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THE ELEGANT ART OF MOVEMENT

*"One should always put the best foot foremost.
One should please, shine, and dazzle, wherever
it is possible."*

LORD CHESTERFIELD, 1732

The elegant art of eighteenth-century movement, an integral part of daily living, was strongly influenced by how costumes were cut and how they were worn. In motion, these were superbly elegant; movement brought them to life!

While the modern idea of movement is a fairly simple one—the process of changing position, place, or posture—the eighteenth-century concept was far more complex. For our purposes, we may consider it to have consisted of four categories:

CARRIAGE OR BODY POSTURE: standing in repose;
MOTIONS: changing from one position to another,
that is, walking, sitting, dancing, etc.;
MANNERS: performing social rituals;
ADDRESS: bearing of the body during conversation.

Each of these categories had precise standards of performance which were subtly reinforced by costumes. There was, however, an incredible variety in the actual execution of movement, since every eighteenth-century man and woman interpreted these standards according to his or her individual social standing and personality. For example, although the highly embellished French styles of movement, performed with effortless self-possession, were second nature to the upper classes, at times they chose to execute them perfunctorily or to ignore them completely. Upper- and middle-class fops were very frenchified, taking all movement to extremes. The urban middle classes tended to simplify movement, performing in a straightforward, if occasionally self-con-

scious manner, while country middle-class movement was often laboriously proper. Servants who imitated the movement of their masters too closely were criticized severely for "aping their betters." Those of all classes who were old-fashioned in their beliefs clung to the rigid formality of their seventeenth-century childhood.

To this highly class-conscious era, movement was the ultimate status symbol. "At court even, a graceful address, and an air of ease, will more distinguish a man from the crowd, than the richest cloaths that money may purchase."¹ At the beginning of the century, elegant movement was the hallmark of the aristocracy. But as the century progressed, the ambitious middle classes steadily expanded their economic and political bases of power, and began to challenge the social supremacy of those above them, driving the upper classes to retreat behind an invisible social barrier of manners rather than wealth. Movement became the final rung on the eighteenth-century social ladder. It was one art which could not be purchased; it had to be learned—a painstaking process requiring time and practice. There were rules for every conceivable type of movement—from entering a room to passing someone on the street, fighting a duel, dancing a minuet, or drinking a cup of tea. These rules were gleaned from three main sources: dancing masters, etiquette books, and costumes. By the end of the century, all three sources were being directed toward fur-

thering the upward mobility of the middle classes.

Upper-class standards of movement originated in seventeenth-century France during the reign of Louis XIV. Although in the eighteenth century these rules were somewhat relaxed and refined, they were nevertheless continually regarded as the source of courteous behavior and elegant movement until the French Revolution. From the time they could walk, upper-class eighteenth-century boys and girls were tutored by French-trained dancing masters who regularly visited the fashionable homes of their charges to teach the latest bows, curtsies, and dances (fig. 4). Between visits, each child was expected to practice his lessons daily and, if necessary, in front of a mirror.

Less affluent parents sent their children to dancing schools or taught them at home from one of the many books on conduct and dance, which contained step-by-step instructions and often illustrations. One such text, *The Man of Manners: or Plebeian Polished*, was written in 1768 "chiefly for the Use and Benefit of Persons of Mean Births and Education, who have unaccountably plung'd themselves into Wealth and Power."²

Whether acquired from dancing masters, conduct manuals, or costumes, the elegant art of movement was something of a paradox. On the one hand, it depended on a highly complex and precise set of rules whose execution required consider-

able bodily discipline, while, on the other, it required an "easy" or apparently effortless manner of performance. A child learned very early just how much effort it took to appear effortless, in much the same way as does a classical ballet dancer today.

At first glance, the wearing of eighteenth-century costumes may not look so difficult. But if we could be transported back to the world of the costumes displayed in this catalogue and exhibition, we would be astonished by the many ways these clothes would affect our normal posture and ability to move. Today's woman would discover that she could not slump or bend forward without getting poked by her corset. Her ballooning skirt would make it hard to turn around without bumping into people or knocking over things. On her first attempt at sitting down in a chair, she would likely miss the seat altogether!

Today's man could find himself the model of this description by Lord Chesterfield, one of the century's foremost exponents of etiquette:

He is at a loss what to do with his hat, when it is not upon his head; his cane...is at perpetual war with every cup of tea or coffee he drinks; destroys them first, and then accompanies them in their fall. His sword is formidable only to his own legs...His clothes...constrain him so much, that he seems rather their prisoner than their proprietor.³

Such costumes obviously had a purpose other than comfort, reflecting a way of thinking different from our own. This

relationship between mental attitude and movement in costume is significant because costumes were, and are, worn by the mind as well as the body—to grasp fully the significance of the costumes and movement of any era, we must look beneath the surface to the attitudes that generated them.

KEY ATTITUDES

The look of status always outweighed the desire for physical comfort. Witness this excerpt from the Duchess of Devonshire's letter to a friend in 1778: "...my new French stays...are so intolerably wide across the breast, that my arms are absolutely sore with them; and my sides so pinched—But it is the 'ton'; and pride feels no pain...to be admired, is a sufficient balsam."⁴ Fashionable men and women willingly suffered physical discomfort and deliberately sacrificed freedom of movement—so dear to the twentieth-century life-style—for the elegant look of status (plates 13–15; cat. nos. 15, 127, 135).

One of the main goals in eighteenth-century life was the pursuit of pleasure. Even the Declaration of Independence went so far as to proclaim the pursuit of happiness, a form of pleasure, as one of man's inalienable rights. Note, however, that *pursuit*, not attainment, was the guarantee. This was a century oriented toward process rather than goal, in which people believed that pleasure "was important...worth taking trouble about, and could be given some of the quality of art."⁵ One of the most

unusual aspects of the era's aesthetics was the conviction that if properly dressed and in sufficient command of movement, an individual could be transformed into a work of art. "Let us imagine ourselves, as so many living Pictures drawn by the most excellent Masters, exquisitely designed to afford the utmost Pleasure to the beholders," declared Kellom Tomlinson in *The Art of Dancing*.⁶ Costumes, movement, and speech were all spectator-conscious. Every movement was artfully calculated to charm an audience, to show oneself off to best advantage with seeming effortlessness.

The S-curve of William Hogarth (1697–1764), the English painter and engraver, functioned as an aesthetic ideal; this asymmetrical serpentine line was proclaimed the perfect line of beauty. Its languid curve decorated every aspect of eighteenth-century life, from clothing to furniture, interior design, architecture, and landscaping, and also served as an integral part of movement. People walked, stood, and even gestured in S-curve patterns, a far cry from the dominant straight lines so popular today.

Intellectually, individuals derived great satisfaction from the belief that they were the epitome of rational beings. In this age of enlightenment, they were firmly convinced that anything could be accomplished if one's mind were put to it. They delighted in creating, in almost oriental fashion, contradictory but simultaneous levels of meaning—juxtaposing rapid speech with languid

movement, the language of words with the nonverbal language of fans, the performance of difficult movement with apparent ease, or mental vigor with frivolously embellished costumes.

Although feelings ran deep, they were carefully held in check by the intellect. The head ruled the heart in the eighteenth century. Interestingly, the major outlet for feelings and emotions was conversation, itself a highly developed art. The most admired conversation was both elaborate and balanced, abounding with themes and variations, well-turned S-curve phrases, epigrams, and double entendres. From gossip to philosophy to letter writing, the eighteenth-century man or woman was never at a loss for words. Whether conversing in salons, coffeehouses, or clubs, there was never a hurry to get to the point.

Such key attitudes combined to influence the fashionable eighteenth-century individual to choose costumes that challenged the body to a level of control and performance, the mastery of which gave pleasure to the mind. These attitudes also insured that, no matter how dazzling or elaborate the costume, one's personality would always dominate it.

Generally speaking, all four categories of eighteenth-century movement—carriage, motions, manners, and address—began with a disciplined body. To meet the criteria for elegance, movement had to be free and graceful; it could not be angular or stiff. Movement required time to be performed

and appreciated. Both performer and recipient developed a complex mutual rhythm of performance/acceptance that was never ignored or rushed, haste being the sign of a servant or rustic.

CARRIAGE

Proper carriage or body posture was the cornerstone of eighteenth-century movement (fig. 5): one had to learn to pose with studied ease. The basic rule of deportment taught to every child stated: "In order to attain a graceful manner in moving, it is first necessary to know how to stand still."⁷ And, indeed, it required considerable self-possession and control to stand without fidgeting for extended periods of time, subject to others' "measuring" (looking one up and down). Elegant carriage consisted of artfully positioning the head, torso, and limbs in an easy, unaffected manner. The body, lifting from the base of the spine, should at all times express a light, floating quality, almost as if it were filled with helium, barely able to stay on the ground (plates 16, 17; cat. nos. 14, 161).

Elegant carriage began with the head which, as the seat of the intellect, was the focal point of the figure. If the head was held properly, all other movement followed naturally. "Hold up your head...let it stand free and easy; to be stiff is almost as bad as to stoop," was the general directive given in *The Polite Academy*.⁸ Women were allowed to tilt their heads slightly to one side, forming a gentle S-curve with the torso, as long

as they avoided all "affected motions of the head, all wanton...glances of the eyes, all ogling or winking, dimpling of the cheeks, or primming of the lips."⁹ Wigs were the major costume item affecting head placement. In and out of fashion for both men and women throughout the century, wigs forced the head upright and limited its turns.

or carriage to be considered elegant, the shoulders and arms had to look relaxed, the upper arms curving gently away from the torso, not dropping straight down at the sides like servants or rustics. Correct placement of the hands was critical. A woman lightly rested them palms up, one on top of the other; they were turned slightly in toward the body at the front point of her bodice. The sleeves of the women's dresses in this catalogue and exhibition may be observed to be carefully shaped to reinforce this curved-arm stance (fig. 6; cat. no. 14, detail)—some cup under the back of the elbow, while others are darted at the inside elbow. Long before Napoleon, it was the practice for a man to place one hand (usually the right) lightly into the bosom of his waistcoat, which was left unbuttoned, except for three buttons at the waist. The other hand was placed under the side flap of the waistcoat above the swordhilt. Because the armholes of bodices, vests, and coats were cut very high under the arm, it was physically far more comfortable to hold the upper arms slightly away from the torso; to drop the arms

straight down at the sides made the armholes bind. With his coat buttoned, a man could raise his arms up over his head and his coat would not ride up (fig. 8). These sleeves actually gave him more freedom to move in an upward direction than the coat sleeves of modern men's suits. Thus, both men's and women's sleeves were instrumental in supporting the elegant carriage of the arms.

The feet were always turned out. Not only did this throw the legs into an S-curve position, it also made an eighteenth-century gentleman "stand firm, easy, and graceful."¹⁰ Encased in knee breeches, skintight stockings, and shoes with one- to three-inch heels, he cultivated a modified fourth-position ballet pose, displaying to all the world, and the ladies in particular, his well-developed, well-turned calves.

If a gentleman led with his calves, a lady, supported by her corset, led with her bosom. In this status-conscious century, corsets instantly proclaimed class distinction. The more severe the cut and boning of the corset, the higher the lady's class, provided that it was worn with apparent ease. It could not be laced too tightly, lest it produce stiff posture and awkward movement, which were both inelegant and unendurable. Actually, when correctly worn, the corset did most of the body display work for the lady; it obviously straightened her spine. Boned high in the back, it flattened the shoulder blades which, in turn, rounded and forced back the shoulders,

resulting in a fashionably narrow back and uplifted or "prominent" bosom (fig. 7). The instant a lady started to slump, a gentle prod from the corset bones reminded her to straighten up. Although from today's point of view nothing could be physically more restrictive than a corset, to the eighteenth-century lady the corset conferred a degree of social security far more satisfying than physical comfort. The posture of status was consciously built into the corset's shape—no wonder it was such an essential part of her costume! As soon as she could walk, a little girl of the eighteenth century was put into training stays (less rigidly boned) which disciplined her young body to "naturally" develop that sought-after "air of good breeding," that correct and elegant posture which was the unmistakable stamp of the upper class.

Corsets were by no means restricted to girls. Aristocratic young boys were put into similar training stays (although usually without a front point) to mold their bodies into the fashionable shape and upright carriage expected of them as adults. At approximately age ten or eleven, boys discarded their stays, their chests by that time fashionably full and round.

Children spent long hours practicing the elegant art of carriage, assisted by such costume pieces as wigs, sleeves, shoes, and corsets. Having mastered this art, they proceeded to our second movement category, that of motions: walking, sitting, dancing.

Fig. 9
Daniel Chodowiecki (German, 1726–1801)
Scenes from Life, 1770 (detail)
Engraving on paper
11 x 8 1/4 in.



MOTIONS

The motion of walking was so admired in the eighteenth century that all fashionable people spent a portion of each day publicly promenading in a park where, while nonchalantly strolling and conversing, they could display themselves and observe others displaying themselves to best advantage. Since walking began with the feet, the costume item that most influenced this movement was the shoe. Lacking arch supports, eighteenth-century shoes made the muscles of the feet and ankles work overtime. The higher the heel of the shoe, the more the weight of the body was thrown forward onto the balls of the feet, thereby shortening the stride: the narrower the heel, the more likely the ankle would wobble (plates 18a, 18b, 18c; cat. nos. 148, 152, 164). One was expected to maintain the same elegant carriage in walking as in standing still (fig. 9): "The rate of walking should be moderate, neither too quick or too slow. One suggests heedlessness, the other indolence; avoid these two extremes."¹¹ A gentleman was urged to take smooth steps, moderate in length, with legs turned out. He was cautioned to keep at least two yards away from ladies to avoid bumping their skirts or trampling their trains. A lady also was advised to walk smoothly, "swimmingly," but with steps shorter than a man's and without jostling her skirts.

The skirt, in fact, was the most challenging item of costume to manage in motion. Of the three fashionable eighteenth-cen-

tury skirt shapes—round hoop, panniers, and bustle, each of which enlarged some aspect of the lady's hips—panniers were, undoubtedly, the ultimate status symbol. Extending up to four feet on either side of the hips, panniers caused traffic jams in the streets, riots over seats in the playhouses, and general consternation in such varied locales as parks, ballrooms, carriages, and church pews (fig. 10). Yet ladies were delighted with this fashion, which not only added dignity and grace to the figure, but set the wearer physically apart from the crowd, highlighting her to perfection as a work of art. To manage panniers successfully, the lady had to think *before* she moved. For example, if she found herself walking toward a too-narrow doorway, she would have to decide, long before reaching it, whether to turn gracefully and walk through it sideways or to collapse the sides of the panniers appropriately and, *without stopping*, smoothly translate her decision into action.

Panniers posed challenges to those surrounding the lady as well. Consider the dilemma of the gentleman accompanying a lady in panniers on a promenade or dance floor. Should he stand next to her where, in order to barely reach her hand, he would have to lean at an aesthetically awkward angle, or in front of her where her skirt would annoyingly bump up against him, or behind her? Usually this last was the most satisfactory solution for both parties (fig. 12).

Lord Chesterfield believed it was easier

to stand and walk gracefully than to sit gracefully. Certainly, sitting successfully in panniers—something of a cross between docking a boat and parallel parking—bears this out, as does the story of Baron Karl von Lyncker, page to the Duchess Anna Amalie of Prussia, who “conceived the brilliant notion of stretching the sides of his mistress’s dress well out through both windows of the glass coach in which she went driving on Sundays.”¹² Unfortunately for us, Lyncker neglects to describe how the duchess got into and out of this conveyance with grace.

Once seated, the lady’s ability to move was regulated by her corset. She could bend sideways or backward, providing her corset cleared the waistline at the necessary points. But the length and stiffness of the corset front often prohibited her from bending forward at the waist or from crossing her thighs without doing herself serious damage (fig. 11). Consequently, a seated lady was most comfortable either perching on the edge of her chair or reclining sideways or backward, one elbow leaning on a table or furniture support, in an S-curve pose. If she accidentally dropped a handkerchief or fan, she relied on a servant or gentleman to pick it up. Short-legged ladies, reclining backward on deep-seated chairs, often positioned a cushion or footstool beneath their feet to relieve the strain on their legs.

Chesterfield offered gentlemen this advice on sitting:

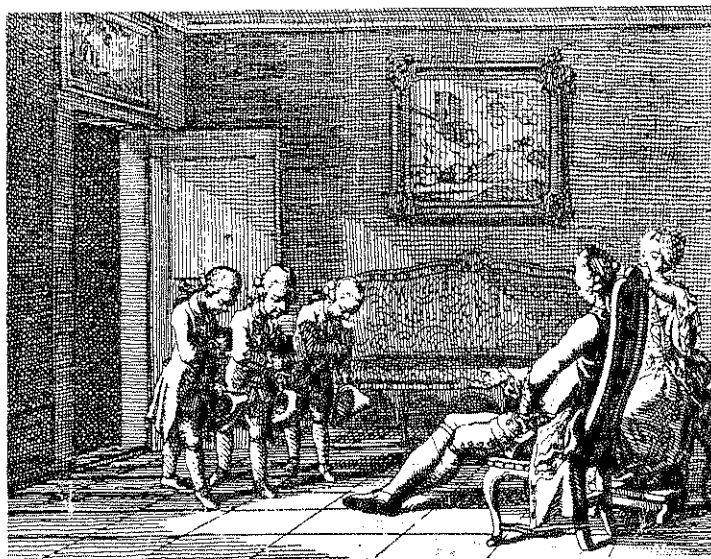
Awkward ill-bred people, being ashamed, commonly sit bolt upright and still; others too negligent...[wallow in their chairs]...but a man of fashion makes himself easy, and appears so, by leaning gracefully instead of lolling supinely; and by varying those easy attitudes, instead of that stiff immobility of a bashful booby.¹³

A gentleman never sat on the stiffened back skirt of his coat.

Of all the motions, dancing was the most formidable and most admired. It not only was a favorite leisure activity, but also provided the body with exercise, and when well done gave a “natural, easy, and graceful air to all the [other] motions of your body.”¹⁴ The most popular dance of the entire eighteenth century was the minuet. A stately, disciplined dance, it required exquisite timing, superb body control, intense concentration, and apparent effortlessness. Combining complex S-curve figures with improvised interludes, it demanded of the body a firm waist and controlled torso together with S-curve embellishments of the arms, hands, legs, and feet. The most elaborate minuet was danced at court by one couple at a time, for as long as seven minutes. It was a dance superbly designed to display the elegant motions and costumes of the performers to a highly appreciative and critical audience. From dance manuals we learn that a lady was allowed to take hold of her skirt at the sides—but only with her forefinger and thumb. Usually, she was not supposed to touch her skirt at all. Among the tales of danger on the dance floor comes that of

FIG. 13

Isaak Chodowiecki (German, 1726–1801)
Children Thanking Their Father for Gifts, 1770
 Engraving on paper
 3 5/16 x 4 1/4 in.



"the Duke of Gloucester's [shoe] buckle [which] became tangled in Lady Bridget Lane's shoe rose in 1767, pulling the shoe off."¹⁵

The motions of walking, sitting, and dancing had several features in common. They each required a careful assessment of the physical dimensions added to the body costumes; they involved a surprising degree of leg control to perform with "ease"; and they required the gentleman to give the lady some practical physical assistance.

MANNERS

Manners, our third category of movement, were expressions of feelings through accepted social rituals. While seventeenth-century manners were "marked by chivalry, grave dignity, formality: the manners of the throne room: [eighteenth-century manners] were characterized by gallantry, refinement, grace, and intimacy: the manners of the boudoir."¹⁶ Manners included such salutations as the bow, the curtsy, and the kissing of the hand. Formal stationary bows and curtsies were exchanged when entering and leaving a room, beginning and ending a dance, and giving objects or receiving them (fig. 13). Less formal moving bows and curtsies were made in passing someone by barely dipping the body without stopping. These courtesies were performed smoothly and in keeping with a person's status. The higher the rank or the greater the regard in which a person was

held, the deeper the bow or curtsy he or she received. Countless variations were possible.

Two methods of kissing the hand were in fashion. In one, still practiced in Europe today, the gentleman raised the back of the lady's hand to his lips. The other, now extinct, was an eighteenth-century form of blowing kisses. It was the most emotionally powerful gesture one could make, and was usually combined with a bow or curtsy. The procedure was to bring the forefinger of the right hand in a curved direction toward the lips and, without touching them, to reverse the curve and extend the hand outward and down in a continuous flowing motion.

Elegant manners required perfect timing, expert execution, and precise knowledge of the status of the person being complimented, so as to judge the degree to which the compliment should be paid.

ADDRESS

Our final category of movement is address: elegant bearing during conversation. As we have seen, conversation in the eighteenth century was a vital outlet for ideas and feelings. People engaged in both verbal and nonverbal conversations, often at the same time.

Verbal address consisted of speaking distinctly, gracefully, and briefly, without displaying anger, self-consciousness, or undue excitement. While it was desirable for the mind and speech to be agile and animated, the body had to remain quite

still. Chesterfield cautioned his son: "Never hold anybody by the button, or the hand, in order to be heard out; for if people are not willing to hear you, you had much better hold your tongue than them."¹⁷ He gave his godson this formula for checking the excess of passion: "Do everything in Minuet time, speak, think, and move always in that measure, equally free from the dulness of slow, or the hurry...of quick time."¹⁸ And he further encouraged his son with this observation: "The characteristic of a well-bred man is, to converse with his inferiors without insolence, and with his superiors with respect and ease. He talks to kings...without the least concern of mind, or awkwardness of body."¹⁹

One of the most fascinating aspects of eighteenth-century address was the potential nonverbal language of such costume accessories as fans, snuffboxes, and handkerchiefs. A person might say one thing with words and just the opposite with a fan position or a pinch of snuff. The accessory that most clearly symbolized the ideal of eighteenth-century nonverbal address was the fan (plate 21: cat. no. 4). "Women are armed with fans as men with swords and sometimes do more execution with them," warned Addison in 1711.²⁰ A lady without her fan was considered undressed. It was her dear and constant companion, revealing the secrets of her head and heart to all who could read the language of the fan, which could assume a thousand different fleeting moods. Without saying a word,

FIG. 14
 Jan van Grevenbroeck (Italian, 1737–1807)
The Huntress, c. 1780
 Watercolor on paper
 from Grevenbroeck's *Gli Abiti de veneziani di quasi
 ogni eta con diligenza raccolti e dipinti nel secolo
 XVIII*, vol. 1.

a lady could use it to flirt outrageously one minute and severely reprimand a lover the next. According to Addison, the mere flutter of a fan was fraught with drama.²¹

The manipulation of accessories like the fan required great dexterity of the fingers and wrists. They added a rich, silent vocabulary to the art of conversation and were indispensable to the art of flirtation.

The elegant art of eighteenth-century movement was sophisticated, charming, and varied. It reflected both the attitude and the personality of the individual who performed it, and extended even to riding costume (plate 22; cat. no. 48; fig. 14). In order to appear "easy," its performance required surprisingly intense mental concentration and bodily discipline, particularly of the legs. For its sustained effect it relied on the support of eighteenth-century costumes, whose surfaces concealed intriguing potentials for movement, that subtle yet significant dimension of the behavior of those elegant ladies and gentlemen who preened, glided, flourished, and flirted over the canvas of the eighteenth-century world, themselves the premier works of art.

