

# French Revolution Fashion

## From Fanciful to Cutting Edge

Do your parents ever disapprove of your appearance? Do they sometimes dislike what you do to your hair or what you choose to wear? If the answer is yes, then you have something in common with Marie Antoinette, queen of France. The queen's mother and empress of Austria, Maria Theresa, heard about her daughter's appearance and made her opinion known in a letter: "They say that your coiffure rises 36 inches . . . and is decorated with a mass of feathers and ribbons, which make it even higher . . . I was always of the opinion that one should follow the fashions with restraint but never exaggerate them."

### Big, Big Hair

Marie Antoinette ignored her mother's disapproval and embraced the fanciful and excessive fashions of the eighteenth century. The *coiffure*, or hairstyle, to which Queen Marie Antoinette's mother referred, is the perfect example. In the period before the French Revolution, women's hairstyles reached outlandish proportions. Women of the nobility curled and intertwined hair around wire structures with padding for extra height, and coated the structure with lard to keep it all in place. They dusted it with flour and adorned it with an assortment of items, including feathers and blown glass.

After such meticulous preparation, some women kept their hairstyles in place for weeks, even months, and whenever they needed to scratch their heads they used long rods that resembled knitting needles.

Many women rode in carriages with their heads sticking out of the windows as a way to prevent their elaborate hairstyles from getting crushed by the carriage ceilings. The fashion became so widespread that doorways throughout the fashionable areas of France were refitted and raised so that women could pass through more easily.

Marie Antoinette not only had her hair piled but also had her hair decorated with "sentimental scenes." She appointed a man whose sole responsibility was to make sure the queen's face revealed her beauty at all times: he designed a variety of miniature scenes to place in her hair. He put a garden, which was complete with tiny summer houses, statues, and flowerbeds, in her hair. He placed a hunting party scene with chasing deer in



Portrait of Marie Antoinette

her hair. He designed a barn scene that included a boy and girl in a haystack. Pretty soon, women of the nobility followed suit and started putting miniature scenes in their hair: sea battles, a coach and horses – nothing was off limits.

When women weren't showing off their big hair, they wore bonnets made of straw and trimmed in silk, ribbon, and lace. They carried a fan in one hand

### Discussion or Essay Questions

To the French, the combination of red, blue, and white was known as the tricolor. The colors red and blue stood for the city of Paris, and the color white was for the king. These same colors are used in the American flag. Do some research using an encyclopedia, the Internet, or the library, and find out more about the colors used in the U.S. flag. Do they symbolize anything? Explain.

What are you wearing today? What kind of statement do you think you make with your clothes, hair, and appearance? If you were walking down a street, what could a stranger tell about you just from your appearance?



### Try This!

Spend an hour or two in a place frequented by a lot of people, such as a shopping mall or public park. Sit quietly and observe people you see (you might even want to take notes). Do their clothes and appearances symbolize any ideas? What can you tell from what someone is wearing or how he or she arranges his or her hair?



and a little velvet mask in the other, which was mostly for show. They wore dresses of silk and satin with embroidered decorations, bows, and ruffles. Hoop, hip, and derriere pads were placed underneath the dress for form. The clothes were colorful and bright, so as to attract attention. But Marie Antoinette and women of the nobility weren't the only ones following extravagant fashions.

### Men's Silk Culottes

Men of the nobility were equally indulgent. Men took painstaking precautions to show off their status with clothes made of fine materials. Men wore *culottes*, or silk pants fitted just below the knee. For it was these elaborate and fanciful fashions that made a social statement by outwardly distinguishing the nobility from the Third Estate. Along with culottes, men wore white stockings and leather boots. They carried two watches and, sometimes, a bamboo cane with a gold or porcelain knob. Some men carried their canes musket-style: up on the shoulders and pointed skyward. Hats were tall with a silver buckle in the middle of the ribbon.



Peasant in Sansculottes

## Nobility or Peasant?

In stark contrast, common peasants wore simple clothing out of mere necessity. If you were a man or boy, you wore a woolen jacket and *pantalons*, or long, baggy trousers. If you were a woman, you wore a simple dress, usually made of wool or cotton, with a plain apron and mop cap. Peasant clothes were not fanciful or colorful. They



Outlandish Noble Fashion

were drab and unremarkable, and the wearers were only concerned about the toughness of the material against everyday, manual labor.

When King Louis XVI held a meeting of the Estates-General in 1789 at the start of the French Revolution, the common peasant's drab clothing stood in clear contrast to the garments of the nobility and clergy class. While the clergy wore their traditional scarlet and purple vestments, and the nobles wore colorful silks and velvet capes, the king ordered the peasants to wear black clothing, a symbol of their lowly position in society. These dress requirements served as a reminder to each class, especially to the common peasants, of its social and political standing.

## Making a Political Statement

But with the coming of the French Revolution, everything about fashion changed. Fashion became more than a means for self-expression or class identity. It no longer symbolized merely the excesses of the nobility. Fashion took on added meaning; people started making political statements with what they wore. Some French wore red, blue, and white together, known as the tricolor. The tricolor carried an unspoken message of support for the revolution and a fairer system of government, namely, a constitutional monarchy. Red and blue symbolized the colors of Paris, and white was the color of the king or royalty. Many supporters wore tricolor rosettes on hats. Some women wore hats shaped like the Bastille tower and trimmed with a tricolor ribbon. Some men wore small replicas of the Bastille tower on the buckles of their shoes.

The rising urban working class, who played a vital role in the revolution, named themselves after its own ubiquitous article of clothing, the pantalons, or *sansculottes*. *Sansculottes*, which means "without breeches," were worn by common men. French Revolution supporters also wore the *bonnet rouge*, or cap of the revolution, as a symbol of liberty. It was a red woolen cap with an end piece that hung down behind like a ponytail. The angry mob that crowded around King Louis XVI thrust one such red cap at him and forced him to wear it. Queen Marie Antoinette also was given a *bonnet rouge*, which she placed on her son's head. For a short while, the royal family's actions pleased the mob.

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Even hairstyles changed. Remember the big hair of the nobility? It quickly fell out of favor. During the revolution, those unfortunate enough to die by the guillotine had their hair cut short just before the execution. This enabled the blade to get a clean cut on the victim's neck without the hair getting in the way. The short haircut suddenly became a hairstyle that was fashionable, and the passion for hair cropped *à la victime* spread all the way to England. Now that's cutting edge fashion!

Women's dress during the early 1790s also took on a more subdued look. Dresses were no longer padded and puffed, but deflated to look thin and translucent. Dresses took on a more sensible, man-tailored style. During the Reign of Terror, a fashion for plain dresses in dark, drab colors took over. Wigs and hair powder passed away, and women left off from wearing corsets during this terrible period.

The dramatic changes brought about by the French Revolution were reflected in the exaggerated shifts in fashion. During the revolution, the French people literally wore their beliefs and feelings. They didn't have to speak in order to make a statement. Instead, they used their clothes and their hair.

Like many fashions today, the fashions of eighteenth century France came and went in the blink of an eye. But they left a lasting impression on everyone, including peasantry, nobility, clergy, and royalty. So the next time you pull on a pair of pants and shirt, or comb and style your hair, ask yourself, what kind of statement am I making to the world?



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