

It's All in the Details: Making an early 19th Century Ball Gown

By Hope Greenberg

In 1775, the year of Jane Austen's birth, women wore gowns with a fitted bodice, the waist at or below the natural waistline, and full skirts over a visible, often ornate, petticoat. They were made in a variety of heavy silks, cotton or wool. By the time she had reached her late teens the ornate gowns were being replaced by simple, lightweight, often sheer cotton or silk gowns that reflected the ideals of classicism.

This guide provides images and details to consider when creating an early 19th century ballgown. The examples provide a general guide, not an exact historic timeline. Fashion is flexible: styles evolve and are adopted at a different pace depending on the wearer's age, location, and economic or social status. These examples focus on evening or ball gowns. Day dresses, walking dresses, and carriage dresses, while following the same basic silhouettes, have their own particular design details. Even evening gowns or opera gowns can usually be distinguished from ball gowns which, after all, must be designed for dancing!

By focusing on the details we can see both the evolution of fashion for this period and how best to re-create it. What is the cut of the bodice, the sleeve length, or the height of the bustline? How full is the skirt, and where is that fullness? What colors are used? What type of fabric? Is there trim? If so, how much, what kind, and where is it placed? Based on the shape of the gown, what can we tell about the foundation garments? Paying attention to all these details will help you create a gown that is historically informed as well as beautiful.

General Silhouette

1795



Light fabric, full, high-waisted skirt usually cut as one with the bodice, elbow length sleeves (full length for day wear), rounded bosom filled in with a large handkerchief.

1800-1805



Diaphanous muslins, white on white embroidery. Think Greek or Roman draperies. Gathered bodice, still cut as one with gown. Moderately high bustline, short or elbow length sleeves, train. Some overtunics.

1810s



Neckline broadens, often square, puff sleeves, bodice sometimes gathered, sometimes trimmed, bustline even higher, strong vertical embroidery on front center skirt. Silks and more color.

1819



Late teens: bodice at it's smallest and highest. Sleeves and bodice highly decorated. Skirt cut wider, stiffened and trimmed to make it stand out. By 1820 waist drops as skirts widen.

Undergarments: Shift, Corset (Stays), Petticoat

Shift:



The layer closest to the body for this entire period is a linen or cotton shift. It is constructed of rectangles and triangles, with short sleeves and a drawstring or gathered neckline being most common.

The stays or corset are worn over the shift. Unlike later corsets, late 18th-early 19th corsets were not designed to give one a small waist. The 18th century corset was heavily boned and designed to provide a smooth, barrel-shaped torso with rounded bosom. The transitional corset kept the rounded bosom, but was short-waisted. The early 19th century corset was softer, often stiffened only with cording and a center busk (a smooth thin strip of wood in a pocket running between the breasts down the center of the corset), and designed to provide a columnar shape. The diameter of the column was not as important as achieving a smooth, vertical look with a very high bustline and a "lift and separate" look. By the late teens, early 20s, the corset began to return to a more substantial garment, with attempts to rein in the waist.

The layer above the corset is a linen or cotton petticoat, usually with bodice. The cut of the neckline depends on the dress under which it will be worn. The shape of the petticoat's skirt, especially the location of gathers, should follow the style of the gown being worn over it.

1795



The 1790s corset supports, but does not push up, the bustline. The neckline would be filled in with a large handkerchief, and the "tail," along with a bustle pad, helps hold out the skirt.

1810



The 1810 corset creates a smooth columnar line and pulls the bustline up quite high. The straps are well out of the way to accommodate the broad neckline. There is a busk pocket on this corset, though the busk itself is missing.

Notice that even though a certain amount of exposed bosom is fashionable, visible cleavage is NOT a desired beauty trait.

Corsets are made of sturdy cotton (coutil, twill, canvas) with cords and quilting for stiffening. The busk, a thin wooden strip about 1-2" in width, is inserted in a vertical pocket between the breasts. The busk helps maintain an erect posture and a smooth line. Even corsets without any other form of stiffening usually have a busk. Corsets of this era are laced in the back with a single spiral lace (i.e. not two laces criss-crossed).

1819



The waistline of the 1819 corset begins to drop and be more defined, although the bustline is still quite high. Additional quilting across the front begins to suppress and add definition to the waist.

Bodice Front

1790s



This gown with a crossover neckline, as well as other gowns of this period, feature a bodice that is low, round, and filled in with a handkerchief. The bodice is cut as one piece with the skirt and gathered.

1805



This gown features a broad neckline, gathered slightly at the neck. The waist is drawn in slightly by a drawstring but there are no gathers: again, the ideal is a smooth column. The waistline is about a third of the way between the shoulder and elbow.

1808



The bodice has a broad, rounded neckline, gathered slightly by a drawstring (this actually improves the fit). There are no gathers at the front of the skirt.

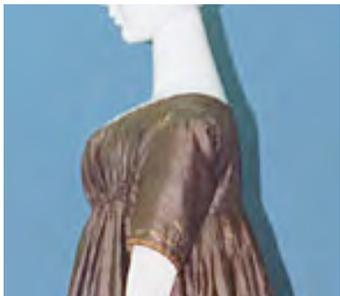
1815-20



The black bodice shows the wide but short style of the late teens. The waistline is quite high, and there is now trimming that adds volume to the shoulder, enhancing the horizontal effect.

Bodice Back

1795-1800



This silk gown shows the longer, less full sleeve. The bustline is high and the waistline is only very slightly lower in the back. The skirt is very full, with the fullness being distributed evenly around the waistline.

1800-1810



Net gowns with chenille embroidery were popular between 1806-1810. This gown has a narrow skirt but the fullness is still in back, with a small bustle pad to help the skirt stand out from the body. Waistlines even front-to-back, or dipped slightly.

1800-1810



This bodice shows the classic "diamond back" cut for this period. Shoulder seams were set behind the modern shoulder line and a diagonal back seam went from near the center back to the back of the arm. Backs were narrow (posture: upright, shoulders back) with armholes cut deeply towards the center back.

18-teens



As the decade advances, fashion magazines describe gowns as having a "broad back." The diamond shape remains standard, but is cut wider. The waistline is cut higher in the back than in the front. This gown shows the characteristic back arch.

Sleeves

1795-1800



1810



1816/1818



18th century sleeves covered the elbow. With the transition to the new, lightweight gowns, sleeves began to shorten. Long sleeves were still in use for daywear, but sleeves for evening wear were generally shorter. During the early phase, sleeves were straight, set into the armhole with little or no gathering. As puff sleeves replaced straight sleeves, the gathering was still concentrated at the back, particularly in English gowns. Also note that as the armhole is cut much closer to the center back than a modern armhole the sleeves need to accommodate that.

Throughout this period the direction of the fullness of the sleeve is increasingly outward, not upward. Even the highly ornate sleeves of the late 18-teens follow this line. It will be taken to extremes in the wide-shouldered gowns of the late 1820s and 30s.

Note that after about 1805 the lower edge of the puff sleeves generally falls horizontally in line with the bodice. Many gowns of the 18-teens that have tiny bodices show equally tiny sleeves. Necklines also widen, though bare shoulders will not be seen until later in the century.

Skirts

1795



Light cotton or silk undergown is gathered around entire waist and has a slight train. Overgown has longer train.

1800



A similar gown, without the overdress, gathered slightly in the front and extensively in the back. Round train. Trains are found on day and evening dresses during the first few years of the century. They disappear in daywear around 1806, although they do hang on for a bit in evening or "opera" gowns (not ball gowns).

1805-10



A yellow line is drawn on this image to show how the side seam falls. The front of skirt is now a single rectangular panel set into the bodice with no gathers. The side seam is well to the back, and, as the panel is a rectangle, falls slightly to the front (i.e. it is a straight seam but due to the shape of the skirt it appears to curve.) The side back panels are triangular to provide fullness and all the gathering is in the back.

1816



Skirts continue to be cut with a front rectangle, side gores, and gathered back. After about 1815 they begin to widen at the hem. The front is still set smoothly into the bodice but the panel is more triangular. The increasingly heavy decoration at the bodice is balanced by decoration at the lower skirt.

The fashion plates show ball gowns with short hemlines, at or just above the ankles, beginning around 1810.

Hair and Hats

1795



1803



1812/1816



1818/1822



Big hair: grey powdered curls, puffs, and rolls with turbans and tall plumes.

Hair is dressed in "classical" style, with curls close to the head but with the mass of hair drawn back. Styles move from 'Grecian' where the hair is at the back of the head, to 'Roman' where the volume moves forward.

As the decade progresses, hair is dressed more elaborately, with the bulk moving to the top of the head. Flowers and ribbons are popular. A variety of turbans are worn, following the shape of the hairstyle. This means they are small and closer to the head at the beginning of the decade, but become larger and higher as the decade progresses. Plumes also make a comeback.

Fabrics and Colors

1) Fabrics:

The cottons of the period are called muslin, but are actually lighter and more sheer than most modern cottons and quite different from the utility fabric we call muslin in the U.S. Smooth cotton gauze, cotton voile, light batiste or fine silk/cotton blends are reasonable substitutes. Modern silks tend to be soft and drapery. Period silks were light but stiffer. Good quality dupioni or shantung can be a reasonable substitute, though they are more "slubby" and stiffer than period silks. Silk taffeta provides a more authentic drape and feel. The difficulty is finding these at a reasonable price! A few online sources for fabrics are listed below. Polyesters and rayon/acetates come in a greater variety of colors and weights, but do not breath well which makes them hot for dancing in. (Note: Polyester can be washed; acetate generally cannot.) A net or sheer silk or cotton overlay, was also popular. The net overlay embroidered with chenille was in vogue for the years just before 1810 (see red example above). The fashion plates from just before 1820 show many gowns made of silk satin (not as shiny as modern satin) with a sheer overdress. Again, the difficulty is finding a period-equivalent. Chiffon and georgette tend to be too fluid. Some lightweight silk organzas, though rather stiff, may work.

2) Colors:

White, of course, and a variety of pastels, but stronger colors were also popular. For example, the Ladies Magazine of 1812 lists salmon, blue, pink, green, red-lilac or heliotrope, buff, grey, crimson, orange, lemon, jonquil and puce as fashionable colors. Patterned fabrics are trickier: the white-on-white embroidered muslins show a variety of trellised vines and flowers, but where a contrasting figure appears (an embroidered flower or woven in design) the pattern is usually a small figure made with few colors, regularly spaced. Greens tend to be pure, blues tend towards sky blue but not blue-green or teal.

Cutting and Sewing Tips

1) Think about foundations!

With the possible exception of young women at the turn of the century, none of the gowns above are worn without some kind of foundation to provide the correct silhouette. Under all of these gowns women would have worn a shift, a corset (especially after the first few years of the century), and a petticoat. Wearing these layers seems to be the biggest difference between achieving a true Regency look and just looking like you are wearing a nice high-waisted dress.

While I would encourage everyone to make a corset there are some short cuts you can take. A bodiced petticoat with boning, a non-period alternative to wearing a corset, is one option. (See Jean Hunnisett's invaluable book for one example, or Sense and Sensibility patterns.) Properly constructed, this option can give you the "lift and separate" look but will probably be uncomfortable as the bones tend to dig in to the waist. An underwire bra with the straps pulled short is another, though modern bras tend to emphasize "push up and in for maximum cleavage" rather than the more period look.

Perhaps surprisingly, the most comfortable foundation can be a corset. Properly fitted, the corset will evenly distribute support and provide plenty of flexibility for dancing. Jean Hunnisett's book provides diagrams and instructions. Drea Leed's online corset pattern generator can also be used as a starting point. This site is designed to produce an Elizabethan corset which is the wrong shape for Regency wear: an Elizabethan corset is designed to flatten the breasts and create a wide cone silhouette whereas an early 19th century corset is designed to lift and separate the breasts and provide a columnar shape to the torso. To adapt the results of the corset generator you will want to lengthen the corset, provide gores for the hips, and add gores to support the bust. The placement of boning channels is also different. See the historical garments or the Hunnisett book for proper placement. (A note about bones: whale baleen, reeds, or cording were the period materials used. Modern women, especially those with fuller figures, may want to substitute spiral steel. It is readily available, flexible, and somewhat more 'effective'.)

2) Make a muslin

Since the advent of off-the-rack clothing or graded patterns we have become used to accepting that not all clothes will be a tailored fit. Regency women, at least those who could afford the beautiful ball gowns in these images, would have made, or had those gowns made, personally and individually. The result would have been gowns that fit well and made the most of any given woman's figure. You can achieve this type of fitting by making a muslin, a personalized pattern fitted to your own body that you can then adapt for gown patterns.

To achieve the best fit, wear the undergarments you intend to wear with your finished gown. Using a modern pattern with a fairly fitted bodice, cut out your bodice pattern, placing the shoulder seams along the top of the shoulders, as in a modern gown. Baste it together. Try it on and note where the fitting problems are. Does the fabric pull or gap around the bust or neck? Try adjusting the shoulder angle. Is the waistline just under the bust? Adjust up or down as needed. Is the bodice snug around the bottom? Add or gather as needed.

Once the bodice fits well, draw new shoulder and back seams to create the diamond back. Leave your shoulder seam sewn together and cut along your new "diamond back" lines. Also, cut in the armholes towards the back. You do not actually need to use a pattern at all. There are several online sites that describe how to make your own muslin pattern. Search on 'make sloper', 'make toile', or 'make muslin'.

3) Adapting Modern Patterns

There are several pattern makers that offer Regency style patterns. Even the "Big 4" pattern companies' patterns can be adapted. There are three major areas where changes need to be made:

- **bodice depth:** the Regency waist is very high. This may seem like an obvious statement but it's important to note that while the waistline is just under the bust, that position is with the bust pushed up by the corset. As the style progressed the bodice became even smaller, as can be seen in the images from 1816 on. After 1820 the waistline begins to drop. Sleeves move with the waistline, so when choosing a gown style try to keep the appropriate waistline with the appropriate sleeve style.
- **back seams:** the seams in the Regency bodice are not in the same place as modern seams. Modern seams are usually on top of the shoulder and under the arm. The curved (Princess) seams on modern backs form a deep curve. Regency seams, on the other hand, are generally off the shoulder, not under the arm, and, on the back, are straight or form a more gentle curve.
- **skirts:** after about 1806, skirts are made of a front piece that is rectangular, a wide back piece that is rectangular, and then side gores that are triangular. These triangular gores become wider at the bottom as the century progresses, giving skirts a wider hemline. The skirt's side seam is not necessarily directly under the arm. The front piece is set into the waist smoothly while the back is gathered heavily. A small pad tied or sewn to the inside back waist will help the skirt stand out from the body, giving your gown the period look (this is how they did it too).
- **back closure:** modern gown back closures (those without zippers!) generally overlap in the back. Early 19th century gowns more frequently show a back closure that meets at the back but does not overlap. What about the gap? Remember that under these gowns women would have worn a shift, a corset, and a petticoat. Modesty retained!

4) Finishing Details

Trims on gowns followed an evolutionary pattern of their own. The early period sheer muslins were often embroidered elaborately. The embroidery was often more dense near the hem. In the years just before and after 1810 a definite vertical line in the center front of the skirt was popular. Piping, "van dyke" (pointy) lace and trim, and "windowpane" sleeves all became popular in the 18teens under gothic influences. In the years leading up to 1820, skirts widened. Padded hems or padded rouleau (tubes of fabric stuffed with lambswool, cotton or even rope) were used to stiffen the lower skirt. Trim became increasingly elaborate both on bodices and on skirts.

Compare these two images. The first is an extant gown from between 1800-10, the second is a gown made from the *Sense and Sensibility* pattern company:



Though not quite visible in this image, the shoulder seam in this extant gown is actually well behind the shoulder. The back seam goes straight from the waist to the armhole. The armhole is cut deeply to the back and most of the gathering for the sleeve is at the back. There is no side seam under the arm. The bodice side front and side back are a single piece.



On this modern pattern the shoulder seam is directly on top of the shoulder. The modern princess back seam rises steeply from the waist and then makes a sharp curve.



The lines drawn on this image indicate how to alter this pattern to bmake it more like the extant example. The shoulder line is no longer on top of the shoulder but about an inch below it. The back seam is straight and begins closer to the center back. The armhole is cut deeper towards the center back.

Resources

Fabric

Joann's or other national chains sometimes have silk or reasonable man-made fibre fabrics that approximate period fabrics.

Fabrics.com: <http://www.fabric.com> (good selection of dupioni, reasonable prices, good sales)

Denver Fabrics: <http://www.denverfabrics.com> (great collection of dupionis and taffetas, reasonable prices if you catch a sale)

The Linen Store <http://www.fabrics-store.com>: an excellent source for linen. Their 2.8 oz. linen is perfect for shifts.

Fashion Fabrics Club: <http://www.fashionfabricsclub.com/> (big selection, moderate prices)

Fabric Club: <http://www.fabricclub.com> (changing selection, often some good buys)

Fabric Mart: <http://www.fabricmartfabrics.com/> (small ever-changing selection but generally good prices)

Thai Silks: <http://www.thaisilks.com/> (gorgeous collection of silks though more of a modern style; pricey)

Hyena Productions: <http://www.hyenaproductions.com/index.html?cd=HYENA> (absolutely stunning decorator \$ilk\$ more suitable for 18th century gowns)

Dharma Trading: <http://www.dharmatrading.com> (they sell textile craft supplies but carry white cotton voiles, lawns and batistes at excellent prices)

Heirloom Sewing: http://www.heirloomsewingforchildren.com/fabric_index.htm (beautiful embroidered cottons and laces)

Regency Web Sites

(there are many, just google on regency fashion. These are a few of my favorites):

Demode Extant Women's Clothing: <http://www.demodecouture.com/realvict/1800s.html>

Cathy Decker's Regency Fashion Page: <http://hal.ucr.edu/~cathy/reg3.html>

Jessamyn's Regency Costume Companion: <http://www.songsmyth.com/costumerscompanion.html>

The Costumer's Manifesto: <http://www.costumes.org/history/100pages/regencylinks.htm> (a page of links to other sites)

The Costume Gallery: <http://www.costumegallery.com/>

University of Washington Fashion Plate Collection: <http://content.lib.washington.edu/costumehistweb/>

...and Drea Leed's Elizabethan Corset Generator: <http://www.elizabethancostume.net/custompat/index.html>

Books

Arnold, Janet. *Patterns of Fashion 1: Englishwomen's Dresses and Their Construction C. 1660-1860*. London: Macmillan, 1984.

Blum, Stella, and Rudolph Ackermann. *Ackermann's Costume Plates: Women's Fashions in England, 1818-1828*. New York: Dover Publications, 1978.

Bradfield, Nancy Margetts. *Costume in Detail; Women's Dress, 1730-1930*. Boston: Plays, inc, 1968.

Byrde, Penelope. *Jane Austen Fashion: Fashion and Needlework in the Works of Jane Austen*. Ludlow: Moonrise Press, 2008.

Fukai, Akiko, and Tamami Suoh. *Fashion: The Collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute : a History from the 18th to the 20th Century*. Köln: Taschen, 2002.

Hunnisett, Jean. *Period costume for stage and screen: Patterns for women's dress, 1800-1909*. Studio City, Ca: Players press, 1991.

Johnston, Lucy, Marion Kite, Helen Persson, Richard Davis, and Leonie Davis. *Nineteenth-Century Fashion in Detail*. London: V&A Publications, 2005.

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