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Rebecca L. Coleman

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Dr. Ann Wright, Ph.D

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Dreams, hopes and fairy tales; how can history and media images link fashion icons together?

What are the stories that lie beneath the layers of fabric?

Fashion designers of today have a variety of media available to them for research from television to magazines, film and theatre. However, before today's mass media designers looked to the art world for creative motivation. Portraits in art for designers were as a rule the first place turned to for historical research.

Painted portraits (Rodidni) gives the designer detailed information of fashion for the period they are researching, as well as social and cultural identity. In addition, it tells us something else about the person in the picture, it paints a story. Of this they, the designer have to be wary because it is the painter's interpretation of what was actually there. Because of this, it makes us have to decide between fact and fiction. Is anything fabricated to make the painting more pleasing to the cultural class of its day? What we see is the image of the clothing; therefore can we gain any knowledge about the person by their appearance? In other words, does their clothing tell stories? This question links the two women Madame de Pompadour and Princess Diana.

Both women were famed 'Fashion Style Icons' of their decades. Both had a fairy tale story that any young girl would dream. Fashion seems to be an important tool used to provide the plots in their stories meaning that without the clothing the factual story of their lives might be less interesting to the public. Of course out of duty they would have to set standards and follow traditions (Hartnell). However, both women defied and broke these rules.

Being the mistress to the King of France, Madame de Pompadour lived in Versailles as if she were the Queen. She had such beauty and intelligence it made her a very powerful

woman. A style of taffeta she liked so much was named after her (Rodidni). However, the portraits painted of her are of most importance. Without them, I believe we would not have our first 'fashion icon'. She takes first place and therefore others follow.

To be a true fashion icon it is not just about the clothing, it is the stories and statements the clothes say. Still to this day, the wedding of Charles and Diana is still the biggest television event of all time with a global television audience of 750 million (BBC on this day). With so much public attention, it takes a strong woman and a high-risk taker to make statements with clothing. Diana, Princess of Wales chose unknown fashion designers to design and make her most important public gown. Why did she do this when the whole world was waiting in anticipation for the reveal of the dress of the decade? It was a gamble that paid off. With this public interest in her, she used her high profile image in the media to her advantage. This did not last for long as the popular culture and media infatuation with her produced devastating results.

Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson was born on the 29<sup>th</sup> December 1721 in France. Her upbringing was working class. As a young, beautiful woman, she took an interest in the arts and found that she had some talent in acting. With this interest she made friends with the men of Parisian society such as Voltaire (Britannica.com). He, along with others would come to see the new star in the Paris salons. At this time, she married the young nobleman Guillaume Le Nomant d'Etioules. Now known as Madame d'Etioules her name and new place in society placed her in noble class. The King Louis XV [15] had made his interest known to her. In 1745 after obtaining a divorce, she became the King's mistress. Given a new title, throughout history she would be known as the Marquise de Pompadour (Birkenstock).

At the age of twenty-three the Madame de Pompadour moved to the Palace of Versailles. It was here she gained power and used it to make lasting impressions not only on the King but also on the popular culture of the time. Although the King made the decisions

Madame de Pompadour gave the orders. The King was a shy man and so she would often act on his behalf, therefore he made her his private secretary.

Utilizing the power she had achieved she moved on to follow her passion for the arts. The King gave her free range and money to do anything that would please him. A small theatre was built to her requirements. She drew upon her friends to help stage a production as well as courtiers to perform (Mitford). One of these friends was artist Francois Boucher (1703-1770). He painted scenery and designed costumes for her theatre. However, he would become famous for portraits of Madame de Pompadour. One in particular is his painting of her in 1756.

What makes it famous is Madame de Pompadour appearance. Her gown is painted in a way that we collect detailed information. The dress of dark emerald green satin was that of a robe 'a la francaise' or the sack gown (Fukai). A loose fitted gown made up of lengths of material, which came from the shoulders and moved to the back where it would have been pleated (142). A line of pink-ribboned bows called an echelle runs down the stomacher and we see the bows repeated at the hemline of the petticoat and sleeves. As with the style of the sack gown the flounces on the end of the sleeve have three layers and have sliver lace, trim. The use of roses for decoration all over the gown I believe we have to question. Were roses her favourite flowers and because of this did Boucher just simply painted more? Alternatively, was it that she wanted to appear to show that she was more than just the Kings mistress? Showing she wore elaborate luxury gowns fit for a Queen I believe this was what she was doing. Comparing this painting of others that Boucher painted of her, the gowns are not as ornate as this one. I believe she had intentions of this portrait being seen by society therefore it was a method she used to truly make her a fashion icon.

The link between Diana, Princess of Wales and Madame de Pompadour is to me an easy one. Diana from the age of nineteen to thirty-six developed from a shy humble girl of deep-rooted aristocracy into a world leader in fashion. It all started on the 29<sup>th</sup> of July 1981.

‘The Wedding of the Century’ as it was called by the press was indeed a once in a lifetime event. A real life story for all ages of a fairytale Princess marrying her Prince (Denney). Images from that day are in the history books. Without doubt, the appearance of Lady Diana from the glass carriage immortalized the wedding. However, everyone was talking about the wedding dress. The designers Diana commissioned to design the gown were virtually unknown. David and Elizabeth Emanuel had graduated from the Royal College of Art four years previous (Graham).

Robert Lacey writes, “Liz Emanuel’s vision had been that the bride should emerge from her carriage like a butterfly breaking out of its chrysalis” - symbolic to Diana’s transformation from young girl to married woman and that of Lady to Princess. Also the wedding dress with its pure Ivory silk taffeta and old lace gave an appearance of youth, beauty and romance with 10,000 hand-sewn sequins and pearls. British silkworms consumed mulberry leaves for months to make the new silk. Old lace that Queen Mary had once owned, borrowed family heirlooms for her tiara and diamond earrings. A blue ribbon sewn into the waistband along with an 18-carat yellow gold horseshoe made what is today the most copied wedding dress for brides. The style became known as the ‘meringue dress’ and lasted for a decade.

Throughout the next sixteen years Diana used her fashion styling and media attention to make some remarkable and memorable statements. Every time she appeared in the public eye, she was on television telling a story with her clothing. Remembered not only for her fashion but also for her campaign and charity work she was able to help change the public

opinion on major issues. In April 1987 she was photographed touching an infected HIV virus sufferer. That one touch it changed the world's view on HIV and AIDS.

How can essential fibres woven together have so much influence? Cloth, pieces of fabric draped into 3D and worn for function. Magic happens when the designer gets to work with such women that have power. They direct the style and therefore depict what and how the public perceive them. In this new age of hope, we are in need of a new fashion style leader. No one could ever take the place of Diana the late Princess of Wales. However, I do believe that there could be a lady in waiting emerging to claim the title of 'Fashion Icon'.

In January 2009 Michelle Obama took on her new role as first lady to the United States of America. Age 45 and a working mother she also has her duty to the country (McCauly). With this comes rules, traditions and in the present world economy expectations from the public. For her inauguration gown she chose the young, virtually unknown designer Jason Wu (Alexander). After three and half years at the Parsons School of Fashion he interned with Narciso Rodriguez (Alexander). The gown he designed is now part of fashion history. The one shouldered white layered floor length dress had a romantic sense of style. On the top layer small appliquéd flowers were strewn with Swarovski crystals (Style). Elegant and romantic the image of this dress is to me off a pre-conceived idea of what a princess would wear. Placing, Michelle Obama into American royalty.

So far, Michelle might be playing it safe. What seems to be happening is that the media reports whom she is wearing, for example J.Crew company's stock goes up and the store takes an influx of consumers (Sachs). This of course could be what she intends happen considering the country is in a recession. In addition, do the people really want to see their public figures splashing out on expensive clothing when they cannot afford it? No, they do not as this would contradict with her husband's campaign and belief for new times of change.

Her statements with her clothing may not be clear but to me it is simple. Just look back into history. The links are there as I have aimed to prove. First, look at the image, next ask what story or statement is being made with the clothing and you will find that that in the case of a true fashion icon the outcome will be the same, influence and power. These are what lie beneath the layers of fabric that make the stories.

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