



What a Painting Represents: Fashion and the

Life of Catherine Murat in 1837

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Abstract

In 1837, French portrait artist Jacques Amans painted Princess Catherine Murat, the great-grandniece of George Washington and wife of Prince (and lieutenant-colonel) Achille Murat, as their paths crossed briefly in Louisiana. It was here that Amans created a neoclassical portrait, depicting Catherine posed sitting in an elegant fashion. Pictured in a white Victorian style dress, this portrait of Catherine represents not only who she was at the time, but who she wished to be as well. This painting's details provide evidence for the culture of class in Tallahassee, and the representation of new European trends by an American woman. By researching the portrait of Catherine, this project hopes to uncover the induction of Victorian trends in American fashion, and also to uncover the history of Catherine Murat's life that can potentially be told through art.

Background

This research focuses on a portrait of Princess Catherine Murat, great-grandniece of George Washington and wife of Prince (and lieutenant-colonel) Achille Murat. Catherine, born in 1803, was originally from Virginia, but after the death of her first husband she relocated with her family to Florida. It is here where she met Achille, the nephew of Napoleon who had moved to Florida in 1824. The two were then wed in 1826.

In 1835, The Murats temporarily moved to Louisiana as Achille had purchased a Plantation outside of New Orleans. This is where they met Jacques Amans. Amans was a French neoclassical portrait artist who had come to Louisiana during the 1830s in hopes of finding more work. This meeting led to the portrait of Catherine which was painted in 1837.

Methods

First, research began through the examination and further study of many secondary (and some primary) sources connected to early Territorial Florida. This allowed for in-depth evidence of the time period (1821-1841) to be found, and set the stage for specializing the research.

This specialization was done by selecting special interests found in these sources. These special interests were then turned into the annotated bibliography. After limiting these selected interests down to a top three list of primary sources, the official specialization for research was found - a portrait of Princess Catherine Murat, painted in 1837 by portrait artist Jacques Amans. Once this primary source was selected, research became much more in depth. This included a study of the Victorian era as a whole to identify specifically the clothing worn in the portrait, as well as background research on both Murat and Amans. Once these basic research topics were sufficiently researched, more abstract research began, such as connecting how Murat presents herself as a social leader in Territorial Tallahassee at the time, as well as connecting her fashions to blooming trends in Europe.



Findings

The Victorian era of fashion originated in Europe with the reign of Queen Victoria in 1837. This portrait, created in America within the same year this era began, includes many allusions to the Victorian fashions of Europe despite Catherine's residence in Florida. These allusions include:

- The off-shoulder neckline is strikingly similar to a Bertha neckline, which was most commonly worn by women in the Victorian era.
- The silhouette of her dress's torso, which has a waistline slightly lower than popular dresses of the Georgian era (ended just before the Victorian).
- The tight upper sleeve into a larger lace bottom sleeve, which was a transitional style into Victorian fashion of the 1840s.
- Her necklace, which emulates slide chain jewelry which garnered popularity during the Victorian era.
- Her hairstyle, with what are at times called spaniel curls, is kept cropped closely to her head. This is a shift from hairstyles that were previously popular before the 1840s.

Catherine's choices in fashion also hold connotations of class, which reveals much about her as a person. Achille Murat moved to Florida at the prospect of finding fortune, but he was consistently unsuccessful. With this knowledge, it can be reasonably deduced that Catherine's status was not based on wealth, rather on birth and marriage.

- Only those middle or higher in status were able to show the amounts of skin seen by Catherine's neckline.
- At the time, lace (such as at her neckline and sleeves) was considered to be socially meaningful due to both its beauty and price.
- The white dress was a symbol of aristocratic fashion.

Conclusion

Research for this topic is still ongoing, but the representation of Victorian fashion already discovered in this portrait of Princess Catherine Murat is key evidence of how quickly European trends were able to reach the Americas. The Victorian era had only just begun in Europe during early 1837 and by the time this portrait was painted late in that same year, Americans were already showcasing obvious inspirations from the era in their own fashion trends. As displayed by Catherine's portrayal of these trends, Territorial Floridians were already claiming these trends as higher class than the previous trends which were fading out. By immersing herself in this style of fashion, Catherine was not only showcasing to the world her connections to Europe but how she wished to be perceived. Catherine purposely presented herself in a way that she could be interpreted as a woman of high status, despite the Murat's financial struggles throughout their time in Florida together. By engulfing herself in brand new, foreign imagery, she overshadowed her current status, and instead told the world what she wished to be seen as - Princess Catherine Murat. As further research is conducted, it will continue to work towards uncovering what else can be said about Catherine through this portrait.

Web References

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