Greeking Women's Fashion from 1795 to 1863

The year 1795 typically stands as the start of a new fashion trend that came to be known broadly as the Empire style. The Empire style is marked by its informal styling for women – the waistlines were high and uncorseted and sleeves hardly existent, while the skirt made of lightweight fabrics, including muslins, hung loosely to the ground. It was a truly neoclassical style, in which women dressed as if they themselves were classical Greek sculptures. This ease gave way to the Regency style around 1815, which was more rigid in fit and used stiffer, heavier fabrics like brocades, though the high waistlines continued a bit longer. By 1820, however, corsets, hoops, and large bell sleeves (where lack of or simple sleeves had been part of neoclassical Empire fashion) emerged – Romanticism had arrived. The fashion was, to be certain, a complete rejection of this short period of relatively relaxed and free female fashion intended to imitate classical Greek style. By 1880, however, evidence of a hybrid style had emerged, which seemed to bridge the classical influence of Empire and the rigidity and exaggeration of Romanticism – the corseted, hour-glass shape was retained, but silks and other softer fabrics were being shaped into artificial drapes that resembled those found on Greek statuary. What influenced these changes in fashion from Greek to un-Greek to Greek again? In this paper, I argue that women's fashion over the course of the nineteenth century was influenced by important archaeological discoveries during the same period.

Three major discoveries in particular were highly visible and popular in France, where these fashion trends emerged, and seem to have had an outsized influence on the shapes and flow of women's dress. The first was the 1788-89 excavation of pieces of the Parthenon frieze by Louis Francois Sebastien Faurel for the then ambassador of France to the Ottomans, Comte de Choiseul Gouffier. The piece was subsequently taken back and displayed in his home until it was

seized in 1792 by the revolutionaries and made public. When French women decided to show their rejection of the monarchy by rejecting its fashion, they turned, I suggest, to the shapes and drapes of the Parthenon frieze to replace it.

The second great discovery to impact French fashion was, I suggest, the Venus de Milo, discovered in 1820 and displayed at the Louvre shortly thereafter. The Venus is, of course, mostly nude and exposed the reality that Greek drapery (often called "wet drapery") was probably not necessarily appropriate for ladies of "proper" upbringing after all. Already in 1814, we see an increase in Orientalist art representing female nudes. Throughout the mid-1800s, scenes from ancient Greece seem to have been themselves Orientalized and eroticized in the same manner, perhaps a reflection of views of modern Greece as Eastern. The sensation that was the Venus de Milo fueled this eroticization and decreased the properness of dressing up Greek.

A third discovery, however, brought a return to Greek influence. In 1863, parts of the Nike of Samothrace were unearthed by the French consul, Charles Champoiseau, who sent the work on to Paris, where it went on display, once again, at the Louvre. The impact of the Nike was not immediate, but over the course of the 1870s, we see changes in style, particularly in the art of the Pre-Raphaelite painters, that manifested by 1880 as a new hybrid fashion that kept the corset and non-clinging drape, but "Greeked it up," with drape lines inspired by the Nike. Most notably, despite retaining the bustle, the hips narrow and the drapery is set at an angle to replicate the feeling of motion found on the Nike. Examples include the French sheer morning dress, ruffled and draped eveningwear, and British artistic dress.