

## ***A Sense of Jane Austen – dress & history***

The English author Jane Austen (1775–1817) is perhaps best known for the books *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*. The women in her novels are privileged, but also economically dependent. With humour and irony, Austen criticized the restricted role of women in her day, and several of her female characters break the strict rules of etiquette.

This exhibition shows costumes from film versions of these three novels. Through encounters with both female and male characters, the exhibition tells us about lifestyle and conditions in the English upper class around 1800 – the world in which Jane Austen’s novels are set.

The exhibition is on show in the Textile Hall in the Lund Hall.

### **Jane Austen (1775–1817)**

***“He & I should not in the least agree of course, in our ideas of Novels & Heroines;—pictures of perfection as you know make me sick and wicked...”***

From a letter from Jane Austen to her niece Fanny Knight, 23 March 1817

Jane Austen lived during a period of upheaval in British history. The time from 1760 to 1820 saw major changes as a consequence of the industrial revolution. Social development was also affected by the dramatic events in France, which began in 1789 with the storming of the Bastille, and the Napoleonic Wars which ended with the Battle of Waterloo in June 1815.

As early as the 1790s Jane wrote the drafts of three novels at her home in Steventon, Hampshire. At the same time she made her debut in society and attended balls. Thanks to good connections, the Austen family socialized with people above their own class. They mixed with local landowner families, and Jane Austen’s elder brother Edward inherited a large fortune and several properties from childless relatives. Jane no doubt understood that her own economic situation was vulnerable, as the unmarried daughter of a vicar who would not leave any large inheritance.

When her father retired in 1800, Jane moved with her sister Cassandra and her parents to Bath. After his death, the financial situation became troublesome. For several years the sisters and their mother were in practice homeless, moving between different spa towns and relatives’ homes. In the years 1800–1809 Jane wrote very little compared with before. In 1809 when the two sisters with their

mother moved into a house belonging to their brother Edward in Chawton, Jane appears to have regained her inspiration.

We do not know very much about Jane Austen's life or the forces that drove her. She left no diaries, and of the roughly 3,000 letters that she wrote during her lifetime, only about 160 are preserved. It is likely that the straitened economic circumstances after the father's death prompted her to find a publisher for the books. *Sense and Sensibility* was published in 1811. It was followed by *Pride and Prejudice* two years later, *Mansfield Park* the year after, and *Emma* in 1815. During her lifetime Jane Austen earned only 630 pounds from her books. After Jane's death *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were also published (both in 1818) and much later *Lady Susan* (1871).

Jane Austen's books all end in marriage, but they are so much more than entertaining love stories. They are about how people relate to each other, about frustration, prejudices and power. Jane Austen's sharp pen, her humour and ironic stance, still give pleasure to readers today.

## **Upbringing, birth & ideals**

***"Birth and good manners are essential; but a little learning is by no means a dangerous thing in good company; on the contrary, it will do very well."*** From *Persuasion*

The social game and differences in status between people is an ever-present theme in Jane Austen's novels. It was essential to know one's place and one's rank in society. Almost all those who did not belong to the landed gentry aspired to emulate them.

The children's schooling was important, but upbringing and accomplishments were considered more important than formal education. Both girls and boys were brought up to exercise self-control in keeping with the morality of the time, and to be a source of advantage and honour for their family and for their class. A good upbringing, elegance, tact and finesse were important – for males and females alike.

## Education & accomplishments

***“...over the mantelpiece still hung a landscape in coloured silks of her performance, in proof of her having spent seven years at a great school in town to some effect.”*** From *Sense and Sensibility*

Around 1800 there was a change in the view of children and upbringing in the upper and middle classes. Children had previously been viewed as unfinished miniatures of adults, but now they were increasingly regarded as individuals in their own right. Play began to be viewed as significant for children's development, but it was still believed that upbringing prepared children for their roles as adults. A child's education began at the age of about eight. Both girls and boys could be sent to boarding schools, or taught in the home by tutors or governesses.

There was a great difference in the upbringing and education of girls and boys. The schooling of upper-class daughters was chiefly intended to make them attractive on the marriage market and give them the accomplishments they needed to conduct themselves in the drawing-rooms of the social elite. Learning to read and write in a beautiful hand was essential. A knowledge of elementary mathematics was needed so that a married woman could manage the household accounts. Girls were schooled in singing and music, painting, dancing, embroidery and needlework, and languages such as French and Italian. They were also considered to need a basic knowledge of subjects such as botany, literature and history, not least so that they could easily converse in social situations. A deeper knowledge of science, history, classical languages or theology was reserved for boys.

## Ladies & gentlemen

***“...besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions.”***

***“His appearance was greatly in his favour; he had all the best part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and very pleasing address.”***

From *Pride and Prejudice*

Around 1800 upper-class persons were expected to combine a pleasant manner and good upbringing with the accomplishments typical of their sex. The feminine ideal was a modest, tranquil and “natural” young beauty, while the masculine ideal was a sporting gentleman who behaved with dignity and honour in all situations.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century the upper-class ideals had been influenced by the thinking of the Enlightenment. “Naturalness” became the new ideal. An artificial appearance and behaviour had previously been viewed as a sign of refinement, but now this became unseemly in

both women and men. The “natural” body that the upper class strove for differed significantly from the labouring body of the lower classes. A muscular torso with a bent and broad back reflected physical labour, unlike a more slender body with an upright, narrow back.

Bodily defects were regarded as a sign of poor character, which meant that an elegant posture was very important for women and men alike. Girls were drilled from an early age to walk with an erect back and take such short steps that it appeared as if they were gliding forward. Young men improved their stance through fencing, which also taught the desired gracious movements. This kind of training also gave shapely legs which were shown off in the tight trousers that were in fashion at the time.

## **Visits & rituals**

***“I suppose you will not like to call at the Great House before they have been to see you?”***

From *Persuasion*

When a daughter was allowed to accompany her mother on a visit to neighbours and acquaintances, it was a way to let the world understand that the girl was of marriageable age. Visits were a part of everyday life and a well-established ritual among the upper class, in both town and country. Between eleven and three o’clock was a suitable time to pay a call. Ladies often did needlework during the visit; it was considered elegant and appropriate to do embroidery or make lace. On the other hand, it was not good manners to darn stockings or sew clothes in front of guests.

A good hostess served coffee, tea, snacks, fruit or cake during the visit. The call was not supposed to last too long – anything from fifteen minutes to half an hour was socially acceptable. If the master and mistress of the household were not at home, the visitor left a calling card. It was considered extremely impolite not to return a call within a short time. In *Pride and Prejudice* Jane Bennet waits two weeks for Caroline Bingley to return her visit. When Miss Bingley finally comes, she stays for just a short while – that too a sure sign that their former friendship is at an end.

## **Leisure & pastimes**

***“The Mr. Musgroves had their own game to guard, and to destroy, their own horses, dogs, and newspapers to engage them, and the females were fully occupied in all the other common subjects of housekeeping, neighbours, dress, dancing, and music.”***

From *Persuasion*

Upper-class women were expected to devote most of their time to household matters, the men to physical outdoor activity. For both sexes, letter writing and reading were considered suitable pursuits. Women should ideally read “edifying literature” while men read newspapers or historical literature and novels. While women embroidered, painted watercolours, decorated hats or played music, men dedicated their time to hunting and shooting, to their hounds and horses.

Walks, excursions by horse and carriage, and riding were suitable outdoor activities for both sexes. Walking was a healthy pastime, and good for the complexion, provided the weather was fine, of course. Moreover, strolls could give unmarried young women and men a chance for private conversation without any stain on their reputation.

Really wealthy women and men had considerable amounts of spare time every day. The servants took care of all the work in the household, cooked and served the food, did the laundry, took care of horses and hounds, looked after parks and gardens, and managed transports. Younger sons who had not inherited property and money were forced to provide for themselves and their families. In these families the men’s leisure time was restricted by their occupation and the women’s spare time depended on how many servants the household could afford. For upper-class men there were only four truly respectable professions: law, the church, the army and the navy.

## **In honourable company**

***“A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!”***

From *Pride and Prejudice*

Jane Austen had a keen eye for tact and etiquette. Important elements in all her novels are gossip, rumour and people’s honour. Women in particular had good reason to preserve their honour. It was not socially acceptable for a young unmarried woman from the upper class to be alone with a gentleman.

Marriage gave women an opportunity to have a home of their own where they would be provided for, and this was therefore the goal for most young upper-class women. A woman's status was determined by the man she married. Women without a fortune had poorer chances of marrying.

## Balls & scandals

***“To be fond of dancing was a certain step towards falling in love; and very lively hopes of Mr. Bingley's heart were entertained.”***

*From Pride and Prejudice*

Balls gave an opportunity to meet potential marriage partners. Privately arranged balls were the finest, but almost every town had assembly rooms where public balls were held. These were open to anyone who could afford a ticket.

Young women often made their debut in society at a ball. On the dance floor women and men could flirt and converse, under the watchful eyes of the spectators. The rules of etiquette were strict. A man could not invite a woman to dance unless they had been formally introduced, and he was expected to escort the lady back to her company after the dance.

It was considered impolite and humiliating to decline a man's invitation to dance and then accept another partner. If a woman definitely did not wish to dance with a man, she had to excuse herself by saying she was tired or the like, and then refrain from dancing for the rest of the evening. It was not suitable to have more than two dances with the same man, and only married couples danced the waltz because this required the couple to hold each other.

Breaches of etiquette resulted in gossip and possibly scandal. For an unmarried woman it meant that she could not expect a good match. A married woman was her husband's property, and if she was unfaithful the husband could take the lover to court and receive large sums of money in damages. The time around 1800 in Britain is known as “The Age of Scandal”. Several members of the royal family, the nobility and the celebrities of the day were involved in scandals of infidelity, and the newspaper gossip columns were full of these.

## **Dinners & socializing**

***“Another stupid party last night; perhaps if larger they might be less intolerable, but here there were only just enough to make one card table, with six people to look over, & talk nonsense to each other.”***

From a letter from Jane Austen to her sister Cassandra, 12 May 1801

A large number of dishes were served at elegant dinners. Between five and twenty-five dishes could be on the table at the same time. Soups, fish dishes, aspics, poultry and meat of different kinds alternated with pies, egg and vegetable dishes, sauces and various pastries and desserts.

The American Louis Simond, who visited England at the start of the nineteenth century, described a dinner as follows: *“The master and mistress of the house sit at each end of the table ... the mistress at the upper end – and the places near her are the places of honour. ... I shall venture to give a sketch of a moderate dinner for ten or twelve persons. ... First course: Oyster Sauce, Fish, Fowls, Soup, Vegetables, Roasted or Boiled Beef, Spinage, Bacon. Second Course: Creams, Ragoût à la Française, Pastry, Cauliflowers, Game, Celery, Macaroni, Pastry. Dessert: Walnuts, Raisins and Almonds, Apples, Cakes, Pears, Oranges. ... Soon after dinner the ladies retire, the mistress of the house rising first, while the men remain standing. Left alone, they resume their seats, evidently more at ease, and the conversation takes a different turn – less reserved – and either graver, or more licentious.”*

While the ladies conversed, the gentlemen indulged in port and tobacco. When they were finished, they joined the ladies. Tea and coffee were served in the drawing room, and the ladies were expected to provide entertainment with music and singing. Card games and elegant conversation were a natural feature, and in less formal situations sometimes parlour games as well.

## **Women & property**

***“Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor – which is one very strong argument in favour of matrimony.”***

From a letter from Jane Austen to her niece Fanny Knight, 13 March 1817

The women in Jane Austen’s novels are privileged, but also economically dependent. Without a fortune of her own an unmarried woman was at the mercy of her male relatives’ benevolence and financial support. Becoming a lady’s companion or a governess was the only way for respectable women to support themselves.

A woman who married was not legally competent. She could not enter agreements, sign contracts or wills, yet she was usually the person responsible for the household economy. The assets or fortune a woman might have brought into the marriage became her husband's property, unless otherwise agreed in a prenuptial settlement. It was common for part of the woman's dowry to be put away in the hope that the earnings could provide for the widow and under-age children if her husband should die.

An unmarried woman or widow who came of age at 21 could control her own money and property as long as she remained single. Many wealthy widows had no shortage of suitors but chose not to remarry because they would once again lose their legal competence. They could, however, need a male guarantor to handle their business and bank contacts.

## **Weddings & marriage**

***“Without thinking highly either of men or matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only provision for well-educated young women of small fortune.”***

*From Pride and Prejudice*

For women marriage was a way to ensure a living. A woman was dependent on a man – a father, brother or husband – to provide for her. A good match was important for both parties, but also for their respective families. The more money and property, the greater the necessity of a suitable marriage. It was particularly important that the eldest son of the family, who often inherited everything, married a suitable woman. Marriage ensured the family's wealth, status and survival – provided a male heir was born.

Marriages of convenience were being replaced at this time by romantic marriage. Yet it was considered inappropriate to be passionately in love, as this was not a stable foundation for a marriage. Instead the parties were expected to aim for a pleasant and comradely relationship. It went without saying that a woman was subordinate to her husband, and that she not had had sex before marriage.

Marriage was a lifelong undertaking, and divorces were very uncommon. If a woman had been unfaithful it was grounds for a man to seek a divorce, but not vice versa. If a woman chose to leave a marriage she had no rights whatever.

## Clothes & consumption

***“Their eyes were immediately wandering up in the street in quest of the officers, and nothing less than a very smart bonnet indeed, or a really new muslin in a shop window, could recall them.”***

*From Pride and Prejudice*

At the end of the eighteenth century Britain was a great colonial power with vigorous trade and a nascent industrial revolution. This brought greater prosperity for the upper middle class, and many families who engaged in commerce and industry became very wealthy. They showed off their riches through status symbols such as big houses, more servants, exclusive carriages, fashionable clothes, furniture and other possessions. This led to a great increase in the number of shops and stores – shopping became a popular pastime.

Fashions changed radically during Jane Austen’s life. New materials and techniques caught on. The success of the British textile industry was due to a combination of technical inventions and ruthless exploitation of underpaid labour. Cotton became cheaper through slave labour on plantations in the southern states of America, and imports of silk from France stopped during the Napoleonic Wars.

The great interest in classical antiquity was reflected in fashions, and the mostly light-coloured dresses worn by women were intended to resemble Greek tunics. Around 1800 upper-class English women had adopted the new fashion of a high waistline just under the bust and a full-length skirt with a hint of a train. Fashion-conscious men wore a knee-length riding coat, waistcoat, shirt and cravat, riding boots and long trousers. Knee breeches were considered old-fashioned after the French Revolution but were still worn in formal situations and by older men.

In the exhibition *Dressed-up – Female Fashion 1730–2000*, one floor above in the Textile Hall, you can see dresses from Jane Austen’s time belonging to the Kulturen collections.