

Fashion and the world of the women of the VOC official elite

Liza-Mari Coetzee
University of Johannesburg
lizamari.coetzee@gmail.com

Abstract

During the early modern period material culture increasingly started to serve as symbols of identity and status rather than merely fulfilling a basic need. One example of such possessions that was particularly relevant for demonstrating social position was clothing. By using markers of distinction such as clothing, individuals could affirm or reaffirm their identities and could denote an association with a certain status group. At the Cape, this means of distinction was employed by the social elite that consisted of a small group of senior officials with the Governor at the head. The Governor was appointed by the VOC and in all cases but one, was not locally born. Equally, many members of the VOC elite were temporarily stationed at the Cape and would return to Europe or move to another VOC station at the end of their tenure, most often taking their wives and daughters with them. The aim of this article is to discuss women belonging to the VOC elite of Cape society and to determine whether these women maintained their status through the use of status objects (in particular clothing and other items used for personal adornment). The second aim of the article is to assess what effect this use of clothing as a symbol of status had on the social consciousness surrounding the importance or unimportance of particular objects. The article will also aim to determine how these women in the top echelons of Cape society influenced and determined what types of fashion, dress and accessories were seen as status objects.

Keywords: Conspicuous consumption; VOC; Women; Cape Town; Clothing; Fashion; Cape Colony; Eighteenth century.

Introduction

From about 1630 the apparel of women became an important factor in European society. As the desire for outward shows of wealth increased, wealthy burghers had their wives wear clothing that emphasised the leisure which

her husband's wealth gave her.¹ According to an influential article by Georg Simmel, fashion arose as a form of class differentiation in a relatively open/mobile class society so that the elite could set themselves apart by markers such as a distinct form of dress. This in turn resulted in subordinate classes copying these markers in their efforts to identify with the superior class.² As in early modern Europe, the same trend appears to have developed in the newly settled colonies, among others, the Cape of Good Hope. This trend became more markedly obvious as the wealth of the colony increased in the course of the eighteenth century due to the expansion of the local economy. Early in 1755, Ryk Tulbagh received a "plakaat" from Batavia describing the extensive sumptuary laws promulgated by the Governor-General of Batavia, Jacob Mossel, in December of the previous year.

Because of these Batavian laws and the excessive display within the Cape, Governor Ryk Tulbagh promulgated a series of sumptuary laws adapted for the situation at the Cape. These measures were passed to control the display of pomp and thus regulate the "proper" order of society.³ The regulations were in response to circumstances in which, in the opinion of the Hoge Regering in Batavia (who first promulgated the sumptuary laws), excessive display led to individuals "[losing] respect for their betters, and above all those who, though of a higher and more prominent station than they, are not possessed of greater means and so must bear the insupportable from such wastrel Company servants, burghers and other inhabitants".⁴ Therefore the aim of sumptuary legislation was to draw a clear line between those inhabitants of the Cape of Good Hope and other VOC territories whose positions allowed for pomp and show and those who had delusions of grandeur; the "nouveau riche" of the day.

The aim of this article is to determine to what extent the same phenomenon of using clothing as a marker of distinction occurred in the Cape Colony. This will be done by looking at the social world of Dutch women in colonial society, especially as is applicable to VOC women at the Cape. Case studies of women belonging to the VOC official elite will be analysed in order to determine what role these women played in early colonial society as purveyors

1 H Freudenberger, "Fashion, sumptuary laws and business", *The Business History Review*, 37(1-2), 1963, p. 40.

2 H Blymer, "Fashion: From class differentiation to collective selection", *The Sociological Quarterly*, 10(3), 1969, pp. 275-91.

3 R Ross, *Status and respectability in the Cape colony, 1750-1870: A tragedy of manners* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 9.

4 JA van der Chijs, *Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakkaatboek, 1602-1811* (16 volumes) (Batavia & The Hague, Landsdrukkerij & M Nijhoff, 6, 1885-1897), pp. 773-774.

of fashion. Finally, the article will look at how this role as purveyors of fashion changed over time as the Colony grew and became more prosperous. By drawing from these various sources the article will uncover the impact that women of the VOC official elite had on fashion and the conspicuous use thereof in the Cape Colony.

Dutch women in the colonial world

The settlement of Dutch trading posts in the East and at the southern tip of Africa meant that ideas concerning the role of fashion in displaying status were exported to other parts of the world. Dutch culture and social practices remained, initially at least, similar to what they had been in the Netherlands. Initially there was a substantial sex imbalance in the Dutch settlements. Few women accompanied their husbands to the colonies, and most of those who did returned with their husbands to Europe after their period of service. In the establishment phases of the Dutch colonies there were no family ties that bound either Dutch men or women to the colonies. This, however, changed over time. By the mid-seventeenth century in Batavia the wives of senior officials were often from among the immigrant society, born to European parents or to European fathers and local Batavian women or slave women brought to Batavia from either India, the Arakan coast, or the Indonesian archipelago.⁵

What is important, however, is that both the locally born women of European parentage and the women who formed part of the “mestizo” population grew up in a society governed by Dutch practices. In the colonies Roman-Dutch law remained applicable, as were many of the cultural practices of the Dutch, along with some locally adopted practices. Women and men born in the Dutch colonial world would therefore have followed Dutch social practices while having strong economic and family bonds to the colonies. In Batavia, as with other Dutch outposts in the East, many of the locally-born sons of VOC officials would return to the Netherlands to complete their education before returning to re-establish family ties.⁶ It is this development of a uniquely local population with Dutch governance and a settled character which led to a more established society essential for the development of social hierarchy.

5 JG Taylor, *The social world of Batavia: Europeans and Eurasians in colonial Indonesia*, 2 (London & Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), p. 35.

6 R Raben & U Bosman, *Being Dutch in the Indies: A history of creolisation and empire, 1500-1920* (Southeast Asia Program Publications at Cornell University, 2008), p. 57.

The colonial elite in Batavia were an example of this intermixing of the local Asian society that converted to Christianity with the colonial official elite. Nicolaus de Graaff noted of the elite women in Batavia:⁷

The extreme splendour (sic) and hauteur with which the women in Batavia – Dutch, Mestiza and Half-caste too – display especially upon going to and from church... for on such an occasion each is decked out more expensively than at any other time... Thus they sit by the hundreds in church making a show like lacquered dolls. The least of them looks more like a Princess than a burgher's wife or daughter, so that Heaven itself is filled with loathing, especially as they go and come from church, when even the most inferior has her slave follow behind to carry a parasol or sunshade above her head against the fierce heat. Many of these have great hanging silk frops embroidered with golden dragons and ornamental foliage.

As colonial society became more settled, the importance of social hierarchy became more pronounced as can be seen in the quote from de Graaff above. He stresses that these women were not only Dutch, but that they were also of mixed race descent. Under Dutch law all women acquired the nationality and status of their husbands, which is why women of Asian parentage could gain European status when marrying European men. The same holds true for the Cape where women of mixed parentage were taken up in European society.⁸ Marriage registers show that it was more common for European men to marry women of mixed parentage born at the Cape than freed slave women from elsewhere.⁹ This can perhaps be attributed to the fact that these women were already versed in the complexities of a colonial society with a distinctly Dutch character.

Although the earliest stage of colonisation of both the East and the Cape resulted in miscegenation, this decreased over time as more and more women of European birth moved to the colonies or were born there to settler parents. Scholars like Anne Stoler have argued that another important characteristic of women in a colonial situation was the fact that European women were agents of imperial culture in their own capacity, even if they did not have any political position. Therefore, these women, either born in the colonies and raised with Dutch values, or newly settled within the colonies, would act as “regulators of culture” in society, whether it be regarding economic, social or any other values important to them. Therefore, the arrival of European

7 JG Taylor, *The social world of Batavia...*, p. 41.

8 JG Taylor, *The social world of Batavia...*, p. 49.

9 HF Heese, *Groep sonder grense* (Protea Boekhuis, 2005), pp. 25-27.

women directly coincided with the “embourgeoisement” of colonial society.¹⁰ This means that European women in effect became regulators of social status and hierarchy, establishing what and who was socially acceptable. As such they strongly influenced social practices in the colonies.

Seventeenth-century Dutch women were in some respects an oddity of their time. Compared to women of other European countries, Dutch women were allowed a much freer existence in both a social and a legal sense. So different was the social conduct of seventeenth century Dutch women that Fynes Moryson, an English traveller who toured Europe, was shocked to find that Frisian women were allowed to assume control over the family budget, among other things.¹¹ What was perhaps even worse in his view was that Dutch women were allowed many more social liberties than their European contemporaries. The greater social liberties permitted to Dutch women can be attributed to many factors; one being the legal status of Dutch women compared to other European women. Thus Joseph Shaw in 1709 opined during his travels in the Netherlands that “being better provided for by the laws of their country than in other nations [they] are not forced to trust to their wits, nor put on those poor pitiful shifts to jilt mankind and bubble their husbands for money”.¹²

The legal provisions made for Dutch women as referred to by Shaw date from the Middle Ages, enabling women to, among other things, inherit property in their own right. Although Dutch thought on the legality of private property was not as liberal as today, provisions were made for the protection of a woman’s possessions. For example, although the property of a Dutch woman formally came under her husband’s legal authority, women retained the right to a reversion of property ownership. This would happen in situations where the husband died and a woman could retain her possessions as well as those personal items belonging to her such as clothing. Furthermore, it usually happened that the law saw property acquired during the marriage as having joint ownership, belonging to both the husband and wife.¹³

10 AL Stoler, “Making empire respectable: The politics of race and sexual morality in twentieth-century colonial cultures”, A McClintock, A Mufti & E Shohat (eds). *Dangerous liaisons: Gender, nation and postcolonial perspectives* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 351.

11 S Schama, *The embarrassment of riches: An interpretation of Dutch culture in the Golden Age* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987), p. 403.

12 S Schama, *The embarrassment of riches...*, p. 404.

13 S Schama, *The embarrassment of riches...*, p. 405. For a fuller discussion of this, see A Schmidt, *Overleven na de dood: Weduwen in leiden in de Gouden Eeuw* (Amsterdam, Prometheus / Bert Bakker, 2001), Chapters 3-4.

A woman's property was also protected from a husband who squandered her part of the estate, or if she felt that he was mismanaging it or abusing his right as guardian of the property. Furthermore, unmarried women who fell pregnant could sue the child's father, either to get the father to marry the pregnant woman or to provide a dowry for the pregnant woman in order for her to marry someone else. The father could also be forced to pay the costs for the delivery of the child and could even be obliged to pay towards the child's maintenance.¹⁴ Dutch women were also very much part of the merchant system. With their husbands' permission they could obtain the authority needed to make commercial contracts and notarise documents. This was even more prevalent among widows who took over their family's business dealings upon the death of their husbands.¹⁵

The VOC official elite at the Cape

In Western Europe, sumptuary laws were common with regard to dress, dating back as far as Carolingian times. In 1279, even the Pope fulminated against the "immodest ornamentation" of his flock and by the mid-fourteenth century sumptuary laws existed in almost every country in Western Europe. In the Low Countries, however, dress codes had not existed, and only one edict regarding extravagant dress was issued in Flanders in 1497. This changed when the Dutch started establishing outposts in the East. Dress now became a way of distinguishing those who held power from those who did not. Additionally, the Dutch rulers of Batavia did something their confreres in the Republic never did and laid down a major sumptuary law in 1754. This issuing of sumptuary legislation replaced six previous edicts that were issued over the course of the previous century and aimed at reducing the splendor and display of the people living in Batavia and other towns under the control of the VOC.¹⁶

Sumptuary legislation had far-reaching practical implications, to the point that these laws regulated not only the display of wealth but even the apparel of people. These regulations were not completely alien but emanated in part from the social structure of colonial Dutch society. There were various attempts to

14 S Schama, *The embarrassment of riches...*, p. 405. For more on this topic, see van M der Heijden, *Huwelijk in Holland: Stedelijke rechtspraak en kerkelijke tucht, 1550-1700* (Amsterdam, Bert Bakker, 1998), Chapter 6.

15 S Schama, *The embarrassment of riches...*, p. 407.

16 R Ross, *Clothing, a global history* (Polity Press, 2008), p. 41.

regulate display throughout the history of VOC settlements, although at the Cape this would only become a problem in the second half of the eighteenth century.¹⁷ During this time there was a growth in the consciousness of rank and status in the Netherlands, a fact which filtered through to the small community at the Cape.¹⁸ The influence of Dutch ideas and culture on the colonial outposts of the VOC is supported by a recent analysis of the Dutch culture in Asia which demonstrated that being culturally Dutch remained the most important elite qualifier throughout the eighteenth century.¹⁹ Elite status could not be bought but could be acquired through conspicuous consumption of goods associated with elite Dutch culture. As most of the VOC official elite at the Cape of Good Hope were not born at the Cape, and many first served in the East before coming to the Cape and returned to the Netherlands upon retirement, there is reason to suggest that the display of “Dutch” (as opposed to colonial) culture was an important qualifier of belonging to the elite. Schutte writes that:²⁰

Even when certain official families had settled at the Cape, sometimes for generations, they retained the stamp of belonging to the Company rather than to the citizenry. This was particularly true of officials in higher ranks; among the lower ranks there seems to have been a stronger inclination to settle.

At the Cape there were a large number of VOC officials (including soldiers) who outnumbered the adult male burghers until well into the eighteenth century. In fact it was only around 1755 that the number of male adult free burghers exceeded the number of officials.²¹ There was great differentiation in rank and status among the officials at the Cape. According to Schutte the gap was pronounced between the different officials, with an enormous gap existing between a councillor of India and a bookkeeper, and a colonel and a surgeon; even if all of them had the prestige of being listed on the Roll of the Qualified (“Rolle der Gequalificeerden”).²²

17 R Ross, *Status and respectability in the Cape colony, 1750-1870: A tragedy of manners* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 14.

18 K Schoeman, *Dogter van Sion: Machtelt Smit en die 18e-eeuse samelewing aan die Kaap, 1749-1799* (Kapaastad, Human & Rousseau, 1997), p. 29.

19 R Ross & A Schrikker, “The VOC Official Elite”, N Worden (ed.), *Cape town between east and west: Social identities in a Dutch colonial town* (Johannesburg & Hilversum, Jacana & Verloren, 2012), p. 27.

20 G Schutte, 1989, “Company and colonists at the Cape, 1652-1795”, R Elphick & H Giliomee (eds), *The shaping of South African society, 1652-1840* (Cape Town, Maskew Miller Longman, 1989), p. 297.

21 For example, in 1732 there were 1 016 VOC officials (including soldiers) but only 717 adult male free burghers at the Cape, G Schutte, “Company and colonists at the Cape...”, R Elphick & H Giliomee (eds), *The shaping of South African society, 1652-1840...*, p. 295.

22 G Schutte, “Company and colonists at the Cape...”, R Elphick & H Giliomee (eds). *The shaping of South African society...*, p. 296.

The number of high and middle ranking officials at the Cape increased threefold from about 30 to 90 in the eighteenth century. The highest position a Company servant could attain was membership of the Council of Policy, a body consisting of the “Secunde” (deputy governor), the fiscal, cellar master, the secretary of the council, the cashier, the warehouse master and the master of the garrison, all of whom were presided over by the Governor.²³

The VOC divided its employees according to rank as well as position. An individual’s rank referred to a combination of his work, function, salary and status. For example, Jan van Riebeeck was head of the Cape settlement and was referred to as the Commander (“Commandeur”). His rank, however, was that of a Merchant which refers to his position in the Company hierarchy, as well indicating his salary bracket. In reality there were three groups or hierarchies, reflecting the various branches of the VOC’s activities: from soldier to general, from sailor to captain at sea, and from scribe to governor-general.²⁴

The occupants of these posts and their families were the top of the elite in Cape society and were treated accordingly, and in later years their position as such was protected by the sumptuary legislation. The status of high-ranking officials was further reinforced by the day-to-day rituals and practices of society. An official with the rank of Merchant or Senior Merchant could immediately be recognised by his dress.²⁵ Senior Merchants were allowed to wear velvet clothing and Junior Merchants were permitted to wear silver or gold shoe buckles. More important for the purpose of this article is the dress of the wives of high-ranking officials. Ladies of high social ranking could also be distinguished by the clothing and jewellery they wore, which after 1755 was also regulated by sumptuary legislation. According to Ross it is “perhaps because the public world of the Cape was so exclusively male [that] the distinctions of rank were stressed particularly by the elite women of the Colony”.²⁶ Because women could not hold public office they instead expressed their rank through the use of highly conspicuous goods such as clothing. Women could not break away from the status of the men in their lives, be it fathers or husbands, except in the event of widowhood when they could become the heads of their own independent households.²⁷

23 R Ross & A Schrikker, “The VOC official elite...”, N Worden (ed.) *Cape town between east and west...*, p. 28.

24 TANAP, “Introduction to the resolutions of the council of policy of the Cape of Good Hope” (available at www.tanap.net, as accessed on 8 April 2014).

25 R Ross & A Schrikker, “The VOC official elite...”, N Worden (ed.) *Cape town between east and west...*, p. 35.

26 R Ross, *Status and respectability in the Cape colony...*, p. 15.

27 R Ross, *Status and respectability in the Cape colony...*, p. 16.

Women and status at the Cape

The dependency of women in Cape society on the rank of either their husbands or fathers is expressed in OF Mentzel's writings on the culture of the Cape Colony. Of the women he writes:²⁸

Should a woman meet a number of other women whom she did not know before, she would talk affably with them, but sooner or later impress upon them, unconsciously perhaps, that she must be treated with the consideration that her husband's rank, or perhaps her own conceit, entitle her to.

He later adds:²⁹

A & B were, as girls, the closest friends – more than sisters to each other. Both were daughters of under-merchants [i.e. junior merchants], but A had social precedence over B because her father was senior in rank to B's father. Both married under-merchants but B's husband was senior in standing to A's. All at once B's presence became hateful to A. Their long friendship was at an end. A avoided B whenever she could; she would not go to any function where B was expected. Nothing that B had done was responsible for this change in A's attitude. The fact was that by marriage their social status had changed. B had now precedence over A because of her husband's rank, and A could not become reconciled with the change. Most ladies hold that A's conduct was right and proper; that there was no other way; to me it all seems very petty.

A final example of the importance of rank to especially women is this description by Peter Kolb, who lived in the Cape between 1705 and 1713:³⁰

... dat't ceremonieel wegens den rang alhier, en door gantsche Indie, veel stipter nagekomen word als in Europa; aangezien niemand den anderen zal wyken als zyn rang hem de bovenhand geeft; de wyfjes zyn voornamelyk in dit stuk oplettende, en ten eersten op haar paardje als zy zien dat eene andere aan't hogerend zit die zo hoog in rang niet is als zy.

Mentzel sheds further light on the social interaction between women:³¹

Formality governs the interchange of visits among the ladies of the town. Among them social distinctions are sharply graded; pomp and circumstance play a leading role in determining rules of etiquette. Before one lady will visit

28 OF Mentzel, *A geographical-topographical description of the Cape of Good Hope*, Part 2 (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 1925), p. 108.

29 OF Mentzel, *A geographical-topographical description of the Cape of Good Hope...*, p. 107.

30 P Kolb, *Naaukeurige en uitvoerige beschrijving van de Kaap de Goede Hoop* (Amsterdam, Balthazar Lakeman, 1727), 2, p. 301. Translation: There is ceremony in rank here, as in the entirety of the Indies. It is followed much more strictly than in Europe since no one will deter if his rank gives him the upper hand. The women especially are particular about this and are the first to defend their honour if they see someone of lower rank placed higher than themselves.

31 OF Mentzel, *A geographical-topographical description of the Cape of Good Hope...*, p. 107.

another due notice of her intentions is given; etiquette demands that as well as commonsense, since the other party must be given an opportunity to receive her visitor in proper state. At no place, however, in the whole world are the minutiae of calling so elaborately worked out and so slavishly followed as by the ladies of the Cape.

Mentzel writes that although society at the Cape was relatively small and for that reason different social classes mixed freely, he was still mindful that “social distinctions [were] sharply graded”. In VOC Cape Town there existed a heightened awareness of status and rank, sharply accentuated by the variety of different ranks and positions that existed within the town. Worden asserts that the main reason for the existence of this need to constantly defend one’s identity was the constant influx of newcomers and strangers in the settlement. In this transient society it was essential to defend one’s position, especially as it was susceptible to change in a fluid society such as that which existed at the Cape in the early eighteenth century.³² As is illustrated in Mentzel’s description of the deterioration of the relationship between girls “A” and “B”, consciousness of social position was strictly adhered to. Furthermore, although it is not mentioned directly, the piece suggests how important appearance was to someone who received a visitor since she needed proper notice in order to receive her guest in the “pomp and circumstance” of the day. The importance of a woman’s appearance is impressed upon the reader when Mentzel subsequently writes that upon the caller’s return home she would report on “how her friend looked”.³³

Senior VOC officials were, with the exception of Hendrik Swellengrebel, never born at the Cape, and rarely settled there after they retired from their posts.³⁴ These senior officials tended to be closely linked to networks in the East and the Fatherland which made them different from settled burgher society at the Cape. These trade and familial networks placed senior VOC officials and their wives in positions gatekeepers of European goods, news and fashion at the Cape. VOC officials and their wives used this access to, and knowledge of, European fashion and goods to reaffirm their dominance in the social hierarchy. According to Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption, which argues that highly conspicuous goods are used in order to gain status, there are two motives for their consumption. The first is individual comparison,

32 N, Worden, “Public brawling, masculinity and honour, N Worden (ed.), *Cape town between east and west: Social identities in a Dutch colonial town* (Johannesburg & Hilversum, Jacan & Verloren, 2012), p.196.

33 OF Mentzel, *A geographical-topographical description of the Cape of Good Hope...*, p. 107.

34 Even Swellengrebel moved to the Netherlands with his family upon retirement.

which is the use of conspicuous goods by members of a higher class in order to distinguish themselves from the lower classes. That this form of consumption was practised at the Cape in relation to clothing and other forms of personal adornment is clear from the sumptuary legislation of 1755, which limited the wearing of certain types of clothing to the VOC official elite.

The second motive for the conspicuous consumption of goods is “pecuniary emulation”, which is the consumption of conspicuous goods by members of a lower class in order to be associated with the members of a higher class. Sumptuary legislation at the Cape suggests that this form of conspicuous consumption through emulation must have occurred as restrictions were placed on the types of materials the lower classes were allowed to wear. The sumptuary legislation of 1755 determined that:³⁵

No women below the wives of junior merchants, or those who among citizens are of the same rank, may wear silk dresses with silk braiding or embroidery, nor any diamonds nor mantelets [a short cloak]; and although the wives of junior merchants may wear these ornaments, they shall not be entitled to allow their daughters to wear them. All women, married or single, without distinction are prohibited, whether in mourning or out of mourning, under penalty of 25 rixdollars, to wear dresses with a train.

The importance of fashion to those women who did not belong to the elite can be gleaned from the writings of the burgher woman, Hester Venter, who was born in 1750. Her family lived close to what was then the frontier of the Colony, but even in this isolated location her writing demonstrates how pervasive the importance of clothing was, and that there was a deep-rooted belief that a person’s appearance went hand-in-hand with their status:³⁶

Namate my jare van twaalf en dertien verbygaan, het die weke gemoedsgesteldhede van my kinderjare verdwyn. Ek het so sonder gedagte in die wêreld voortgegaan, ja, sou ook al die prag en die modes wou nagevolg het as my geringe staat so iets toegehelp het, maar ek kon dit nie regkry nie. My ouers was arm, en my vader het my skerp verbied om mee te doen en ons streng in orde gehou.

The desire of the lower classes to emulate their social superiors is further supported by the evidence in a letter written from an unknown writer to

35 SD Naudé & PJ Venter (eds), *Kaapse Plakkaatboek III, 1754-1786* (Cape Town, Cape Times, 1949), p. 12.

36 K Schoeman (ed.), *Die Suidhoek van Afrika: Geskryfte oor Suid Afrika uit die Nederlandse tyd, 1652-1806* (Pretoria, Protea, 2002), p. 80. Translation: “As my twelfth and thirteenth year passed, so did the weak feelings of my childhood. Without thought I went through the world, yes, I would have liked to follow the beauty and fashions of the day if my poor state allowed it, but I could not. My parents were poor and my father strictly forbade me to take part in it”.

Hendrik Swellengrebel junior in 1779. In the letter the writer complains that:³⁷

No one is interested in work and everyone, even in the lowest classes, wants to live in luxury. This cannot last. Money is getting scarcer and scarcer. Wealth consists in paper money, houses, slaves and furniture, and frivolous French finery among the women ...

Women, prestige and fashion

That the wives of senior officials saw themselves as being of superior social position is suggested by Mentzel when he writes: “Wives of lesser officials and of wealthy burghers are not so narrow in their outlook as the ladies of high degree”.³⁸ The distinction between the “ladies of high degree” and those who were socially below them was performed through the dress and possessions of the socially influential. In order to maintain the social hierarchy it was important for the men and women of the VOC official elite to assert their position through the use of highly conspicuous goods, a privilege which was protected through sumptuary legislation. The most important aim of the protection of status and rank for the VOC was to maintain the impression of the power and prestige of the Company in the eyes of its lower-ranking officials.³⁹ In order to do so, the use of conspicuous goods by those of lower rank was restricted.

Clothing, being one of the items restricted by the sumptuary legislation, was an important tool for the establishing of the social precedence of the VOC official elite and their wives. Besides this, the wives of VOC officials had greater opportunity of accessing the newest fashions from Europe via the VOC’s extensive trade network. This enabled high-ranking women to acquire the latest fashions, which would trickle down to the lower ranks as affluent members of society attempted to imitate the newest styles. Since much of the clothing worn was hand-made at the Cape, copying the newest style of dress did not depend on importing ready-made clothes; instead it relied on the skill of the individual. John Barrow gives some insight into this process when he writes of Cape women in the 1790s:⁴⁰

37 GJ Schutte (ed.), *Briefwisseling van Hendrik Swellengrebel Jr. oor Kaapse Sake, 1778-1792* (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 1982), p. 318.

38 OF Mentzel, *A geographical-topographical description of the Cape of Good Hope...*, p. 108.

39 K Schoeman, *Dogter van Sion...*, p. 29.

40 K Schoeman, *Dogter van Sion...*, pp. 234-235.

They are expert at the needle, at all kinds of lace, knotting and tambour work, and in general make up their own dresses, following the prevailing fashions of England brought from time to time by the female passengers bound to India.

In the same way other visitors “en route” to the East would aid the diffusion of fashions from Europe, especially French styles which were particularly favoured by the women at the Cape during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Cornelis de Jong, who resided in the Governor’s house at the Cape in the 1790s and who subsequently came into contact with the highest echelons of Cape society, later writes of the women of the VOC official elite:⁴¹

Alles is te rijk; wetende dat zij zooals alle vrouwen, tooisel noodig hebben, vindt men haar zelden ongekappt of zonder opschik. De strikjes, de linten en gazen zijn met veel zorg en overleg geplaat.

Despite the relatively small size of the settlement at the Cape, there was occasion enough for prominent women to show off the newest fashions. Celebrations were held at the Castle on special occasions, among them the birthday of the Governor and the Prince of Orange. These events would be attended by high-ranking officials and prominent free burghers and would be grand affairs with a feast, music and dancing. Of the women, Le Vaillant writes in 1790 that he was “surprised to see that the women dress and adorn themselves with the same fastidious elegance as our French ladies, but they have neither their style nor their graces”.⁴² Le Vaillant adds further that the women at the Cape were “mad about dancing; thus rarely a week passes without several balls taking place”,⁴³ thus ensuring that sufficient social occasions existed for display by the elite. The social precedence of the VOC official elite and their wives ensured that they took precedence at all social and state occasions at which times they used clothing as a qualifier of their status, and it is for this reason that we find excessive amounts of elaborate clothing in the primary sources pertaining to the VOC official elite.

41 K Schoeman, *Dogter van Sion...*, p. 242. Translation: Everything is too rich; knowing that all women need pretty things, one rarely finds her without adornment. The bows, ribbons and meshes are placed on their person with great care and deliberation.

42 F Le Vaillant, *Travels into the interior of Africa via the Cape of Good Hope*, translated and edited by Ian Glenn with the assistance of Catherine Lauga Du Plessis and Ian Farlam (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 2002), 1, p. 17.

43 F Le Vaillant, *Travels into the Interior of Africa...*, 1, p. 17.

Juffrouw Anna van Kervel: The Governor's daughter

One of the few visual sources we have of the clothing of important individuals at the Cape is a scene of the sinking of the ship the *Visch* on 5 May 1740. The ship entered the bay at night and was wedged between the rocks it struck. According to Mentzel, as soon as it was light the Governor and the other chief officials hastened to the spot where the ship had ran aground. The most notable members of Cape society were congregated on the beach, among them the daughter of the late Governor van Kervel, Anna van Kervel, who is referred to by Mentzel as the “jonge Juffrouw”; “Juffrouw” being a title that was only given to daughters of socially prominent families.⁴⁴ Besides Anna van Kervel, the picture captures the backs of various other notable individuals. It was painted from a sketch made on the spot by a painter in the employ of Governor Swellengrebel, making it a valuable primary source for shedding light on the clothing of influential individuals at the Cape in the eighteenth century.⁴⁵

Image 1: Painting of the stranding of the *Visch*, 1740



Source: D Strutt, *Fashion in South Africa, 1652-1900* (Cape Town, A Balkema, 1975), pp. 100-101.

⁴⁴ OF Mentzel, *Life at the Cape in the mid-eighteenth century: Being the biography of Rudolph Siegfried Allemann* (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 1919), p. 126.

⁴⁵ D Strutt, *Fashion in South Africa, 1652-1900* (Cape Town, A Balkema, 1975), p. 78.

Governor van Kervel arrived at the Cape in 1708 and served in a variety of high-ranking positions. Upon the death of Governor Noodt in 1729, Jan de la Fontaine was named governor and van Kervel was promoted from the position of “Pakhuismeester” and Merchant to that of “Secunde”.⁴⁶ In 1736 de la Fontaine applied to resign his post as Governor at the Cape and return to the Netherlands. This permission was granted on 20 July 1737. Subsequently van Kervel was named as Governor of the Cape and took over the position on 1 September.⁴⁷ Unfortunately his term of governorship was short-lived and van Kervel died after only four weeks in his post. Although his wife died soon afterwards, it would seem some members of his family remained at the Cape for a few years. His eldest daughter, Anna van Kervel, who is depicted in the painting only returned to Holland in 1741 where she married Jacob van Meerdervoort.

Although Anna van Kervel was not the then current Governor’s daughter, she still retained a position of social precedence as befitted her rank at the Cape. Also, Mentzel suggests that Governor van Kervel was a popular man, and the respect due to her father would have accrued to Anna. At the time of the sinking of the *Visch*, Hendrik Swellengrebel was the Governor at the Cape but as his children were still very young, it is very probable that Anna van Kervel was still one of the higher ranking women in the colony. This is indicated by the fact that over her head a slave holds a “kiepersol”, a type of sun shade that was seen as a rare symbol of status. Its general use was in fact forbidden by Simon van der Stel in 1687.⁴⁸ The sumptuary legislation of 1755 limited the use of parasols to such an extent that out of a population of around 12 000 Europeans at the Cape, no more than 50 men and their wives were allowed to use one.

Despite the fact that Anna van Kervel did not remain at the Cape for long after the painting of the sinking of the *Visch*, her presence in the portrait gives a great deal of insight into the dress of a fashionable lady of the day. Born in 1717 while her father was posted at the Cape, Anna van Kervel would have been 23 at the time of the sinking of the *Visch*, an age at which she could influence fashion and dress – an influence that Mentzel underscores when he writes of her that she “possessed such unusual understanding that one could not but regard her with the utmost esteem and admiration”. Comparing her

46 OF Mentzel, *Life at the Cape in the mid-eighteenth century...*, p. 92.

47 OF Mentzel, *Life at the Cape in the mid-eighteenth century...*, p. 105.

48 CG Botha, *Social life in the Cape colony in the 18th century* (Cape Town, Juta, 1926), pp. 61-62.

to other girls and women at the Cape, Mentzel claimed that she “surpassed them all”.⁴⁹

The painting of the sinking of the *Visch* is however not the first reference to Anna van Kervel. In the diary of the Lammens sisters of Zeeland, which recorded their stay-over at the Cape in 1736, mention is made of an invitation from Anna van Kervel whose father was at this time still the “Secunde”. The sisters were picked up by the Van Kervels’ carriage and taken to the “Secunde’s” house for tea. In their diary they refer to the 19-year old Anna as “a most dear and pretty young girl”. It seems as if these women got along very well as Anna “honoured” them with a return visit the next evening, playing away at card games till late in the night, and also on the following night before the Lammens sisters continued on their journey to Batavia.⁵⁰ Clearly, then, by the turn of the 1730s, the young “juffrouw” van Kervel was at the centre of fashionable society in Cape Town, such as it existed in the small outpost.

Anna van Kervel and the other women depicted in the scene were in vogue with fashions all over Europe. All the women seem to be wearing hoops beneath their dresses. The hoop replaced the rump (bustle), moving away from the back of the gown to form a voluminous skirt which was stiffened by the insertion of cane or whalebone. The hoop only appeared in England in 1711, when a writer for the English “Spectator” mockingly wrote that he thought the woman wearing a hoop of whalebone “near her time [of giving birth...] but soon discovered all the modish part of her sex as far gone as herself.”⁵¹ Although considered to be a ridiculous fashion at the time by some, it nonetheless spread quickly and widely; so much so that by 1736 Joachim von Dessin ordered whalebone hoops for his wife and seven-year old daughter.⁵² The painting of the sinking of the *Visch* suggests that the fashion of wearing hooped skirts was already firmly entrenched by 1741. The women in this painting wear clothing that would have been in fashion in Europe the same year, with the exception of the French “sacque” which was popular in Europe between 1710 and 1750.⁵³ Instead it would seem that elite women at

49 OF Mentzel, *Life at the Cape in the mid-eighteenth century...*, p. 105. Compare C Pretorius, *Al laggende en pratende: Kaapse vroue in die sewentiende en agtiende eeu* (Cape Town, Human & Rousseau, 1998), pp. 58-59.

50 ML Barend-van Haefen (ed.), *Op reis met de VOC: De openhartige dagboeken van de zusters Lammens en Swellengrebel* (Zutphen, Walburg Pers, 1996), p. 101.

51 D Strutt, *Fashion in South Africa...*, p. 67.

52 JLM Franken, “n Kaapse huishoue in die 18de eeu: Uit von Dessin se briefboek en memoriaal”, *Argief Jaarboek vir Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis*, 3 (Cape Town, Cape Times, 1940), p. 18.

53 JLM Franken, “n Kaapse huishoue in die 18de eeu...”, *Argief Jaarboek vir Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis*, 3 (Cape Town, Cape Times, 1940), p. 78.

the Cape preferred the equally fashionable alternative to the “sacque”, which was a dress with a fitted bodice worn over a hooped skirt. Aprons were very popular at the Cape in the first half of the eighteenth century with many of the women in the painting wearing them as items of ornamentation rather than as utility items.⁵⁴ Aprons could be both long and short and could accompany almost any style of gown.

Anna van Kervel is dressed in a green and white striped dress with pleated cuffs across the bend of her arm. Striped material was popular for informal wear at the time.⁵⁵ Although we cannot see the front of Anna van Kervel’s ensemble, all women of the time wore some form of kerchief to cover the décolletage of their gowns. Her entire outfit suggests the peak of fashion.⁵⁶ On her head she wears a pinner with lappets, decorated with green ribbons and a red bow which matches her red stockings and shoe ribbons. The style of the wide pinner with lappets that Anna van Kervel is wearing is copied by the three other ladies depicted on the painting; a fact which according to Daphne Strutt might suggest that Anna van Kervel made the particular form of headwear fashionable.⁵⁷

From the painting of the *Visch* it would appear that the elite of Cape Town were up-to-date with the fashions in Europe. The fact that the women all wore similar clothing suggests that they either copied visitors to the Cape or women who were exposed to the prevailing fashions in Europe; which would not have occurred in Europe to the same degree as there was a greater variety of styles and fashions to influence their choice.

Anna Fothergill-Swellengrebel: Second lady of the Cape

Johannes Balthasar Swellengrebel was the son of a German merchant who was born in Moscow in 1671, entered the service of the VOC in 1692 and was stationed at the Cape in 1697. He was very successful in the employ of the VOC and became a member of the Council of Policy at the Cape, which is indicative of the position and status he held there. Swellengrebel was married at the Cape to Johanna Cruse.⁵⁸ She was the daughter of Jeronimus

54 JLM Franken, “n Kaapse huishoue in die 18de eeu...”, *Argief Jaarboek vir Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis*, 3, p. 117.

55 JLM Franken, “n Kaapse huishoue in die 18de eeu...”, *Argief Jaarboek vir Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis*, 3, p. 78.

56 C Pretorius, *Al Laggende en Pratende...*, p. 59.

57 D Strutt, *Fashion in South Africa...*, p. 79.

58 GJ Schutte (ed), *Briefwisseling van Hendrick Swellengrebel...*, p. 26.

Cruse who earlier had been a member of the Council of Policy. Their eldest son, Hendrik Swellengrebel, was born in 1700, entered the VOC's service in 1713 as an assistant and was nominated to the Council of Policy in 1724. He became Governor of the Cape in 1739 and served in this position until 1751 before retiring to the Netherlands.⁵⁹

Individuals born into burgher society were not easily taken up into the VOC official elite. According to Schutte: "Of the ninety-four officials employed in the central administration in Cape Town in 1779, forty-eight were of Cape birth; however, they were all sons of VOC officials."⁶⁰ This fact in itself illustrates the importance of family ties for the promotion of individuals in the Cape. The Swellengrebel family is a prime example of one of the few Cape families who were able to convert their colonial wealth into a position of governing elite when Hendrik Swellengrebel became the first and only locally born Cape Governor. What is, however, significant is that his father and cousin were both employed by the VOC; his father as a Junior Merchant, while his cousin acted as "Secunde" at the height of his career, an illustrious position for another Cape-born son.⁶¹

Wealth opened the way into the VOC elite for the Swellengrebel family. The use of wealth in conspicuous ways was necessary for establishing the status of an individual and with the familial background of the Swellengrebels it would have played an even more important role in validating their social position. During Hendrik Swellengrebel's term as Governor the importance of public display and ritual is underscored by the number of people he employed in his personal retinue, as well as the functions these individuals fulfilled. Hendrik Swellengrebel's retinue consisted of a chef, a baker, a painter, three hunters, two tailors, a shoemaker and a household servant.⁶² What is interesting to note is that three out of the nine servants mentioned here were involved in the outfitting of the Governor's person, a fact which gives some insight into the importance of clothing to an individual of high rank. Hendrik Swellengrebel was not the only one of his family to invest in clothing. Sergius Swellengrebel, cousin to Hendrik Swellengrebel and "Secunde" at the Cape, and his wife acquired a large amount of clothing throughout their lives.

59 WJ De Kock and DW Kruger, *Dictionary of South African Biography*, 2 (Cape Town & Johannesburg, Tafelberg, 1972), p. 726.

60 K Schoeman, *Here en boere: Die kolonie aan die Kaap onder die Van der Stels, 1679-1712* (Pretoria, Protea, 2013), p. 157.

61 R Ross and A Schrikker, "VOC official elite...", N Worden (ed.) *Cape town between east and west...*, p. 37.

62 K Schoeman, *Dogter van Sion...*, p. 29.

In order to appreciate the social and economic aspects of a member of this family, probate inventories may be consulted, which contain detailed information on the material life of the individual. The deceased estate inventory of Sergius Swellengrebel's wife, Anna Fothergill, contains detailed information on the clothing of a woman who belonged to the VOC elite. As wife to the second highest-ranking official in the Cape, Anna Fothergill would have played a prominent role as a purveyor of fashion. Upon her death in 1764 her inventory included 30 linen aprons, which during this time were worn as part of everyday wear, as well as three silk aprons, two with white embroidery and one decorated with gold lining. In addition, her inventory included 16 pairs of cotton stockings, 67 handkerchiefs, eight lace caps, three bonnets, fans, and a few capes in different materials. Also included were 35 dresses referred to in the inventory as "sacken"; a style of dress called a "sacque" in French, which during this time was very fashionable.⁶³ Her inventory makes provision for her son to inherit a further three dresses which brings the total number of dresses in Anna Fothergill's inventory to 38. The presence of the "sacque" dresses in Anna's inventory indicates how fashions diffused from Europe to the Cape via not only the extensive trade networks of the VOC, but also family connections, and how the women of the VOC official elite continued to dress according to contemporary European fashions.

Underneath her dresses, Anna Fothergill would have worn some form of corseting and for this reason her inventory also contains six stays which were made with whalebone or wood with elaborate fronts to bridge the gap between the bodice ribbing of her dresses.⁶⁴ Other underwear included 56 chemises which were made of fine soft linen, worn beneath the corset or stays. The excessive number of these chemises suggests that Anna Fothergill was very particular about her person.⁶⁵ Her neckwear, also referred to as handkerchiefs, consisted of 67 assorted pieces as well as a black gauze handkerchief, one with fringes and five with embroidery. If it is taken into account that handkerchiefs and aprons could be mixed and matched for different outfits, it would suggest that Anna Fothergill had a remarkable amount of clothing for her time. Four pairs of shoes and 15 fans completed her wardrobe.

That Anna Fothergill was left a wealthy woman after the death of her husband is apparent from the amount of clothing she possessed upon her

63 C Pretorius, *Al laggende en pratende...*, p. 61.

64 D Strutt, *Fashion in South Africa...*, p. 112.

65 Compare D Strutt, *Fashion in South Africa...*, p. 115.

death. Clothing was valuable and would not easily be discarded, rather it would be repaired or altered to suit the latest fashions, and upon the death of an individual would be bequeathed to relatives or friends. In the case of Anna Fothergill's deceased estate, the value of her clothing was enough to bequeath most of it to her sister-in-law, Jennij Raper, who at that time was living in London, while some individual pieces were given to her son at the Cape. He inherited:

- 1 blue and silver dress
- 1 dress with coloured flowers
- 1 white sacque with flowers
- 1 unfinished pink dress
- 1 white mantel
- 1 brown handkerchief with gold embroidery
- 1 white handkerchief with gold embroidery
- 1 white handkerchief with silver embroidery
- 1 pair of white shoes with silver and gold flowers
- 1 fan
- Hunting and horse riding clothing

Besides the various items of clothing included in Fothergill's inventory there were two sets of caps made of lace as well as three mourning caps. In addition to these the inventory includes eight caps with lace, two flowered gauze caps and three unidentified caps. Besides these head coverings, Fothergill also possessed six bonnets, six hoods and a black velvet "calot", as well as four hats.⁶⁶

Clothing was mostly made by the women themselves, or as was the case for the more well-to-do women of the day, by handy slave women. Mentzel refers to embroidery done by slave women in the 1730s:⁶⁷

The slave women from Bengal, Suratta and other places can work and embroider... most beautifully, so long as the designs are provided for them. These slaves are for this reason very valuable, and a housewife who possesses any of them keeps them employed upon work of this kind the whole year long.

Anna Fothergill's inventory also included a significant amount of material which was used to make clothes. The material in the inventory included:

⁶⁶ TEPC, Cape Transcripts, TECP—*Two centuries transcribed, 1673-1834*, 2008, MOOC 8/12.15 a-e.

⁶⁷ K Schoeman, *Here en boere...*, p. 257.

- Green Chinese gauze
- Chinese linen
- Fine hamans
- Dimet with flowers
- Blue calmink
- Red moeris
- Red saaij
- 1 piece blue carsaaij
- Blue linen
- Chintz
- Fine blue striped material
- Blue linen
- 1 roll of linen
- Green silk

According to Schoeman, jewellery in early estate inventories is surprisingly simple and would probably have been viewed as an investment rather than as a showpiece. By comparison, the remarkable amount of jewellery found in Anna Fothergill's estate supports her elite status and remarkable wealth. The inventory lists the following pieces:

- 1 gold ring with 1 diamond
- 1 gold ring with 5 small diamonds
- 1 gold ring with 5 small diamonds
- 1 gold ring with 11 diamonds
- 1 gold ring with a blue sapphire and 12 small diamonds
- 1 gold ring with 7 diamonds
- 1 gold ring with 1 ruby and 2 diamonds
- 1 gold thumb ring with 9 diamonds
- 1 pair earrings with 22 diamonds
- 1 pair gold earrings, each with 3 diamonds
- 1 gold pocket watch with hook
- 1 pocket watch
- 1 pair of gold suspenders
- 1 small gold bar
- 1 piece of gold
- 3 gold rings
- 1 pair of gold earrings
- 1 gold buckle
- 2 buckles with stones
- 1 gold ring with 1 green emerald and 2 diamonds
- 1 gold watch clasp

- 1 gold signet ring
- 1 red signet set in gold
- 1 large stone set in gold as pendant
- 1 pair of shoe buckles with stones
- 1 pair of calf buckles with steel inlay
- 1 pair of hat buckles with ribbon
- 2 pairs of silver shoe buckles
- 2 pairs of silver calf buckles
- 1 pair of green stone earrings
- 2 strings of pearls
- 1 pair of earrings
- 1 string of pearls and earrings

According to Strutt, a woman of this time would favour the wearing of strings of pearls as necklaces which could also be worn intertwined in the hair. Paste or jewelled buckles for shoes and neckbands were also in vogue. Anna Fothergill had numerous buckles in her inventory, among them one gold buckle which would probably have been worn with a neckband, bracelet or girdle.⁶⁸ She also possessed a small fortune in jewels. In 1739, 25 years before her death, a gold ring with nine diamonds fetched 60 rixdollars in the auction of Johannes Heufke's estate.⁶⁹ Diamond jewellery was very expensive at the Cape and there are numerous pieces included in Fothergill's inventory which would have been very valuable. Anna Fothergill would have been exquisitely dressed for her time, completing her ensembles with precious jewels and accessories that would have made her a fashion icon in her circle at the Cape.

Changes over time

As the eighteenth century wore on, the function that women of the VOC official elite played as role models and gatekeepers of fashion at the Cape changed. Fashion represents outward proof of an affluent society. The relative growth in affluence over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would have resulted in the growth of the conspicuous use of fashion. As was the case in Europe, the lower classes aped their betters through dress; the main competition being between the elite (in the case of the Cape, the VOC's high-

⁶⁸ Compare D Strutt, *Fashion in South Africa...*, p. 121.

⁶⁹ TEPC, Cape Transcripts, TECP—*Two centuries transcribed, 1673-1834*, 2008, MOOC 10/5.26.

ranking officials) on the one hand and those members of burgher society who would come to be known as the landed gentry. This class of landed gentry emerged as a result of the awarding of exclusive rights to supply produce to the VOC such as meat and alcohol. The right was called a “pacht” and was purchased annually from the Company. Individuals who became part of the landed gentry did not necessarily only make their fortunes through either “pachts” or farming. Gerald Groenewald has done extensive work on early entrepreneurship in the Cape, and one of his subjects, Hendrik Oostwald Eksteen, is a perfect example of the different trades that the growing upper-middle class engaged in. Eksteen started in the alcohol trade and continued to exploit it for the next 15 years before diversifying his assets into agriculture. Eventually he became the exclusive supplier of meat to the Company.⁷⁰

The new affluent members of burgher society attempted to imitate the VOC official elite through conspicuous consumption.⁷¹ In essence, Thorstein Veblen’s theory of “conspicuous consumption” is the acquisition and display of possessions with the intention of gaining social status.⁷² Social comparison theory suggests that people tend to compare themselves with others in order to determine how well they are doing.⁷³ People can engage in both upward and downward comparison, but upward comparison will occur faster, which can lead to feelings of inferiority, resulting in motivation to “keep up with the Joneses” through the attaining and public display of the same level of possessions.⁷⁴

There was a marked income inequality between different Company servants, an inequality that would continue during the early settlement of free burghers at the Cape. As the eighteenth century progressed, a service economy emerged in Cape Town that catered for the circulating population of sailors and provided maintenance and supplies for passing ships.⁷⁵ This developing economy included taverns, lodging houses, shops, bakeries,

70 G Groenewald, “An early modern entrepreneur: Hendrik Oostwald Eksteen and the creation of wealth in Dutch colonial Cape town, 1702–1741, *Kronos*, 35, p. 30.

71 H Freudenberg, “Fashion, sumptuary laws and business”, *The Business History Review*, 37(1-2), 1963, p. 40.

72 N Ordabayeva & P Chandon, “Getting ahead of the Joneses: When equality increases conspicuous consumption among bottom-tier consumers”, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 38(1), 2011, p. 27.

73 N Ordabayeva & P Chandon, “Getting ahead of the Joneses...”, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 38(1), 2011, p. 29.

74 N Ordabayeva & P Chandon, “Getting ahead of the Joneses...”, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 38(1), 2011, p. 30.

75 S Du Plessis & S Du Plessis, “Happy in the service of the company: The purchasing power of VOC salaries at the Cape in the 18th century”, *Economic History of Developing Regions*, 27(1), 2012, p. 126.

breweries and building works, among others.⁷⁶ The expanding economy offered opportunities for enterprising free burghers, resulting in a rise of living standards of many of the burghers and their wives, who used status symbols such as clothing as a way of flaunting this newly acquired wealth. The modes of dress had changed due to the economic boom at the Cape, a fact that was accounted for by two factors: urbanisation and the rise of the bourgeoisie.⁷⁷

Both these phenomena were seen at the settlement at the Cape of Good Hope in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. According to Du Plessis and Du Plessis, a study of the evolution of real wages in the Cape of Good Hope suggests that the market economy expanded steadily throughout the eighteenth century, culminating in a boom period during the 1780s as a result of the stationing of the French garrison. French troops under Colonel Conway arrived in July 1781, creating the catalyst for a new period of greater prosperity for the people of Cape Town. The influence of this on the fashions worn at the Cape could not be reversed. In fact it would seem that as time went by the importance of dress increased. A Moravian missionary wrote that at the New Year's dance of 1793 at the Company post in Soetmelksvlei in the Overberg:⁷⁸

The pride of the women here is astonishing. They are farmer's daughters, but I have seldom seen a lady in Germany walk about more elegantly dressed and with headgear more grand.

Although the importance of VOC women as purveyors of fashion was established during the very early years of the Colony when all the Europeans at the Cape were still in Company employ, this was to change over time. Initially there were very few free women at the Cape, serving to detract from the social competition between the classes. After the first free burghers were released from Company employ they were relatively poor and could not at first compete with the grandeur of the VOC official elite. But as the Colony expanded, so did the income of the burghers and the number of women at the Cape. As the economy boomed and the wealth of burghers increased, so did their tastes for fashion and status symbols, and as the free burgher population's consumption of these status symbols grew, so too did the competition between wealthy burghers and the VOC elite. The economic stations of the burgher elite were levelled with those of the VOC official elite,

76 Compare GJ Erasmus, "Die Geskiedenis van die bedryfslewe aan die Kaap, 1652 tot 1795", PhD, University of the Orange Free State, 1986.

77 H Freudenberger, "Fashion, sumptuary laws and business", *The Business History Review*, 37(1-2), 1963, p. 39.

78 K Schoeman, *Dogter van Sion...*, p. 242.

and burghers could afford to dress themselves lavishly. In doing so, the power of the VOC officials as role models of fashion diminished.

An example of how the women of the VOC official elite gradually lost their role as role models of fashion can be seen from the deceased estate inventory of Wilhelmina Zeeman which was compiled in 1793. Zeeman was the wife of Captain Johannes van der Plas, which placed her among the slightly lower ranking women of those men in VOC employ, although her husband was considerably better off, both in terms of status and wealth, than many members of society. Divided into the three groups of divisions within the Company structure, Wilhelmina Zeeman's husband held the highest rank he could within his own category, the military.

Despite the fact that she was not part of the small group of the elite members of society as defined by the administrative hierarchy, her inventory contains an impressive amount of clothing which may be attributed to the changes in fashion caused by the stationing of the French garrison at the Cape. Wilhelmina Zeeman serves as an indicator of how society changed towards the end of the eighteenth century when the VOC was in financial ruin and society had become more independent from Company rule. Women who were not part of the VOC official elite competed with those who still held the position of the foremost women in the Colony, among whom a new generation of women adopted the accessible French fashions imported to the Cape during the 1780s. Wilhelmina Zeeman must have been a very fashionable woman for her time. Her inventory included: 15 dresses in the French "sacque" style, 12 dresses of different styles, one unfinished chintz dress, seven jackets, 21 pairs of cotton stockings and 29 chemises. Her accessories included: three pairs of shoes, one pair of mules for the protection of her shoes, four women's hats and one gauze bonnet. Three fans completed the ensemble.

It is, however, Wilhelmina Zeeman's jewellery that is particularly noteworthy. Her inventory contained two gold pocket watches, four gold brooches, three pairs of gold buttons set with stones, one of which was set with rubies. Other jewellery in the inventory included:⁷⁹

- 3 pairs of gold earrings
- 1 gold ring set with pearls
- 2 gold ring set with stones

⁷⁹ TEPC, Cape Transcripts, TECP—*Two centuries transcribed, 1673-1834*, 2008 MOOC 8/20.44 and MOOC 8/20.47.

- 1 gold ring set with 7 diamonds
- 1 gold ring set with 1 large and several small stones
- 1 gold ring set with an amethyst
- 1 gold thumb ring
- 1 silver buckle mounted in gold with stones
- 1 silver hair comb
- 1 gold ring set with jewels
- 1 gold watch chain
- 1 pair of small hand bracelets brasseletjes
- 1 silver braaijhoutje [clasp?]
- 1 ivory braaijhoutje
- 1 gold dragonfly
- 1 gold ring set with pearls
- 1 pair of arm bracelets brasseletten
- 1 pair of gold hand bracelets handbrasseletje

From this list of items it would seem that a woman of lower social rank at the Cape could by the late eighteenth century dress extravagantly for the time. A remarkable occurrence in the inventory of Wilhelmina Zeeman is a chest filled with 34 women's hats. Despite the excessive number of hats, the other items in the inventory do not indicate any form of shop keeping on the part of Wilhelmina Zeeman. Perhaps she was merely a woman who enjoyed a variety of headgear. As the wife of a Captain, Wilhelmina would probably not have set the fashion trends had she lived 50 years earlier, but as the world opened up and the Cape was brought into closer contact with Europe and prosperity grew among all classes, the importance of social position as a prerequisite for being fashionable changed. Role models of fashion could now be found among the wives of those who were not part of the high-ranking VOC elite.

Conclusion

The wives of the VOC official elite acted as role models, purveyors and to some extent gatekeepers of fashion at the Cape of Good Hope during the eighteenth century. Fashionable items of clothing were used as markers of distinction between the social groupings at the Cape, distinguishing those who belonged to the upper echelons of society from those who did not. As the century progressed, however, and prosperity grew among the burgher class, this distinction was contested by those individuals who had the financial

ability to be fashionable, diminishing the role of the ladies of the high VOC official elite as role models and purveyors of fashion. This change resulted in a more open society where members of different social classes could influence the fashion of the day, provided of course that they had the capital and willingness to do so.