

FASHION-PLATES: SOURCES FOR CANADIAN FASHION*

The term "fashion-plate" brings to mind the image of a woman dressed in the latest style looking as if she has just stepped out of the pages of *Vogue* or, in fact, like a fashion-plate. Engraved fashion-plates illustrating the newest fashions were first seen in women's journals in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.¹ They varied in size from small prints with a single figure to larger folded impressions depicting several costumes and were often hand-coloured. Just as fashionable women do today, women of the nineteenth century wanted to see illustrations of the current styles in order to model their costumes after them.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, portraits and photographs often seem to focus conspicuous attention on the costume of the sitter. Some women appear to have been photographed as much to record their fashions as their features. A few posed in a new costume nearly every year and the obvious pride in their clothes suggests that they were in the latest style. That the latter is true, can be shown by a comparison of photographs in the Notman Photographic Archives² with contemporary fashion-plates.

William Notman's early photographs were almost entirely of the English-speaking community of Montréal. Among his subjects were women of fashionable society: wives and daughters of eminent Montrealers, civic officials, regimental officers and nobility. For their photographs many women wore silk day dresses, the costume worn for visiting and receiving calls. It can be assumed that they would choose to wear their newest costume.

In 1860³ Notman began to make *cartes de visites*, usually full-length portraits mounted on cards measuring two and one-half by four inches. Copies of these photographs were kept in scrapbooks, numbered and identified with the name of the sitter. Each book, containing from about one thousand to fifteen hundred pictures, was dated and covered a period of about two to four months. The accuracy of the dating of the photographs makes them an invaluable source for the study of fashions as they were actually worn.

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One of Notman's photographs in particular sheds an interesting light on the influence of fashion plates. In late February or early March of 1867, a Mrs. Williams was photographed wearing a silk day dress with elaborate decorative detail on the skirt (fig. 1).⁴ The decade of the 1860's was a period of transition in costume; the silhouette changed considerably, most notably in the skirt. Early in the '60's the skirts were dome-shaped and worn over a round crinoline. They gradually changed to an oval shape, flatter in front and over the hips, with more fullness behind falling into a train. Then peplums, short pieces of fabric added at the waist of the bodice or attached to a belt, or longer over-skirts were often added. Soon after, the overskirts were drawn up to form a pouf behind until the crinoline was discarded completely and the pouf became a bustle late in the decade. The skirt in the Notman photograph is in the middle phase; flat in front with fullness behind, probably worn over an oval-shaped or "elliptic" crinoline.⁵ The flatness in the front of the skirt lends itself to detail, and Mrs. Williams has added braid or ribbon to suggest a pointed overskirt and decorated it with bows.

The inspiration for this embellishment can be found in a fashion-plate that appeared just four months earlier in the November 1866 issue of *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (fig. 2). *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* was one of several British and American magazines available in Montréal containing fashion news, fashion-plates and sometimes, patterns.⁶ First published in 1852,⁷ the *Magazine* became one of the most important British fashion journals in 1860 when it began to import fashion-plates from the French magazine *Moniteur de la Mode* published in Paris.⁸ One of the plates was included hereafter in each issue throughout the life of the *Magazine*.⁹ These charming plates were designed by Jules David (1808-1892), a painter, lithographer and book illustrator who sketched for the *Moniteur* for nearly fifty years until his death.¹⁰ David's plate in the November 1866 issue of *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* illustrates a costume with skirt decoration identical in almost every detail to that of Mrs. Williams' skirt. Although the *Magazine* did offer patterns for sale for some of their fashions, there was none available for this particular costume. Mrs. Williams' skirt apparently is an example of the ingenuity with which a clever dressmaker could duplicate a design using only an illustration. It may be noticed that the bodices are not identical. Mrs. Williams has added épaulettes, a gathered band at the shoulder, and buttons down the front of the bodice.

It is also interesting that Mrs. Williams' pose, except for her right arm, is the same as that in the fashion-plate. It was very difficult to hold

a pose long enough for the camera exposure required at that time; Mrs. Williams' right hand supports her head while her left hand rests on a chair. Certainly the skirt of her costume is displayed in an identical way to that in the fashion-plate. The arrangement of the folds seems almost to suggest that she had taken the fashion-plate with her to the studio. Another fashion publication available to Montréal women was *Godey's Lady's Book*,¹¹ published in Philadelphia from 1830 to 1898.¹² Possibly a more popular magazine, its fashion-plates were usually redrawn from other periodicals and appeared at a later date. Several of their fashions in the 1860's appear to have been copied from British journals that had been published from two to nine months earlier.¹³ The design for Mrs. Williams' skirt also appeared in a fashion-plate in the May 1867 issue of *Godey's Lady's Book*, two months after Mrs. Williams' photograph (fig. 3). Whether this was copied from the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* or from the *Moniteur de la Mode*, it could not have been the source of the design for the skirt in the Notman photograph.

Women also kept their wardrobes up-to-date by having alterations made to their costumes.¹⁴ While ready-made dresses were offered for sale in that period,¹⁵ fashionable Montréal women could have had their costumes made by one of the several tailors and dress-makers working in the city,¹⁶ with fabrics imported from abroad.¹⁷ Regular sessions with her dressmaker would have been part of the everyday life of the woman of fashion. While women today merely shorten their skirts, the investment in the yards of material required to make a dress, as well as the accessibility of dressmakers, resulted in much more major alterations in the 1860's. Notman has documented a tailoring alteration in two photographs of the socially prominent Mrs. George Washington Stephens taken a year apart. In January 1869, Mrs. Stephens was photographed wearing a loose-fitting jacket trimmed with fur (fig. 4).¹⁹ Just over a year later, in March 1870, she was again photographed in the same costume (fig. 5),²⁰ but during the interval she had adapted her costume to the changing fashion. Her jacket had been re-cut and was now quite fitted at the waist. While she still carried her muff, her more ornately trimmed hat was tipped even further onto her forehead to accommodate her much larger chignon or "cushion." These more elaborate coiffures of the late '60's were usually augmented with false hair.

Both of these examples demonstrate how fashionable Montréal women followed the latest fashion trends and Mrs. Williams, photographed in a costume illustrated in London only about four months earlier shows us how quickly one could follow them. It must be remembered, however, that by the 1860's communications between

Montréal and London were very good indeed. Steamships provided weekly mail service between Montréal and Liverpool after 1858²¹ and brought goods regularly from Britain during the shipping season.²² The opening of the Victoria Bridge in December 1859²³ connected Montréal directly to the port of Portland in Maine by way of the Grand Trunk Portland Railway, thus assuring an abundant supply of the latest journals to inspire Montréal's fashionable women.

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Notes:

¹ Vyvyan HOLLAND, *Hand Coloured Fashion Plates 1770-1899* (London: Batsford, 1955), p. 52.

² Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum.

³ William Notman opened his photographic studio in Montréal in 1856. His earliest photographs were ambrotypes, a process in which the plates became the finished pictures; few of these have survived. About 1860, Notman began making *cartes-de-visites* using the "wet-plate" method which produced negatives, making it possible to make many copies. Notman kept these negatives and they are now part of the Notman Photographic Archives. J. Russell HARPER and Stanley TRIGGS, eds., *Portrait of a Period, a Collection of Notman Photographs, 1856-1915* (Montréal: McGill Univ. Press, 1967), n.p.

⁴ Notman photograph no. 25,085, mounted in scrapbook dated 9 January 1867 to 12 April 1867 which contained nos. 24,445 to 25,718. The approximate month was estimated by dividing the period covered in the scrapbooks in proportion to the number of photographs contained in it.

⁵ Elliptic crinolines were advertised in the (Québec) *Morning Chronicle*, 9 May 1866, 16 October 1866, 31 January 1867.

⁶ *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* was advertised for sale in the (Québec) *Morning Chronicle*, 15 June 1865. It has been assumed that it would also be available in Montréal.

⁷ HOLLAND, p. 100.

⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 100, 103.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 103. "...in 1877 [*The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*] was incorporated in a publication bearing the singularly unromantic title of *The Milliner, Dressmaker and Warehouseman's Gazette*, which continued to issue the Jules David plates until it, too, came to an end in 1881."

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 97-98.

¹¹ *Godey's Lady's Book* was advertised for sale in the (Québec) *Morning Chronicle*, 28 May 1864. See n. 6.

¹² HOLLAND, p. 70.

¹³ Fashion illustrations in issues of the *Illustrated London News* in February 1867, June 1867 and December 1868 appeared in a redrawn form in *Godey's Lady's Book* in October 1867, November 1867 and February 1869.

¹⁴ A number of costumes in the McCord Museum Costume Collection show evidence of alteration.

¹⁵ H. & H. Merrill advertised dresses for sale in the *Business Guide to Montreal 1860 with a Collection of Popular Songs*.

¹⁶ Advertisement, "Messrs. Galbraith & Brown, tailors, clothiers and general outfitters," *Montreal Business Sketches* (Montréal: Canadian Railway Advertising Co., 1865). Advertisement, Calloway & Falle, dressmakers, *Montreal Daily Witness*, 12 June 1861.

¹⁷ Advertisement, William Benjamin & Co., *The Traveller's Guide for Montreal, Quebec and Saratoga Springs* (Montréal: 1859).

¹⁸ Mrs. Stephens was the daughter-in-law of Harrison Stephens, an American who made a fortune in Montréal, served as Consul of the United States and lived in a mansion on Dorchester Street where Place Ville-Marie now stands. Edgar Andrew COLLARD, *Call Back Yesterdays* (Don Mills: Longmans, 1965), p. 50.

¹⁹ Notman photograph no. 35,616, mounted in scrapbook dated 13 November 1868 to 25 March 1869 which contained nos. 34,554 to 36,714.

²⁰ Notman photograph no. 43,987, mounted in scrapbook dated 3 March 1870 to 25 August 1870 which contained nos. 43,760 to 48,647.

²¹ Stephen LEACOCK, *Montreal, Seaport and City* (New York: Doubleday, Doran 1942), p. 173.

²² In 1866, 96 per cent of shipping arriving in Montréal was British. *Ibid*, p. 183.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 178.



fig. 1. William NOTMAN Studio, Mrs. Williams, 1867, February or March. (Photo: Notman Photographic Archives, No. 25,085-I, McCord Museum)



fig. 2. Jules DAVID, *The Fashions Expressly designed and prepared for the Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, November 1866, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, Vol. II, opp. p. 321. (Photo: the author)



fig. 3. KIMMEL & FORSTER, *Godey's Fashion's for May, 1867*, *Godey's Lady's Book*, Vol. XXIV, no. 443, opp. p. 396. (Photo: the author)



fig. 4. William NOTMAN Studio, *Mrs. G. W. Stephens*, 1869, ca. January. (Photo: Notman Photographic Archives, No. 35,616-BI, McCord Museum)

fig. 5. William NOTMAN Studio, *Mrs. George Stephens*, 1870, ca. March. (Photo: Notman Photographic Archives, No. 43,987A-I, McCord Museum)

