

Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

April, 2009

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority



Sewing it All Together: Using Research to Bring Sarah Carlyle's Dress to Life by Sarah Coster

In 1975, the year before Carlyle House would officially open to the public as a restored historic house museum, two fragments of blue brocaded silk were donated by two separate Carlyle descendants, Mrs. Kirk and Mrs. Mothersill. The fragments came with the family history that they were worn by Sarah Fairfax Carlyle for her wedding or for a ball. At the time, they were assumed to be Spitalfields silk (English) and dated to around 1750-1761.



Examining the evidence. From left to right: French silk brocade, c. 1750-60, The Carlyle silk, Portrait of a German Princess, 1734.

These two fragments were rectangular pieces with no indication of style. What did the dress look like? Who wore it? When was it worn? Where was the fabric really made?

Now, over thirty years later, the fabric, once cut into pieces and scattered across the country, is now coming back together in the exhibit "Sewn Together," which will feature two recreated dresses.

By studying the silk and silks like it, as well as hundreds of period images, fashion historians have been able to determine as closely as possible the style of both dresses.

Part I: The Fabric

Before deciding on the dress patterns and periods, we needed more information about the silk. Had it really been made in England?

Could we determine an accurate date? Were there other silks like it?

Historian Mary Doering scoured through images and museums looking at silk samples. Through her research she was able to determine the origin of the silk. Below is an excerpt of her report.

"Eighteenth-century silks were distinguished by their woven patterns. The design and execution of the floral motifs used in the Carlyle House silk appear to be Continental European rather than British. English silk designers worked on a freelance basis and a significant number of their original patterns have survived which document the evolution of these textiles during the eighteenth century. The surviving patterns and silk samples suggest that the Carlyle House silk was not produced in Britain. The symmetrical based layout of the silk indicates it was most likely woven ca.

CARLYLE HOUSE

Jim Bartlinski, Director

Sarah Coster, Curator/Educator

Mary Ruth Coleman, Director Emeritus



1730. The flatness of the delineation of the design motifs points to a date before the mid 1730s when the technique of *points rentres* or shading was introduced by the Lyon silk designer Jean Revel. Based upon existing scholarship it is difficult to identify the precise origin and date of the silk, but it was most likely produced in a regional silk center outside of Lyon.”

In addition to discovering that the silk was made in Lyon, not Spitalfields, Mary’s research indicates that the silk may have had an earlier date than first thought. When exactly was the fabric made? We may never know. One thing is certain, the fabric was made in time for it to be worn at Sarah Fairfax Carlyle’s wedding in 1747, as the long-time family tradition had claimed.

Part II: Sarah Fairfax Carlyle’s Dress– 1747

The staff of Carlyle House knew they wanted a dress created to the time of Sarah Fairfax’s wedding to John Carlyle, which occurred on December 31, 1747. Both family legend and the date of the silk suggested that this may have been the material used in her wedding dress. Additionally, blue was a very common color choice for wedding gowns in the 18th-century. One question remained, what did this dress look like?

In the 1740’s two fashionable silhouettes co-existed: the side hoops and the domed petticoat. Costume historians have concluded that while both styles were considered suitable for formal attire, the domed petticoat was a bit less formal. We most frequently see domed petticoats in paintings depicting “at home” in the country. Therefore, we decided to use side hoops.

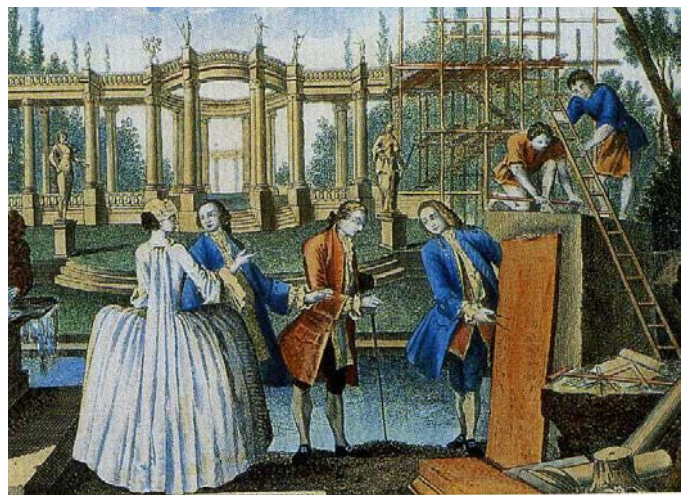


This dress with side hoops is at Platt Hall and is documented as having been worn in Manchester England for the wedding of a lady from the country gentry.

Based on period examples, the recreated 1747 dress will be a sacqueback gown with a closed front. The saqueback gown was distinguished by its full, loose pleats that fall from the top of the back neckline to the bottom of the skirts. The closed front meant that it did not open to show a petticoat underneath. Closed fronts were fashionable until the 1750’s when gowns with open fronts came into style. This style was perfectly suited to showcase the expensive elaborate silk designs of the period.



A c. 1740s American gown with side hoops, from the Colonial Williamsburg collection.



1740s English print from the Carlyle collection showing a saqueback dress with side hoops.

Part III: Sarah Carlyle Herbert’s Dress– 1797

The 1747 dress, however, was not the only story the silk had to tell. In 1985, a Carlyle descendant by the name of J.R. Herbert Boone, gave the Homewood House Museum in Baltimore, a silk dress sleeve with the following note attached; “part of a sleeve of the dress worn by the lovely ‘Sally’ Fairfax at a ball given at Gadsby’s Tavern in Alexandria, Va., 1748; for General Washington.” Clearly most, if not all, of this information was incorrect. Alexandria did not



exist until 1749, and Gadsby's Tavern would not be built for another 35 years.

But perhaps a grain of truth could be discovered in the fantastical tale. We know that Sarah Carlyle Herbert was friends with George Washington. She and her future husband dined together at his home. The first Birthnight Ball held at Gadsby's Tavern occurred in 1797. Although Washington did not attend that one, he did grace the next two, in 1798 and 1799. Now in her early 40s, Sarah Herbert would have been a long time resident and well-known person in town and would certainly have had both an invitation to the balls as well as the opportunity to dance with George Washington.



But did she wear her mother's wedding gown to these balls? Two sleeves coming together again for the first time in decades helped prove that Sarah

Herbert did indeed remake the 1747 dress to fit the 1790s style. In 2008, Sarah Coster was giving a tour to a group of Carlyle descendants in town for a family reunion. Fortuitously, the Homewood sleeve was on display. When Nancy Holt Stowell saw the sleeve she immediately recognized it as similar to a piece she had seen in her attic. At the time, Ms. Stowell was unsure if she had kept the fragment or not. Thankfully, she had saved the piece, which she kindly donated to the museum. Upon receiving the piece, it was discovered to match the other sleeve fragment, creating one whole sleeve. Due to neglect in her attic, Ms. Stowell's sleeve was the best preserved in the collection and was used to determine the original colors of the gown.

Costume historians Newbie Richardson and Colleen Callahan examined the sleeve and confirmed a mid-1790s date for the style. Between 1793 and 1795, dress styles underwent a dramatic transformation. The new classically-inspired empire waistline was all the rage. The new style required light, airy fabrics which draped and clung to the figure. The wonderful



Nelly Custis and Martha Washington on the portico of Mount Vernon, 1796 by Latrobe. Notice how the artist depicts Nelly's dress versus

silk brocades of the previous generation were stiff and did not drape well. These silks, however, were still considered extremely elegant and expensive. One might compare these silks to a family diamond. The setting of the diamond may become out of fashion and the family might have

the stone reset to be more up-to-date, all the while keeping the stone. Likewise, many women in the 1790s restyled those older silks into modified over dresses.



1790s examples of the way different dressmakers attempted to use the new dictates of the changed silhouette with the older fabrics and dress making techniques. The dress on the right, from La Gallerie de la Mode et du costum, Paris, shows a similar adaptation of an older silk sack back gown to the slimmer silhouette.

Sarah Herbert would have been about 40 years old when she re-styled her mothers dress. We know from the one existing sleeve that she used that design element, a style we have already seen documented in period portraits. As a middle aged lady, she would have been accustomed to wearing stays, conforming to the conical shape and posture of a proper gentlewoman. Women do not discard years of fashion training overnight.



This dress is from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and would have allowed the wearer to rein in her proper undergarments while conforming to the latest style.

We will never know exactly how Sarah Herbert updated her mother's beautiful imported silk to fit the drastic change in style

that occurred in the 1790s. But by using known historical garments like the one above, along with the shape of the existing sleeve, Newbie Richardson and Colleen Callahan pieced together an approximation of what Sarah Carlyle Herbert's c. 1797 dress might have looked like.

The two dresses you will see on display beginning in mid-April are well researched guesses at what our two Sarahs might have worn. They help bring to life two women who have left us few written documents and no portraits. More importantly, these two dresses tell a story. It is a story of a fabric that connected a mother and her daughter who never had the chance to know one another. It is a story of the generations of women who followed and saved that fabric, passing it down from mother to daughter. It is a story about the power a dress can have on the imagination. We hope you will enjoy imagining the women who wore this dress so many years ago.

~A huge thanks to Newbie Richardson for her help putting this article together.



1747



1797

Friends of Carlyle House Annual Garden Day Herb and Wildflower Sale

April 18th, 8 am to 4 pm



McLean HS's Armonia Choir provided live music at last year's Herb Sale.

This annual event raises money for Carlyle House collections and education projects. The sale will feature both culinary and decorative Herbs from the Mount Vernon Greenhouses. In addition to the herbs, local artisans and crafters will be selling a variety of handcrafted art, jewelry, herbal, wild bird and other nature related products. Live entertainment can be seen throughout the day, and master gardeners will be on hand to answer all your garden related questions.

How can you help?

- ◆ Attend and buy herbs or other merchandise.
- ◆ Tell your friends and neighbors.
- ◆ Volunteer. We need guides inside the house.
- ◆ Post a flyer. We can e-mail a flyer for you to post in your local library, etc.

