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Rica to Rhedi in Venice

The whims of the French in fashion I find amazing. They have forgotten how they were dressed this summer, and they are even more unaware how they will be dressed this winter ; but above all it is unbelievable what it costs a husband to dress his wife in style.

What good would it do for me to give you an exact description of their dress and ornaments ? A new fashion would come along and destroy all my efforts, as it does those of their workers, and before you received my letter everything would be changed.

A woman who leaves Paris to go spend six months in the country returns as antique as if she had buried herself there for thirty years. The son fails to recognize the portrait of his mother, so greatly does the costume in which she is portrayed seem foreign to him ; he imagines that it is some American woman [1] it represents, or that the painter wanted to express one of his fantasies.

Sometimes the coiffures rise gradually, and a revolution brings them back down all of a sudden ; there was a time when their immense height put a woman's face in the middle of herself. [2] At another it was the feet that occupied that position ; the heels formed a pedestal that held them up in the air. Who could believe it : architects were often obliged to raise, lower, or widen doors, according to whether women's apparel required this change of them, and the rules of their art were subordinated to these fancies. Sometimes you see a face sporting a prodigious quantity of mouches, [3] and they all disappear the next day. There was a time when women had a waist [4] and teeth [5] ; today there is no question of those. In this changing nation, whatever the critic may say, [6] daughters are made differently from their mothers.

It is the same with manners and the way of living as with the fashions : the French change their ways according to the age of their king. The monarch could even succeed in making the nation grave if he had attempted it. The prince impresses the character of his mind on the court, the court on the city, the city on the provinces. The soul of the sovereign is a mold that gives their shape to everyone else's.

Paris this 8th day of the moon of Saphar 1717

[1] The Amerindian woman, with her unvarying feather headdress, is a widely disseminated image at the time.

[2] The Princesse Palatine observes on 14 January 1688 : "At court no one wears a fichu any more ; but coiffures are becoming higher by the day" (Palatine, p. 77-78). La Bruyère wrote that fashion "makes of a woman's head the base of an edifice several storeys high, the order and structure of which change according to their whims" (*Les Caractères*, "De la mode", 12). This fashion disappeared in 1714 but was to return in the 1780s.

[3] See letters 50 and 107.

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[4] Flounced dresses made fashionable by Madame de Montespan during her pregnancies, which had returned to favor after the peace of Utrecht (1713), could be combined with a more recent invention (1718), that of panniers, just as useful for hiding growing waistlines ; they are implicitly opposed to the more traditional form, which calls attention to the waist.

[5] "Having teeth" is apparently a sign of youth and beauty, the elderly seeking rather to hide what remained of theirs.

[6] The word can signify "a censor, who reproaches others' mistakes, and points out their flaws maliciously or too harshly" (*Trévoux*, 1704), but also a person who judges a work. It is not clear whether Rica is suggesting anyone in particular.