic at this period meant stretchable material such as stockinette.

**Bustle:** Returns in 1810 in the form of small rolls sewn into the back of the skirt; by 1815 it had become detached in the shape of a long sausage with tapes at each end by which it was tied round the waist.

**Pockets:** The former device of a detached pocket hung round the waist under the skirt became impractical with the scanty dresses of the period, and so they were replaced by the handbag or ‘reticule,’ commonly called a ‘ridicule.’ An observer in 1805 remarked it was out of the question for ladies to wear pockets.



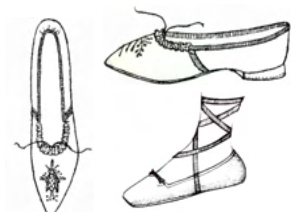
1700's  
Pocket

Reticules

**Stole:** Omnipresent, particularly as part of the evening costume. A long rectangle like the Greek chlamys, draped as the wearer pleased. Also described as immensely long, made of lace gauze, satin, or brocade. Worn draped over the forearms (not around the shoulders). Can be difficult to manage gracefully as it has a habit of twisting into a bedraggled string or looping itself unkindly underneath the seat of the dress or sliding off the arms so it falls underfoot.

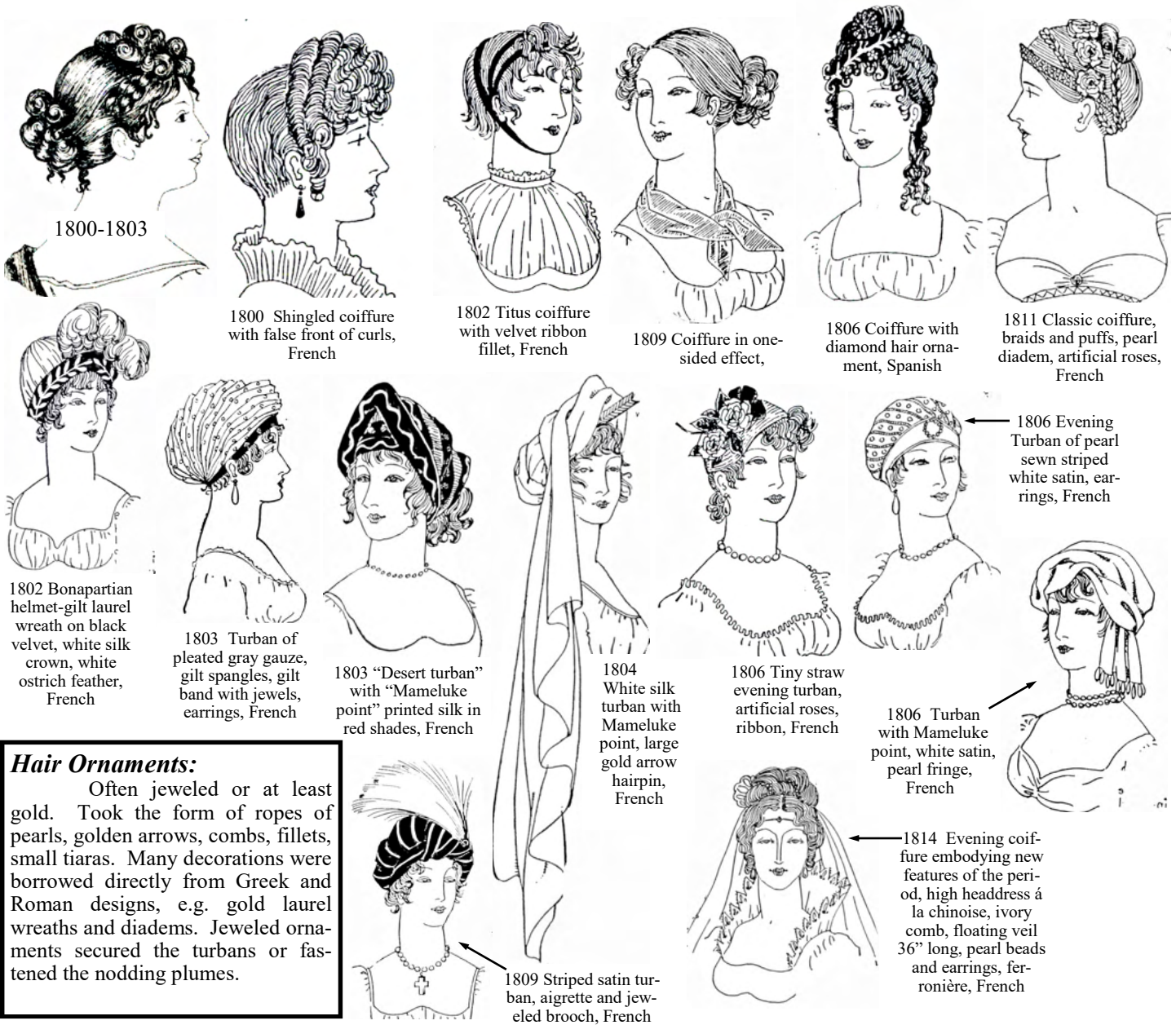
**Stockings:** Almost always white for evening, although the daring might wear pink which would show as nude under a thin dress. Decorated on the sides with embroidered clock-work.

**Shoes:** Flat, thin-soled slippers, often with criss-crossed ribbon ties extending to the knee to hold them on and trimmed with a tiny bow near the tip. The shoes were often homemade, from satin, silk, or soft kid in white and delicate colors as well as black. Sometimes they were embroidered at the tip. Roundish toes prevailed in the earlier years of the new styles, but by 1813, the fashion illustrations once more show points.





**Hair:** About 1800, various attempts were made to find some suitable form of hairdressing resembling that of the ancient Greeks. These efforts were not much more successful than those which had been made to imitate Grecian styles of dress. The hair above the forehead was curled and coiled, while the back hair was plaited and arranged with the help of combs into a large crown from which numerous small curls—*tire-bouchons*—hung loosely. This fashion did not last long, and for lack of anything better women began to borrow male fashions, especially the style *à la Titus*. This developed in about 1812 into a very simple and becoming coiffure. The front hair was parted in the middle of the forehead, combed smoothly toward the sides, and curled, while the back hair was arranged in a coil. With all these coiffures, some sort of headdress was worn, mostly a turban. About 1806 a tall ostrich feather came to be stuck perpendicularly in the hair.



**Hair Ornaments:**  
Often jeweled or at least gold. Took the form of ropes of pearls, golden arrows, combs, fillets, small tiaras. Many decorations were borrowed directly from Greek and Roman designs, e.g. gold laurel wreaths and diadems. Jeweled ornaments secured the turbans or fastened the nodding plumes.

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