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La Mode à l'Écossaise: Textile of Diplomacy

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The fashion style called *La Mode à l'Écossaise* flourished during the early years of the French Second Empire (1852-1870). There is no equivalent English term for it except maybe “tartanmania.” In the early 1850s Queen Victoria’s fondness for wool tartans had already popularized this textile as clothing for women and children in England. Tartans came to France as a full-fledged fashion style after Empress Eugénie wore a tartan gown for the trip to England. The six-day State Visit of the French Imperial couple started on April 16th, 1855, a very foggy Sunday, when Napoleon III and Empress Eugénie set sail from Calais aboard the mail-steamer the *Pélican* while another boat the *Pétrel* carried the Empresses’ hairdresser, her wardrobe and the Imperial jewels. At Dover, they were greeted by His Royal Highness Prince Albert who accompanied them for the rest of the journey to Windsor Castle, where they were received by Queen Victoria.

Ivor Guest (1952) in his book *Napoleon III In England* wrote about this State visit in great detail describing the outfits of the Imperial couple upon arrival: “The Emperor Napoleon III and the Empress Eugénie could be seen quite clearly standing on deck, the former in the uniform of a French General with blue tunic and red trousers, the latter in a dress of Royal Stuart tartan, grey paletot and straw bonnet, [after lunch] the Empress had changed her cloak for a black velvet mantle trimmed with lace, and now wore a blue silk chip bonnet with a plaid ribbon to match the tartan of her dress, and a black veil” (p.103).

What was the significance of the tartan dress and the Royal Stuart pattern? What kind of a first impression did Empress Eugénie want to make on her host and hostess? What kind of a statement was the Empress making about herself? And finally what were the consequences of this gesture. To answer these questions we need to take a look at the following:

A. The history and evolution of the tartan as a textile up to the mid-nineteenth century

B. The general situation in Europe:

1. The artistic mood from Sir Walter Scott to Winterhalter
2. The political atmosphere and the relationship of the two countries
3. The scientific advances that influenced trade and industry

C. The personal ancestry of Empress Eugénie

At the first Textile Society of America Symposium, *Textiles as Primary Sources*, September 1988, Richard Martin in his keynote address presented the complexity and constant state of flux in “attributed meanings” of textile designs pointing out: “For many, such as Roland Barthes, textiles and clothing can thereby be described as a sign system offering a language by which we have non-verbal communication in the world” (p. 51) as incomplete and inaccurate and that: “Textiles are not a simple language to be translated into words and made into equivalents; they are subtle, ever changing visual display, prismatic in their complexity, always elusive and all-important in their meanings...we learn that attributed meaning may be as substantive and even as intrinsic as any primary fact in design” (p. 52), as it is in the case of the Empress’s choice of the tartan dress.

Checks, tartans being composite checks, have been in existence from antiquity and have been found in early burial sites. Elizabeth Wayland Barber (1999) has written about the history of woven textiles thoroughly in her book, *Mummies of Ürümchi*, tracing the proto-Celt plaid twill weavers as coming from “the general vicinity of the Caucasus” (p. 144) where weaving started as early as 3000 B.C. Check patterned textiles, as presented in a colloquium by Yedida K. Stillman (1977), are mentioned and illustrated in “trousseau lists from the *Cairo Geniza*” (p. 193) dating from the Islamic High Middle Ages (10th - 13th century). Tartan designs were woven and worn in the Highlands without much notice until the eighteenth century then were used in the military. After the victory of the British at the battle of Culloden, 1746, wearing of tartans was banned in Scotland, this law lasted 35 years. John Telfer Dunbar (1962) has written a well researched book about the complex and often confusing *History of Highland Dress*: “The major changes in Highland dress took place within a short space of time unlike the gradual evolution of most other traditional costumes” (p. 2). Most historians agree that by the beginning of the 19th Century the tartan had become a Scottish Symbol of Identity. Robin Nicholson (2005) in his article on the history of the tartan wrote: “Although tartan as metaphor and symbol enjoyed an unprecedented and fascinating period of transience in the years 1746-1822, since that date it has been fixed with a single unchanging identity that has become so closely entwined with the self-image of the Scottish nation as to be almost unassailable” (p. 166), thirty years before the 1855 State Visit.

The Artistic Mood in Northern Europe was one of Romantic Nationalism: the writings of Sir Walter Scott, Byron, and Wordsworth, the paintings of Winterhalter, Constable, Delacroix, the music of Berlioz, Chopin, Mendelssohn and Verdi to name a few set and reflected the mood of the time. The Romantic nationalistic feelings were so strong that even after the Ossian phenomenon of James Macpherson and his inventive translations of the old Gaelic bard, another

phenomenon occurred, that of the highly publicized and theatrical visit of King George IV to Edinburgh. Sir Walter Scott, author and member of the Celtic Society of Edinburgh was in charge of the 1822 State Visit of the first Hanoverian monarch to visit Scotland. The country was literally “tartanized”...The King wanting to show his respect to the Scottish people wore the full tartan regalia as seen in the painting by Sir David Wilkie, a ‘not-so-subtle’ instance of the tartan as ‘textile of diplomacy’. Even J.G. Lockhart Scott’s devoted son-in-law called this phenomenon a “collective hallucination”.

In 1842, twenty years after King George IV’s visit, his niece Queen Victoria and Prince Albert went on a State visit to Edinburgh. Both the Queen and the Prince became very fond of Scotland and eventually acquired Balmoral. John Telfer Dunbar (1977) in his book *Highland Costume* wrote: “Following the visit of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to Scotland in 1842, and the Prince’s subsequent adoption of Highland dress, it became an almost essential costume for sport and evening-wear by the many followers of the Court styles”(p. 44). Prince Albert had made the tartan into the fashionable court attire for gentlemen and ladies, the fashion conscious Empress must have been aware of this.

The political atmosphere in Europe was strained due to the Crimean war, France was trying to halt the Russian invasion and needed England’s alliance, the latter joined rather unwillingly at first for the two had been enemies not so long ago, but now they had a common goal. With the 1855 State Visit the personal friendship that developed between the country leaders helped seal this alliance. Desmond Seward (2004) in the biography *Eugénie: The Empress and her Empire* wrote about the couple’s visit to England at a time when the British still remembered Napoleon I as the enemy: “The Victorians were astonished that the nephew of Napoleon I was coming to England, Queen Victoria was less than enthusiastic...and Prince Albert was heard saying that George III’s ghost must be turning in his grave.... nevertheless the visit did take place and if the prime-minister, Lord Palmerston, deserved credit for so imaginative an invitation, so did Napoleon III for accepting it” (p. 82). The young Napoleon III while in exile had lived in England and followed the British politics closely.

The *Times* (April 16, 1855) daily newspaper reporting about The Emperor’s visit: “This remarkable event is at length an accomplished fact, and the Emperor Napoleon III and the Empress Eugénie are guests at Windsor Castle. So has come to pass one of those extraordinary occurrences which constitute the romance of history...this event is of highest importance to the two countries whose Sovereigns thus cement, by the observances of private friendship, the more formal ties of a great State alliance”.

Queen Victoria, who had been quite apprehensive about this visit, was quite at ease now, Ivor Guest (1952): “the Queen was enjoying herself. ‘Really,’ she mused, ‘to think of a granddaughter of George III dancing with the nephew of our great enemy, the Emperor Napoleon, now my most firm ally, in the *Waterloo Gallery* is incredible!’” (p. 113).

In Europe, this was a time of major scientific advances and inventions that affected commerce and trade, and conditions were favorable for the flourishing and spreading of *La Mode à l’Écossaise* starting in Paris spreading throughout Europe and even crossing the Atlantic. The world fairs in the fifties were instrumental in the spreading of these technologies and making them accessible to all.

1. Photography- the recognition of its invention by 1852 and its use made the propagation of images to wider audiences faster.

2. Color printing- magazines and textile sample books made fashion and textiles more appealing.
3. Mechanical sewing machines were being mass-produced by 1850 and machine sewing came to the homes.
4. The Jacquard-type mechanical weaving loom made the production of textiles and trims with complicated multicolor designs faster and cheaper.
5. The department-store as we know it today had taken birth along with the concept of ready-to-wear made fashion more affordable and accessible to the middle classes.
6. The introduction of the metal cage crinoline in the fifties was a welcome invention fulfilling the desire for wide skirts without all the layers, the expense and the weight.
7. The invention of the first synthetic dye since local and imported organic dyes were getting harder to acquire. Anita Qye and group (2000) have been analyzing dyes used in quality 18th and 19th Century Scottish tartans and combining their results with correspondence between manufacturers have made interesting discoveries, for example about scarlet dyes: “When cochineal [superior scarlet dye] prices rose considerably between 1798 and 1817 as a consequence of trade disruptions by wars with revolutionary and Napoleonic France, the firm paid up to ten times the price of madder [inferior red dye]. However, between 1814 and 1817 they appear to have had no choice in the matter and bought madder instead, probably because cochineal became either too expensive or scarce...” (p. 9). The time was ripe for synthetic dyes.

The first synthetic dye was invented purely by accident by William Perkin, an 18 year-old chemistry student at the Royal College of Chemistry. He was given the assignment of synthesizing quinine from toluidine/coal tar. The experiments were not going well, but without getting discouraged continued to investigate the nature of the black precipitate he kept getting. Morris Leikind (1956) at the Perkin Centennial explained the lucky moment: “When this black precipitate was purified and dried and then digested with spirits of wine, it gave a brilliant purple solution. Then came an act of genius. Perkin immersed a piece of silk in this colored solution and found that his aniline purple was a dye. Perkin put the quinine problem aside and concentrated on a study of the coloring matter” (p. 432). By August of 1856 he had patented his reaction and left the Royal College to become an industrial chemist.

Empress Eugénie’s heritage may also have played a role in the choice of the tartan gown. She was born in Spain and educated in Paris, her name: Maria Eugenia Ignacia de Montijo de Guzman, countess of Teba. Her father was Don Cipriano de Guzman, Count of Teba and her mother was Dona Maria Manuela Kirkpatrick, the daughter of William Kirkpatrick a Scottish wine merchant in Malaga; So Eugénie was one quarter Scottish through her maternal grandfather, but not of royal descent, neither was Napoleon III. According to the *Times* reporter the British people did not care about his ancestry: “We see the first friend and ally, ...we see the man who has restored order, prosperity, and power to his country in the course of three years...There are many noble pedigrees in Europe more ancient...it is not for us then, to insist that the grandfather of the present Emperor of the French was a private Corsican gentleman; nor to speak the truth, do we care much about it. We see in our illustrious visitor the man who has restored his own fortunes and those of France...”

We can now appreciate the “prismatic complexity” that Richard Martin spoke of and the many factors at play in this diplomatic choice of textile design. The Empress wanted her hosts to see her in a tartan gown as she stepped on British soil: tartan to please Queen Victoria’s fondness for the pattern, tartan to impress Prince Albert and his fashion style, and tartan for her Scottish

ancestry. Empress Eugénie used the Royal Stuart tartan pattern without being royalty and wore the Scottish emblem of identity even though she was not going to Scotland. The consequences of this diplomatic attire were favorable in England and launched *La Mode à L'Écossaise* in France which flourished with the help of modern technology and lasted roughly for a decade. The scale of the tartan design was at its best on voluminous skirts and over the cage crinoline. As the cage crinoline diminished in size and popularity the scale of textile patterns diminished as well and stripes rather than tartans became the next fashionable design. Also aniline dyes were no longer new and exciting and those showy silk tartans became too much. After 1870 *La Mode à L'Écossaise* was gone with the wind, gone was the cage crinoline and gone was the Empress.

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