



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

ISSN 2515-0995

journal@dresshistorians.org
www.dresshistorians.org

Copyright © 2017 The Association of Dress Historians

The Association of Dress Historians is Registered Charity #1014876 of The Charity Commission for England and Wales. The Association of Dress Historians supports and promotes the advancement of public knowledge and education in the history of dress and textiles.

The Journal of Dress History is the academic publication of The Association of Dress Historians through which scholars can articulate original research in a constructive, interdisciplinary, and peer-reviewed environment. The journal is published biannually, in the spring and autumn.

The Journal of Dress History is copyrighted by the publisher, The Association of Dress Historians, while each published author within the journal holds the copyright to their individual article.

The Journal of Dress History is published on an Open Access platform distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

The editors of the journal encourage the cultivation of ideas for proposals. Please view the Submission Guidelines on the journal's website for more detailed information regarding the submission of articles, book reviews, and other pieces for publication consideration.

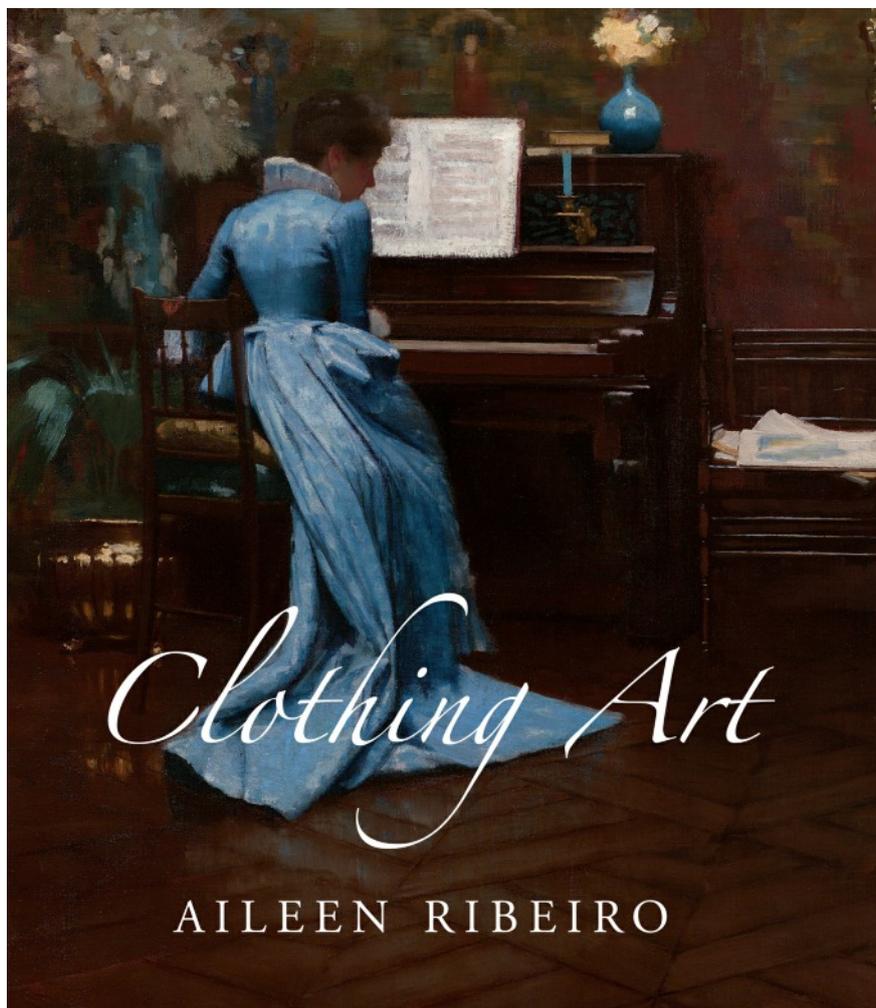
The graphic design of *The Journal of Dress History* utilises the font, Baskerville, a serif typeface designed in 1754 by John Baskerville (1706-1775) in Birmingham, England.

Truth and Imagination: How Real Is Dress in Art?

Professor Emeritus Aileen Ribeiro, PhD

Keynote paper delivered at The Association of Dress Historians' annual International Conference of Dress Historians on 5 November 2016, entitled, Out of the Dark and into the Light? Dress in the Early Modern Period and the Age of Enlightenment, 1400–1800.

The Dispute, a 1911 painting by Georg Sauter (a German artist who moved to London in 1889) depicts two women in loose, flowing neo-medieval gowns. Is the clothing real, or fictive? In either case it is related to aesthetic clothing, then in its last manifestation; there are also links to reform dress which was popular both in England and in Germany. This kind of discourse about truth and imagination is crucial in understanding how artists see dress, and it forms one of the themes in my book *Clothing Art: The Cultural History of Fashion, 1600–1914*, in which my aim is to look at dress mainly from the point of view of the artists who represent it, during a period which begins with the seventeenth century and ends with the First World War, although this time-frame is somewhat elastic and reference is made to art



and clothing outside these boundaries. This book, therefore, is not a conventional history of fashion, but because art and dress are so closely intertwined, the major developments are discussed along with a series of case studies. The different ways in which artists see and ‘read’ dress are examined, and how we might see and ‘read’ dress in their art. I discuss the links between art and dress, what meanings can be seen in artists’ representations of clothing, and examine some of the ways in which they depict it in their art.

Inventories provide important ‘archeological’ details of clothing, its manufacture and its consumption, but art not only visualises dress but sets it in a cultural and historical context. To understand how artists depict clothing, we need to know about the history of clothes and fabrics, and to be familiar with extant garments, so that we can assess how truthful a work of art is. We need to know, in short, what the artist might have emphasized, changed, generalised, omitted or invented; art is the *via media* between what we can see, touch, and experience in actual clothes, and the ways in which they might be described in literary and documentary sources. Where the clothes in a portrait survive we are able to judge the degree of exactitude with which it is painted; when grand ceremonial or official clothing is concerned, the artist was commissioned to show this in all its rich fabrics and strange dignity, and for this reason it survives far longer than fashionable dress. An example here might be Reynolds’ *Lord Middleton* (1761–1762) in the coronation costume he wore for the coronation of George III in September 1761; examination of the velvet mantle showed that what looks like ermine in the portrait is actually white rabbit fur with black bristle inserted in imitation of ermine tails. The depiction of the gold brocade coat is a *tour de force*, although it glitters more in the real garment than on the canvas due to the fugitive nature of Reynolds’ paints.

Artists, it must be remembered, are not textile designers, and although in such portraits they may be expert in the representation of fabric, paint can never replicate the intricacies of pattern and weave. Nor should it, necessarily, for what we wish to see in a work of art is more than a photographic record of factual detail, but an imaginative and sensitive encounter with the portrayal of clothing, of the kind evident in a great artist like Velázquez. In his portrait of the eight-year old *Infanta Margarita* (1659) the artist not only gets the details of dress right – essential for a court painter – the jubón and basquiña with decorative silver braid, over the vast hoop, but the way the garments are painted, the slightly crumpled velvet, the intense softness of the sable muff, creates an image rising above the mundane to become magical. It is a portrait of truth and poetry, the essence of clothing.

Portraits usually (there are exceptions) result from encounters between artist and sitter, but we know relatively little about the way studios were organized, the visual sources (manuals of allegory, pattern books, etc.) available, the use of lay figures and assistants, all of which had an impact on what clothes and accessories were chosen and what roles they might play. We know even less about the negotiations which would have taken place with regard to the choice of clothing. Should the clothes in a portrait be a more or less direct copy of what the sitter wears, or involve a more nuanced process of selection and emphasis to create an image of dress removed, to a lesser or greater extent, from the reality of actual garments? Thus, in the latter category, van Dyck in England during the later 1630s painted simplified versions of fashionable clothes in order to ‘put Ladies dresse into a Careless Romance’ so as to create a distance from ‘the various Modes that alter with the Times’.¹

Pursued to a logical conclusion, increasingly generalized variants of informal fashion turned into loose draperies (as popularised in portraits by Lely), which had little connection with reality except perhaps for the shining silks from which they were contrived in the studio. So, a *Careless Romance*, for at least the following hundred years or so, turned women into pastoral nymphs, classical goddesses and supposedly ‘timeless’ beings. By the eighteenth century this trend had become increasingly formulaic (see, for example, Reynolds’ *Grand Style* portraits of the 1770s), creating costume which to us may appear anaemic and unconvincing, but which to theorists like Jonathan Richardson in 1715 best suited serious representations of women and not mere images of fashion.² Another kind of ‘fanciful’ dress, inspired by the historical and the popularity of the masquerade, was the creation of a number of artists in eighteenth-century England. Some portraits were pedestrian images of actual masquerade costume,

others studio copies, the work of drapery painters, no longer real dress but an artistic convention. The only artist who managed this genre successfully was Gainsborough, combining a sense of the 1620s/1630s with a contemporary fashion aesthetic. It does not really matter whether his beautiful portraits of *Mary Graham* (1775–1777) and *Frances Duncombe* (1777) are real fancy dress or Gainsborough's own invention, they are magical and imaginative recreations of the past and the recognisably present.

However artists play with truth (and there are shades of reality due to the painter's skills and imagination and the cultural context in which the work is created), clothing in art always relates to real clothes. Even what Jonathan Richardson describes as 'arbitrary loose dress' follows the lines and character of the clothing of the period in which it is created; 'timeless' dress really does not exist. When we acknowledge and interpret the varying degrees of truth both factual and imaginative which artists employ to depict clothing in their work, art becomes a superb and intellectually sustaining way to understand and appreciate the history of dress.

Endnotes

- ¹ Sir William Sanderson, *Graphice, the Use of the Pen and Pensil, or, The Most Excellent Art of Painting: in Two Parts*, Robert Crofts, London, 1658.
- ² Jonathan Richardson, *An Essay on the Theory of Painting*, Printed for A. C. and sold A. Bettesworth, London, 1715.

Biography

Aileen Ribeiro read history at King's College, London, followed by postgraduate study (MA and PhD) at The Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London. She was Head of the History of Dress Section at The Courtauld Institute from 1975 to 2009; appointed Professor in the History of Art at the University of London in 2000, she is now Professor Emeritus. She lectures widely in Great Britain, Europe and North America, and has acted as costume consultant/ contributor to many major exhibitions. These include Reynolds (Royal Academy of Arts, London: 1986); Winterhalter and the Courts of Europe 1830 to 1870 (National Portrait Gallery, London: 1987 and the Petit Palais, Paris: 1988); Goya: La imagen de la mujer (Prado, Madrid: 2001 and National Gallery of Art, Washington: 2002); Whistler, Women and Fashion (Frick Collection, New York: 2003). Recent contributions to exhibition catalogues include an essay on Renoir's use of fashion in his painting *La Loge*, in *Renoir at the Theatre. Looking at La Loge* (Courtauld Institute 2008); an essay on Gainsborough's portrait of Ann Ford in *Thomas Gainsborough and the Modern Woman* (Cincinnati Art Museum 2010); an essay on Gustave Caillebotte's painting *Paris Street, Rainy Day* for *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity* (Paris, New York and Chicago 2012), and an essay on dress in Liotard in *Jean-Etienne Liotard* (National Gallery of Scotland and The Royal Academy of Arts 2015). In addition, she has published many books and articles on various aspects of the history of dress, including *The Art of Dress: Fashion in England and France 1750–1820* (1995); *Dress and Morality* (2003); *Fashion and Fiction. Dress in Art and Literature in Stuart England* (2006); *Facing Beauty. Painted Women and Cosmetic Art* (2011) and (with Cally Blackman) *A Portrait of Fashion. Six Centuries of Dress at the National Portrait Gallery* (2015). Her most recent book is *Clothing Art: The Visual Culture of Fashion 1600–1914* (2016).

Copyright © 2017 Aileen Ribeiro

Email: aileen.ribeiro@courtauld.ac.uk