

Contemporary Comments 9.2

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE FONTANGE

The following series of quotations from letters written at the French court and from the English newspaper *The Spectator* provide a contemporary account of the rise and fall of the headdress called the fontange in France and the commode in England.

Versailles to June 1687. It doesn't surprise me to hear that you are wearing coiffures of ribbon—everyone here does, from little girls to old ladies of eighty, the difference being that young people wear bright colours and old ones dark shades or black. The reason I don't wear them is that I can't bear anything on my head during the day, and at night I find the rustling of the ribbons too noisy; I should never get any sleep, so I have given this fashion a miss.

Versailles 26 January 1688. . . . No one at court wears a fichu. The coiffures grow taller and taller every day. The King told us at dinner today that a fellow by the name of Allart, who used to do people's hair here, has dressed all the ladies of London so tall that they can't get into their sedan-chairs, and have been obliged to have them heightened in order to follow the French fashion.

Versailles 11 December 1695. We don't dress our hair so very high now, still high but not so high as before. The headdresses are now worn bent forward and not so straight up as they used to be. It isn't true that a tax has been put on the coiffure, someone must have invented that tale as a joke.

The Spectator, an English daily periodical, remarked on the abandonment of the style:

Friday, June 22, 1711. There is not so variable a thing in Nature as a Lady's Head-dress: Within my own Memory I have known it rise and fall above thirty Degrees. About ten Years ago it shot up to a very great Height, insomuch that the Female Part of our Species were much taller than the Men. . . . At present the whole Sex is in manner dwarfed and shrunk into a race of Beauties that seems almost another Species. I remember several ladies, who were once very near seven Foot high, that at present want some inches of five. . .

Apparently the style changed first in England. St. Simon, in his *Memoires of the Court of Louis XIV*, describes the reaction of the English Duchess of Shrewsbury to the style in his memoirs for the year 1713.

. . . it was not long before she had pronounced the ladies' style of hairdressing to be perfectly ridiculous—as indeed it was, for they then wore erections of wire, ribbons, and false hair, supplemented with all manner of gewgaws, rising to a height of more than two feet. When they moved, the entire edifice trembled and the discomfort was extreme. The King, so autocratic in small details, detested this fashion, but despite his wishes it continued to be worn for more than a decade.

What the monarch could not command, the taste and example of an eccentric old foreigner achieved with surprising speed. From those exaggerated heights the ladies suddenly descended to an extremity of flatness, and the new style, so much simpler, more practical, and infinitely more becoming, has lasted to the present day.

A Woman's Life at the Court of the Sun King. Letters of Liselotte von der Pfalz. 1984. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pages 47, 48, 71.

Norton, L. ed. and trans. *Historical Memoirs of the Duc de Saint-Simon*. Vol. II, 1710–1715. (Shortened version) 1984. New York: McGraw-Hill, p. 284. St. Simon wrote his memoirs, based on notes taken the time of which he wrote, between 1739 and 1751.