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The Nègligé in Eighteenth-Century French Portraiture

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Abstract

In the eighteenth century, many portraits show sitters wearing clothes known as négligés, such as shirts or nightgowns, in an apparently relaxed and casual attitude. It reflects a fashion that develops in opposition to the formal dress code of the Court. The choice of an informal wear in portraiture may not be meaningless, in a time when constraints on dress were extremely important, and when people were defined by their clothing. This article will start by defining the négligé and explore the development of this trend, in fashion and in history of art.

A new taste for clothing known as négligés emerged in France during the 1680s. The fashion rapidly spread in Europe, and by the 1780s, almost 20% of the fashion plates from the *Galerie des Modes*, the new fashion magazine, included the word négligé. This fashion was far less studied than obviously meaningful garments such as court dresses and uniforms. The problem is that few clothes of this kind have survived, and, moreover, this fashion is representative of a lack, a negation: lack of adornment, negation of formal clothing, which may make it difficult to decode. However, many portraits show sitters wearing this type of clothing, such as shirts or nightgowns. The sitters also choose not to wear wigs and complicated hairstyles, to have their breeches untied or to abandon their stays: the négligé lies in the attitude as frequently as in the clothing. How did artists and sitters use this fashion? Was there a non-verbal message to be understood? I will try to answer these questions by defining the négligé, and show the variety of its use through case studies.

The Meaning of Nègligé

The noun 'nègligé', has a slightly different meaning in English and in French. The French verb 'négliger' derives from the Latin 'negligere' or 'neglegere' ('to not tie'). It had existed at least since the twelfth century and means 'not to take care of, to pay no attention to,' always with a negative connotation, often used in a moral or legal context.¹ For example, people 'neglect their duty' or 'neglect to pay their taxes.' Between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, new words deriving from négligé appear, such as 'négligemment' (neglectfully), and are usually related to a state of dirtiness. From the end of the seventeenth century the word 'négligemment' applied to an attitude of affected indifference or elegant casualness.² After the French Revolution, the aristocratic négligé became out-of-date. Gradually, the use of the word concentrated itself towards the intimacy of the interior, and then in the narrowest domain of the bedroom.³ From the twentieth century onwards, the French 'nègligé' means, as the English 'negligee', a loose garment worn by women in their private space.⁴

From the 1680s through to the eighteenth century, the elegant casualness of the négligé can be directly related to the sprezzatura, which is, according to Baldassare Castiglione's *Libro del Cortegiano*, the main quality of a courtier.⁵ It is a type of controlled detachment, a way of being at ease in all circumstances, which is the result of a lot of effort. In France, the négligé as an aristocratic behaviour was well established in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. An article in the July 1681 edition of

the *Mercuré Galant* about the history of politeness at the French court relates that ‘the politeness of the ancient Court was too constrained and too affected (...) Nowadays, we are clean without difficulty, and we are neglected without being dirty.’⁶ In the 1694 *Dictionary of the French Academy*, the *négligé* is ‘the state of a woman when she is in informal wear.’ This can refer to the English notion of undress, but, according to Iris Brooke, ‘undress was an accepted term for anything that fell short of full dress. (...) Undress was worn in the morning, indoors, and outdoors’.⁷ It seems then that the English undress has a wider use than the French *négligé*. *Négligé* only exists as opposed to ‘full dress’, which in eighteenth century French was called ‘*parure*’. Consequently, it only applies to upper-class men and women, and cannot exist among lower classes who never use *négligés* nor *parures*.

During the eighteenth century, the *négligé* became a style that could be used not only in fashion and attitude, but also in literature and painting. The 1762 *Dictionary of the French Academy* defines *négligé* as follows: ‘a style *négligé* is a style which is not refined (...) It is also used in painting, with a quite similar meaning. A beautiful *négligé* is often more pleasing than a cold correctness.’⁸ At the same time, it is an artificial construction for the coquettes who try to appear elegantly neglected at their morning toilette. In painting, as in literature, the style was chosen according to the subject of the painting. For example, biblical or mythological scenes deserve a high level of technique and finish, whereas a simple daily-life scene can be painted neglectfully. But, in a perfectly painted scene, some ‘*négligences*’ should be left by the artist to prevent the painting from becoming boring because of its consistent quality. The ‘*shadows*’ caused by these ‘*négligences*’ highlight the qualities of the best parts of the painting. It is difficult to achieve such a balance and it requires much work from the artist. In conclusion, to be neglected in painting, or in one’s behaviour, or in clothing, is not a natural and innate quality, but a subtle construction.

Clothing and Portraiture

It is well known that clothes are very important when talking about portraits. In eighteenth-century France, there was intense debate about how sitters should be dressed in their portraits: should they use contemporary dress, with the risk of becoming outdated, or use classical garments and draperies, which may become ridiculous, and which extract sitters from their time? Roger de Piles does not really choose his position. In his *Cours de Peinture par Principes*, he writes that ‘rich clothes are usually not convenient to men’s gravity. Women should be neglectfully dressed, without losing their dignity and nobility.’⁹ But a portrait painter must know the art of diplomacy, and further, ‘when men and women would like to be anything else, the painter should be pleased to imitate their clothing’.¹⁰ In the second half of the eighteenth century, Denis Diderot, the philosopher missing his old nightgown, wrote much about clothes in art. Usually, he does not appreciate contemporary dress, as in his 1765 *Réflexions sur la Peinture*,

Add to the dullness of our bows, the one of our clothes. (...) I defy the genius of painting and sculpture himself to take advantage of this system of meanness. What a nice thing, in marble or in bronze, a Frenchman with his buttoned waistcoat, his sword and his hat.¹¹

He sometimes contradicts himself, however. For example, when commenting on the portrait of *Voltaire Seated* by Jean Antoine Houdon in 1781,¹² he writes, ‘This figure has some character. The attitude is found rather unfortunate; it is because we are not touched enough by its simplicity. We would prefer a nightgown rather than this voluminous drapery.’¹³ Finally, these *négligés*, such as nightgowns, are a kind of compromise between the classical draperies and the current fashion, and can be very convenient for artists.

Fashion Plates

The first fashion plates showing *négligé* clothes appear at the end of the 1670s and during the 1680s. Some engravers are well known, such as Jean Dieu de Saint Jean or the Bonnard family, and most of the plates are published alone or in the *Mercuré Galant*. Some of these *négligés* look like dressing gowns, and others are black dresses that are used to go outside and visit friends. The *négligé* is widely used

during the eighteenth century and in the famous *Galerie des Modes*, which was published from 1778, almost 20% of the engravings that I found included the word *négligé*, which could apply to clothes, accessories, or hairstyles.

There are many kinds of *négligé*, for example:

- The mantelet is a light linen or cotton coat that women put on in the morning, during the long time they spent to get ready
- The *lévite*, or *négligé de la volupté* (which means sensual delight). During the eighteenth century, the formal dress for upper class ladies was the robe à la française, or sack gown, which was impossible to put on without external help. This difficulty was a guarantee of the lady's honest behaviour. On the contrary, the *lévite* was as easy to put on as it was to remove, without the help of a maid, that is why it was thought to be very convenient for discreet encounters, inspired by the dream of a sensual oriental culture.
- There was a grand *négligé*, because there are levels of *négligé*. The final level of *négligé* was about the head. Being totally neglected involved covering one's head with a scarf, a bonnet and/or a veil to hide the fact that the hair was undone.

Many of these clothes were used in portraits, and some of them, such as the mantelet au lever de l'Aurore, were inspired by fancy clothing: the goddess Aurora has been repeatedly used to represent young and attractive women in mythological portraits.

Mythology and Exoticism

Mademoiselle de Clermont belonged to the royal family of France. She ordered two portraits from Jean-Marc Nattier. In the first she was represented as a spring in a mythological portrait.¹⁴ The spring was a very common theme through which to represent young women. Nattier used the same white shift and the same blue drapery, the same jar and the same aquatic plants several times, for example in his latter portrait of Marie-Henriette Berthelot de Plénoeuf in 1739.¹⁵ In the bottom left corner of the painting, a putto holds an anchor, which is a marine reference, and a snake, a medical symbol: it means that this water is healthy. With her left hand, the princess shows a young woman pouring water in a glass. Her attitude is similar to Hebe, the gods' cupbearer who brings them eternal youth. Hebe was also a very popular goddess for use in young women's portraits, such as Jean-Marc Nattier's *Madame Le Fèvre de Caumartin* in 1753.¹⁶ The difference between most of the Hebes and this one is that there is a visible hemstitch line around her shoulder and the cleavage of her shirt is decorated with a lace flounce. Moreover, the purple drapery that surrounds her looks like an actual skirt. This Hebe may not belong to the gods' world, but be an actual maid serving real water. In the background of the picture, there is a building which did exist: it was a pavilion in the princess' castle of Chantilly, where people used to come to enjoy the mineral water in the gardens. Jean-Marc Nattier made a mix between fancy and actual clothes to symbolize the wonders of the Chantilly thermal springs, offered and protected by Mademoiselle de Clermont. A few years later, in 1733, the princess ordered another portrait from Jean-Marc Nattier, where she plays the role of a sultana, a role that allowed her to show her legs, which can be considered as very erotic, but was permitted in the context of a fancy oriental setting.¹⁷ With these two portraits, Jean-Marc Nattier used the conventions of mythology, exoticism, and the new fashion for *négligé* to enhance the princess' personality.

The Seductive Power of the *Négligé*

All of these neglected clothes and attitudes have a seductive power, which is illustrated in genre scenes such as *Les Quatre Parties du Jour: Le Matin (The Morning)* by Nicolas Lancret in 1739.¹⁸ When the young lady, wearing a peignoir over an opened shift, turns to serve coffee to the Abbé, her breasts are revealed, which she does not mind, but makes her maid smile. It is that seduction that young fashionable ladies were seeking when they had their portrait done, especially en *négligé*. For example, Laure de

Fitz-James, Princesse de Chimay, wears a morning *négligé* over her stays in her portrait by Louis Michel Van Loo in 1767.¹⁹ The princess was a close friend of Queen Marie-Antoinette, after having served Queen Marie Leszcynska, Louis XV's wife. The painting was exhibited at the 1767 Salon, with the portrait of her brother, and was harshly criticized by Denis Diderot,

Madame the Princesse de Chimay, Mr. the Chevalier her brother, you are bad, perfectly bad; you are dull, but perfectly dull. (...) Princess, tell me, do not you feel how this curtain you are lifting is heavy? It is difficult to say which one, brother or sister, is stiffer and colder.²⁰

The portrait is indeed rather artificial. The princess is dressed as if she was at her morning toilette, but her hair is done. She is lifting a red curtain with her left hand, and it seems that she is resting on a balcony, with a dark background. All these settings evoke the opera rather than the bedroom. This painting summarizes how artificially constructed and unnatural the *négligé* was among these young women. Almost fifteen years later, Louis Sébastien Mercier could not stand the fashionable young Parisian ladies and their whimsical attitude. He imagined what they would say when they came to the theatre wearing their morning *négligé*,

Since I cannot make the comedy come to my home, I want at least be free to arrive at seven, to appear in a simple undress, as when I get out of bed. I want to bring my dog, my candlestick, my chamber pot; I want to enjoy my sofa, to receive the homage of my suitors, and to leave when I am bored. To deprive me of these advantages, is to make an attempt on the freedom that good taste and wealth provide.²¹

By the end of the eighteenth century, the *négligé* came to be associated with bad morals and aristocratic depravity and consequently totally opposed to the bourgeois morality which would come to prevail in the nineteenth century.

Freedom in a Dressing Gown

The masculine *négligé* is mainly represented by the dressing gown, or night gown. A mix of the Japanese kimono and the Turkish caftan, the nightgowns were first traded by Dutch merchants in the seventeenth century. The fashion rapidly spread through Europe. In French fashion plates, it is often called 'Armenian dress': it has an exotic taste which was part of its success. Most of these fashion plates derive from a single model, probably by one from the Bonnard family. In the *Galerie des Modes* in the 1780s, the seventeenth-century model was still in use, but the fabrics, colours and accessories are adapted to current fashion. In the most famous fashion plate, a young man is enjoying a cup of chocolate or coffee, the new fashionable beverage. He is *en demi négligé* (half neglected), because his clothes are neglected, but not his hair, since he has his powdered periwig on. More than expensive, colourful and exotic, nightgowns were extremely comfortable, especially if compared to the stiff, tight and often fragile court suit, or *habit à la Française*. Although they are called nightgown (in French *robe de chambre*), these clothes were to be worn at home during the day, either before getting dressed or as informal wear. The rise of the nightgown goes with the development of the cabinet, a small room dedicated to study or work at home, where upper-class men would receive friends, suppliers, or solicitors.

It is well known that in many portraits the sitters wore the nightgown, whether they be scientists, artists or philosophers. Figure 1 is an example of how the use of nightgowns in portraiture can be related to the sitter's life. The Duke of Choiseul was one of the most important ministers of King Louis XV. He was in charge of Foreign Affairs, War and the Navy. He was very wealthy and had a sumptuous way of life. His several portraits were famous, whether painted, carved or engraved. Most of them derive from two models by Louis Michel Van Loo in 1763: one in armour, the other one showing him at his working desk.²² He wears a complete court suit made of red velvet, trimmed with fur and decorated with gold, with the blue ribbon of the Order of the Saint-Esprit, the most important Chevalric order in France.



Figure 1

Étienne-François, duc de Choiseul-Stainsville at his Desk, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, 1786, oil on canvas; 1460x1140mm, Waddesdon (Rothschild Foundation), England, 155.2008.

He also shows his good taste (he was an important art collector) with precisely painted fashionable furniture.

In 1770 the Duke was banished from the Court because of his numerous enemies led by Madame du Barry, the king's mistress. He had to retire to his castle of Chanteloup, and later to his Parisian town house where he recreated a small court made of opponents to his banishment: by visiting him, which was forbidden, they were showing to the court how unfair his punishment was. A few months before he died, ruined by having maintained his expensive way of life, he commissioned a portrait from Adélaïde Labille-Guiard. She was an artist famous for having painted the royal family and some wealthy Parisians. In this portrait, finished in 1786 after the Duke's death,²³ the sitter is still at his desk, but is no longer working. He is resting, contrary to the previous portrait which showed a very dynamic attitude, as if the Duke was about to get up and leave. He was known for his constant activity and his quickness when he was in charge; he is now comfortably installed in the chair. The furniture depicted here has been updated

to the latest fashion, and the clothes have also changed: he wears a pale nightgown, underlining the fact that he does not wear the court costume anymore. But we know that full dress was worn at Chanteloup; consequently, the choice of a nightgown must be meaningful. Moreover, his breeches are obviously untied. They are red, like the ones he used to wear in his previous portraits, but the buttons have disappeared. The *négligé* of this man freed from the constraints of royal court, freed also from the official dressing code, lies in the attitude as well as in the clothing.

To conclude, *négligé* clothes, which could at first seem meaningless, were used in many ways in portraiture to convey a nonverbal message: a carefully constructed seduction, or the liberation of the body following the liberation of the mind, what queen Marie-Antoinette tried to do (and failed). She decided to wear *négligé* white cotton dresses known as *chemises à la reine*, which was not possible outside her domain of Trianon. Her portrait by Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, wearing that dress caused such a scandal at the 1783 Salon that it had to be replaced by another one where she was painted with a formal silk robe à la Française. The image of powerful people had to be controlled, and this control obviously included clothing. The highly political meaning of dress in eighteenth-century France justifies the study of this fashion trend that lasted a century among the French aristocracy and was then reused by artists and people trying to find a way out of a rigorous morality.

Endnotes

- ¹ Jacqueline Picoche, *Dictionnaire Étymologique Du Français*, Dictionnaires Le Robert, Paris, 2002.
- ² *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, 1694.
- ³ In the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, *négligé* means 'costume du matin' (morning attire) in 1878, 'vêtement qu'une femme porte dans l'intimité' (clothing that a woman wears in intimacy) during 1932–1935.
- ⁴ 'Tenue légère qu'une femme porte dans l'intimité', current definition.
- ⁵ *Il Libro del Cortegiano* or *Book of the Courtier* (Venetia, 1528) describes the ideal qualities of a courtier at the court of Urbino which was a model of politeness and refinement. The book was successful through Europe, translated in several languages and became a reference for the aristocratic life.
- ⁶ 'La politesse de l'ancienne Cour estoit trop contrainte et trop affectée. (...) à present on est propre sans peine, et l'on est negligé sans estre mal-propre', in 'En quoy consiste l'air du Monde, et la véritable Politesse, par M. de la Féverie', *Mercure Galant*, July 1681, p. 102. Quoted by Pascale Cugy, in 'La fabrique du corps désirable: la gravure de mode sous Louis XIV', *Histoire de l'Art*, n°66, 2010, pp. 83–93. The *Mercure Galant* is considered as the first French fashion magazine, from 1678 to 1714.
- ⁷ Iris Brooke, *Dress and Undress. The Restoration and Eighteenth Centuries*, London, Methuen and Co., 1958, p. vii.
- ⁸ 'On appelle Style negligé, Un style qui n'est point châtié (...). Un beau negligé plaît souvent plus qu'une froide correction', *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, 1762.
- ⁹ 'Les habits fort riches conviennent rarement aux hommes, et la grande chamarrure est au-dessous de leur gravité. Les femmes doivent être parées négligemment sans perdre leur dignité et leur noblesse', Roger de Piles, *Cours de Peinture par Principes*, Jacques Estienne, Paris, 1708, p. 221.
- ¹⁰ 'Quand les hommes et les femmes voudront être autrement, le parti que le Peintre doit prendre, est de se faire un plaisir de l'imitation', *ibid.*
- ¹¹ 'Ajoutez à la platitude de nos révérences, celle de nos vêtements. (...) Je défie le génie même de la peinture et de la sculpture de tirer parti de ce système de mesquinerie. La belle chose, en marbre ou en bronze, qu'un Français avec son justaucorps à boutons, son épée et son chapeau!' Denis Diderot, *Salons*, Brière, Paris, 1821, t.I, p. 359.

- ¹² *Voltaire Assis*, Jean Antoine Houdon, 1781, marble, 140x106x80cm, Comédie-Française, S0148.
- ¹³ 'Cette figure a du caractère. On n'en trouve pas l'attitude heureuse; c'est qu'on n'est pas assez touché de sa simplicité. On lui aimerait mieux une robe de chambre que cette volumineuse draperie.' Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Garnier, Paris, 1875-1877, t.12, p. 68.
- ¹⁴ *Marie-Anne de Bourbon, Dite Mademoiselle de Clermont (1697-1741) aux Eaux Minérales de Chantilly*, Jean-Marc Nattier, 1729, oil on canvas, 195x161cm, Chantilly, musée Condé, PE375.
- ¹⁵ *Marie-Henriette Berthelot de Plénoeuf*, Jean-Marc Nattier, 1739, The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo, Japan.
- ¹⁶ *Madame Le Fèvre de Caumartin*, Jean-Marc Nattier, 1753, National Gallery of Art, Washington, United States.
- ¹⁷ *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane*, Jean-Marc Nattier, 1733, oil on canvas, 1090x1405mm, The Wallace Collection, London, England, P456.
- ¹⁸ *Les Quatre Parties du Jour: Le Matin (The Morning)*, Nicolas Lancret, 1739, oil on copper, 283x364mm, The National Gallery, London, England, NG5867.
- ¹⁹ Laure-Auguste de Fitz-James, Princesse de Chimay (1744-1814), Louis Michel Van Loo, 1767, oil on canvas, 865x865mm, Versailles, Château de Versailles et Trianon, Paris, France, MV 8325.
- ²⁰ 'Madame la princesse de Chymay, Mr le chevalier de Fitz-James son frère, vous êtes mauvais, parfaitement mauvais; vous êtes plats, mais parfaitement plats. (...) Princesse, dites-moi, ne sentez-vous pas combien ce rideau que vous tirez est lourd. Il est difficile de dire lequel du frère et de la sœur est le plus roide et le plus froid.' Denis Diderot, *Salons*, Brière, Paris, 1821, t.2, p. 36.
- ²¹ 'Puisque je ne peux pas faire venir la comédie chez moi, je veux au moins avoir la liberté d'y arriver à sept heures, d'y paraître en simple déshabillé, comme lorsque je sors de mon lit. Je veux y apporter mon chien, mon bougeoir, mon vase de nuit; je veux jouir de mon fauteuil, de ma dormeuse, recevoir l'hommage de mes courtisans, et m'en aller avant que l'ennui me saisisse. Me priver de tant d'avantages, c'est attenter à la liberté que donnent le bon goût et la richesse'. Louis Sébastien Mercier, *Le Tableau de Paris*, Mercure de France, Paris, 1994, t.I, pp. 487-488.
- ²² *Etienne-François, Duc de Choiseul-Stainville*, Louis Michel Van Loo, 1763, oil on canvas, 948x1230mm, Châteaux de Versailles et Trianon, Versailles, Paris, France, MV 3845.
- ²³ *Étienne-François, duc de Choiseul- Stainsville at his Desk*, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, 1786, oil on canvas; 1460x1140mm, Waddesdon (Rothschild Foundation), England, 155.2008.

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Biography

Elise Urbain Ruano is a PhD candidate at the University of Lille and the Ecole du Louvre. Her thesis is about the definition and evolution of the *négligé* in French portraiture through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the relationships between France and England. Her MA dissertation about the *négligé* won the 2014 XVIII^e siècle Prize. She has recently written a chapter for the catalogue of the *Tenue Correcte Exigée* exhibition at Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris. Her forthcoming publications will be on lightness in fashion and morality in the eighteenth century, and on the question of intimacy in French portraiture.

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