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2014

Parasol

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Recommended Citation

Martin, Taylor, "Parasol" (2014). *The Ladies' Paradise: Artifact Study*. Paper 3.

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Sunshade 15

In the novel *The Ladies' Paradise*, a prominent item sold at the fictional Ladies' Paradise was parasols. The parasol was not only an item that could be bought at the Ladies' Paradise, but it also was used as part of the lavish displays around the store. In Chapter 9, Zola describes the display of parasols:

It was the exhibition of parasols. Wide-open, rounded off like shields, they covered the whole hall, from the glazed roof to the varnished oak molding below. They described festoons round the semi-circular arches of the upper storeys; they descended in garlands along the slender columns; they ran along in close lines on the balustrades of the galleries and the staircases; and everywhere, ranged symmetrically, speckling the walls with red, green, and yellow, they looked like great Venetian lanterns, lighted up for some colossal entertainment.¹

During the nineteenth century, parasols were used not only to keep the sun out of women's eyes, but to achieve a "fashionable" look among middle and upper class women. A pale complexion that needed little or no makeup was the look the women wanted to achieve in order to set them apart from the working class. A pale complexion also led people to believe that the woman was dependent on her husband.² An artifact labeled "Sunshade 15" in the University of Rhode Island's collection was donated by Mrs. George Ballentine of Kingston, Rhode Island in 1953. She is the wife of former Dean Ballentine of the Business College at the University of Rhode Island. According to the records in the costume collection, the parasol belonged to Mrs. Joseph Noton, a cousin of Mrs. Ballentine.

The parts of the parasol include the cover, whalebone ribs, stretcher, runner, wood stick, ferrule and brass joint.³ The cover is made of black moiré fabric with eight strips of black velvet sewn vertically down the fabric; black fringe adorns the bottom of the cover. The fringe detail is a good indicator that the parasol was bought at a store such as Ladies' Paradise because fringe

was a trait of store-bought parasols.⁴ This parasol was fashionable for its time, which would be between the 1860s and 1870s. The moiré fabric was considered very elegant and the fringe seemed to be a popular decoration at the time.⁵

Endnotes

- 1) Émile Zola, *The Ladies' Paradise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 242.
- 2) Edward Zhang, *History of the Parasol*. August 20, 2012. <http://ezinearticles.com/?History-of-the-Parasol---A-Sunshade,-A-Ritual-Artifact,-And-A-Fashion-Accessory&id=7240267> (accessed April 13, 2014).
- 3) Jeremy Farrell, *Umbrellas and Parasols* (London: B.T.Batsford Ltd., 1985): 26.
- 4) Marta Vincent, *Originals By Kay*. 2006. http://www.originals-by-kay.com/learn_about/Edparasols.htm (accessed April 13, 2014).
- 5) Joan L. Severa, *Dressed for the Photographer* (Kent State University Press), 1997.

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