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Marie-Jeanne "Rose" Bertin

Designing Woman

Haute couture designer—and social climber nonpareil—Marie-Jeanne Bertin attracted an elite 18th-century clientele that included the queens of France, Spain, and Sweden.

By Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell

In the heady, fashion-crazed days of late 18th-century France, Marie-Jeanne "Rose" Bertin was a celebrity, breaking new ground as fashion consultant to Marie-Antoinette and many other illustrious ladies—and gentlemen—of the court of Louis XVI. Remarkably, an exquisite gown and matching underskirt attributed to Bertin is one of the treasures in the ROM's textiles collection. It is a rare surviving example of pre-Revolutionary court dress, and if it is indeed by Bertin, it is rarer still, for only a few pieces attributable to that famous and prolific dressmaker survive (see "Dressy Origins," page 17).

Technically, Rose Bertin was not a dressmaker but a milliner, or *marchande de modes*, which translates literally as "fashion merchant." For most of the 18th century, fashion sense was demonstrated by the choice of trimmings and accessories. By supplying these, the *marchandes de modes* dictated the course of 18th-century fashion. France's complex system of guilds restricted *marchandes de modes* from making gowns and from trimming them with the same fabric with which they were made; this was the exclusive right of *couturières*, or seamstresses. But in 1776, the *marchandes de modes* of Paris were formally incorporated (Rose Bertin was chosen as mistress of the new corporation). With this reorganization, *marchandes de modes*—already sought after for their ribbons, laces, cloaks, caps, and headdresses—could now claim dominion over a woman's entire wardrobe.

Although Rose Bertin's name may be unfamiliar today, in her lifetime she was internationally renowned. By 1787, hers was "a name known . . . in all the countries of the world," according to a well-travelled witness, the Marquis de Bombelles. It is a tribute to Bertin's immense fame that we actually have a portrait of her. Today we take it for granted that fashion designers can become celebrities, but for that time it was a rare achievement for a mere milliner. More noteworthy still, Bertin remained at the top of her profession for nearly 20 years; few fashion designers in history have enjoyed such prolonged success.

Bertin's association with the French queen, Marie-Antoinette, no doubt played a large part in Bertin's rise to fame—and in her downfall. But Bertin's rags-to-riches story owes just as much to talent and ambition. France's *ancien régime* offered few avenues for social mobility, particularly for unmarried women. Through ingenuity and sheer force of personality Bertin overcame this obstacle—and in the process elevated fashion from trade to art.

Born in 1747 in Abbeville, a textile town north of Amiens in Picardy, France, Bertin came from undistinguished origins. When she was only seven years old, her father died, leaving the family in a rather precarious financial state. While still in her teens, she set off for Paris to apprentice with Madame Pagelle, an established milliner with ties to the French and Spanish courts.

Seven years later, in 1770, Bertin left Madame Pagelle's to open her own shop. The unknown provincial girl quickly eclipsed her more famous rivals and attracted an elite clientele. Two royal weddings that took place just as she was beginning her career undoubtedly helped, as they created a great demand for court dress. News of Bertin's genius spread quickly; the Princesse de Conti recommended her to the Duchesse de Chartres, who in turn praised her talents to the

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON

Marie-Antoinette
wears her scandalous new style.
Portrait by Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, 1783

newly crowned Queen Marie-Antoinette in 1774.

Bertin was not Marie-Antoinette's only *marchande de modes*; the task of dressing the queen was far too demanding for just one person. But no other *marchande de modes* was allowed such free and frequent access to the queen—or to the royal treasury. Rose Bertin and Marie-Antoinette became inextricably linked in the public imagination, and it was Bertin who took the credit (and the blame) for the French queen's decadent elegance.

Marie-Antoinette is remembered as a woman obsessed with fashion. Before meeting Rose Bertin, however, she was not considered especially well-dressed. The Duchess of Northumberland, who attended the queen's wedding, gave an unflattering account of the 14-year-old bride, awkwardly attired in a formal court gown. Afterwards, Madame Campan, the queen's lady in waiting, observed Marie-Antoinette's growing interest in fashion with alarm, writing: "The Queen had shewn but a very plain taste in dress; she now began to make it an occupation of the moment; and she was of course imitated by other women. Every one instantly wished to have the same dress as the Queen, and to wear the feathers and flowers to which her beauty, then in its brilliancy, lent an indescribable charm. The expenditure of young women was necessarily much increased; mothers and husbands murmured at it; some giddy women contracted debts; unpleasant domestic scenes occurred; in many families quarrels arose; in another, affection was extinguished; and the general report was—that the Queen would be the ruin of all the French ladies."

For Bertin, however, the queen was her best advertisement. By 1778, Bertin had grown so powerful at court that the press dubbed her France's "ministre de modes" or minister of fashion. Bertin's genius was what we now call planned obsolescence; she brought fashion up to the very minute. By creating topical fashions named for current events, Bertin ensured that they would go out of style as quickly as they had come in. The pouf headdress was symbolic of fashion's new pace, alluding to political scandals, popular plays, scientific advances, or public figures. The price of feathers skyrocketed as headdresses rose to such heights that, according to one observer, "women could not find carriages high enough to admit them; and they were often seen either stooping, or holding their heads out at the windows."

Infanta
Dona Carlota Joaquina.
Portrait by M. S. Maella

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The queen was certainly Bertin's most famous patron, but nearly 400 other Rose Bertin clients have been identified from clothing bills that survive in French archives. She had an enormous, diverse, and international clientele; her business records read like a Who's Who of 18th-century society. In addition to the Queen of France, Bertin dressed Queen Sophia Magdalena of Sweden, Infanta Carlota Joaquina of Spain (who later became Queen of Portugal), Queen Louisa of Spain, Grand Duchess Maria Feodorovna of Russia, and half the nobility of Europe. Bertin even provided the 10-year-old Spanish infanta with the French trousseau for her marriage to the prince of Portugal (the dress seen at left was likely a part of the trousseau). Many men, too, bought gifts for their wives or lady friends from Bertin, including Thomas Jefferson, while he was American ambassador to France.

As Marie-Antoinette came under increasing criticism for her excesses, she tried to simplify her wardrobe, trading brocaded silks for muslin, and feathered poufs for straw hats. But because of the quality of the imported fabrics used, her new pastoral style was just as influential, expensive, and damaging as the old one had been. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's portrait of the queen in a plain white muslin gown and straw hat created a scandal at the salon of 1783—the gown was thought to resemble a chemise or undergarment. Nevertheless, variations on the so-called *chemise à la reine* soon appeared in all the fashion magazines, including the plate pictured on the next

page from the *Gallerie des Modes* in the ROM collection.

In spite of her gestures toward economy and simplicity, the queen continued to be perceived as the ruin of all French ladies. And as her popularity waned, so did that of her favourite "ministre." Bertin drew criticism not only for her astronomical fees, but also for her privileged place in the royal circle. It would be impossible to exaggerate the degree to which Bertin made herself at home at Versailles, or the outrage this provoked. Bertin could often be found roaming the corridors of Versailles and was invited to performances at the court theatre. The Vicomtesse de Fars complained: "The best place in the court theatre was reserved for a shopgirl, whom the Duc de Duras escorted by the hand." The queen even abandoned royal protocol so that Bertin could be present in her apartments as she dressed each morning.

Not surprisingly, Bertin developed an ego of royal dimensions. The Baronesse d'Oberkirch called her "a singular person, inflated by her importance, treating princesses as equals." A rival *marchande de modes* complained that Bertin "assumed the airs of a Duchess, and was not even middle class." She was notorious for refusing to serve provincial and bourgeois ladies. A newspaper described her stretched out in her shop on a chaise longue, greeting her noble patrons with a "very slight" inclination of her head.

To the aristocracy, Bertin was an upstart and an interloper; to the *sans-culottes* (lower-class Parisian republicans), however, she was no better than an aristocrat herself. Royalists and republicans alike held Bertin responsible for encouraging Marie-Antoinette's extravagance; nevertheless, she continued to dress the queen right up until Marie-Antoinette's imprisonment in the Temple in August 1792.

Ironically, Bertin's heroic triumph over her humble origins was symptomatic of sweeping social changes that would catapult France into revolution, which had catastrophic consequences for the French fashion industry. The luxurious trimmings that had been the bread and butter of the *marchandes de modes* became politically incorrect. Unlike the queen and many of her other clients, however, Bertin managed to survive the Revolution by leaving the country, travelling to London, Brussels, Frankfurt, and possibly St. Petersburg, where she continued to dress fashionable foreigners and French émigrés. Although she was twice accused of emigrating, a crime punishable by death, both times she managed to prove that she had left France on legitimate business.

By the time she returned to Paris in 1795, Bertin was out of danger, but also out of style. In 1799, she could still count the queens of Spain and Sweden and the Duchess of Devonshire among her customers, but very few French women. Soon after, she retired to her country house at Épinay. Although many of her clients died or fled the country and never paid their bills, and she never regained her pre-Revolution fortune, Bertin managed a comfortable retirement. It would be an exaggeration to say she lived happily ever after. Perhaps it was enough, in those dangerous times, that she lived at all. She died on September 22, 1813, a year before the restoration of the monarchy in all its splendour; upon his return to Paris in 1814, Louis XVIII, who had known Bertin before the Revolution, apparently asked for the former "minister of fashion," and hearing that she had been dead for six months, publicly expressed his regret.

Undoubtedly, if she had lived, Rose Bertin could have made a comeback, just as Coco Chanel did after finding herself on the wrong side of the political climate during World War II. French society had changed forever, but change is the essence of fashion, and Bertin had always thrived on it. Her remarkably long reign at the top testifies to a talent for reinvention and self-promotion. Fashions came and went, but Rose Bertin was almost always in style.

The simple pastoral look
seen in this fashion plate from the Gallerie des Modes *was popularized by Marie-Antoinette*

961.91.2 / BRIAN BOYLE, ROM

Dressy Origins

Was the ROM's Gown Made by Rose Bertin?

Only a few specimens attributable to famed 18th-century French dressmaker Rose Bertin survive. One of them is a gown and matching underskirt in the ROM's textile collection. While many of the pieces attributed to Bertin are damaged or incomplete, the ROM's gown, though stained and altered, is remarkably intact. The Museum's first director, C. T. Currelly, purchased it in 1925 from Mary Christie, a London antiques dealer who in the 1920s supplied the ROM with several 18th-century gowns. Christie was the source of the Rose Bertin connection. But was she a trustworthy source?

Ultimately, it is impossible to prove that the ROM's or any other 18th-century garment was created by Rose Bertin, or worn by Marie-Antoinette. But, at the same time, there is no reason to doubt it. The motifs and techniques used in this gown link it to other surviving garments almost certainly made by Bertin, and the ROM's accession records and Marie-Antoinette's bills (which mention a similar gown) further support the provenance. If it was not made by Rose Bertin for Marie-Antoinette, the gown was undoubtedly made by an extremely skilled French *marchande de mode* or "fashion merchant" of the same period for a high-ranking lady of the court. The embroidery, materials, and original stitching are of the very highest quality; the entire garment— from fabric to sequins—was made by hand, in an age before mechanization.

The gown—particularly the bodice—was altered (the new stitching is obvious and the embroidery doesn't match up on one of the seams) during the 19th century, but many original features survive. An open robe *en fourreau*, meaning that the gown has a fitted bodice cut in one piece with the trained overskirt, the gown has back pleats on the bodice stitched down to the waist, and a matching petticoat is visible underneath. The cut dates it to the 1780s. If not for the alterations, it might be possible to date it much more precisely.

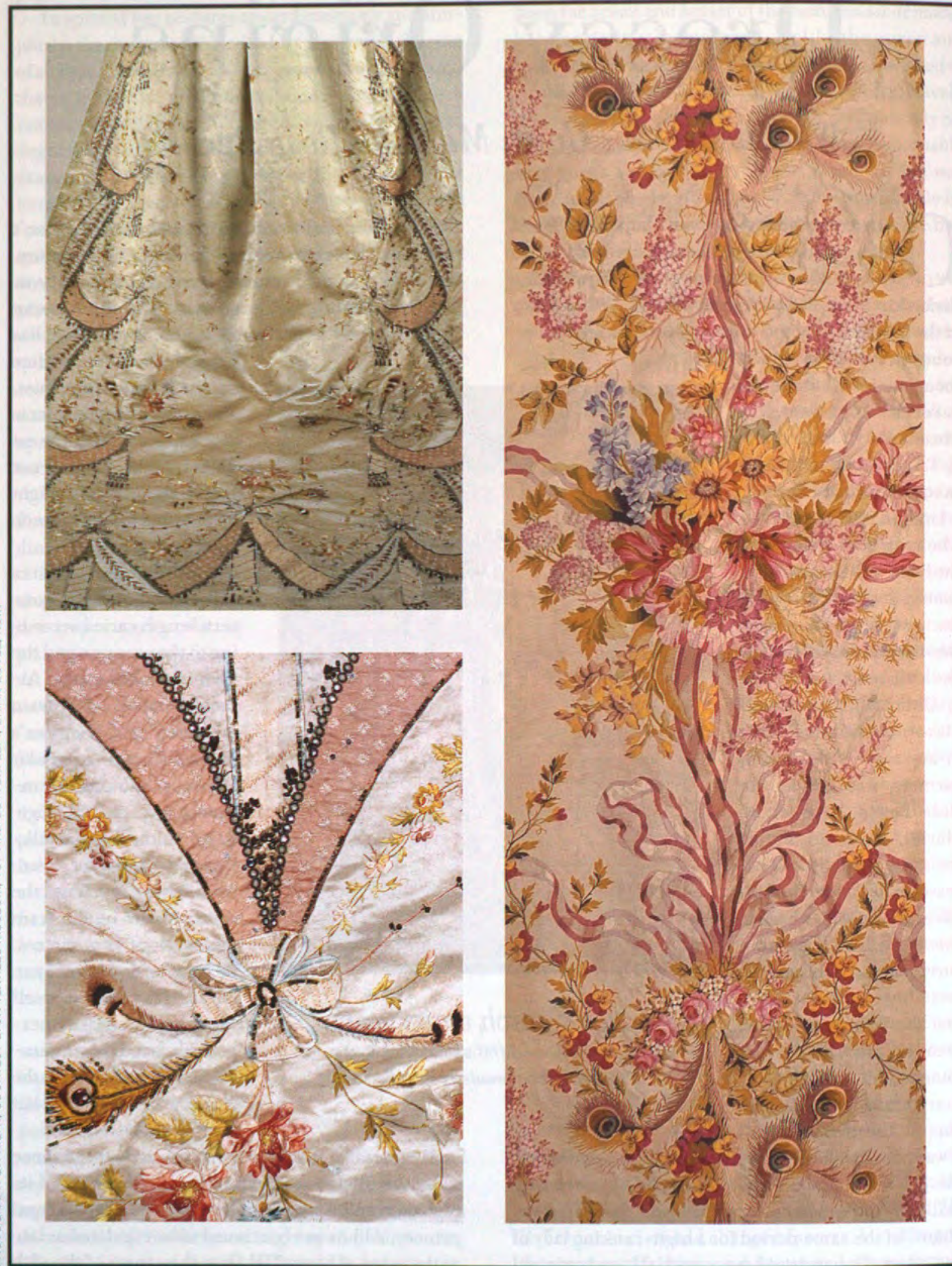
The long train suggests a ceremonial or court context; length varied according to the occasion and the wearer's social status. Almost every inch of the train is embroidered. The gown's ivory silk satin—a popular choice for showing off embroidery—probably originated in the French silk-weaving capital of Lyon; from selvage to selvage, the centre panel of the train measures 54 centimetres, the standard width of Lyon looms. The fabric itself would have been fairly inexpensive, but the costly embroidery would have put the gown out of reach for all but the very highest society.

Historically, the wearing of embroidery in France was controlled by sumptuary laws, a measure of its high cost. In 1315, embroidery was reserved for royal princes, and its use continued to be regulated as late as the reign of Louis XIV. Over the course of the 18th century, however, it was increasingly worn by both men and women who could afford such a luxury.

The embroidery motifs on the ROM gown, particularly the peacock feathers, strongly suggest a royal con-

1780s French court gown
from the ROM's collection may have been made by Rose Bertin

925.18.31 / BRIAN BOYLE, ROM



PHOTOGRAPH ON RIGHT, COURTESY LYON TEXTILES MUSEUM. TOP AND BOTTOM LEFT, BRIAN BOYLE, ROM

Royal details: the peacock and pheasant feathers *on the ROM's gown (bottom left) have royal connotations and are similar to those shown on a wall-hanging (right) commissioned for Marie-Antoinette's chamber at Versailles. Swags of ribbon and realistic flowers on the ROM's gown (top left) were popular embroidery motifs in the 18th century*

nection. Native to southern Asia, the peacock was imported to the West in the 5th century BC. In India, it was an emblem of princes, but in the West the bird's beauty was perceived as specifically feminine. With its tiny crown of feathers, its magnificent train of tail feathers, and its proud and graceful carriage, the peacock was thought to resemble a queen, and has long since been associated with queens and empresses. In Ancient Greek mythology, the peacock was the symbol of Hera, the wife of Zeus, and in Roman funeral rites, the peacock was thought to transport the spirit of the empress to the heavens, just as the eagle carried the spirit of the emperor.

Centuries later, in 1771, Catherine the Great of Russia commissioned wall hangings adorned with strutting peacocks and pheasants to decorate her palace at Tsarskoe-Selo. In 1786, Marie-Antoinette ordered a more delicate variation on the theme for her bedroom at Versailles: peacock feathers intermingled with garlands of flowers and ribbons. To this day, peacocks roam the Queen's Garden at the Château de Fontainebleau, just under the windows of Marie-Antoinette's former suite.

The pheasant iconography is a bit more difficult to link to royalty, although it, too, was an Eastern import and an ancient symbol of imperial authority. By Marie-Antoinette's time, pheasant was also a common game bird and the favourite quarry of Louis XVI, an enthusiastic huntsman. In the 1780s, the pheasant was a fashionable motif, appearing both in embroidery and in printed and woven textiles.

What is perhaps most significant about the pheasant feathers is that they are from a bird not native to France or even to Europe. The 18th century was an age of exploration, both geographic and scientific, and the greatest advances captured the popular imagination, spilling over into fashion, where they were celebrated in elaborate headdresses and illustrated in embroidery. Embroidered feathers of exotic birds or plants, then, were intellectual status symbols as well as fashion statements. We also know that on February 2, 1791, Rose Bertin sold Marie-Antoinette a *grand habit* or court gown, which she'd had embroidered with, among other things, "pink and white satin ribbon with feathers of exotic birds embroidered on the ribbon . . . the train in white satin trimmed around with . . . a satin ribbon embroidered in the same feathers bordered on each side." Bertin noted: "The feathers were furnished by and belong to the Queen." While the description does not match the ROM gown exactly, it certainly echoes it.

The flowers embroidered on the ROM's gown, unlike the exotic feathers, are fairly familiar, even pedestrian. With the growing emphasis on naturalism in 18th-century art, promoted by the writings of Rousseau and the botanical drawings of Redouté, who was appointed royal flower painter in 1788, everyone wanted clothing decorated with natural motifs, realistic flowers in particular. Many of the most popular flowers of the time are represented on the ROM's gown: poppies, peonies, carnations, daisies, pansies, hyacinths, and roses, all of which are mentioned throughout Rose Bertin's surviving bills. But many other 18th-century favourites are missing, including tulips, lilacs, and daffodils. With further research, it may be possible to date the gown more precisely based on the flowers used, or to identify possible sources for the flowers in botanical sketches of the time.

The serpentine garlands or festoons of ribbon with elaborate bows on the ROM's gown represent another popular embroidery motif of the day; the same motif appears on a petticoat panel attributed to Rose Bertin and on another heavily embellished ivory satin court gown of 1784, both in the collection of the Musée de la Mode et du Textile de la Ville de Paris. The ribbon garlands on the ROM gown are made of appliqué pale blue and pink satin on the one side and ivory satin on the other side, ingeniously combined to resemble three-dimensional swags. Ribbon was one of the fashion staples sold by *marchandes de modes*, and it was not uncommon for this ribbon to be embroidered and lined with ribbon of another colour.

Other embellishments on the ROM gown include metallic threads, *paillettes*, *paillons* (spangles), and glass stones mounted on silver facings, designed to sparkle in candlelight. Sadly, about 95 percent of the gown's *paillettes* have fallen off, but the original stitches and paste remain to give an idea of just how dazzling it would have been when it was first worn. Additional sparkle comes from pleated metallic strips called *clinquante plissé*, and two types of *bouillon*, or silk thread wrapped in a thin coil of metal.

At court, one's primary goal was to stand out from the glittering crowd. The Baroness d'Oberkirch described a ball given by Marie-Antoinette: "One of the most beautiful sights that I have ever seen is the entrance of the royal family at a ball, when all the court was present. . . . The quantity and the brilliance of the jewels, the gold and silver embroidery, and the richness of the fabrics are magnificent. One cannot imagine it without having seen it."

The same could be said of the ROM's exquisite gown. Whether or not it once belonged to Marie-Antoinette, or was made by Rose Bertin, even in its altered and damaged state, it is a stunning piece, and its beauty and artistry offer a faint reflection of a once-glittering world. ■

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