The earliest books on fashion history published in Europe date back to the Renaissance and the early modern period. Between 1520 and 1610, over two hundred books on dress were published in Germany, Italy, France, and Holland. These little books, designed for wealthy consumers, contained wood-engraved plates and minimal text, often in Latin and were focused on contemporary clothing. Curiosity about the foreign and the strange was as intense as ignorance was rife and publications contained fantasized images of the noble savage (the Peruvian, the Florida Indian, the African) set against plates of the fashionable clothes of European aristocracy and the dress of merchants, peasantry, and tradesmen. Between 1760 and 1820 interest in fashion and dress from wealthy consumers encouraged the publication of large folio-size costume books featuring hand-colored, etched copper plates and the new color printing technique of aquatint and, from the 1830s, lithography. Romanticism suffused all these luxury publications, with their emphasis on illustration with brief text, now no longer in Latin. Thomas Jefferys's ambitious four volumes, *Collection of the Dresses of Different Nations, Ancient and Modern* (1757 and 1772), covered dress of the entire known world, including "Old English Dresse after the Designs of Holbein, Vandyke, Hollar and Others." His view of women's fashions was that they were simply "a Decoration of Beauty, and an encitement to Desire."

"Antiquarian" Research into Fashions

A widening fascination with classical dress of ancient Greece and Rome in France led to Michel-François Dandré Bardon's *Costume des anciens peuples* of 1772 and André Lens's *Costume des peuples de l'antiquité* in 1776. These helped to fuel the eventual development of neoclassical fashions. The Gothic Revival too encouraged a wave of European interest in medieval dress history. These books provided "authentic" details of "Gothic" dress for dressmakers as well as artists, architects, and enthusiasts of fancy dress. Interest lasted into the nineteenth century and indeed beyond. The central dress historian of this period in England was Joseph Strutt, an artist and antiquarian. His major work was *A Complete View of the Manners, Customs, Arms, Habits etc. of the Inhabitants of England* (1774, 1775, and 1776) and *Complete View of the Dress and Habits of the People of England*, 1796 and 1799, which covered the Middle Ages through to the seventeenth century, using literary sources, and medieval manuscripts and monuments.

**Related Articles**

- Definition of Fashion
- James Laver
- Walter Benjamin
Dress of the Orient

The passion for an exotic, fantasy "Orient" encompassed Turkey, Arabia, India, China, and finally Japan, and fueled the imaginations of the makers of fashions and fancy dress throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The vogue for Chinese decoration and chinoiserie infiltrated deeply into court and middling circles in Europe from 1680 to 1780 and much artistic and fashion inspiration was drawn from costume books of the period. Jean Baptiste Joseph Breton de la Martinière's *La Chine en miniature, ... costumes, arts et métiers de cet empire*, with its seventy-four plates, was published in Paris, in 1811-1812. William Miller's *The Costume of China* of 1800 was reprinted in 1805, but with new plates drawn by William Alexander, official draftsman to the embassy of Earl Macarthy from 1792 to 1794 to China.

The elitist fashion vogue for *Turquerie* styles drew on plates from costume books such as William Miller's *The Costume of Turkey* of 1804 and, in 1814, on Jean Baptiste Joseph Breton de la Martinière's *L'Egypt, et la Syrie au moeurs, usages, costumes et monuments des egyptians, des arabs, et des syriens*. Indian women became exoticized and sexualized, while modified Indian styling also filtered into European fashionable dress. François Baltasar Solvyns's *Costumes of Indostan* was published in Calcutta in 1798-1799 and in London in 1804. Books with plates of Japanese dress were disseminated from the early nineteenth century. Thus, well before the tidal wave of publications of the 1880s and 1890s, Breton de la Martinière's *Le Japon, ou moeurs, usages, et costumes des habitons de cet empire d'après les relations récentes de Krusenstern, Landsdorf, Titzing* was published in Paris by A. Nepveu in 1818.

Rural Europe

From the early nineteenth century a wave of descriptive books on the dress of European peasantry also exerted an influence on fashionable and fancy dress. Utopian notions and Romanticism turned to visions of a rural Europe peopled by a healthy peasantry in picturesque clothing. These costume books are informative and charming but also reveal period imperialist, gender, and stereotypic race and class prejudice. *The Costumes of the Hereditary States of the House of Austria* of 1804, for example, contains both sweet images of romanticized peasant women from all over central, southern, and eastern Europe set against textural and visual anti-Semitism in coverage of Polish Jewish dress. Twenty-three major French works were published between 1810 and 1830 on Breton peasant dress alone, such was the interest.

Books of Historical Dress for Theater and Fancy Dress

The role of historians undertaking research for theater costume and fancy dress purposes has been central to the development of fashion history since the eighteenth century. Thomas Hope's *Costumes of the Ancients* in 1809 was planned as a designer's dictionary, for "the theatrical performer, the ornamental architect and every other artist to whom the knowledge of classical costume is necessary." James Robinson Planché, the major early nineteenth-century British costume historian, not only republished volumes of Strutt but made the first attempt to design historically accurate costumes for a Shakespearean play in 1823. His 1834 *History of British Costume* became the first really popular costume history book, republished in cheaper versions in 1849 and in 1893.

Nineteenth-Century French Histories
Fashion, Sociology and Psychology

While these early generations of descriptive dress history studies, all by male writers, laid the foundation stones of fashion history, it took Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) and George Simmel's *Philosophie der Mode* (1905) to launch lasting theoretical debate about the cultural meanings behind fashion development and the causes of variation in consumption patterns. Interestingly, however, their theories made virtually no impact on fashion history until at least sixty years after their publication. A selection drawn from the many new dress history books of the 1900 to 1930 period, including George Clinch's book *English Costume, from Prehistoric Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, for example, of 1909, showed little change from established antiquarian approaches. *Modes and Manners of the Nineteenth Century* by Oscar Fischel and Max von Boehn is a four-volume German study of fashion from the 1790s onward, first published in 1909, which used a lively choice of cartoons as well as the usual fashion plates. Hilaire Hiler's *From Nudity to Raiment* in 1929 took a painter's interest in the field. With M. Meyer, he produced one of two meticulous costume bibliographies of the 1930s. Theirs was a *Bibliography of Costume*, published by H. W. Wilson in 1939. This followed René Colas's *Bibliographie générale du costume et la mode* of 1933. These carefully researched books were basically descriptive with little detailed study of garments.

Early Object-Centered Dress History

Elisabeth McClellan's unusually progressive study of 1904, however, *Historic Dress in America*, took markedly different approaches. It examined clothing worn in Spanish, French, English, Dutch, Swedish, and German settlements in early North America. This study, little discussed in the early 2000s, is remarkable on several counts. First it was written by a woman; and second, the author worked from a strongly object-based approach, declaring that "some relics of by-gone days have been preserved intact and placed in our hands for the preparation of this book-veritable documents of history on the subject of dress in America" (McClellan 1904, p. 5). Exceptional for studies of this period, hers took care to include everyday working clothes, such as her "Woman in Typical Working Dress 1790-1800" drawn from an original garment from the Stenton house in Philadelphia.

The second, major object-focused study is now a forgotten book by the painter Talbot Hughes, whose dress collection was accepted by the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1913. In that same year, interested in dress history for his own genre paintings, he published his *Dress Design-an account of Costume for Artists and Dressmakers-Illustrated by the author from old examples*. The book is illustrated with little line drawings, photographs, and even cutting patterns of surviving clothes from the mid-sixteenth century through the 1870s (Taylor, *Establishing Dress History*, pp. 47-49). Thalassa Cruso, the first costume curator at the Museum of London, basically a social history museum, also pioneered object-based fashion history. Her ideas were published in the museum's first dress catalog in 1933. She was probably the first woman costume curator to fuse theories related to issues of fashion production and consumption with close garment study.

The Psychology of Dress

The psychology of dress opened up further debates about the functions of dress and fashion. These debates were taken up by Frank Alvah Parsons in New York, whose study of that name was published in 1920, by J. C. Flügel, in his study *The Psychology of Clothes* of 1930, and in the work in England of the dress historians C. W. Cunnington and James Laver from the 1930s.

Thus by 1933, three diverging approaches to the study of fashion were in place-the descriptive, somewhat social history-oriented methods; object-focused research conducted largely but not exclusively by women curators; and the more detached, theoretical approaches developed by male specialists. These divisions remained firmly in place for another fifty years.

The Men Dress Historians

Drawing on Flügel, Dr. C. W. Cunnington, a medical doctor, and James Laver, Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the Victoria and Albert Museum, both took a deep interest in fashion history and in issues of women, style and sexuality, and fashion. Between 1931 and the late 1960s, they published books that successfully opened dress history to a wider popular audience. James Laver produced over fifty books dealing with art, prints, social, theater, and dress history. He understood well the problem of explaining the ephemeral character of fashion to those who still continued to dismiss the field as culturally worthless, defining fashion as "a spear head of taste, or rather it is a kind of psychic weathercock which shows which way the wind blows" (J. Laver 1945, p. 193).
The Women Fashion Historians

It is in this period too that women historians finally make their mark. It is significant within the history of the development of feminine approaches that they chose object-based approaches, much like those of Elizabeth McClellan and Thalassa Cruso. Directional, object-centered publications in the 1940s by Doris Langley Moore and from the 1950s onward by Anne Buck created methodological approaches that have remained lastingly valid.

Doris Langley Moore, whose personal costume collection formed the basis of the now famous Museum of Costume in Bath, published two much-neglected books: *The Woman in Fashion* of 1949 and *The Child in Fashion* of 1953. Using her own collection, these explored fashionable dress from 1800 on photographed on live models, (her famous actress and theater friends and their children) with carefully correct period hairstyles and in period settings. While this method of illustration is no longer used because of the danger to the garments, both her books contain directional debate that sought to explode popular sartorial myths, such that Regency dress was transparent and that Victorian women had tiny waists. Attacking Flügel and C. W. Cunnington for an overemphasis on women's sexuality as the most significant motivation for wearing fashionable dress, Langley Moore addressed the social and cultural codes hidden within fashionable dress, avoiding the trap of class generalization that Fischel and von Boehn and Cunnington fell into.

C. W. Cunnington's wife, Phillis, also a doctor, who had worked with him on the famous *Handbook* series, began, after his death in 1961, to collaborate with new researchers. Thus, she began producing a now-famous and well-reputed series of dealing with specialist dress histories, including her seminal study *Costume for Births, Marriages and Deaths*.

Anne Buck, as the first Keeper of the Gallery of English Costume at Platt Hall, from 1947 to 1972 quickly established an object-based approach that emphasized both the social function of dress and professional museological methods of conservation and display of clothing artifacts. This exerted a seminal influence in the dress history world after the 1950s. Her meticulously researched publications fused close analysis of clothing examples with archival study and are classic examples of "good practice." Her range of special interests included smocks and English lace making. In 1961 she published her *Victorian Costume and Costume Accessories* and in 1965, *Children's Costume in England from the Fourteenth to the end of the Nineteenth Centuries* (republished in 1996) and *Dress in Eighteenth Century England* of 1979. Once retired and with more time for archival research, she published a series of articles that incorporated new consumption approaches. That Buck centered her work on object-based approaches was rare enough, but rarer still is that her enthusiasms and expertise embraced the clothes of all levels of society.

Another group of women fashion historians developed the work of Talbot Hughes, studying surviving clothing through analysis of the cut and making up garments and specializing in producing cutting patterns of period clothing. Nora Waugh taught theater wardrobe design at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London. She published *Corsets and Crinolines* in 1954, *The Cut of Men's Clothes* in 1964, and *The Cut of Women's Clothes* in 1969. Based on patterns drawn up from surviving garments, Waugh added details of style history and making up details but was vague on many sources.

This methodology was further developed by Janet Arnold and explained in her *Handbook of Costume* of 1973. Arnold spent a lifetime exploring dress history through meticulous analysis of the cut of male and female fashionable dress. She was frequently called on by museums on both sides of the Atlantic to advise on dating reconstructing damaged period clothing and often advised on film and theater productions.

New Approaches from the 1980s
From the 1980s, a great range of more open-minded theoretical approaches, derived from other academic fields, transformed the entire field of fashion history study. These included analysis of the semiotics of fashion, new approaches to the coded body (fashionable, subcultural, and male/female, and gay/lesbian). Elizabeth Wilson’s work is cited by many as seminal to the acceptance of “fashion” as a legitimate field of study. Wilson’s *Adorned in Dreams* of 1985 (revised in 2003), which included a celebration of the enjoyment that women can derive on their own terms from fashionable dress, was a turning point. From the 1980s, interest in fashion history blossomed through new critical approaches flowing out from the developing fields of cultural and gender studies. These have had a dramatic impact on fashion history research as reflected since 1997 in the pages of *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, founded and edited by Valerie Steele.

**Object-Focused Study**

Older, established fashion history methodologies have had to respond to these fresh approaches and have held their ground. Naomi Tarrant, of the Royal Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh, in her 1994 book, *The Development of Costume* stressed her conviction that artifact-based approaches remained a vital counterweight to theoretical analysis. Museum fashion history exhibitions in North America and across Europe spawned significantly new types of glossy yet informative and critical shows and catalogs, such as Richard Martin’s and Harold Koda’s study of orientalism and fashion at the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1994. *Radical Fashion*, curated by Claire Wilcox at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, placed contemporary radical couture and conceptual dress in front of the British public for the first time. Other “designer” exhibitions and catalogs have sparked debate about an overly close relationship between museums and global fashion companies through much-needed financial sponsorship. Some suggest that as the fashion world itself relies more and more on celebrity product endorsement, fashion history too must respond to the commercial and cultural realities that surround the fashion world in the early 2000s.

**Studies on Fashion Designers**

The history of the haute couture industry is thus subject to more intensive debate than ever before and studies now move far beyond the usual coffee-table books. Alexandra Palmer’s *Couture and Commerce*, for example, is a seminal example of these new approaches. This beautifully illustrated study details the processes of the designing, making, and retailing of Paris couture clothes, as well as their social consumption and cultural meanings to Toronto society in the 1950s.

**Conceptual Fashion**

The advent of conceptual fashion has triggered new analytical debate in studies by, for example, Caroline Evans, Jennifer Craik, Richard Martin, Joanne Entwhistle, and Christopher Breward. The journal *Fashion Theory*, too, has been at the forefront of these developments. Breward writes that “the self constructed role of radical fashion design seems to be to present a very specialized commentary on the vicissitudes of contemporary taste and aesthetics, everything to do with internal fashion culture debate about genre, hierarchy, presentation and style” to be “showcased rather than sold” (Breward 2003, p. 229). Finally, Caroline Evans’s seminal 2003 study *Fashion at the Edge* debates conceptual and couture fashion from the 1990s, using fashion development as a tool through which to “pathologize contemporary culture” and to examine its characteristics of “alienation and nihilism.” She discusses conceptual and couture fashion as “a form of catharsis, perhaps a form of mourning and a coping stratagem…. [It is] the dark side of a free market economy, the loosening of social controls, the rise of risk and uncertainty as key elements of ‘modernity’ and ‘globalization.’” She writes, “The dark history of twentieth century seems finally to have caught up with fashion design” (Evans 2003, p. 308-309).

Thus, fashion studies and fashion history are fields that positively incorporate critical approaches built around anthropology,
psychology, history of technology, business, sociology, material culture, and cultural studies. The best examples of good practice are also finally filled with impressive color plates and intelligently fuse object and theory. It is serious debates such as these that confirm the fundamental and central cultural place of fashion within society and that clarify the future directions for the field of fashion history and fashion studies.

See also Ancient World: History of Dress; Appearance; Theories of Fashion.

Bibliography

The sections on the history of fashion publications are drawn from chapters 1 and 2 of Lou Taylor, Establishing Dress History, 2004, Manchester University Press, with their kind permission.


Strutt, Joseph. *A Complete View of the Manners, Customs, Arms, Habits etc. of the Inhabitants of England* (1774, 1775, and 1776) and *Complete View of the Dress and Habits of the People of England*, 1796 and 1799.


Timeline Description: People have loved clothing fashion for thousands of years. From the early days in Egypt through present day, clothes are an expression of who we are.

Date | Event
--- | ---
3000 BC | Ancient Egypt

Drawings, documents, and archeological findings have revealed the fashions worn by people in various ancient civilizations. Ancient Egyptians typically wore lightweight cottons; men wore short kilts, and women wore long, fitted dresses.
their design and construction. The modern industry, based around firms or fashion houses run by individual designers, started in the 19th century with Charles Frederick Worth who, beginning in 1858, was the first designer to have his label sewn into the garments he created. I looked for evidence in newspapers, fashion industry publications, and in photographs at historical archives and museums. Oakland Tribune Oct. 21, 1918. Heather Vaughan Lee is the founding author of Fashion Historia. She is an author and historian, whose work focuses on the study of dress in the late 19th through the 20th century. Covering a range of topics and perspectives in dress history, she is primarily known for her research on designer Natacha Rambova, American fashion history, and the history of knitting in America and the UK. Her new book, Artifacts from American Fashion (November 2019, ABC-CLIO) is available wherever books are sold.