

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Paris Fashions

The New Orleans *Daily Picayune* had the latest word on "Paris Fashions" in 1864 when it printed "A Paris letter of Jan. 24th", announcing: □

"A new blue and green have been contrived by the scientific dyers of silks, which keep their color so distinctly and vividly by candle-light as to throw all previous dyes into the shade. These, and a beautiful violet, which does not redden by candle-light, are the favorite new colors, replacing the oak shades so fashionable last winter under the names of 'Russia leather,' 'Queen's hair' and 'Wood.' Figured silks, plaid stripes, small and large *Chine* flower and brocades keep their place in public favor; but the plain shades are considered the newest and most fashionable for evening dresses."

The above report from France was the result of the latest scientific discoveries in the field of synthetic dyes and a fashion firestorm that took place in the City of Light in 1864. It involved the Empress Eugénie, wife of Emperor Napoléon III of the Second Empire of France, and an exquisite green silk gown (more on that later).

Born on May 5, 1826, in Granada, Spain, the Empress Eugénie became the fashion icon of all Europe and across the ocean to New Orleans and the rest of the United States, as well. The Empress adored *haute couture*, a term first used to describe the work of fashion designer Charles Fredrick Worth (1826-1895), and set a standard in Paris that had not been seen since the days of Josephine. The steel (or cage) crinoline, was introduced by Worth in Paris in 1856. It eliminated the need for women to employ a dozen heavily starched petticoats to hold their skirts in shape. They discarded all those the multiple layers and instead used only one or two starched petticoats. At first this cage was ridiculed as a type of birdcage, but when Eugénie and her ladies-in-waiting began to wear the new device, it became all the rage. It was dubbed "the Parisian Eugénie Jupon Skeleton Petticoat." And the Empress became known as "*La Reine Crinoline*," ("Queen Crinoline").

The *Daily Picayune* described the process: "The petticoat, worn over the crinoline, is made in two parts; viz., an upper piece, but slightly full, so cut as to form a point behind; this upper piece comes down to the knee. To this upper piece is sewed a deep flounce, falling very near the ground; nearly plain in front, and growing gradually fuller towards the back. The bottom of this flounce is trimmed with one deep frill of four inches, or two of three inches, or three of an inch and a half; with a heading of narrow tucks above each. The frills, starched and fluted, are not only extremely pretty, but serve to support the edge of the dress, and to keep it from drawing in below the crinoline. They are all made and set on by the sewing machine, the lavish amount of beautiful "stitching," so exquisitely and rapidly made by these admirable productions of American genius, being extremely ornamental as well as strong."

Eugénie wore dresses made of silk, wool, poplin and velvet in numerous colors. The English color of mauve, also called "Perkin's purple", brought out the color of the Empress' eyes. William Henry Perkin (1838-1907) was a young chemist's assistant at the Royal College of Chemistry in London (only 15 at the time) who had been trying to extract synthetic quinine from coal tar. He explained, "I was endeavoring to convert an artificial base into the natural alkaloid quinine, but my experiment, instead of yielding the colourless quinine, gave a reddish powder." This aniline byproduct made Perkin a millionaire, for (upon washing the substance) it became mauve (which Perkin called mauveine), the first artificial aniline dye. A flood of new aniline colors appeared, first crimson fuscine, and later blues, violets and greens. Eugénie was very fond of the color magenta because it was named for the French victory at the battle of Magenta in Italy in 1859. The pastels of dove grey, cream, and buttercup yellow were also some of Eugénie's favorite colors (as they had been with Marie Antoinette).

In 1863 a German chemist, Eugen Lucius, one of the founders of the dye works at Hoechst near Frankfurt, discovered a new green dye. Its *début* caused a sensation. This color was called "Aldehyde or Hoechst green" and was used on silks manufactured in Lyons, France. A Lyons silk-dyeing firm called *Renard et Villet* bought up all the green dye Hoechst could make and used some of it on a silk evening dress that the firm presented to the Empress Eugénie. Monsieur Renard had locked up the entire year's production of the green silk in anticipation of the Empress' powerful influence on the fashion world and of the increased demand for anything she was viewed wearing. Eugénie wore the stunning gown to the Paris opera in 1864 and Renard's gamble paid off. The color of the dress remained stable, as the dye was the first green that did not turn blue in gaslight. Following the *début* of this vivid new color, the demand for Aldehyded/Hoechst green was in proportions never before witnessed. And since the crinoline hooped-skirt, also made fashionable by Eugénie, used such a large

quantity of cloth or silk, more dye was needed. One can see how young Perkin became rich.

And if a young lady wanted this or any other latest Paris fashion in New Orleans, she would probably visit the most popular *modiste* of her day, Madame Olympe.

Olympe Boisse was a French-born New Orleans dressmaker who regularly traveled to Paris to keep up-to-date on the latest trend-setting French fashions of the day. Eliza Ripley wrote of a party given in the Crescent City by a "Mme. Chose." She didn't "give any more definite name," for it was "a sub rosa venture on her part," a so-called "soirée" she hosted the previous night. "Madame buys her chapeaux of Olympe," wrote Eliza.

Olympe began her career on Chartres Street in 1853 when she took over the business of A. Mace, who had been importing French millinery goods. Within five years Madame Olympe had expanded her business to include dresses, lace and other necessary items for a fashionable New Orleans lady. Initially she was merely an importer of French goods but after some time designed and sold her own garments. A *modiste* is defined as one who produces, designs or deals in women's fashions (or more particularly a milliner, one involved in the design, manufacture and sale of hats).

According to the city directories, by the 1870s Madame Olympe had relocated her *boutique extraordinaire* to a townhouse at 154 Canal Street. Her place of business was, needless to say, exceedingly popular among the ladies. Some gentlemen of New Orleans, however, referred to Olympe as "that old imp" because of her expensive price tags. Olympe's shop was most likely shuttered during the Civil War, when a blockade prevented nearly all textile goods and dresses from reaching the American South. And in 1864, when Eugénie made her green dress *début* at the Paris Opera, New Orleans was under Union occupation. Olympe's business reemerged after the war and prospered until the late 1880s.

Olympe studied diligently the designs of Charles Frederick Worth (an Englishman, by the way) and Emile Pingat. Largely forgotten today, Pingat was active in the latter half of the nineteenth century and at the time, had a reputation equal to Worth's. Publications such as *Godey's Lady's Book* and the *New York Times* often mention both *couturiers* in the same sentence. An 1883 issue of *Harper's Bazaar* told of a dinner conversation, "The great subject of dress was allowed, and the rival merits of Worth, Pingat and their noble army were discussed."

Madame Olympe's additional claim to fame is that she was one of the first, if not the first, American dressmakers to label her garments, a

practice initiated by Eugénie's *couturiers*, *Worth et Bobergh* in the early 1860s. And, more importantly, Olympe's shop was the unparalleled center of fashion in the nineteenth century American South.

"That old imp" is also mentioned in General George Armstrong Custer's wife Elizabeth's memoir *Tenting on the Plains* (1887), regarding a visit she and the General made to New Orleans: "We had come on board almost wrecked in our finances by the theatre, the tempting flowers, the fascinating restaurants, and finally, a disastrous lingering one day in the beguiling shop of Madam Olympe, the reigning milliner. The General had bought some folly for me . . ." This was written after her husband's death at the Little Big Horn.

Curiously, Custer was not the only link to the Wild West. In the early days of silent movies, William S. Hart (1864-1946) was one of the first great stars of the motion picture western. He appeared in a 1919 film entitled *John Petticoats* in which he plays the part of a lumberjack named "Hardwood" John Haynes. In the movie, he receives word that he has inherited a "*modiste*" shop in New Orleans. Not having any idea what this is, John is completely flabbergasted when he first sets eyes on the dress shop window. He meets Caroline Meredith (played by blushing ingénue actress Winifred Westover), who Hart actually marries in real life. In the film, John falls in love with Caroline, too, but even though he buys fancy clothes, his rough manners put her off. Not confident to run a New Orleans ladies' store, complications arise for John. If only he'd brushed up on his Paris fashions like Madame Olympe.

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