

Designing 'Swedishness': Theatre Costume Design under the Rule of Gustav III

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Abstract: This article explores the early development of Swedish costume design during the reign of Gustav III (1771-1792). From the beginning of his rule, the Swedish king consciously and actively developed the local cultural scene, funded the Swedish Royal Opera and other institutions, as well as wrote and performed theatrical works himself. He also intervened in the scenography of pieces and was very interested in dress in general, using it often for his political aims. Theatre and dress were not only treated as aesthetic objects, but also as tools for creating a sense of Swedish national identity among the people.

The 'Swedishness' of costume design is thus primarily connected to the subjects represented in those initial plays which addressed Swedish themes: historical figures and people from different Swedish regions. On the other hand, both the designers and forms used to create this Swedish design were often imported and adapted from abroad, especially from France and Italy. Using a transnational perspective and material-oriented approach, this study examines certain strategies and milestones in Swedish costume making, highlighting international exchange, but also showing unique cases of adaptation to the local stage.

Keywords: costume design; theatre; Sweden; Gustav III; France; Italy

Recommended citation: Surname, Forename, 'Article Title', *1700-tal: Nordic Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 20 (2023). 102–129. <https://doi.org/10.7557/4.6875>

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* The realization of this article was supported by the Swedish Research Council (project number 106/31002953) and Kungl. Vitterhetsakademien (Bernadotteprogrammet 2021). I would like to thank Livrustkammaren, Nationalmuseum, Kungliga Biblioteket, Musikverket and Gustavianum for generously providing their images free of charge. I am also grateful to Jennie Nell, Sara Ekström, and the two anonymous reviewers for their useful feedback and suggestions.

In Sweden, the last quarter of the eighteenth century saw an unprecedented flourishing within the performing arts, promoted vehemently by King Gustav III (1746–1792), who himself was involved in the theatre as a writer, performer and designer.¹ His interest in theatre was deeply intertwined with his political ambitions: the theatre was one of the tools with which he aimed to generate a sense of national unity and even national identity in his subjects and to construct his own image as the nation's leader. At the same time, the king was deeply interested in the philosophical, the didactic and, not least, the aesthetic aspect of performing arts, which he aimed to develop during his reign often taking inspiration from abroad.

Gustav III's great passion for theatre and the importance he gave to the performing arts during his reign is well known and has been widely researched.² However, while theatrical costumes have traditionally been seen as a mere decoration or, at best, as a dramaturgical tool, this article argues that they played an integral part in the king's political project, becoming literally the fabric through which power and ideology were expressed. Special attention will be given to the transnational substance of this 'patriotic' project; the ways in which political ideas, dramatic and musical forms, costume concepts and people travelled, were adopted and adapted, creating something new. The perspective of cultural mobility and transfer have proved extremely efficient in theatre and performance studies in recent years.³ This follows a general trend in the humanities, which moves away

¹ In this article, I use English spelling of the names of sovereigns, except for those mentioned in the titles of the plays, which are left in the original.

² E.g.: *Gustavian Opera, An Interdisciplinary Reader in Swedish Opera, Dance and Theatre 1771–1809*, ed. by Inger Mattsson (Uppsala: Royal Swedish Academy of Music, 1991); Marie-Christine Skuncke and Anna Ivarsdotter, *Svenska operans födelse: Studier i gustaviansk musikdramatik* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 1998); Jennie Nell, 'The Royal Rhetor: Princely and common virtues in the operas and plays of Gustavus III', in *Virtue Ethics and Education from Late Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Andreas Hellerstedt (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), pp. 207–52. [Crossref](#).

³ E.g.: Melania Bucciarelli, Norbert Dubow and Reinhard Strohm, *Italian Opera in Central Europe*, 3 vols (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2006–2008); Rahul Markovits, *Civiliser l'Europe: politique du théâtre française au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2014); Rahul Markovits and Jane Marie Todd, *Staging Civilization: A Transnational History of French Theater in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2021). [Crossref](#); Christine Jeanneret, 'Costumes and Cosmopolitanism: Italian Opera in the North', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 32, 1 (2020), 27–51. [Crossref](#); Christine Jeanneret, 'Made in Italy, Tailored for Danes: Giuseppe Sarti and Italian Opera in Copenhagen', *Music and Letters*, 102, 2 (2021), 271–93. [Crossref](#); *Mapping Artistic Networks: Eighteenth-Century Italian Theatre and Opera across Europe*, ed. by Tatiana Korneeva (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021).

from nationalist cultural identity and ethnic authenticity, also for the study of patriotic projects such as national theater.⁴ Considering how little information about costume of this period is preserved in Europe in general (except for France), the Swedish case represents a unique opportunity to study the dynamics of costume design in terms of the relations between the foreign and the local, the aesthetics and politics, cosmopolitanism and national identity. In short, this article thematizes the process of creating the Swedish national theatre, opera and costume by emphasizing their constructed and inherently transnational essence.

Performing power and fashioning identity

Using theatre and performance as a political tool was of course not unique to Sweden and to the eighteenth century. It was part of aristocratic and royal propaganda (but also counter-propaganda) long before, in Italy, France, Great Britain and other European countries. The spectacles could embody the legitimacy of the rulers, portray social hierarchies, celebrate successes on the battlefield, and other events, but the theatre could also become the place to express contesting opinions and even directly undermine the ruling power.⁵

The emerging consciousness of a Swedish national identity in the second half of the eighteenth century has been thoroughly discussed by Swedish historians. Gustav III has been described as the first Swedish ruler who implemented a nationalistic programme within industry, politics, and culture.⁶ Love for the fatherland ('l'amour de la patrie') was considered a personal, social, and political virtue,

⁴ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); *Cultural Translation in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Peter Burke and Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). [Crossref](#); *De la comparaison à l'histoire croisée*, ed. by Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann (Paris: Seuil, 2004); *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). [Crossref](#).

⁵ See, for instance: Roy Strong, *Art and Power: Renaissance Festivals, 1450–1610* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California, 1984); Barbara Ravelhofer, *The Early Stuart Masque: Dance, Costume and Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Marie Apostolidès, *Le roi-machine. Spectacle et politique au temps de Louis XIV* (Paris: Minuit, 1981); Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (London: Yale University Press, 1992); Georgia Cowart, *The Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIV and the Politics of Spectacle* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2008); Jeffrey S. Ravel, *The Contested Parterre: Public Theatre and French Political Culture, 1680–1791* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁶ Patrik Hall, *Den svenskaste historien. Nationalism i Sverige under sex sekler* (Stockholm: Carlssons, 2000); Jonas Nordin, *Ett fattigt men fritt folk. Nationell och politisk självbild i Sverige från sen stormaktstid till slutet av frihetstiden* (Eslöv: Symposium, 2000); Bo Lindberg, 'Introduktion: nationalism och nationell identitet i 1700-talets Sverige' in *Nationalism och nationell identitet i 1700-talets Sverige*, ed. by Åsa Karlsson & Bo Lindberg (Uppsala: Opuscula Historica Upsaliensia, 2002), pp. 7–15.

which featured heavily in his education, through his study of history and philosophy. From the moment the prince was born, the court constructed a narrative of him being the third great Gustav, following in the footsteps of his famous predecessors Gustav Vasa (1496–1560), considered the founder of the early modern Swedish state building and a *pater patriae*, and Gustav II Adolph (1594–1632), who won considerable victories for the Protestant cause in the Thirty Year's War. Later in life, Gustav III incorporated patriotism into his politics and the figures from the glorious Swedish past re-appeared in his self-fashioning, political 'performance', and in his plays.⁷

The concepts of patriotism present in Gustav III's discourse were connected to the power of the king and state, thus differing from the republican and civic ideological movements.⁸ The Swedish king aimed to steer nationalistic discourse from above, utilizing various tools to awaken love and pride for the fatherland within his subjects. He did this not solely through legislation, which was not, according to Sara Ekström, his preferred tool of power, but also through education, examples and persuasion via spoken and written discourse, performance, and dress.⁹

In 1773, just two years after he became king, Gustav III founded the Swedish Royal Opera, and then several other cultural institutions (including The Swedish Academy in 1786 and The Royal Dramatic Theatre in 1788), showing that culture would acquire a more prominent position during his rule. The opera was to feature as an important medium for boosting Swedish nationalistic sentiment – a way through which the language would be refined and Swedish history and its heroes promoted.¹⁰

⁷ Marie-Christine Skuncke, *Gustaf III: det offentliga barnet: en prins retoriska och politiska fostran* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 1993), 36–39; Nell, 'The Royal Rhetor', 209, 216–217. It was not only the opera and theatre, but also other theatrical events – i.e. events with a performative aspect such as carousels, divertissements, pageants, or public and private audiences – that enabled him to communicate directly with his subjects and thus to 'perform' his political power; see Maria Berlova, 'Playing King', *Nordic Theatre Studies*, 26, 1 (2018), 80–90. [Crossref](#); Maria Berlova and Michael Kroetch, *Performing Power. The Political Secrets of Gustav III (1771–1792)* (London: Routledge, 2021). [Crossref](#).

⁸ Erik Lönnroth, 'Sweden', in *Nationalism in the age of the French Revolution*, ed. by Otto Dann & Rowland Dinwiddy (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1988), pp. 101–112; Mikael Alm, *Sartorial practices and social order in eighteenth-century Sweden: fashioning difference* (Routledge: New York, 2022). [Crossref](#).

⁹ Historian of ideas Sara Ekström analyses these tools of power in Gustav III's politics in her doctoral thesis *All styra genom känslor. Regeringskonst i tre gustavianska projekt 1772–1792* (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2023). Previous scholarship of the Gustavian nationalistic project, mentioned above, is reviewed in her thesis.

¹⁰ Mattsson, *Gustavian Opera*, pp. 15–46.

The king was keenly involved in the visual aspects of spectacle, which later also showed in his ability to imagine and describe designs, sets, and even the choreography that he wanted to put on stage.¹¹ In the same way, he applied this visuality when choosing his own clothing for various occasions. Often, he referred to the clothes worn by his royal predecessors, in order to underline the historical continuity and foster patriotism among spectators, unique even in the international historical context. For instance, his coronation garment in 1772 was not of the fashion of the time, but was inspired by Charles XI's (1655–1697) ceremonial dress (Fig. 1–2).¹² Charles XI was the ruler who re-introduced autocracy in Sweden; hence, through reference to his clothing, Gustav III also was also referring to his future political plans.¹³ Another symbolic moment was Gustav III's departure to fight the war with Russia. The date itself, 23 June 1788, marked the anniversary of Gustav II Adolph's departure for the Thirty Years War in 1630. Furthermore, the king wanted to draw other parallels with the past through his dress and accessories. Swedish count, military man, and politician Fredrick Axel von Fersen described his garment in the following manner:

On this day His Majesty wore his war uniform, with a jacket embroidered like that of Gustav Adolph, over which he carried Charles XII's rapier in a wide bandolier. Charles X's hat with a large bunch of straw as a banner, and a yellow-and-blue cockade too.¹⁴

While the faithfulness of this report, and the exact composition of Gustav III's attire has been since debated by several scholars,¹⁵ there is no doubt his garment referred to the victorious Gustav II Adolph.

Possibly the most famous example of the king's attention to his clothing is the project of the Swedish national costume, a specific kind of attire to be worn by everybody (except for peasantry and priests), which he introduced in 1778 (Fig. 3).¹⁶ Lena Rangström has argued that while the main reasons of this 'costume

¹¹ Which is apparent from his notes about the performances he planned for the court stage, see *MS Konung Gustaf III:s egenhäniga skrifter, Dramatiska arbeten*, Uppsala Universitetsbibliotek Carolina Rediviva, Gustavianska Samlingen, F. 412.

¹² Lena Rangström, *Kläder för tid och evighet* (Helsingborg: Livrustkammaren, 1997), pp. 103–17.

¹³ I am grateful to Jennie Nell who brought my attention to this political connection.

¹⁴ 'H. M. klädde sig denna dagen uti sin krigsuniform, med en jacka broderad lika med Gustav Adolfs, uppå hvilken ett bredt axelgehång bar Konung Carl XII:s värja. Konung Carl X: s hatt med en stor halmtapp till fälttecken och en gul och blå kokard dertill', Fersen 1871: 38, English translation from Berlova and Kroetch, *Performing Power*, p. 130.

¹⁵ Berlova and Kroetch, *Performing Power*, pp. 130–31.

¹⁶ See Eva Bergman, *Nationella dräkten. en studie kring Gustaf III:s dräktreform 1778* (Stockholm: Nordstedt & söner, 1938); Rangström, *Kläder för tid och evighet*, 165–87; Rangström,



Fig. 1: David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl, *Allegory of King Charles XI receiving the government of his mother Hedvig Eleonora*, 1692, Nationalmuseum, NMDrh 126.

Fig. 2: Alexander Roslin, *Gustav III in coronation dress*, 1777, Nationalmuseum, NMGrh 660.

Fig. 3: Pehr Hilleström, *Repas public, Le jour de l'an 1779*, Nationalmuseum, NMDrh 499.

reform' were economic – to boost local production, to free the people from the caprices and expenses of foreign (mainly French) fashion as the king argued in his pamphlet – it had also the clear purpose of creating a sense of unity in his subjects, and most of all, the sense of national identity.¹⁷ This was confirmed by the later historiographical studies of Gustav's national costume project by Alexander Maxwell, Mikael Alm and Sara Ekström.¹⁸

Certain sartorial features of the national costume refer to the Renaissance dress, known also as the Spanish fashion. According to Rangström, these historical and geographical references were not incidental, because, in the patriotic narrative of the time, the Spanish dress in fact had Swedish origins, through the mythological Goth ancestors who travelled all the way down to southern Europe. The folk dress of Scania, similar to the Spanish dress, should have been evidence for this theory.¹⁹ In any case, through this creation, we can see the transnational (and transhistorical) aspects of the dress and costume, typical for Sweden in this period.

Considering Gustav III's skillful self-fashioning and efforts to fashion his entire court and all his subjects, it is no surprise that he also had his own ideas and aims for theatrical costume, which will be analyzed in subsequent sections of this article.

French inspiration in theatre and design

From an early age, Prince Gustav was educated in French culture and was especially fond of French drama, which he had the opportunity to see on stage performed by his mother's French theatre troupe of Jeanne du Londel, and he also performed himself.²⁰ During his stay in Paris between 1770 and 1771, he took in performances at the Opéra, Comédie-Française, and at the court almost daily.

Modelejon: Manligt mode 1500-tal 1600-tal 1700-tal (Vänarmo: Atlantis, 2002); Alm, *Sartorial practices*; Ekström, *Att styra genom känslor*, pp. 95–153. While the project of Swedish national costume was particular, it was not unique. According to Alexander Maxwell, the 'desire for national uniforms emerged in the Late Enlightenment and climaxed during the French Revolution'. He studies these movements, including the Swedish case, in his book *Patriots against Fashion: Clothing and Nationalism in Europe's Age of Revolutions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 80. [Crossref](#).

¹⁷ Rangström, *Modelejon*, pp. 127–42.

¹⁸ Maxwell, *Patriots against Fashion*; Alm, *Sartorial practices*, Ekström, *Att styra genom känslor*.

¹⁹ Rangström, *Modelejon*, pp. 127–38.

²⁰ Skuncke, *Gustaf III: det offentliga barnet*; Marie-Christine Skuncke, *Sweden and European Drama 1772–1796: A Study of Translations and Adaptations*, diss. Uppsala University, *Historia Literarum* 10 (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1981); Agne Beijer, *Drottningholms slottsteater på Lovisa Ulrika och Gustaf III:s tid* (Stockholm: LiberFörlag, 1981); Beijer, *Les troupes françaises à Stockholm, 1699–1792. Listes de répertoire* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1989).

Therefore, we can conclude that Gustav III was very up-to-date with the latest trends in French theatre and design. To follow the French in the arts and to use the French language for communication, was of course not a new thing among the nobility of early modern Europe, and not even in Sweden.²¹ But Gustav III did not only copy the French works; he also aimed to adapt the foreign models for the Swedish cause in a rather sophisticated manner.

The first Swedish-language opera, staged in 1773, *Thetis och Pelée*, was inspired by the famous French *tragédie en musique* from 1689.²² Gustav himself wrote the first draft of the story, as well as the list of costumes, detailing the fabrics, colours, and accessories for each character in the opera.²³ Several other operas in Swedish had plots taken from classical mythology.

In this early period, Swedish architect, designer, draughtsman and engraver Jean Erik Rehn (1717–1793) usually designed the sets and costumes for all the operas and plays. Rehn visited France to study between 1740 and 1745 and then again in 1755.²⁴ His drawings testify to this foreign influence and a conventional shape of costume, similar to the designs of Jean-Baptiste Martin (1730–1763) and early Louis-René Boquet (1717–1814), who were costume designers for the French court theatre and Paris Opera: they feature a wide and rigid *tonnelet*²⁵ and high feather panache for male performers, and wide hoops for women

²¹ See, for instance, Marc Fumaroli, *When the World Spoke French* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2011); French original *Quand l'Europe parlait français* (Paris: Fallois, 2001), quoted in Markovits and Todd, *Staging Civilization*, 2–3; Stefano Fogelberg Rota, *The Queen Danced Alone: Court Ballet in Sweden during the Reign of Queen Christina (1638-1654)* (Turnhout/Tours: Brepols, 2018); Inga Lewenhaupt, 'Slottsteatrarna före den gustavianska tiden', in *Drottningholms slott. Från Hedvig Eleonora till Lovisa Ulrika*, ed. by Göran Alm and Rebecka Millhagen (Stockholm: Votum Gullers Förlag, 2004), pp. 368–95; Beijer, *Drottningholms slottsteater*; Beijer, *Les troupes françaises*.

²² *Thetis och Pelée* premiered on 18 January 1773 at Boolhuset in Stockholm, with music by Francesco Uttini, libretto by Johan Wellander and choreography by Louis Gallodier.

²³ E.g.: 'Pele... l'habit est de Taffita celadon brodde en argent tissus casque diamante manque', 'Jupiter / Habit de satin cramoisi tonnelait de satin jeune mante de satin cramoisi manni-fiquement brodde la couronne tout de diamant manque' [original spelling], in '26. Habits pour l'opéra de Thétis et Pélée', *Konung Gustaf III:s egenhändiga skrifter. Dramatiska arbeten*, MS F. 412, vol. 3, p. 412, Gustavianska Samlingen, Uppsala Universitetsbibliotek Carolina Rediviva; quoted in Mattsson, *Gustavian Opera*, pp. 237–52.

²⁴ Anna-Greta Wahlberg, 'Jean Erik Rehn', *Grove Art Online* (Oxford University Press, 2003). [Crossref](#).

²⁵ The *tonnelet* was a kind of stiff knee-length (or shorter) skirt worn by male performers as part of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century *habit à l'antique* or *la romaine*. Also called the *bas de saye*, the *tonnelet* would imitate the lower part of the Roman military uniform with its pleated skirts, and it would be covered with striped leather *lambrequins*. During the eighteenth century, it became rather rigid, stiffened with paper or heavier fabric.

(Figs. 4 and 5).²⁶ Rehm created designs for *Thetis och Pelée*, following Gustav III's instructions expressed in the lists of costumes, but only one – and indirect – piece of visual evidence was preserved of this collaboration: a scene from the opera depicted on a fire fan (Fig. 6).²⁷ This picture shows still rather conventional costume *à la romaine*²⁸ with a wide *tonnelet* for the man, and a richly adorned dress with a wide hoop for the female figure. Such garments also appear in the costume inventory for the opera. Analyzing this source, theatre historian Rut Eriksson came to the conclusion that the costumes for *Thetis och Pelée* were inspired by designs of Martin, and thus would have been considered old-fashioned in the 1770s.²⁹ This shows that Rehm's concept of stage costume was rather traditional, unaffected by the costume reform that was underway at the time, a theoretical discourse that started to have practical consequences on French stages (Comédie-Française, court theatre and Opéra) in the 1750s.³⁰ The proponents of the reform required a stage costume that would abandon the proprieties of court dress as well as fashionable styles, simplify and reduce the volumes, and instead take inspiration from the dress of the past, other regions or countries. French historian Pierre Frantz connected this shift in thinking about the costume to the new aesthetics of tableau, where theatre was compared to the visual arts and appreciated in a similar way.³¹ In my study of the costume reform, I distinguished different phases of this movement, the first – moderate – wave (1750s–1770s), and the second, more radical, which took place

²⁶ For more about Martin, Boquet and the conventional stage costume of the first half of the eighteenth century, see Petra Dotlačilová, *Costume in the Time of Reforms: Louis-René Boquet Designing Eighteenth-Century Ballet and Opera* (PhD diss., Stockholm university, 2020), pp. 77–101, 181–90.

²⁷ The fan features a verse from Act IV, scene 8 of the opera, two figures on the ground, representing Thetis and Pelée, and one flying on an eagle representing Jupiter, who in that scene utters the depicted verse: “J grymme andar samlens här, att år den dierfve straff bereda” (“Ye cruel spirits gather here, to plan audacity's defeat”). However, since the decoration on the fan is a collage of coloured prints, they might have been recycled from an earlier source – although the depicted garments are certainly stage costumes, and not fashion plates.

²⁸ *Habit à la romaine*, also called *habit à l'antique*, refers to a uniform from the Ancient Roman period, considered in early modern Europe as the most graceful and noble costume, used to dress characters in tragedies that took inspiration from classical mythology and Greco-Roman history. This type of costume emerged in Renaissance Italy, subsequently making its way to other European stages, but its composition and look also changed over time. In early eighteenth-century France, it was composed of *pourpoint* or *corps* – a doublet made of richly embroidered fabric, imitating the breastplate – long decorative sleeves completed with a round skirt called a *tonnelet*, sometimes covered with *lambrequins* or stripes. *Habit à la romaine* was completed with boots called brodequins, and a helmet with a feather panache.

²⁹ Rut Eriksson, *En Kostymhistorisk Studie Kring Kungl. Teaterns Repertoar Från Gustaviansk Tid Till Nationalromantikens Genombrott* (PhD diss., Stockholms universitet, 1974), pp. 56–58.

³⁰ Dotlačilová, *Costume in the Time of Reforms*, pp. 108–65, 221–97.

³¹ Pierre Frantz, *L'esthétique du tableau dans le théâtre du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: PUF, 1998).



Fig. 4: Jean Erik Rehn, Costume design for a warrior, Nationalmuseum, NMH 555/1995.

Fig. 5: Jean Erik Rehn, Costume design for a shepherdess, Nationalmuseum, NMH 553/1995.

Fig. 6: Fire Fan with the motive from the opera *Thétis och Pélée*, The Swedish Royal Palace.

Fig. 7: Pehr Hilleström, *Orpheus och Euridice*, 1773, Royal Swedish Opera archive.

from ca 1781.³² As we will see in the following, the Swedish costume – through the agency of Gustav III – finally developed along the lines of the French costume reform as well.

Moderately reformed design can be observed in a painting from the first performance of Gluck's *Orpheus och Euridice* (1773), probably also designed by Rehn and captured in a painting by Pehr Hilleström (1732–1816) (Fig. 7). Here we can see Orpheus dressed in costume *à la grecque*³³ in the form of a crossed-over tunic in red and gold fabric, long sleeves, trimmed with a fringe and golden embroidered or painted geometric ornaments; Eurydice wears all-white dress in the contemporary shape, adorned with a white veil.³⁴ This kind of costume corresponds with the early phase of costume reform, carried out in practice, amongst others, through the work of designer Louis-René Boquet.³⁵ It consisted of partial inspiration from ancient models and visual arts, and reduced ornamental decoration and fashionable items such as *tonnelets* and hoops (indeed the *tonnelet* does not appear in the costume inventory for this opera). However, it was still not considered appropriate to show naked skin like in the paintings, so long sleeves, breeches, stockings and draperies etc covered performers' arms and legs. The fact that Boquet's work was known in Stockholm during this period can be proved by the presence of many copies of his designs in the Royal Swedish Opera archive. Some of them probably served as models for concrete productions: e.g., twelve preserved anonymous drawings for the opera *Aline, drottning av Golconda* (1776) – a Swedish adaptation of the French piece by Sedaine and Mosigny *Aline, reine de Golconde* (designed by Boquet and premièreed at the Paris Opera in 1766) – are almost identical with Boquet's originals (compare Figs. 8–9 and 10–11).

Given Gustav III's personal involvement in the production of the performing arts in Stockholm, and his familiarity with the French stage, there is little doubt that he directly encouraged such inspiration and the purchase of design models. Therefore, while he actively criticized the imitation of French fashion in everyday dress, following French trends in terms of stage design was more than welcome.

³² Dotlačilová, *Costume in the Time of Reforms*, pp. 108–65, 221–97.

³³ *Habit à la grecque* was a new variety of 'serious' costume, used in tragedies and pastorals inspired by classical mythology, that appeared in the second half of the eighteenth century. It was an alternative to *habit à la romaine*, worn by male and female that were not warriors, but for instance princes, princesses, kings, gods. Its main feature was the fastening of the coat/tunic across the chest, completed with a sash around the waist.

³⁴ These costumes are also described in detail in the inventory from 1792: Orpheus's tunic was made of gold atlas with red paillon, decorated with silver lace and sequins, cape of *feu* (flame-red) atlas with blue paillon and with the same decoration as the tunic; Eurydice's dress was in white silk atlas, veil in gauze from Italy, bodice and petticoat of silver fabric. See Eriksson, *En Kostymhistorisk Studie*, pp. 58–59.

³⁵ Dotlačilová, *Costume in the Time of Reforms*, pp. 221–97.



Fig. 8: Anonymous, costume design from *Aline, Drottning av Golconda*, 1776, Royal Swedish Opera archive.

Fig. 9: Louis-René Boquet, *'Zélie. Dame de la Suite de la Reine de Golconde'*, *Aline reine de Golconde*, 1766, BnF-Op D216 VII-5

Fig. 10: Anonymous, costume design from *Aline, Drottning av Golconda*, 1776, Royal Swedish Opera archive.

Fig. 11: Louis-René Boquet, *'Officiers golcondois'*, *Aline reine de Golconde*, 1766, BnF-Op D216 VII-4

However, the king ‘inherited’ Rehn from his mother, so to speak, and he was always looking out for new talents which he could foster and instruct according to his own vision. Therefore, it did not take long before he tried to engage a new designer as well.

The first Swedish hero enters stage: comédie-ballet Birger Jarl

So, in 1774, a foreign designer was summoned to create sets and costumes for the *comédie-ballet Birger Jarl*.³⁶

This work represents an important milestone in Swedish theatre history because it became the first music-theatrical piece on a subject from Swedish history. While authors Gustaf Fredrik Gyllenborg and Gudmund Jöran Adlerbeth wrote the final version of this play, the first draft was written by Gustav III and preserved among his personal manuscripts.³⁷ This document, written in a mix of Swedish and French, informs the reader not only that the king sketched the story of the play in great detail, including the dialogues, but that he also had ideas about the scenography, stage movement/choreography, and some of the costumes.

Birger Jarl provides an illuminating example of how it combined the old and the new, the French and the Swedish.³⁸ First of all, it took the form of a *comédie-ballet*, or a play with music and dance – a genre which had its heyday in the time of Louis XIV and Molière. More precisely, Gustav took inspiration from Voltaire’s *comédie-ballet La Princesse de Navarre* (1745)³⁹ – this piece was written for the wedding of Louis, dauphin de France to the Spanish Infanta Maria Teresa.⁴⁰ The gen-

³⁶ *Birger Jarl, skådespel i tre akter med sång och dans*, text by Gustaf Fredrik Gyllenborg and Gudmund Jöran Adlerbeth. After Gustav III, music by Henrik Philip Johnsen and Francesco Antonio Uttini, with inserts by Jean-Philippe Rameau, première at Bollhuset 7 July 1774. While the Swedish printed libretto defines the piece as a play with songs and dance, the first draft by Gustav III in French refers to it as a *comédie-ballet*. The title role was performed by Carl Stenborg, and Queen Mechtild by Elisabeth Olin.

³⁷ Gustav III, *Birger Jarl* (1774), in *Konung Gustaf III:s egenhändiga skrifter. Dramatiska arbeten*, vol. 3, pp. 251–85.

³⁸ Although, duchess Hedvig Elisabeth Charlotta, a meticulous commentator of the court life who also performed in the production of *Birger Jarl* in 1783, judged the piece ‘not very interesting’ and even ‘boring’. Cf. Hedvig Elisabeth Charlotta, *Hedvig Elisabeth Charlottas Dagbok*, vol. I 1775–1882 (Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & Söner, 1902), 438 and vol. II, 1783–1788 (Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & Söner, 1903), pp. 1–2.

³⁹ *La Princesse de Navarre, comédie-ballet en un prologue et trois actes avec trois divertissements*, text by Voltaire, music by Jean-Philippe Rameau, première at Versailles, 23 February 1745. The inspiration has been already pointed out in Skuncke & Ivarsdotter, *Svenska operans födelse*, pp. 72–80.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

re was already quite out of fashion by the mid-eighteenth century, but Voltaire used it specifically to pay tribute to the reign of the Sun King. Both the occasion and the mission of *La Princesse de Navarre* might have inspired Gustav III in his choice, because he commissioned it for his brother Duke Charles' wedding. The king-dramaturge adopted the form of Voltaire's piece – a spoken play of three acts with music and dance divertissements, and also some elements of the original plot, including the rescue of a princess/queen, a false identity, and a love story. However, he changed the place and characters: *La Princesse de Navarre* takes place in fourteenth-century Spain, and tells the story of Spanish princess Constance and French noblemen Duke de Foix; Gustav's play is also set in medieval times (around 1261, as the king writes), but recounts the story of Swedish nobleman Birger Jarl (1210–1266), legendary founder of the city of Stockholm, and the Danish queen Mechtild. She hated Birger Jarl out of principle, because he was the enemy of her husband, the Danish king. However, after her husband's death, Mechtild was threatened by the Norwegian king, and Birger Jarl offered her refuge in his castle. During this time, he did not reveal his true identity because he was in love with her, but he also knew how much she hated him. Therefore, the main plot of this *comédie-ballet* is all about seduction: Birger Jarl deploys several strategies to impress Mechtild and make her fall in love with him. In the first divertissement, Mechtild encounters several allegorical and mystical characters who enter the stage through different doors: Venus, Amor and the Graces together with a chorus of Pleasures and Games, who try to convince her of the pleasures of love. After that, a group of Sámi soothsayers and fortune tellers arrive to predict a happy future for her. Here, we can see a parallel with the first divertissement of *La Princesse de Navarre*, where Astrologers and Gypsy ('Bohémien') soothsayers sing and dance. In the second divertissement, Birger Jarl proposes that they perform a little opera together, *Aglé*, in which he plays Apollo dressed as a shepherd, courting the incognito Mechtild as Aglé. This play within play mirrors the main plot and was inspired by another French piece – *Eglé* by Pierre Laujon.⁴¹ In *La Princesse de Navarre*, the second divertissement features Cupid, three graces, and shepherds. Finally, Mechtild falls in love, Birger Jarl reveals his true identity and their happy union is celebrated by all Swedes. In the third divertissement, we see both representatives of the court and of the people: peasants from the central Swedish region of Dalarna and the village Vingåker in Södermanland. This divertissement draws a parallel with the French original, where French, Spanish, Neapolitan and Milanese people rejoice at the union of Constance and Duke de Foix.

⁴¹ *Eglé, ballet héroïque en un acte*, text by Pierre Laujon, music by Pierre Lagarde, premiered at Versailles, 13 January 1748.

In the creation and plot of this *comédie-ballet* we can see both clear inspiration from the French examples and trends and their adaptation into a Swedish / Nordic context. The choice of Birger Jarl was of course symbolic from a patriotic perspective, but it also provided an opportunity to explore the medieval theme, which had become popular on the French stage at the time. During his French stay, the then-prince Gustav not only attended several plays set in the Middle Ages, but also performed himself in a private staging of the new chivalric drama *Gaston et Bayard* (1771) by Pierre Laurent de Belloy.⁴² Furthermore, *Birger Jarl* put various people from across the Swedish kingdom on stage for the first time. All these aspects were a challenge for the stage and costume design which was in dynamic development at the time.

And while it would perhaps have been logical to choose a Swedish designer for this task, such as Jean Erik Rehn, Gustav III decided otherwise. He invited the Italian architect Carlo Galli Bibiena (1728–1778) from the famous scenographic dynasty, who was probably on his way from Italy to Russia, where he was supposed to work for the court theatre of Catherine the Great. Rehn was apparently extremely upset about the employment of this foreigner, and as one courtier wrote in a letter, his angry curses echoed in the castle throughout the entirety of the Italian designer's stay.⁴³ While Bibiena's designs for Birger Jarl were not preserved, one of his designs representing a gothic interior can be found in the Hermitage museum.⁴⁴ Although of an earlier date, we can assume that Bibiena could have created a similar design for *Birger Jarl*, since Gustav III's instructions for the set design in the first act explicitly demanded 'a salon, splendidly decorated in the Gothic taste'.⁴⁵

The costume designs for the play were not preserved either, however, a few notes of the king's handwritten instructions, and most importantly, two inventories survived to inform us about the material substance of the garments.⁴⁶ The first

⁴² Agne Beijer, 'Le Théâtre de Charles XII et la mise en scène du théâtre parlé au XVIIe siècle', in *Revue de la société d'histoire du théâtre*, huitième année, II-III (1956), 197–214.

⁴³ Holger Nyblom, *Gustaf III:s opera. Minneskrift utgiven med anledning av Kungl. Teatern 150-årsjubileum 1773–1923* (Stockholm: G. Tisells tekniska förlag, 1923), p. 74.

⁴⁴ Carlo Galli Bibiena (1721–1784), 'Interior in Gothic style', pen and brush with Indian ink and bistre, 29x43 cm, The Hermitage Museum, inv.n. OP-202. See in museum's digital collection: <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/02.+Drawings/219372/?lng=de>

⁴⁵ 'Le théâtre represente le sallon principale au château de Bielbo orné dans le goût gothique...', Gustav III, *Birger Jarl* (1774), in *Konung Gustaf III:s egenhändiga skrifter*, vol 3, p. 255 (original spelling); 'Theatren föreställer en salon, präktigt utsirad i Göthisk smak.' [Gyllenborg] 1774:1.

⁴⁶ *Inventarium på de kläder som tillhöra piecen Birger Jarl*, MS sig. T.12, Swedish National Library; *Inventarium öfver Kongl. Mindre Theatrens klädes och attributs magazin År 1813*, MS sig. D6C, Royal Swedish Opera archive.

inventory features names of courtiers in most roles, which suggests that it does not record the première in 1774, but a later performance in a private setting (possibly in 1786)⁴⁷; the second, entitled 'Inventarium öfver Kongl. Mindre Theatrens klädes och attributs magazin' was composed in 1813, and lists the costumes for several pieces without indicating the names of the performers. In any case, reading these documents, connecting them with drawings and paintings from the time and with preserved garments from a later period, we can start to decode how these first Swedish characters were dressed on the royal stage.

The entry for Birger Jarl in the first of the inventories mentioned discloses that its performer wore two different costumes in the play: one rather conventional royal garment in red and white, lined with ermine, and the second imitating a knight's armour:

Baron Armfeldt [as Birger Jarl]

1° A costume consisting of crimson silk serge mantle, lined with white taffeta and trimmed with ermine and gold galloons. Coat of silver fabric striped with crimson atlas and golden galloons, trimmed with ermine. Vest of silver fabric with crimson rosettes and golden galloons. Belt of crimson atlas trimmed with ermine. 2° A harness of steel fabric, trimmed around the neck with blue taffeta, yellow vest lined with blue taffeta. Trousers of yellow cloth with cuissards of the same fabric like harness, boots of steel cloth and leather tracks. Uses the same mantle as above.⁴⁸

The second inventory features potentially three costumes for this character, the two detailed above, plus another one which was perhaps the most sumptuous, made mainly from golden cloth, blue silk, silver lace and sequins. The second type of costume – the harness – is made from 'steel cloth', a fabric with silver threads

⁴⁷ A production of *Birger Jarl*, performed by the courtiers, was also staged at Gripsholm Castle in January 1783, and recorded by Duchess Hedvig Elisabeth Charlotta in her diary; however, the cast of this performance was different than the one noted in the mentioned inventory (in 1783, duke Charles played Birger Jarl and princess Sophia Albertina played Matilda). In 1786, the duke was injured, and the king was very close to G.M. Armfeldt, who then played Birger Jarl. Furthermore, the inventory also contains a list of roles (with a cast of professional actors) for the comedy *Tom Jones*, dated 30 August 1786. See Hedvig Elisabeth Charlotta, *Hedvig Elisabeth Charlottas Dagbok*, vol. II, pp. 1–2, 87–106, 464–65.

⁴⁸ 'Baron Armfeldt / 1° En klädning bestående af cramoisie siden sarge kappan, doublerad med hvit taft garnerad hermeliner och guldgalonger. Ofver råken av silfvertyg randad med cramoisie atask och guldgalonger. Hermelins hem. / Under råken av silfvertyg med cramoisie bonsetter och guldgalonger. Ceinturet cramoisie atask med hermelins hem. / 2° Ett harnesk af ståltyg garnerat kring halsen med blått taft, gul klädes väst doublerade med blått taft. / Byxorna af gult kläde med cuissarer af samma tyg som harnesket, stål tygs stoffletter och spår läder. / Nyttjar samma kappa som til foregående klädning.' *Inventarium på de kläder som tillhöra piecen Birger Jarl*, MS sig. T.12, Swedish National Library.

imitating the luster of steel, which was in French called *moire acier*. Over the harness he wore a vest in Swedish colours – yellow and blue. This costume form could be compared, for instance, with the designs by Leonardo Marini (1737–1806), a regular collaborator of Carlo Bibiena in Turin. Marini’s concept of costume was strongly influenced by the costume reform initiated in France, and he even quotes the reformer Jean-George Noverre in his short treatise on costume *Ragionamento intorno alla foggia degli abiti teatrali*.⁴⁹ In his costume drawings (Fig. 12) a new, more faithful version of knight’s harness appears, with ‘armour’ covering the entire body including legs, without the conventional *tonnelet*, and instead featuring a tunic or vest to bear the knight’s coat of arms. Two Swedish costumes from the late eighteenth century, made according to the drawings of Frenchman Louis-Jean Desprez (1743–1804), show how the harness was imitated through fabric, also using silver sequins and the application of papier mâché (Fig. 13).⁵⁰

The second main character of the *comédie-ballet* – the Danish Queen Mechtild – wore a costume appropriate for her status as a widow – a black taffeta dress with a black veil.⁵¹ This, again, corresponds to the requests of costume reformers, who wanted to adapt the garments not only to the geographical and historical provenance of the characters, but also to their dramatic situation, which should be thus more important than their social status. Whilst a black dress for a widow was a common custom in the eighteenth century, it was rather a new phenomenon on the operatic stage. One of the first instances of this mourning dress in opera was that of Thélaïre in 1770 production of *Castor et Pollux*, designed by Boquet (Fig. 14).⁵²

⁴⁹ Leonardo Marini, *Abiti antichi di diverse nazioni di d’Europa e d’Asia, inventati e disegnati da Leonardo Marini Torinese ed eseguiti al Reale teatro di Torino* (Turin: Stamperia reale, 1771).

⁵⁰ For a detailed description of these garments and plays for which they were designed, see Eriksson, *En Kostymhistorisk Studie*, pp. 123–29, Rangström, *Modelejon*, pp. 191–94, Maarit Kalmakurki, ‘The King and his Costumes’, *Theatre Design & Technology*, 53, 4 Fall (2017), 38–51.

⁵¹ ‘Hennes Kongl. Höghet Princessan / En svart atlask klädning. Armarne med crevasser och hvita flors bonsetter. Korseten och kappan garnerade med svart flor.’ [HRH Princess / A dress of black atlas with slashes and white gauze puffs (?). Stays and cape garnished with black gauze.] *Inventarium på de kläder som tillhöra piecen Binger Jarl*, MS sig. T.12, Swedish National Library.

⁵² The drawing is not dated, and *Castor et Pollux* has been restaged at the court and at the Paris Opera several times in 1754, 1763, 1764, 1770, 1772, 1774, 1777, 1778, 1782. The costume list for the performance of 1763 at Fontainebleau prescribes for Thélaïre a typical ‘princess’ dress in white satin with golden embroidery, while the list from 1770 features the black mourning dress. *Programme de Castor et Pollux opera représenté devant leurs Majestés à Fontainebleau le 5 Octobre 1763* and *Programme de Castor et Pollux opéra en 5 actes représenté devant sa Majesté à Versailles le 9 Juin 1770*, Archives nationales O/1/3266. Cf. *Dictionnaire de l’Opéra de Paris sous l’Ancien Régime (1669–1791)*, ed. by Silvie Bouissou, Pascal Denécheau and Françoise Marchal-Ninosque, (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2019), vol.1, p. 715.



Fig. 12: Leonardo Marini, Ubaldo, *Armida*, ca 1771, Biblioteca Reale Torino.

Fig. 13: Anonymous, Gustaf Wasa's 'Steel cloth harness' from the opera *Gustaf Wasa*, 1786, & Ubaldo's costume from opera *Armida*, 1787, The Archive of Swedish Royal House.

Fig. 14: Boquet, 'Thellaire en habit de deuille', *Castor et Pollux*, after 1770, BnF Op D2160-6 (28).

Fig. 15: Boquet, 'Fontainebleau 1765 / Mlle Lany suivante des plaisirs dans Eglé', 1765, BnF Op D2160-6 (61).

The first divertissement was introduced with the entrance of Venus, Amor, Graces, the Pleasures and Games. They were dressed in a rather conventional manner for these characters, in pink, white and blue taffeta dresses, adorned with gauze decoration and flowers. Such allegorical characters appeared often in the French baroque opera, including *Eglé*, which served as one of the inspiration sources for the production of *Birger Jarl*. Drawings by Boquet, created for *Eglé* in 1772 feature similar colour combinations and decorations and might also hint at the way these characters appeared on the Swedish stage (Fig.15). After this tableau, the divertissement featured the entrance of Sámi (or ‘Lapp’, as these characters were called in the libretto) soothsayers.⁵³ Therefore, here we can observe an adaptation of the French model (in *La Princesse de Navarre* Astrologues and ‘Gypsy’ soothsayers appear [Fig. 16]) to the local context. This adaptation shows the alignment of the *Lapp character* with the stereotypical representation of ‘the Other’ or ‘exotic’ characters such as *Gypsy, African, Chinese or Turkish characters* on the European theatrical stages.⁵⁴ However, in *Birger Jarl*, there is no sign, from what can we read in the available sources, that these characters are depicted in a negative or ridiculous way, as was the case in the Finnish theatre in the following century.⁵⁵ In fact, this piece seems to be the first Swedish play where the Sámi people were represented, and the costume inventory shows a certain effort to reflect their typical garments:

Ballet of Lapponians [...]

Costumes consist of grey silk taffeta coat, lined with red, buttonholes trimmed with small silver ribbon, collar of blue taffeta trimmed with 2 rows of silver ribbon. On the sleeves red cuffs (?) with silver galloons. A bodice of skin coloured taffeta, which is tied in the back.

Wide red taffeta trousers.

Red belt with silver galloons and ribbon

⁵³ From the fourteenth century, the Swedish kingdom gradually occupied parts of Norrland (so-called ‘lappmarkerna’), inhabited by the indigenous Sámi people, in order to gain territory and natural resources. Until the mid-twentieth century, the Sámi were generally referred to as ‘Lapps’. See e.g. Lennart Lundmark, *Stulet land. Svensk makt på samisk mark* (Fill in city: Ordfront 2008); Gunlög Fur, ‘Kolonisation och kulturmöten under 1600- och 1700-talen’, in *De historiska relationerna mellan Svenska kyrkan och samerna: En vetenskaplig antologi*, band 1, ed. by Daniel Lindmark & Olle Sundström (Skellefteå: Artos & Norma bokförlag, 2016), pp. 241–82.

⁵⁴ Cf. Joanna Weckman, ‘Creating a “Lapp” Character: Sámi Dress Utilised as Costume in Early Finnish theatre’, *Ethnologia Fennica*, 48, 2 (2021), 41–72 (p. 45). Following Weckman’s example, I use the term *Lapp character* (and equivalent for the other ‘exotic’ characters), in order to highlight the fictional nature of these characters.

⁵⁵ Weckman describes that in the nineteenth- and early twentieth century, ‘Sámi people connoted laziness, dishonesty, and lack of self-discipline... and dirtiness’, *ibid*.

Grey taffeta cap with blue taffeta rim, trimmed with black (?) and sequins.
A chain with medals
6 Sámi drums and sticks⁵⁶

The *Lapp* characters dancing in *Birger Jarl* wore grey coats and hats with a red trim, that could correspond, for instance, to Carl Linnaeus' (1707–1778) 'Lapp' costume, in which he had made his portrait in 1737 (Fig.17),⁵⁷ or to the dress worn by the Sámi man in a Hilleström painting from 1782. They also wore a belt, chain, and medals, and during the dance they played the drum, clearly referencing the rituals which became more widely known thanks to a publication by German scholar based in Sweden, Johannes Schefferus (1621–1679).⁵⁸ Perhaps these drums could have been similar to the one depicted in Linnaeus' portrait. On the other hand, we can also detect a certain elevation in style. The whole garment was made in silk taffeta, adorned with silver ribbons and galloons, while the Sámi original dress of the time featured less luxurious, but warmer and more practical materials such as leather and fur (as described by the Linnaeus), decorated with simple ribbons on the cuffs and hem (as visible on the paintings). The lack of fur in fact distances these characters from a stereotypical representation of 'Lapps' as 'barbaric' and 'wild' people, present in some of the oldest visual sources such as Vecellio's *De gli abiti antichi et moderni di diversi parti del mondo* (1591).⁵⁹

Finally, the last divertissement featured courtiers and people from the Swedish region of Dalarna and the village Vingåker, represented for the first time in this play. The courtiers were all dressed in 'blue and golden costumes', promoting

⁵⁶ 'Balett af Lappar [...] Kläderna bestå af en grå tafts rock i sidorne, röra revens, knapphålen garnerade med smala silfverband, kragen af blått taft garnerad med 2r rader silfverband. På armar röda uppvark med silfver galoner. Ett couleur de chair tafts lif, som knytes på ryggen. / Vida röda tafts byxor. / Ceinturet röft med silfver galon och band garnerat. / Mössan af grått taft med blå tafts kantning, garnerad med svarta ..ljer och pailletter / En kedja med medaille.' *Inventarium på de kläder som tilhöra piecen Birger Jarl*, MS sig. T.12, Swedish National Library.

⁵⁷ Carl von Linné, *Iter Lapponicum = Lappländska resan: 1732, Dagboken; utgiven efter handskriften av Algot Hellbom, Sigurd Fries, Roger Jacobsson* (Umeå: Skytteanska samf., 2003); Carl von Linné, *Lapplandsresan; översättning av latin: Mikael Mosesson & Sara Arvestad* (Göteborg: Mimer bokförlag, 2015); Nellejet Zorgdrager, 'Linnaeus as Ethnographer of Sami Culture', *Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek*, 29, 1 & 2 (2008), 45–76.

⁵⁸ Joannis Schefferi Argentoratensis, *Lapponia, Id est, Regionis Lapponum et gentis nova et verissima descriptio* (Frankfurt: Christian Wolff, 1673); Håkan Rydving, *The End of Drum-time: Religious Change Among the Lule Saami, 1670s–1740s* (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1995).

⁵⁹ Weckman, 'Creating a "Lapp" Character', p. 63, referring to Cesare Vecellio, *Vecellio's Renaissance Costume Book. All 500 Woodcut Illustrations from the Famous Sixteenth-Century Compendium of World Costume by Cesare Vecellio* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1977 [1591, 1598]).

Swedish national colours.⁶⁰ Peasants showing their love for the king is a trope that reappears regularly in poetry and performing arts in general, and so with the first play on the Swedish topic, people from these concrete regions materialize on stage. It should be mentioned that by this period, the region of Dalarna was considered the cradle of the Swedish nation, the home of *pater patriae* Gustav Vasa, and its inhabitants were thought to maintain the ‘natural character’ of their ancestors.⁶¹ The representatives of the two regions are summarized in the inventory under one heading as ‘Peasants’:

Ballet of the Peasants [...]

Ladies’ costumes consist of small blue vests without sleeves, trimmed with silver ribbon. Bodice in red taffeta. Gauze shirt with short sleeves. Red taffeta skirts with blue taffeta stripes, silver ribbon and sequins around the bottom hem. Blue taffeta apron.

Men’s costume consists of white gauze shirts, blue taffeta vests without sleeves, trimmed with silver ribbon. White taffeta trousers, black taffeta apron lined with pink taffeta, black taffeta hat.⁶²

Here too, the inventory suggests a certain elevation in style, differentiating true folk dress from the theatre costume worn at the court theatre. The main fabrics are again silk taffeta, fine gauze, and silver ribbons (while the folk dress would be made of wool, linen and leather). On the other hand, the composition of the costume is clearly different from court dress. The women wear white shirts with short sleeves, red skirts, red bodices, and over that a small vest, which might correspond to the garments depicted in the images of regional folk dress from the period (e.g. Pehr Hilleström’s painting of two women in a festive dress from Vingåker, Fig.18). They also have striped skirts, which is another element of the folk dress, and of course an apron, the universal marker of a peasant woman. More concrete reference to regional dress appears in a later inventory from 1813. Here we find the dress of a performer who sang the solo of a girl from Vingåker, consisting of

⁶⁰ ‘Höfmännen och Hofjungfrurne äro alla i blått och guld klädda men hafva röda och blå band’, Gustav III, *Birger Jarl* (1774), in *Konung Gustaf III:s egenhändiga skrifter*, vol. 3, p. 281.

⁶¹ Berlova and Kroetch, *Performing Power*, pp. 158-159; Ekström, *Att styra genom känslor*.

⁶² ‘Balett af Bond folk. [...] / Damernas kläder bestå af små tafts tröjor utan armar til couleuren blå, garnerade med silfver band. Röda tafts lif. Flors sjortor med korta armar. Röda tafts kjortlar garnerade med blå tafts rander, silfver band och pailletter nedan omkring. Blå tafts förkläder. / Cavalierernes kläder. Af hvita flors sjortor, blå tafts tröjor utan armar, garnerade med silfver band, hvita tafts byxor, svarta tafts förkläder doublerade med rosen rödt taft, svarta tafts hattar.’ *Inventarium på de kläder som tilhöra piecen Birger Jarl*, MS sig. T.12, Swedish National Library.



Fig. 16: Boquet, 'La Princesse da Navarre Fontainebleau 1769 / Chœurs Astrologue', BnF-Op D216 VIII-16.
Fig. 17: Martin Hoffman, 'Carl von Linné in Sámi dress', oil on canvas, 1737, Linnémuseet, Uppsala.
Fig. 18: Pehr Hilleström, Two women in festive dress from Vingåker, Södermanland, 1782, Nordiska Museet.
Fig. 19: Pehr Hilleström, Orpheus och Euridice in 1786, Drottningholm theatre.

a white silk rasé skirt, a 'Wingåkers' jacket – also in white silk rasé, and a woollen braid around her head.⁶³

Featuring both 'modern' trends in contemporary European costume design and their adaptation to the local theme and context, the *comédie-ballet Birger Jarl* stands at the beginning of Swedish national theatre and design. While at this early stage, we cannot speak about the faithful imitation of the folk or regional dress on stage, and particularly the presence of Sámi people can be seen more as a case of exoticism than of anthropological representation, the design for *Birger Jarl* can be interpreted as a genuine effort to give them the symbolic visibility, and also to take an interest in their way of dressing. It is thus the earliest case in Sweden of using theatre costume as a tool – and indeed an indispensable one – to create or reinforce patriotic feelings in the spectators, visualizing both famous historical figures and Swedish people of all classes. The next section will show how this aspect was developed in Gustav III's subsequent theatrical projects.

Desprez and the second wave of costume reform

Gustav III continually developed his project of Swedish national theatre in the following years, with increasingly bolder projects, both in scale and in form. While *Birger Jarl* featured a national hero, the plot largely revolved around a love story, and did not focus so much on his heroic actions. The subsequent operas and plays such as *Drottning Cristina* (1785), *Gustaf Wasa* (1786), *Gustaf Adolf och Ebba Brahe* (1788), *Siri Brahe och Johan Gyllenstjerna* (1788), *Gustaf Adolfs ädelmod eller Märta Banér och Lars Sparre* (1789), *Helmfelt eller den återfunne sonen* (1788) were dedicated to other famous kings, queens, and important events in Swedish history, while pieces like Leopold's and Åhlströms' *Frigga* (1787) addressed a subject from Nordic mythology.⁶⁴ At the same time, several other productions proved that

⁶³ 'B. En kjortel av hvidt rask C. En Wingåkers råck av hvidt rask D. En ylle valk kring hufvudet.' *Inventarium öfver Kongl. Mindre Theatrens klädes och attributs magasin År 1813*, MS sig. D6C, Royal Swedish Opera archive.

⁶⁴ *Drottning Christina, dram i fyra akter*, by J.H. Kellgren after Gustav III, premièred at Gripsholm in 1785; *Gustaf Wasa, lyrisk tragedi i 3 akter*, libretto by J.H. Kellgren, based on Gustav III's draft, music by J.G. Naumann, premièred at the Opera in 1786; *Gustaf Adolf och Ebba Brahe, lyrisk dram i 3 akter*, libretto by J.H. Kellgren after Gustav III, music by Vogler, premièred at Opera in 1788; *Siri Brahe och Johan Gyllenstjerna, drama i 3 akter* by Gustav III, premièred at Bollhuset in 1788; *Gustaf Adolfs ädelmod eller Märta Banér och Lars Sparre, dram med sång och dans i 3 akter* by Gustav III, premièred at Bollhuset in 1789; *Helmfelt eller den återfunne sonen, dram i 5 akter* by Gustav III, premièred at Bollhuset in 1788; *Frigga, opera i 1 akt*, libretto by C.G. Leopold, music by O. Åhlström, premièred at Opera in 1787. The costumes for these pieces are studied in Eriksson, *En Kostymhistorisk Studie*. For a dramaturgical analysis of plays by Gustav III, see e.g. Levertin Oscar, *Gustaf III som dramatisk författare*, 4th ed. (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1920); Nell, 'The Royal Rhetor'.

the Swedish opera was in touch with current trends in European theatre. This tendency is represented by the aforementioned staging of Gluck's reform operas *Orpheus och Euridice* (1773) and that of *Iphigenie i Auliden* (1778) and *Alceste* (1781), but also by productions such as *Aline, drottning av Golconda* (1776), *Electra* (1787), and *Soliman den andre eller De tre sultaninnorna* (1789).⁶⁵

From 1784, the design of the Swedish national theatre was entrusted to the hands of French Louis-Jean Desprez, whom Gustav III hand-picked during his travel in Italy.⁶⁶ According to the contract signed on 28 April 1784 in Rome, Desprez would obtain two assistant scenographers in Stockholm; these were young Swedish artists Carl Johan Hjelm (1771–1826) and Per Estenberg (1772–1848).⁶⁷ With Desprez, a second wave of costume reform arrived in Sweden, practically at the same time as it was introduced on the Parisian stages.⁶⁸ This new style required careful study and closer imitation of historical sources for costumes. Thanks to the large collection of clothes belonging to past Swedish kings, preserved at the Royal wardrobe, Gustav III and his designers were able to take concrete inspiration for the costumes in these historical plays.⁶⁹ Furthermore, they always looked for inspiration abroad as well, which can be demonstrated by the presence of the then-fresh publications *Costumes et annales des grands théâtres de Paris* (1786–1789) and *Recherches sur les costumes et sur les théâtres de toutes les nations, tant anciennes que modernes* (1790) by Jean-Charles Levacher de Charnois in Gustav III's personal library. These publications can be considered as the main medium for the second wave of costume reform, offering extensive visual material for inspiration.

⁶⁵ *Iphigenie i Auliden, tragediopera i 3 akter*, libretto by Du Roullet, translated by C. Manderström, music by Ch. W. Gluck, premièred at Bollhuset in 1778; *Alceste, opera i 3 akter*, libretto by R. Calsabigi, translated by Hertzehjelm, music by Gluck, premièred at Bollhuset in 1781; *Aline, drottning av Golconda, opera i 3 akter*, libretto by Sedaine, translated by C.B. Zibet, music by F. Uttini, premièred at Bollhuset in 1776; *Electra, tragediopera i 3 akter*, libretto by N.F. Guillard, music by J.C.F. Haeffner, premièred at Drottningholm in 1787, and *Soliman den andre eller De tre sultaninnorna*, komedi på vers i 3 akter, by Favart, translated by Oxenstierna, music by J.M. Kraus, premièred at Bollhuset in 1789.

⁶⁶ Barbro Stribolt, 'Louis Jean Desprez. An Introduction' and 'Desprez's Urban Scenes', in Mattsson, *Gustavian Opera*, pp. 123–38; Magnus Olausson, 'Desprez, Louis-Jean' in *Grove Art Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Accessed 5 April 2023.

⁶⁷ Fredrik-August Dahlgren, *Anteckningar om Stockholms Theatrar. Förteckning öfver Svenska Skådespel uppförda på Stockholms Theatrar 1737–1863 och Kongl. Theatrarne Personal 1773–1863 med flera anteckningar* (Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & Söner, 1866), p. 426.

⁶⁸ Dotlačilová, *Costume in the Time of Reforms*, pp. 157–63, 286–96.

⁶⁹ See Eriksson, *En Kostymhistorisk Studie*; Kalmakurki, 'The King and his Costumes'; Anna Kjellsdotter, 'The Royal Swedish Opera Costume Collection and Gustavian Dress', *Dance Body Costume. Prospektiven 2*, ed. by Petra Dotlačilová & Hanna Walsdorf (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2019), pp. 187–212.

When it comes to costuming work on subjects from Antiquity, the development of style can be best observed in the well-known painting by Hilleström, capturing the revival of *Orpheus och Euridice* in 1786 (Fig.19). Compared with the painting from 1773, we can see that the characters now wear a new form of 'Antique' dress, consisting of simple tunics and ornamental decoration *à la grecque*. The new Greek and Roman costume can be observed in detail in copies of Desprez's designs for *Elektra* from 1787 or those for the revival of *Thetis och Pelée*, probably from 1791.⁷⁰ We can see the 'reformed' style of the costumes, which is expressed through the limited decoration of garments and diminished volume of skirts, the generally vertical line of the silhouette and simple headdresses. In fact, such costume differs considerably from what Kalmakurki described as the 'conventional theatrical heroic costume', because it does not contain the seventeenth-century invention of the *tonnelet*, hoops and a high feather panache.⁷¹

As mentioned above, Gustav III was interested in historical dress well before the arrival of Desprez; it could be even said that he was in step with the first wave of costume reform when it came to applying its call for putting historically more accurate costumes into practice. The most typical expression of this interest was the invention of the so-called Burgundian costume. Kalmakurki found that the earliest example of the Burgundian costume dates from 1760, when the king ordered a 'Burgundisk karouselldräkt' for one of his plays.⁷² Later visual sources, such as Alexander Roslin's painting of a scene from the play *La Partie de chasse de Henri IV* (1770) or Hilleström's depictions of the famous carousels, organized by Gustav III in the 1770s, show the form of Burgundian costume: slashed doublet, short baggy breeches with silk pulled through the slits, and a cape, in various colour combinations (grey and white; gold and blue; green and pink). Several examples of this garment were even preserved in the Swedish Royal Armoury archive, including the luxurious version in golden cloth and blue satin worn by Gustav III for the famous carousel at Adolph Fredrick Square (today's Mariatorget) in 1777;

⁷⁰ These drawings are collected in the so-called Nordfors's album, preserved in the Opera's archive. Even if anonymous, Rut Eriksson showed that they are most probably copies of Desprez drawings made by C. J. Hjelm. See Eriksson, *En Kostymhistorisk Studie*, p. 20. Maarit Kalmakurki attributed these drawings to Jean Erik Rehn (see 'The King and his Costumes', pp. 38–40), but Eriksson's attribution seems more likely, considering the style and the period.

⁷¹ Besides, Kalmakurki's full description of this garment is 'conventional theatrical heroic costume seen across Western Europe since the late Renaissance', by which she dismisses the development of costume in ca 300 years, during which the heroic costume in fact took several forms – especially during the eighteenth century. While the original inspiration for the Roman soldier's uniform might be the same, the expression of this costume onstage differed in the shape, materials, amount and kind of decorations and accessories.

⁷² Kalmakurki, 'The King and his Costumes', pp. 43–44.



Fig. 20: [after Louis-Jean Desprez], costume drawings for Gustaf Wasa and Severin Norrby in *Gustaf Wasa* (1786), Royal Swedish Opera archive.

this garment was in the event programme, written by the king, and referred to as ‘old Swedish’ (*‘gammalt Svenska’*).⁷³ The Burgundian – but really old Swedish – costume thus has several similarities with the Swedish national dress, introduced in 1778 and discussed above: the slash-like details on the sleeves, or the wired collars. This is certainly not a coincidence; the historical points of reference were the same – the periods of Gustav Vasa and Gustav II Adolph – developing the project of building a sense of Swedish national identity through visual references to Sweden’s famous history.

This project continued in the following period in a more direct way; when Gustav III staged the aforementioned plays and operas on an event from Swedish history, he required the appropriate costuming. Rut Eriksson has analyzed Desp-

⁷³ Rangström, *Kläder för tid och evighet*, pp. 145–46; Kalmakurki, ‘The King and his Costumes’, pp. 43–45.

rez's designs and inventory notes, which show the use of the Burgundian costume for all productions with Swedish heroes, from *Gustav Vasa* to *Helmfelt*.⁷⁴ At the same time, the designer differentiated between various characters through cuts and colours used. For instance, in the opera *Gustaf Wasa* (Fig. 20), which features Swedish and Danish courtiers and knights, the knights wore armour executed in steel fabric, while the courtiers wore a Burgundian costume; furthermore, all the Swedish representatives wore (apart from black) yellow and blue detailing, while the Danish wore red and black. In these designs, we can observe the female variant of the historical costume, featuring stripes, slashed sleeves, and lace-wire collars.

Gustav III's project of building national identity through opera and theatre ended abruptly, with his assassination at the ball at the Opera on 9 March 1792. After that, theatrical activity decreased rapidly, and several of the artists protected and proclaimed by the king suddenly lost their privileged position. Louis-Jean Desprez's contract as 'director of decorations' at the Royal Theatre expired in 1798, after which it was not renewed and he died in poverty six years later. However, his contribution to Swedish design – bringing contemporary design trends to Sweden and their adaptation in convergence with the patriotic ideas of Gustav III – cannot be denied. His pupil Carl Jacob Hjelm (1771–1827) continued Desprez' legacy as a designer for the Royal Swedish Opera in the following decades.

Conclusion

Through his cultural policy, the Swedish king Gustav III aligned himself with the long tradition of European rulers using theatre as an important tool for promoting both their political and personal agendas. Using costume as a means to communicate his ideas was clearly a conscious choice by the king, considering how he tried to fashion himself – and his subjects – through ceremonial and national garments, how he wrote costume lists for performances and carefully chose his designers.

However, as theories of cultural mobility and transnational history have taught us, cultural identities are usually hybrid, formed by 'the complex "flows" of people, goods, money, and information' that are 'endlessly shifting social landscapes'.⁷⁵ This becomes strikingly clear in Gustav III's national opera and theatre project, which was directly inspired by foreign and especially French models, theories and practices, yet with the pronounced ambition of creating new Swedish theatre. The first opera in Swedish *Thetis och Pelée*, and the first music-theatrical piece on a

⁷⁴ Eriksson, *En Kostymhistorisk Studie*, pp. 123–32.

⁷⁵ Greenblatt, *Cultural Mobility*, p. 1.

subject from Swedish history *Birger Jarl*, were created based on the French *tragédie en musique* and *comédie-ballet* model, and with music composed by the Italian Francesco Uttini (1723–1795), who came to Sweden in 1754 with an Italian opera company. Later on, the king brought new musicians to Sweden from Germany such as Johann Gottlieb Naumann (1741–1801) and Joseph Martin Kraus (1756–1792), to develop his Swedish opera project. Hybridity in music, taking inspiration from and merging Italian, French, German and Austrian styles, seems to be typical for early Swedish opera.⁷⁶ Scenographers were also invited from Italy, but in terms of costume design, the French style was the most influential in Europe, and Gustav III followed the reform developments in this area, applying the new principles of costume design to his theatre. The choice of collaborators and of repertoire often shows that the king was well up-to-date with the latest developments on the European art scene; Gluck's reformed operas, as well as the new genre of *opéra-comique*, were performed in Stockholm rather early on in a European context.

At the same time, it was important for the new national opera and theatre to take their subject matter from Swedish history, putting on stage peoples from various parts of the Swedish kingdom, and considering Swedish historical and regional clothing. Admittedly, we cannot speak about the anthropological representation of these people and their dress on stage, since Gustavian theatre applied a certain degree of aesthetic stylization, as used on the European stages, more or less, until the late nineteenth century.⁷⁷ However, the historical figures and people of Sweden were given a visibility through these stage works, and were thus included in the narrativity of the nation.

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⁷⁶ Cf. Mattsson, *Gustavian Opera*.

⁷⁷ Veronica Isaac, "'Re-Dressing The Part": The Scenographic Strategies of Ellen Terry (1847–1928)', in *Scenography and Art History: Performance Design and Visual Culture*, ed. By Astrid von Rosen and Viveka Kjellmer (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 141–164.