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The Undergraduate Historical Journal at UC Merced

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5kd8g2jw>

Journal

The Undergraduate Historical Journal at UC Merced, 2(2)

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Publication Date

2015

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Peer reviewed

Fashion and the English Class System, 18th-19th Century

By Sarah Spoljaric

This paper discusses the emergence of the fashion industry in England during the late eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. I am focusing on the economic and social factors, which allowed the fashion industry to flourish and continue to be sustained till today. England traditionally has a strong class structure, however due to the massive colonialism which Britain experienced, a middle class began to emerge. This middle class had new wealth, which they deposited, back into the clothing factories, which the lower classes worked in mass-producing clothing from the raw materials imported from England's colonies. Deriving from the economic prosperity fashion held fast as a way to display wealth differentiating the classes due to the different fabrics and designs they had access to. Mass-production styles changed rapidly, especially in the middle class, technology of the day, especially magazines and newspapers projected fashion trends and spread throughout the countryside. The fashion industry simultaneously reinforced the class structure by creating a new market for people to spend their money on. At the same time the newly emerged middle class had the ability to buy their way into higher class and display it with their style. Overall, the fashion industry fed off social and economic circumstances of the time, which to this day have allowed England to be one of the centers of the fashion world.