Empire Fashions

Tom Tierney
INTRODUCTION

The Empire period encompasses dress styles, furniture designs, and interior decoration popular in early nineteenth-century France, especially those favored by Napoleon and Empress Josephine during the First Empire (1804–14). Napoleon’s interest in ancient Rome, Greece, and Egypt stimulated creativity in direct imitation of classical styles. Archaeological discoveries were the basis for this source of inspiration. Empire styles then spread from France to the rest of Europe, including its colonial possessions. This period was preceded by the Directoire—the government of France from 1795 to 1799 (“Directoire” refers to the executive committee of five directors). This era also drew upon classical styles. The styles of both historical periods are included in this book.

In the years leading up to 1789—the beginning of the French Revolution—fashions had already begun to change to simpler designs, with less class distinction being shown, and for a good reason. To display elegance in public was to put one’s life in jeopardy. With the fall of the French monarchy and the executions of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette and most of their court, magnificence in dress virtually vanished. Gone were the hoops, paint and powder, and elaborate harrdons. Fine garments were often taken from the backs of the newly executed aristocrats or looted from their abandoned homes and sold. The Revolution had disastrous consequences for the French economy; France’s export trade almost disappeared. The linen and textile mills of Brittany and the Languedoc closed down, and many tradesmen closed their shops. After the Reign of Terror—when revenge was taken against aristocrats—subsidized, doors were reopened to refugees in the hope that they would bring money and trade to France.

The fundamentals of the modern male costume date from the French Revolution, when knee breeches gave way to trousers. The revolutionary street fighters who adopted the workingman’s long-legged pants were called sans culottes—meaning “without breeches.” the apparel of the aristocrats. In addition, men wore knee-high “jockey” or “top” boots, generally of black leather with tan turned-down cuffs. Around 1792, the Muscadines emerged. Muscadine was a term of derision for flamboyantly dressed, effeminate patriotic dandies who used musk scent, reminiscent of Muscadine candies. These
young fops were not taken too seriously and were tolerated as an annoyance, just as the "zoot-suiters" and "punks" and other faddish dressers were.

The Incroyables were succeeded by the Merveilleuses (literally, "incredible"), young dandies who fitted themselves out in coats tippet at the waist and flared in the skirt, waistcoats of contrasting-colored satin, and full sheer cambric cravats. Breeches finished with ribbon loops ended below the knee. Blue and white or green and white were the preferred color combinations. Men wore their hair cropped on top and long over the ears in a style called "dogs' ears." The more elegant man of the period wore a frock coat, preferably in brown, with a black or violet collar and canary yellow or bottle green breeches. The waistcoat was dark satin, and the cravat white muslin or green, black, or scarlet silk.

Women's costume also took on a simplicity of style, with a tightly fitted bodice emphasizing the bosom. Sleeves were long and fitted; skirts were full, gathered at the waist, and worn over petticoats in lieu of hoops. A soft, full-cut lingerie gown, the chemise à l'anglaise (English gown), belted high with a crushed satin sash, was worn year-round. Peasants, working women, and female revolutionaries generally wore their skirts shortened to midcalf. High heels, linked to the aristocracy, were replaced by soft satin or kid flat slippers. The Incroyable's female counterpart was the Merveilleuse ("marvelous one"), who carried the style of "Classical Greek" to extremes, wearing pink silk body tights under sheer, skimpy muslin dresses, even wetting the dress to make it cling. Tiny sandals with cross-cross lacing up to the knee were popular.

The elegantly dressed woman's gowns of the Directory period are of interest because, for the first time, the creators of fashion deliberately turned back to another period's clothing for inspiration—in this case, classical Greece and Rome. Designers erroneously assumed that the aged and sun-bleached ruins had always been white, therefore, white became the preferred, predominant hue in interiors and fabrics. Even a pale complexion was preferred during the Directory and First Empire periods. The elegant result of this return to the classical past was a sheath or chemise gown, worn slightly full over a lower bosom, and sashed or tied just below the breast line, with the skirt usually ending in a train. Tumans were worn over the long, straight gowns, which had side slits to reveal the legs. Regardless of the season, sheer materials were used for these gowns, bringing on an epidemic of respiratory ailments, sometimes called "muslin disease," in 1803.

The revealing nature of Directory fashions left no room for pockets, so women began carrying small drawstring reticules (purses). As for hairstyles, a classic coiffure with the psyche knot (hair knotted at the back of the head) was adapted from classical Greek sculptures. This could be decorated with combs, coronets, and nets. Hairpieces were used to produce ringlets and chignon. These were followed by various bobs, such as the Titus or Brutus styles for men and women. The Titus was cut short in layers and brushed up and out from the crown of the head, the uneven ends hanging over the forehead and ears. The Brutus was a little less shaggy, and the bangs lay flatter.

Napoleon Bonaparte, France's brilliant military hero, became First Consul in 1799 and Emperor in 1804. One of his first tasks was to rebuild the economy. He introduced weaving machines to France's textile mills, creating new fabric-producing factories, and rebuilt the lace industry. In 1801, Joseph Jacquard revolutionized the textile industry by inventing the mechanical loom (its use of perforated cards representing a pattern was a forerunner to the punchboards of the modern computer) to weave patterns and brocaded fabrics. The French government bought Jacquard's loom and gave him a royalty and yearly pension. As Napoleon's Empire period progressed, pantaloons or trousers became an important feature of men's attire, and between 1810 and 1815, tight-fitting trousers and garters in a single garment became the mode. The habit, or suit, with trousers (generally with stirrup straps) and a coat of the same fabric became a popular item in dark blues, greens, and browns. Full dress at court and for public balls consisted of a velvet coat, black satin breeches, an elaborately embroidered silk waistcoat, a shirt with frilled wrist ruffles, a jabot or neck frill, and a neck cloth. For winter wear there were two styles of greatcoats—the redingote, a three-quarter or full-length coat or dress, and the carrick, a garment with several shoulder flaps.

During the Empire Period, a fashionable women's style was the chemise chemisette gown with long sleeves divided in several strips by narrow bands of ribbon (mamelukes). A frilly neck ruff, the chenille (known as the "Betsey" in England), was popular. Another highly popular item was the spencer, a very short bolero jacket edged in fur, swansdown, or fringe; it originated in England, but the French quickly adapted it, for both men and women. By the middle of the Empire period, the redingote became the costume for winter wear. It generally had two or more layers of broad shoulder flaps like the men's carrick coat but was belted high beneath the bosom to follow the Empire line. Around 1804, a high-waisted, fur-lined woman's coat appeared, the nijlentowel, which was popular in England. Empress Josephine established two styles of court gown, "the little costume" and the "grand costume." The first was of embroidered satin (blue was Josephine's favorite color) with short puffed sleeves and a train falling from the belt line. The grand gown, designed in brocade with metallic threads, had long, tight sleeves and a sumptuous train falling from the left shoulder. Both gowns had square necklines with standing lace collars and were elaborately embroidered in silk, pearls, and sequins. An accessory of great importance during this period, remaining in fashion for over a century, was the cashmere shawl. This fashion dates from Napoleon's Egyptian campaign, which also was responsible for the introduction of elegant turbans. Headgear in general was ornamented with ribbons, flowers, plumes, and lace.
Gentleman and Lady, ca. 1789

Left: The gentleman wears a striped silk claw-hammer frock coat with a high, square, cutaway waist, and a square-cut waistcoat in a contrasting color. He wears yellow nankeen (durable Chinese cotton) breeches, white hose, and soft slippers. Right: The lady is dressed in a patterned muslin chemise gown with narrow waist sash. She wears a fringed shawl, a muslin fichu (scarf) fills the neckline. Her mushroom (balloon) muslin hat has eyelet trim and bow.
Muscadine and Lady, ca. 1792

Left: The lady wears a chimneypot hat with rolled brim. Her full-length redingote dress in open-robe style has a fitted bodice, stand-fall collar, and shoulder caplet. She wears a puffed buffon (pouter pigeon) neck cloth. Right: Her Muscadine companion also wears a chimneypot hat, but his has a flat brim and tricolor cockade. His redingote has a cutaway skirt and double revers (wide lapels). He wears nankeen knee breeches and jockey boots.
Muscadine and Lady, ca. 1793

Left: Muscadine wears a dark wool redingote over striped (red, white, and blue) vest and pants. He displays a large tricolor ribbon cockade on his beaver hat. His hair is powdered and frizzed into "dogs' ears" at the sides. Right: The lady wears a striped cotton gown with short jacket and self-fabric bows. Over the jacket she wears a white gauze fichu (drapé) in pouter pigeon style. Her bonnet of ribbon and ostrich plumes tops her rolled sidecurls.
Two Ladies in Promenade Gowns, ca. 1793

Left: Lady wears a long-sleeved white muslin gown with a short-sleeved, fur-trimmed velvet robe. She carries a muff of matching fur and wears a turban of embroidered silk decorated with flowers, lace, and even a jeweled fan! Right: She wears a chemise à l'anglaise (English frock) in lingerie fabric with a satin sash at the waist and matching satin slippers. The over-gown is lined in matching satin. Her flowing curls are topped by a gauze turban with ostrich plume.
Sans-Culottes and Female Revolutionary, ca. 1793-94

These revolutionaries wear the working class garb of Parisians. Left: She wears a white long-sleeved chemise under her dark bodice; a striped (red, white, and blue) short skirt—working women could wear this length; and wooden sabots. She sports a tricolor cockade on her linen bonnet. Right: He wears red-, white-, and blue-striped pantaloons (closely fitted calf-length trousers); a simple white shirt; soft leather slip-on shoes; and a red “liberty” cap with cockade. Both are armed for street fighting.
Left: The drummer boy wears a discarded officer's jacket over an apron and knee breeches. Center: Musketeer wears long pantalons à pont (trousers opened in the front by means of a bridge—pont—buttoned to the vest); a white shirt, and a caramagnole (Revolutionary-style) jacket. Right: Their leader wears a tricolor baldric (sash), a redingote with revers (wide lapels), an open-collar shirt, long pantalons à pont, and jockey boots. All three wear a Phrygian (ancient close-fitting) cap.
A Merchant and Daughters, ca. 1795

Left: The gentleman wears a cutaway coat with tails, a stand-up collar, and revers. His drop-front breeches have double rows of closure buttons and ribbon ties. There are buttons at the knee as well. He wears jockey boots with ribbon loops. Top right: The older daughter wears a summer promenade gown. Bottom right: The child wears a muslin gown with ribbon-trim gathering at the waist, arms, and hem. She wears a muslin mobcap.
Left: The boy wears a satin "skeleton" suit (tight-fitting suit with jacket buttoned to trousers) with waist sash. This historical period was significant as the first time that children's garments were designed specifically for children and were not miniature replicas of adult garments. Right: The lady wears a promenade costume of a white muslin gown with pastel over-gown and train. She wears a wired bonnet of gathered sheer trimmed with spikes of silk flowers.

Merchant's Wife and Son, ca. 1795
Left: Hussar (cavalryman) wears braided waistcoat and short braided jacket with fur trim. His green uniform has silk braid and gold buttons; black hat has red band and green plume.  
Center: Officer of the Light Infantry wears cutaway jacket and long waistcoat; blue tailcoat with red revers, collar with brass buttons, white waistcoat and breeches; black plummed hat.  
Right: Line cavalryman wears a blue jacket, a red-lined tailcoat with golden revers, white bandoleer (shoulder band), and black tan-cuffed boots.
 Soldiers, ca. 1796

Left: Infantryman in blue jacket with red revers, collar, cuffs, and epaulettes: white waistcoat and red-, white-, and blue-striped pants; white spats and black shoes; black hat. Center: Musketeer wears a white jacket with rust-red revers; white waistcoat, pants, and bandoleer; black gaiters. His brass and black leather helmet sports a black plume. Right: Line infantryman wears blue coat with red revers, epaulettes, and collar; white waistcoat and pants with black gaiters; black becorme (two-cornered) hat with flowing red plume.
Incroyables, ca. 1796

Left: This Incroyable wears a wool coat with embroidered satin revers and velvet collar and cuffs. His knee breeches have ribbon loops. He wears silk stockings and leather pumps and a bicorne with a cockade. Right: This man, whose leather boots are being blacked by a street urchin, wears a redingote with oversized revers and a wide neck cloth. His stockings cover the bottom of his breeches. He carries a fan; his hairdo is in the dogs' ears style.
Merveilleuses, ca. 1796

Left: This Merveilleuse is dressed simply in a sheer gown of muslin gauze, which she wears over pink tights to give the "classical statue" look. She wears laced sandals. Right: Short-sleeved white muslin gown worn with long white gloves; a long, brightly colored wool scarf; clocked hese (stockings embroidered at the ankle) with satin slippers, a high neck cloth; and a jockey cap with extended visor.
Vendeuse and Merchant, ca. 1796

Left: This working-class vendeuse—saleswoman—wears a skirt that reveals her quilted petticoat, striped cotton fichu at her neck, and a mobcap under a ribbon-trimmed straw hat. Right: The merchant resembles an Incroyable, who, like a rock star, influenced popular taste. His redingote has wide revers and stand-up collar; the pocket has ornamental bells to discourage pickpockets. He wears a frilled waistcoat over knee breeches; short boots show patterned knitted hose. He wears a bascule hat over "dogs' ears."
Dance Mania, ca. 1797

After the demise of court functions, public and private dances provided social contact in Paris. The graceful dancer in the center wears a soft printed-cotton gown in classical style, with a scarf thrown over one shoulder and caught at the waist like an over-tunie. The gentlemen wear cutaway coats with waistcoats and breeches, stockings, and slippers. The man on the left wears a Brutus haircut, the one on the right a Titus cut.
Dance Costumes, ca. 1797

Left: The man wears a short-waisted, double-breasted cutaway jacket with flared cuffs. Center: The lady wears a classic gown with train; the skirt features contrasting ribbon trim and bow ties. Right: She wears a soft muslin gown, criss-crossed with red ribbons to grimly recall how some victims of the revolutionaries were trussed on the way to the guillotine; the ribbon tied around her neck shows where the cut would occur. She wears a large kerchief in mobcap style.
The painter Jacques-Louis David was asked to create costumes for the executives of the Directoire, but his designs were largely unsuccessful. **Left:** The lady’s gown is a somewhat opaque fabric with elaborate metallic embroidery trim. A fringed *haléine* (purse) hangs from her waist. Her ankle-length gown reveals her strap sandals. Her haircut is the woman’s version of the Titus. **Right:** A member of the Directoire wears one of David’s designs for formal occasions, replete with tassels and embroidery.
Napoleon Bonaparte was a brilliant military commander. By 1799 he was virtually dictator of France. Here he appears in military garb consisting of a black swallow-tailed frock coat with a red stand-fall collar and piping, worn over a white waistcoat and fashionable tight-fitting white pantaloons. His black jockey boots have brown tops. His black bicorne hat has a red and gold cockade. He is shown in his favorite stance—hand tucked into waistcoat—a pose adopted by many men.
Gentleman and Lady of First Empire, ca. 1800

Left: Lady wears a velvet spencer jacket with fur-trimmed collar and flared wrist cuffs over muslin Empire gown with embroidered silk pattern and neck scarf. Her chignon is bound up in a turban-like silk band that matches her gown. Right: Gentleman wears formal court attire: a red velvet claw-hammer tailcoat over a striped silk waistcoat, trousers tucked into black Hussar boots. His bicorne hat is decorated with gold galloon (lace or ribbon trim). He carries yellow kid gloves.
Couple in Walking Costumes, ca. 1800

Left: The lady wears a pale, lightweight neoclassic gown banded in dark ribbon. Her straw hat has bands of ribbon matching the dress. A separate trim is attached with hooks at the back of the neckline; it is embroidered with a leaf motif. Her pastel gloves match her fan and the bow and tie of her bonnet. Right: Her companion wears a dark high-waisted cutaway coat with tapering sleeves over light ankle-length pantaloons and dark shoes and hat.
A Well-Dressed Couple, ca. 1800

Left: The lady wears a promenade gown of light-colored muslin; low-cut neckline has frills that match cuffs. The removable long sleeves are topped with puffed sleeves. The gown is belted with double ribbons. Flower-trimmed straw hat is tied like a bonnet. Right: Her companion wears a short-waisted spencer jacket with narrow tails; sleeves puff at the shoulder and taper to the wrist. The short frills are stached to stand out. He wears loose-fitting culottes.
Two Stylish Women, ca. 1802

Left: A young matron wears a sleeveless pullover canesou jacket of dark velvet with swansdown trim over her light-colored muslin gown. Her velvet hat is trimmed with pleated gauze, ribbon, and flowers. Right: Her friend wears a velvet tunic edged with embroidered medallions incorporating pearl beads. She wears the tunic over a pale muslin chemise with puffed sleeves. She wears satin slippers and has a Titus haircut.
Left: Formal pale-toned silk satin gown with puffed sleeves. The back and side panels, which are decorated with ribbon embroidery, fall into a train. The lady’s hair is bound with gold fillets; she wears long gold drop earrings and white evening gloves. Right: Day gown of embroidered muslin with puffed sleeves and lace trim. She wears a pleated chemise, or Berse (small neck ruff) of pleated muslin. Worn with matching velvet sash and slippers.
Gentleman and Lady, ca. 1804

Left: Her suitor wears formal day attire consisting of a cutaway tailcoat of dark velvet, a striped waistcoat, nankeen breeches, white ribbed stockings, and a dark bicorn hat with gold fringe. Right: Young woman in garden gown of pale satin with puffed sleeves and embroidered ribbon edging. Her detachable train of brightly colored fabric has a darker embroidered trim. The short-brimmed straw hat is edged in lace and trimmed with flowers.
Napoleon Bonaparte

Napoleon proclaimed himself emperor of France in 1804. The founding of the First Empire did not significantly change the French government, but some of Napoleon's actions—his impressive coronation, the revival of princely titles—recalled pre-Revolutionary days. Here, he is dressed for his coronation (the crowned himself with a gold laurel wreath) in a long white satin tunic embroidered with gold bullion thread; his toga/train matches Josephine's train. His crown was designed in red velvet, gold, and diamonds.
Empress Josephine, ca. 1804

Here, Empress Josephine is simply dressed in a garden frock of pale satin embellished with a gold fringe. Ribbon trim embellishes the sleeves, high Empire waistline, and neckline of the dress. Josephine had one of the most extensive jewelry collections in the world; here she displays a valuable necklace, as well as a brooch attached to the bodice. She wears a tiara in her hair, which has been styled with side curls and ringlets.
Bride and Groom of the Empire Period, ca. 1895

Left: The groom is dressed in a dark frock coat with full skirt and deep revers over a pale-toned striped silk waistcoat and striped trousers. He wears a white shirt and stock, and kid gloves. Right: The bride wears a blush-white gown with silk embroidery, a lace-edged veil, and long, sheer gloves with an embroidered floral pattern. She has adorned her hair with pink and blush roses.
Left: She wears a wool redingote with self-shoulder cape and satin collar and revers. Her hat is made of the same satin, edged with braid. She wears a white chemise (mock ruff) and a white gown. Right: Her companion is dressed in a carrick coat with five shoulder capes and turned-up collar, a dark fitted waistcoat, and light-colored striped trousers tucked into Hessian-style boots. He wears a dark top hat with rolled brim and carries a wooden truncheon.
Young Couple in Walking Costume, ca. 1810

Left: The girl wears a paisley shawl over her Empire chemise, which is bordered by a band of shawl material. She wears a lace-edged sheer vest; her hair is held in place by a ribbon bandeau. Her gloves match her satin slippers. Right: The young man wears a dark velvet double-breasted coat with tapered sleeves. His light-colored breeches have an embroidered pattern that camouflages the drop-front opening. He wears Hessian-style boots and a dark top hat.
Fashionable Women, ca. 1810

Left: The woman is dressed in an Empire-style (belted high beneath the bosom) house gown or housedress made of sheer light-colored muslin or lawn (cotton or silk). 
Right: This woman wears an over-dress, made of the same muslin or lawn, which converts the previous ensemble into a tea gown, should callers stop by. It is decorated with an embroidered motif. Around this time, women were adopting Greek styles of hairdressing, with hair curled, coiled, and plaited.
Couple Out for a Stroll, ca. 1810

Left: Lady's silk gown has embroidered leaf-pattern trim at the skirt. The removable sleeves, train, and muff are made of Persian lamb. Her beehive straw hat is tied like a bonnet; it is trimmed with flowers and "blackbands."

Right: The gentleman wears a dark claw-hammer tailcoat. His tight-fitting trousers button under the shoe and are trimmed down the sides with decorative buttons. He wears a dark top hat and dark shoes.
Stylish Couple Paying a Call, ca. 1810

Left: The gentleman wears a short version of the carrick coat with a single cape, which he has thrown over his shoulders like a shawl. He wears a short-crowned hat and dark Hessian boots over his light-colored striped trousers. Right: The lady is dressed in a dark velvet can-can jacket that matches her bonnet and the pleated flounce at her skirt hem. The skirt is made of lightweight pale-colored wool. She wears a neck ruff and bow.
A Fashionable Couple, ca. 1811

Left: The lady's beautifully crafted mameluke sleeves consist of numerous pleats divided into puffs by thin ribbons. A three-tiered pleated collar tops the sleeves. They are part of her douillette (cherusse) coat dress and a pleated-back Empire gown. Her cotton lawn bonnet is decorated with eyelet embroidery, ribbon, and silk flowers.

Right: Gentleman wears a dark wool claw-hammer coat, the tails widened with pleats, over buckskin breeches and Hussar boots. He carries a beaver hat.
Couple in Formal Court Dress, ca. 1813

Left: The man’s claw-hammer coat of brightly colored velvet has a stand-up collar and wide cuffs. He wears a satin brocade waistcoat and white satin trousers. He carries a bicorne hat with ostrich-feather edging. Right: The lady wears a pale satin tunic over a white gown; puffs of muslin held with pearl beads recall Renaissance pull-through puffs and slashes. The tunic’s neckline, hemline, and sleeves are edged with lace points. She wears a Greek-style coronet and snood.
Fur Trim and Ostrich Plumes. ca. 1813

Left: The lady wears a dark wool great coat trimmed with fur. This style, called a "winceoura" (wince waste), was inspired by Napoleon's Russian campaign. The bonnet of the same fabric is fur trimmed and topped by an ostrich plume. Her slippers are fur trimmed, she carries a matching muff. Right: Her companion wears a fur-trimmed, gold- braded Hussar jacket over a straight skirt. Her hat and slippers are of dark satin; the hat has an ostrich plume.
Two Ladies Wearing Redingotes, ca. 1815

Left: The lady wears a dark-colored velvet redingote. Her ruched bonnet, the same color as the coat, is topped with ostrich plumes. Her stockings are white, the lace-up slippers dark. Right: A summer-weight redingote of patterned silk in light tones, with long, full sleeves under short, puffed ones. Her stand-up collar is topped by a white lace-edged cherusse (pleated collar). Her straw bonnet is topped by ostrich plumes.
Family in Formal Day Wear, ca. 1815

Left: Father wears brightly colored wool frock coat with long claw-hammer tails and a stand-fall collar. His tight-fitting breeches are pale yellow satin, his silk stockings white, and his pumps and bicorn dark. Center: Son wears a pastel satin "skeleton" suit (tight-fitting, with jacket buttoned to trousers) with ruff collar. Right: Mother wears a classic light-colored satin Empire gown with satin ribbon appliqué. Her tall hat, topped with ostrich plumes, matches the gown.
Ladies' hats and hair styles from the Revolutionary Period

o. Silk cottage bonnet with lace frills, satin ribbon.
Empire Fashions
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This coloring book panorama of late 18th- and early 19th-century French fashions offers a fascinating survey of the changes in clothing styles worn during and after the Revolution, and of clothing of the Napoleonic era in general.

Forty-five plates of detailed, accurate illustrations include representations of claw-hammer frock coats and vests for the well-dressed man, loose pantaloons and shorter skirts for the working classes, high-waisted promenade gowns for fashionable ladies, the coronation gown worn by Empress Josephine of France, and other examples of period dress. Footwear, walking sticks, reticules (purses), top hats, turbans, a “pooz” bonnet, and dozens of other period accessories are included, along with hairdos for men and women.


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