



# *Lady's Gown*

**1730-1770**

*A visual guide to cut  
and construction*



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*A visual guide  
to the cut and construction of a  
Lady's 18th-Century Gown  
providing the basic information*

Clothing has always been an outward expression of the wealth and social position of the wearer. That is, people wear not only what they want to but what they can afford. This was readily apparent in the 18th century. Men and women from the middle or professional classes aimed to imitate the fashions set in wealthy and aristocratic circles. This was as true in the colonies as it was in Europe. Despite the difficulties, the colonists did their best to stay aware of changes in fashion, from fabrics to styles. French styles and fashions were the models most widely copied. Even the English, whose interest in outdoor and country pursuits dampened the influence of "frivolous" court fashions, felt the appeal of French style.

European women in the 18th century had several styles of dress from which to choose. Among the options were various jacket and skirt combinations, a close-bodied gown known as the 'robe à l'anglaise', and the flowing sack-back gown which was first introduced in France. The sack gown came to be called the 'robe à la française', so closely was it identified as a French style. It came to dominate women's dress for much of the century.

In its earliest incarnation the sack gown was an informal negligée or dressing gown worn primarily in private or intimate settings. Lengths of fabric were draped front and back in loose, unstitched pleats, which fell from the shoulders to the ground. By the 1730s, as the bodice became more fitted and lost its association with a state of undress, or 'déshabillé', the sack gown became more than acceptable; it had become fashionable for public wear. The loose folds on either side of the front were formed into unadorned pleats, known as robings, which were sewn in place. The soft pleats across the back of the shoulders became more formalized, arranged in box pleats which draped elegantly to the floor. The elbow-length sleeves were finished with stiffened and pleated wing cuffs.

From about 1730 on, the sack gown was most commonly worn as an open robe. The front edges of an open robe did not meet and the gap was filled by a skirt, called a petticoat, and the front of the corset, which was sometimes hidden by a decorative stomacher. The front of the open sack revealed the rigidly corseted torso at the front. At the back, the loose pleats, worn slightly trained, still gave an air of a negligée style. The

gown was worn over a boned corset, and a hooped petticoat called a 'panier', which was stiffened with whalebone or cane.

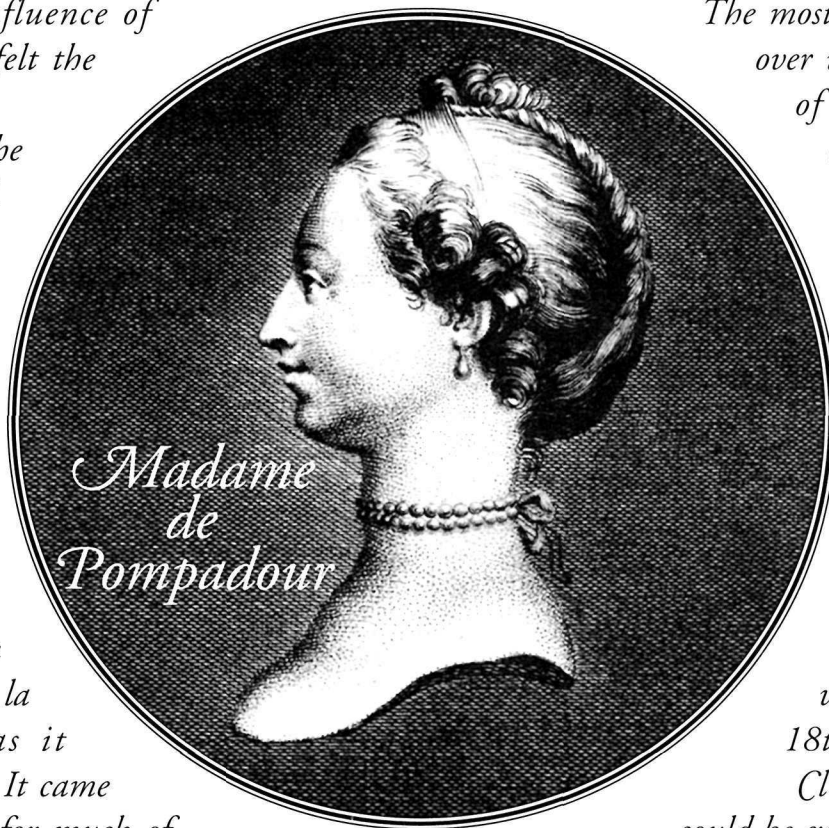
Subsequent changes to the basic cut of the sack gown were subtle. The changes introduced during the 1740s-60s had more to do with changes in fabrics, details, and decoration than with the cut of the dress. The box pleats across the back shoulders became narrower, where before they had extended across the entire width of the back. The severe wing cuff was replaced by one or more layers of flounces, cut short in the crook of the arm and long over the elbow.

The most elaborate court gowns, worn over very wide paniers, were made of exquisite silks and metallic brocades. The brocades were sometimes decorated with complex ruchings edged in 'passementerie', costly embroideries and lace sleeve flounces, and fresh or artificial flowers. Madame de Pompadour, mistress of Louis XV, epitomized the apparently effortless, yet in reality carefully contrived, elegance which we associate with the 18th century.

Clothing in the 18th century could be expensive when compared to the other costs of living. The expense was due more to the fabrics than to labour costs associated with garment work. Fashionable gowns were often made of silks, which were expensive. Gowns were costly because of the many yards of expensive fabric required to make them. Dress silks were narrow by today's standards, usually about 22 inches wide, and the most expensive kinds were those that were complex weaving patterns, such as brocades.

This guide provides an introduction to the cut and construction of a mid-18th century sack-back gown. The pattern provided is for a basic, unadorned gown. With the appropriate choice of fabric, construction details, and surface trimmings the pattern can be used to create a gown suitable for the period from 1730 to 1770. The pattern is based primarily on an original mid-century gown in the collection of Parks Canada.

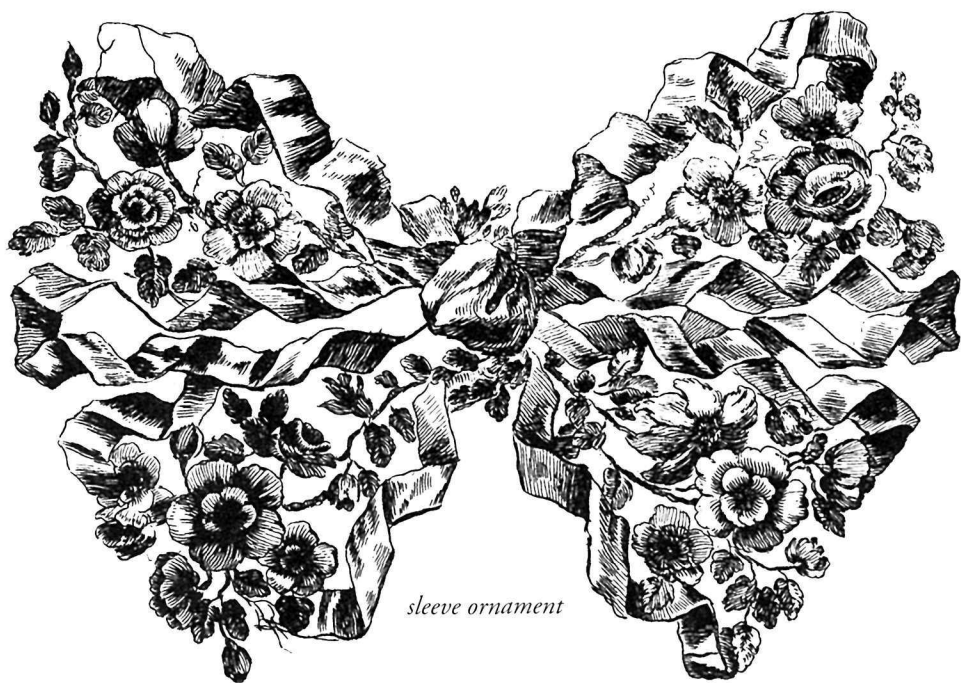
Although the sack gown continued to be worn well into the 1770s, changes in the cut, introduced during the 1760s, make it difficult to modify the pattern beyond the 1760s. Variations in construction techniques and styling have been drawn from original examples in other Canadian, American, and European collections.







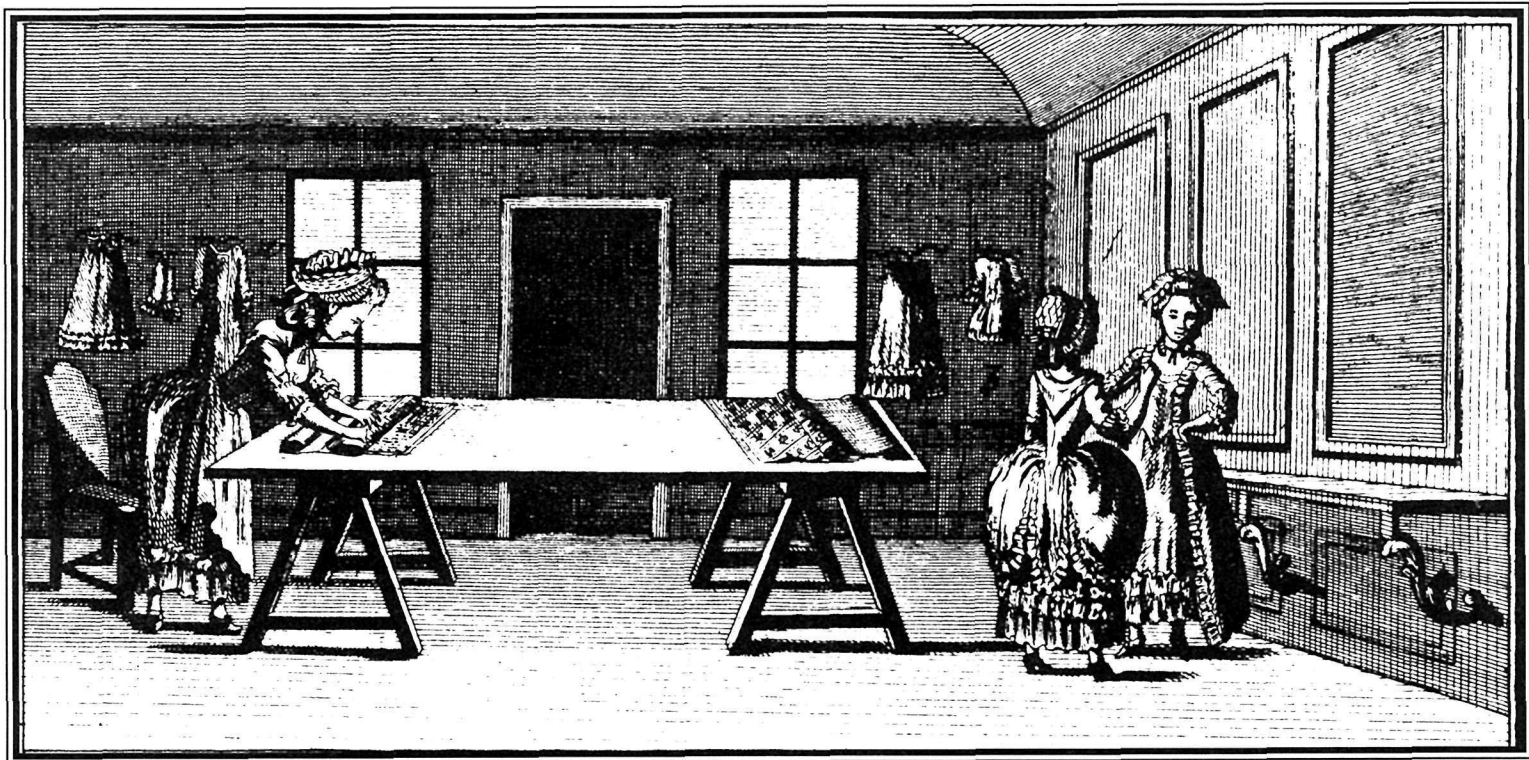
fan stick



sleeve ornament



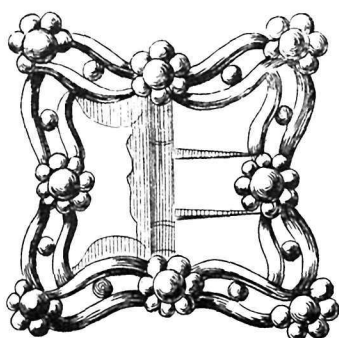
earring



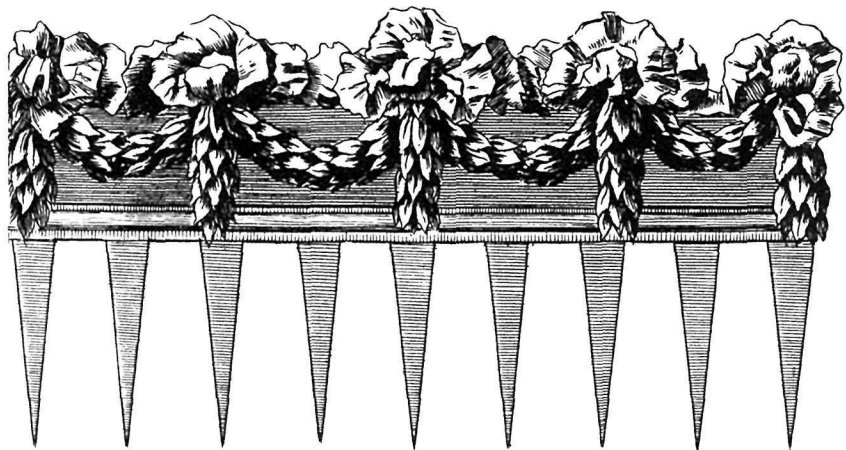
*A strict guild system affected every aspect of clothing production in France. Until 1675, tailors made clothing for both men and women. After that date the profession was divided. Dressmakers or 'maîtresses couturières' then made garments such as petticoats, jackets and gowns for women. Tailors continued to make boned bodices, corsets, and court gowns. Although garments were stitched completely by hand, the construction of 18th-century gowns seems crude in comparison with later examples of the dressmakers' art.*



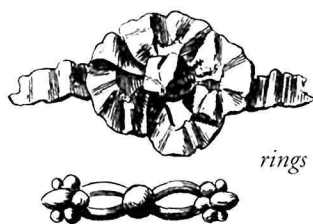
watch chain



shoe buckle



comb

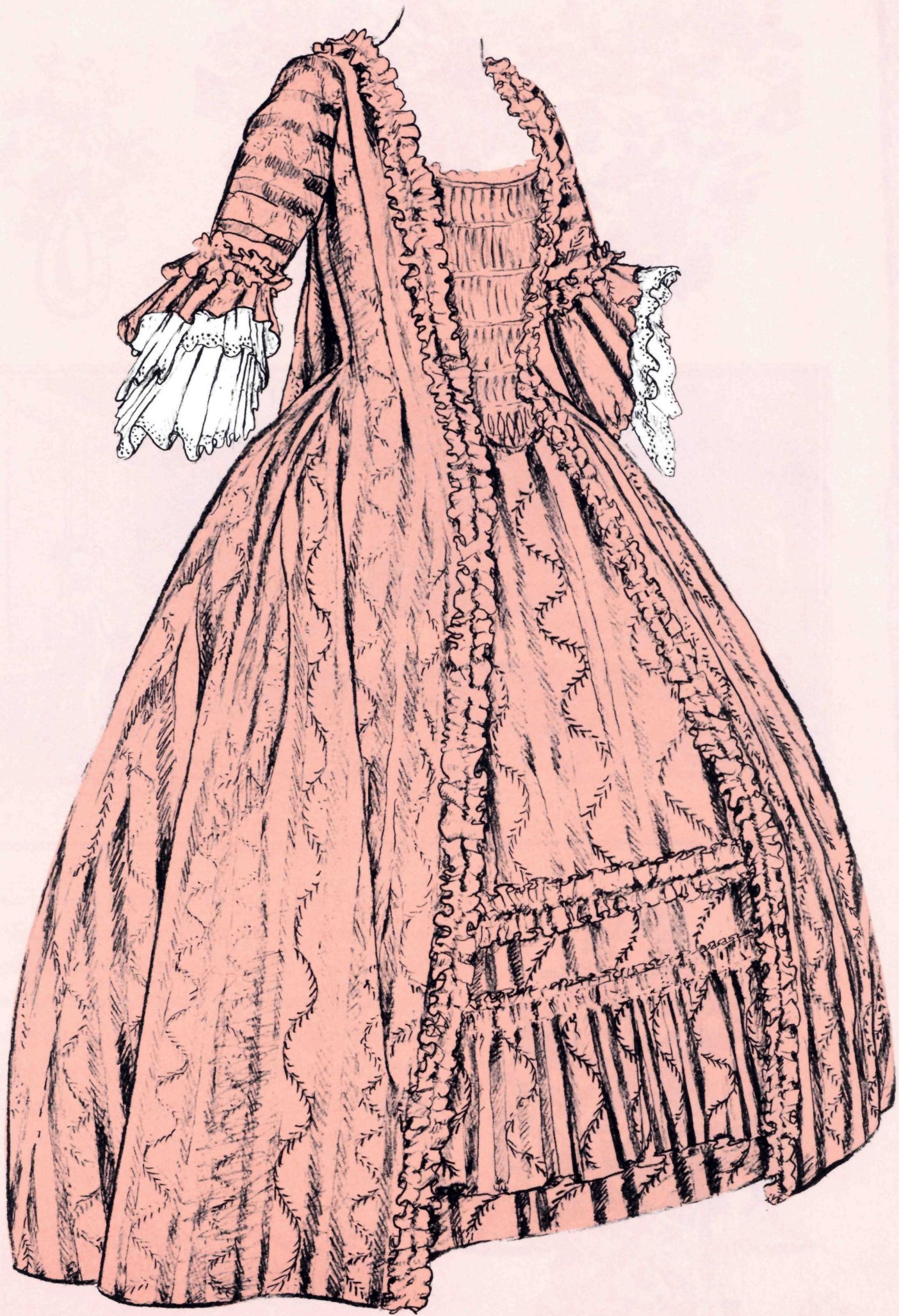


rings



## *Lady's Gown, 1730–1770*

### *Front View*



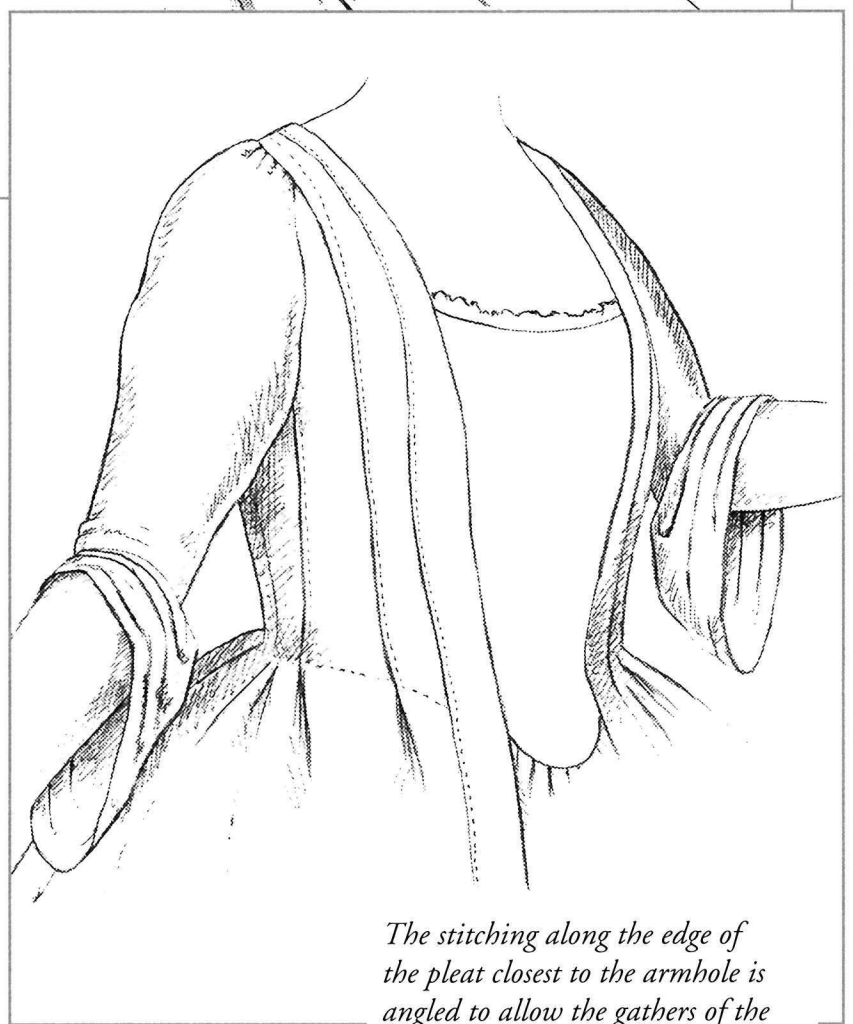
*The sack gown can be made to suit the lady of fashion or her servant, depending on the choice of fabric and trimmings. The gown shown here would suit a wealthy and fashionable woman, yet it is not as elaborate as a court dress. The separate petticoat is worn slightly shorter than the sack gown, over a moderate panier. The bodice fits smoothly over the rigidly corseted torso. The front edge of the bodice is pinned to the corset and*

*stomacher. The sleeves are finely pleated into the top of the armhole. Pocket openings were left in the side seams to allow access to separately constructed pockets worn tied around the waist. This gown is trimmed with the simplest form of ruching and sleeve ruffles. Women of modest circumstances might choose a plain fabric and dispense with trimmings. Details of working women's dress are given on page 10.*

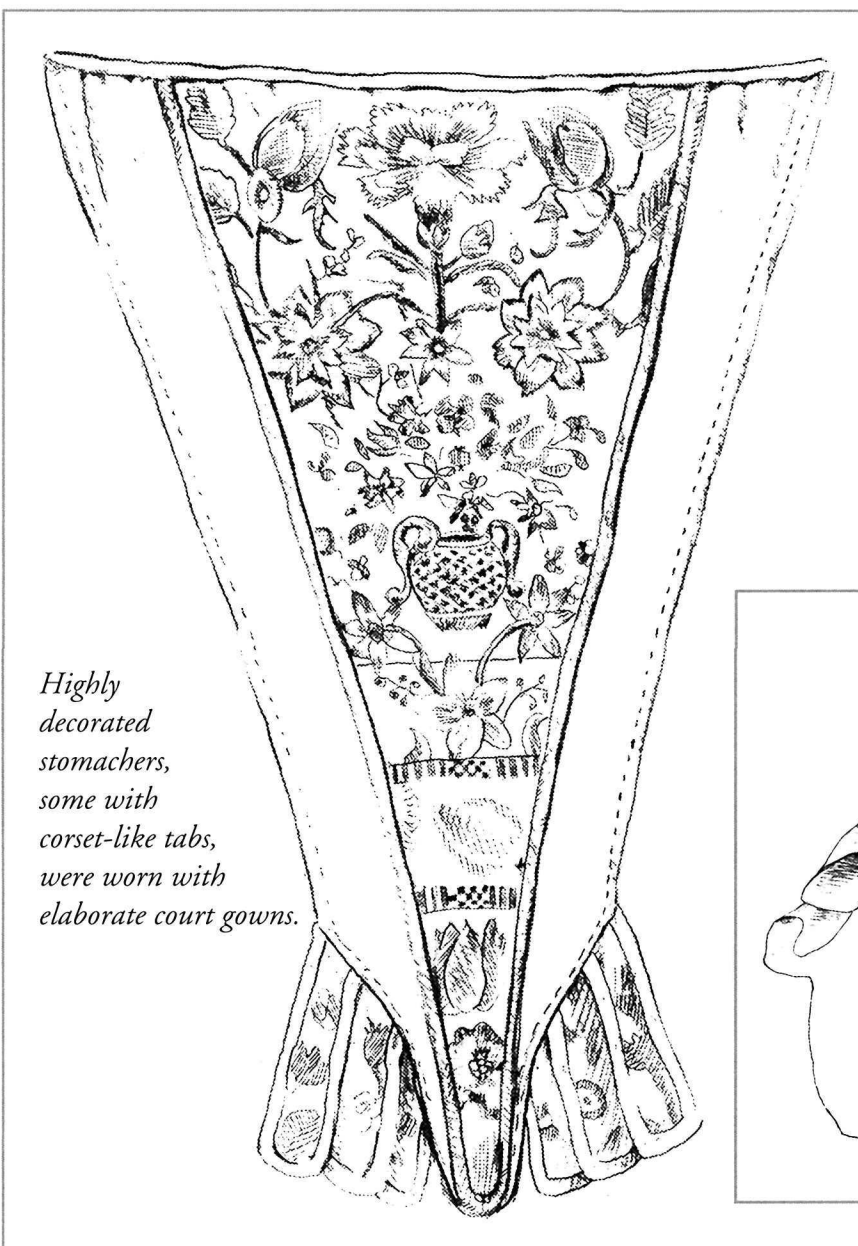




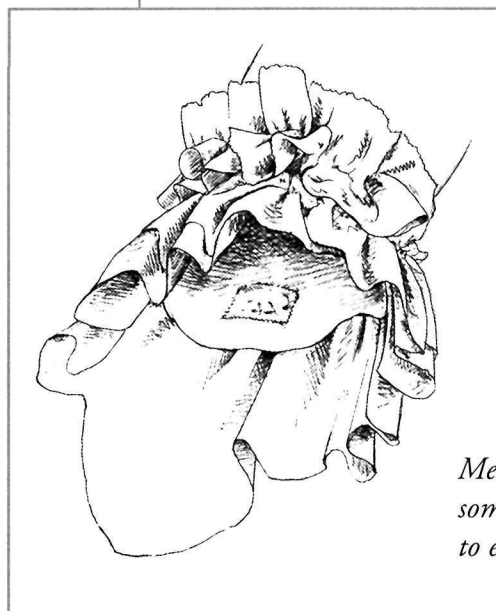
*The pleats of the gown are stitched in place to the linen lining, except those of the central box pleats. Some gowns were made slightly adjustable by lacing the lining at the centre back.*



*The stitching along the edge of the pleat closest to the armhole is angled to allow the gathers of the sleeve cap to be concealed under the pleat. The pleated wing cuffs were lined, then stitched only to the front of the sleeve, leaving the back of the cuff free.*



*Highly decorated stomachers, some with corset-like tabs, were worn with elaborate court gowns.*



*Metal disks encased in linen were sometimes stitched to the sleeve lining to ensure an elegant line.*



# Lady's Gown, 1730–1770

This gown is designed to be worn over a corset. It will not fit an uncorseted figure correctly.

## Basic Assembly:

Cut, assemble, and fit the bodice lining, pinning the front edges to the corset. Baste in the sleeves to check the fit. Make corrections to the lining as required. The back lacing may be added after the initial fitting. Dismantle the bodice lining.

Do not use the front and back pattern pieces to cut the armholes and side seams. Join rectangular lengths of fabric then pleat them using the dimensions and pleating patterns given on the pattern pieces. Baste the pleated front and back panels over the corresponding lining pieces, positioning them carefully, then cut the armholes and side seams of the bodice using the correctly fitted lining pieces as your pattern. Make sure not to cut through the folds of the pleats nearest the armholes.

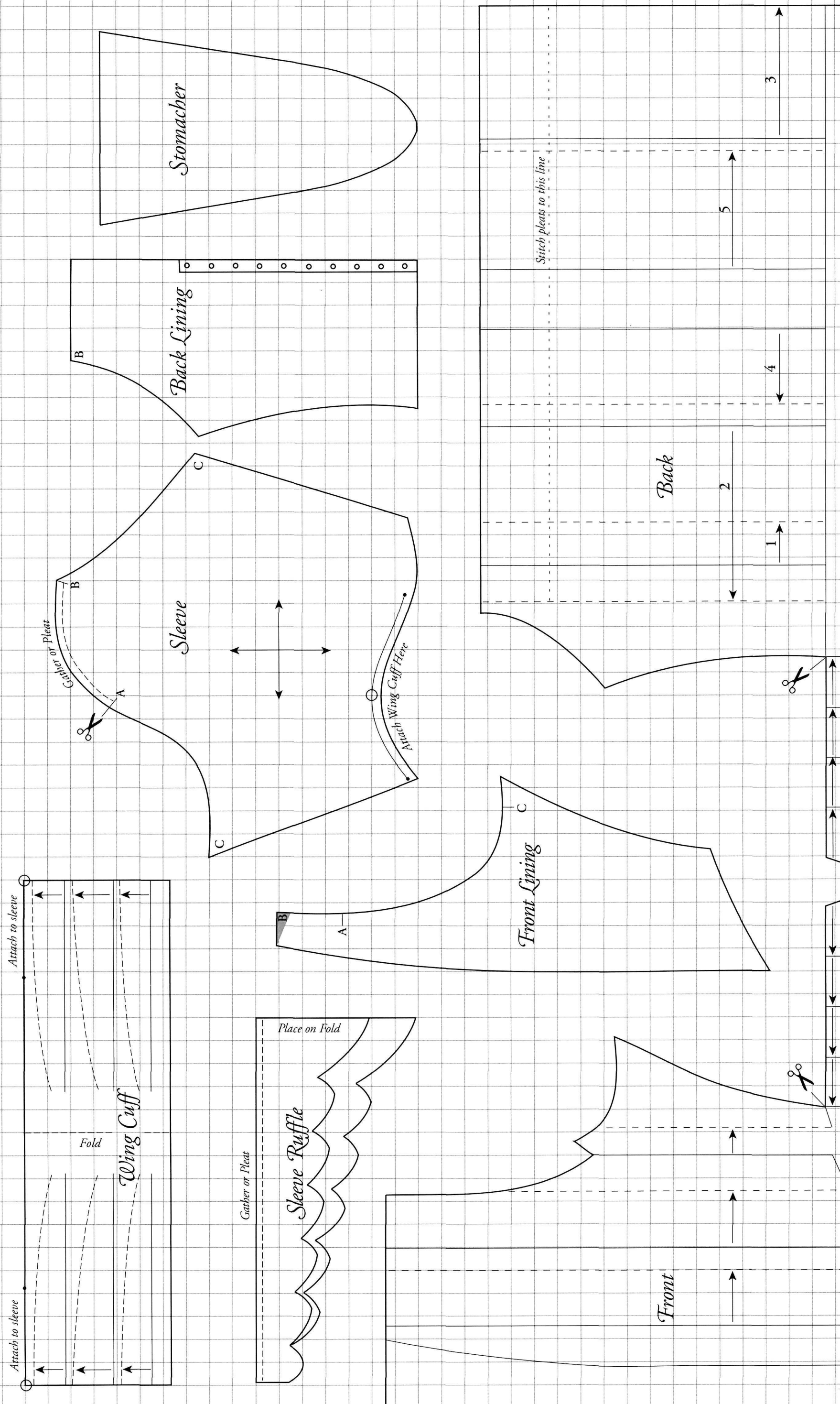
Stitch permanently and invisibly through the outer fabric to the lining along the outer folds of the front pleats and pleat 1 on the back. Slant the stitching on the front pleat closest to the armhole from point A to point B. Turn the front facing toward the inside over the lining and stitch in place close to the edge, trimming the excess facing at the armhole.

Join the shoulder and bodice side seams leaving the lining free. Join the skirt side seams, leaving openings for the pockets. Narrow hem the pocket openings. Finish the lining side seams and shoulders by hand. Turn under the lower edge of the lining and stitch in place. Form the waistline pleats above the pocket openings, securing them from the inside through the lining and garment fabric.

Line the sleeves. Finely pleat or gather the sleeve cap between points A

and B through both layers. When setting the sleeves, set them in the usual manner along the underarm from point A on the front to point B on the back. Clip through the sleeve seam allowance at point A. Working from the outside, position the sleeve cap between the bodice and the pleat nearest the armhole from point A to point B and stitch to the seam allowance. The raw edge of the sleeve cap on the outside will be concealed by the pleat. Face lower edge of skirt. Attach sleeve ruffles or cuff and decorate gown as desired.

Keep in mind that even on gowns of exquisite silk fabric the workmanship is notably crude, nor was fitting the science it became in the 19th century. Relatively crude fitting alterations were made during the course of construction. Seamstresses devoted their attention to the exterior of the gown, not to its interior finishing.



## Pattern Size:

Height: 5' 5" (165cm)

Bust: 36"-38" (90-95cm)

Waist: 26"-28" (66-71cm)

## Materials:

All fabrics 45" (115 cm) wide.

Gown: 10 yards (11 m)

one way pattern.

Lining: 1 1/4 yards (1.15 m)

Hem facing: 1/2 yards (.5 m)

Linen or silk thread.

Wider modern fabrics can be cut in half lengthwise to simulate the width of original 18th century fabrics.

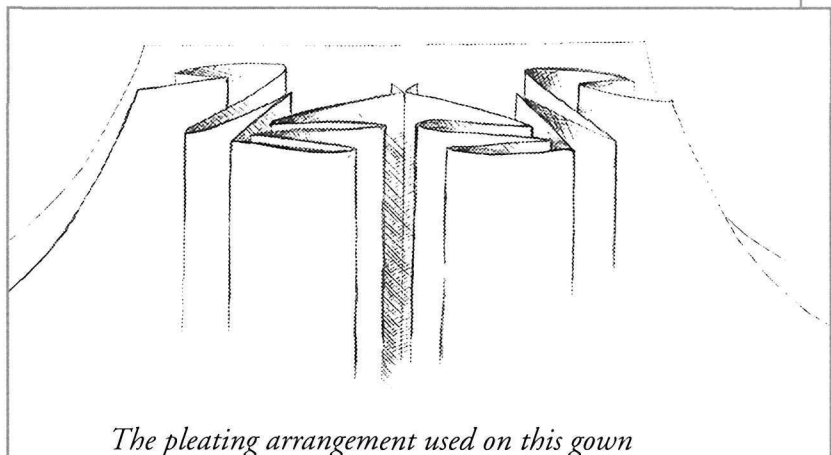
## The pattern:

Add seam allowances to all edges, except the scalloped edge of the sleeve ruffle. Seam allowances in the 18th century were usually 1/4" (7 mm) to 1/2" (12 mm). Where selvedge edges could not be used to advantage, seams were commonly finished by overcasting.

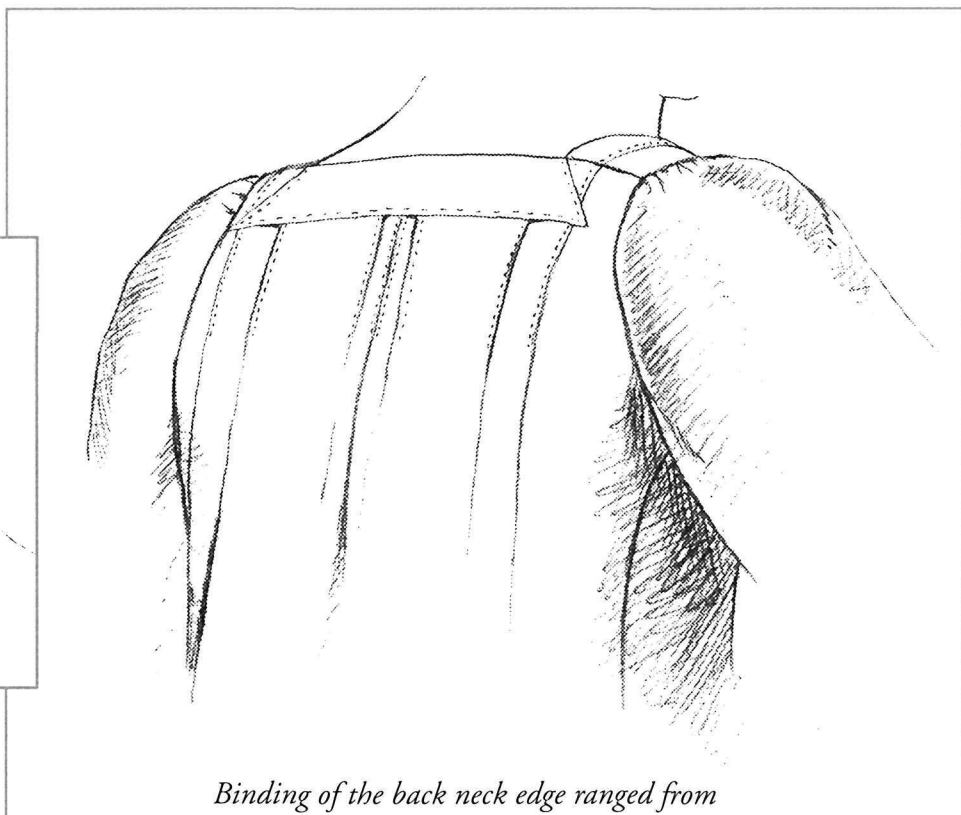
The shoulder edge of the front and front lining pattern are cut on the straight but once fitted, may slant downward toward the armhole as shown by the shaded area on the front lining pattern.

Scale 1:4

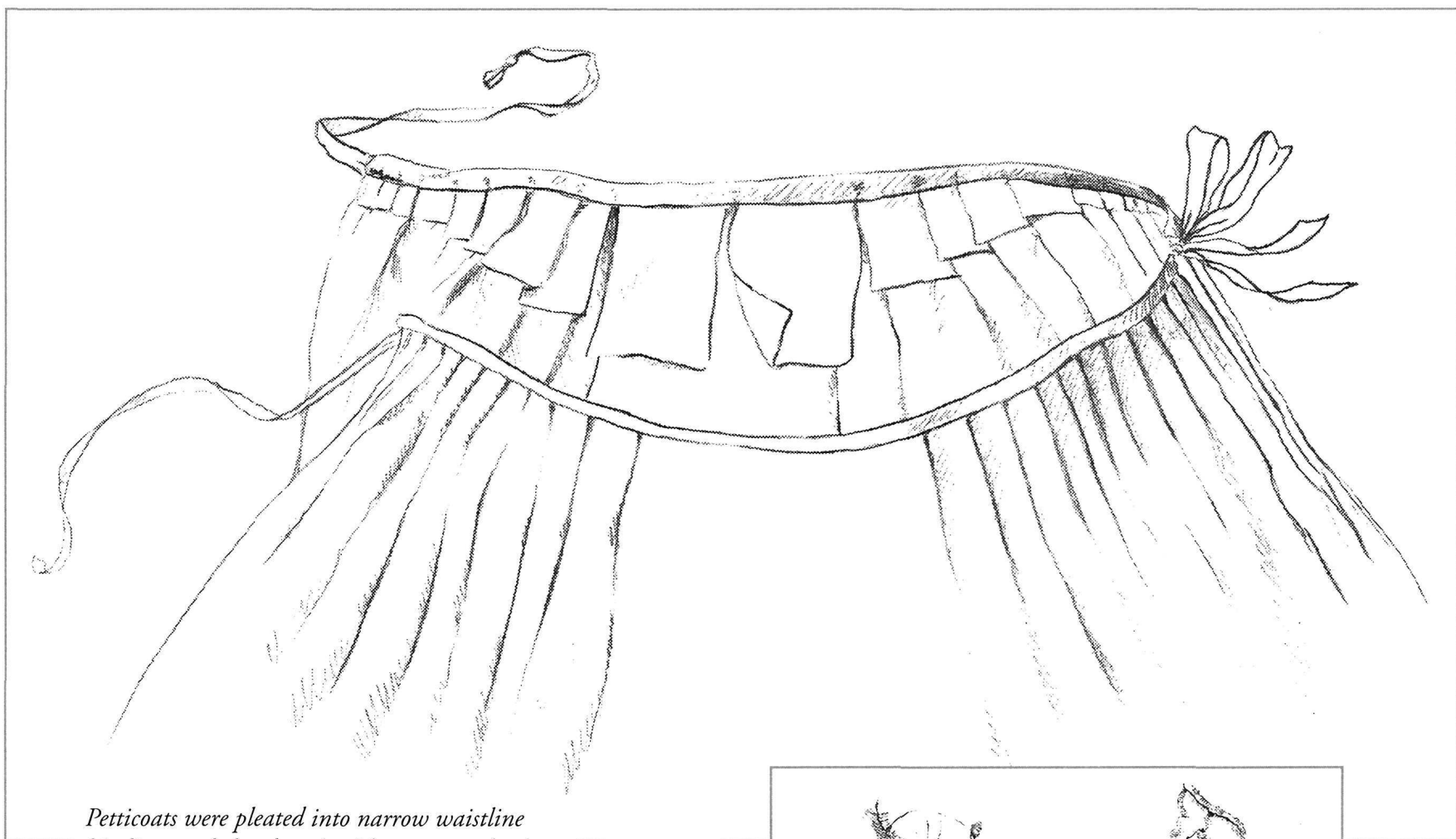




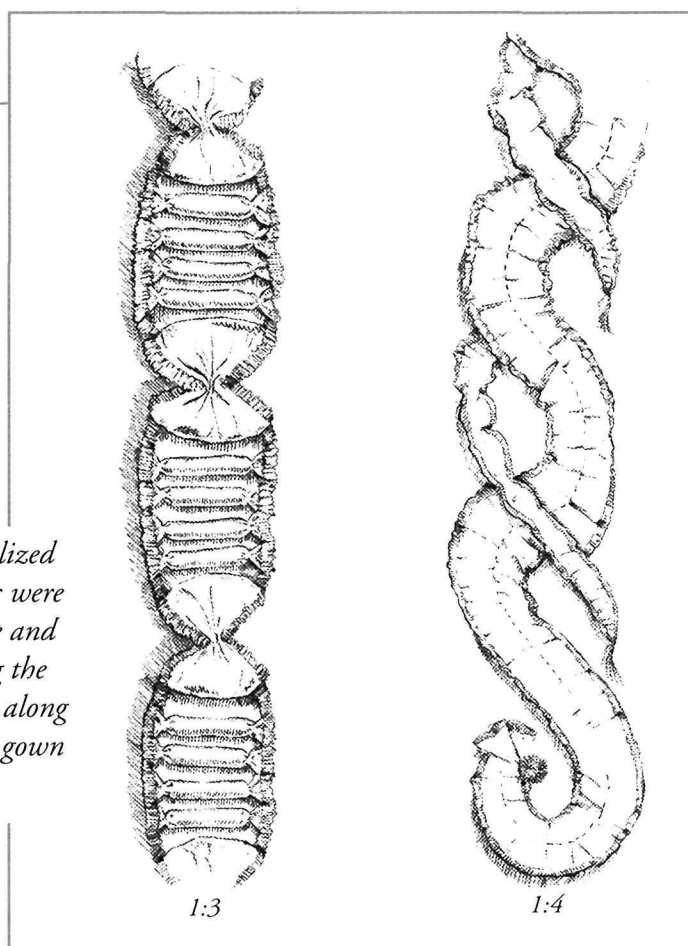
*The pleating arrangement used on this gown is only one of the endless variations of the characteristic box pleating patterns.*



*Binding of the back neck edge ranged from narrow straight-grain bands to wider strips, angled or mitered at the ends.*



*Petticoats were pleated into narrow waistline bindings and closed at the sides or centre back with ties. Costly fabrics were usually mounted on a linen or wool foundation petticoat only where they would show.*



*Choice of fabric and ruching individualized otherwise similar gowns. Strips of fabric were pinked or edged in narrow braid or lace and manipulated into fanciful borders along the front edge of the gown and horizontally along the hem of the petticoat, only where the gown revealed them.*

1:3

1:4



## *Lady's Gown, 1730–1770*

### *Back View*



*The sack gown is deceptively loose-fitting and is characterized by the symmetrical box pleats of the back. The gown fabric is first pleated, back and front, then mounted to a tight-fitting linen bodice lining that extends to the waistline. The sleeves are also lined in linen while the skirt of the gown was usually unlined. This gown is cut with slanted skirt side seams. However, the skirts of many 18th-century gowns were cut straight*

*to the floor from waist level. If this is your preference, make sure the skirt will be full enough to fit comfortably over your panier. The hemline of the skirt was often faced with a band of plain linen or silk. When made in striped fabrics, the sleeves are cut so the stripes run around the arm. Only rarely did the striped fabric run vertically on the sleeves during the 18th century.*





## *Working Women's Dress*

*The pattern for a sack-back gown can also be used to create a working class woman's jacket.*

*Clothing worn by working women varied in quality and style in much the same way that dress varied generally between the wealthy and the poor. Among household servants, for example, their place in the hierarchy was reflected in their clothing. A personal maid-servant to a wealthy employer might be fashionably dressed in a sack-back gown, perhaps worn 'retroussé', that is, with the hem of the gown pulled though the pocket openings. Clothing worn by the majority of working class women, however, was more serviceable and practical, commonly consisting of a jacket and petticoat.*

*For practical reasons most working women and servants did not wear hooped petticoats, but they did wear corsets. Worn over a linen shift, the corsets could be made of linen canvas, stiffened with cane or reeds, or of leather, scored so that the leather would curve around the body. These corsets were less heavily boned and less tightly laced than those worn by fashionable women.*

*Petticoats were made of woollens or a mix of wool and linen. They were sometimes quilted or worn in layers to give additional warmth. The hem of a petticoat was commonly tucked into the waistband while a woman was at the washtub or doing some other heavy chore.*

*Working women wore a range of jacket styles, including a shortened version of a sack-back gown. Rather than filling in the front of the jacket with a stomacher, the jacket was closed and held in place by an apron tied around the waist and pinned to the front of the bodice. This shortened version of the sack was also worn by the wealthy as an informal yet fashionable dress. This variation may have been introduced as sack gowns were shortened when the hems wore out.*

*Since clothing in the 18th century was expensive, the wardrobes of working women were limited. Garments were mended when they wore out, and they were recycled and reused. Many articles of clothing were purchased second-hand at auctions or from used clothing merchants. Even well-to-do women sometimes had their expensive gowns restyled as fashions changed, and some passed their cast-offs on to their servants.*



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