Walter Crane, Dress, & Children's Illustration

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I would like to begin my paper with an account of some of the disasters which occurred during its preparation. I was approached some time ago on the subject, and with August the thirteenth then a very distant date, I accepted, as one does, blithely and relatively without concern. The obligation at that time was just a tiny wisp of mist on an otherwise bright and clear horizon. I thought to myself - mid-August - Toronto - after dinner. What obviously was required was something light, unobtrusive, undemanding, hopefully amusing...something akin to the sherbets, interspersed from time to time in the traditional Victorian banquets between the richer, more varied, and more nutritious courses of the meal itself. What, I thought, could be less taxing than a nice little account of the frivolous world of fashion, bringing in, for the sake of appropriateness, the work of Walter Crane, who had filled the pages of his picture books with such marvellously imaginative and decorative costumes.

Then, shortly after I had begun my preparations, the first disaster struck in the form of an enlightening article in the *Times Literary Supplement.* In it the author presented a most persuasive case for the study of costume, dress, and fashion. Nothing, it appeared, was more serious. Empires have evidently risen and fallen in direct relation to hemlines; the shape of a sleeve can heal a schism. Each of us is a vast walking encyclopedia of information, once the key to reading our clothing is mastered. Shortly thereafter, an editorial in a leading British art journal reinforced the first article, once again emphasizing the gravity of the situation, and urging the scholars of the world to concentrate their efforts in this neglected area. What I had proposed as a light and possibly diverting little disquisition, suitable for a muggy August evening, turned out to be a subject of much moment and grave international concern.

It was, of course, too late to turn back. As a concession, you will notice that I have cut out many of the jokes, added footnotes and quotations, and worn a grey suit, but I may as well tell you now that the frontiers of art, science, and scholarship are not going to be extended, costume-wise, this evening, and I apologize in advance for any inadvertent amusement that may occur.

With Walter Crane, I thought I was on surer ground. Here was a universally admired, internationally renowned innovator and pioneer in children's illustration whose work continues to capture the imagination of rising generations of artists and designers. [Books he illustrated include *Aladdin's Picture Book, Beauty and the Beast, Picture Book, Buckle My Shoe Picture Book, Alphabet of Old Friends, Sirens Three, The Baby's Opera,* and many others.] And he is one who obviously took a great joy in observing and recording a wide range of strange, beautiful, and delightful costumes. So far so good. But on closer examination I found that Crane's interest in costume, despite the apparently effortless

fluency of his drawings, was part of his deeply serious concern for the decorative arts of his time, and that his interest in dress had its roots in his commitment as a social reformer. So far all was well. Delving deeper I became gradually convinced that Crane's commitment to dress reform, and his genius as an illustrator, had combined to effect one of the most significant revolutions of our time. To Walter Crane is possibly owed the great freedom in dress which women enjoy today. Could *I,* in International Women's Year, introduce yet *another male* as one of the great liberating benefactors of the opposite sex? One whose efforts have affected the daily life of women everywhere, and whose relatively unsung contribution was of much greater significance than that of many of the vaunted heroines of the movement? Grave and dangerous cargo for such a fragile vessel as an after-dinner chat! But I shipped it aboard, and it will accompany us through tonight's journey.

Lastly, I had assumed that Crane—as an illustrator of books for children—shared the high ideals and selfless motivation of children's librarians; that books for children were intended to amuse, delight, and instruct in the most aboveboard way possible; that attempts at subliminal inculcation were abhorrent and smacked not a little of 1984. Can you imagine my horror — how could he have done this to me?— when I came across the following quotation which branded him immediately as a self-confessed, apparently unabashed propagandist of the deepest dye. From his "Reminiscences" written in 1904 I quote:

> My drawings for these books were done for a very modest sum and sold outright to the publishers. The engraving and printing was costly, and very large editions had to be sold in order to make them pay—as many as 50,000 of a single book, I was told, being necessary. However, if they did not bring in much money I had fun out of them, as in designing I was in the habit of putting in all sorts of subsidiary detail that interested me, and often made them the vehicle of my ideas in furniture and decoration.

And, of course, his ideas of decoration included notions about dress, and it is these ideas and notions of Walter Crane's, introduced for fun into his children's books, which I want to consider tonight. So, despite the freight of triple disaster, I shall now embark.

Walter Crane's illustrations for traditional nursery and fairy tales have had an almost universal attraction for children and adults alike since they were first published a hundred or so years ago. The brilliant colours and bold lines have helped to form our concepts of many of the heroes and heroines of Fairyland, and they continue to attract new generations of admirers.

Much of the appeal of his illustrations lies in the strikingly decorative effect of his pages, and much of that effect is achieved both through his fine selective eye for detail and through his concern with making all of the detail conform to his exacting standards of decorative design. Nowhere is this more apparent, at least to me, than in the care and concern he has shown in the conception and execution of the costumes worn by the characters who inhabit the pages of his picture books.

Crane's concept of decorative illustration is strongly influenced by the technique and ideals of the Japanese print makers. Bold black outlines separating flat areas of colour, and the carefully planned introduction of sections of rich patterning, are characteristics of the prints most admired by the Western connoisseurs of the time. Just like the Japanese Printmasters, Crane makes effective use of the line and flow of textile drapery in his designs. You may notice some echo of the flowing kimono lines, which add so much grace to the prints of Japan, in Crane's illustrations.

Walter Crane's interest in dress was based on much more than his desire to produce romantic and picturesque illustrations for children. You have already heard of his concern for the decorative details of his pictures. As a vehicle for spreading his ideas, an edition of 50,000 was not bad in Victorian England, and to influence the developing taste of a rising generation was a golden opportunity.

Walter Crane's interest in dress as a form of decorative art was basic to his concept of himself as an artist, teacher and, above all, social reformer. Even if he had never produced any of his brilliant series of picture books, his concern for dress reform and his influence on the success of the reform through his writings and teaching would have earned him a place in the history of modern clothing. But his passionate concern for lifting the general level of taste in household and personal decoration was first introduced and given its widest, and probably most receptive, audience through his fairytale illustrations.

Walter Crane was born in 1845, only three years before the formation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, whose work and ideals were to have such a formative and lasting influence on his own work, and ten years after the birth of William Morris, whose views of society and art coincided with his own.

Walter Crane's early life and his later career can be traced in his reminiscences, written in 1904, ten or so years before his death. The book is, as many of you know, a tasty treat indeed. Crane's style is not dramatic, and his last intent is to glamorize his own life and achievements. The book proceeds at a leisurely matter-of-fact pace, like a huge Victorian tea with anecdotes, character vignettes, incidents, and asides, like currants in a nourishing, tasty but no-nonsense batter. He presents an account of his development as an artist, decorator, teacher, and above all as a committed socialist. It is a most important document in helping us understand the relation of the artist to the society of his time, and it reveals Crane as a dedicated humanist devoting his art and his life to his fellows.

By the 1860's Walter Crane was well into his professional career, and by the seventies his reputation as a children's book illustrator was well-established. And also by the seventies terrible things were happening in the world of fashion. By that time the first great fashion revolution had been finally killed off and lay buried under heaped-up crinolines and crinolettes, swags and festoons, layers of skirts, petticoats, frills and furbelows. Women had triumphantly reassumed the fetters which their grand and great-grandmothers had triumphantly thrown off just one hundred years before.

In the one hundred years since the 1770's, fashion had gone almost a full circle: from elaborate and confining court dress of Bourbon France—the culmination of three hundred years of restricting dress for women—through the simple draperies of the post-revolutionary period, in which the female body was permitted to present itself in light-textured, lightly formed garments that allowed a freedom of movement unparalleled since classical times. Then, within a generation, there was a return to dress as bondage for the fashionable lady. The history of fashion in the nineteenth century is the history of an almost headlong rush back to the security of tight, constricting clothing, constructed to impede free movement, and designed to severely restrict the range of physical activities possible for a lady of any social standing—until by 1870, one hundred years after its defeat, the elaborate puffed, trimmed, vast and cumbersome skirts, and tight, form-fitting bodices of the court of the Bourbons were once again in fashion and, as if to emphasize the defeat of the Commune of 1870, the trims and trappings of the vanquished aristocracy of a century before were aped and parodied by middle class fashionables everywhere.

I would like now to show you a series of slides to illustrate the process I have been describing, to show what sort of sartorial mess the ladies of the mid-19th century had gotten themselves into. Later I hope to show you how our hero of this evening got them out of it. [Slides]

I have, of course, been quite unfair in equating what people actually wore with what the fashion plates decreed must be worn. Stylization, exaggeration, over-emphasis of fashionable features, heightening of colours—all are factors which tend to separate the fashion plate world from reality. In his nursery illustrations Crane depicts the fashions of the late 1860's and early 1870's and makes the most of their decorative possibilities by simplifying the silhouette, harmonizing the colours, and eliminating non-essential detail.

Walter Crane was an acute observer and had the ability to record his observations in a lively and appropriate way. Here he observes and records the fashionable dress of his upper middle class contemporaries at an ideal level of quiet and respectable good taste. From his drawings it is clear that he understands the cut and construction of the dress of his time, and he makes the most of its decorative and graphic possibilities. He does manage somehow to make the everyday dress of his nursery adults fill the same role in the design of his pages as the Japanese printmakers were able to do with the much more graceful and artistic kimono. At the same time his observations strike us as truthful. By applying his own carefully thought-out rules of harmony and design in dress he is able to present the clothing of his contemporaries sensitively, sympathetically, and appropriately. [Slides]

Meanwhile there were murmurs of discontent. The fashion revolution had not been lost without protest along the way. There are always those who attempt to oppose the juggernaut of fashion, but by mid-nineteenth century the foes of fashion were becoming increasingly vocal. They were—almost without exception—voices crying in the wilderness. Tight lacing in particular was condemned on all sides, yet tight lacing continued; the excesses of fashion were reviled on moral, religious, and economic grounds, yet elaborate, expensive, and injurious toilettes continued to be worn. Mrs. Bloomer, the American

lady, devised in the 1850's a practical, inexpensive, modest, and healthful garment for women; for her pains she was greeted with universal howls of laughter which have not yet entirely died down.

Then as now—and as always—styles of dress aroused controversy and conflict of interest. Fashion and antifashion each had its passionate adherents, and the rest of society tossed more or less without protest in the wake of the adventuresome.

One group had decided views on dress which stemmed from purely aesthetic principles. This was the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood formed in the 1840's by the artists William Holman Hunt, John Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Their intention was to free painting from the restraints of the Academy and to restore to it the truth and fidelity to nature which they felt had been abandoned by the later painters of the Renaissance.

A romantic vision of a medieval world free from any taint of classicism was the setting chosen from many of the works of the Brotherhood and their followers, and their search for fidelity to nature led them to seek an accuracy in the representation of the clothing depicted in their canvasses. Their search for authenticity and the problems they encountered, as well as the solutions and compromises they evolved, are splendidly documented by Leoneé Ormond in a recent issue of the *Costume Society Journal* on Costume in the painting of Rosetti.

The women—wives, sisters, mistresses, and models—who formed the domestic circle of the artists and their followers tended to be unconventional or advanced in their attitude to prevailing standards of taste—particularly so in dress—and the clothing they devised for themselves was influenced by the preference of the circle for the loose flowing lines, and pure colours of medieval costume. Portraits and photographs of the ladies of the Pre-Raphelite circle show them wearing garments similar to those in the reconstructed medievalism which was the background for so many of the artists' canvasses.

Nor were they all that strikingly different from the general lines of the prevailing fashion. Instead of being constructed to restrict movement and mould the form, they were devised to allow for a much greater freedom of movement. Colour and choice of material, too, reflected the aesthetic preference of the Brotherhood.

The dress of the Pre-Raphaelite ladies became a cult among those with pretensions to advanced artistic taste, and what had begun as an anti-fashion statement became itself a fashion in certain circles. *Punch,* that great defender of the tastes and prejudices of the rising middle class, had a great deal of fun with the new artistic dress and its adherents. Like any cult, the aesthetic cult ran to excesses, and the lunatic fringe was satirized with great gusto in the pages of *Punch* and, most notably, in the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *Patience.*

It is interesting to compare the rise in popularity of Aesthetic dress and the creation of a fashion from an anti-fashion, with the history of the dress of our era's hippies or whatever we want to call them. Certainly the dress of the counter-culture together with elements from the dress of the East, the American frontier, and work clothes, has itself become a fashion and was an important element in helping to banish the

restricting tendency of fashionable dress as it was developing in the 1950's. [Slides]

However, one hundred years ago the times were not ripe for the acceptance of such challenges to fashion. The heaped-up ridicule and the excesses of some of its adherents were bound to have an inhibiting effect on the popularization of Aesthetic dress. For the majority, fashion continued on her restrictive way, adding the crinolette, the tied-back skirt, the swathed knees—hobbling the wearer—and the weighty draped bustle. The fashion plates continued to show the female figure as draped, tasselled, and swagged as the furniture and interiors of the period, and photographs of the period reveal ladies as tightly bound, beaded, and as flounced as ever.

Nevertheless the reforms deriving from the Pre-Raphaelites continue to survive amongst the progressive few, despite the ridicule of the Philistines, and from these early experiments in dress reform, these eccentric challenges to fashion, was to come, eventually, the freedom in dress enjoyed by women of today.

To my mind, a great factor in the survival of Pre-Raphaelite ideals of dress, and certainly an important element in the transmission and popularization of those ideals, was the work of Walter Crane. I would like to suggest that his choice of costumes for his Fairy Land heroines did much to educate a rising generation to a taste for the loose, flowing, unrestricting garments which were to form the basis of the second and still continuing clothing revolution of our time.

In the following slides I've selected illustrations of some of the fanciful costumes from Crane's Fairyland wardrobe published in the 1860's and 1870's. Pre-Raphaelite influences are strong, but I've added a few to show how wide-ranging was Crane's interest in, and knowledge of, costume. I hope to show, as well, that these costumes foreshadow the fashions that were to come in the next generation, that with their ample draperies and flowing lines they anticipate the softer silhouette of the late 1890's and the Edwardian "Age of Chiffon." [Slides]

Meanwhile the Juggernaut of fashion rolled on to even greater excesses, despite the warnings, examples, and exhortations of reformers. The efforts of these reformers who were increasingly active from the mid-19th century, are admirably chronicled in a recent publication by Stella Mary Newton, *Health, Art, and Reason.* The movements and personalities are supported by meticulous documentation and a fascinating wealth of pertinent illustration.

In women's clothing of the 1880's, the contortions and exaggerations of fashion are seen at their most extreme. A tight form-fitting bodice, heavily boned, produced the effect of armour plating; narrow sleeves were set in to inhibit free movement of the arms. Skirts were stretched over the knees to make a normal stride impossible, and a draped encumberance behind further impeded freedom of movement. The fashionable dress of the 1880's bound and restricted its wearer as never before. The nineties produced some sort of reaction. Voluminous skirts and sleeves permitted slightly more freedom of action. The fashions of the nineties were retrospective in silhouette and detail. Inspiration was sought in the recreation and adaptation of

Renaissance styles, calling for heavy, stiff materials, brocades, satins, and velvets, hung with lace and ribbons.

In the middle of the decade Walter Crane contributed an essay on dress to a periodical devoted to dress reform. The article was revised and republished in a collection of his essays brought together under the title *Ideals in Art*. The essay, called "Of the progress of taste in dress in relation to art education," discusses much more than the title would suggest. In relating questions of taste and appropriateness in dress to social and economic conditions, he anticipated the direction that serious study of dress was to take in the future.

I will quote one section which seems to hold a key to Crane's ideals of dress and bears most a most important relation to his work as an artist and illustrator.

> What modern costume really lacks is not so much character and picturesqueness, as beauty and romance—a general indictment which might be brought against modern life. We are really ruled by the dead weight of the prosaic, the prudent, the timid, the respectable.

He included sketches of two artistic dresses, and the readers of his fairy tales would have recognized them as old friends. You will, I think, be able to see the similarity between his proposals for modern dress and his costumes from the fairy lands of beauty and romance. It must have been a source of great satisfaction for him to see the fashions of the following decade gradually following the lines he proposed. [Slides]

Crane found the turn-of-the-century fashions much more congenial since they appear to have incorporated some of his aesthetic notions and those of the rebels of an earlier generation. In the next few slides you will see how successfully he is able to mix fantasy and reality. He is able to combine the two worlds—the world of contemporary fashion and his flower world of beauty and romance—in a way that would have been impossible in the preceding decades. Fashion historians like to tell us that ladies dressed, in this turn-of-the-century and Edwardian world, as if for a perpetual garden party, and Crane would appear to agree. [Slides]

When I began to prepare this paper I had not intended to add to the responsibilities of children's librarians or to widen appreciably your area of concern. But I fear that when it is known how effectively a children's book illustrator in the 19th century moulded, tamed, and turned the titanic forces of fashion, children's departments in libraries the world over will be overrun with a horde of designers, retailers, manufacturers, and fashion opportunists of every stripe, all seeking feverishly to be that enviable one-step-ahead-of-the-game that is essential in the fashion business. Not only that, but I expect that the process of book selection will appreciably lengthen as each illustration will have to be considered for its possible effect on the wardrobes of the future. It is a solemn and serious responsibility, and I know that it will be dealt with in the manner it deserves.