Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

REGENCY GIRL'S DRESS H194

A Regent is a person who acts as head of state because the monarch is too young or ill. The Regency Period is broadly said to be the years between 1795 and 1837. The Regency actually occurred from 1811 to 1820 when King George III was declared mad and his son, the Prince of Wales took over. When George III died in 1820 the Prince of Wales was crowned George IV and reigned until 1830.



During these years the majority of the population lived in poverty. By the end of the 1700s, almost half of the cultivated land was owned by just 5000 families. They leased the land to farmers. The Regency period was also a time of war. Britain fought the French in the Napoleonic Wars. Families made great sacrifices in an effort to defeat Napoleon.



Meanwhile the Prince Regent had earned a reputation for being an extravagant patron of the arts. George read the novels of Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen. He established a large collection of paintings and had a keen interest in architecture. The grand Brighton Pavilion (left) was commissioned by the Prince but paid for by the country. His spending angered Parliament, as they had to clear the debts.

The Prince's wife was Caroline of Brunswick (right). Their marriage was arranged to build a political alliance but there was never any love between them. Caroline eventually left Britain, returning only for George IV's coronation. She was refused entry even though she was to be Queen. The public felt Caroline had been badly treated and the King's popularity never recovered.



George IV was an icon for a period of excess before the constrained Victorian era. He died in 1830 after suffering health problems from indulging in large banquets and lots of wine.

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Girl's regency dress



This dress is a replica based on the Regency Period. It has been made from 1970s material. A replica costume allows Reading Museum to let school children handle a dress that we would otherwise have to keep in our stores. The style is accurate but the dress pattern and design are not. An authentic Regency dress would have been made from muslin, a finely woven cotton fabric. Plain colours were preferred because it was fashionable for clothing to have the classical style of ancient Greece and Rome.

The dress has a very high waistline and a square neck line. The long chord would be passed around the front, below the bust and tied at the back. This kept the dress in place. Its style was known as the Empire line. This doesn't refer to the British Empire but to the French. It was made famous by the Empress Josephine (below) when she wore a spectacular outfit to Napoleon's coronation in 1804. Despite the fighting between the two countries, British fashion still followed that of the French.



It is quite a different dress from the earlier Georgian and later Victorian Period. These fashions were for a dress that fitted close to the torso. The Regency style was looser and more flattering to larger women. It is full length and reaches the ankles. It was considered indecent for a girl to show her legs. As the Regency period continued women started to wear drawers under their dresses. It was a type of underwear and helped keep out the cold.

