WHEN WORTH WAS KING

Charles Frederick Worth seized his day—1858–95—and became the world's first male arbiter of fashion.

By Anne Hollander

Worth is a resonant name in fashion history—the only name dominating Parisian fashion during the last third of the nineteenth century, and a potent one until well after the First World War. The name stands for the founding of the great haute couture business in France, an enterprise that was to contribute powerfully both to modern French economic security and to the luster of French culture in the modern world. If today Worth's name has been largely forgotten, it has nonetheless endured. In a tribute, the Museum of the City of New York has mounted a major exhibition of his creations which will run until March 15, 1983, to generate a much-deserved revival of interest.

Charles Frederick Worth came to Paris from his native England in 1845, when he was nineteen, driven by a keen ambition. He had been working in a fashionable London dry-goods firm, knew no French, and had no money. After a few false starts, he was hired by Gagelin, an elegant firm that sold dress fabrics, trimmings, and a number of made-up cloaks, mantles, and shawls. He stayed twelve years, becoming a leading salesman in charge of his own radical innovation, a dressmaking department inside the fabric shop.

Those twelve years were essential to his future. Worth came to understand how elegance could be expressed through textiles; he learned French, and from his position behind the counter he learned to understand the women of his time.

Armed with his specialized awareness and native talent, Worth opened his own dressmaking shop in 1858, when he was thirty-two. He had by then a lovely young wife, who had been a cloak model at Gagelin and who served as his initial inspiration and mannequin. Within a decade this young Englishman became absolute king of French fashion and the only dressmaker famous on four continents. How did he do it? Most important, he established a completely new kind of shop, specializing in the *design* of women's clothes, not just their construction. For two centuries, Parisian women's apparel had been made by other women. Before that, throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, male tailors had made all the clothes for both sexes using women only as seamstresses. But in 1675 the sewing women broke away from the tailors' guild and got the legal right to be the exclusive makers of women's dress and to form their own guild. Consequently, during the whole of the eighteenth century and much of the nineteenth, the frivolous female craft of dressmaking was separate from the serious masculine art of tailoring for men. Although "fashion" was a long-standing Parisian specialty and Paris was renowned for its high standards of taste and inventive craftsmanship in women's clothes, dress designing was not a recognized occupation. Women studied fashion plates, bought their own material in fabric shops, and designed their own effects, relying on the suggestions and handiwork of deft milliners and dressmakers.

It was the well-established world of French female theater that swiftly capitulated to Worth's overmastering male eye and made him its sole director and producer. Worth dealt directly with the silk

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Worth believed in giving full expression to fabrics. The play of light on the satin of this ball gown (ca. 1886) evokes the French Rococo period he admired.

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merchants and designed clothes in superb fabrics of his own choosing. His constant use of rich materials gave a needed boost to the silk manufacturers of Lyons, who wove more and more interesting textiles to Worth's order and gradually came to supply the whole couture business he had founded. Worth provided his customers with everything—the conception, the fabrics, the details, the execution. He was the first to design a "collection," to make up a range of dresses for every occasion. He worked with important clients to set them off to particular advantage, to individualize the costume according to his own creative view of the lady.

Because during his ascendancy Worth was unique, his was the first and perhaps the only true fashion dictatorship. At a crucial time in French cultural history, it was he alone who shifted the responsibility for a woman's appearance from the taste of the lady herself to that of her male couturier. In his own sphere, Worth crystallized the Romantic myth of woman as man's creation, the creature of his vision and imaginative power, the projection of his longing and his fear. During this same period, Flaubert created Emma Bovary, Tolstoy created Anna Karenina, and Dumas fils created *La Dame aux Camélias.* Living ladies who lacked a great novelist to invent them could now find a great designer for the task.

A Man Must Dress a Woman

Since a woman's designer was now the arbiter of her appearance, "Fashion" came to be viewed as a blind and stupid force to be despised—something that trapped the gullible into looking ridiculous and the multitude into looking alike. Now only the fashion designer could save one from Fashion; in his hands and under his gaze the true self would find its right adornments. And it was at around this time that the playwright Feydeau is supposed to have said, "One must be a man to know how to dress women." As a man, Worth automatically made the enterprise seem serious: a man in a woman's business was looked upon as an artist, whose imaginative vision transcended the mode.

CULVER PICTURES

Charles Frederick Worth in the 1880s in the artist's costume he wore at home.

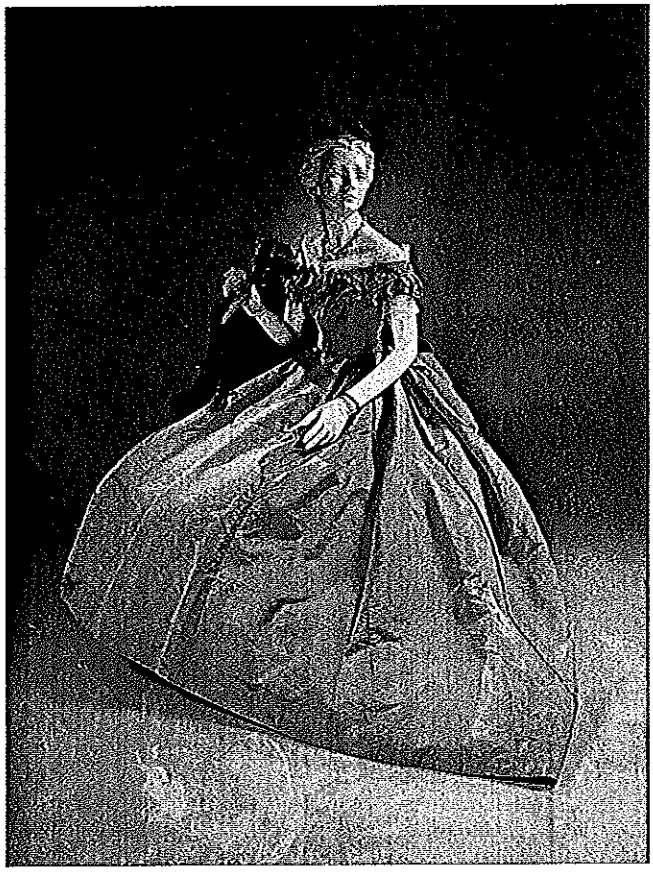
Worth's customers delighted in being "created" by him, to the occasional uneasiness of their husbands, lovers, and fathers, who, of course, were footing the bills. That he was English undoubtedly contributed to his success: as a foreigner he was classless, able to deal intimately with ladies of high station without seeming presumptuous; the English, moreover, had long been highly regarded in France for their skillful handling of cloth. Indeed, all Worth's dresses enhanced women's looks through clever cutting and superb fitting. His designs were simple and clear, with flattering lines and unfussy embellishments. They emphasized the sweep of the whole figure and clarified the outline of the head and neck, or of the arms and waist. His early evening dresses, described in various memoirs, were often of simple white tulle, perhaps shot with pure silver thread or caught up with a few clusters of violets.

In the 1840s and 1850s, just before Worth appeared on the scene, a stasis characterized fashionable feminine costume. The crinoline reached its hugest size—a great dome supported by a hooped petticoat. Sleeves opened wide at the bottom to show very full undersleeves. The bonnet, completely surrounding the face with a curtain in back to hide the hair, boxed in the head and rendered the neck invisible. Shawls were obligatory out-of-doors. They obscured the lines of the upper body and spread out over the big skirt so that a woman walking on the street became a vast cone of fabric with only her face visible at the top.

A dress might have its bodice, skirt, and sleeves all trimmed separately, but in the same way: three small ruffles above the waist, three large ruffles below it, three ruffles on each sleeve—a leaden scheme, allowing for many variations on only one idea. Ball gowns were very décolleté all the way around and bared the shoulders, but deep flounces encircling the neckline tended to veil the upper torso. The matching flounces around the vast skirt further emphasized the encircling character of the costume. A woman stood in the center of her clothes, a nearly invisible column supporting a huge, festooned tent.

During the 1860s, the decade of Worth's rise to fame, a new look of forward movement and activity overtook female dress. The domed skirt was narrowed at the top to show the shape of hips and stomach, and swelled out in back as if in a stiff breeze. The bonnet was sharply reduced in size, lost its curtain, and sat high on the back of the head, where the hair was swept up into a big, visible chignon. The neck emerged, sleeves narrowed, and shawls were abandoned in favor of fitted outer garments. The skirts of ball gowns swept backward into exuberantly puffed out drapery and flowing trains. Trimming lost its staid, compartmentalized quality,

The silk evening dress of 1866 (top left) has the narrower crinoline Worth liked. A look of stately forward motion is enhanced by the promenade dress of 1872 (top right). The 1880 visiting outfit (bottom left) has a crisp fit. Soft sleeves and frills offset a taut, tiny waist in the 1890 dinner dress.

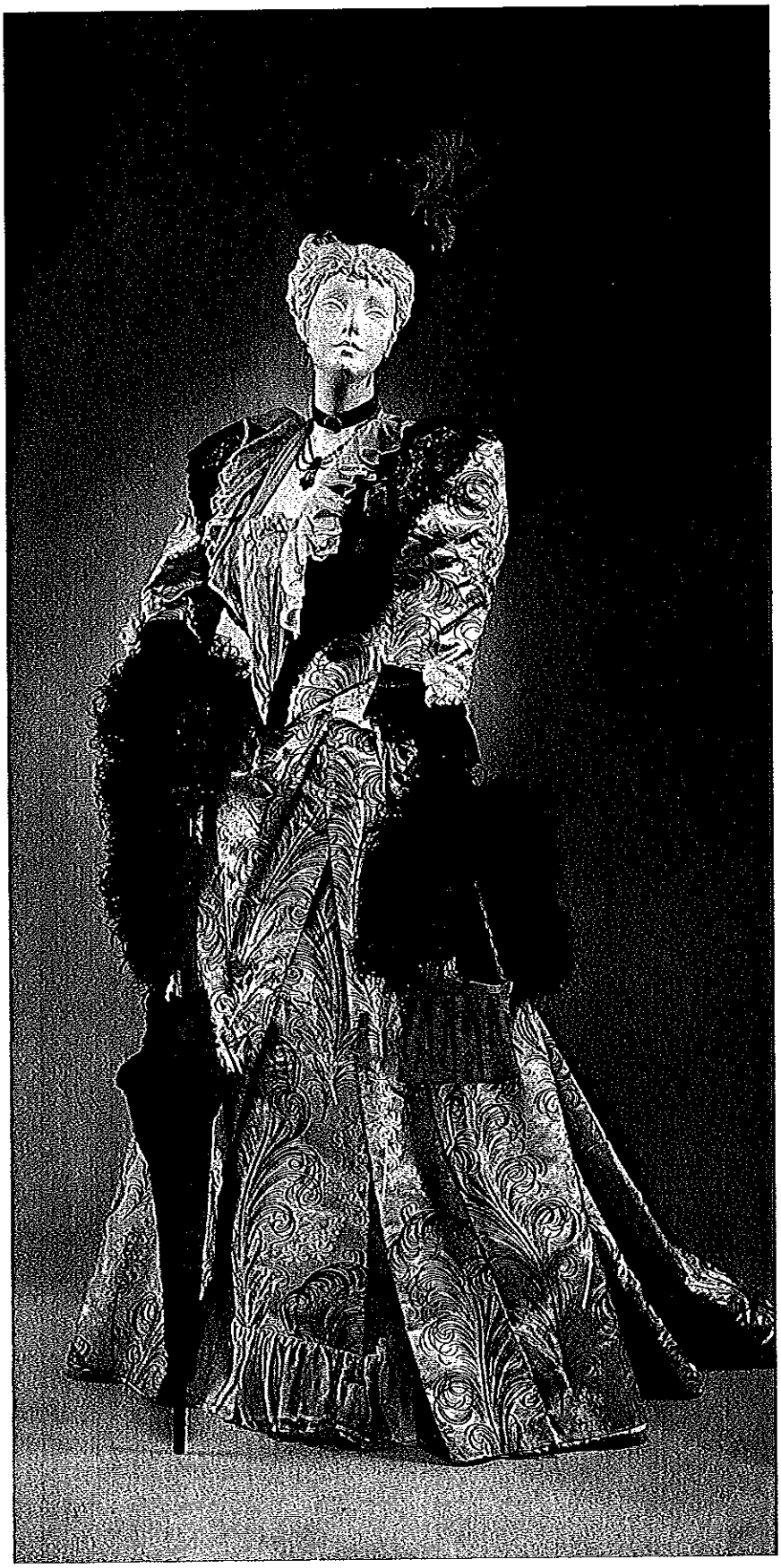


as rows of flounces fell out of favor and flat, applied ornament began to sweep over the whole costume. Colors deepened and contrasts were sharpened. Vitality and zest with a little daring exaggeration of the figure were the signs of the new mode. While he didn't start it, Worth contributed a great deal of impetus to this trend. He urged it forward with inspired taste, as though eager to expose the feminine shape, to model the female body and then propel it into graceful motion.

Clothes Make the Woman

Worth could never have succeeded so quickly without the favorable situation that prevailed in France. In 1852, after decades of civil unrest, Bonaparte's nephew Louis Napoleon became emperor. A new court, financed largely by merchants and bankers, had instant need for the obvious marks of imperial status and power. Louis had a beautiful Spanish wife, who unlike much of her court, was noble, and, indeed, she looked every inch an empress in her exquisite clothes. It was Eugénie who became Worth's patron, not only establishing his prestige but also encouraging his use of sumptuous fabric and his lavish designs for court functions. Worth designed sober traveling costumes and restrained walking suits, but his genius was for the luxurious public garments so necessary to the ladies of the new empire. In 1859 the racetrack at Longchamps was opened, and the haut monde flocked there with no other purpose than to see and be seen, to confirm the importance of the new Napoleonic age, if only through the imposing elegance of its women.

But times had fundamentally changed. A bourgeois puritanism had crept into the rebuilt society of France. Sexual mores, which had reached a state of refined depravity under the *ancien régime,* were now founded upon a strict, essentially middle-class code: there were virtuous women, and there were whores; there was society, and there was the demimonde. The fa-



The fabric is heavy and the design complex, but there is nothing ponderous about this satin afternoon dress (ca. 1895).

Worth dresses appeared on both sides of the track—on gaudy courtesans as well as stately princesses.

A TICKET TO SOCIAL SUCCESS

In September 1879, Mrs. Henry Adams, whose husband was the grandson and great-grandson of presidents, was on one of her trips to Paris. Naturally she visited the shop of Charles Frederick Worth and ordered a dress. Returning a few days later for a fitting, she had to wait while another woman was served. "The wearisome interval was amusingly filled up," she wrote her father, "by watching a compatriot, I should imagine a prosperous grocer from Iowa, with a fat wife for whom he wanted a smart dress. To see him in his spruce broadcloth frock-coat and awe-struck expression, 'hefting' the silks to be sure he was getting his money's worth, and finally examining for himself shelf after shelf of pieces, was an inspiring spectacle."

Proper Bostonians like Mrs. Adams may have felt amused contempt for the grocer's fat wife, but Charles Frederick Worth did not. In fact, following the demise of the Second Empire, rich Americans were fast becoming his best customers. They possessed, he said, "faith, figures, and francs." Worth was entirely willing to cater to a new, American aristocracy, one defined not by titles but by riches. For the wife of a successful American capitalist, a Worth gown was a ticket to social status. After all, his sketches had appeared in *Harper's Bazaar,* no less, and it was common knowledge that he had dressed countesses and duchesses, not to mention the last empress of France.

So, blue-blooded ladies routinely found themselves competing with the portly wives of tycoons for seats in the House of Worth waiting room. Consider, for instance, Mrs. Calvin Stewart Brice, pictured right. The daughter of an ironworker from Lima, Ohio, Olivia Meily married a railroad magnate who got elected to the United States Senate from Ohio in 1890. In 1897 the senator retired and they moved to New York, the mecca for the newly rich with social ambitions. That year the Brices were invited to a fancy-dress ball at the Waldorf Hotel. The hosts, members of an upstate clan who had made a killing in fancy woods and leather, vowed to make this fête the most lavish of the century. Eighteen hundred guests were told to appear in a costume they might have worn to a court function in the sixteenth, seventeenth, or eighteenth century. A feverish search for suitable garb ensued; one local paper reported that "cablegrams have even been sent to [dressmakers in] London and Paris."

At the ball, the host came as Louis XV; his wife, sporting jewels that had belonged to Marie Antoinette, as Mary, Queen of Scots. One guest arrived in a suit of gold-inlaid armor that set him back $8,000. And Mrs. Calvin Brice made her entrance into New York society in a Worth gown, of course, an exact replica of the infanta's dress in Velázquez's famous painting. The costume cost her several thousands of dollars and was never to be worn again, but no matter: her picture made that week's Sunday supplement. All things considered, it was worth every dime.

—Ava Plakins

mous courtesans of this period all seem to have existed only for the purpose of providing a cause for the truly destructive extravagance of noblemen and gentlemen who also had to maintain costly legitimate establishments. Unlike the courtesans of Athens, Venice, or Versailles, these *grandes cocottes* were not known for their witty conversation and cultural influence, or even for amorous technique and superior erotic gifts. Their skill was visible expenditure, the more vulgar the better. For the men who supported them, they satisfied what seemed an urgent need for public evidence of potency in the form of wealth, rather than for private sources of pleasure. They embodied the complex fantasies of sex and money generated by such a materialistic and prudish world.

Wives meanwhile had the task of displaying legitimate status. The game of society was to keep the two worlds apart. The wives in their elegant finery and carriages did not acknowledge the existence of mistresses, who stayed on the other side of the racetrack in their even more dashing dress and equipage. Society closed its ranks against the demimonde, which was nevertheless ubiquitous, notorious, and highly conspicuous.

Worth dresses appeared on both sides of the track. The new creator of the female image had as much scope for his talents among gaudy courtesans as among dignified bankers' wives and stately princesses: in all cases, the desired effect was that of no expense spared. One result was that Worth became immensely rich, richer than any other dressmaker before him. Since he dressed public figures, his fame and clientele reached far beyond Paris to the royal courts of other nations, where ladies hoped to rival the exquisite chic of Eugénie and her circle, and to the democratic shores of the United States, where immense fortunes were being made by enterprising men and spent by their energetic women, in Paris if possible. The designer's prices, like his prestige, were nearly double those of other dressmakers. His clients found them well worth it.

An important movement under way in Paris during Worth's career was the early

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development of modern French painting. "Art for the sake of art" was a new countercultural slogan among the painters of the avant-garde, who opposed the formulae of official art and the careers it assured. Beautifully rendered salon paintings on mythological themes were being challenged by scenes of uncompromising reality executed with a painterly directness that showed respect for the importance of the medium and the subject. The independent artist, who was scornful of any success that smacked of artistic compromise, became a new hero. As in any commercial and conventional age, creative imagination was a rare commodity.

Worth capitalized on this. In calling himself an artist he invoked the new authority of the artist as revolutionary prophet and pure-minded visionary, when in fact he functioned as an official decorator paid to produce delicious confections for the rich. His photograph in later life shows him in a soft velvet cap and fur-lined robe, a costume worn (like Wagner's similar outfit) in imitation of Rembrandt, the great hero of artistic self-determination. Worth had come a long way from the dry-goods counter.

In fact, as an artist, Worth was a wonderful designer. He worked in a new medium—the complete image of the dressed woman, not just her dress. Far from ordering him to come to them, the great ladies often went to his atelier before the ball to put on their gowns, receive the final touches, and submit to his approval, confident that his eye was clearer than their own. He had a gift not just for good tailoring and for embellishing feminine looks but also for understanding advanced trends in modern design. Although he had no part in the revolutionary new vistas opened up and illuminated by Manet and Degas, his works do bear the unmistakable flavor of what was to become Art Nouveau during the decade in which he died. His mature designs show a sinuous harmony among all elements of each costume, a rhythmic clarity of applied decoration, a new and dynamic asymmetrical use of old motifs.

When Charles Frederick Worth died, in 1895, he was almost imperceptibly succeeded by his two devoted sons, Gaston and Jean-Philippe—the latter a gifted designer and sympathetic disciple of his father, the former a shrewd businessman. Jean-Philippe followed the aesthetic paths laid out by his father, continuing to create rich and sleek new arrangements of Renaissance and Rococo themes. Although they demonstrate the radical changes in feminine shape and style inaugurated at the turn of the century, Jean-Philippe's designs are indistinguishable in spirit from those of his father. They show a similar respect for the authority and beauty of richly woven silk, and an equal sense of the drama of the female figure—a feeling for "presence."

A gown of tulle with rhinestones over lavender satin (ca. 1914) by Jean-Philippe Worth foretells twenties fashions.

Other couturiers of the new generation that had risen on the tide of Worth's success were exploring different avenues. Some stressed the delicacy of lace and fragile embroidery; others, the crisp, tailored look of active modernity; and still others, the inventive fall of drapery. Among its competitors, the House of Worth stayed true to an ideal of dignity and broadly displayed wealth until it was finally driven into the shade by the social modes of the twentieth century. Society changed its character, and women their forms of display. Royal and imperial courts had by then rapidly dwindled in number and power, and custom-made presentation robes were no longer required.

End of the Dynasty

Neat suits, amusing but useful little dresses, and brisk sportswear, alternating with festive expressions of ephemeral fantasy, all drove out the elaborate ostentations that had been so important for Charles Frederick Worth's original clientele. Nevertheless, the reign of Jean-Philippe and Gaston Worth continued to prosper and was smoothly followed by that of Gaston's two sons, Jean-Charles, the designer, and Jacques, the business director, who took over the house in the twenties. This great fashion dynasty ended finally only in 1952, on the retirement of Roger Worth, the eldest son of Jacques and the fourth generation of Worths in couture.

Worth was the first dressmaker to demonstrate publicly—and force others to acknowledge—the importance of control over the way clothes look. For centuries that principle had been well understood ("The apparel oft proclaims the man," said Polonius), but the wearer had to take his or her own risks. Worth was the first to offer such control as a service to the female public—at a price, of course. Although he owed his first success to the empress, he was no captive court dressmaker. He was the first to profit personally from the fact that a flair for style and taste in dress, like beauty, are no respecters of social status or good morals. Unlike all the tailors and milliners who worked for Queen Elizabeth I and Marie Antoinette, he made his name, not that of his clients, a synonym for elegance.□

The influence of Art Nouveau appears in this otherwise traditionally grand 1897 ball gown by Jean-Philippe Worth.