

The Politics of Fashion: Women's Clothing in Colonial America 1760-1775



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Introduction

During 1760 to 1775, clothing and fabric in the British North American colonies became politicized by patriots and loyalists. Through my research, I will deconstruct the specific correlation between the political binary and women's fashion.

After the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763, Britain began passing acts to increase taxation on the colonies. In return, colonists changed their consumer habits, and began boycotting British goods, including fabric.

Women, traditionally confined to the domestic sphere, were not thought to have opinions about politics and were not allowed in political spaces. However, women were in charge of household purchases, and during boycotts, domestic purchasing power was politicized. Either a woman could support the boycott by changing her regular purchasing habits, or she could continue to buy imports, supporting England.

Clothing was incredibly important in visibly indicating status. For women, especially upper class women, clothing and fabrics indicated power and validated their social status. Wearing fabrics such as homespun was seen as patriotic, but it also removed the respect women gained from wearing fashionable clothing.

Many social and political factors converged to influence what women wore, and how that clothing was perceived politically. Alongside their own political beliefs, women had to take into consideration the popular opinion of their communities. In order to avoid social rejection, women might be reluctant to dress in a way that aligned with their own political views, if those went against popular opinion. For some upper class women, maintaining power and social standing through clothing was important enough to ignore boycotts and continue purchasing imports.

While certain styles were associated with certain political beliefs, women could ignore those associations and wear what was most socially beneficial, or they could use those associations to present themselves in a certain way, controlling how they were perceived, regardless of their actual political alignments.

Criticisms of Fashion

As women's fashion developed in this period, women faced harsh criticism if they were deemed too fashionable or excessive. Hoop skirts faced especially harsh attacks throughout the 1760s. Hoops were worn by women as a way to display the expensive fabrics of their gowns, indicating their position as a consumer. However, men claimed these had no practical purpose, and implied they were sexual in design, leading to more criticism. Women had to find a balance of appearing fashionable in order to maintain their status and social position, but not too excessive as to garner criticism.



The Review, ca. 1750-1770, paper. London, The British Museum.

Satire and over-exaggerations were another way to leverage criticism against fashions. Here, the hoop skirt is being depicted as both inconvenient because of the width, and immodest.

Robe a la Francaise

ca. 1760s, silk, linen, cotton. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Note the detailed rococo decorations – the serpentine trim around the opening of the gown and along the stomacher, and the attachments to the petticoat. Note also the amount of extra fabric used on the back to create the long draped pleats.



Robe a l'anglaise

ca. 1770s, silk. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Note the smaller lines of trim along the gown and torso, and instead the focus is on the patterned silk used. On the back, note the extra fabric has been brought in tight to the torso, and the skirt is tightly pleated along the top.



Changing Styles

During the early 1700s until the 1760s, the *robe a la francaise* was the most popular style for upper class women. This gown originated from court styles, and was often decorated with serpentine trimmings along the front of the gown in a rococo aesthetic. In the 1760s, the skirt of the gown became more dome shaped due to the transition to hoop skirts under the petticoat, rather than panniers which had been popular previously. The *robe a la francaise* featured double box pleats on the back falling from the shoulders to the floor.

In the early 1770s, leading up to the Revolution, fashion began a distinctive switch from the extravagant *robe a la francaise* to more simpler styles, such as the *robe a l'anglaise*. This change began in France as egalitarian styles became desirable by the upper class, and spread from France to England to the colonies. This also aligned with the later period of boycotts, which may have encouraged the spread of the fashion in the colonies. The *robe a l'anglaise* removed the long pleats from the back, and instead brought the fabric tight around the torso. Additionally, many of the rococo style decorations and accessories on the *robe a la francaise* skirt were removed or greatly lessened. These changes meant the *robe a l'anglaise* required much less fabric to make.

Since women of any political affiliation tended to follow these changing styles, fabric was another way to attempt to determine political affiliation, but this was never absolute. While wearing homespun, or lower quality fabric produced in the colonies, was an obvious signifier of being a patriot, there were other ways to comply with boycotts. Many women would have their gowns altered to the new styles, made of imported fabrics they had purchased before boycotts, allowing them to stay in fashion while complying with the boycotts. However, the colonies did not follow fabric trends as closely as Europe, so it was difficult to determine whether the fabric used was new or old, and therefore if they were supporting the boycott or not.

Conclusion

The politics of women's dress were very complex and not easily defined. During the 1760s and 1770s, men attempted to overlay political alignments onto fashion, an established form of power and communication for women. However, women, especially elite women, prevented specific styles from being completely tied to one political view or another. In theory, there were specific ways that patriots or loyalists should dress, but in practice, there was no unifying consensus or binary for the politics of women's fashion.

Tensions rose after the Revolutionary War started, but women continued to dress in the way which was most beneficial for themselves. Fashion remained a complex language which could mean different things to different people, and continued to be very important to women.

As I continue my research from the Revolutionary War until the early 1790s, women continue to use clothing for their benefit and to convey different values and opinions. During the revolution, styles continued to become simpler, and women continued to balance social power with surviving during a time of war. After the revolution, the new nation had to find a common identity and decide how to present themselves to the rest of the world. Women's fashion played a large role in representing the new republic.

References

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