

Women's fashion in the 19th century often looked for inspiration to historical dress, from medieval to early 19th-century, and to oriental dress (Ottoman Empire, Near East, Japan, and China). The study will have two primary objectives corresponding to the reasons for undertaking research. Firstly, I will look into how it was done in Poland: this topic has hitherto escaped scholarly attention. Through the study of authentic garments and accessories, portraiture and other visual sources, fashion journals and literary fiction, I will establish what specific fashions inspired by historical/oriental dress were actually worn in Poland and analyze what they meant in artistic and social contexts. In particular, I will compare women's fashion in Poland and the West to see whether there were any original themes of historical/oriental inspirations appearing in fashionable dress of Polish women. The results of this research will aid our interpretation of historic dress and of many artworks in which dress is represented.

The other objective and reason for undertaking this study is more general. My enquiry addresses the nature of 19th-century historicism and orientalism in fashion and presents a new way of looking at them. Historicism and orientalism in fashion may be analyzed from various perspectives. The object-based approach focused on authentic items of dress and their material characteristics (fabric, cut, construction) is fundamental to museum studies. Historicism and orientalism in fashion may also be interpreted in connection with fine arts, painting in particular, as the instruments of heightening the aesthetic expression of fashionable dress. These approaches have yielded interesting insights. One may also expand the focus beyond the object and image, beyond the concerns of the seamstress and painter, to incorporate the wearer's perspective. One may ask why individual women in their specific position and circumstances chose to don such fashions and what historical/oriental elements were selected for various occasions and why; what psychological and social needs such fashions fulfilled; how their adoption was modified by dress etiquette and historical/ethnographical knowledge. This very promising perspective has not been explored yet and I will follow through.

But the real challenge is to pull it all together, to integrate these approaches to better understand historicism and orientalism in women's fashion as complex phenomena unfolding in multiple contexts. I will thus propose an integrated theoretical model for analyzing fashions inspired by historical or oriental dress as they were being worn by individual women in specific circumstances. This brings together the above approaches' respective concerns with the dress object, the dressed body's stylistic expression, and their social meanings. The framework for the model is found in period sources which attest that such fashions were perceived as having an 'appearance of costume' and indeed used in that manner: they carried surplus meanings relevant to the role temporarily assumed by the wearer. She was an actress in a 'comedy of manners' costumed appropriately for her character, physical appearance, setting, and script. This perspective seems particularly relevant to women's fashion in the 19th century which – in contrast to men's fashion – made ample use of historical and oriental inspirations in standard wear and not only in fancy dress. Such 'theatrical' fashions were the domain and prerogative of women. Contemporary commentators pointed to the weaker social position of women as the key factor encouraging them to seek an acceptable form of self-expression in fashion as it was inaccessible to them in other areas of social life. I will develop the model by analyzing individual cases of specific fashions being worn or represented in particular circumstances and creating a multidisciplinary apparatus drawing from dress and art history, fashion theory, theatre and film studies.