

Miss Lisa Brown's Guide to Dressing for a Regency Ball – Ladies' Edition



Jane Austen & the Regency

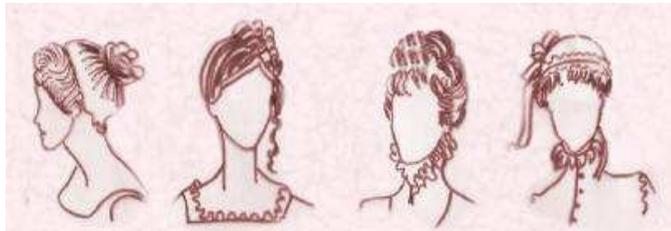
The term “Regency” refers to years between 1811 and 1820 when George III of the United Kingdom was deemed unfit to rule and his son, later George IV, was installed as his proxy with the title of “Prince Regent”. However, “Regency Era” is often applied to the years between 1795 and 1830. This period is often called the “Extended Regency” because the time shared the same distinctive culture, fashion, architecture, politics and the continuing Napoleonic War.

The author most closely associated with the Regency is Jane Austen (1775-1817). Her witty and engaging novels are a window into the manners, lifestyle and society of the English gentry. She is the ideal connexion to English Country Dancing as each of her six books: Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, Emma, Persuasion, Mansfield Park and Northanger Abbey, feature balls and dances.

Hair

If you are unable to assemble much of a Regency wardrobe, you can still look the part with a period hairstyle.

Curly hair for both men and women was favored over straight hair. Individual curls were made with pomade (hair gel) and curling papers. Fortunately, we have curling irons to do the job. Think ringlets.



For very short hair, sweep it forward and curl. Contemporary hair styles can be disguised with a bandeau or turban.



Medium length hair can be parted in the middle and curled. It was popular for the hair to look slightly disarrayed.



Long hair should be parted in the middle with the bangs curled.

The back can be twisted into a bun or put into a high pony tail and curled. Just don't let it look like a pony tail. Or do a French twist from the bottom and let it pouf out at the top with curls.

It can look slightly disheveled. Wisps and ringlets hanging at the nape of the neck, on the forehead and in front of the ears were very fashionable. Practice ahead of time.



The Minimum

If you wish to look like a gentlewoman but don't have a large dowry, all you need is an Empire waist gown and your own shoes.

1) Gown – Don't let the term "gown" scare you. Any and all one piece dresses were called gowns.

Empire style ball gowns have low cut, (get over it) rectangular or sometimes V-neck bodices and short sleeves. The waist sits right under the breasts and the skirts drop straight to the floor creating the look of a column.



The fabric was sometimes gathered across the breast, especially in the center. The skirt was gathered at the back of the gown in the center with a pouf. They often had a short train that was pinned up for dancing. Light colors, especially white, were preferred over dark and sheer, wispy or gauzy material was popular. The last foot or two of the skirt or the hem usually had some type of ornament or decoration. The bodice and sleeves often did too.

Most ball gowns would have been made of silk but today Regency ball gowns can be made of silk, taffeta, organza, voile, cotton or modern blends. Sari material is another option. The lighter the color and the more transparent the fabric, the better.

2) Shoes – Women's shoes during the Regency resembled ballet slippers, some with ties and some without. Wear your own "flats" with a small heel of no more than ½ inch or ballet slippers. No high heels please. The most important rule for dancing is to wear comfortable shoes. No one has fun when their feet hurt.



The Maximum

If you are married to the heir of a well-to-do family with money and time being no object, the following items should be added to the gown and shoes discussed previously.

1) Underpinnings – High breasts are essential for achieving the correct Regency silhouette. Every merchant or tailor who deals with period gowns will tell you that it won't look right or fit properly without the correct undergarments. They are referring to corsets, more properly known as "stays" and petticoats. The majority of 21st century women, however, have no interest in paying for or wearing such things.



The solution is a long slip in place of the petticoat and a demi-cup bra, also know as a balcony bra or balconette bra instead of the stays. The bra should be straight across the top of the cup and straps should be far to the side. Bring your dress with you when you purchase it and vice-a-versa

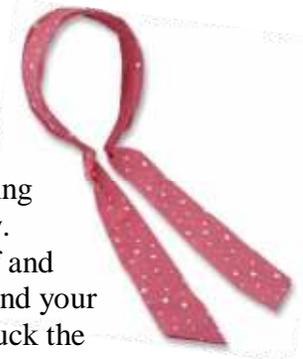
If you are trying for a higher degree of authenticity, patterns for chemises, stays and petticoats can often be found with Regency dress patterns.



2) Headdress –Some kind of hair decoration, usually involving feathers, was worn for a ball. Ribbons, tiaras, turbans, bandeaux, veils or a combination of them are options.



Bandeaux of various widths were popular during the Regency. Take a scarf and wrap it around your head, then tuck the



ends in or purchase a stretchy fabric headband.

Accessory shops like Claire's - found in most malls – sell tiaras and headbands with fabric tails that can be tied into a bow.



Turbans and turban-like headdresses were very popular during this era and hide short hair. Any hair sticking out of the turban should be curled.

A pattern for turbans can be purchased from Rocking Horse Farms #197.
<http://rockinghorse-farm.com>



Large plumes were the height of fashion for any headdress. A feather attached to a turban is so very attractive.

Custom made headdresses can be purchased at Austentation Regency Accessories:
<http://www.austentation.com/>

3) Gloves – White leather opera length gloves that extend above the elbow would be worn at all times during a ball except while eating. The fashion was for them to look disheveled and droopy at the top.

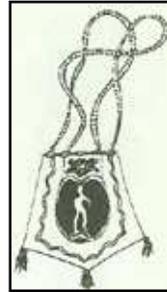
Today, leather opera gloves are difficult to find and very expensive. Try cotton instead. Please don't buy shiny satin. Ask for a matte finish if purchasing gloves made of a synthetic material. No fingerless or lace gloves please.

Your best bet for finding decent opera gloves is a second hand clothing store. Another option would be stores



carrying bridal or prom items. But remember, no shiny satin!

4) Reticule – A small drawstring bag just large enough to hold your car keys, gloves and fan. They often didn't match the gowns however it can be made from the extra gown material if available. No crochet bags please.



5) Jewelry – Necklaces, bracelets, earrings, brooches, pins and rings were worn. Brooches and pins were used to pin up sleeves, overdresses and trains. Rings were worn on the index finger.



Bracelets can be worn over the gloves or above the gloves on the bicep. Earrings hung from the ears on wires. No posts please.

Cameos were extremely popular. Authentic cameos are expensive but reproduction cameos are affordable and attractive. Please don't wear one on a black velvet choker!

Simple crosses of gem stones, gold, silver or pewter were popular and Jane Austen wore a small gemstone cross herself. The character of Eliza Bennett from the 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* mini-series wears a copy of it.

Necklaces made of small pearls with a large pearl as a pendant were very fashionable. Pearls were also used as trim for turbans, gowns and hairdresses.



If a simple solution for jewelry is needed, the brand “1928” (renamed 2028 in Macy’s) found in many department stores looks like period jewelry. Also try the Victorian Trading Company for cameos, tiaras and opera gloves:

<http://www.victoriantradingco.com/>



6) Fans – Both men and women carried fans especially at a ball where it would be hot. They were made of wood, ivory or paper and could be simple or fancy. Sandalwood or paper fans can be purchased at stores specializing in Asian goods.



Purchasing your wardrobe

By now you must realize these items cannot be found at the local mall. There are three main ways to acquire the clothing you will need.

1) Buy the patterns for yourself or a local seamstress to make.

It’s not possible to buy a single pattern to fit all your needs so be prepared to purchase several patterns.

Before purchasing any pattern, learn about its good and bad points from the Great Bay Area Customers Guild’s “Great Pattern Review”.

<http://www.gbacg.org/great-pattern-review/>

A) Simplicity and Butterick have some serviceable patterns for this era.

* Butterick #B6630 or #B4890

*Simplicity # 4055.

B) Patterns from Sense and Sensibility are a nice compromise between the commercial and re-enactor-level patterns. They are easy to make, the website offers helpful tips, and there are many photos of successful gowns. Patterns for underpinnings are also available.

<http://www.sensibility.com/pattern/regency.htm>

C) Patterns designed for re-enactors are more historically accurate. However, they can be difficult to make and often require the wearing of stays to fit properly. A sampling of Regency patterns for gowns, stays and accessories are found below.

Complete Regency Wardrobe

<http://www.ravenrook.com/clothier/bagatelle/regency.jsp>

Past Patterns #002, #30, #31

<http://www.pastpatterns.com/1789.html>

Reconstructing History #834

<http://www.reconstructinghistory.com/>

Rocking Horse Farm

Early 19th Century Gown or Gown with Calf Length Overdress

<http://rockinghorse-farm.com/>

Mantua Maker #1810-1, #1810-2, #1810-3

<http://www.mantua-maker.com>

Folkwear #215

<http://www.folkwear.com/>

Wingeo #256 or #257

<http://wingeo.com>

D) Listed below are re-enactor supply companies that carry many of the above patterns and others. They also sell ready made clothing.

Smoke and Fire

<http://www.smoke-fire.com/>

Jas. Townsend & Son

<http://www.jastown.com/>



James Country

<http://www.jamescountry.com>

Old Time Patterns

<http://www.oldtimepatterns.com/regency.html>

Harper House

<http://www.longago.com/regencywomen.html>

Patterns of Time

<https://www.patternsoftime.com>



2) Buy them already made on eBay.

eBay is your friend. New Regency gowns are listed every day, ranging in price from \$15.00 to \$300.00. It's a great source if you are patient and know how to use it. Search for "Regency dress", "Regency gown", "Jane Austen". You even buy costume-made stays on eBay; search for "short stays".



3) Use a Period Costume Specialist for custom-made gown.

Very Merry Seamstress in Lima, NY

<http://www.verymerryseamstress.com/catalog.htm>

Oakhill Clothiers located in Nunda, NY, south of Geneseo

<http://www.oakhillclothiers.com/>

Fashions in Time, located in Scotia, NY

<http://www.fashionsintime.com/>

Sue's Old Fashions, located in Cadyville, NY, near Plattsburg

<http://www.suesoldfashions.com/>

Linda's Early Fashions, located in Toronto, ON

<http://www.uppercanadianheritage.com/lindasearly/>

Dragonfly Formals, located in Colorado Springs, CO

<http://www.dragonflyformals.com/Welcome.html>

<http://www.dragonflyformals.com/Mercantile.html>

Emily's Boutique, located in Scottsdale, AZ

www.wemakehistory.com/EBoutique/EBoutique.htm

Threadbare Stitchery located in Chatfield, MN

http://threadbarestitchery.com/1800s_ladies.htm

Calico Annie, located in Dallas, TX

http://www.calicoannie.net/regency_era_1790.htm

Fashions of the Ages, located in Los Angeles, CA

<http://www.fashionsoftheages.com/>

4) Convert a dress from the 1970s, a thrift store or a wedding.

A) Learn how to convert a dress from a thrift store from the Regency Exhibition Ball in Lansing, MI

<http://thriftstoreregencyexhibitionball.blogspot.com/>



Learn how to retro-fit a modern dress with help from the Oregon Regency Society

<http://www.oregonregencysociety.com/files/retrofitEZ.pdf>

<http://www.oregonregencysociety.com/files/retrofitINT.pdf>

<http://www.oregonregencysociety.com/files/retrofitDIF.pdf>

B) Use a dress from the 1970s with little or no alterations.



C) Use a dress with an empire waist from a wedding or formal dance.



1802



1811

Bare Necessities

Finally, if the décolletage of a Regency gown is just too much for you to bare, you could always wear a sheer chemisette (dicky) underneath it.



Sense and Sensibility offers three chemisette patterns in their “A Regency Underthings Pattern”.

Rocking Horse Farm also offers a chemisette pattern as part of #197 “Early 19th Century Accessories”.



1823



1812