

# Virtual Author Talk



## The Art of the Mantua-Maker: 1870 - 1879 Deb Salisbury\*

*The author of "The Art of the Mantua-Maker: 1870-1879: Fashion, Sewing, and Clothes Care" talks about why she wrote the book and why she loves this period.*

I have to admit I'm a list maker. I've made lists of dress history for years, only to lose them in the clutter on my desk and in the resulting cleaning sprees. (I like to see the surface of my desk once in a while.) But finally it occurred to me that someone else might be interested in the same types of details that I love so much.

I adore nineteenth-century fashion magazines. I love Victorian-era sewing books even more. However, I've often been discouraged by books about Victorian clothing because they show lovely pictures, but gave no tips as to how the dress was made. Learning to sew in the loose-fitting fashions of the later twentieth century gave me no hint of the intricacies of structured clothing, or of the amazing things women were willing to put themselves through to trim their gorgeous dresses. This jeans and sweat-shirt girl quickly learned to appreciate the techniques those seamstresses employed.

After many years of collecting, I wanted to share their original writings with other historical-dress enthusiasts. However, I held back from writing this book for years because my original publisher discouraged illustrations as too much trouble for her small press, and I couldn't see how I could do the subject justice without a large number of pictures. Then, I discovered [Createspace](#), an online publishing site for independent authors, and discovered how easy it is to add pictures. In fact, it was so easy that I got

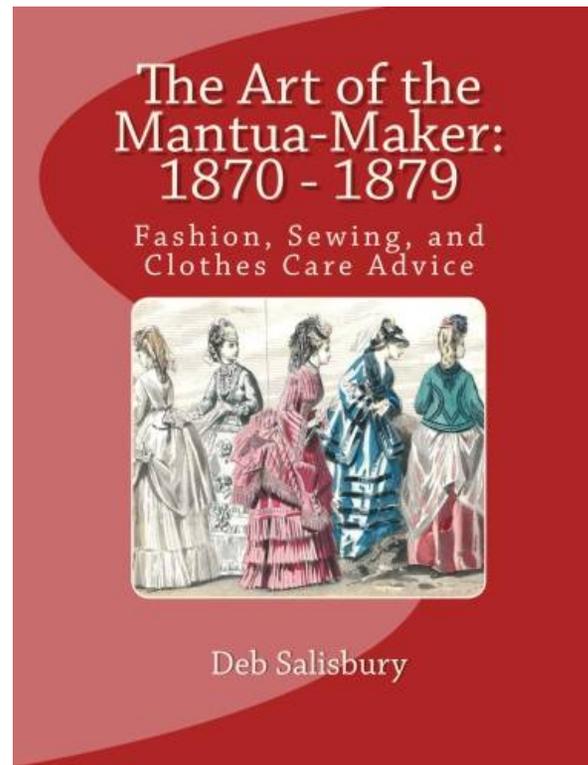
carried away and the file became too large, so I had to edit out many illustrations.

Because my personal collection of fashion magazines is strongest in the 1870s, I decided to start with that decade. [\*The Art of the Mantua-Maker: 1870 - 1879 Fashion, Sewing, and Clothes Care Advice\*](#) compiles sewing and fashion advice from books and magazines during the 1870s, given in the words of writers of that time.

To my eyes, the fashions of the 1870s were extremely graceful, without as many exaggerations as the other decades of the Victorian era. I love the gently sloping bustle, and the smooth lines of the cuirass bodice. Of course, the ladies of this era loved extravagant trim: braid, embroidery, shirring, ruffles, puffings, plaits, and flounces; the list seems endless.

The art of the mantua-maker was practiced by every woman who wanted to create her own wardrobe. Fashion magazines were studied and dissected, scoured for details on how each effect was created, how many seams were used, and where the pleats were placed. They learned why changes were made, when they went out of date, and how to recreate the styles they liked.

Individual taste seemed more allowable during this period, too. Within certain limits, of course. One needed to be aware of the



fashions, and be willing to adjust them to her body shape, complexion, and status in life.

Fashion magazines in the 1870s were largely aimed at middle-class women with money to spend, and appearances to keep up – something very important to people during this era. Wealthy women relied on their modistes to keep them current with the trends (when they weren't out ahead of them), but middle-class women relied on magazines like *Peterson's Magazine* and *Godey's Ladies Book*. Some of these women made their own clothes, but many took the magazines' designs to their dressmakers.

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“Taste in dress is the sure guarantee of the lady. Nor is it mere money that makes a tasteful dress. It is principally a knowledge of the fashions, and how to adapt them to your style.”

– *Peterson's Magazine*, November 1875

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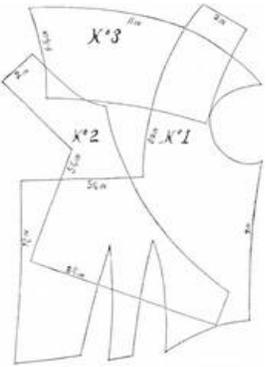
Most of the fashion articles in magazines were only one-half to three pages long, sometimes spread across different sections of the issue. They described the illustrations in the front of the current issue, general trends in fashion, and occasionally gave brief instructions (often little more than hints) on how fashionable dresses were constructed. Deep in the magazine's general



### LOW WATTEAU-BODY

“We give, here, an engraving of a Low Watteau-body for full evening-dress, and also a diagram of the pieces of which it is to be made. They are, as will be seen, three in number, viz: the front, the side-piece, and the back. This Watteau-body has a square opening both back and front, and is made without sleeves. That pattern is for a body a little above the usual or average size, say thirty-four and a half inches round the chest, and twenty-four inches round the waist.”

– *Peterson's Magazine*, October 1871



Q&A section were more tips about fashion and dressmaking advice.

I found a couple of books that gave a few pages of dressmaking advice, and I included the best examples. I always include the source at the end of each book or magazine's section.

*Peterson's Magazine* often gave a “pattern” (an illustration of a dress) and a “diagram” (an outline of the pieces), along with brief description of how to make it, like the Low Watteau-Body shown above.

Sometimes the construction advice was more concrete, as with this from *Peterson's Magazine*, January 1870:

“We begin with a plaid walking-dress, suitable for a best dress. The material should be either a woolen plaid, or any one-colored woolen stuff goods. It will require about eighteen yards of single width, or fourteen yards of double width material; and can be made both fashionably, and at the same time comparatively inexpensively.

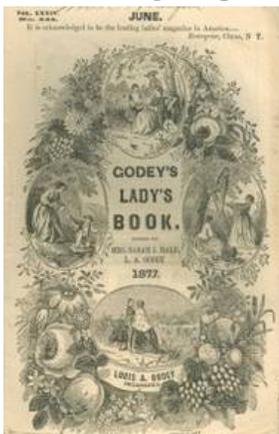
“The under-skirt has one gored width in front, and if the material is of double fold, the side gores come off of the front width. By observing to cut the skirt in this way, much material can be saved; then add two full widths in the back; cut the flounce a quarter of a yard in depth, and bias, and put it on as seen in the design, either with a band of black velvet one inch wide, or with worsted braid, or even with bias bands of black alpaca, stitched down by the sewing-machine. The upper-skirt is short, and even all round, (trimmed also with a bias ruffle six inches deep,) being simply looped up in the middle of the back with a large bow of the material of the dress.”

I combined the various illustrations, descriptions and hints from all of my sources into chronological order to let the reader watch how fashion and dressmaking evolved over the months. Usually there was a slow progression, but occasionally a new innovation would put in a sudden appearance.

Among the periodicals I used most, *Peterson's Magazine* and *Godey's Lady's Book* (left) were aimed at women at large, though particularly at middle-class women. They offered self-improvement articles, stories about women and girls, poetry, lectures

(especially about temperance), how-to articles on everything from art to embroidery to lace making, and, of course, fashion advice.

Magazines like *Smith's Illustrated Pattern Bazaar* were intended to sell patterns, but they included many articles about current fashions, and they dropped hints about dressmaking techniques by mentioning how many gores a new style of skirt used, or what type of fabric worked best. *Arthur's Illustrated Home Magazine* gave more information about Butterick patterns than they did about fashion trends, along with stories and articles of interest to its readers.



### To Make Old Black Silk Look Like New

“Unpick the garment, and wash the pieces in hot soapsuds; rinse by dipping up and down in hot water, then dip in second water, prepared as follows: Boil two ounces of logwood chips in five quarts of water, add a quarter of an ounce of copperas; strain through an old bit of calico, and dip your silk into this dye. Let the silk be pinned on to a line by the corners, and hang until it is nearly dry. Then take it down and iron it between two pieces of old black silk. It will look like new.”

*Peterson's Magazine, February 1875*

Advice on how to care for clothing was invaluable in the days before washing machines and dry cleaning. Recipes on cleaning made frequent appearances in all the magazines. Articles like the one above make me extremely glad I'm not a Victorian laundress, lady's maid, or middle-class do-it-yourself woman.

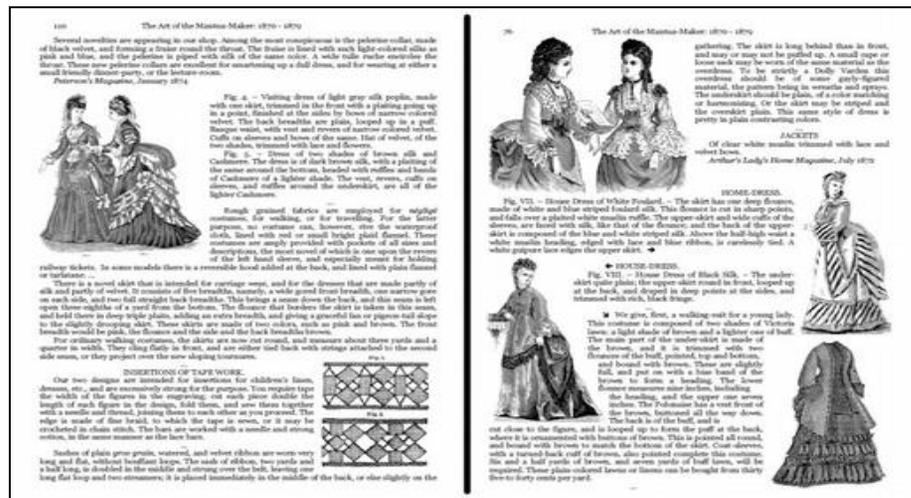
*The Art of the Mantua-Maker: 1870 - 1879 Fashion, Sewing, and Clothes Care Advice* compiles sewing and fashion advice given in books and magazines during the 1870s, in the words of writers of that time. Each entry shows the name and date of the periodical quoted. I've included as many pattern sketches as I could find.

The book has three sections:

1. Sewing tips and fashion advice
- 2) Fabric cleaning and care.
- 3) Bibliography of magazines and books I found useful.

It's organized chronologically, so you can look for fashion and sewing advice by month and year. I've included over 740 black and white period engravings of dresses, trim, and patterns to help show the details of changing fashions of the 1870s.

*Deb Salisbury is the owner (and sole employee) of The Mantua-Maker, creating quality historical sewing patterns for the modern sewing artist since 1993. She fell in love with costuming when her boyfriend took her to BayCon's Masquerade in 1986, and she's been making historical and fantastic clothing ever since. Her designs have won awards at World Con, Costume Con, WesterCon, and BayCon.*



Sample page from *The Art of the Mantua-Maker: 1870 - 1879*.