

20 April 2023

Earliest surviving British royal wedding dress goes on display in new exhibition at The Queen's Gallery

The wedding dress of George IV's daughter Princess Charlotte of Wales, on display for the first time in over a decade, is among more than 200 works from the Royal Collection that go on show at The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace from tomorrow (Friday, 21 April) in the new exhibition ***Style & Society: Dressing the Georgians***.

The exhibition explores what fashion can tell us about life in Georgian Britain, a period rocked by social, political and technological revolutions. Alongside paintings, prints and drawings by artists such as Gainsborough, Zoffany and Hogarth are rare surviving examples of clothing, jewellery and accessories. Together, they provide a fascinating insight into what was worn across all levels of society, from the practical dress of laundry maids to the glittering gowns at court.

Princess Charlotte was George IV's only legitimate child, but died in childbirth at the age of 21 in 1817. Her marriage to Prince Leopold a year earlier was considered one of the most important royal weddings of the era. Her **silk embroidered bridal gown** is the only royal wedding dress that survives from the Georgian period, though it appears to have been significantly altered from its original form, in keeping with the Georgian practice of repurposing and recycling clothing. The Princess followed the tradition for European royal brides to wear silver, despite white wedding dresses becoming popular by the end of the 18th century.

Princess Charlotte's mother, Caroline of Brunswick, also wore silver for her wedding to the future George IV in 1795. On display for the first time is a **portrait of the wedding ceremony** by John Graham, displayed alongside **the original silver and gold dress samples supplied for the bride and other royal guests**, on loan from Historic Royal Palaces. While the royal couple and their congregation made a glittering spectacle, their highly embellished clothing and wide skirts would have been noticeably outdated in fashionable circles, reflecting the increasing association of the court with old-fashioned styles of dress rather than cutting-edge trends.

Anna Reynolds, curator of *Style & Society*, said, 'Dress is so much more than just what we see on the surface, and it's fascinating what we can learn about a period when looking at it through a fashion history lens. Visitors might be surprised to learn how much the Georgian period has in common with the fashion landscape we know today, from influencers and fashion magazines to ideas about the value of clothes and how they can be recycled and repurposed.'

At the heart of the exhibition will be a **full-length portrait by Thomas Gainsborough, c.1781, depicting Queen Charlotte wearing a magnificent court gown**. It will be shown alongside a **beautifully preserved gown of a similar style**, worn at Queen Charlotte's court in the 1760s, on loan from the Fashion Museum Bath. Portraits throughout the exhibition will demonstrate how artists rendered magnificent gowns such as these in paint in exquisite detail, from the metallic woven silk in **Antoine Pesne's *Duchess of Saxe-Wessenfels***, to the bows and fine lace of **Francis Cotes' *Princess Louisa and Princess Caroline***.

Allan Ramsay's **life-size coronation portraits of George III and Queen Charlotte** demonstrate how ceremonial clothing was carefully chosen to emphasise themes of continuity,

tradition and spectacle. Queen Charlotte wears a gown heavily embroidered with gold thread, and a stomacher panel covered with diamonds. This stomacher, which no longer survives, was valued by a contemporary spectator at £60,000 – the equivalent of almost £10 million today.

With the rise of a professional class, more women earning wages, and cheaper fabrics available, the 18th century saw fashion becoming more accessible to the masses. Pleasure gardens, theatres and coffee houses provided new settings to show off the latest styles, and the first fashion periodicals spread up-to-the-minute trends, many inspired by clothing previously reserved for working-class or sporting pursuits. Pages from **influential French fashion periodicals**, on display for the first time, recommend looks inspired by men's riding dress and military uniforms, both of which became popular everyday styles for women.

The Georgian period saw specific forms of children's clothing introduced, designed with comfort, practicality and freedom of movement in mind. In **Benjamin West's 1782 portrait of Prince Octavius**, the 13th child of George III and Queen Charlotte, the three-year-old wears a skeleton suit – a new style of children's dress inspired by the working-class clothing of sailors and fishermen. The young prince, perhaps playing at being king, is shown carrying **his father's sword**, which will be shown alongside the painting, both on public display for the first time.

Georgian jewellery was often highly personal and sentimental. Items on display include **diamond rings given to Queen Charlotte on her wedding day** and a **bracelet with nine lockets**, six containing locks of hair and one with a miniature of the left eye of Princess Charlotte of Wales. As with textiles, jewellery was often repurposed; a **striking necklace** was made from pearl-adorned dress-coat buttons that had belonged to George III. Other accessories that may be less familiar to visitors will include **jewel-encrusted snuffboxes** and **chatelaines**, which were attached to the waist and used to carry items from pocket watches to perfume bottles.

The exhibition also explores the hair, cosmetics and grooming tools used by Georgian men and women to achieve their elaborate styles, as well as 18th-century developments in eyewear and dentistry. On show for the first time is a **silver-gilt travelling toilet service**, acquired by the future George IV as a gift for his Private Secretary at a cost of £300, the equivalent of more than £20,000 today. The toilet service gives a remarkable insight into a Georgian gentleman's grooming routine, containing more than 100 objects including razors, combs, ear spoons and tongue scrapers – as well as tools for cleaning guns and making hot chocolate.

Ends

***Style & Society: Dressing the Georgians* is at The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace, 21 April – 8 October 2023.**

A selection of images is available via [Dropbox](#). For further information, please contact the Royal Collection Trust Press Office, +44 (0)20 7839 1377, press@rct.uk.

Royal Collection Trust is grateful to the Fashion Museum Bath; Historic Royal Palaces; The Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle; and The School of Historical Dress for the loans made to this exhibition.

Visitor information and tickets for The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace: www.rct.uk, T. +44 (0)30 3123 7301. The Queen's Gallery is open Thursday to Monday, remaining closed on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

The accompanying publication is published by Royal Collection Trust, available at £40.00 from Royal Collection Trust shops and www.rct.uk/shop, and at £49.95 from all good bookshops.

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A accompanying programme of events at The Queen’s Gallery will include:

- **A one-day [creative course](#) with The School of Historical Dress exploring how Georgian fashion was made (4 May).**
- **Two evening [‘In Conversation’ events](#) with exhibition curator Anna Reynolds and the historian, writer and presenter Alice Loxton focusing on how Georgian fashionable dress was portrayed in paintings, prints and drawings (11 May in person, 27 June online).**
- **A [panel discussion](#) exploring how Georgian fashion is recreated for stage and screen, with exhibition curator Anna Reynolds; Jenny Tiramani, Head of The School of Historical Dress; and Kathleen McKee, Lecturer in Costume for Theatre and Screen at Wimbledon College of Arts (8 June).**
- **[Coronation-themed storytelling sessions](#) for families (8 May and 1–2 June).**

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#DressingTheGeorgians

Notes to Editors

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The Royal Collection is among the largest and most important art collections in the world, and one of the last great European royal collections to remain intact. It comprises almost all aspects of the fine and decorative arts, and is spread among some 15 royal residences and former residences across the UK, most of which are regularly open to the public. The Royal Collection is held in trust by the Sovereign for his successors and the nation, and is not owned by The King as a private individual.

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