

or translated by others in Europe and the United States. In a typical example of the elevation of these entities as ultimate fashion authorities, *Harper's Bazaar* suggested in the fall of 1893 that American modistes had taken in “the latest novelties from the *ateliers* of Worth, Rouff, Paquin, Félix, and Doucet,” which “settle[d] beyond doubt the fashions of the winter.”²⁷

Most dressmakers—the majority of whom remained women—worked on a smaller scale, lacking the reach of the grand *maisons de couture*. Although the influence of these leading houses was widespread, skilled independent dressmakers were not simply copying these sources but interpreting them to create designs that best suited their own clients. However, as they were shaping fashion at an individual rather than universal level, they did not gain the loftier status of originators or the broader reputations of the most prominent houses.

If widespread name recognition remained elusive for most, criteria were being established for individuals to be acknowledged for their contributions to fashion. Although these developments created heightened expectations for fashion professionals, they also set the stage for more women to gain visibility in the twentieth century, when many female designers were acknowledged as leaders of fashion and appreciated for their distinctive bodies of work.

DRESSMAKER TO DESIGNER: A LINEAGE

For most dressmakers working in Europe and the United States prior to the twentieth century, anonymity was a condition of the profession. Their personal achievements were not amplified by the industry nor were their names tied to their work in an enduring way. The eventual move toward greater visibility and lasting reputations was tied to the rising idea of fashion as an artistic endeavor and of the dressmaker as a creator—as a “designer.” This change also shifted expectations. To achieve designer status, to gain widespread recognition by name, it was not sufficient to execute finely crafted garments conceived to meet the needs of particular clients. It was also necessary to be seen as guiding the direction of fashion. Those without the platform to exert such sweeping influence were not as readily recognized for their individual skill or ingenuity.

Fashion history has similarly been defined by this emphasis, privileging the work of those with the broadest reach and sway, with lesser attention given to makers working on a smaller scale, shaping fashion in more subtle ways. Recent and ongoing work by fashion historians, though, has uncovered and expanded on the narratives of lesser-known designers and their work in this period and later, some of whom are examined in the succeeding chapters of this publication. Although few of the mostly female dressmakers working prior to the twentieth century can be identified by name or linked to their individual designs, they can collectively be acknowledged for their contributions to the development of fashion and credited as the “ancestors” to the modern women designers explored in the following chapter and genealogy.

1. Edith Abbott, *Women in Industry: A Study in American Economic History* (New York: D. Appleton, 1910), 216. Cited in Marla R. Miller, “Dressmaking as a Trade for Women: Recovering A Lost Art(isanry),” in *A Separate Sphere: Dressmakers in Cincinnati's Golden Age, 1877–1922*, ed. Cynthia Amnéus (Cincinnati, Ohio: Cincinnati Art Museum; Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2003), 1.
2. Jennifer M. Jones, *Sexing La Mode: Gender, Fashion and Commercial Culture in Old Regime France* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 77. Jones is specifically referring to events that took place in France, though a similar pattern is echoed in other European countries as well.
3. Pamela A. Parmal, “La Mode: Paris and the Development of the French Fashion Industry,” in *Fashion Show: Paris Style* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2006), 19–20.
4. Clare Haru Crowston, *Fabricating Women: The Seamstresses of Old Regime France, 1675–1791* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), 180. Crowston also discusses exceptions to this; see 180–82.
5. Crowston, *Fabricating Women*, 185–87.
6. Avril Hart, “The Mantua: Its Evolution and Fashionable Significance in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in *Defining Dress: Dress as Object, Meaning and Identity*, eds. Amy de la Haye and Elizabeth Wilson (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1999), 93.
7. Jones, *Sexing La Mode*, 82.
8. Crowston, *Fabricating Women*, 31. On the components of women’s court dress, Pascale Gorguet Ballesteros, “Caratériser le costume de cour: propositions,” in *Fastes de cour et cérémonies royales: Le Costume de cour en Europe, 1650–1800*, eds. Pierre Arizzoli-Clémentel and Pascale Gorguet Ballesteros (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2009), 58.
9. Hart, “Mantua,” 93.
10. Crowston, *Fabricating Women*, 40–41.
11. Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris* (Amsterdam, 1789), 11:133.
12. Jones, *Sexing La Mode*, 84.
13. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, ou de l'éducation* (Paris, 1762), 3:63, 65. Cited in Crowston, *Fabricating Women*, 65.
14. “The Dressmaker. A Sketch,” *Ladies' Pocket Magazine* 2 (1828): 115.
15. Crowston, *Fabricating Women*, 67.
16. Amnéus, *Separate Sphere*, 16.
17. Elizabeth Gartland, *The American Lady-Tailor Glove-Fitting System of Dress-Making, from Experience and Practice* (Philadelphia, 1884), 12. Cited in Claudia Brush Kidwell, *Cutting a Fashionable Fit: Dressmakers' Drafting Systems in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979), 45.
18. On the advantages of dressmaking as an occupation for women, as well as the barriers to success, see Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), especially chap. 2, “A Precarious Independence: Female Proprietors in Gilded Age Boston,” 25–54.
19. Gamber, *Female Economy*, 12.
20. As typical examples, see for instance *Le moniteur de la mode* (May 1852): 66–76; *La mode illustrée* (April 7, 1872): 105–10.
21. Charles Dickens, “Dress in Paris,” *All the Year Round*, February 28, 1863, 9. Cited in Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 251.
22. Pierre Larousse, *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX^e siècle* (Paris: Administration du grand Dictionnaire universel, 1869), 5:417. Cited in Philippe Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Richard Bienvenu (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 187.
23. Steele, *Paris Fashion*, 251.
24. F. Adolphus, *Some Memories of Paris* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1895), 190. Cited in Elizabeth Ann Coleman, *The Opulent Era: Fashions of Worth, Doucet, and Pingat* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 33.
25. On Worth’s “genius for invention,” see “Worth, the Paris Dressmaker,” *Harper's Bazaar*, February 14, 1874, 117. On the idea that “Dress, with Mr. Worth is a fine art,” see “The King of Fashion,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 3, 1880, 6.
26. Catherine Broughton, *Suggestions for Dressmakers* (New York: Morse-Broughton, ca. 1896), 1, 3.
27. “New York Fashions: French Dresses,” *Harper's Bazaar*, October 28, 1893, 883.

A CONSTELLATION OF COMETS AND SHOOTING STARS

New VISIBILITY for WOMEN in FASHION
(ca. 1900–1968)

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by Mellissa Huber

A CONSTELLATION OF COMETS AND SHOOTING STARS

NEW VISIBILITY FOR WOMEN IN FASHION
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ROBE À LA FRANÇAISE

Revival and Reinvention in Eighteenth-Century Fashion

by Jessica Regan

One of the longest-enduring and most iconic forms of eighteenth-century dress, the *robe à la française* remained fundamental to French fashion from the 1730s until the Revolution, continually renewed through variations in silhouette, textiles, and trimmings.¹ This elegant example—dating to the 1770s but composed of fabric produced decades earlier—reflects the evolution of this archetypal style and the eighteenth-century dressmaker’s essential ability to transform seemingly outmoded materials into garments that quintessentially belonged to the latest moment in fashion.

Women’s dress in eighteenth-century France was the product of a robust network of specialized artisans and tradespeople. These individuals included the designers and weavers responsible for the era’s lively textiles, the mercers and drapers who sold those goods, and the dressmakers and *marchandes de modes*—or fashion merchants—who created garments and accessories or furnished their finishing touches. Women were integral to this system as both merchants and makers but most notably as dressmakers. The vast majority left no records of their working practices and today are unidentifiable by name, their artistry revealed only anonymously through surviving fashions.

Dressmakers were responsible for turning a client’s recently purchased materials into eye-catching fashions or, often, for revitalizing older textiles by remodeling them into garments that aligned with the spirit of a new era. This example utilizes an ivory silk damask dating to the 1710s that was woven in China for the European market. Representing what twentieth-century historians termed the “bizarre” style for its incorporation of unusual motifs that blended Chinese,

Indian, Persian, and European influences, the silk reflects a trend that faded by the 1720s.² However, fine textiles continued to be valued and repurposed as dress styles evolved; monochromatic fabrics in particular retained their appeal for subsequent generations, as their less-prominent imagery integrated more easily into later fashions.³

This dress, in which the silk used in the body of the gown also forms its embellishments, was probably made in its entirety by a dressmaker, without the intervention of a *marchande de modes*. Fashion merchants specialized in adornments made of lace, ribbons, and other materials that they also sold, while self-fabric ornamentation typically fell under the dressmaker’s purview.⁴ The exquisite damask was likely originally used in another garment and later reworked into its current form, as the fabric panels that form the dress are irregular in shape and width. Since these anomalies are obscured by the gown’s deep folds, they do not disturb its aesthetic integrity.

The maker has crafted a silhouette and embellishments that fully conform to the prevailing style of the early 1770s, with a wide-hipped skirt and richly textured trimmings. The silk is expertly worked into decorative flounces at the hemline and carefully formed ruchings along the center front opening that are graduated in width to complement the gown’s swelling silhouette. The dress’s most distinctive detail, however, may be its striking silk lining composed of an ivory ground with brilliant green and raspberry-colored stripes. Nearly hidden and perhaps only discreetly revealed when the wearer was in motion, this vivid textile may also have been previously employed for another use and is here given new life—both functional and alluring.

1. Although by the late 1770s the style was no longer the height of fashion, it remained in use into the 1780s as court dress, largely replacing the *grand habit*. Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe 1715–1789* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002), 188, 219.
2. Kristen Stewart, “Dress (Robe à la française),” in *Interwoven Globe: The World Textile Trade, 1500–1800*, ed. Amelia Peck (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013), 196. Melinda Watt, “‘Whims and Fancies’: Europeans Respond to Textiles from the East,” in *Interwoven Globe*, 96.
3. The Costume Institute has several other examples of dresses

made in the 1770s or 1780s from damasks produced earlier in the century, including 1994.406a–c; 2009.300.731; 2018.110a–c; and 2018.111a, b.
4. This division of labor was codified in revised Parisian guild statutes in 1782, which stipulated that the *marchandes de modes* were only permitted to create dress embellishments of different materials from those used in the dress itself. Clare Haru Crowston, *Fabricating Women: The Seamstresses of Old Regime France, 1675–1791* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), 67.





Marcelle Chaumont

Evening ensemble, Fall/winter 1948–49. Medium: (a, b) metal thread (c) silk



HOUSE OF VIONNET *Madeleine Vionnet*

Evening dress, ca. 1924. Medium: silk, metal



MAD CARPENTIER *Madeleine Maltezos*
Evening dress, late 1940s. Medium: silk



Elizabeth Hawes
"The Styx", fall/winter 1936. Medium: silk



HOUSE OF DIOR *Maria Grazia Chiuri, Grace Wales Bonner*
Spring/Summer 20XX. Medium: Silk, Metal, Glass; Gift of Name Lastname, 20XX



CHLOÉ *Gabriela Hearst*
Spring/Summer 20XX. Medium: Silk, Metal, Glass; Gift of Name Lastname, 20XX

ABSENCE/OMISSION INTRODUCTION

by Mellissa Huber

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ABSENCE/ OMISSION

HANIFA'S "KINSHASA" DRESS: *Color, Culture, and the Politics of Representation*

by Elizabeth Way

Anifa Mvuemba paid tribute to her Congolese roots with the “Kinshasa” dress, the first piece in Hanifa’s influential 3D-animated “Pink Label Congo” capsule collection. The stunning fashion show omitted models, only drawing more attention to the inclusively embodied designs that sashayed across over 150,000 Instagram feeds. The idea of countering omissions is both deeply embedded and multilayered in the “Kinshasa” dress. Named after the capital of Democratic Republic of the Congo, the garment incorporates the red, blue, and yellow of the Congolese flag. In a short film and interview that preceded the collection presentation, Mvuemba discussed how a lack of awareness of the Congolese culture and situation has made the country and its people invisible in the international consciousness, even as sixty to seventy percent of Earth’s supply of coltan—a vital ore in the manufacture of electronics—makes the world dependent on the nation’s mining industry. Mvuemba shed light on the contrast between the country’s beautiful natural resources and the horrific plight of child mining laborers. Viewers followed an animated YouTube search of “Democratic Republic of the Congo,” underscoring the designer’s commitment to encouraging her audience to research and understand issues of Congolese labor abuse and violence.

Yet Mvuemba’s film also highlights her pride in her Congolese heritage. Inspired by the stories of Congolese women’s strength and perseverance, as related by her mother, the collection emphasizes “the beauty of Congo [that] is often untapped and overlooked.”¹ The decision

to center her collection on her background was well thought through; wary of the fashion industry’s tendency to pigeonhole Black and African designers, she waited for the right time to bring this part of her identity as a designer to the fore.² Focusing on the intentional details of her designs, Mvuemba notes, “If you’re African then you know about... African seamstresses and how... detail... and color [are] so important... I really wanted to make sure that I used that in this collection, just to give tribute to all the African seamstress out there, not just Congo specifically.”³

In the “Kinshasa” dress’s national colors, red signifies pain, suffering, and blood, blue represents peace, and yellow symbolizes hope. It can be no coincidence that, from the front, the dress looks to be completely red. As movement is introduced, flashes of yellow show at the skirt’s hem at the sides, and only from the back—a vantage point often omitted from fashion exhibitions—can the interplay of the three colors be seen. The backless cut makes the body of the wearer an integral part of the powerful design, and in the months after the Instagram presentation, the bodies of intergenerational Black American women stood in for the invisible model to make the “Kinshasa” dress an icon of the Hanifa brand. Actress and beauty entrepreneur Tracy Ellis Ross wore it in an August 2020 editorial shoot for Elle.com and actress Zendaya donned it on the cover of InStyle in September 2020. Both women specifically chose the dress to represent their allegiance to Black fashion creators and their often-invisible impact.

1. Hanifa (@hanifaofficial), Instagram video, May 23, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CAhDULhAFvG/?hl=en>.
2. Devine Blacksher, “The Designer Who Sent Ghost Models Down the Runway: Anifa Mvuemba Always Does Things Her Own Way,” *The Cut*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.thecut.com/2020/09/hanifa-designer-anifa-mvuemba-on-her-pink-label-congo-show.html>.
3. Hanifa (@hanifaofficial), Instagram video.



HANIFA *Anifa Mvuemba*

“Kinshasa” mini dress, 2020 Pink Label Congo. Red, blue, and yellow pleated polyester suiting.

