

# Fashion and Politics

Dolley Madison's imposing figure, and her flare for clothing, made her a style icon. She loved French fashion, which also coincided with her politics: Democratic Republicans were pro-France, while Federalists were more aligned with England. With its high "Empire" waist, the gown at right, one of her five surviving dresses, was distinctively French. Corsets were temporarily out of style, so it was comfortable as well. But the Empire cut also mirrored the clothing of ancient Greece, and reinforced the connection Americans proudly felt to the Greek republic. Dolley understood this symbolism. For her, a dress was never just a dress.

If Dolley knew someone heading to Paris, she provided a shopping list. In this one, she ordered a few small-size items, possibly for her sister, Anna. She also added price limits, a step she may have neglected a few years later, when she spent a staggering \$2,000. She sometimes hid these expenses from James, who was driven toward debt by Dolley's sprees. But her wardrobe was extensive because of her many responsibilities as a political wife.

Dolley made clothing choices carefully. For James's inauguration

in 1809, she wore a white linen dress and purple velvet bonnet, a plain look to keep attention focused on her husband. Plainness was not her aim when she dressed for her Wednesday night squeezes (see **Resource 4**). One dress was rose-colored satin, with a long white velvet train lined in lavender silk and edged with lace. She added a belt, necklace, and bracelet (all gold), and a white velvet turban decorated with white ostrich feather tips and embroidered with gold thread.

Dolley's fashion often suggested European courts, and some people were horrified by her displays. But she did not dress as royalty actually dressed, more the way Americans thought they dressed. And her friendly behavior seemed very American, down-to-earth. The combined message—European style and New World informality—subtly signaled that the United States would take its place among the world's great powers, but it would do so on its own terms.

**Sources:** Catherine Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006); Margaret Bayard Smith, letter to Miss Susan B. Smith, March 1809, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society, portrayed by the family letters of Mrs. Samuel Harrison Smith from the collection of her grandson J. Henley Smith* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015027775694;view=1up;seq=11> (accessed by M. Waters, 8-17-2016).



*Dolley Madison's Silk Satin Open Robe.*  
The National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

## Discussion Questions

- ★ What does this shopping list reveal about Dolley Madison's wardrobe?
- ★ Why did the clothing of the president's wife matter? Does it still matter today? Why or why not?
- ★ Why did Dolley Madison choose to dress very plainly for her husband's inauguration when she was known for dressing extravagantly for their weekly parties?

## Memorandum to Mr. Zantzinger for Purchases

2 Looking Glasses, long, and large as can be bought for \$100.00  
 100 yds the best carpeting that can be had for \$1 pr yd— 100.00  
 1 piece Black Levantine, 1 piece cheap white satin  
 1 piece queens grey florence silk, 20 yds Blond Lace 3 inches wide—  
 1 small Box assorted Feathers, do. Flowers, do. Ribbons—  
 2 pieces of fine cambric a 2 or three Dolls pr. yd.  
 2 pieces pocket Kerchiefs Cambric, at 75 Cents or one Doll pr. kerchief  
 10 yds fine Lace at 4 or 5 Dolls pr. yd—1 dito at 2 dols, narrow/  
 2 doz: pr. white & one doz pr. black silk stockings large size—  
 2 doz pr. white Kid gloves long, & large— 4 doz short do assorted colours  
 1 Doz pr. shoes with heels—one doz pr. without—  
 —1 piece white crape— — a print, of the bust, of N. Bonaparte, large as life, taken by an élève of David; it may be found in the shops of the Marchands des gravures < . . . > the price some months since was, 20 francs. —4 Orange, or bright yellow Marino Shawls not exceeding 12 or 15 Dollars—one large white shawl \$20 or 25 with a rich border—Two Spring bonnets—Two dito for Winter—Two of them for a large Head—one of each for a smaller head. all, for the morning one douzn fanciful but very cheap snuff boxes

Dolley Payne Todd Madison's Memorandum to Mr. Zantzinger for Purchases, [1801–1807], in *The Dolley Madison Digital Edition*, ed. Holly C. Shulman. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2004. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/DPM3372> (accessed by M. Waters, 9-7-16)

### Notes

*yds.* = yards

*levantine* = a silk fabric, woven for extra texture

*do., dito* = ditto (the same as the previous item)

*dols and doll* = dollars

*pr. yd* = per yard

*pr.* = pair, or per

*doz, douzn* = dozen

*élève* = student (in French)

*David* = French artist Jacques-Louis David

*francs* = French currency

*marino* = a high-quality wool

< . . . > = missing or unreadable text