

2.1

Not Just a Pretty Picture: Fashion as News

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Just over the toupée a broad white or sky-blue ribbon is drawn from one side to the other, upon which the twelve signs of the zodiac are either painted or embroidered with silver or gold, or woven in, (all which sorts of ribbons may be had ready made at Paris) and tied behind in a large knot, the bows of which ascend, and the streamers are left flying.¹

The Lady's Magazine in July 1777 thus describes the latest fashion news out of Paris and its newest fashion plate (Fig. 2.1a). The *Zodiaque* represents the absolute “newest French Ladies Head Dress,” based on first-hand reports “from our correspondent at that seat of gallantry and fashion.” Together with a gentleman’s hairstyle, *en Medaillon*, they are, “the newest head dresses of what is called *le beau monde* at Paris.”² *The Lady's Magazine or Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex, appropriated solely to their Use and Amusement* (1770–1837) was the first journal to include regular fashion news and engravings of contemporary fashions, and this is one of its earliest plates. It combines the two most common categories of fashion news: reporting on what is new (products, trends, styles) and describing what is happening (who wore what where and when). Indeed, we already see many of the characteristics of fashion news and illustration that would be so typical later: the emphasis on newness, on accuracy, and on Paris as the center of fashion.

The image conforms to what’s expected of a fashion news picture: “The primary purpose of any fashion picture, locally produced or not, is to show a new style pleasantly and in clarity of detail. It’s like any other news picture worth printing; it must tell the story.”³ This advice from a 1951 guide on presenting fashion in newspapers could just as easily describe this 1777 engraving, which positions the figures to highlight the most important details of the new styles. Thus the woman appears in profile to best display her hair’s hemispheric shape and the Zodiac ribbon and the man is in lost profile so that we can make out the *Medaillon*—his hair shaped to appear “in imitation of a medal.” No setting or background distracts us and the name of the style is elegantly inscribed below. This spare presentation of the essential details of the style and its careful textual description is typical of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century fashion news pictures.



Figure 2.1a “The Gentlemens [sic] Head-Dress, *en Medaillon*; and The last new Ladies Head-Dress, *à la Zodiaque*,” copper-plate engraving, *Lady’s Magazine*, July 1777. Harvard University.

Of course, this sort of image differs rather dramatically from the elaborate photoshoots included in magazines today to highlight the latest styles, but only a hundred years later, we find a much closer precedent as well as some dramatic changes in the presentation and purpose of fashion news pictures. In an 1876 plate (Fig. 2.1b) by Paris-based illustrator Jules David, we see an elegant Parisienne with her two daughters walking past a wall filled with posters and images advertising theatrical events.

To make our public, urban, and particularly Parisian setting even more obvious, David includes in the background a Morris column, typical Haussmannian street furniture that would have displayed even more advertising, and two men—one reading a newspaper. The veiled woman stares out at us, seeming self-confident and savvy as she shepherds her two children through the streets of Paris. The image encourages the magazine reader to identify with this self-assured Parisienne and to admire her sophisticated chic (and that of her smartly outfitted daughters).

The differences between these two plates in many respects encapsulate the dramatic changes the fashion press would undergo over the course of the nineteenth century, setting the shape of the fashion press and fashion news picture today. Instead of an anonymous, small, black and white near-diagram set against a plain background, we have a large, folio-sized, signed, hand-colored narrative scene set in modern Paris. The focus is no longer on a single new item (head dress designs), but on goods for the whole body and family; the inscription below the 1876 plate advertises where to buy not only the fashions depicted, but also lingerie and corsets, Eau Figaro (a hair dye) and *lait antephelique* (an early face lotion, known even then to be toxic, but thought to remove freckles). Where *The Lady’s Magazine* simply said



Figure 2.1b Jules David, *Le Journal des dames et des demoiselles*, hand-colored lithograph, 15 November 1876. New York Public Library.

the Zodiac ribbons could be bought “ready made at Paris,” the 1876 plate gives the names and addresses of specific *local* shops where the goods could be obtained. The image is pointedly Parisian, produced by perhaps the most famous nineteenth-century fashion plate illustrator, but its circulation was international, appearing here in the *Journal des dames et demoiselles*, published for the French journal *Le Moniteur de la Mode* out of Brussels, but reproduced also in the *Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* in London and

Le Bon Ton in New York.⁴ Its impromptu staging seems to offer a snapshot of what women were wearing then on the streets of Paris, which doubtless appealed to its far-flung viewers. Indeed, the audience for the image was no longer a few hundred aristocratic Londoners, but more than a hundred thousand bourgeois readers all over the world. In keeping with this shift in audience, the 1876 plate promotes dress for everyday wear, not aristocratic head dresses “with jewels representing stars” and ribbons of gold and silver thread. While Paris remains the “seat of fashion,” the subject of fashion coverage has shifted; in place of equal attention to aristocratic men’s and women’s styles, we find a gendered focus on the dress of bourgeois women and children.

Fashion news pictures thus both reveal and instantiate changing period ideas about fashion and its proper audience. By the 1870s, fashion plates celebrated a decidedly sophisticated, urban vision of bourgeois femininity—promoting especially the woman as discriminating consumer and shopper.⁵ With the rise of the fashion press, fashionable display was no longer merely about personal wealth, elegance, style, and taste, but also about conforming to a specific visible image as the embodiment of the latest fashion; one had to keep up with the news to ensure one’s *chic* (a nineteenth-century neologism). Fashion plates facilitated this continual re-fashioning, as a woman could bring the plate to her dressmaker to be copied or, by the late nineteenth century, could buy the exact fashions depicted.

Fashion news was often discussed in terms of “novelties,” thus avoiding the serious political implications of “news,” but feeding the rising capitalist culture of consumption at the same time. The fashion press and fashion news picture were both limited and enabled by the changing technologies of print and economics of publishing. Fashion plates were among the first commercial usages of lithography; themselves both material objects and commodities, they encouraged the further capitalist pursuit of goods and commoditized knowledge. From the very start, what counted as fashion news and who was creating the news was constantly changing, as was the form of the fashion magazine and its conventions. But remarkably, by the mid-nineteenth century the fashion magazine as we know it today—international, advertising-supported, centered on visually striking editorial news pictures, and reporting on dress at glamorous events, with fashions for every budget and products for every need—would already be established.

The rise of fashion news

Illustrated plates of foreign and contemporary costume, often as worn by royalty and aristocrats, had circulated in Europe since the sixteenth century; by the late seventeenth century, text began to accompany the illustrations, but such plates served as documentation of past fashions rather than counsel as to what to wear in the future. Dress slowly began to attract attention in the contemporary press, with the *Mercure Galant* (1672–1832) in France emerging as the first periodical to semi-regularly report on fashion, though it only featured plates one year (1678). Men’s fashion was covered first and frequently in more detail than women’s dress. *Le Courier de la nouveauté* (1757) was the first journal to announce an intention to specialize in fashion news, but is known only by its prospectus. *Le Courier de la mode* (1768–70) lasted only slightly longer and included no plates. Thus it was *The Lady’s Magazine* (Fig. 2.1a), founded in 1770, which first included regular fashion coverage and engravings of contemporary dress and hairstyles. From its first issue, the journal promised to inform readers of “every innovation that is made in the female dress,” with “an assiduity which shall admit of no abatement, and by an earliness of intelligence which shall preclude anticipation.”⁶ It frequently emphasized the recentness and specificity of its fashion news by recording the date and location where the depicted fashion was seen in the caption.

For example, a June 1775 plate showing “Two Ladies in the newest Dress” was subtitled, “From Drawings taken at Ranelagh. May 1775.” These plates presented the latest fashions as models for emulation rather than clothes for sale; after all, in this era there was no ready-made clothing—all clothing was individually made by dressmakers or women themselves.

In France, *Cabinet des modes* (1785–93) was the first journal to regularly feature fashion plates, promising readers “an exact and prompt knowledge of all the new clothing of both sexes.” Appearing on the first and fifteenth of every month, each issue included three hand-colored engravings and eight pages of fashion news. While the plates themselves made no mention of specific shop names, from its inception *Cabinet des modes* practiced the particularly French form of advertising: the *réclame*, or covert editorial ad, in which promotional mentions of shops were made in the context of reporting the latest news. Thus fashion news was, almost from the very start, bound up in commerce and the promotion of the latest goods found in Parisian shops.⁷ In England, more direct advertising was favored. Indeed, the English fashion magazine, *La Belle Assemblée* (1806–68), was the first to include a separate advertising supplement, which compiled “literary, fashionable, and domestic advertisements . . . addressed to the elegant, polite, and economical,” and to attribute regularly the fashions it described to a sole commercial source—Mrs. Bell, an inventive London shop owner.

Recognizing the publicity a fashion magazine could generate, the fashion house Popelin-Ducarre in 1839 began producing an illustrated monthly brochure describing its new products, which, under the enterprising editorship of Adolphe Goubaud, was soon transformed into the lavish *Moniteur de la mode* (1843–1913), one of the most dominant French fashion journals of the nineteenth century. Jules David (Fig. 2.1b) created nearly all of its plates and was among the first illustrators to include elaborately detailed backgrounds; his fashionably dressed figures appear indoors and out, in the city and in the country. Indeed, fashion plates by the mid-nineteenth century resemble modern editorial photoshoots commissioned by magazines today, appealing to readers not only by presenting the latest fashions, but also through their novel and seductive staging.

The expanding audience for fashion news

Newspapers and journals in the eighteenth century were largely a luxury product with a small number of subscribers; fashion journals circulated only in the hundreds, mostly to society women and men. In eighteenth-century France, about a dozen journals included some fashion coverage, but in the nineteenth century more than 400 journals devoted to fashion would be published, testifying both to the increasing interest in and market for fashion news.⁸ With the advent of the Second Empire (1852–70), the fashion press underwent a massive proliferation as Napoléon III and Empress Eugénie actively promoted the French textile trades and drove fashion innovation. Not just the number of fashion journals, but also their circulation, attained new heights. For example, in December of 1866, *La Mode illustrée* (1860–1937)—*Le Moniteur de la mode*’s chief rival—had a circulation of 58,000, which was more than ten times the circulation of its July Monarchy (1830–48) counterparts.⁹ By way of comparison, at the same time the bourgeois journal *Le Figaro* had a circulation of 55,000 and the most popular journal of the day, the apolitical *Le Petit journal*, had a circulation of 259,000.¹⁰ Notably, to adapt to the surge of interest in fashion, *Le Petit journal* and other *grands journaux* added illustrated fashion supplements and included regular fashion columns. This proliferation and increased circulation can be attributed in part to the demand for advice from a new and growing category of readers: bourgeois women, anxious for the fashion

knowledge the journals could provide, but it's clear that men also followed the latest fashion news. By 1890, *La Mode illustrée* had a circulation of 100,000 and *Le Moniteur de la mode* claimed 200,000.¹¹

While subscriber numbers were rising and becoming more diverse in terms of class, notably over the course of the nineteenth century the subject of fashion news became increasingly female.¹² While early fashion plates featured both men and women, images in the mainstream fashion press after 1850 virtually never featured men, only the occasional boy. Flügel's theory of the male renunciation of fashion at the end of the eighteenth century has been dramatically overemphasized, but it's true that discussion of men's fashion was increasingly consigned to tailoring journals, particularly as Paris began to dominate the fashion press and especially women's fashion.¹³

Fashion as international news—Paris as fashion capital

The fashion press operated out of the great capitals of Europe—chiefly London and Paris; fashion news was thus by definition urban and, from its earliest days, international as well. The first Italian fashion magazine explicitly reported on foreign trends, as its title makes clear: *Giornale delle nuove mode di Francia e d'Inghilterra* (Milan, 1786–94). The first journal devoted to fashion in Germany, the *Journal des Luxus und der Moden* (Weimar, 1786–1826) included reports and plates of French, English, and Italian fashions. The first American fashion magazine, *Graham's American Monthly Magazine of Literature, Art, and Fashion* (Philadelphia, 1841–58), directly copied French and English plates for its fashion coverage—making the “news” the images reported sometimes up to a year old.

While London would remain the center for men's fashion and women's riding dress, Paris by the 1830s would become the dominant center of women's fashion and its pre-eminent fashion journals would enjoy an international circulation, spanning six continents. The demand for French fashion news was such that, as early as 1823, *Townsend's Selection of Parisian Costumes* arranged to import French plates accompanied with English descriptions.¹⁴ By 1847, *Le Moniteur de la mode* reported it was printing 700,000 fashion plates annually; it published eight foreign editions, including a bilingual French–English edition and a Franco–American edition starting in 1851.¹⁵ *La Mode illustrée* accepted subscribers from as far away as China, Australia, and the Marquesas.¹⁶

That the nineteenth-century fashion news media had become entirely dependent on Paris was demonstrated dramatically by the 1870–1 Franco–Prussian War, which placed Paris under siege for months and sent fashion publishers outside the city into a tailspin (*La Mode illustrée* remarkably continued to publish despite the siege). Initially journals simply printed notices that they had no plates, but as the siege dragged on, they were forced to publish vastly inferior locally produced plates and—in a testament to their desperation—rely on miniaturized fashion news and images smuggled out of Paris by carrier pigeon and hot air balloon. Thus an international media culture had arisen, centered on the Parisian fashion plate as news picture.

Photography and the fashion news picture

In 1880, *L'Art de la mode* (1880–1967) broke new ground as the first journal to reproduce a fashion photograph, though photography did not become common in fashion magazines until the twentieth

century, when advances in halftone printing made it more feasible and economical. *Les Modes* (1901–37) was the first journal to regularly feature photographs, often shot by the Reutlinger Studio in Paris; it included both halftone prints and tipped-in color photographs of single, full-length figures on glossy paper. By 1909, drawings and descriptions of dress at events (the “newest Dress” at Ranelagh) would slowly be replaced by documentary-style fashion photographs, like that by the Seeberger family of the latest haute couture as worn by the finest society in Paris and Biarritz.¹⁷ Fashion photography would follow a similar evolution from single figures set against plain backdrops to more elaborately staged shoots—from deliberate aristocratic decadence (Fig. 2.1a) to the impromptu aesthetic seen in our 1876 plate (Fig. 2.1b). Indeed, the shape of the fashion news picture and its thirst for novelty had been set long before photography, and would continue to drive the fashion press long after.

Notes

- 1 “Description of the newest French Ladies Head Dress, à la Zodiaque,” *The Lady’s Magazine* (July 1777): 374.
- 2 “Description of the newest French Ladies Head Dress, à la Zodiaque,” *The Lady’s Magazine* (July 1777).
- 3 Garrett Davis Byrnes, *Fashion in Newspapers* (New York: Published for American Press Institute by Columbia University Press, 1951): 8.
- 4 See the December 1876 issues of both.
- 5 Justine De Young, “Representing the Modern Woman: The Fashion Plate Reconsidered (1865–1875),” in *Women, Femininity and Public Space in 19th-century European Visual Culture 1789–1914*, eds Heather Belnap Jensen and Temma Balducci (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014).
- 6 “Address to the Fair Sex,” *The Lady’s Magazine* 1 (August 1770): 2.
- 7 H. Hazel Hahn, *Scenes of Parisian Modernity: Culture and Consumption in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): 63.
- 8 Raymond Gaudriault, *La gravure de mode féminine en France* (Paris: Éditions de l’Amateur, 1983): 193–96.
- 9 Raymond Gaudriault, *La gravure de mode féminine en France* (Paris: Éditions de l’Amateur, 1983): 156. Claude Bellanger, *Histoire générale de la presse française: 1815 à 1871* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1969): 290.
- 10 Christophe Charle, *Le siècle de la presse, 1830–1939* (Paris: Seuil, 2004): 103, 109, 189.
- 11 Annie Barbera, “Des journaux et des modes,” in *Femmes fin de siècle, 1885–1895: Musée de la mode et du costume* (Paris: Éditions Paris-Musées, 1990): 103.
- 12 Jennifer Jones, *Sexing la Mode: Gender, Fashion and Commercial Culture in Old Regime France* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).
- 13 J. C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth Press, 1930).
- 14 Vyvan Beresford Holland, *Hand Coloured Fashion Plates, 1770 to 1899* (London: Batsford, 1955): 64.
- 15 *Le Moniteur de la mode* (30 December 1847): 214. Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History*, rev. edn (New York: Berg, 1998): 106.
- 16 “Prix de *La Mode illustrée*,” *La Mode illustrée* 52 (December 1873): 416.
- 17 Nancy Hall-Duncan, *The History of Fashion Photography* (New York: Alpine Book Co., 1979): 26.