



Watercolour drawing of Jane Austen by her sister Cassandra,
dated 1804.

JANE AUSTEN IN CONTEXT

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Dress

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Over the four decades of Jane Austen's lifetime, dress styles for women and men altered radically; as always, the 'love of novelty', defined by Beau Brummell as the 'parent of fashion',¹ had much to do with it. But more importantly, changes – in manufacture and in political thought – prompted late eighteenth-century society's move away from brocaded stiffness towards a more natural flowing shape characteristic of the Regency era.

Innovations in cotton spinning technology, such as Crompton's mule of 1770, suddenly enabled the production of high-quality yarn in quantities large enough to satisfy the demands of an already modernised weaving industry. As a result water-powered mills soon supplied cotton and linen fabrics affordable even to the most deprived: registers for the London Foundling Hospital record the cotton garments that abandoned babies were mostly clothed in. The low production costs of cotton fabrics came at a high human price, for mills were run on a factory system that exploited a cheap workforce, chiefly women and children from neighbouring workhouses. Evidence given to a Parliamentary Committee in 1814 revealed that working hours at the notorious Backbarrow mills lasted from five in the morning until eight at night. Printing techniques were also industrialised: block-printing of the 1770s, a step-by-step process which had required separate wooden blocks for every colour and involved much handiwork, was superseded in 1783 by roller-printing utilising machines which produced the distinctive striped designs of the period.

To satisfy the demands of this accelerated textile industry, cotton wool imports to Britain increased exponentially from 6.8 million lbs in 1780 to 99.3 million lbs in 1815. The West Indies, Britain's established supplier, could not keep up with the demand and India, provider of finer varieties of the fibre, proved increasingly unwilling to equip a rival industry. A solution presented itself with the

St Domingo slave uprising in 1791–2, which inflated raw cotton prices and encouraged planters in Carolina and Georgia to cultivate it. By 1802 America had firmly established itself as Britain's largest supplier of cotton wool. And, whereas the exploitation of slave labour on West Indies sugar plantations roused concerns in liberal circles at home, no humanitarian movement comparable to the anti-saccharites questioned Britain's lucrative involvement with the plantation system in the American South. When people grumbled it was more likely a protest against the decline of traditional woollen industries, a result of the eager market for cotton: the 'ladies think no more of woollens and stuffs than of an old almanack' complained one wool merchant.² In response regional charities formed, such as the genteel Lincolnshire society organising annual 'Stuff balls' in support of their local woollen manufactures. After one such event in 1791, which guests were made to attend dressed uniformly in woollen fabrics of the same colour, Lady Banks posted textile samples to her correspondents and praised the occasion as 'a charming good Meeting' – though even she had to concede, 'I can't say a great deal for the Manufacture.'³ Two decades later the technical innovations of the cotton industries became the target of more forceful public rage when workers in Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire and Lancashire stormed factories and destroyed the stocking frames and power-looms that threatened to obliterate their livelihood. The Tory government hit back with a harsh new bill that ruled machine-breaking a capital offence and passed it notwithstanding Lord Byron's impassioned defence of the Luddites.

In the 1780s and 1790s muslins, a variety of delicately woven cotton fabrics so transparent they needed to be worn in multiple layers, became the favoured material for women's gowns. At first the finest muslins came exclusively from India, especially Madras, so that know-all Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* publicises his understanding of the fabric by purchasing 'a true Indian' for his sister at only 'five shillings a yard' (1:3). Domestic manufacturers began to employ expert weavers to try and compete with the imported ware. Scotland was renowned for its good-quality muslins, as was Norwich, from where in 1786 Lady Jerningham proposed bringing a new 'beautiful magnificent gold muslin' for her daughter, which 'everybody is ordering'.⁴ Yet on the whole the British muslin industry continued to have difficulties cornering the market for

high-quality, expensive cloths. The change was not effected until the beginning of the nineteenth century, when a widespread perception of the decline of the colonial product helped the domestic: *Ackermann's Repository of Arts* for June 1810 concluded that 'for two or three years past, the Indian goods have sunk in the estimation of the public'. Some, like James Maitland, charged the East India Company and its trade monopoly with ruining the Bengal manufactures. To illustrate the former excellence of Indian muslins he told of a luxury variety which, when 'spread upon wet grass' was 'scarcely visible' – so much so that a weaver had been exiled after his cow accidentally ate a precious strip.⁵

With the supply of fine quality muslins on the rise, the popularity of silk waned. It continued to be used especially in formal evening wear but the ban on French silks during the Napoleonic Wars, compounded by the Emperor's decree of 1806 which threatened British trade partners with war and cut off raw silk imports, created a dependence on expensive smuggled ware. More significantly, the war between Britain and France resulted in a swell of patriotic sentiment on either side of the Channel that accorded overblown significance to an individual's choice of fabrics: while the British prided themselves on their colonial empire and domestic cotton manufactures, Napoleon reportedly tore Josephine's embroidered muslin gowns and reintroduced a sumptuous court style to resuscitate the Lyons silk industry.

Muslins could be plain or woven in patterns of stripes, spots or floral sprigs. For evening wear they would be adorned with silver or gold thread embroidery and trimmed with lace or glass beads. Pastel colours like lilac and peach were popular though white was the fashion colour throughout the period, from the 1790s when elegant 'Miss Tilney always [wore] white' (*NA*, 1:12) right through the 1810s, when Jane Austen reported to her sister from London that 'They trim with white very much' (*L*, 15–16 September 1813). In the eyes of her young niece, she may have seemed to have 'taken to the garb of middle age unnecessarily soon'⁶ but actually Jane Austen was never one to buck a trend: despite some doubts as to the outcome, she decided to have her gown 'trimmed everywhere with white ribbon plaited on, somehow or other' and ordered a 'white sattin' cap with 'a little white flower perking out of the left ear' to complete the outfit (*L*, 15–16 September 1813).

In the 1780s the emergence of the light, flowing muslins popularised a novel style of women's dress. Worn over several layers of petticoats, the '*robe anglaise*' required voluminous starched muslin kerchiefs, hip-pads and bum rolls to achieve the desired effect of billowing bosom and bell-shaped skirt – the fact that this was widely welcomed as a more 'natural' silhouette speaks volumes about preceding fashions (fig. 33). Equally as popular as the round gown – so called as it was made in one piece – was the wrapping-gown, which Horace Walpole unflatteringly likened to a man's nightgown with a belt: tied at the waist with a wide, often brilliantly coloured, sash that held in place the soft drapes, the style was initially worn as informal morning dress but gradually crossed over into acceptable day wear. Hair fashions were adjusted to suit the more natural look: gone were the unhygienic coiffures of the earlier decades, towering structures crowned with ostrich feathers which had been glued in place by prodigious quantities of goose grease and powder. Thick, copious curls, lightly dusted with hair powder, were now *de rigueur* (fig. 34), preferably accentuated by a wide-brimmed ribboned straw hat, a look that was started by one of Marie Antoinette's pastoral whims: Eliza de Feuillide, updating her cousin Phyllis Walter on Versailles fashions, informed her that 'Large Yellow Straw Hats,' such as would be a familiar sight in Kent – 'I believe You may have seen [them] worn by the Hay Makers' – were now 'universally adopted'.⁷ Both round and wrapping-gown still required lightly-boned stays though the wide hoops of the previous decades were outmoded. The Georgian court, however, continued to prescribe the cumbersome panier, and, after her arrival in London four years later, Eliza attended a reception at St James's Palace standing, she reported, for two hours 'loaded with a great Hoop of no inconsiderable Weight' (*Le Faye, Outlandish Cousin*, p. 76).

While a fossilised British court clung to tradition, a revolution in France simultaneously did away with royals, aristocrats and the flamboyant dress that had distinguished them. The political move to establish social equality was underpinned by Enlightenment philosophy, which veered between an idealised primitivism yearning for man's 'state of nature' and pragmatic republicanism which espoused classical virtues. Both currents, however, unified in their bloody opposition to luxury. The resulting dress style adopted throughout Paris merged a studied approximation of lower-class



Figure 33. *The Gallery of Fashion* for 1794, showing, on the left, a double-sleeved muslin round gown and neckerchief. The full petticoat of spotted muslin on the right is worn with a gown of red-striped chintz. One hat is of striped sarsenet, the other accessorised with a red bow and yellow plume.



Figure 34. *The Gallery of Fashion* for July 1796 showing full round gowns. The lady on the left wears her soft powdered curls tucked under a large cap, typical of married and older women. Her companion has accessorised her hair with a sprig of flowers.

practicality with elements of antique simplicity. French radicalisation under the Terror occasioned a patent desire among most British to dissociate themselves from Jacobinical costume and it was only with the establishment in 1795 of a bourgeois Directory that the sexy neo-classical trends slowly filtered through. By the turn of the century British women had taken up dressing *à la grecque* in semi-transparent, narrow-cut muslin gowns which often bared the arms, much of the décolleté, and further accentuated the bosom with a waistline that had moved just underneath the breasts (figs. 35, 36). How much of one's feminine curves was left to the imagination depended on the amount of layering; the most audacious dispensed with corsets altogether and pared down undergarments to the bare minimum of a shift. In 1798 urbane Eliza described the 'uproar' caused in Ipswich by one pretty officer's wife's skimpy dress: wearing 'only one thick muslin Petticoat and a thin muslin Robe over that, of which the sleeves come only three inches below her shoulders', her 'throat & bosom' were left 'entirely bare', a revealing mode of 'undress' that 'would be remarked even in London', she concluded merrily (Le Faye, *Outlandish Cousin*, p. 154).

Dressing in gossamer fabrics in summer was one thing, but the British weather could prove a health risk to fashion victims like the clergyman Powlett's wife, whom Austen described as being 'at once expensively & nakedly dress'd' in mid-winter (L, 8–9 January 1801). To keep cold at bay, outer garments such as spencers, pelisses or shawls gained in popularity. The spencer was a short jacket ending just below the bust, usually made of strong, contrasting colours in either silk or wool. A pelisse was a long-sleeved coat cut on the same lines as the dress, trimmed or lined with furs, often exotic such as leopard, for extra warmth. Large rectangular shawls, especially costly cashmere ones woven in decorative oriental motifs, were especially sought after as they provided possibilities for graceful, classically inspired arrangements. Of course not everyone would have had the option (or self-absorption) of a Lady Bertram to will a relative's hazardous journey to the 'East Indies' that she 'may have [her] shawl' (MP, 2:13), so domestic manufactures met the demand with the production of imitation wool shawls mixed with silk – Paisley, in Scotland, set the standard with a pattern still familiar today.



Figure 35. *Ackermann's Repository of the Arts* for August 1809, showing a walking dress of fine India muslin and satin spencer with carmelite hood. The girl is wearing a cambric dress and chip hat.



Figure 36. *Ackermann's Repository of the Arts* for August 1811, showing an evening dress consisting of a Grecian round robe made of flowing Indian muslin, worn with a blue satin Roman tunic.

To complement the neo-classical style of dress, hair was now cropped short to frame the face in tight unpowdered curls, either natural, or teased into shape with paper. Small bonnets, caps or turbans, made of satin, velvet or muslin, and trimmed with ribbons, lace veils or swansdown displaced the large straw hats of the previous decades. At the close of the century, artificial fruit trimmings were 'the thing', as Austen reported from Bath, adding she had seen 'Grapes, Cherries, Plumbs & Apricots' sold for the purpose but inclined towards buying a sprig instead as she could not 'help thinking that it is more natural to have flowers grow out of the head than fruit' (L, 2 and 11 June 1799).

Even a rigid British court etiquette began to adapt to changing fashions and introduced a bell-shaped hoop which was thought to complement the new style of women's dress. However, a hooped gown belted just underneath the bosom gave even the most slender shape a somewhat bloated appearance. Travelling decked out in prescribed court costume was no slight feat either, though the invention of the revolutionary collapsible hoop added to the wearer's comfort, if not her attractiveness: reporting the arrival of court ladies squeezed into their sedan chairs, the American traveller Louis Simond described 'their immense hoops' folded 'like wings, pointing forward on each side' and concluded bluntly that 'thus cased' they did 'not ill resemble the foetus of a hippopotamus in a brandy bottle'.⁸

The male equivalent of women's revealing dress was the perfectly-tailored suit, popularised by the most influential dandy of the period, Beau Brummell. Blessed with handsome looks and a razor-sharp wit, he held aristocratic society in awe and set the standard for masculine elegance from the Regency onwards: the dark green or blue tailored double-breasted frock coat, set off against the cool whiteness of a linen shirt and starched, meticulously arranged necktie or cravat (fig. 37). He replaced breeches with tight-fitting cream pantaloons which showed off the contours of his leg and teamed them with tasselled Hessian boots. The look of understated perfection was rounded off with lightly coloured gloves – yet where Frank Churchill appears content with the range of 'Men's Beavers' and 'York Tan' provided by Ford's in Highbury, Brummell's were made to order by two tailoring firms, one entrusted



Figure 37. *Le Beau Monde* for May 1807, showing gentleman's evening dress consisting of a dark blue, double-breasted coat. Only the three lower flat gilt buttons were to be buttoned. The look was completed with a high starched necktie, a fine white quilted waistcoat, white silk stockings and breeches tied below the knee.

with the cut of the fingers, the other with the thumbs, to ensure an impeccable fit.

The elegant column-like silhouette of women's Regency costume – though taking the occasional inspiration from exotic realms and foreign folklore (fig. 38) – remained virtually unchanged until about 1815 when the general taste for simplicity gradually gave way to a desire for fussy prints, stiffer fabrics, fuller skirts, puffy sleeves and hems lavishly decorated with bows and ruches (fig. 39). The display of naked arms was also going out of fashion: preparing for a dinner invitation in London in 1814, Austen chose to wear a 'gauze gown' with long sleeves but initially felt insecure about 'how they [would] succeed'. She returned reassured by the hostess 'that they are worn in the evening by many' (L, 9 March 1814).

One considerable advantage of cotton textiles was their convenience: even in fashionable pale colours a soiled cotton dress was often salvagable where a silk gown was not. Soap balls, made from lye, animal fat, salt and perfume, were taxed and did not come cheap but a French invention at the end of the eighteenth century allowed the low-cost production of soda and provided a salubrious alternative to that other alkali traditionally credited with cleansing powers: urine. Stubborn stains on luxury fabrics, meanwhile, needed to be treated with other natural detergents: fuller's earth was said to work on grease, lemon juice on ink, butter and hot milk on fruit.

Muslins, however, were sometimes fragile and, as Tilney warns Catherine, likely to 'fray' (NA, 1:3) or wash out. Sometimes dyeing could rescue a faded garment, though occasionally the end product turned out worse than the original: after having a gown dyed blue, Austen reported that 'it divided with a Touch' (L, 7–9 October 1808). 'Mr Floor', who had ruined her gown with a faulty dye made from either native woad or indigo imported from the West Indies, would very likely also have offered specialist cleaning services for Indian muslins and cashmeres.⁹ Large households would often dispatch their washing to a laundry, after recording the individual items on a list similar to the 'washing-bill' mistaken by gullible Catherine for a mysterious Gothic manuscript (NA, 2:7). But washing could also be done by the servants: laundry days in gentry and aristocratic households were toilsome and protracted since the infrequency of them was itself a sign of social status indicating



Figure 38. *Ackermann's Repository of the Arts* for August 1811, showing a high round robe, short capuchin cloak and turban bonnet. The boy is wearing a long-sleeved Indian dimity waistcoat under a trouser jumpsuit and a velvet college cap.



Figure 39. *Ackermann's Repository of the Arts* for July 1818, showing a walking dress with puffed sleeves and a lavishly decorated hem. The wide-brimmed hat is accessorised with ribbons in a light pea-green to complement the parasol.

the possession of an ample amount of linen. Hence, once large quantities of washing had piled up, the hiring of outside laundresses often became necessary. Announcing that a new help had been found to undertake their 'Purification', Austen added mischievously, 'She does not look as if anything she touched would ever be clean, but who knows?' (*L*, 27–28 October 1798). This presumed lack of personal hygiene was growing rather rare in the late eighteenth century. Cleanliness, of clothes and one's person, had itself become fashionable: Jane and Cassandra Austen reportedly held 'all untidy ways in great disesteem' (*Memoir*, p. 169) while Beau Brummell, whose ritualistic morning toilette famously took upwards of five hours, decreed categorically 'no perfumes but very fine linen, plenty of it, and country-washing'.¹⁰ Of course the lower classes would have been far from the mind of the period's most illustrious dandy, yet the revolution in the cotton industry also benefited them. Campaigners for social reform such as Francis Place noted the alteration: recalling his childhood in the 1770s when even gentlemen's daughters would wear their quilted petticoats stuffed with wool and horsehair 'day by day until they were rotten, and never were washed', he welcomed the 'great change' in 'improved cleanliness' for all ranks brought about by the 'manufacture of cotton goods'.¹¹

During Austen's time, most of women's dress articles were either sewn to order by 'mantua-makers', professional dressmakers, or made at home, often with the assistance of a ladies' maid. At home old garments could serve as patterns; for the latest styles, however, the smartest of one's social circle had to be wheedled into sharing their secrets – as demonstrated when the ambitious Misses Steele persuade Lady Middleton to allow them to copy her modish gowns, no doubt giving rise to that uneasy amalgam of conceit and resentment so astutely captured in Jane Austen's comment to her sister that she was 'pleased with Martha & M^{rs} Lefroy for wanting the pattern of our Caps' while not being 'so well pleased' with Cassandra for actually giving it to them (*L*, 2 June 1799).

Fabrics were purchased at shops such as Ford's in Highbury, 'woollen-draper, linen-draper, and haberdasher's shop united', where customers like Harriet could dither over plain or figured muslins (*E*, 2:3,9), draped for display in huge swags over doorways and on walls. For the less voluminous Regency styles, seven yards

of fabric generally sufficed – though Austen boasted she needed an extra half-yard given that she was a 'tall woman' (*L*, 25 January 1801). Then the cut needed to be chosen and the dressmaker instructed accordingly. To some these decisions seemed more trying than liberating: 'I wish such things were to be bought ready made' an irresolute Austen grumbled (*L*, 24–6 December 1798). Indecisiveness seems to have been no rare occurrence since Place, who himself began his prosperous career as a breeches-maker, complained of the many customers who 'disliked' their garment 'when it was made up': for a man to be a good tailor, he concluded, he 'should be either a philosopher or a mean cringing slave'.¹²

With the growth of consumerism in the late eighteenth century the fashion industry came up with an ingenious way to assist fickle customers: magazines marketing the latest metropolitan trends. The Parisian miniaturist Niklaus von Heideloff, who had fled Jacobin rule, launched the first British magazine solely devoted to fashion in April 1794. His exclusive *Gallery of Fashion* was issued monthly with two aquatint plates, hand-coloured by himself and highlighted with metallic paints. Detailed descriptions of the modish outfits and *de rigueur* accessories accompanied his plates. Other journals such as *La Belle Assemblée* and *Le Beau Monde* followed suit but the most successful venture proved to be *The Repository of Arts, Literature, Commerce* (1806–29): published by the print-seller Rudolph Ackermann, it covered a wide range of cultural topics and included hand-coloured plates and sometimes pattern samples of the latest textiles with addresses where they could be purchased.

Not surprisingly, the fashion industry also found profitable ways to tap into swelled patriotic sentiments. Here, too, the French had set the trend way back in 1789 when miniature replicas of the Bastille carved out of its stone remnants were worn by fashionable ladies as pendants and rings. A decade later in Hampshire, Austen exchanged her mundane white cap for a stylish fez-inspired 'Mamalouc cap' (*L*, 8 January 1799) to celebrate Admiral Nelson's victory over the French in the Battle of the Nile. This bloody fight spawned a lucrative commemorative industry producing patriotic jewellery, fans, ribbons, vinaigrettes and other paraphernalia. Among the most popular accessories were gold anchors engraved with the date of the battle and painted ivory lockets depicting Nelson's heroism and the loyalty of his crew – an

emblematic choice considering that little over a year had passed since the successful sailor mutiny at Spithead in spring 1797.

This mushrooming of materialism and conspicuous consumption, fired by a print media that proffered as affordable necessities goods that had once been deemed luxuries, worried middle-class moralists. Vicesimus Knox was concerned over society's increasing obsession with appearance, which he warned would result in 'general ignorance, want of principle, [and] levity of mind and behaviour'.¹³ The feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft was also troubled by the intellectual trivialisation of fashion-conscious women, and even more by the sexual objectification of their bodies. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) she demanded social change to offer women opportunities to define their self-worth irrespective of their personal attractions – 'surely', she asked, 'she has not an immortal soul who can loiter life away merely employed to adorn her person?' (ch. 2). The moral purport of Austen's fiction (in contrast to her personal delight in fashion evinced in her correspondence) was similarly to depict dress as the concern of, at best, the immature – as is the case of Catherine Morland, who was yet to learn how little the 'heart of man' was 'biassed by the texture of [a] muslin' (*NA*, 1:10) – or, at worst, the vacuous and vulgar. When in 1822 Beau Brummell evaluated the history of costume he, too, lamented the corruption of civilised society though he, in opposition to Knox, Wollstonecraft and Austen, reasoned that a nation 'verges towards its fall' the moment 'utility supersedes beauty' (Brummell, *Male and Female Costume*, p. 121). The decline of Britain he attributed to a trend that would no doubt have delighted them: 'Clever people have greatly increased of late years', he complained, and 'the worst of merely clever people' was 'their indifference about externals'.

NOTES

1. Beau Brummell, *Male and Female Costume*, repr. (1932), p. 124. Subsequent references are included in the text.
2. F. Moore, *The Contrast or a Comparison between our Woollen, Linen, Cotton, and Silk Manufactures* (1782), p. 16. See also Michael M. Edwards, *The Growth of the British Cotton Trade, 1780–1815* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967).

3. Lady Banks on 28 October 1791 and 23 October 1793, in *Dear Miss Heber*, ed. Francis Bamford (1936), pp. 112, 159.
4. *Jerningham Letters*, ed. Egerton Castle (1896), vol. I, p. 37.
5. James Maitland, *An Inquiry into the Practical Merits of the System for the Government of India under the Superintendence of the Board of Controul by the Earl of Lauderdale* (1809), pp. 128–9n.
6. Considering Jane Austen's eager interest in fashion, Caroline Austen's statement that her 'two Aunts were not accounted very good dressers' seems somewhat unconvincing, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 169. Subsequent references are included in the text. For an informative study of fashion in Austen's letters and novels, see Penelope Byrde, *Jane Austen Fashion: Fashion and Needlework in the Works of Jane Austen* (Ludlow: Excellent Press, 1999).
7. Eliza to Phylly Walter, 16 May 1780, in Deirdre Le Faye, *Jane Austen's 'Outlandish Cousin', the Life & Letters of Eliza de Feuillide* (London: British Library, 2002), p. 58. Subsequent references are included in the text.
8. Louis Simond, *Journal of a Tour and Residence in Great Britain, during the years 1810 and 1811* (1817), vol. I, pp. 208–9.
9. Jane Ashelford, *Care of Clothes* (London: National Trust, 1997), pp. 8–10, 24.
10. *Harriette Wilson's Memoirs*, ed. Lesley Blanch (London: Folio Society, 1964), ch. 2.
11. British Library Add Ms 27827, ff. 50–1.
12. *The Autobiography of Francis Place (1771–1854)*, ed. Mary Thale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 217.
13. Vicesimus Knox, *Liberal Education: or, a Practical Treatise on the Methods of Acquiring Useful and Polite Learning* (1781), p. 151.