

**ELIZABETH KECKLY: FASHIONING A PUBLIC IMAGE****TEACHER TOOL 2****Fashion in Antebellum America**

Women's fashion is a reflection of social, cultural, political, economic, and artistic forces of any given time. The changing styles that evolve from these forces tell of historical events, and also serve as reflections of how people lived. The concept of "fashion" as we know it is a relatively new idea. The development of industrial technology—in Great Britain and in the United States—influenced the production of textiles and apparel. The production of elaborate garments in the pre-industrial age required an enormous amount of painstaking hand labor. Each garment was hand-made *and* custom-made dependent upon the client's specifications. The mass production of garments began with the invention of the sewing machine, usually credited to Elias Howe, who patented his hand-operated sewing machine in 1846. In 1859, Isaac Singer developed and mass-produced a sewing machine operated by a foot treadle, allowing hands to remain free so that they could guide the fabric while sewing. Garments then could be made more easily and more quickly.

Life and dress among the poor, peasant, and enslaved reflected their status, as well. Their clothing was made from homespun, often rough, fabrics. If lucky enough, they inherited castoffs from the rich or estate/plantation owner. These garments, often remade, were handed down from generation to generation.

The 'art' of dressmaking, known as *couture* reflected the male designer (*couturier*) and his female counterpart (*couturiere*). The first successful independent fashion designer was Charles Worth. English by birth, Worth settled in Paris in 1846 and attracted wealthy, prominent female clients. By mid-century the (Parisian) Fashion Salon evolved so much that Worth and other prominent designers employed a staff of seamstresses and tailors. An international market for Parisian fashion developed and French courtiers became *the* major influence on fashion in the western world, setting styles and trends until the mid-twentieth century. During the mid-nineteenth century, the cult of fashion spread from Europe to the United States. Women of means (financial and influential) in urban areas employed dressmakers to create their garments. Fashion ideals were influenced by European trends, and women were exposed to contemporary European fashion trends through the publications *Godeys Lady Book*, *Peterson's*, and *Harper's Weekly*.

Fashion plates and fashion dolls were used to show the latest styles and came in the publications. Clients would bring their pick to their dressmaker who would create the dress to fit them, mixing, and matching different elements (fabrics, trim, styles, etc.).

This document was generously contributed to the Crafting Freedom Website by Laura Nichols, a New York State teacher and 2005 Crafting Freedom fellow.

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