



The Dress that Traveled the Globe

BLOG POST BY ANNA WEISSMAN

She gazes out from the canvas, her gown a riot of color and pattern—and a puzzle. What was this unusual garment, and how did it end up immortalized in an 18th-century portrait painted in the Caribbean? We can only guess—but those guesses take us on a journey through fashion, global trade, and empire.

One of my favorite aspects of curatorial work is the chance to dive deep into individual artifacts—pieces that at first glance might seem straightforward, but on closer study reveal entire worlds.

During my time at the Winterthur Institute, I had such an opportunity, and chose one of their mid-18th-century oil paintings, *Portrait of a Woman*, attributed to Boston-born artist John Greenwood (1727–1792). Greenwood likely painted it while living in the Dutch colony of Suriname in the 1750s.

We don't know much about the sitter, but what grabbed my attention right away was her dress. It's not what you would expect for the time—different in cut, fabric, and style. That unusual dress became my starting point for figuring out when and where the portrait might have been painted, and what story it might be telling.

Fashion that Breaks the Rules

Between 1750 and 1775, women's fashion in Europe and the colonies usually followed a set formula: low necklines, a conical torso shaped by stays, full skirts, and sleeves that ended just past the elbow. Popular styles included the robe à l'anglaise, with its fitted back and open skirts, and the robe à la française, which had loose Watteau pleats at the back but was still tightly fitted in the bodice.



Robe à l'anglaise

Silk, British, 1776

2009.300.952 Brooklyn
Museum Costume Collection at
The Metropolitan Museum of
Art



Robe à la française

Silk, French, 1750-1775

C.I.54.70a, b
Metropolitan Museum of Art



Untitled (Portrait of a Woman), attributed to John Greenwood (1727–1792), Winterthur Museum

Reading a Dress

The museum's records list the garment as a *vrouwenjak*, a Dutch term for a woman's jacket. However, former fashion curator of the Fries Museum in the Netherlands, Gienke Arnolli was skeptical, because the garment lacks the required front closures.

Could it be a loose fitted *kassekijntje*? These jackets could be made from linen, silk, or cotton, and while some were used for everyday wear, others were richly decorated for more formal occasions. They were practical garments, allowing for more movement than a tightly fitted gown, but still fashionable enough to be seen in public. In some cases, they were even adapted for maternity use - could our sitter have been pregnant?

Our sitter, though, is wearing something looser, with shorter sleeves and a big, bold floral print. That's a big departure from the norm. It hints that she might have been in a warmer climate—where lighter, looser clothing made sense—and possibly somewhere with more relaxed social rules than the major cities of Europe. This was likelier in colonial outposts than in Europe's metropolitan centers. Maybe our sitter was indeed posing in Dutch-occupied Suriname.



Jacket in chintz, skirt in wool damask, 1750–1800.
MoMu Collection Fashion Museum of Antwerp



Les Casaquins [*kassekijntje* in Dutch], Antoine Hérisset (1685–1769), Etching on paper after 1730, RP-P-1907-4065 Rijksmuseum

The fabric on her gown looks like chintz—a smooth, finely woven cotton that was hand-painted or block-printed with elaborate designs. Chintz came from India and was a must-have in Europe for its bright, long-lasting colors and detailed patterns, often full of curling vines, oversized blossoms, and exotic leaves.

On her dress, you can spot bold red and golden-brown flowers, deep green fronds, and tiny white accents, all spread across a soft blue-gray background. Those big, showy blooms are part of an orientalist style that was all the rage in the 1760s and 1770s, imported to Europe by Dutch and English trading companies. These designs were made especially for European buyers—not for local markets in India or China—and the Coromandel Coast of India was a major source for the Dutch-imported versions. It's very likely that's where this fabric's journey began.

One detail that really stands out is the soft grey-blue background of her fabric. This was a signature Dutch preference—English buyers favored crisp white, and the French almost never chose dark backgrounds for cotton prints. Pair that with the fact that the Dutch East India Company controlled much of the chintz trade, and it's a strong clue that our sitter was painted in a Dutch colony.



Sun hat, cotton, dyed in chintz technique, India ca. 1730. Fries Museum Leeuwarden, Royal Frisian Society collection



Detail of painting



Cotton fragment, cotton, mordant- and resist-dyed, painted, India Coromandel Coast, c. 1780-82

*Note the base color, the provenance is Frisian, from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



Detail of a Morning gown

cotton, mordant- and resist-dyed, painted; India, Coromandel Coast, c. 1760-1780

*Note especially the flower on the bottom left, which looks quite similar to the red flower on the garment

Layers of Meaning

The garment's style and print open the door to multiple interpretations. On one hand, this dress could be a personal statement about the sitter herself. Historian Zara Anishanslin, in *Portrait of a Woman in Silk*, explores how clothing could signal a woman's interests, affiliations, or intellectual pursuits. A gown decorated with naturalistic flowers—possibly even species native to the region—might point to an interest in botany. If that's the case, the sitter is presenting herself as educated, confident, and intellectually curious, using her gown as a kind of visual calling card.

But there's another, more complicated layer to consider. In an 18th-century colonial context, botanical imagery could also carry connotations of possession and control over the land. It aligned with the Enlightenment idea of “taming” nature—a concept deeply entwined with imperial expansion. In Suriname, such “taming” was made possible by the forced labor of enslaved Africans and the exploitation of Indigenous peoples, who sustained the colony's lucrative sugar, coffee, cocoa, and cotton plantations. In this light, the lush plants on her gown could symbolize colonial power, whether or not the sitter consciously intended it.

It's also worth considering whether her clothing reflected her immediate surroundings. In a tropical climate, lighter, looser garments were practical. Choosing a botanical print that resonated with the local environment could have been a way to express connection to the place—or to assert authority over it. Was she borrowing from the beauty of local flora to anchor her identity there, or wearing it as an emblem of her control?



This single dress pulls together threads from across the globe: Indian textile artistry, Dutch mercantile networks, Caribbean colonial society, and European fashion trends. As the saying goes, it is “the product of a hundred climates.” It's also a piece of political and economic history—woven through with the fraught relationships between colonizer and colonized—all captured in the portrait of a woman whose name we may never know, but whose dress speaks volumes.

illustration of (local) woman in Suriname,
ca. 1775
note the short sleeves!