Formal Evening Wear

CHAPTER SEVEN

The costumes for formal evening wear form an intensely interesting part of our subject. What better sources of inspiration can we hope for than the elaborate costumes of the people of France, and the none the less charming attire of our own ancestors?

France, the creator of the fashion world, has always held the sceptre of supremacy, her kingdom extending to all parts of the civilized world, and today every country looks to her for the coming modes. Due to this unquestionable leadership, the designers of France have had the greatest opportunity to display what seemed at first to be a natural trait of the French people—the art of designing original costumes. The libraries and museums of France are storehouses of inspiration for designers, but other countries, too, are having larger opportunities for designers than were possible until recently.

The World War, which interrupted the work of the designers of France, had a pronounced effect on American fashions, and our designers were compelled to resort to other than French sources for suggestions. Their success in the creation of designs, independent of foreign influences, was so great that it started a new movement for the establishment of extensive libraries and museums throughout the United States.

For the moment, however, we shall study the costumes of the French during the past four centuries.

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With the opening of the sixteenth century we are brought face to face with the form which exists in modern costumes. The reason for the departure from the ancient lines of drapery was due, at this time, to the introduction of the corset as a part of women's attire. The corset of the sixteenth century had no bones, but consisted of several layers of heavy material cut and sewed into the desired shape. This closely fitting garment divided the length of the figure into two distinct parts.

In the costume of 1530, see figure 45, the purpose of the design was to make the waist appear as small as possible, and it was drawn in tight, while the skirt flared out into a sort of bell-shaped hoop. The skirt took this form by the use of an underskirt of stiff material cut and sewed into the form of a funnel turned upside down. As a result of this new style of skirt, the waist, by contrast, appeared smaller than it really was. The cotte, an under-dress used in the 13th and 14th centuries, was no longer a complete garment, but a piece of rich material sewed to the underskirt, which served for a panel in front. The sleeves were very wide and were usually made of fur; indeed, all the materials used in this period were of the richest, such as taffetas, satins, damasks, and cloths of gold and silver. Jewels, too, were worn most extensively, elaborate girdles and jeweled garlands often bedecking the bodice or waist.

During the reign of Louis XIV the costumes were particularly noted for their sumptuousness; the general elegance and extravagance which marked the rule of this monarch were evidenced also in the costumes worn at court. Figure 46 shows a costume worn dur-
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ing the latter years of the reign of Louis XIV. The bodice was tight, and pointed very low at the front, and the short, close-fitting sleeves were usually finished with ruffles of lace. The skirt was puffed out at the sides, recalling somewhat the hoop of the sixteenth century. Richly painted under-dresses of colored silks were worn, and as a matter of fact, the underskirt was of such elegance that the top skirt was often folded and pinned back to show the underskirt.

In the early part of the eighteenth century, we find the revival of the hoop, or "panier," as it was frequently called. This consisted of a frame-work of cane or whalebone, sometimes of steel, fastened together by tape. It projected from the hips, but was flat on the front and back.

Figure 47 shows a draped costume over the panier. This marks the period during which Madame Pompadour was the dictator of fashion in France, and it was at this time that the best costumes of the century were created. In direct contrast to the overdecorated, lavishly ornamented costumes of the days of Louis XIV we have this charming and dainty creation. The pointed bodice was still in vogue, but much lace and ribbon were gracefully applied to both bodice and skirt. A great deal of attention was given to the shoes and stockings, which were usually embroidered with gold and silver, and the shoes were often adorned with jeweled buckles.

The French Revolution brought about a distinct change in the customs, the manners, and the dress of the country; and there was a swinging of the pendulum of fashion to the plainer styles, simplicity being the keynote of the costumes of this period.

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Figure 48 shows a costume worn about 1811. The neck was cut very low, the sleeves were long and tight-fitting, and the waistline was high, while the skirt fell in straight, undraped lines to the floor.

During the period which follows this, we note the influence brought about by the return of the army of Napoleon, when turbans and materials of an Oriental texture were introduced.

In figure 49 we show a costume of the Second Empire, under Napoleon III (1852-1870). Observe the change in the outline from that of the preceding periods. You will note that every period is marked by some change in the line and form of the silhouette.

During this time the tight bodice still remained popular, and when sleeves were worn, they were usually tight at the shoulders and full at the wrists. Close-fitting bonnets, of straw, lace or net, and often decorated with artificial flowers and plumes, were worn.

We shall now study the American costumes as represented in figures 50, 51 and 52.

Figure 50 is a Quaker dress, worn about the year 1782. Note what a strong resemblance there is between the skirt of this costume and the paniers worn in France during the same period. The shawl formed a most important part of the attire of the Quaker ladies because of its simplicity.

Figure 51 shows a gown worn about the year 1805. This garment was made of sage-green china crêpe. Observe the high waistline and the features that are similar to those in the gowns of the First Empire in France.

Figure 52 shows an American costume of about the year 1838, which was made of pink satin, with lace
trimming at the sleeves. Here, again, we find the French influence in the low neckline, the pointed waist, and the wide skirt that brings back the hoop-skirt of former days in France.

Note the designs in figures 53 and 54.

The evening wrap was suggested by the Quaker costume of 1782. The fichu of the old-period costume is used on the wrap, but instead of tying in the front, the fichu is draped up over one shoulder. The folds in the overskirt suggested draping the entire coat to one side.

The evening gown was suggested by the French costume of 1530. The off-the-shoulder neckline formed by the lower braid in the old-period costume is made round and used in the modern costume. The braid over the shoulder is suggested in the form of a ribbon that comes through at the waistline on either side, and trails on the floor with a few ermine tails. The wide sleeve is suggested, but in chiffon instead of ermine. Strips of ermine outline the neck and bottom of the sleeves, and a few tails peep from under the side drape of the skirt. The chain suspended from the bodice suggested the ermine tails suspended on a string of pearls from the bottom of the sleeve.

Observe carefully the silhouettes illustrated on plate A. These outline, in a general way, the trend of fashions since the twelfth century. You should realize the importance of the silhouette in the design of costumes. If the general outline of your design is not pleasing to the eye, your costume will not answer the demands of good taste, even when the details themselves are beautiful.

Figure 55 is an evening gown suggested by the
Quaker dress of 1782 and by the American costume of 1838. The lines in the bodice of the evening gown are practically the same as those in the American costume. The two lines starting from below the shoulders and going down to the waist on the American costume are raised up on to the shoulders in the evening gown and are carried down to a V. The embroidered insert of the American costume is translated into a lace yoke in the modern dress. The ribbon sash of the old costume is retained in the new. The lines of the skirt of the Quaker dress are used for the evening gown, with slight change. The front of the modern skirt is of lace and is rather short. The rest of the skirt is of velvet, carried into a train at the back.

Figure 56 shows a dance frock suggested by the French costume of 1530. The tight, pointed bodice of the French model is used in the modern frock, but is modified to semi-fitting lines. The various lines on the original model outlining the neck suggested on the modern design, the strap over the shoulder, and the band over the arm all in one with the bodice. The lines at the front of the skirt on the French costume are used in the modern dress, but in the adaptation the lines come straight down instead of spreading apart toward the bottom. The outlining of these lines and of the bottom of the skirt with fur are seen in both models. The wreath at the front of the bodice in the old-period costume suggested graduated wreaths of hand-made flowers at the front of the modern skirt. The materials used are satin and chiffon.