

# Georgian and Regency Women’s Clothing and Accessories

Debra Peck, 2018



Jane Austen Wax Figurine; Jane Austen Centre, Bath, England

Many fans of Jane Austen, her family and the characters in her novels, wish to imitate the clothing and accessories popular during the period known as the “Georgian Era, 1720-1830,” or more specifically, the “Regency Era, 1811-1820.” During the Regency Era, the waistline of dresses rose to just under the bosom, and was known as an “Empire Waistline.” The fashion during this time tended to mimic the styles of the Roman Empire. After 1820, the waistlines on dresses began to drop again, slowly returning to the natural waistline. Fabrics used for clothing in Jane’s day included cotton muslin, cotton, (such as cambric and lawn) linen, silk, satin, and damask. Fortunately, most of these fabrics are still around today, improved by the addition of modern fibers. Muslin was very popular, yet was a much finer and delicate weave than today’s cotton muslins. To wear white muslin was a sign of gentility, as no one in the lower classes would have worn a garment that required such high maintenance! Muslins could be embroidered and dyed to suit taste. To duplicate linen in these modern times, we look for linen-look fabrics, as true linen tends to be very expensive. The same is true of silk.

Colors popular during this period had the following names:

Pomona Green	XXXXXXXX	Canary	XXXXXXXX
Jonquil	XXXXXXXX	Slate	XXXXXXXX
Lavender	XXXXXXXX	Blue	XXXXXXXX
Puce	XXXXXXXX	Red	XXXXXXXX

There were no zippers used, and buttons were of bone, shell, or wood. Most buttons had shanks; however, some had holes. Buttons could be cloth covered or were “Dorset Buttons,” made by covering a round disc of wood with yarn. A popular dress trim of the day was called “Van Dyck Points,” named for the Flemish painter Sir Anthony Van Dyck, who painted detailed v-shaped lace collars and scalloped edges on the clothing of his clients in his paintings. This elaborate trim was hand sewn and was a very time-consuming process! Sleeves were long, 3/4 length, puffed, or layered, sometimes with very complicated fabric or lace caps on the sleeves.

Shoes worn were ballet slipper types, mules, (a backless shoe) and lace-up half-boots. Very little jewelry was worn, except by the upper classes. Perhaps they were worried about being attacked by highway men! Bandeaux (hair-bands) made of ribbon, cloth, and velvet, with the addition of pearls, ribbons, and flowers for the lower classes, and jewels for the upper classes were worn. Jane’s family would not have tried to wear anything that would have suggested an upper class, such as feathers, as everyone knew their place and how to dress for their level in life. Jane and Cassandra would also have repurposed their clothing, always finding clever ways to make it better and up to date with the latest fashion.

#### Accessories:

**Fichu:** A scarf usually made of lace used as a cover-up for modesty. These were either tucked in the bodice or tied or pinned across the front of the bodice.

**Pelisse:** An overdress or coat dress. These could have long sleeves, 3/4 length sleeves, or were sleeveless. The skirt could be long or 3/4 length.

**Spencer Jacket:** A short jacket named for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl Spencer, who invented them. They could be sleeveless, have long or puffed sleeves.

**Shawls:** Shawls and Capes could be made of fabric or knitted. A very popular shawl of the period was the Cashmere Wool Shawl, which very often had a paisley trim. These shawls can be duplicated today by purchasing 2 Pashmina shawls (I found mine on Amazon) cutting off one end of each and sewing the two together in the center with a flat fell seam, to get the length desired. If you are a knitter, the online magazine called “Jane Austen Knits” has many lovely patterns from which to choose! Capes could have hoods or be hoodless, sometimes trimmed with fur, and sometimes without trim.

**Reticules:** A small purse used for a handkerchief, money, or other small items, since dresses were without pockets during this time.

**Bonnets and hats:** Made of fabric or woven straw decorated with ribbon, flowers, sometimes fruit, and feathers. No respectable woman would go outside without a bonnet in Jane's day! Good straw bonnets are for sale on Amazon.

**Gloves:** Gloves were usually white or ivory; short gloves for the daytime, and elbow length or over the elbow gloves for the evening.

If you are not a seamstress or are not acquainted with one, there are online stores that sell clothing mimicking the Georgian or Regency Era. Two good ones are **Recollections.biz** and **bdoutfit.com**. If you sew, some excellent patterns to be purchased in Joann's Fabric Store or online are:

**Dresses:** Simplicity 4055, McCalls Costumes MP558, Butterick 6630

**Cape:** Butterick 3084

**Spencer Jacket and Pelisse:** Sense and Sensibility Spencer Jacket and Pelisse Pattern SS101 (online)

**Bonnets:** Free online pattern, [Simplicity.com/regency bonnet pattern](http://Simplicity.com/regency_bonnet_pattern)

Timely Tresses Historic Millinery TTS-104 The Julia 1800-1810

And many more bonnet patterns online.

**Book:** Regency Women's Dress Patterns 1800-1830 by Cassidy Percoco

Because of Jane Austen's station in life, she and her sister and mother would have found it necessary to own just a few nicer dresses in colors they liked, and then accessorize with shawls, Spencers, pelisses, and overdresses, designed to match all of the dresses. Accessorizing is also a good practice for the modern woman's approach to imitating Regency outfits, as period clothing these days can be expensive to purchase and to make. To get the best mileage out of your wardrobe, if possible, make sure your accessories match all of your chosen dresses. This way, a few outfits become several!

**Inexpensive ways to accessorize:**

1. Turn a modern calf-length dress with an empire waistline into a Regency costume by sewing a matching floor-length underskirt with an elastic waistband to use when you need the dress for a costume. It is best to choose a dress in a color or pattern that mimics the period. Add lace or other trim to the dress as you choose.
2. Turn a simple dress into a ball gown by sewing an overdress made of printed or embroidered sheer fabric to be worn over the simple dress.

3. By making minor alterations to a modern jacket, you can make yourself a wonderful Spencer jacket. Thrift store jackets are a terrific inexpensive way to do this, and if you make a mistake, you don't have to feel too bad!
4. If you are a knitter, there are many wonderful patterns out there for shawls and capes, which have seen a miraculous rise in popularity in recent years. The yarns available are yummiier than ever! For some of the best Regency style knitting patterns, check out "Jane Austen Knits" magazines available online, or sometimes for sale through e-bay. The magazines sold from 2011-2015, and if you were lucky, you purchased them in their paper form at that time. They are still available online.

However you put together your Regency wardrobe, the main objective is to have fun doing it, as the possibilities are endless! Be sure to access all the wonderfully useful information online, and you will be sure to make even Jane proud!



Debra Peck created this handout for the presentation that she and Yvette Tremblay-Kelly did on 3/25/18 "Creating a Regency Wardrobe: How to Be an Emma, Not a Mrs. Elton" for the Jane Austen Society of North America, Eastern Washington/Northern Idaho Region, in Spokane, WA. She has graciously allowed our region to share it with others, but please be sure to give Debra credit for her work.