

Mary Chamberlain and Fashion

Mary Chamberlain had a great interest in fashion and throughout her life clothes were of importance to her. As the wife of a prominent politician she attended a large number and range of social functions for which the 'correct' dress was necessary.

She had a favourite couturier, Charles Worth of Paris. The firm was founded in 1858 by Charles Worth who was English, and the business was continued by his sons. Mary dealt with 'Monsieur Jean' on her frequent visits to Paris to order new clothes. She arrived in England from America in December 1888 as a young bride of twenty four already well equipped with Worth dresses. The extremely generous trousseau her father, Judge Endicott, had provided her with included seven Worth dresses. There were two dinner dresses, one white and silver satin and the other of green silk, three ball gowns of lilac, pink and white tulle, a light blue brocaded tea gown and high necked 'At Home' silk dress, with matching slippers and stockings for all the outfits. These were probably chosen from sketches and fabric samples sent from Paris to the shop of Mrs Donovan in Madison Avenue New York who as well as selling her own designs sold Worth dresses. From the time Mary lived in England she generally went in person to the salon in Paris to choose patterns and fabrics, and for fittings. Her first visit to Worth in Paris was on December 5 1880 where the Chamberlains spent a week en route to their honeymoon in the Riviera, and Mary had the final fittings for the trousseau dresses. Her wedding dress however, was not from Worth but probably from Mrs Donovan of New York. It was a grey camel hair travelling dress worn with a dark grey velvet bonnet. The following year when the Chamberlains visited Egypt she wore this dress when visiting the ladies of the Sultan's harem and they were amazed by its simplicity.

Mary Chamberlain first wore a Worth dress in Birmingham at a reception at Birmingham Town Hall on January 8 1889. She received a rapturous welcome such was the popularity of her husband. With her pink silk dress she wore the diamonds she had been given as wedding presents, and received more jewellery: a string of oriental pearls clasped with diamonds from people of Birmingham; from the Women's Liberal Association a six pointed diamond star

and from the constituents of West Birmingham a gold filigree necklace, brooch and bracelet made in Birmingham.

Mary described her clothes in her weekly letters to her mother. Of the Worth ball gown she wore to the dance the Chamberlains gave as part of a house party on February 6 1889 she wrote:

I wore my lilac tulle. It is so pretty. The back of the skirt is covered with a plain veil- the under veil being tucked up the middle. In front the morning glories are around the bottom of the skirt and then up in this way the whole covered with a veil which falls to the hem of the skirt and is not caught anywhere. The morning glories are rather stiff in the hair and I wore the star presented by the women of Liberal Democratic association, my pearl and diamond necklace and Papa's crescent. Meril, my maid, informed me my dress was by far the prettiest there – I agreed with her.

However, her trousseau of Worth dresses did not include anything suitable for being presented at Court which would mark her entrance into London society and for which there were strict regulations about the colour and style of dress.. Her dress was ordered from Worth in late January 1889 and was ready in three weeks without Mary visiting Paris. She was presented by the Duchess of Bedford on February 26. The dress was of white flowered brocade with silver spangled tulle and trimmed with Honiton lace. The lace had been given to her by Caroline Kenrick the sister of Joseph Chamberlain's first wife. Her head dress of was of tulle with three ostrich feathers fastened by the diamond star the pearl and diamond necklace her husband had given her, on shoulder diamond star presented at Birmingham and the diamond crescent, a wedding gift from her father worn as a brooch and two bracelets – one of opals and diamonds bought with money given by her grandfather, the other of diamonds, the gift of Pierpont Morgan. She carried a bouquet of white roses and lilies of the valley with white orchids. The following year she was again at Court necessitating another Worth dress. Mary attended Court drawing rooms several times, including the occasions when she presented her step-daughters and her daughters-in-law. One of these Worth court dresses is in a public collection donated by Mary to the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, USA, in 1912. She wore the dress at a drawing room on March 9 1893 and at the

wedding of the Duke of York and Princess Mary on July 6 1893. The dress is of pale blue satin with elaborate embroidery of iridescent beads on the hem of the skirt and on the bodice. The matching shoes of blue silk and embroidery were made by Perchellet of Paris from whom Mary frequently bought evening shoes.



Photograph of Mary Chamberlain, 1893, wearing court dress by Worth, *the gift of George Peabody Gardner 1958, Peabody Essex Museum 129162*



Detail of embroidery , *Worth, Dress, 1893, Silk, the gift of Mrs Joseph Chamberlain 1912, Peabody Essex Museum 103495*

Mary's portrait was painted twice, each time wearing a Worth dress. For the portrait by John Everett Millais in 1890-1, she selected a grey dress she had already ordered in Paris in 1890. She wrote to her mother, 'the grey [dress] is very soft and pretty the skirt only relieved by some folds on the side of the skirt which is demi-train. The sleeves are of velvet, with silk cuffs and a regular ruffle of lace- very long- in Paris some of these sleeves covered half the hand like those of Queen Eleanor. There is a fichu of grey muslin edged with lovely white lace with little knots in the pattern white watered ribbon which fastens behind very elegant and picturesque. This I had in mind for the portrait. It might be any period and as I told you it was adapted from a picture of Madame Roland. The colour is light and delicate the sleeves a little darker than the silk. What think you? '



Portrait of Mary Chamberlain by John Everett Millais, 1890-1, Birmingham Museums Trust;
Portrait dress by Worth of Paris, 1890, *courtesy of Fashion Museum Bath*

The second portrait was by John Singer Sargent in 1902, her mother paid for the portrait and the dress. The artist had discussed with Mary the specifics of the dress and Beatrice accompanied Mary to Paris in March 1902:

Of course the portrait dress was the first thing to be thought about and at 10.30 yesterday we presented ourselves at Worth and found M. Jean and Mme Denise awaiting us. He was most amiable and soon entered into the spirit of it. Mr Sargent is haunted by the scarlet poppy idea but M. Jean quite agreed with me that it will not do. I said "parrot" rather than "coquettish" was the colour which might do. Mr Sargent also returns to white silk with a 'drapery volante' of colour. M. Worth was quite of the opinion that this should be the proper thing, since 'gris perle' was tabooed by the Millais portrait- we choose two pieces of silk one a deep rose taffeta with a lining of silver gauze and the other a rose and gold crimped tissue. These are to be taken to London to try the

effect in the studio. The silk for the dress is white peau de soie which does not catch the high light Mr S deprecates and is green in the shadow. I think he will find it “permetable”.



Portrait of Mary Chamberlain by John Singer Sargent, 1902, *National Gallery of Art, Washington DC*

On the same visit Mary ordered a yellow dress and one of 'mauve striped crepe de chine' a dust coat, a long thick coat and a wrap. 'There's a trousseau for you! You see you have encouraged me to great extravagance but then a coronation does not come every year.'

Worth did not only make new dresses but also cleaned and remodelled the clients' Worth dresses. In May 1890 the pink silk dress was taken to Paris to be made over and to be cleaned of the rosewater spots it had suffered at Lord Hartington's banquet. Of the visit to Worth in March 1902 Mary further wrote that Worth 'is going to remake my red satin into a Van Dyck dress adorned with that beautiful old lace Joe brought me from Malta and he is going to remake my pink satin with brocade roses and to refurbish up the green satin in case Mr Sargent suddenly decides that, and that only, will do.' The red satin dress is in the National Museum of Australia.

The portrait dress was also cleaned and remodelled. On November 4 1902 Mary wrote 'my portrait dress has returned from a visit to Paris so white and clean. The waist is adorned by a pink rose and he has added a wide belt of very blue ribbon veiled in a very delicate mauve chiffon – the end of which falls to the hem of the skirt in front and ends in pearl tassels – very dainty and pretty and completely distinguished.'

The celebrations during the Queen's Silver Jubilee year of 1897 made special demands and for Mary included new dresses for the reception she hosted for Colonial premiers and for the Duchess of Devonshire's fancy dress ball. A visit to Worth supplied both, Mary going to the ball as a shepherdess in pink silk and satin, with powdered hair and a velvet hat with feathers. Her mother had offered to buy her a Puritan costume for the ball but 'you know how Joe likes me in fine feathers and he might think I look like a Cinderella in the quiet dress of the Puritans.' Mary had bought the hat in Birmingham which was unusual as she found shopping in Birmingham a dispiriting business and had complained to her mother that before their trip to Egypt in November 1889 she had needed a tropical riding habit and 'had to have it made in Birmingham and spent hours over the fitting.'

Periodic visits for the weekend to Windsor Castle, or to the stately homes of leading politicians might require a large wardrobe but the three month's visit to South Africa after the Boer War on which she accompanied Joseph Chamberlain then Colonial Secretary, from November 1902 to March 1903, necessitated much planning: 'Garments for S. Africa: travelling dress of fawn alpaca; a dust coat of pongee silk (they say the dust is terrible); two winter coats and skirts one darkish blue the other fawn for travelling; a very pretty (white) batiste dress with garlands of roses made without a lining and some more skirts those in addition to all the clothes I had before to take with me those we talked over. Twenty six dresses they add up to.....'

Mary also bought hats in Paris. The hat maker she frequented was Auguste Petit whom she considered 'one of the delights of visiting Paris' and in 1902 when shopping for the Sargent portrait dress reported 'we have been there all afternoon and have added two more hats and some "coiffures" '. Enterprising milliners might also show their hats in the clients' homes. In March 1902 she wrote that

a visit from a French milliner Mme Torre has taken all my time and the usual volume of correspondence yesterday absorbed the rest. I have invested in a lovely black hat round and flat and peculiar until it gets on to the head where it sits and is off the face and is infinitely more becoming than any of the other 40 to 50 she brought – it has no trimmings on the flat crown and soft mainly felt-is round and on the brim underneath a wide steel buckle fastens a broad band of sapphire blue velvet, black feather plumes which fall over the hair behind- very "chic" – and can be worn with most things. It will be an awful blow if it does not look well with the dark blue dress coming from RaudnitzI must have something to appear in – my winter hats are reduced to the lowest ebb.

The Raudnitz dress referred to another French couturier she bought from. When the dress, of blue serge material embroidered with lighter blue border in the skirt and bodice, arrived its velvet and serge belt did not fit and had to be sent back to Paris. 'I am annoyed to have to wear it with a black satin belt instead of its own velvet and serge. I have just discovered there is no pocket - another vexation.'

In October 1903 year she ordered a new winter dress from Paris but did not have to travel there. A Paris designer, Madame Hallée, sent her assistant to Highbury. 'Jeanne Hallée's woman came down with models for me to see and I have ordered my winter costume from her –"Bordeaux" coloured velveteen ...' In December Mary wrote to her mother enclosing a sample and asked 'how do you like the colour of my new dress? It is very soft and pretty, as yet I have only worn it once.'

Mary's day clothes included skirts and blouses, and suits. Her trousseau had included a suit from Mrs Donovan of New York, made of silk and wool with striking buttons. This is in the Fashion Museum Bath which has a collection of Mary's clothes, including the Millais portrait dress. These were donated after her death in 1957, aged 93.