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Fabric Boots

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“The day when Denise came down wearing a pair of fabric boots for which she had paid five francs, Marguerite and Clara voiced their surprise under their breath, but loud enough to be heard...” (Zola, 1883, p. 136)

A pair of black silk boots was acquired by the University of Rhode Island’s Historic Textiles and Costumes collection in 1996 (accession number: 96.10.14). The styling and construction of these boots suggests that they were made in the 1860s, which happens to also be the time period that *The Ladies Paradise* is set in. The boots are believed to be ready-made, as they are signed with their maker’s name (possibly: “MP Robertson”) on the collar’s lining, along a number to indicate sizing. Research on the maker’s name has been conducted but nothing has been discovered.

The boots consist of a ribbed woven black silk upper and leather outsole with stacked heels. In the 1800s, silk boots were largely restricted to evening wear occasions, and by the 1870s and 80s stacked heels were only used on walking boots. This would indicate that they were made sometime before 1890 (Rexford, 2000). There is a slit on the inner side of the boot for side lacing, behind which a tongue is attached. Side-laced boots were common beginning in the early 1830s. The boots were also shaped on left/right lasts, as clearly differentiated by the shape, or “swing”, of the outsoles. This was a more costly construction, but became more mainstream once the manufacturing of left/right lasts was mastered. However, it was still common to see dress shoes constructed as straights (Rexford, 2000). The five-inch height of these boots from heel seat to collar also indicates that they are from after 1860. Shoes from 1860 and later are also very likely to have a decorative finish on the sole, than those from the 40s and 50s, as demonstrated on these boots (Rexford, 2000). The most common finish is a dark, glossy finish that forms a border around the sole. Both leather outsoles are in very good condition and only a few nail heads are visible. The silk uppers are also gently used and have held up well over time.

Side lacing boots replaced the gaiters that were worn over shoes into the early 1800s. Although boots until the 1860s were made as straights, side laced boots were only worn with the laces on the insides of the feet, as they would have been uncomfortable to lace on the outside. The combination of silk upper, stacked heel, right/left construction and side lacing as seen on these boots is rare. Where the construction, quality, lack of wear and materials indicate that the wearer was wealthy, it wouldn’t surprise me if these were French-made boots that were forward for their time. This would also explain why the maker could not be identified. Although Denise’s boots would likely have shown more excessive use, this pair demonstrates a popular boot style at the time she made her own purchase, and most likely resembles the pair she wore.

References

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