

# COLLECTION CONNECTION

## The Etiquette of Dress

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Raimundo de Madrazo Garreta, *Mrs. Charles Phelps Taft*, 1902, oil on canvas. Taft Museum of Art. Photo by Tony Walsh

A woman in a white dress smiles warmly from the portrait above the north fireplace in the Music Room. Painted in the sitter's fiftieth year, the 1902 portrait of Anna Sinton Taft by Raimundo de Madrazo Garreta is also a record of fashionable feminine dress in America at the turn of the 20th century. While fashion illustrations of the era provide exaggerated two-dimensional ideals of dress, several selections from the exhibition *Fashion in Film: Period Costumes for the Screen* offer glimpses of the three-dimensional form of a gown such as the one worn in this portrait.

Over the course of the first 12 years of the 20th century, fashion changed rapidly and drastically. Women's dress in the early years of the century was characterized by a sinuous curving silhouette, disciplined by underpinnings. The most popular

style of corset had a long, straight front that pushed the upper torso and chest forward, shaping the bust into a generously swelling "monobosom" (cleavage was not displayed in the early 1900s), cinching the waist, and pushing the derrière backward, creating an S curve when the body was seen in profile.

Reporting on new French fashions for the American fashion magazine *The Delineator* in 1900, Mrs. John Van Vorst wrote, "The most popular corset at present in Paris is known as the cuirasse

Américaine. It . . . is made without bones and with only two steels on each side beside those in the front and back . . . it binds the hips and leaves the chest free, giving a straight line in front and a slightly curved line in the back at the waist." As the decade progressed, this curve relaxed until, on the eve of World War I, the ideal feminine figure was an upright and slender column with the waistline slightly raised, as seen in the evening dress from the film *Howards End*.



The W.H.K. & S. "Ascot" straight fronted corset. *Illustrated London News*, 1902, print. Picture collection, The Branch Libraries, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations



*Two-Piece Evening Dress* (detail), worn by Emma Thompson as Margaret Schlegel in *Howards End*, 1992, directed by James Ivory. Set 1908–10. Costumes designed by John Bright and Jenny Beavan; net and striped metallic fabric over silk, embroidered with narrow braid, bodice trimmed with beaded metallic lace

Against a tumble of blue drapery, Anna Taft's posture demonstrates this early 20th-century S curve: the fabric on the bodice of her gown blouses gracefully over her banded waist, while her left hip curves up and slightly behind her. There is a hint of a forward tilt, encouraged by the corset beneath, in her upper torso.

In films such as *The Golden Bowl* and *A Room with a View*, costumers clothed their actresses in a modified version of this S curve. Visible on screen are bodices with draped necklines, lace flounces, and fabric flowers above cinched waists and skirts given a slight fullness at the small of the back through pleats or gathers. The variety in these garments, all from films set in the first decade of the 1900s, along with Anna Taft's portrait of 1902, also tells us about appropriate dress for various activities and times of the day.

A woman's day could be filled with countless social events: receiving friends and visitors in the morning, garden parties, afternoon tea parties, evening receptions, soirées (evening social gatherings), dinners, musical entertainments, theatre, opera, and balls (with the most elaborate dress reserved for the ballroom). All these events required appropriate dress to conform to contemporary codes of etiquette—the mark of the civilized, well-mannered, and well-bred person. Etiquette books instructed their readers not only on the correct way to proffer and respond to invitations to myriad social events but also on how to dress for these occasions. While necklines, skirt lengths (with or without train), fabrics, details, and accessories might change throughout the day, the S-curve silhouette remained constant.

Etiquette writers and fashion publications prescribed high necklines for morning and afternoon, as seen in a vintage outfit from *A Room with a View* for Helena Bonham Carter as Lucy Honeychurch. Lower necklines distinguished dress for evening wear from that for daytime. In the manual *Social Etiquette* (1896), author Maud Cooke advised, "A regularly décolleté (exposing the neck and shoulders) gown is properly worn only during the same hours that a gentleman's dress suit is donned, that is, 'from dusk to dawn.'"

Variations of this low-necked gown appear in the Merchant Ivory film *The Golden Bowl*, based on the 1904 novel by Henry James. Dressed in an ivory gown, the pale hue of which indicates her innocence, Maggie Verver and her friend Fanny Assingham, garbed in a more elaborate frock, prepare for an evening with an ambassador. In *The Encyclopaedia of Etiquette* (1901), author Emily Holt instructed readers on proper dress for such an event:

"For an evening reception the hostess wears a white, gray, black, or colored gown of silk, satin, lace or velvet, short in the sleeves and décolleté at the neck, with a long train. Handsome jewels and an elaborate coiffure add to her appearance. All women guests imitate the hostess's example, wearing what is best known as elegant dinner gowns, with jewels, light or white gloves, slippers, and their hair elaborately dressed."



*Two-Piece Evening Dress* (detail), worn by Kate Beckinsale as Maggie Verver in *The Golden Bowl*, 2000, directed by James Ivory. Set early 1900s. Costumes designed by John Bright; silk satin with lace, incorporating vintage elements

Holt continued, "For women, the essential dinner costume is décolleté; that is, cut open about the throat and shoulders and short in the sleeves—

else the arms are covered with delicate and transparent stuff." A satin evening gown worn by Uma Thurman as Charlotte Stant Verver in the same film exemplifies this full evening dress, with its lower neckline, sequins, and gossamer sleeves, appropriate for a late, intimate supper. In the brief scene in which this dress appears, the character descends a staircase for such a meal at home in the lavish English manor house where she lives with her husband. Cooke added, "A lady's dinner dress may be elegant as her fancy dictates." In the film, Charlotte accessorizes the gown with long white gloves and feathers in her hair.

In *Social Etiquette*, Cooke provided additional advice on the details of dress for special occasions, her words perfectly reflected in Anna Taft's satin and lace gown. Regarding necklines, Cooke wrote, "A dress should never end directly upon the skin. The line of contact should always be softened by an edge of lace, tulle, or ruching." Cooke further observed, "Few women have beautiful arms above the elbow," so she recommended, "A sleeve that falls in lace and frills just below the elbow hides many defects, besides softening, and rendering delicate, the lower arm and the hand."

Mrs. Taft and her dressmaker appeared to have been well aware of this advice. The gown even made an impression on Anna's husband, who wrote to his half-brother William Howard Taft that "O'Hara made a dress for her trimming it with old Venetian lace." White was fashionable in the early 20th century. Anna Sinton Taft's white satin dress, trimmed in fine net and lace, would have been appropriate for receiving guests at her home in the early evening. She continues to greet them every day from her perch above the fireplace at the Taft Museum of Art.