

Art, Fashion and
the Classical Ideal
in the 1790s

THE AGE OF UNDRRESS

AMELIA RAUSER



The year (1808) Ladies undress of Bum be seen



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The Age of Undress

Art, Fashion, and the Classical Ideal in the 1790s

AMELIA RAUSER

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INTRODUCTION

Galateas

In the 1790s, elite women appeared in the metropolitan ballrooms, gardens, and opera boxes of Europe and the United States dressed as living statues. “Our girls and young women apologize for everything by saying they are making themselves into *Greeks* or *statues*, and that they *drape* themselves; they presently only want to wear quite clear and unfinished muslin,” a Parisian tailor reportedly complained.¹ The style of dress they wore, sometimes called the *robe à la grecque*, was a sheer, white, high-waisted muslin dress worn with minimal undergarments and often accessorized by a cashmere shawl (fig. 1). “The most fashionable female dress is now exactly after the antique statues—The flowing drapery, the high zone, and the head compressed as much as possible. The effect is graceful in the extreme. The use of powder is daily decreasing among our British beauties, and dark hair is the rage of the present moment,” announced the *Oracle and Public Advertiser* in January 1796.² As it clung to haunches and exposed arms, eschewing most padding, powdering, and ornamentation, this new style of dress represented a dramatic departure from the mantuas and polonaises of the previous decades. Yet it was also short lived: by the 1820s, corsets, ornaments, silks, and full skirts were back in fashion.

This new style is best referred to as neoclassical dress, for it was profoundly intertwined with the aesthetic experiments and philosophical puzzles of radical neoclassicists working in other artistic media in the same period. Neoclassicism is often discussed as a cold, masculine, rational, even bureaucratic style: words like “austere” and “stoic” are commonly used by scholars to describe it, and the columns, entablatures, and rotundas of neoclassical architecture have been the visual signature of banks and capitol buildings for more than 200 years.³ Indeed some key parts of the neoclassical movement, such as the creative circles of Salon painters in 1790s France, were self-consciously homosocial, structured around close networks of male artists interested in exploring the bounds of masculinity.⁴



Opposite:
Fig. 1 Cotton muslin dress with silk embroidery, ca. 1800. Indian textile made for Western market. Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Above:
Fig. 2 John Dunn, *Lady Emma Hamilton as a Bacchante*, ca. 1798–1800. Miniature in watercolor on ivory, 8.6 × 6.8 × 0.3 cm. National Maritime Museum, London



Fig. 3 Ann Frankland Lewis, 1798, from the *Collection of English Original Watercolor Drawings, 1774–1807*. Watercolor on paper, 23.5 × 17.8 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art

However, in this book I wish to show that, in fact, the neoclassicism of the 1790s was often intensely embodied and deeply emotional, and that women were at its center: as ideals and allegories, as artistic agents—active aesthetic innovators and creators—and as important patrons. By “embodied” I mean a neoclassicism that valorizes the body as the site of diverse sensory experience, elevating the importance of sensation as the precursor to cognition and understanding. In addition, an embodied neoclassicism blurs boundaries between real and artistic bodies, art and life. Marked by a sensual, even ecstatic communion with a deeply strange and primitive classical past, this embodied neoclassicism aimed to use art as a portal through which the harmonious union of art and freedom—both bodily and political—could be brought back to life in a new golden age. At times this collection of ideas and ambitions has been discussed as a priapic neoclassicism centered around male desire and subjectivity.⁵ But here I wish to argue for a “bacchantic neoclassicism,” a set of aesthetic, intellectual, and moral commitments that shaped women’s experiments with neoclassical dress and their engagement with art, philosophy, and popular culture (fig. 2).

The emergence of neoclassical dress in the 1790s is far more than a historical curiosity. Fashion is arguably the most important constituent of an era’s artistic culture, as getting dressed is an aesthetic decision that people make every single day, and one that situates their bodies in time, space, and culture. Englishwoman and amateur artist Ann Frankland Lewis memorialized a “dress of the year” annually over a period of 34 years (fig. 3), marking the span of her life with the ticking of a fashion clock.⁶ Unlike painting or sculpture, however, fashionable dress is not an art form of masterpieces, but of multiples; like printmaking, fashion forms a discourse and its representational commitments are collective rather than individual. Thus, despite the fact that fashion articulates individual human identities with a particular age, status, season, and occasion, and despite the importance of a few fashion innovators in inventing and disseminating change, fashion can give us insight into broad cultural values and aspirations. When fashion changes dramatically, then, we should investigate. In the 1790s, the profound change of neoclassical dress signaled not a merely whimsical alteration of women’s taste, but rather a wholesale transformation of the aesthetic concerns of the moment and their intersection with women’s cultural position in particular. We should look hard at neoclassical fashion not only because it is a fascinating phenomenon in itself, but also because it points to important fault lines in neoclassical culture, revealing places of innovation, contestation, and debate over such issues as the science of life, the understanding of race, and the purpose of art.

Of course, no one changes a culture’s approach to dress overnight, and interest in more “natural” dress had been growing throughout the 1770s and 1780s, especially among artists and aesthetes who pursued dress reform in tandem with

other changes in the emotionality and physical expressiveness of the arts. French “Anglomania” of the 1780s associated lightweight cottons, round gowns (dresses pulled over the head rather than closed in front), and menswear derived from hunting clothes with the greater informality and personal liberty of English culture.⁷ New dress forms like the polonaise and the caraco brought in slimmer proportions and greater ease of movement, often derived from working-class garments.⁸ Most notably, the vogue for the *robe en chemise* or *robe en gaulle*, a ruffled white muslin dress associated with Marie Antoinette’s informal courts at the Trianon and her dairy farm, spread across Europe in the 1780s, providing elite women with an elegant but informal style.⁹ A preference for informality and mobility in dress had been increasing for some time, then, but the exposure of bodily contour, the anti-fashion significations, and the high-waisted silhouette of neoclassical dress were nonetheless dramatic departures from the norms of just a decade or two earlier.

Contemporaries claimed they were “making themselves into Greeks or statues” when wearing neoclassical dress, and we should take them seriously, for the living statue was a concept with great intellectual weight in the eighteenth century. Scientists and philosophers used it as a thought experiment to contemplate the nature of life itself, while artists deployed the concept to explore the dialectic or continuity between ideal and real. What did it mean for women to adopt this concept as a frame for their self-presentation? Neoclassical dress requires us to consider questions of animation and petrification, stasis and mobility, body and fragment, classical and modern, primitive and civilized, contour and dimensionality, art and life. This book will use the idea of the living statue as the lens through which to view the emergence and meaning of neoclassical dress in the 1790s.

How can we accurately characterize an ephemeral art such as fashionable dress? Paintings and drawings have their own interpretative agendas; fashion plates have only an attenuated relationship to fashionable practice; surviving garments are partial and unrepresentative. This study takes into account a wide range of evidence, encompassing not only these artifacts but also periodicals, private letters, popular prints, and literature, in order to consider not just what was actually worn, but more significantly the contemporary perception, aesthetic meaning, and debate over neoclassical dress. We will focus on the innovative garments worn by a small number of elite women in the cosmopolitan capitals of Europe and the United States, where, I argue, dress formed an important part of advanced artistic culture. Yet these aesthetic innovations were not isolated; they reshaped the dominant silhouette worn by most Western women for nearly two decades. In this book I am interested in exploring the nexus of neoclassical dress with neoclassical culture, and its social meaning in the 1790s.

For most scholars, neoclassical fashion has appeared to be a French invention, an outgrowth of the Revolution of 1789 and part of the general taste for antiquity in furnishings and the decorative arts.¹⁰ Its high point is associated with the most extreme practitioners of the *nudité gazée*—women such as Thérèse Tallien, Joséphine Bonaparte, and Juliette Récamier (fig. 4)—and their decadent circle



Fig. 4 Eulalie Morin, *Portrait of Madame Juliette Récamier, née Jeanne Françoise Bernard*, 1799. Oil on canvas, 115 × 87 cm. Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, Versailles, France

Top row, left to right:
Fig. 5 Silk dress, ca. 1775.
French. Metropolitan
Museum of Art, New York

Fig. 6 Silk robe à la polonaise,
ca. 1780–85. American.
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York

Bottom row, left to right:
Fig. 7 Stays, pannier (hoop
petticoat) and chemise,
1750–80. English. Los Angeles
County Museum of Art

Fig. 8 Silk and linen
stomacher with metal
embroidery, ca. 1720.
British. Metropolitan
Museum of Art, New York

active during the four-year period between the Terror and the rise of Napoleon, known as the Directory. But in fact, as we shall see, neoclassical fashion did not emerge from the crucible of political revolution, nor was it invented in France. Rather, it first arose as artistic dress, used by innovators in painting, theater, and dance across several European cultural centers in their search for a more authentic and expressive art.¹¹ Far from merely expressing a conventional vogue for antiquity, the white muslin neoclassical dress of the 1790s was a choice redolent with disruptive meaning. Crucial moments of innovation in dress happened in studios and drawing rooms alongside other aesthetic experiments in diverse artistic media, as women used neoclassical dress to present themselves as works of art come to life.

ART WITHOUT ARTIFICE

Neoclassical dress was part of a wave of aesthetic gestures fueled by a growing distrust of artifice. For decades, artifice had been embraced in art and fashion as the desirable polish of civilization, the refinement of culture that defined politeness and separated humans from a state of nature. Earlier notions of identity valued artifice as a necessary social patina on the raw crudity of nature.¹² The individual was in some ways created by his social roles and networks, and thus to put on a powdered wig was not to deceive others about one's natural hair but rather to courteously engage with social norms and to broadcast one's role and stature in society.¹³ Similarly, the fashionable dress forms that dominated women's dress for most of the eighteenth century celebrated the beauty of sophisticated artifice.

The most dominant forms were based on the mantua, a robe into which a woman slipped her arms, with the fastening in front (usually anchored by a separate piece, the stomacher), and exposing the separate skirt or petticoat (fig. 5). The mantua, which arose in the late seventeenth century and supplanted the two-piece jacket and skirt, was likely derived from the dressing gown, thus imparting a hint of eroticism and undress into this most formal and courtly fashion. Although the robe and the skirt were two separate pieces, they were often constructed from the same textile, giving a uniform appearance to the ensemble. Over the course of the eighteenth century, robes that were derived in form from the mantua developed slightly different shapes: they could flow loosely from the shoulders into a rear train (*robe à la française*); be tacked down with pleats to articulate the rear waist (*robe à l'anglaise*); or loop up the skirts into poufs (*robe retroussé* or *à la polonaise*; fig. 6). In any case, they were made of colorful, decorative, expensive fabrics and ornamented with lace, flounces, and embellishments. Indeed, the square-hipped hoops or panniers, worn during the mid-century decades and enduring as courtly dress through the end of the century, created a flat, rectangular skirt shape ideal for the display of sumptuous textiles (fig. 7).

The most highly decorated part of such an ensemble was usually the stomacher (fig. 8): a triangular element onto which the two sides of the robe fastened. This, along with the stays worn underneath, shaped the torso into a flattened cone with the breasts pushed up, often above the top of the garment, veiled by a thin





Above:
Fig. 9 Daniel Chodowiecki,
Natur und Affectation, from the
Göttinger Taschenkalender,
1777. Etching, 8 × 4.4 cm.
Heidelberg University Library

Opposite:
Fig. 10 Daniel Chodowiecki,
Natur und Affectation, from
the *Göttinger Taschenkalender*,
1777. Twelve etchings, each
8 × 4.4 cm. Heidelberg
University Library

kerchief known as a fichu, or by the exposed top of the chemise underdress. Stiffened with a strip of wood or baleen (whalebone) called a busk, the stays and stomacher smoothed the torso into a flat expanse for embellishment with embroidery, jewels, or ribbons. This inverted triangle sat atop the rectangle of the panniered skirt, regularizing the female body into a stack of abstract shapes whose surface was blizzarded with decoration. Powdered and elaborately dressed hair and pronounced cosmetics contributed to the bodily display of refinement and politeness via artifice.

Yet in the 1780s, an impulse toward more “natural” dress began to surface. Reformers and artists had long

decried the artifice of fashion; moralists impugned its frivolity, deceptiveness, and profligacy, while artists disliked the falsity and temporality it imparted to their portraiture. But as new ideals of personal subjectivity took hold in the 1780s, the chorus became louder and more pointed.¹⁴ Now, the artifice of social roles seemed not to constitute the individual but rather to mask him. Instead, the most authentic version of the self was thought to be visible when the individual was in private, unmasked, and natural. The preoccupation with unmasking, with peering past the social facade to the truth within, led not only to the vogue for caricature but also to the passion for naturalism in fashion.¹⁵ In the 1780s, fashionable women themselves began to embrace the chic of a dress that appeared closer to “nature.”

Yet paradoxically, the path to nature was through an imitation—and embodiment—of art. Indeed, Daniel Chodowiecki’s *Natur und Affectation* (*Natural and Affected Behavior*; fig. 9), from 1777, expresses the growing distrust of artifice and ends up foreshadowing neoclassical dress. This illustration was part of a series representing the contrast between natural and affected manners, published in the influential natural philosophy journal *Göttinger Taschenkalender* (fig. 10). In a series of moral contrasts, the printmaker advocates for restraint in bodily expression, both in gesture and in fashion, whether in response to art, a beautiful landscape, or bad weather.¹⁶ In the first panel of this contrast, the man and woman stand in harmony with their natural setting, barefoot and draped only enough to be decent. In the second panel, the couple is overloaded with panniers, tall hairpieces, silk, fringe, and tassels, and the landscape is almost completely obscured behind their fashionable attire. Yet it is not only their dress but also their bodies that are contrasted: while the “natural” couple turns to face one another with joined hands and weight shifted in classical contrapposto, the “affected” couple looks out at the viewer, touches hands in a courtly gesture, and steps forward with the crossed ankles of balletic first position. For much of the eighteenth century, lessons from dancing masters had imparted the courtly body with civilizing refinement in posture and gesture, yet here Chodowiecki criticizes such refinement as inauthentic artifice, choosing instead classical poses as signifiers of truth.¹⁷ Significantly, the natural man is almost completely nude; in an



Natur

219.



Affectation

W. Schwanke, Kupf.



Empfindung
Sentiment

W. Schwanke, Kupf.



Empfindung
Sentiment

W. Schwanke, Kupf.



Geschmack
Tout

W. Schwanke, Kupf.



Geschmack
Tout

W. Schwanke, Kupf.



Kunst-Kenntnis
Connoissance des Arts

W. Schwanke, Kupf.



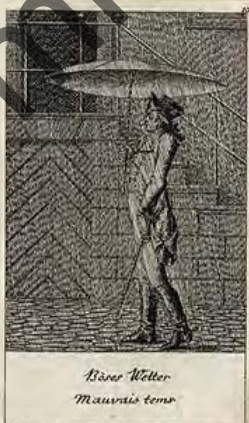
Kunst-Kenntnis
Connoissance des Arts

W. Schwanke, Kupf.



Böse Wetter
Mauvais temps

W. Schwanke, Kupf.



Böse Wetter
Mauvais temps

W. Schwanke, Kupf.



Reitbahn
Manège

W. Schwanke, Kupf.



Reitbahn
Manège

W. Schwanke, Kupf.

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Fig. 11 James Gillray, *Ladies Dress, as it soon will be*, 1796. Hand-colored etching, 31.3 × 22.5 cm. Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University

embrace of the classical notion of *arete*, his athletic body itself expresses his moral virtue. The natural woman, by contrast, seemingly cannot escape some fashioning even in a state of nature, and so it is the drapery of a classical sculpture that is taken to be most at harmony with natural man: hair pulled back and dressed with bands of ribbon, and a simply draped garment that bares both virtuous breasts, wrapped with a cord that circles the waist and crosses over one shoulder. As we shall see, Chodowiecki's "natural woman" costume of 1777 is very close to the actual dress that would be worn by the most fashionable women 20 years later.

Indeed, neoclassical fashionable dress was startlingly naked. Satires such as James Gillray's *Ladies Dress, as it soon will be*, 1796 (fig. 11), reveal British contemporaries' ridicule and glee at the degree to which these new fashions exposed the body. Much like Chodowiecki's "natural" woman, this fashionable lady bares her breasts, drapes herself in white muslin, and dresses her hair with a simple ribbon—although she adds the fashionable accessories of ostrich plumes, fan, and embroidered stockings. Drawing on a visual similarity to the underdress or chemise commonly

worn under an outer robe (seen peeking out from beneath the stays in fig. 7, above), neoclassical dress seemed to eschew entirely the formal, fashionable layer of costume donned by earlier generations. In the crucible of the Terror in Paris, the chemise underdress also came to signify aristocratic prison wear: what elite women wore after being stripped of their polonaises and locked into La Force or Les Carmes prison. Thus, to be undressed in neoclassical muslin in the 1790s was not only to be classical, "natural," and half-naked; it was also, especially in Paris, to have been dangerously vulnerable and to have survived.

But beyond its unprecedented nudity, neoclassical dress represented a kind of anti-fashion. It swathed the body in an articulation of its limbs, joints, contours, and masses, rather than treating the body as a surface to be decorated. Neoclassical fashion was simpler to craft and to clean, and it appeared to eschew the idea of lavishly upholstering the body in favor of lightly veiling a mobile form. In particular, however, it represented a kind of artistic or aesthetic dress—a way of dressing that was explicitly outside fashion and affected superiority to it in its timelessness and appeal to authenticity, naturalism, and women's artistic agency. As anti-fashion, neoclassical dress allowed the women who embraced it to appear to rise above petty artifice and ornament, and to construct themselves as aesthetic agents at the center of key artistic and philosophical discourses of the Enlightenment.

THE LIVING STATUE

- D'ALEMBERT: . . . Then stone must be sensitive.
DIDEROT: Why not?
D'ALEMBERT: It's hard to believe.
DIDEROT: Yes, for him who cuts, chisels, and crushes it, and does not hear it cry out.
D'ALEMBERT: I'd like you to tell me what difference there is, according to you, between a man and a statue.
DIDEROT: Not much. Flesh can be made from marble, and marble from flesh.¹⁸

That statues could live was an idea that fascinated artists, philosophers, and scientists in the eighteenth century. For the philosopher Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, the “statue-man” figured as a productive thought experiment—a statue as a Lockean blank slate, without senses and thus without ideas. Gradually endowing his inanimate marble creature with one sense at a time, Condillac watched as the statue came alive, transmuting sensation into cognition and working out the ontological implications of empiricist science.¹⁹ This same imagined enlivening was central to aesthetic theory of the period: “A statue must live,” Johann Gottfried Herder argued, “its flesh must revive: its face and mien must speak. We must believe we can touch it and feel that it warms itself under our hands.”²⁰ In both cases, the statue enlivens as sensibility—whether its own or its observer’s—increases. In addition, vitalist science posited that cognition was dispersed throughout the body, and that all matter was either imbued with self-organizing life or had the potential to be. Thus, all knowledge, including aesthetic experience, was understood as located in the body and fed by the senses: those who cultivated their sensibility by enlivening such intersubjective feelings as sympathy and desire facilitated more precise and sensitive perception of the world.

It is not surprising, then, that the story of Pygmalion, which placed both desire and the living statue at the core of aesthetic experience, was very prominent in eighteenth-century theater, dance, and visual art.²¹ Most eighteenth-century viewers knew the story from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: Pygmalion was a Cypriot king who became disgusted by real women after seeing contemporary prostitutes. He carved a beautiful ideal woman in ivory, fell in love with it, made offerings to it, and pleaded with Venus to bring it to life. By the eighteenth century the sculpted woman had acquired the name Galatea, Greek for “she who is milk-white.” Herder’s aesthetic treatise, “Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion’s Creative Dream” (1778), used the myth to muse on sculpture’s seeming ability to come to life in the imagination of the viewer via a spark of desire that transformed sensory experience into aesthetic understanding.²² The dream of Pygmalion, then, was not only the dream of a superhuman creative artist, but also the dream of an art that lives, of sensations that speak truth, and of a world that

Fig. 12 James Gillray,
Dido, in Despair!, 1801.
 Hand-colored etching,
 25.3 × 35.8 cm.
 Lewis Walpole Library,
 Yale University



aspires to the same perfection and idealism as art. As a potent embodiment of the aspirations to blur boundaries between art and life, and to bring the golden age of the past into the present, Pygmalion was suited to artistic innovations aimed at conveying greater authenticity, sensuality, and embodied naturalism.

These engagements with sensation, cognition, and aesthetic experience brought new attention to the sense of touch—"the most profound and philosophical" of the senses, according to Denis Diderot.²³ If indeed the whole body were a kind of thinking organ, and knowledge derived from sensation, then the sense organs of the body are not only the eyes, but also the nose, ears, tongue, and skin. The haptic sense, once derided alongside taste as a decadent sense that endangered the moral health of the soul, became the subject of new scrutiny in eighteenth-century thought, not only in science and philosophy but also in the newly founded "science of sensation," aesthetics. In the apprehension of art, haptic perception sparked art to life in the mind of the viewer, particularly when stimulated by desire. Beauty, desire, and the sense of lifelikeness in art were thus rooted in Enlightenment theories of vital embodiment.

These three ideas—the elevation of the haptic; the primacy given to embodied sensation as the engine of cognition; and the central role of desire in the appreciation of art—all centered qualities long associated with women and femininity at the heart of prestigious cultural discourses. As modern Galateas, or enlivened sculptures, women's closeness to nature and greater sensitivity to the tactile could be claimed as granting them a privileged access to aesthetic and even moral truth. This provided a limited, yet potent, way for women to assert their aesthetic agency and extrapolate from these theorized forms to a lived experience. Already characterized as more emotional, more embodied,



Fig. 13 James Gillray, *Advantages of wearing Muslin Dresses!—dedicated to the serious attention of the Fashionable Ladies of Great Britain*, 1802. Hand-colored etching, 25.2 × 35.4 cm. Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University

less rational, and more attuned to the “lower” senses of taste and touch, women were able to assert expertise in these arenas and exercise aesthetic agency as artists and patrons. As this book argues, women made paintings, wrote poetry, staged performances, patronized art, and dressed and styled their own bodies as ways to intervene and participate in these cultural discourses.

Yet as we shall see, the growing participation of women in vanguard neoclassicism also triggered a gendered backlash. Neoclassical visual culture was a stew of transmission and translation, high and low, imitation and invention, public and private, elite and commercialized, two-dimensional and three-dimensional. Some contemporary commentators grew alarmed by this, and by women’s artistic participation, and diminished and dismissed women’s formative role in this modern aesthetic. Women’s aesthetic interventions were often characterized by such critics as debased aping and mere dilettantism; over the course of the decade, terms such as bacchantism, amateurism, and dilettantism became negative and feminized epithets. As the taste for authentic, embodied classicism spread through prints, attitude performances, theater, ballet, and fashionable dress, to wider, less educated, and more female audiences and agents, the ridicule grew: women were clueless imitators of true art.

Emma Hart, later Lady Hamilton and companion of the British ambassador to Naples, was a lightning rod for this debate, both lauded as a masterful performer of neoclassical “attitudes” and mocked for her vulgar aping of classical idealism.²⁴ Satirist James Gillray’s *Dido, in Despair!* (fig. 12) distills the ridicule: this living statue is no Venus, sensitively attuned to the refinements of formalist perfection, but, rather, fat, maudlin, messy, and drunk. Her dress is not neoclassical drapery, but a common nightgown. And ordinary women in neoclassical dress were nearly as laughable, their pretensions to aesthetic

Opposite:

Fig. 14 Francis Legat after George Romney, *Cassandra Raving*, from *Troilus and Cressida*, 1795. Etching and engraving, published for the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery, 57 × 41.4 cm. Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University

vanguardism just as ridiculous. Gillray's *Advantages of wearing Muslin Dresses!—dedicated to the serious attention of the Fashionable Ladies of Great Britain* (fig. 13) features a woman whose fashionable muslin has caught fire and whose fat body and ungainly pose echoes Hart's in *Dido*. Humiliations are heaped upon her as an upset tea table, loaded with neoclassical porcelain, spills tea right into her lap. By invoking fashionable women's "serious attention," Gillray mocks the ideas and values women attached to their aesthetic choices as frivolous and stupid: muslin catches fire, the neoclassical icon of erupting Vesuvius is only sublime at a distance, and it is ridiculous to pose at being classical sculpture brought to life. These are nothing but silly pretentions.

INVENTING NEOCLASSICAL DRESS

Neoclassical dress thus began in controversy, mockery, and scandal. Yet its breadth and longevity indicate that it must have been both useful and satisfying for the women who wore it. Indeed, by the early years of the nineteenth century neoclassical dress was so ubiquitous, and so secure in its identification as modern, chic, and natural, that numerous individuals tried to take credit for inventing it. In her *Memoirs* (published 1835), Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, who was known for wearing a white muslin dress and turban while painting in the studio as early as the 1780s, several times mentions her own fashion interventions, taking credit for the innovative neoclassical performance dress of Emma Hamilton in Naples and for arranging the toilettes of the Grand Duchesses' robes à la grecque in Russia.²⁵ In 1830, the son of British portraitist George Romney claimed his father led the taste for antique-style dress:

Though it was the fashion during the greatest part of Mr. Romney's practice, for ladies to wear high head dresses and stiff, long-waisted stays; yet, whenever he had an opportunity . . . he rid himself of those ungraceful incumbrances, and returned to nature and truth. His picture of Cassandra, in the Shakespeare Gallery [fig. 14], influenced the public taste, and was instrumental in expelling from the empire of fashion the long and shapeless waist; and in introducing a more simple and graceful mode of dress, approaching nearer to the Grecian.²⁶

In 1832, artist Albertine Clément-Hémery's memoir credited one of her studio-mates in Paris, Adèle Tornezy, with inventing the style, saying "it was from our studio that Greek clothes came out to replace the shapeless bodices called à la Coblentz," and noting that after the young women artists paraded one day in 1794 the whole town imitated them:

The following Sunday, the Tuileries, the Champs-Élysées were filled with women streaked with bright-colored belts, hairbands, and Greek cothurnes. Tornezy triumphed; her haberdasher owed her his fortune.²⁷



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But contemporaries who noticed the new fashion arising during the 1790s, rather than decades later, tended to credit it to one of three women: Lady Charlotte Campbell in London, said to be the model for Gillray's satire of ladies' dress discussed above (fig. 11); Emma Hart (later Lady Hamilton) in Naples, who posed for Romney's *Cassandra* mentioned above (fig. 14); or Madame Thérèse Tallien in Paris (fig. 15). These three women will appear as focal characters in Chapters One, Three, and Five.

"It is scarcely fifteen years," reported *La Belle Assemblée* (London) in 1809, "since Lady Charlotte Campbell was the most distinguished ornament of the fashionable circle. . . . It is perhaps unnecessary to inform those female readers who are possessed of experience in the science of costume, and can count the revolutions of fashions with accuracy and precision, that Lady Charlotte Campbell was the first inventor of what is technically called *short waists*."²⁸ Yet others had attributed this innovation—the raised waist, with its accompanying freedom from "that martyrdom which beauty has sustained from whalebone and tight lacing"—to Emma Hart, the striker of "attitudes" at Sir William Hamilton's house in Naples.²⁹ *The Times* of London credited Hart in 1793 with "attempting to introduce the dress and manners" of "Grecian models," while her old lover Charles Francis Greville teased her about her influence in the summer of 1793, writing: "Tell Lady H. that I hope she does not follow the fashion of others; at the [Queen's] birthday the prevailing fashion was very unlike court dress, & very unlike a Grecian dress, & very unlike Lady H. dress, but evidently an imitation of her."³⁰

Still other sources, such as this British account from 1796, credited Thérèse Tallien—the Parisian beauty and heroine of Thermidor (the end of the Reign of Terror)—with introducing the antique style to London, repeating a familiar dynamic of Britons following a Parisian fashion:

The Ladies of the present day, without waists, did not perhaps know that they copy this fashion from Madame Tallien, who copied it from the Greeks. Madame Tallien is one of the most elegant women in Europe, and had her waist shortened by a cestus of diamonds . . . The original Greek dress is a short negligee, and all of one piece from top to bottom, but never with a petticoat dropped over the body.³¹

Throughout the Directory period, European periodicals followed the extreme and revealing fashions of the *Merveilleuses*, especially Madame Tallien, as fashion trendsetters. Yet by contrast, a Parisian fashion journal in 1799 credited not local beauties, but Emma Hart, by then Lady Hamilton, as the leader of fashion or "l'oracle du goût": "As we know, Lady Hamilton, wife of the British ambassador in Naples, . . . is the model and the director of the fashion and adornment of women; as soon as she adopts a form of dress or hat, one can be sure that the next day it is copied by all the fashionables of the court."³²

Innovation in fashion is difficult to pin down and is usually due to a confluence of sources and influences. Nonetheless, the repeated crediting by contemporaries of these three women—Emma Hart in Naples, Lady Charlotte Campbell in London,

Opposite:
Fig. 15 Jean-Bernard Duvivier,
Portrait of Madame Tallien,
1806. Oil on canvas,
125.7 × 93.3 cm. Brooklyn
Museum, NY. Healy Purchase
Fund B, 1989.28

and Thérèse Tallien in Paris—lends credence to their being among the leaders of the neoclassical innovations of the 1790s, standing metonymically for larger communities of influence located in these places. These sources also draw our attention to the cross-border influence of these women—Hart, for example, is called the setter of style in Paris and London, even though she's based in Naples, while the Parisian Tallien is a model for both London ladies and distant European courts. Contemporaries' discussions of neoclassical dress also allow us to sketch a timeline for neoclassical dress's appearance and dissemination. The emergence of white, high-waisted drapery from stages and art studios to fashionable evening and day wear occurred first in Naples in the late 1780s and early 1790s, led by the example of Hart. Campbell spent the winter of 1789–90 in Naples with her mother, the Duchess of Argyll, who was the first high-born British lady to receive Hart and who became close to her.³³ Campbell brought the concept of neoclassical dress back with her to London, and it was just after she had turned 18 and emerged into the London social scene, in spring 1793, that we first begin hearing of the high waists, padded bellies, and transparent drapes she popularized. Meanwhile, Tallien, only two years older than Campbell, was in Bordeaux at this time, having divorced her émigré husband and taken refuge with relatives. There she met the charismatic Jean-Lambert Tallien, her future husband, and appeared as Goddess of Liberty in Bordeaux's Festival of Reason in December 1793. Her emergence as a fashionable icon began with her release from prison in 1794 and her renown as "Our Lady of Thermidor," with her taste for blond wigs and white muslin round gowns. Extreme neoclassical fashion flourished in the Directory period, led by Tallien and other ladies in her circle. At least two of these women, Joséphine de Beauharnais (Bonaparte) and Fortunée Hamelin, were Creoles who incorporated some of the practices and connotations of West Indies plantation culture into their muslin ensembles. The emergence of new illustrated fashion journals in London, Paris, and Weimar in the late 1790s cross-fertilized these innovations and spread them further. By 1800, the high-waisted white muslin dress was the orthodox style for women across Western Europe and the Americas.

TIME, PLACE, PERSON, FORM, MEANING

This book traces the emergence of neoclassical dress from the "attitude" costume of Naples to the belly pads of London to the transparent confections of Directoire Paris over the course of a tumultuous decade. Paintings, prints, aesthetic treatises, popular periodicals, memoirs, plays, scientific studies, sculptures, and garments all form the tapestry of evidence. Five elements distinguish the material form and expressive capacity of neoclassical dress: its drape, or the way it clung to the form of the body rather than creating a surface for decoration; its transparency, revealing the body but also metaphorically evoking truth and authenticity; its high-waistedness, with a columnar silhouette that highlighted the breasts and belly; its whiteness, based on the bleached cotton fabric called muslin; and its lightness, the spare yardage of the style and the resulting exposure of arms, breasts, and backs. In this book, the cultural

history of neoclassical dress will be anchored by attention to the material truths of its construction and design. Short formalist studies of each of these five material features of neoclassical dress intersperse the chapters that follow, highlighting the form's emblematic connection to a larger constellation of contemporary concerns.

In what follows, I consider five overlapping matrices—time, place, person, form, and meaning—each of which aims to map an aspect of neoclassical dress. Chronologically the narrative proceeds across the decade of the 1790s, while geographically it follows the emergence of neoclassical dress in Naples and its spread to London and then Paris. Each of these three geographical nodes is also associated with three women who were key innovators in each place: Emma Hamilton in Naples, Lady Charlotte Campbell in London, and Thérèse Tallien in Paris. Finally, each chapter takes one iconic figure by which women were often understood as living artworks as the point of departure for an exploration of an aspect of the living statue paradox: Galatea; the bacchante; Psyche; the Corinthian Maid; the wax statue; and the *femme sauvage*. When taken as a whole, these five matrices undergird the synthetic essays that form each chapter of the book, and shape my argument that women's self-presentation as living statues in the 1790s was a substantive aesthetic project with historical significance and enduring cultural efficacy.

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DRAPE

Opposite:

Chapeau de Velours. Fichu quadrillé,
from *Journal des dames et des modes,*
Costume Parisien, An 9, 1 décembre 1800.
Hand-colored engraving, 18.1 × 11 cm.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Below (detail of fig. 56):

Marie-Denise Villers, *Marie Joséphine*
Charlotte du Val d'Ognes, 1801.
Oil on canvas, 161.3 × 128.6 cm.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



NEOCLASSICAL DRESS is modern and formalist: its approach to the body is to swathe it in a thin textile that both constructs and reveals the form beneath. Earlier gowns, with their figured silks and elaborate embellishments, created sumptuous and scintillating surfaces, and bodies were bolstered by stiffened stays and wide panniers in order to provide flat expanses to be decorated. By contrast, neoclassical dress is made of matte, cotton textile with an open, plain weave, and the dress easily falls into soft folds and drapes around the contour of the form beneath it (detail of fig. 56, below). This characteristic of muslin was sometimes the occasion for satire, as in James Gillray's *The Graces in a High Wind* (fig. 16), which poses three elegant women as the Three Graces. Although they are clothed, these modern Graces are nearly as naked as their classical exemplars; the strong wind has blown their thin muslin into and around every nook and contour of their bodies. Women looped their dress over their elbows (fig. 17) or pushed it back with their arms or pulled it taut across their knees. It wrinkled and fell easily into folds that caught the light and created shadow. Its neutral color and subdued decoration encouraged the eye to read past the surface of the garment to the body beneath.

Cotton muslin, the textile usually used for neoclassical dress, is a plain weave cloth in which the warp and weft threads are identical. The fineness of the cloth was determined by the thinness of the thread and the openness of the weave. Not until the 1790s did British industrial spinning machines begin to rival the gossamer quality of Indian hand-spun thread; even then, no human or machine in Europe could compete with the skill of Bengali weavers, who were able to make muslin so fine that a sari made from the textile (typically 6 to 9 yards long) could be folded up into a matchbox. When the flat, open, fine weave of muslin is draped on the bias, as it often was for the dress's bodice, the warp and weft threads are able to slide into those open spaces in the matrix, giving the textile fluidity and elasticity. The fabric can then conform to the shape beneath, accentuating the curve of the body by clinging to the figure. In addition, the dresses were designed to exploit the fabric's ability to drape—for example, by cutting a dress with extra-long sleeves that draped into bunched



folds at the wrist (fig. 18). Such folds and bunches formed patterns of highlight and shadow, subtly articulating the shapes they molded.

By the late 1790s, most neoclassical dresses were constructed with a narrow back panel that gave the appearance of thin shoulder blades drawn tightly together (fig. 19). Fabric was gathered at the high center-back waist and released into a train at the rear. This train was important to the range of bodily expressions provided by the dress: when seated, the train pooled elegantly around the figure, while when standing it was often looped over the arm or clasped in the hand of the wearer, which pulled the fabric taut around her rear, raised the hem above her ankles, and provided continual variety in the patterns of pleating and draping. Neoclassical drapery, then, is essentially sculptural and formalist; it defines the body as an integrated mass, rather than decorating its surface.

Painters and sculptors had been concerned with the use of form-creating drapery for generations, of course, but fashionable dress had, in the past, usually valued surface over form, flattening the body with expensive patterned textiles and glittering embellishments, and marking in time its currency and fashionability. Neoclassical dress, by contrast, was artistic dress, in at least three ways: it was derived from the artistic practice of draping models; it emerged from the studios and theatrical stages, which were the first locations to align this style of dress with ideals of naturalism and authenticity; and it treated the body like a work of art, sculpting it in three dimensions.

Painters Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and Angelica Kauffman not only frequently painted their sitters in a kind of generalized classical drapery, but also adopted versions of such dress themselves, both

Above, from left to right:

Fig. 16 James Gillray, *The Graces in a High Wind. A Scene taken from Nature, in Kensington Gardens*, 1810. Hand-colored etching, 25.7 × 35 cm. Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University

Fig. 17 *Bonnet à la jardinière, orné de Rubans et d'une branche de Lilas. Centure à la Victime*, from *Journal des dames et des modes, Costume Parisien*, An 6, 17 novembre 1797. Hand-colored engraving, 18 × 11.7 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



From left to right:

Fig. 18 Cotton muslin dress with cotton embroidery, ca. 1800. Indian textile; dress fabricated in England. Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Fig. 19 Cotton muslin dress with cotton embroidery, ca. 1800. Indian textile; dress fabricated in England. Victoria and Albert Museum, London

as studio dress and in their numerous self-portraits.¹ Kauffman's *Self-Portrait as the Muse of Painting* (fig. 20), made for the Duke of Tuscany's famous gallery of artists' self-portraits in 1787, uses classicizing dress to facilitate the painting's dual signification as self-portrait and allegory.² Kauffman's dress is similar to those deployed in many of her portraits and self-portraits over the years: a loose drape of white, matte textile that crosses over the bust, drapes over the shoulders, and is gathered high under the breasts, falling in folds across her legs. It reveals glimpses of an underdress with gathered, elbow-length sleeves and a modest neckline. Kauffman's hair is loose and unpowdered; her only ornament is a sash with a cameo featuring Minerva. Neoclassical dress marks Kauffman's body as outside the quotidian world of ordinary female roles and responsibilities, belonging instead to the realm of art. Allegory traditionally construed female bodies as empty vessels to be filled with abstract meaning; Kauffman here seizes on this tradition and turns it to her advantage by using classical drapery to align her physical body with the allegorical body of painting itself.



Above, from left to right:
 Fig. 20 Angelica Kauffman, *Self-Portrait as the Muse of Painting*, 1787. Oil on canvas, 128 × 93.5 cm. Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Fig. 21 Marie-Victoire Lemoine, *The Interior of an Atelier of a Woman Painter* (detail), 1789/96. Oil on canvas, 116.5 × 88.9 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Vigée-Lebrun was vocal about her embrace of artistic or “picturesque” dress; her *Memoirs* are filled with discussions of how she rejected the frivolous fashion of her time in favor of the neoclassical-style white dress.³ Of the 1780s, she writes: “As I detested the female style of dress then in fashion, I bent all my efforts upon rendering it a little more picturesque, and was delighted when, after getting the confidence of my models, I was able to drape them according to my fancy. . . . Besides, I could not endure [hair] powder.”⁴ For herself, she affected a kind of chic nonchalance, saying: “I spent very little on dress; I was even reproached for neglecting it, for I wore none but white dresses of muslin or lawn, and never wore elaborate gowns excepting for my sittings at Versailles. My head-dress cost me nothing, because I did my hair myself, and most of the time I wore a muslin cap on my head, as may be seen from my portraits.”⁵ Directing readers to her self-portraits as indices of her typical working attire, she testifies to their spontaneity and authenticity; indeed, by the time she wrote these memoirs at the end of her life, her image as an artist was indivisible from her characteristic white dress, muslin cap, and natural curls, as seen for example in a depiction of her by Marie-Victoire Lemoine exhibited in 1796 (fig. 21).⁶ All of these sartorial choices were quite distant from the pads and hoops, rich silks, and frizzed coiffures that were fashionable in the 1780s.



Fig. 22 Daniel Berger after Anton Graff, *Esther Charlotte Brandes as Ariadne*, 1782. Etching, 16.5 × 10 cm. Heidelberg University Library

In fact, many artists and performers were interested in reforming dress during the second half of the eighteenth century. Over the course of several decades, actors and dancers in London, Paris, Naples, Vienna, and several German cultural centers grew increasingly attentive to movement, gesture, expression, and realism, and developed new norms for costume to support these ambitions.⁷ Older theatrical styles had stressed perfect postures and conventional gestures in performers who wore formal courtly dress. The new, more pantomimic style called for actors to move their bodies with larger and more angular and emphatic gestures, as well as to use more eloquent facial expressions. In tandem with these expressive innovations, actors experimented with altering their costumes, even though strict rules of propriety and formality made such changes controversial at first. In 1775, two different theatrical productions each claimed to be the first to introduce a truly classical costume for antique characters. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's monodrama, *Pygmalion*, was staged in Paris with the actor Larive costumed in a tunic and sandals; his more conventional Galatea, however, wore panniers and a large powdered wig.⁸ The same year in Germany, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe staged a legendary production of *Ariadne auf Naxos* in Gotha. Actress Esther Charlotte Brandes wore a white silk dress with a red sash and sandals (fig. 22). A contemporary reviewer lauded the archaeological accuracy of the costume:

In 1775, the German stage is observing the laws of the costume brought back from a very long time ago. At the presentation of *Ariadne* at Gotha, the first genuinely ancient Greek dress appeared on the stage, after the drawings of ancient monuments and manufactured according to Winckelmann's description and the headdress was also made after an old gem of Ariadne.⁹

The costume made a new type of truth claim by linking itself to the accurate study of antique art. In turn, it supported the theatrical production's modern disdain for artifice and embrace of authenticity.

But the chic of artistic drapery could be double-edged: its austere simplicity signified artistic purity, timelessness, and truth, yet its immodesty and heedlessness of hierarchy and formality could be seen as representing decadence and potential licentiousness. Vigée-Lebrun experienced this backlash in the reaction to her infamous "Greek supper" of 1788. She described the dinner party as the spontaneous fancy of an elegant and artistic household, inspired by passages about an ancient Greek banquet that her brother was reading aloud from the celebrated new imaginary travelogue *The Travels of Anacharsis the Younger in Greece*.¹⁰ She instructed her cook to make some special sauces, borrowed some



Fig. 23 Francesco Novelli after Pietro Novelli, *The Attitudes of Lady Hamilton*, after 1791. Etching, 20.4 × 32.5 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London

antique Etruscan pottery from a neighbor, and then set about contriving Greek costumes for her guests. “My studio, full of things I used for draping my models, would furnish me with enough material for garments,” she wrote, and with them she transformed her guests into “veritable Athenians.”¹¹ Envious tales of this chic entertainment spread rapidly. Vigée-Lebrun claimed the whole thing cost her no more than 15 francs, but rumors of the luxurious decadence of the party soon reached Versailles and other European courts, where the reported cost soared into the thousands.¹² Artistic life, where one might lounge about drinking wine out of Etruscan vessels while dressed like a “veritable Athenian,” was both evocative of classical learning and also retained an aura of barely restrained license. Perhaps most importantly and controversially, it could function as a sphere of female agency and visibility.

Vigée-Lebrun’s party made a splash, but these same elements of female artistic agency, lack of hierarchy, neoclassical drapery, living antiquity, and a general air of decadence were present year after year for the most influential audiences in Europe in the performances of Emma Hart, mistress and then wife to the British ambassador to Naples, who performed “attitudes” in her Neapolitan parlor wearing neoclassical dress. A 1791 etching after Pietro Novelli (fig. 23) shows Hart in various poses derived from classical exemplars, and in each it is mainly her simple dress and shawl that sculpt her body into artistic

attitudes. Bunched between her knees as she kneels, draping across her thigh as she steps forward and leans on a plinth, or pulled taut across the back of her legs as she stands in profile, Hart's drapery defines her body as a living statue.

By the late 1780s, then, the thin white dress, belted with a high waist, baring the arms and accessorized with a shawl, had become associated with innovative artistic experiments. Audiences were used to seeing it depicted in oil paint or worn in the studio, and they were increasingly comfortable seeing it on bodies in motion on the stage. Often connected with allegories, goddesses, or muses, or the legend of works of art miraculously coming to life as in the Pygmalion story, the dress stood for an artistic commitment to authenticity and a naturalism that found its wellspring in antiquity. But as we shall see in Chapter One, it took the special environment of Naples for such experiments to move from art to life—from the studio to the street.

Neoclassical dress was born as artistic drapery and carried connotations of the stage and studio into its role as fashionable clothing for modern women, emphasizing women's self-presentation as artistic subjects and objects by allowing them to drape themselves. Treating the body as a shape to be sculpted rather than a surface to be decorated, neoclassical drapery took a formalist approach and dignified the physicality of the woman who wore it. It highlighted not her wealth or status but her aesthetic refinement, her embodied subjectivity, and her participation in a vanguard discourse of enlightened learning and artistic experimentation. Thus it is no surprise that women artists and aesthetes embraced neoclassical dress. While Vigée-Lebrun and others promoted its comfort, ease, and lack of fuss, neoclassical drapery was not only light and comfortable for a woman who was working at art—it also opened a space for women to participate in artistic life.

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French. Metropolitan
Museum of Art, New York

Fig. 6 Silk robe à la polonaise,
ca. 1780–85. American.
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York

Bottom row, left to right:
Fig. 7 Stays, pannier (hoop
petticoat) and chemise,
1750–80. English. Los Angeles
County Museum of Art

Fig. 8 Silk and linen
stomacher with metal
embroidery, ca. 1720.
British. Metropolitan
Museum of Art, New York

active during the four-year period between the Terror and the rise of Napoleon, known as the Directory. But in fact, as we shall see, neoclassical fashion did not emerge from the crucible of political revolution, nor was it invented in France. Rather, it first arose as artistic dress, used by innovators in painting, theater, and dance across several European cultural centers in their search for a more authentic and expressive art.¹¹ Far from merely expressing a conventional vogue for antiquity, the white muslin neoclassical dress of the 1790s was a choice redolent with disruptive meaning. Crucial moments of innovation in dress happened in studios and drawing rooms alongside other aesthetic experiments in diverse artistic media, as women used neoclassical dress to present themselves as works of art come to life.

ART WITHOUT ARTIFICE

Neoclassical dress was part of a wave of aesthetic gestures fueled by a growing distrust of artifice. For decades, artifice had been embraced in art and fashion as the desirable polish of civilization, the refinement of culture that defined politeness and separated humans from a state of nature. Earlier notions of identity valued artifice as a necessary social patina on the raw crudity of nature.¹² The individual was in some ways created by his social roles and networks, and thus to put on a powdered wig was not to deceive others about one's natural hair but rather to courteously engage with social norms and to broadcast one's role and stature in society.¹³ Similarly, the fashionable dress forms that dominated women's dress for most of the eighteenth century celebrated the beauty of sophisticated artifice.

The most dominant forms were based on the mantua, a robe into which a woman slipped her arms, with the fastening in front (usually anchored by a separate piece, the stomacher), and exposing the separate skirt or petticoat (fig. 5). The mantua, which arose in the late seventeenth century and supplanted the two-piece jacket and skirt, was likely derived from the dressing gown, thus imparting a hint of eroticism and undress into this most formal and courtly fashion. Although the robe and the skirt were two separate pieces, they were often constructed from the same textile, giving a uniform appearance to the ensemble. Over the course of the eighteenth century, robes that were derived in form from the mantua developed slightly different shapes: they could flow loosely from the shoulders into a rear train (*robe à la française*); be tacked down with pleats to articulate the rear waist (*robe à l'anglaise*); or loop up the skirts into poufs (*robe retroussé* or *à la polonaise*; fig. 6). In any case, they were made of colorful, decorative, expensive fabrics and ornamented with lace, flounces, and embellishments. Indeed, the square-hipped hoops or panniers, worn during the mid-century decades and enduring as courtly dress through the end of the century, created a flat, rectangular skirt shape ideal for the display of sumptuous textiles (fig. 7).

The most highly decorated part of such an ensemble was usually the stomacher (fig. 8): a triangular element onto which the two sides of the robe fastened. This, along with the stays worn underneath, shaped the torso into a flattened cone with the breasts pushed up, often above the top of the garment, veiled by a thin

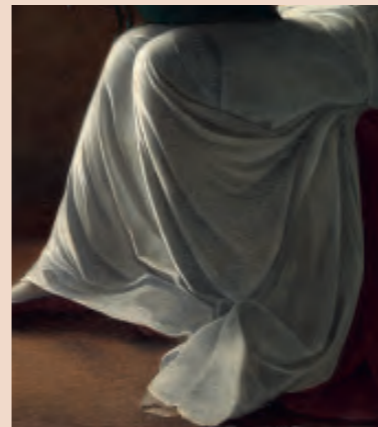




Opposite:
Chapeau de Velours. Fichu quadrillé,
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Costume Parisien, An 9, 1 décembre 1800.
 Hand-colored engraving, 18.1 × 11 cm.
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Below (detail of fig. 56):
 Marie-Denise Villers, *Marie Joséphine*
Charlotte du Val d'Ognes, 1801.
 Oil on canvas, 161.3 × 128.6 cm.
 Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

DRAPE



NEOCLASSICAL DRESS is modern and formalist: its approach to the body is to swathe it in a thin textile that both constructs and reveals the form beneath. Earlier gowns, with their figured silks and elaborate embellishments, created sumptuous and scintillating surfaces, and bodies were bolstered by stiffened stays and wide panniers in order to provide flat expanses to be decorated. By contrast, neoclassical dress is made of matte, cotton textile with an open, plain weave, and the dress easily falls into soft folds and drapes around the contour of the form beneath it (detail of fig. 56, below). This characteristic of muslin was sometimes the occasion for satire, as in James Gillray's *The Graces in a High Wind* (fig. 16), which poses three elegant women as the Three Graces. Although they are clothed, these modern Graces are nearly as naked as their classical exemplars; the strong wind has blown their thin muslin into and around every nook and contour of their bodies. Women looped their dress over their elbows (fig. 17) or pushed it back with their arms or pulled it taut across their knees. It wrinkled and fell easily into folds that caught the light and created shadow. Its neutral color and subdued decoration encouraged the eye to read past the surface of the garment to the body beneath.

Cotton muslin, the textile usually used for neoclassical dress, is a plain weave cloth in which the warp and weft threads are identical. The fineness of the cloth was determined by the thinness of the thread and the openness of the weave. Not until the 1790s did British industrial spinning machines begin to rival the gossamer quality of Indian hand-spun thread; even then, no human or machine in Europe could compete with the skill of Bengali weavers, who were able to make muslin so fine that a sari made from the textile (typically 6 to 9 yards long) could be folded up into a matchbox. When the flat, open, fine weave of muslin is draped on the bias, as it often was for the dress's bodice, the warp and weft threads are able to slide into those open spaces in the matrix, giving the textile fluidity and elasticity. The fabric can then conform to the shape beneath, accentuating the curve of the body by clinging to the figure. In addition, the dresses were designed to exploit the fabric's ability to drape—for example, by cutting a dress with extra-long sleeves that draped into bunched



Fig. 24 *Herculaneum Dancers*, from the Villa of Cicero, Pompeii, 20 BCE–45 CE. Wall painting fragments, 30.5 × 213 cm. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples

Further, her embodied artistry is transmitted, as through an electric spark, to all of her spectators, causing the whole company to be “infected . . . with her own sensations” and to be “transported into an ideal world” for a brief, glorious moment.

Madame de Staël’s *Corinne* appeared at the end of a long decade of tumultuous social, political, and artistic change in Europe, in a novel that is widely recognized as a triumph of romanticism and a template for female artistic agency. But *Corinne* was not the first woman to wear classical dress, make art, and attempt thereby to carve out an independent and expressive life. Instead, Staël’s character was a particularly artful distillation of a subject position that many women claimed in the neoclassical culture of the 1790s. By seeming to bring great classical art to life through their bodies’ dress and attitudes, women not only asserted artistic agency for themselves, but also claimed a transformative potential for the culture around them—a path to a renewed golden age.

In this chapter, I will begin the story of living statues in the radical neoclassicism of the 1790s by arguing that neoclassical dress was invented in late eighteenth-century Naples, and that from the beginning it carried with it the connotations of transformative, embodied artistry and independent subjectivity expressed by Staël’s *Corinne*. Artists, diplomats and Grand Tourists all traveled to Naples, the third largest city in the eighteenth century after London and Paris, and many were both entranced and troubled by its heady mixture of hedonism and antiquity.² All of Naples seemed to be a magical place where the ribald, physical body of antiquity still breathed.

This atmosphere of living classicism in Naples was distilled into its most ubiquitous icon, the tambourine-playing female dancer, and often represented as a bacchante or maenad, especially in the particular form of the classical wall painting fragments, the *Herculaneum Dancers* (fig. 25). The bacchante, devotee of Bacchus and partaker in his ancient

rites of sex and murder, was the classical figure that epitomized the distinctively embodied, sensual Neapolitan classicism, with its double-edged connotations of both passionate freedom and libertine degeneracy. Despite its traditionally licentious associations in European culture, the bacchante became a liberating template for female self-presentation and self-conception. This was aided by contemporary aesthetic philosophy, which, in an innovative series of analyses of the ways sculpture seems to come to life in the eyes of the viewer, credited women’s closeness to nature and their greater sensitivity to the “lower” senses of taste and touch with a privileged access to aesthetic, and even moral, truth. Together, the example of the embodied, Neapolitan bacchante on the one hand and the theories of sculpture appreciation on the other provided a way for women to participate in advanced artistic culture, turning to their advantage their existing status as beautiful objects, and exploiting the contemporary belief that those who were closer to unschooled and embodied “nature”—peasants, southern Italians, and women—were also closer to profound artistic truth. In dressing and posing like living statues during the 1790s, women played Pygmalion to their own Galatea, not only kindling the aesthetic imagination of others but also asserting their own.

In what follows, I will first discuss the intertwined visual tradition of the *Herculaneum Dancers*, the bacchante, and Emma Hart’s attitude performances in the 1780s and 1790s, together with the special character of Naples as a place where classical culture still breathed. We will note the innovation of Hart’s performance dress and its importance for the effect her attitudes created. Finally, I will turn to the influence of the Neapolitan bacchante in European visual culture in the 1790s, noting both the power and the perceived danger of its embodied neoclassicism.



Above, from left to right:
 Fig. 29 George Romney, *Emma Hart as a Bacchante*, 1785. Oil on canvas, dimensions unknown. Private collection

Fig. 30 John Raphael Smith after Joshua Reynolds, *A Bacchante*, 1784. Mezzotint, with aquatint border, 38 × 26.7 cm. Yale Center for British Art, New Haven

Opposite:
 Fig. 31 Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Emma Hamilton as a Bacchante*, 1790–92. Oil on canvas, 132.5 × 105.5 cm. Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight, UK

emphasizing her animality, her vitality, and her deep connectedness to a powerful nature that is also glossed as classical. Both paintings hung in Hamilton's home in Naples, and once Emma herself arrived, Hamilton soon commissioned more, including Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's *Emma Hamilton as a Bacchante* (fig. 31). This painting, made in 1790–92 when the artist arrived in Naples after the outbreak of revolution in France, echoes Romney's composition but infuses the painting with a strong sense of place, including not only the tambourine and the echoed posture of one of the *Dancer* fragments, but also the distinctive silhouette of Vesuvius, smoking in the background.¹⁴ Vesuvius's presence had a specific resonance for Vigée-Lebrun's patron, William Hamilton: he had studied the volcano for decades, published about it, and almost always had it included in portraits of himself.¹⁵ Yoking classical grace and modern beauty, wild nature and timeless culture, animal passion and aesthetic refinement, Vigée-Lebrun locates this bacchante distinctively in Naples.

Artists and aesthetes invoked the bacchante as the sign of a neoclassicism that was not in the head, but in the heart and the loins: an authentic neopagan communion that actually awoke the past and brought art to life.¹⁶ Andrei Pop has used the term "neopaganism" to describe an alternative classicism that emerged in the aftermath of the discoveries of Herculaneum and Pompeii, and resulted in a decentering of both European subjectivity and Christian morality.¹⁷ This was an essentially culturally relativist and pluralistic approach to the past, allowing not only for other moralities but other gods and other truths.



The Maid's story, as told by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* (ca. 77–9 CE) is of the origin of art. A young woman of Corinth was in love with a young man who was about to depart on a long journey; to keep a vestige of him, she “traced the profile of his face, as thrown upon the wall by the light of the lamp.”²⁹ Her father, a potter named Butades, then filled in the outline with clay and modeled it in low relief. Thus, the Corinthian Maid's action was the origin not only of drawing, but of sculpture as well, and the story both situated outline as the antecedent for sculpture and sourced love and desire as the impetus for art's creation.

Artists and writers have debated the extent to which artistic agency should be granted to the Maid in the origin of art, and whether she might stand as a powerful example for women's aesthetic ambitions. As Frances Muecke has noted, early eighteenth-century representations of the scene downplayed the Maid's agency by portraying Cupid as the “teacher” of the Maid, guiding her hand as she drew the outline, as for example in Simon Gribelin's engraved frontispiece to Charles-Alphonse Du Fresnoy's *De Arte Graphica* (*The Art of Painting*), 1716 (fig. 98).³⁰ The divine direction of supernatural Love is thus the inventor of art, with the woman as merely the channel for its inspiration.

Opposite:
Fig. 99 George Romney, *The Origin of Painting*, ca. 1775–80. Pen and brown ink and brush and gray wash on tan laid paper, 51.7 × 32.2 cm. Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of Frank Jewett Mather Jr., x1947-28

Above:
Fig. 100 Joseph Wright of Derby, *The Corinthian Maid*, 1782–4. Oil on canvas, 106.3 × 130.8 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC



FLESH AND STONE: PRISON FASHION

While some women were embodying Liberty or Reason in 1793, others sat in prisons—yet their costumes were startlingly similar. Ironically, a white chemise clothed both the unfree prison victim and the living allegory of Liberty. David's famous drawing of Marie Antoinette on the way to the guillotine (fig. 150) gives us a sense of the standard for prison fashion during the Terror: a plain, loose dress and cropped hair. "The detail of the Murder of the Queen of France is of the most afflictive nature," recounted a London newspaper after her death; "The Queen was dressed in a white loose undress. Her hands were tied behind her. She surveyed the deluded multitude with a firm and undaunted eye."¹⁷ As in this case, the white undress could shock by its contrast with the elaborate ensembles formerly worn by aristocratic ladies, emphasizing how they have been brought low before their deaths, but it could also elevate them as innocent martyrs. One priest recalled after a woman was guillotined: "How I grieved to see that young lady, looking in her white dress even younger than she really was, sweet and gentle as a little lamb, led to the slaughter. I felt as though I were present at the martyrdom of one of those holy young virgins represented in the pictures of the great masters. . . . How the red blood flowed down from her head and her throat!"¹⁸ Prison fashion is here recalled, after the fact, as a badge of martyrdom, the innocent white of the lamb stained with the vivid contrast of the red blood, its abjection transmuted into heroic sacrifice.

William Hamilton's *Marie Antoinette Led to her Execution* (fig. 151), painted in England just a few months after the queen's beheading, claims the high-waisted neoclassical white dress as a mark of the queen's virtuous martyrdom. Marie Antoinette is bathed in light and casts her eyes toward heaven as she is surrounded by shadowed, uniformed men and a crowd bristling with weapons. A white cap conceals her chopped hair. The queen's columnar composure is contrasted with the reveling woman in the crowd to the left, dressed in typical working-class attire based on the fashionable silhouette of the 1780s: a natural waist with stays, an apron, and a kerchief tucked in to a low neckline. Rearing back with both arms in the air, the female revolutionary recalls a baying bacchante, drunk with the blood she is about to witness. In this royalist portrayal it is the saintly queen, not the revolutionary bacchante, who is aligned with virtuous classicism.

Once the Terror was over and the business of fashion re-emerged in France, neoclassical dress surged with a hybrid and layered set of significations, responding to this fraught history. In fact, the experience of the Terror was widely aestheticized through fashion. A pair of gold earrings from the period (fig. 152) depict Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette separated from their heads: cockaded liberty caps on top counterbalance the dangling heads at the bottom, with the instrument of their separation, the guillotine, between them. With similar ghoulishness, around 1798 a few fashion plates appeared with women wearing so-called "croisures à la victime." These ensembles contrasted a white muslin dress with interlaced red ribbons twined around the wearer's torso, down

Opposite, top left:
Fig. 150 Jacques-Louis David,
*Marie Antoinette on her Way
to the Guillotine*, 1793. Pen
and brown ink on paper,
15 × 10 cm. Musée du Louvre,
Paris

Opposite, bottom:
Fig. 151 William Hamilton,
*Marie Antoinette Led to her
Execution*, 1793, 1794. Oil on
canvas, 152 × 197 cm. Musée
de la Révolution française,
Vizille, France

Opposite, top right:
Fig. 152 Earrings in the shape
of a guillotine with dangling
decapitated crowned heads,
ca. 1793–4. Gold. Musée
Carnavalet, Paris



Above, from left to right:
 Fig. 153 Unknown, *Coiffure négligée en fichu* (. . .), from *Journal des dames et des modes, Costume Parisien*, An 6, 19 mai 1798. Hand-colored engraving, 18.2 × 11.7 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Fig. 154 Unknown, *Turban au Ballon. Ceinture croisée. Ridicule à Chiffre.* / *Théâtre Feydeau*, from *Journal des dames et des modes, Costume Parisien*, An 7, 18 novembre 1798, fig. 74. Hand-colored engraving, 17.7 × 11.6 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Opposite:
 Fig. 155 Pierre-Narcisse Guérin, *Portrait of a Young Girl*, n.d. [1794]. Oil on canvas, 60 × 50 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris

her arms, and even over the crown of her head (figs 153 and 154). Such dresses summoned memories of scenes like the one the priest recounted above, with the blood coursing down the white frocks of the victims on the scaffold.

In addition, many women and men wore the cropped hair *à la Titus*, meant to imitate the hairstyles of the Romans but also, of course, recalling the shorn heads of those about to mount the scaffold. Pierre-Narcisse Guérin's *Portrait of a Young Girl of 1794* (fig. 155) is radically shorn, not only of hair but also of any sort of overtly fashionable veneer. She employs the peekaboo gesture of a *Venus pudica*, but doubled, with pink nipples emerging between the fingers of both hands and contrasting with the polished whiteness of her shoulders. The eroticism of the painting is reinforced by the figure's stark vulnerability, and the startling clarity with which we can imagine her as a *victime*. Madame Tallien herself wore diamond rings on her toes with open sandals to draw attention to her rat-bite scars from prison. These eroticized and fashionable invocations of prison and execution appropriated and contained the abjection of the Terror, attempting to remake the endangered and dismembered body into a coherent, whole, desirable, and beautified one.¹⁹

