

The "Battle Dress" of North American Women's Rights Activists from 1851

Trouser-Wearing Women in the First Half of the 19th Century – Amelia Bloomer's Trouser Costume – Women's Right to Trousers – Bloomerism Nationally/ Internationally – Anti-Bloomerites and Bloomer Girls – The Phenomenon of Bloomerism



Long before the propagation of short dresses and long trousers by American feminists provoked heated public debate, there were already women's groups that did not follow the dictates of women's fashion. For example, the adaptation of trousers by women in religious-social communities in North America, precursors of the so-called "Bloomer costume", can be interpreted as a questioning of the female dress tradition of Western cultures.

The first radical changes began in connection with the social movement of the early socialists and the ideas of Protestant pietism, such as the Saint-Simonists in France, the Oneida Community in North America and the Society of Friends, a religious community that emerged in England, also known as the Quakers. They all adopted models of society that rejected hierarchical structures and accepted equality of the sexes. A reform of women's clothing was postulated as a prerequisite for the implementation of equality between the sexes; only a change in costume would enable women of the middle classes to participate in working life. In fact, the earliest evidence of a move away from the long skirt towards trousers can be found in publications of these communities.

This time also knew women who had the courage to declare trousers as their individual costume. In newspapers and magazines of the first half of the 19th century, there are regular reports, some of them illustrated, about women wearing costumes with trousers. The public knew about the tightrope walker Madame Saqui, who delighted Napoleon I with her artistic performances in Turkish trousers, about the famous English traveller to the Orient Lady Esther Stanhope, who also donned the Turkish costume, as well as about various explorers of different nationalities - for example Alexine Tinné and Ida Pfeiffer, who travelled the world as

women in men's clothes, artists who wore trousers either temporarily, like the painter Rosa Bonheur, or continuously, like the writer Madame Dudevant alias George Sand, and Mademoiselle d'Angerville, who in 1838 was the first woman to climb Mont Blanc - in a short skirt and bloomers. The individual costumes of outstanding personalities were generally tolerated as exceptions to the rule, presumably because it could be assumed with certainty that they were eccentric exceptions.

A ground-breaking push came from some American women involved in the anti-slavery and women's rights movements in March 1851 to adopt the "Turkish costume" as a practical and morally correct mode of dress. In the April issue of *The Lily* magazine, editor and women's rights activist Amelia Bloomer describes in detail how the adaptation of the pro-movement costume came about and the reactions they faced:

"Dear readers, look at us in our short dresses and trousers and then, please, give free rein to your feelings on this subject - praise or blame, approval or condemnation, as you please. We are now used to both and are neutral to your views. When we expressed our approval of the proposed reform, we did not think that we ourselves would soon be drawn into it; but as we consider it our duty to carry out what we preach, we felt the necessity of putting our principles into practice without hesitation. (...) Those who think we look 'funny' would do well to look back a few years when they wore ten or fifteen pounds of petticoats and bustles on their bodies, and balloons on their arms, and then imagine who cuts the 'funnier' figure, they or we."

Amelia Bloomer, originally, did not play the role that is usually attributed to her. At first, she neither intended nor expected to make history with her advocacy and adaptation of the reform dress, but then, overwhelmed by the consequences of her decision, faced the conflict with energy and commitment. Her decision to take a militant, uncompromising stance and her willingness to make *The Lily* a platform for discussion among those interested in dress reform can be seen as her real contribution to dress reform.

The reform attempt, which became known as the "Bloomer costume", was not only the first public commitment to improving women's clothing, but was also, from today's perspective, the most radical innovation in terms of form and content. Consisting of a short dress and trousers, the attempt thwarted the previously valid rules of women's clothing. This fact, but above all its explicitly emancipatory character, provoked the conservative majority and made headlines that caused a worldwide sensation with the "Bloomer costume".

The main reason for the failure of the dress reform movement was the fact that from the beginning it went beyond its immediate concern and was therefore only partly seen as a critique of fashion, but its essential content was registered as a critique of society. The majority saw the "Bloomer costume" as a threatening sign of female dissatisfaction with traditional standards, interpreting it as a claim by women to be in charge in marriage as well. Women from other circles, especially those from the working-class or farming milieu, were indifferent to the reform. In addition, the "battle dress of the emancipated" broke with the European dress tradition in a radical way, an innovation that few were prepared to follow. Due to its

unwillingness to compromise the dress reform, as such welcomed by many, thus remained a minority vote of emancipatory-minded ladies, which ultimately had to fail. Without wider group unity, without the support of the leading figures in society and without the support of fashion journals, which could have made the reform fashionable, the reformers could not succeed in the long run in resisting the conventions in force.

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