

Female Dress Experiments at the Time of the French Revolution

"On the Male Fashion Tone of French Ladies" — New Amazons — The Pantalons of the Merveilleuses



During the course of the 18th century, previously valid, class-determined gender roles began to change. With the rise of the bourgeoisie, a separation between the male and female world - the factual professional world of the man and the idealised domesticity of the woman - became increasingly apparent. For a few, however, the ideas of the Age of Enlightenment were also the impetus for a first critical reflection on the role of women in bourgeois society. At the end of the 18th century, in the salons of the ladies of the liberal bourgeoisie as well as in corresponding aristocratic circles, people began to deal with issues such as discrimination against women. This tentative questioning of the prevailing ideal of femininity by leading ladies of society corresponded with the trend of "masculinisation" observed in their dress behaviour, which fashion commentators believed they could already discern on the eve of the French Revolution. The trend towards the "masculine fashion tone of the French ladies" continued after 1800 and many men felt threatened by this 'pretentiousness':

What if, with this addiction to imitating men in their clothes, a heroic spirit was suddenly to enter these ladies and we would see an Amazon army rise up? someone said at one of our resources. Shameful! replied one such female knight in male costume: then the men would become our pack animals, on which we would carry away our baggage." *Zeitung für die Elegante Welt* (1801)

Nevertheless, in post-revolutionary France there was apparently a great willingness to break with taboos and traditions in matters of female dress. The considerations focused on the introduction of a trouser fashion for women, which was not limited to male tricot trousers as part

of the "Greek fashion" but was also modelled on the costumes of other cultural circles. According to the fashion journals, tricot trousers were an integral part of the extravagant fashion of the female "Tout-Paris" and the demi-monde in the years 1794 to 1802. With surprising clarity, fashion correspondents recognised the interdependencies between dress behaviour and role configuration in the changing society of the early 19th century, a fact to which they repeatedly drew attention. Then, during restorative tendencies in politics and society, Parisian women began to distance themselves from pantaloons and gradually replaced the jersey trousers borrowed from men's wardrobes with white cloth trousers.

The female legwear known as pantaloons during and after the French Revolution can be regarded as the first female trouser fashion. This was a transitional form between underwear and outerwear, whereby the character of the outerwear clearly dominated for several years.

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