A group of dresses dating from the early nineteenth century, on view in the costume galleries of the Museum, affords a starting point for a study of fashion during the years just preceding the Greek Revival in the United States. The architecture illustrated in the Greek Revival Exhibition dates from 1820 to 1850; but the contemporary costumes which accompany it show little evidence of classical influence. The Empire style with its background of Greek and Roman art had begun to show symptoms of an approaching change as early as 1810, when, although the silhouette remained the same, the ornament was no longer exclusively classical. It is therefore in the costume of the early part of the century, as illustrated by our European dresses, that we must seek evidence of the influence of the “antique,” as it was then called. This was the style, somewhat modified by a simpler taste, that was worn by the ladies of the new republic from 1800 to about 1810.

One of the most charming costumes of this period in the Museum’s collection was presented to us in 1942 by the daughters of Mrs. James A. Glover. It was worn by Mrs. Peter R. Livingston at the court of Napoleon in 1804 when he was First Consul. Mrs. Livingston’s brother, Robert R. Livingston, was American Minister to France at that time. It is a dress of heavy white satin embroidered with a design of laurel leaves in silver paillettes; and with its flowing court train of Nile-green velvet similarly decorated, it presents very exactly the Empire style as dictated by court etiquette (ill. p. 193). A second dress, which we also illustrate, shows the more modest form this style assumed when the material used was the diaphanous white muslin so much in vogue at the time. This latter dress is embroidered in heavy cotton thread with a border design of rushes.

In both these costumes we see the antithesis of the style current under the ancien régime. The impending change was, however, evident in the dress worn during the last years of Louis XVI’s reign. The cult of simplicity, fostered by such writers as Rousseau, began to have its effect even then on fashion. Large panniers disappeared, the skirt hung full and long about the figure, and the waist showed a tendency to creep ever nearer to the armpits. By 1790 the silhouette had changed radically; skirts were narrower, neck fichus grew fuller and higher until every woman seen in profile had somewhat the aspect of a strange beetle afflicted with a wen. This very ugly fashion did not last long.

After the fall of the leaders of the Terror in 1795, the stage was set for a complete change in social life. The political leaders of the new regime believed that the only way to make a sound foundation for the world they planned was to discard all the impedimenta of the past and to return to the ways of the Roman republic, which they felt had been the most perfect political state. In accordance with this point of view, antiquarianism became the basis of the new art style. To appear in the guise of a classic statue was now the aim of anyone desiring to be in the mode. The painter David, who was the great exponent of this new movement, shows us his sitters wearing the simple white dresses that were felt to be the correct interpretation of classical draperies.

There was also an economic side to this
Plate by Henry Moses from Thomas Hope’s “Designs of Modern Costume,” published in London in the second decade of the XIX century

Another plate from “Designs of Modern Costume.” These illustrations show the Greek influence at its height, both in line and in ornament.
change in fashion. The crushing blows dealt to the textile industry by the Revolution made silks and satins rare and therefore expensive, so that for the woman of average means cottons and calicoes became the practical thing to wear. An English account written retrospectively about 1818 states: “While expensive silks were worn, they could not be attained by persons of small means, but when a few shillings could purchase a Muslin gown, quite in the fashion, every woman could command one. . . . Farmer’s daughters came to market in white stockings and slippers, and sat on a sofa to receive company in silver turbans and elegant muslins. The lowest maid servant refused to wear Pattens and never went out without an umbrella. A pair of black worsted stockings was only to be found—in the Poor House.”

There is also an amusing contemporary account of a Russian officer, newly arrived in England and accustomed to estimating a lady by the warmth of her clothing, who offered a penny to a woman of fashion in Bond Street under the impression that as her clothing was so scanty she must be a pauper.

It has always been the common assumption that France, as arbiter of fashion, set the mode. It is rather startling, therefore, to discover that there is some reason to suppose that the fashion that later evolved as the Empire style had its beginnings in England. There the classical revival began somewhat earlier than it did in France and brought with it a vogue for clothing of simple materials with soft, flowing lines.

The later French version of the style, however, is quite different and often extreme. This was a new era, there was no court to set the style, and everyone was free to indulge in invention. The ten years following the end of the Revolution saw a greater variety of fashion, within given limits, than almost any other period of history. One need only study the prints of the time to see how extravagant many of them were. The Incroyable and his companion the Merveilleuse, typical figures of the period, were as strange as any in fashion history. Corsets and underpetticoats disappeared, silk tights and the transparent chemise slit to the knee were the only undergarments, décolletage was extreme, sandals were worn.

*LEFT:* *Muslin dress with border embroidered in cotton thread.*

*RIGHT:* *Satin dress with design of sequins, given by the daughters of Mrs. James A. Glover, 1942*
in place of shoes and stockings, and sometimes rings were worn on the toes.

Another eccentricity was the great length of the train. The slim muslin dress was usually followed by at least six yards of material used in this way, and on formal occasions it was not unusual for a train to measure fourteen yards. When the train was not spread upon the floor, it was wrapped several times about the wearer's body and then held by the end; in dancing she draped it over the shoulder of her partner.

When the extreme Empire fashion found its way to England, we learn from a contemporary that "the first engravings of the Grecian costume—as nudity was called—... shocked every modest woman; and it was not thought proper to look at them in the presence of gentlemen; how this delicacy wore away and how soon is truly surprising, but certain it is that e'er many months had elapsed, originals exactly representing the Prints were seen in every public place."

The change in hairdressing after the Revolution was marked. The elaborately puffed and powdered hair disappeared and was succeeded by hair cut short. This resulted in a mop-like shock, very similar to the wind-blown bob so popular a few years ago. Wigs to be worn over this cropped hair came into fashion, and we find that the style was accepted in this country as it was in France. In a letter written by Martha Jefferson Randolph to her father, Thomas Jefferson, just before his inauguration as third President we read: "Dear Papa,—We received your letter, and are prepared with all speed to obey its summons.... Will you be so good as to send orders to the milliner—Madame Peck, I believe her name is, ... for two wigs of the colour of the hair enclosed, and of the most fashionable shapes, that they may be in Washington when we arrive? They are universally worn, and will relieve us as to the necessity of dressing our own hair, a business in which neither of us are adepts." Fortunately this fashion was short-lived and was succeeded by one in which a real attempt was made to copy the Greek styles in hair arrangement, with braids and fillets and short curls on the forehead. Over this coiffure caps, usually made of sheer stuffs, embroidered and trimmed with lace and ribbon, were worn. They were in use for both day and evening wear. The Museum collection contains a very charming evening cap, illustrative of this phase.
Sketch by Benjamin Latrobe for the Cathedral in Baltimore (built 1806-1818) showing the early use of Greek detail in architecture. Note that the Empire style in dress was still in fashion. Photograph courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society

of fashion. It is made with a foundation of satin, over which there is a network of silk cord, decorated with artificial pearls.

With this simpler way of doing the hair there came into fashion a smaller type of hat. The earliest form is the bonnet worn by the Merveilleuse in the last decade of the eighteenth century. It has a very shallow crown and an exaggeratedly long, visor-like brim, which must have made it necessary for the wearer to hold it on whenever there was the slightest breeze. Following this came a series of hats of military inspiration, tall as a soldier's shako or shaped like a Greek helmet—the shako with a certain air, but the helmet, which bore names such as casquet à la Minerve, rather unfortunate in form. One of the most charming of the head coverings was the turban, which had been in use some years earlier and which continued in vogue long after the Empire period had passed. The fashion was followed with enthusiasm on this side of the water, as is shown in a letter published by Elisabeth McClellan in her Historic Dress in America in which a Miss Smith, writing from Philadelphia to a friend in 1800, says: "In the pacquet you will find three painted Tiffany Turbans, of which I beg your acceptance of one, & Betsy & Kitty of the others. They are not as well done as I could wish, but they are as well done as I who never learnt to draw could do them." Small, round hats were also in vogue, as were many types of bonnets.

The problem of what to wear as a wrap over all this fragile elegance was a real one, for muslin, lawn, or gauze crushes easily, and a heavy coat would soon destroy the ethereal freshness of a dress of such materials. For a light wrap they invented the jacket called the spencer. This charming waist-length coat, sometimes finished with a turnover collar and lined with fur for winter wear, was as universally popular as the present-day sweater.
named for a Lord Spencer who had the tails of his coat torn off while hunting and, making the best of a bad bargain, set the style for tailless jackets. For long wraps there were silk pelisses, lined for warmth with wool, and shawls. The shawls, with their graceful folds, enjoyed a continuing popularity. The Empress Josephine, with her taste for luxurious dress, is said to have owned between three and four hundred. To wear a shawl becomingly the owner had to drape it correctly (ladies were spoken of as being “beautifully draped” rather than “well dressed”). The Parisienne who had not learned the art could study to perfect herself in it by taking lessons from Mme Gardel. Neither the pelisse nor the shawl could afford as much protection as was needed in our northern climate, and the satin shoes with paper-thin soles commonly worn did nothing to keep the chill and damp from the wearer. We can hardly wonder that under these circumstances “declines” were frequent, and the popular name of “muslin disease” given to them is self-explanatory.

We have seen that the Empire style was a highly artificial one. It was essentially a feminine fashion; for no male of the period was ever persuaded to don chiton or toga, although such draperies appear in sculpture. It is therefore not surprising to learn that by 1810 the Gothic spirit, native to northern Europe, was again beginning to make itself felt. Another ten years and the Romantic style had claimed fashion for its own.

The current exhibition The Greek Revival in the United States will be open until the end of February. An article on this exhibition by Joseph Downs appeared in the last issue of the Bulletin.