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Queen Alexandra's 1902 Coronation Gown¹

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Two ladies meet at a social event, one admires the dress of the other, and says she, too, would like such an outfit. This probably happens all the time but the encounter I discuss in this paper resulted in the 1902 coronation gown for the Queen of England, as well as three additional gowns worn at other coronation ceremonies. So what was it about the gown Queen Alexandra saw that she decided it would be the perfect coronation gown?

The woman whose gown Queen Alexandra admired and wished to have a similar one was Lady Curzon, wife of the Viceroy of India. Mary Leiter Curzon, daughter of Marshall Field's business partner, was part of that elite group of American heiresses who married into English noble families. Her husband noted she not only was a great beauty but possessed a "subtle air of refinement, enhanced by her indefinable gift for wearing lovely clothes." (Nicolson p. 27) Mary Curzon so liked India that she broke with the long held attitude of European women in India of refusing to wear clothing made of Indian cloth and had Indian craftsmen create some of the fabrics for her outfits.

In March 1901 Mary returned to England to recover from a medical condition. In June she attended a garden party to which the Queen also came. Mary happened to be wearing a dress made of cloth from India and the Queen, who was concerned about what she would wear for the upcoming coronation and related ceremonies, realized a gown made from Indian cloth would be perfect since it not only would be unique but would visibly show ties between Britain and India. The Queen had met Lady Curzon numerous times, knew of her fine taste in clothing, and realized Lady Curzon was the right person to take care of the matter of the coronation gown as well as three additional dresses for other coronation court activities.

Princess Alexandra Caroline Marie Charlotte Louise Julia was born into a subsidiary branch of the Danish royal family in 1844. This secondary status in the Danish royal family meant her family lived in modest circumstances until an 1852 political settlement recognized her father as heir to the throne. Unfortunately the settlement did nothing to change the financial condition of her family, a situation which mandated thrift and creativity. One such thrifty activity was making most of her outfits, which gave her an incomparable ability to evaluate taste and fashion since she thoroughly knew how clothing was constructed. In 1863 she married Albert Edward, the Prince of Wales, which totally transformed her life since the British royal family was one of the richest in the world.

Queen Victoria upon the death of Prince Albert in 1861 went into mourning and never left wearing black and socialized minimally for the rest of her reign. During the last half of the nineteenth century Great Britain unquestionably was the most important economic and political power in the world and possessed a social elite dedicated to demonstrating this status. With the

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Queen in seclusion the Prince and Princess of Wales served as the arbiters of British taste and fashion. Prince Edward in fact was so obsessed with proper dress and protocol, he thought nothing of changing his attire a dozen times a day. Fortunately Alexandra not only was extremely beautiful but possessed consummate poise and a taste for fashion. Alexandra carried off her role superbly well even though she had several physical challenges. Thanks to some type of scar on her neck she always wore clothing that covered much of her neck or else wore multiple rows of jewels that effectively covered her neck. A bout of rheumatic fever following the birth of her third child left her with a permanent limp. Thanks to much practice and training she was able to dance, ride, and even ice skate. Unfortunately as she aged she became increasingly more and more deaf and virtually was so by the time of the coronation in 1902. These impediments did not prevent Princess Alexandra from transforming Marlborough House, their London residence, into the most fashionable social venue in the city.

One of the greatest disappointments of Alexandra during her almost forty years as Princess of Wales occurred in the winter season of 1876-77. Queen Victoria had become Empress of India and to mark the occasion there was to be a Durbar, or ceremony, in Delhi to acknowledge this. Prince Edward was to represent Queen Victoria at the Durbar. Alexandra was beside herself with excitement about going to India but Queen Victoria and Prince Edward, concerned about their six children, decided Alexandra must remain in England with them. It was a bitter blow and Alexandra for the rest of her life expressed her disappointment that she was never able to go to India.

Queen Alexandra never indicated what it was about the dress Lady Curzon wore on that fateful July afternoon in 1901 that prompted her decision to ask the wife of the Viceroy of India to have her coronation gown made in India. The two women had known each other for many years and with Lady Curzon returning from India with undoubtedly fascinating dresses made from Indian cloth incorporating Indian motifs such as the lotus, Queen Alexandra suddenly knew what she wanted to wear at the coronation. It is significant to note there was a large age difference between the two women as Queen Alexandra was 57 in 1901 while Lady Curzon was only 31.

The Queen was most concerned, however, that no one else wore a similar gown at the coronation and asked Lady Curzon not to speak to anyone about her special task for the Queen. Subsequently Queen Alexandra modestly relented and allowed Lady Curzon to speak about the project in India, but not in England. The commission was a huge responsibility since Lady Curzon received an absolutely free hand in deciding what the gown should be. The only suggestion the Queen made was that the motifs on it should include roses, thistles, and shamrocks, subtly reflecting the fact England, Ireland, and Scotland were parts of the realm and demonstrated the crown ruled over them. The three floral motifs re-directed the focus of the Indian embroiderers to European plants from plants they typically created. Other than this one suggestion, however, Lady Curzon had absolute discretion in the creation of the cloth for the gown. She quickly decided that since the Coronation would take place in June and Queen Alexandra would also be wearing a heavy velvet and ermine mantle, the gown itself should be very lightweight. Net with metallic embroidery thus became the fabric.

Upon her return to India in early October Lady Curzon immediately began work on this important commission and completed it by February. Accounts vary as to whether the gown or

only its cloth was made in India. The correspondence between the two ladies clearly indicates Lady Curzon was to have the dress made up loosely to fit herself. Undoubtedly when the gown arrived in London and the Queen approved of what Lady Curzon had done, it was sent to the House of Worth in Paris where suitable alterations were made so it would accurately fit the Queen.

Thanks to the secrecy connected with the project, accounts vary as to where the work was done in India. After the coronation, however, Queen Alexandra gave permission for two merchants in Delhi, one in Agra, and one in Benares to receive royal warrants thus identifying where the metallic embroidery was done and who did the work. In her fascination with the project Lady Curzon decided to make duplicate gowns with identical embroidery work but using different colors for her mother and sisters who then lived in Washington, D.C. The colors for the gowns for Queen Alexandra were white, black, and mauve. In referring to them as “Indian coronation robes” the Queen acknowledged India within the vast British Empire. The coronation gown presently is one of only two gowns of Queen Alexandra in the Royal Dress Collection at Kensington Palace.

The coronation regalia worn by Queen Alexandra contained one other notable item from India. In 1849 the East India Company added the Punjab to its Indian empire. The Kohinoor Diamond was one of the treasures of Ranjit Singh, the last Maharajah of the Punjab. The 186 carat diamond was given to Queen Victoria who had it re-cut in 1852 to a more brilliant gem but a considerably smaller one of 105 carats. Set in a brooch it was one of Queen Victoria’s favorite pieces of jewelry and she often wore it. With Queen Victoria’s death the Kohinoor Diamond became part of the coronation regalia. Indian tradition placed a curse on the Kohinoor Diamond that doomed any male who wore it to the loss of his throne. The British, not wanting to test the validity of the curse, set it in the crown of the Queen Consort. Alexandra was the first British queen to wear a crown containing the Kohinoor Diamond.

Lord Curzon decided India also should have a Durbar ceremony filled with pomp and pageantry to acknowledge the coronation. Held in Delhi in 1903 there was a delegation from Great Britain of notable people who attended it, including King Edward’s younger brother, the Duke of Connaught. Pearl Craigie noted the British delegation of 40 people “brought forty-seven tons of dresses and uniforms for the Durbar festivities.” (Hobbes p. 8) The regalia of the hundreds of Indian maharajahs, nizams, and nawabs who participated in the Durbar brought together the largest collection jewels and unique Indian clothing traditions ever assembled in one place. The 1903 Durbar had both political and social events, the climax of which was a ball held in the Hall of Private Audience, the Diwan-i-Khas, in the Mughal Red Fort in the center of Delhi. Lady Curzon, who had made Queen Alexandra’s coronation gown, wore at the concluding Delhi event the most famous dress ever worn by a westerner in India. Known as the Peacock Dress, it featured row upon row of embroidery portraying peacock feathers each with an iridescent beetle elytra wing in the center of each feather. In contrast to the western floral theme of rose, shamrock, and thistle in Queen Alexandra’s coronation gown to state the British throne held power over England, Ireland, and Scotland, Lady Curzon thus used an Indian motif in her dress. The Diwan I Khas was where the Moghul Emperor Shah Jehan sat on the famous Peacock Throne, thus a gown with peacock feathers in its motif linked British rule in India with the Moghul Empire.

The gowns Queen Alexandra and Lady Curzon wore at these coronation events definitely reveal relationships between power, politics, and imperialism. Queen Alexandra's gown incorporated roses, shamrocks, and thistles, the plants identified with England, Ireland, and Scotland thus pointing out in her dress the coronation was for all three peoples. While most people in Westminster Abbey for the coronation would not have realized the Queen's gown came from India they certainly knew her crown contained the Kohinoor Diamond, the most famous diamond from India. Lady Curzon's insightful use of the peacock as the motif for her gown demonstrated sensitivity to the Moghul tradition in India, a tradition of which the British considered themselves to be the proud successors.

Both gowns however also point out challenges to the modern scholar undertaking research on them. Contemporary writers blithely described them in fits of fabric fantasy that hardly reflected reality. Subsequent writers unfortunately have unquestioningly accepted these contemporary accounts and descriptions of them without examining the actual garments. Errors in describing the gown thus have been endlessly repeated for a century. "Cloth of gold" for instance was used to describe both gowns, a term that has no precise meaning and finds usage for any seemingly expensive fabric that incorporates some gold or even gold color. Although Lady Curzon's Peacock Dress used beetle wings to produce the iridescent green color, the myth has evolved that the gown used emeralds. (Beaumont, p. 218, Fowler, 1987, p. 290) Another author declared Queen Alexandra's coronation gown was made in Darjeeling. The two gowns thus point out there are important areas in the history of textiles and costumes that need to be studied and, hopefully, there are some people in this room today who will undertake them.

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