

Fabrics and Furniture in French Court Life of the 1700s

European Art
1715-1800

In this period, French court costume was the height of European fashion, sometimes even driving the French economy. In order to promote the French silk industry, imported silk was prohibited. Silk manufacture, first developed in China and introduced into France in the mid 1400s, was a time- and labor-intensive process. By 1789, 20,000 craftsmen worked in Lyon, the silk capital of France. Silks, particularly velvets, damasks and brocades, were luxury materials.

Costume, often cut with generous draping, highlighted expensive fabrics worn by the wealthy and powerful. In the *Portrait of Cardinal Guillaume Dubois*, the traditional scarlet vestments are a profusion of red silk. Women's dresses perhaps best showcased fine fabrics, particularly as women's skirts expanded at mid century, as seen in the print *The Little Godparents*, with its ornate lace and ruffles. These wide dresses, aided by hip supports called *panniers*, eventually became so wide that women had to turn sideways to pass through doors. In the 1780s, when Queen Marie Antoinette made a simple, loose, high-waisted silhouette popular, seen in a *Portrait of a Woman* from the 1790s, cottons replaced rich silks.

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above: Louis Marie Sicard (French, 1746-1825). *Portrait of a Woman*, 1790s. Watercolor on ivory; diam. 2 7/16 in. Gift of J. H. Wade Jr., G. G. Wade, and Mrs. E. B. Greene 1926.233



right: Pierre-Charles Baquoy (French, 1759-1829) and C. E. Pates (French, 1744-1802). *The Little Godparents* (after Jean-Michel Moreau le jeune), 1777. Etching and engraving; 10 13/16 x 8 11/16 in. Anna Elizabeth Wilson Memorial Fund 1980.51

right: Hyacinthe Rigaud (French, 1659-1743). *Portrait of Cardinal Guillaume Dubois*, 1723. Oil on canvas; 71 1/16 x 58 1/4 in. John L. Severance Fund 1967.17



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right: Attributed to Nicolas Heurtaut (French, 1720–1771). *Armchair*, about 1755. Carved and gilded wood; 41 1/4 x 28 3/4 x 31 1/4 in. Bequest of Mrs. Severance A. Millikin 1989.160



(CONTINUED FROM FRONT) With aristocrats outfitted in fine textiles, court life was a center of conspicuous consumption. Its daily spectacle was a theater of rustling sound and lively pattern. Aristocrats displayed their clothing as status symbols at social gatherings in luxurious surroundings.

Seating furniture of the 1700s met the functional challenges of the changing silhouette of women's dress. Each couch and chair could either display the sitter like a jewel, or reveal her awkwardness. In the early part of the century, armchairs were formal and upright with armrests in line with legs. This type of chair encased the sitter between armrests. A woman with a wide skirt, however, would need to perch on the chair's edge. As dresses became wider by the middle of the century, armrests were set further back and angled to accommodate a woman's wide *panniers* and showcase her costume. In the small-scale porcelain by the Meissen factory, a woman is balanced on the end of the seat while her voluminous gown spills across the couch.

right: While *The Crinoline Group: Musicians* from around 1737 by the Meissen Factory is German, the clothing of both figures is heavily influenced by French styles. (Porcelain; 7 7/8 x 11 1/2 x 6 9/16 in. Gift of Rosenberg & Stiebel, Inc. 1952.2)



above: *Royal Savonnerie Armchair*, before 1717. Royal Savonnerie Manufactory, France, Paris, Chaillot Workshops. Carved wood; Savonnerie knotted-pile (symmetrical rug knot) upholstery; wool, hemp; 48 x 27 3/4 x 21 3/4 in. John L. Severance Fund 1947.183.4