

Dressing Up the Revolution: The American Revolution in French Style, 1776-1789

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ABSTRACT

At the time of the American Revolution, French culture developed a fascination with America. This trend was expressed in many forms, including fashion, artwork, and architecture, all contributing to French narratives about the United States and the American Revolution. The foremost of these narratives were the portrayals of America as a neoclassical, republican idyll and as a rustic, pastoral return to the romantic concept of nature. French figures who donned the “American” style played a large and often conscious role in crafting such cultural narratives. From 1776 to 1789, the “American” style in France took on a variety of contradictory meanings in French culture and politics. French figures like the Marquis de Lafayette, the Duchesse de la Tour du Pin, and the Marquis de Condorcet took on a French-American identity and styled themselves as “Americans” to express different political views. By analyzing these individuals’ political views and sartorial styling, this essay examines the impact of French “American” style on the French perception of America. The essay utilizes contemporary publications such as newspapers and fashion magazines, as well as the memoirs and correspondence of French figures. Through these sources, I examine the narratives surrounding “American” style and identity in France. This reveals the complex relationship between French style and politics, contributing to the ongoing historical discourse on the cultural lead-up to the Revolution of 1789.

KEYWORDS: American Revolution, France, fashion, 18th century

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INTRODUCTION

The American Revolution had a profound impact on the contemporary culture of France. French fascination with America was expressed in many forms of fashion, architecture, and artwork. Sources including fashion periodicals, political writings, and memoirs reflect this trend. One result of cultural exchange was the development of a popular “American” style in France, which encompassed a wide range of expressions, including clothing, hairstyles, and etiquette. Between 1776 and 1789, French expressions of American style and identity reflected French discourse surrounding America itself, shaping French narratives about the United States and the American Revolution. Different figures adopted American style to express different politics, as competing forms of sartorial presentation reflected changing pre-revolutionary political and philosophical currents. For example, the *négligé*, or informal style, of famous figures like Benjamin Franklin was recognized as a symbol of democracy and the American Revolution.¹ This trend was one facet of the American style popularized in French culture at this time.

THEMES OF AMERICAN STYLE

In France, American style was characterized by simplified dress and manners, which sought to evoke the rustic imagery of homespun farmers and Quakers.² This associated America with an idealized concept of “nature,” which carried many meanings in contemporary France. In French discourse, popular works by Jean-Jacques Rousseau romanticized a

return to a natural, uncorrupted state of politics, philosophy, and art. Following this theme, rustic fashions equated natural beauty to the natural virtues of civic society, promoting the ideal of a simple agrarian society, as opposed to absolute monarchy.³ However, not all French writers agreed with this association. In the *Tableau de Paris*, a chronicle that described life in Paris during this time, French writer Louis-Sébastien Mercier called this fashion “affected simplicity,” satirizing the affectations of elegants, the wealthy Parisians who followed the trend.⁴ Mercier identified this trend as a reaction against the elaborate styles that had previously been popular in Paris.

Another theme that overlapped with American style was neoclassicism. Neoclassicism referenced Greco-Roman history, evoking concepts of democracy, republicanism, and “civic virtue,”⁵ the meanings of which were often disputed in French discourse. This style, characterized by art, fashion, and architecture that evoked Antiquity, supported “classical models of liberty, political association, and artistic vitality.” It emphasized an idealized image of “antique freedom” from the democratic civilizations of Ancient Greece and Rome.⁶ In France, neoclassical elements of American style tied the United States to the legacy of ancient democracies and republics. This comparison turned America into an idealized example of democracy and representative government, further associating the United States and the American Revolution with the political philosophy of the Enlightenment.

Both the neoclassicism and the idealized rusticity of

1 Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, “American Idols: Fashions ‘à l’américaine’ in Prerevolutionary France.” *Transactions of the American Philological Society* 109, no. 5 (2021): 190. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45381471>.

2 Robert Darnton, *George Washington’s False Teeth: An Unconventional Guide to the Eighteenth Century* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003): 128.

3 Dagmar Freist, “Belief,” in *A Cultural History of Dress and Fashion in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Peter McNeil, vol. 4 (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021): 104.

4 Mercier Louis-Sébastien, *Panorama of Paris: Selections from Le Tableau De Paris*, trans. Jeremy D. Popkin (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003): 61.

5 Freist, 104.

6 Amelia Rauser, *The Age of Undress: Art, Fashion, and the Classical Ideal in the 1790s* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2020): 189.

American style associated the United States with a utopian image of equality. Writers like Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, a French aristocrat who traveled to America and published *The Letters of an American Farmer*, described the United States as a nation “close to nature,” where “the first principles of universal morality” arose naturally from the citizens’ simple, agriculture-based lifestyle.⁷ While these idealized portrayals did not go undisputed, they were extremely popular in France, shaping French perceptions of America and fueling contemporary discourse.

The French discourse surrounding American style also suggests that, across the French social order, many people were aware of its political meanings. Fashion periodicals such as the *Galerie des Modes*, which ran from 1778 to 1787,⁸ were published primarily in Paris, the center of French fashion. These publications were read by people of all social classes, especially women.⁹ Fashion magazines established a “continuous visual present” by informing readers of constantly changing trends, typically set by the upper classes.¹⁰ In addition to providing realistic illustrations,¹¹ these publications also explained the meaning of each fashion. This context situated trends like American style within the intense political discourse of France, which was discussed, through France’s rich print culture, across different social classes.

One of the most famous and controversial examples of an American fashion trend was the pouf coiffure. Poufs were elaborate headpieces worn over women’s tall hairstyles. This style was worn almost exclusively during the period of the American Revolution and often reflected French opinions toward America.¹² Poufs were highly politicized hairstyles, often referencing key events or topics of debate in France. During the American Revolution, the *Galerie des Modes* published illustrations of styles entitled “Bunker’s Hill, or America’s Headdress”¹³ and “Independence, or The Triumph of Liberty,”¹⁴ accompanied by text with news of events like the Battle of Bunker Hill and naval victories over the English. Clothing was also used to convey “American” sentiments. Another fashion plate, published in 1779, shows a full outfit labeled *habit à l’insurgent*, or “dress of the insurgents,” with a description praising American women for their role in the American Revolution.¹⁵ The *Tableau de Paris* mentions similar styles, named “The Boston” and “The Philadelphia”, both of which expressed support for the American Revolution.¹⁶

The *Tableau de Paris* also addresses the political nature of this style, mocking the Parisians who dressed with a “republican air” without understanding the “serious questions” of contemporary politics, particularly the discourse surrounding England and the United States.¹⁷

7 Darnton, 124.

8 Stella Blum, *Eighteenth-Century French Fashion Plates: 64 Engravings from the “Galerie Des Modes,” 1778-1787* (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 2016): 2.

9 Christian Huck, “Visual Representations,” in *A Cultural History of Dress and Fashion in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Peter McNeil, vol. 4 (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021): 183.

10 Huck, 180.

11 Huck, 180.

12 Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims: Dress at the Court of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015): 170.

13 Lynn Festa and Joseph Roach, “Fashion and Adornment,” in *Cultural History of Hair in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Margaret K. Powell, vol. 4 (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022): 69.

14 Chrisman-Campbell, 161.

15 Chrisman-Campbell, 184.

16 Mercier, 65.

17 Mercier, 148.

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Mercier's comments reflect French interest in British-American politics, satirizing French people who took on Anglo-American fashions without understanding the political ramifications of the style. This also demonstrates the widespread popularity of American style, which was worn throughout Paris, the center of French culture.

However, in many cases, French concepts of American style deviated from the fashions that were worn in contemporary America. For example, after the American Revolution, many women in Philadelphia began to wear elaborate "English" fashions, including silk clothing and "borrowed hair," or hairpieces.¹⁸ This fashion, which broke with the idealized French concept of "American" dress, provoked a negative reaction from Brissot de Warville, a visiting French aristocrat. Brissot viewed elaborate, "European" style clothing as a detriment to the United States' civic virtue, as it conflicted with the rustic ideal of a simple, agriculture-driven republic.¹⁹ This shows how French "American" style shaped French perceptions of actual American people, particularly women, who were expected to uphold the neoclassical virtues of the United States' republic.

Similarly, conflicted sentiments are reflected in broader French discourse surrounding the United States. The "craze for America" in France went much deeper than aesthetic style, extending to the topics of politics and philosophy.²⁰ During this period, many French individuals cultivated "American" identities, a role that had multiple controversial meanings. The conflicts between different French individuals' American identities became increasingly apparent as political

discourse deepened in the lead-up to the French Revolution.

FRENCH "AMERICANS"

The Marquis de Lafayette, a French aristocrat who fought in the American Revolution and supported the American cause in France, styled himself as an American and gained American citizenship during this time. Lafayette's expressions of American style often played into contemporary neoclassical aesthetics, evoking an idealized image of Greco-Roman culture.²¹ Throughout the 1780s, as Lafayette constructed and decorated a new household in Paris, he deliberately mixed American and neoclassical elements. The facade of this building was based on Greco-Roman designs. Lafayette also hired the furniture designer Bernard Moliter, known for neoclassical design, and displayed his "American mementos" along with Greco-Roman symbols.²² Lafayette associated this style with "the virtues of ancient republics," comparing the United States to the Republic of Ancient Rome.²³

Another French individual who took on both an American style and identity was Henriette-Lucie Dillon, Marquise de la Tour du Pin. Like many other educated, aristocratic Frenchwomen, Tour du Pin engaged with politics and philosophy through salons, where she met influential American figures like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. Her husband, the Marquis de la Tour du Pin, also served as a military officer in the American Revolution.²⁴ Tour du Pin supported her husband's political goals as he sought to apply the "American experience" of Enlightenment

18 Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011): 194.

19 Haulman, 195.

20 Darnton, 121.

21 Laura Aurrichio, *The Marquis: Lafayette Reconsidered* (Vintage Books, 2014): 134.

22 Aurrichio, 134.

23 Aurrichio, 134.

24 Caroline Moorehead, *Dancing to the Precipice: Lucie De La Tour Du Pin and the French Revolution* (London: Vintage, 2010): 71.

to France,²⁵ cultivating an “American” style in their household to reflect these ideas. Tour du Pin embraced the “newfound taste for simplicity in dress” and directly compared her style to that of American women.²⁶

In her memoirs, Tour du Pin describes her American style and eventual move to America as a rustic, idealized escape from French culture and society. She compares the United States to Ancient Rome,²⁷ evoking a neoclassical, utopian view of America, somewhat similar to Lafayette’s writings. However, Tour du Pin directly opposed Lafayette’s view of America, referring to him as a “simpleton” and accusing him of misrepresenting the American Revolution through his supposedly “insipid,” inaccurate memoirs.²⁸ This reflects their polarized views on the French absolute monarchy. Following Lafayette’s participation in conflicts like the 1787 Assembly of Notables, Tour du Pin accused him of using American style and rhetoric to support radical politics. This demonstrates how French individuals who adopted the American style often came into conflict over what American ideals represented in France.

The Marquis de Condorcet provides a contrasting example of the conflicts inherent to French “American” identity. During this period, Condorcet published multiple political writings about America, including a pamphlet entitled *The Influence of the American Revolution on Europe*, published in 1788. In this pamphlet, Condorcet claimed that the American Revolution reflected the “progress of the Enlightenment,” referencing Rousseau’s concepts of uncorrupted nature and

the “common will” of each nation’s people.²⁹ Through his work, Condorcet supported the political and philosophical ideas associated with America, identifying himself as an “American” philosopher.³⁰

Condorcet also expressed this support through personal style, as he appears to have deliberately donned “Americanized” clothing for portraits like a painting done by the artist Jean-Baptiste-François Bosio. This fashion is similar to the style worn by both Lafayette and Tour du Pin, evoking a rustic version of American style. Condorcet references this view in his writing, referring to the United States as a “nation of farmers.”³¹ Despite this shared sartorial style, Condorcet’s writings came into conflict with other French “Americans,” who wrote idealistically of America. Condorcet challenged aristocratic French writers like Brissot de Warville and Crèvecoeur, both of whom used America as a “utopian” idyll in their works.³² In response to these exaggerated portrayals of America, Condorcet provided a more realistic interpretation of the American Revolution centered on the “concept of progress.”³³ Condorcet sought to praise the progress achieved by the United States while also acknowledging injustices like the American institution of slavery. His direct challenge to other French writers shows how the meanings of American style and identity were frequently and publicly disputed in France.

Discourse over America and American identity reflected the current political conflicts in France. By adopting American style and supporting the American cause, French

25 Moorehead, 85.

26 Moorehead, 66.

27 Lucie Henriette de la Tour du Pin, *Memoirs of Madame de la Tour du Pin*, trans. by Felice Harcourt (New York, NY: McCall, 1971): 283.

28 Tour du Pin, 273.

29 Durand Echeverria, “Condorcet’s *The Influence of the American Revolution on Europe*.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (1968): 101. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1920807>.

30 Darnton, 121.

31 Echeverria, 104.

32 Darnton, 128.

33 Darnton, 122.

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individuals of various political persuasions could espouse support for their vision of the Enlightenment. These visions ranged from the monarchist opinions of Tour du Pin, who supported reform through France's absolute monarchy, to the revolutionary ideas of writers like Condorcet, who supported the republican concepts of the United States' newly formed government. The contradictory "American fantasies" portrayed in France, often at odds with the reality of the United States,³⁴ reflect the issues that divided French politics at this time.

During the intense political upheaval that occurred in France between 1776 and 1789, many French individuals disputed the definition and enactment of the politics and philosophy of the Enlightenment. Many challenged the authority of the French absolute monarchy, using America as a symbol of Enlightened government. In this context, American style and identities provided an area of discourse, where French individuals disputed their conflicting visions for the future of France. Individuals who donned this style, particularly political writers like Condorcet, were often highly conscious of the conflicting and controversial ideas that it represented.

For example, during the 1788 Assembly of Notables, while some French "Americans" supported the concepts of democracy and republicanism, others advocated for more conservative approaches to reform, particularly the implementation of a constitutional monarchy. One conflict occurred when Lafayette sided with a faction of monarchist Breton nobles. This caused Condorcet, an ally of Lafayette, to express concern that Lafayette had given up his Enlightenment ideals for "noble prerogatives."³⁵ In a friendly condemnation of Lafayette's political actions, Condorcet referenced the Potomac and the Continental Army of America, alluding to both Lafayette's and his identification

with America. Despite their shared "American" identity, the tension between Lafayette and Condorcet's different political ideas was increasingly apparent in 1788. This reflects growing pre-revolutionary conflict and division over the future of the French monarchy.

CONCLUSION

After 1789, the conflicting nature of different French-American identities became far more evident and controversial. During the French Revolution, many French individuals who had previously shared an American style and identity found themselves in opposing political factions. After the Flight to Varennes in 1791, Lafayette continued to argue in favor of a constitutional monarchy, while Condorcet supported republicanism, eventually allying himself with the Girondin faction.³⁶ In her memoirs, Tour du Pin strongly opposed the views of both Lafayette and Condorcet, finding their interpretations of the American Revolution to be too radically republican and revolutionary.³⁷ Despite their alliance during the 1770s and 1780s, the conflict of the French Revolution revealed that these three French "Americans" held very different political views, and had donned American style in support of their respective political factions. Some supported radical republicanism, while others advocated only for conservative reforms to the monarchy. The different factions of French "Americans" demonstrate the close and complex relationship between style and politics during this period of intense political conflict.

In future research, historians should draw from overlooked sources to better understand the different factions that arose during this complex period of French history. Fashion periodicals and personal documents, including memoirs and correspondence, could be used to examine politics from a

34 Darnton, 121.

35 Auricchio, 167.

36 David Williams, *Condorcet and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 33.

37 Tour du Pin, 273.

new angle. For example, analyzing the appropriation of rustic and neoclassical imagery in the French Revolution may yield new, complex interpretations of this controversial period. By examining how different individuals and movements styled themselves, future research can delve into sociopolitical history from a fresh perspective.

From 1776 to 1789, American style in France took on many different forms and meanings. The natural and neoclassical themes that defined this style associated the United States with the ideas of the Enlightenment, shaping French narratives about America and the American Revolution. French styling effectively “dressed up” the American Revolution, providing an area of discourse for many conflicting views of this event. French individuals who donned this style and cultivated “American” identities did so in support of vastly different politics, ranging from absolute monarchy to republicanism. In the tumultuous, changing world inhabited by French figures like Lafayette, Tour du Pin, and Condorcet, the American Revolution had major, controversial, and far-reaching effects. The styles and identities through which these French “Americans” expressed themselves are powerful windows into the complex politics and philosophy of their time.

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