

What to Wear to a Regency Ball – by Sue Hanson



The Regency (in reference to the regent king of England) or Empire (in reference to the Napoleonic empire) period in clothing runs from around 1790 – 1819, the period right after the French Revolution. This fashion movement started in France and was a reflection of the French desire to throw off the bonds of pre-revolutionary France and embrace the ideals of Greek democracy. It was one of the fastest and most drastic changes in fashion that has occurred in history. Gone were the corsets and hoop skirts, knee breeches and powdered wigs of the previous era. They were replaced with simpler, more comfortable clothing. And in the case of men, this era heralded in a style of clothing men have worn every since. Since France remained a fashion leader even after its Revolution, the new styles quickly found their way to the rest of Europe and Colonial North America.

Of course, just like today, what you wore depended on what you would be doing. You had everyday clothes and your Sunday best. However, if you could afford it, you also had clothes for the very special social occasion of its time, the ball.

Balls were very popular during the Regency period, especially among young people as it was one of the few opportunities they had to meet and socialize with those of the opposite sex, maybe even find a spouse. Of course, dressing well was important to all as it showed your social status. However, it was particularly important to the eligible young ladies and gentlemen of means to be dressed in the latest styles (as well as to know the latest dances). In that respect, things haven't changed much.

Of course, the Regency period spans thirty years and there were many variations in fashion. It would be impossible to cover them all. However, below is a general feel for what fashionable people would have worn to a "Regency ball" of their time.

Women

Women's fashion during the early part of this period centered around a gown which can best be described as a simple all-in-one chemise dress or tunic gathered with strings at the neck and just under the bust line. This style came about as an attempt to emulate classical Greece. Pastels were popular and white predominated. Gowns were made of light weight muslins so they would flow like the gowns on ancient Greek statues. To add contrast, they were often accented with brightly colored ribbons and black embroidery along the edges. (In France, a red ribbon worn around the neck signified you had lost a loved one to the guillotine.) A scarf with a bright oriental design or embroidered with gold and silver threads might be worn as a shawl.

After 1810, muslins and pastels went out of style and heavier fabrics of darker colors came back in. Gradually gowns became more tailored and foundation garments crept back in. It is interesting to note that this era of comfortable clothing did not last. By the 1840s, women were returning to corsets and hoop skirts that by the 1850s would reach unprecedented extremes and not be discarded again until the turn of the 20th century. Below are examples of gowns which might be worn at a ball.



Hair styles also reflected the classical Greek look as you can see in the pictures below. Early in the period, if hair adornments were worn, they were kept simple such as a ribbon or flower.



Following the trend in gowns, hairstyles became fuller and more elaborate later in the period, although they retained the Grecian look. Note that women also began to wear more elaborate hair adornments.



Slippers similar to ballet slippers were the shoe of choice for a ball. Like today, you wore your walking boots or shoes to the ball and then changed into your more delicate slippers. The pictures below show leather walking shoes on the left and ball slippers on the right.



Proper ladies and gentlemen wore white gloves at the ball – short gloves with long sleeves and full length gloves with short sleeves,



Hats were not typically worn at balls. They were worn outdoors. However, a lady may have worn a hat on her way to the ball. Here are some examples of hats popular during the period.



Men

Men's fashions also underwent major changes during the Regency period, although not quite as drastic as women's. Men were still wearing the traditional vest and coat over a loose white shirt. However, the long, coats and vests popular in the mid 1700s gave way to the cutaway coat with its sloping tails in the late 1700s and by the Regency era to a completely new style of coat, the tail coat. Long vests popular in the mid 1700s gradually became shorter and shorter and finally evolved into the "waistcoat" or waist length vest that fit so tidily under the tail coat. Early in the Regency period, tail coats were single breasted (one row of buttons down the front). But toward the end of this period, men wore double breasted coats. The pictures below show all these transitions. Note that the laced cuffs and collars on shirts also eventually disappeared.



As seen above, men's pants also changed during the Regency era. In the mid 1700s, fashionable men wore knee breeches with long, embroidered stockings and black pumps. However, pantaloons, long tight pants, came into style in the late 1700s. Pantaloons were initially only worn by young gentlemen and were frowned upon by their elders. They were often worn with knee high boots, especially early in the period, although by 1820 shoes started to replace the boots. White and pastels were the popular colors early in the period, but these gave way to darker colors later on. Pantaloons eventually developed into trousers, the preferred choice of pant for men ever since.

Neck wear underwent a change during the Regency period. The style worn previously was a white stock (band) to which a lace fall was added for dress. However, during the Regency, the cravat gained popularity. A cravat is a long strip of fabric, usually white, which is wound around the neck and then tied into a bow in front. Along with coat collars, cravats became rather wide during this period almost reaching the ears. An example of both a stock and a cravat are shown below.



Men, like ladies, always wore white, cotton gloves for dress. They were wrist length and are shown below.



Boots were very popular with men during the Regency era. However, they only wore boots when outdoors. Men changed into a slipper when indoors, never dancing in boots. Examples of boots and slippers are shown below.



No well dressed man appeared in public without a hat. (Of course, once at the ball, hats were doffed.) The top hat was by far the most popular dress hat of the period. At fist it had a relatively short crown, but this grew in height to become the stovepipe hat. Black was the most popular color but greys and browns were also worn. Below are some top hats worn during the period.



The one element of men's fashion that underwent a drastic change during the Regency was hair styles. White powdered wigs and wigs in general were suddenly dowdy and old fashioned. Of course, older men continued to wear them as they did knee breeches. However, the fashionable young man wore his hair in a Roman (also Brutus or Titan) hair cut inspired by the neoclassical movement. This was a short haircut where the hair was swept forward to make it look windblown. Napoleon wore his hair in this style. Below are several pictures of the Roman hair cut. Notice even balding men swept forward what hair they could.



In conclusion, the styles shown here are generalities of what was actually worn. Obviously, not everyone had access to these fashions and some were simply unwilling to change from the fashions worn by their fore-fathers and mothers. However, if you were a member of Jane Austen's society, this is probably what you wore, especially if you wanted to be a sought after partner at the ball.

