The Journal of Dress History
Volume 1, Issue 1, Spring 2017

ISSN 2515–0995

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www.dresshistorians.org

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An Analysis of Dress in Portraiture of Women at the Swedish Royal Court, 1600–1650

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Abstract

A seventeenth-century fashion doll, known as a Pandora, dressed in Spanish style, illustrates fashion worn at the Swedish court up to 1600, when the Spanish farthingale began to be replaced by a French farthingale. This was also the time when the tight-fitting ruff was exchanged for a bobbin lace collar, raised behind the neck. Around 1635 the collar evolved, once again, into a falling lace collar. These sartorial changes can be followed through portraiture of Queen Christina of Sweden, 1626–1689. This paper addresses dress at the Swedish royal court by analysing evidence in portraiture during the first half of the seventeenth century.

The information is scant, almost nonexistent, about the way in which Swedish royal women dressed during the first half of the seventeenth century. There are no remaining pieces of clothing, and the inventories are incomplete. All we have is a handful of portraits. These show, on the other hand, that Swedish royal women were very much in tune with the fashion of contemporary courts on the continent. That awakens the question of how new ideas in fashion were transmitted to these distant parts of Europe in a period when the fashion journal had not yet seen the light of day. Probably portraits here played an important role. Ever since the development of portraiture, portraits had been exchanged between the European courts. Additionally, when a king or a prince was searching for a wife, portraits of potential wives-to-be arrived at court, where the portrayed woman’s garments, just as much as her face, were scrutinized by the court ladies, who were looking for ideas for their own dresses.

From the middle of the sixteenth century, there were also fashion dolls, commonly known as Pandoras, that were created to provide an idea of the demands of fashion on a lady who wished to be up to date. These carefully dressed miniature figures were not meant to be played with. Instead, they can be seen as advertisements for the latest fashions and fabrics and were as such carried throughout Europe to demonstrate changing personal appearance, from hairstyles to footwear.

The Swedish Pandora

Few dolls of this kind have survived, though, and in Sweden only one is known: a small fashion doll, only 16cm in height, in The Royal Armoury collections in Stockholm (Figure 1). The doll is fully dressed in skirt and bodice made of purple silk and decorated with gold lace. She also has two petticoats. One of these is of cut and uncut velvet, the other of silk taffeta with a bodice of the same material. Her loose silk sleeves are embroidered with gold thread and genuine pearls. In addition to this, she also has an embroidered muff. Her hair, which is actual human hair of a dark blonde shade, is decorated with a row of pearls at the hairline and a diadem made of gold thread and pearls.

The Pandora’s dress features the closed character that is typical of the Spanish fashion that dominated Western Europe from the middle of the sixteenth century to the beginning of the seventeenth century.
The Pandora features Spanish female dress typical of the time, with a partition between skirt and bodice. The skirt is of the Spanish farthingale type and the bodice — drawn to a tip over her stomach — fits tightly to the body all the way up to the lining of the neck. This type of dress required a ruff around the neck, which the Pandora must have had at one time.

None of the other known Pandoras in my research resemble this one but in a portrait of Archduchess Catherine Renata as an infant (Figure 2) there is a doll held in her right hand, which looks very much like the Pandora (Figure 1). Their heads are very similar, and so are their garments (though the painted doll’s skirt is a different colour to her bodice). It is interesting to notice that the painted doll wears a ruff, which suggests that the Swedish Pandora also had one.

According to an inventory, the doll was made by ‘Carl IX’s princess’. This probably refers to his daughter, Katarina, from his first marriage; however, the doll could not have been made by her. Instead, Katarina might have been its first owner as the Swedish Pandora originated in England. We know this through a correspondence from the beginning of the seventeenth century. A letter dated 1604 from Swedish-born Lady Helena (born Bååth, Lady in Waiting to Queen Elizabeth I of England, first married to William Parr and secondly to Sir Thomas Georges of Longford) to her sister Karin Ulfsdotter Bååth, mentioned a doll that Lady Helena had sent a servant to get for her in London. That doll can be none other than this one.

The recipient of the letter from Lady Helena, Karin Ulfsdotter, was Mistress of the Robes to Queen Christina of Holstein–Gottorp (1573–1625), the Consort of Charles IX of Sweden and the mother of Gustavus Adolphus. In this portrait (Figure 3) of Queen Christina, now Dowager Queen (as the King had died in 1611), probably painted by Jacob Elbfas, a portrait painter active in Sweden from 1622,
The dress has a heart–shaped décolletage and, instead of a ruff, there is an elaborate Venetian bobbin lace collar composed of double, petal–shaped layers attached to fine linen fabric. Behind the neck there are loop–shaped panels held up by wire or possibly mounted on card. The bobbin lace of the collar is replicated on the cuffs at the wrist.

The Queen wears a deep purple, two–piece velvet gown. As purple was the colour reserved for mourning royalty, she is probably dressed in mourning for her husband.8 The skirt is of the French farthingale type, the partition between the skirt and the bodice marked by lace and strings of pearls.

In this portrait (Figure 4) of Queen Maria Eleonora (1599–1655), wife of Gustavus Adolphus and mother of Queen Christine, we find a Venetian, bobbin lace collar in double rows but here it is simpler than the above and makes a more elegant impression. The huge cone–shaped cuffs, made of the same kind of lace and assembled in three rows, extend almost up to the elbow. The large, chubby sleeves consist of four to five slotted ring–shaped puffs, possibly padded or supported by steel wire to maintain the correct convex shape.

The portrait was painted in 1619, before she was married to Gustavus Adolphus in 1620, but the dress as a whole still bears the character of the late sixteenth century.7 It is made in two parts, bodice and skirt separately. The hard, narrow bodice is reinforced with whalebones and busk (a pocket on the inside where a broad wooden or whale bone piece was inserted), and ends in a narrow, sharp tip. This sharp tip was a typical feature in the gowns of Queen Elizabeth and was seen as a symbol of virginity.8 The bodice is buttoned in the front but is probably also corseted at the centre back. It is adorned with jewelled bands in a grid pattern, which also follow and mark the waistline.
The skirt is of a French farthingale type, the top edge covered by a short frill. The Queen’s blonde hair is finely curled and highly combed. On her left shoulder there meanders a so-called cadenette, a walkaway loop of hair that was allowed to grow long and was waxed.

**Queen Christina (1626–1689)**

The first known image of Queen Christina is found in the church of Jäder in Södermanland, in a portrait of her father Gustavus Adolphus. Christina is seen to the left in the painting (Figure 5), holding a tablet covered by small pictures arranged in circles that represent the fortresses and towns conquered by the Swedes from 1630 to 1632.

The painting must have been made shortly before the King’s death in November 1632; if Christina had already been made regent when it was painted she should have held a more prominent place. The King is not, however, painted ad vivum, that is impossible because in 1632 he was in Germany where he had been since 1630 with his troops.

The portrait was painted by the above-mentioned portrait painter Jacob Elbfas, who seems to have put great effort into underlining the girl’s resemblance to her father. Their heads are shown in the same three-quarter profile, their broad lace collars are of the same type and Christina’s hair is almost as short and combed back from her forehead as his.

![Figure 5](image)

*Gustavus II Adolphus, Jacob Elbfas, 1632, Church of Jäder, Södermanland, Sweden.*
In the collections of the Royal Armoury there is a bodice (Figure 6) and a shirt (Figure 7) worn by Christina at three years of age, donated in the nineteenth century by the descendants of a woman named Sara Larsdotter, who had been Maid of the Bedchamber to Christina until 1631, when she had left her post to get married. It was probably then she was given these garments. But that is not all she received as parting gifts. In her portrait (Figure 8), painted in 1632 in Stralsund, where she then lived, she is shown holding a pair of pearl-embroidered gloves.\textsuperscript{10} Such fine gloves (Figure 9) could only have belonged to Queen Maria Eleonora. These leather gloves were also donated to the Royal Armoury in the nineteenth century.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{fig6.png}
\caption{Bodice worn by Princess Christina, 1628–1629, The Royal Armoury, Stockholm, Sweden, LRK 9378-9379.}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{fig7.png}
\caption{Shirt worn by Princess Christina, 1628–1629, The Royal Armoury, Stockholm, Sweden, LRK 9378-9379.}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{fig8.png}
\caption{Sara Larsdotter, Unknown Artist, 1632, The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, Stockholm, Sweden.}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{fig9.png}
\caption{Leather gloves depicted in the portrait of Sara Larsdotter (Figure 8), 1628–1629, The Royal Armoury, Stockholm, Sweden, LRK 10685.}
\end{figure}
In March 1633 Christina was confirmed by the four estates as successor to the throne and a Riksdaler with her image was minted (Figure 10). This coin shows Christina standing behind a table on which the crown and the sceptre are laying; in one hand she holds the orb. She is wearing a dress with slit puffsleeves, a deep décolletaged bodice pointed in the front and a broad lace collar that is raised behind her neck. She has round cheeks and an upturned nose; her forehead is heavily rounded under her up-combed, curly hair. The difference to the portrait in Jäder is great. Here it is neither the Warrior-King’s daughter nor a six-year-old girl but an elegantly dressed, young lady that is depicted.

A comparison to a miniature painting of Christina’s mother Queen Maria Eleonora from 1629 (Figure 11), shows that Christina this time was modelled after her mother and that it is from her that the head with its high forehead is fetched. Also the coiffure and the dress’s high collar, deep décolletage and puff-sleeves resemble her mother’s style.

Early in 1634, the above-mentioned Jacob Elbfas was made court painter to Maria Eleonora. Although over a year had passed since the death of Gustavus Adolphus, the court was still in mourning. According to the account books, Elbfas painted Christina only on two occasions, in 1637 and 1641, but he probably portrayed her more often than that. His first portraits of Christina might have shown her in mourning but no painting with that motive has been found.

There is, however, a copper engraving of Christina dressed in mourning (Figure 12) that was issued by ‘Le Blond’, the engraver and art-connoisseur Michel Le Blon in Amsterdam. The six-year-old girl is in ‘deuil blanc’ or ‘white mourning’. She wears on her head a white Mary Stuart cap covered by a thin white veil hanging down over a plain black, collarless dress, whose upper part is trimmed with white linen. Here, also, the resemblance to her father is underlined.

An example of the printers’ free use of each other’s images is an engraving issued in 1633 by Friedrich Hulsius in Frankfurt, in which Le Blon’s image of Christina in mourning is placed inside an oval frame or medallion on a postament. Above the frame, two putti hover, one with a laurel wreath and a crown in his hands, one with a palm branch and a sword. In the postament there is an inscription in Latin, which underlines the likeness to, and thereby the continuity with, her father.
Later the same Hulsius issued another version of the engraving. The framing is the same but Christina is no longer in mourning. She now wears a dark dress with a broad white, laying lace collar and slit puff-sleeves; her hands hidden behind a screen. Neck and shoulders are covered by a thin scarf whose ends are held together by a large brooch. Her hair is short and curly (maybe a periuk). She has a short pearl necklace and pearl earrings. The same portrait — but mirrored and with the addition of a small ray-crown at the back of her head — was used in 1634 in an engraving by Lukas Kilian in Augsburg (Figure 13). The text in the postament, now in German, is also different. Instead of stressing the succession from her father, it underlines that Christina’s power is sanctioned by God and that she herself is God’s representative on Earth. This thought took root in Christina and never abandoned her. To her the monarchy was an earthly mirroring of an order that had been founded by God; a line of thought that resembles the iconography that was created around Elizabeth I; her power was also seen as sanctioned by God.

In this unsigned full-length portrait formerly at Fånö in Uppland, Christina (Figure 14) is wearing a dark, gold-embroidered dress with a low lace collar turned up behind her neck, slit sleeves, marked hip section and a low cut, pointed bodice. In the middle of the décolletage there is a large brooch. Around her neck she has a broad gold chain and on the back of her head a ray crown.

A comparison to an engraved portrait of Maria Eleonora from 1633 (Figure 15) shows that Christina here is made to look like her mother: their coiffures are similar and both wear a low lace collar that is turned up behind their necks — a transitional form between the earlier high, upturned collar and the broad, laying one. We also see that Christina (from her mother as much as from her father) inherited not only the high forehead and the large eyes but also the big nose.

Seeing that the similarity to her mother here is underlined, the portrait may have been made on Maria Eleonora’s initiative. It has been dated 1635 or 1636. In the case of Maria Eleonora having had something to do with it, it cannot have been made later than in August 1636 when she, having been deemed an unsuitable guardian, lost custody over Christina.

Figure 16 is a portrait of the young Queen dressed in a white silk robe embroidered with flowers in bright colours, open in the front over a gold-embroidered red slip. It has a high waist, a low cut bodice decorated with table-cut-stones on black folio and a low lace collar raised behind her back. The skirt
and the wide, slit sleeves are edged with lace. The regalia are lying on a table next to her. She has one hand on the orb; in the other hand she is holding a white oyster fan.

Steneberg dated the painting till 1634 but because of Christina looking a little older than in the above discussed portraits, it may have been executed in 1635 or in the early months of 1636, before her mother was bereft of all influence over her.\(^2\) That this had a hand in the composition of the portrait may be surmised from the dress and especially from the upraised collar, which by now had become old-fashioned but which Maria Eleonora, as can be seen from a portrait from the late 1630s (Figure 17), continued to favour.\(^3\)

\[\text{Figure 15} \quad \text{Maria Eleonora.} \quad \text{Lukas Kilian, copper engraving,} \quad 1633, \text{Unknown Location.} \]

\[\text{Figure 16} \quad \text{Queen Christina.} \quad \text{Unknown Artist, late 1635-early 1636,} \quad \text{Unknown Location.} \]

\[\text{Figure 17} \quad \text{Maria Eleonora (detail),} \quad \text{Jakob Elbfas, circa 1635, National Portrait Collection, Gripsholm Castle, Sweden.} \]
A hip–portrait of Christina in the Gymnasium in Strängnäs is probably a workshop copy after a full–length portrait by Elbfas executed in 1637, as one of the two paintings by him that are mentioned in Stockholm Castle’s account books. In the portrait we find clear proof of Maria Eleonora’s lost influence over her daughter (Figure 18). Gone are the upraised collar and the strict coiffure. Christina’s hair is now worn in loose waves to the shoulders on the sides. At the back of the head a ray crown is fixed. Over her shoulders lay a broad lace collar and a thin décolletage cloth. On her bust she has a large brooch. She has a short pearl necklace round her neck and a long pearl necklace across her shoulders. The collar and also the deep lace cuffs are decorated with reticella or point coupé, a needle lace dating from the fifteenth century and remaining popular into the first quarter of the seventeenth century.

The change in Christina’s appearance from earlier portraits could possibly be explained by the appointment in the autumn of 1636 of a new guardian. Gustavus Adolphus’s half–sister Catherine of Sweden, Countess Palatine of Kleeburg (mother of the future Karl X Gustav) became official guardian and foster mother to Christina. As can be seen from this portrait of Catherine (Figure 19), which must have been painted at about the same time as the portrait of Queen Maria Eleonora (Figure 17), she seems to have been more up to date with the latest fashions than Maria Eleonora (or more willing to follow them). She wears a broad collar which is laying down over her shoulders, as it had been a la mode for some time, and in the same way as in Christina’s portrait.

In November 1641 Jacob Elbfas was paid 108 Taler for a portrait of Queen Christina. Because of the large sum this must have been a full–length portrait which is probably identical to a full–length portrait in the City Hall of Stockholm (Figure 20). It shows Christina standing on a black–and–white stone floor next to a brown–red velvet curtain, wearing a yellow–green dress made of gold brocade with applications of gilded lace. The sleeves, trimmed with lace cuffs, are shorter than in earlier portraits. Over her shoulders lie a lace collar and a thin décolletage cloth.
This painting was the last portrait Elbfas painted of Christina or of any other member of court, where for some time it was felt that his style had become old-fashioned. In 1641 Axel Oxenstierna had written to Le Blon in Amsterdam, asking him to find a painter who knew about perspective in painting, but it was only in 1647 that the Dutch David Beck came to Sweden.

The portraits Beck painted of Christina are filled with symbolism. In the portraits by the French painter Sébastien Bourdon, who arrived in 1652, the symbolism is however gone. Christina has changed her appearance completely and in the portrait (Figure 21), she wears a lose-fitting white shirt under a low-cut black gown, its collar held together by a black ribbon, an unconventional way of dressing that is best described as a compromise between male dress and the tight fitting gowns women in her time were forced to wear, a radical change that reflects a likewise radical shift in her own life. We know that in 1652, when the portrait was painted, she had already decided about her abdication from the Swedish throne in 1654, her conversion to Catholicism and her moving to Rome the same year.\(^5\)

**Endnotes**

Cummings, op. cit., p. 136.


Ibid.


Dahrén, op. cit., p. 186.


Ibid., pp. 59–76. Le Blon was also Sweden’s political agent in England.


In a painting in Tallinn’s City Museum, dated 1638, Christina’s dress is of the same model but has a broad, laying lace collar. Pia Ehasalu, *Painting in Tallinn during the Swedish Modern Period (1561–1710)*, Tallinn 2007, pp. 148–150.

Rodén, op. cit., p. 56.

A similar version is in the Nationalmuseum.

Steneberg, op. cit., p. 44, p. 194.

Ibid., pp. 43–44. The original was probably painted by Elbfas, who remained in Maria Eleonora’s duty until she left Sweden in 1640.

Formerly at Romrod Castle, Hessen, Germany, as part of the portrait collection that Margareta Brahe had brought with her after her marriage in 1661 to Fredrik II of Hessen–Homburg. Steneberg, op. cit., p. 44.

Maybe a first attempt at what we would today call cross dressing? Queen Christina would later in life prefer men’s dress to women’s. See Vern L. Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993, p. 97.

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**Biography**

Inga Lena Ångström Grandien, PhD, is an independent scholar based in Stockholm. Formerly at the Department of Art History at Stockholm University and the Department of Art History at Dalarna University, her research expertise is Swedish post-Reformation art and the Renaissance in general. She has an interest in portrait painting and has, among other things, written an article on the portraits of Charles XII (1682–1718) to be published in Rotterdam in 2018. She has also published an article about the early portraits of Queen Christina in Images of Christina, Queen of Sweden — Queen in Rome (2013), published by The Royal Armoury, Stockholm.

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