

The Clothing of the Carved Figures on European Fairground and Dance Organs

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Large mechanical organs were made for the purposes of entertaining the public, usually in outdoor venues, while allowing for profit to the owner(s) of the organ. Though the organ entertained with music, a prime feature of such organs was their visual appeal. Organ makers were very competitive in creating hand-carved facades and figures, some of them actually life-size. These figures included conductors, bell ringers, cymbal players, other musicians and some which were purely decorative and served only to add ambiance.



Figure 1. The male conductor on this Gijs Perlee organ wears a bright pink justaucorp and apple green breeches. His pale blue waistcoat with gold lapels is worn over a white shirt with a very ruffled cravat at the neck.

In attempting to hold the attention of listeners it was customary to mechanically activate the conductor. The majority of conductors were male, and often had animated features such as the right hand holding a baton and simulating conducting of the music while the head was turning side to side. Occasionally the left hand would also move up and down as if asking for loud or soft music passages. Female figures were often painted in brilliant colors and were frequently animated since the instruments the figures played were bells or triangles; this activity was simple because the figures actually played the instruments with a striker. They also appeared to play drums, lutes, harps, etc; however, the latter group was for visual appeal only as such instruments were more complicated to play. The figures were made to be actuated in perfect sync typically to the percussion in the organ. All actions of the figures were controlled by punched cardboard books or paper rolls. All in all it was quite a show for spectators and a great accompaniment to the music.

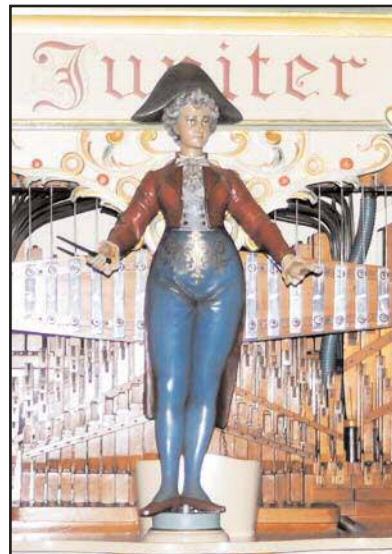


Figure 2. The female conductor on this Gavioli 68-key organ *de Jupiter* wears a deep red justaucorp that is knee length in the back. She has a short double-breasted waistcoat and blue knee length breeches with matching blue hose.

The focus of this article is the authenticity, or lack thereof, of the costumes worn by the carved figures. Only European organs are featured herein; a later article will feature American band and carousel organs. This article is the first known published treatise on the relationship of clothing worn by the figures to that which people wore when the organs were manufactured.

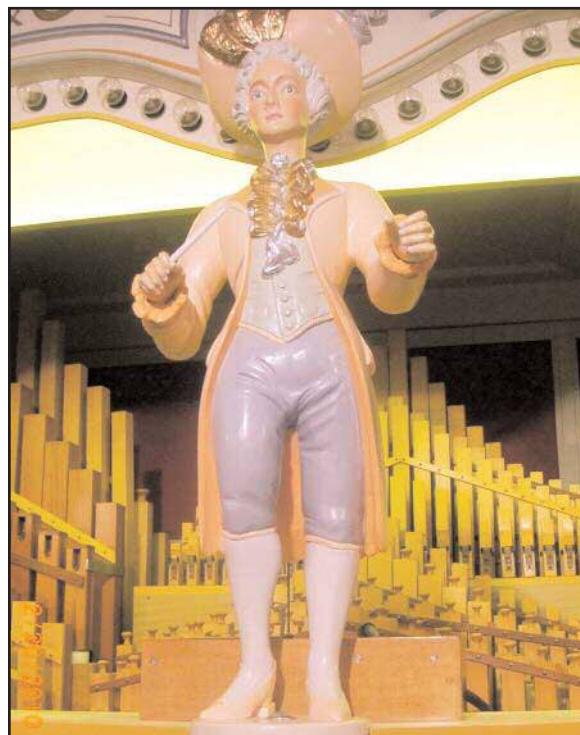


Figure 3. Wearing a pink justaucorp, this male conductor is very much the dandy. His waistcoat and breeches are trimmed in matching pink binding.

Most people standing in front of a European fairground or dance organ are primarily interested in the music that is playing though many, of course, are curious about how the music is produced. The mechanics of these organs is intriguing and can be amazing in contrast to contemporary music devices which focus on digital processing to create or reproduce the music. A person who has a background in costume design, however, while enjoying the music, is more likely to analyze the clothing worn by the carved figures that decorate the organ's facade.



Figure 4. This dancer from a Mortier dance organ is dressed in the same style as the conductors. His rose justaucorp slants sharply back from center front and is worn over a green waistcoat. His breeches extend below the knee and over the top of his hose. His profusely ruffled cravat is secured with a large bow.

It is clear to a costume historian that very few of these figures are dressed in the clothing being worn at the time the organs were built. It is understandable that an organ maker is more interested in how the music is produced and sounds than in other aspects. The facade and figures are meant only for visual appeal and so the accuracy of the clothing in relation to the era in which the organ was made would be irrelevant. To make this point, several of the figures are dressed in what would be considered circus or street performer apparel. Many others are dressed whimsically, bringing the listener a colorful and perhaps humorous moment while enjoying the music.

According to the scarce literature available, the majority of fairground and dance organs were built between 1850 and 1920. This is almost completely within the Victorian and Edwardian period, yet the conductors, whether men or women, are most often wearing the

clothing worn by men for court or formal occasions in the late 1700s. They all appear to be wearing a shirt with or without a series of ruffles, called a cravat or jabot, a colorful vest, called a waistcoat, and a cutaway coat or justaucorp which slants back from the center front. This coat was clearly not intended to be buttoned. They also wear knee length pants, or breeches, and hose or stockings with slippers as illustrated in **Figures 1, 2 and 3**. On dance organs the male figures assumed dance positions rather than conducting the music. Nevertheless they were dressed in a style similar to that worn by the conductors, as is the dancer in **Figure 4**.

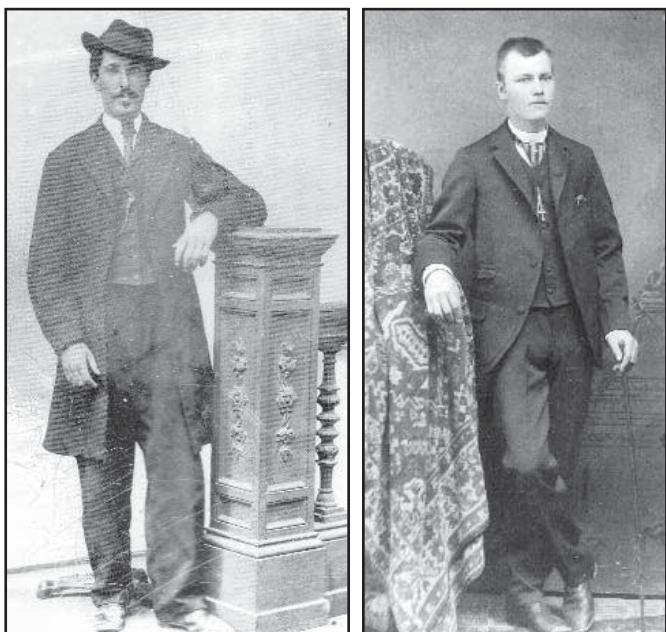


Figure 5 (left). The contrast between the apparel of the figures representing conductors and the ordinary citizen in the early 1860s is clear when comparing this gentleman with the previous illustrations. His clothing is plain, loosely fit and reveals little of the man's body.

Photo: Severa.

Figure 6 (right). This young man wears a sack suit. The jacket has very little fitting, but is hip length. It is worn with matching vest and trousers. The only decorative element is his striped tie sporting a wide, loose knot to show the design to its advantage.

Ordinary men of the Victorian period wore full length trousers, shirts with stiff collars, narrow ties and a jacket much more similar to that worn by men today. The gentleman depicted in the 1860s photo (**Figure 5**) wears typical clothing including a knee length frock coat which has a squared front edge. His vest is waist length and is a solid dark color instead of the colorful clothing worn by men in the 18th century. His shirt collar is narrow, stiff, and worn with a narrow tie. The man in **Figure 6**, a photo from the 1880s, wears a similar shirt, vest, and trousers. His jacket is called a sack coat and as you can

see is similar to the jackets men currently wear. Men's clothing at that time was drab when compared to the highly decorated styles of the 18th century. This is the likely reason why the organ makers chose styles from the earlier period.

The Victorian period was a time when there was an extreme emphasis on modesty and suppressed sexuality. In upper-class homes, for example, Paisley shawls which reached to the floor covered the piano legs so that men's thoughts would not stray to that part of a woman's anatomy. Women's clothing during this time was at least floor length and often longer. It was important not to wear anything that might titillate members of the opposite sex.



Figure 7. These two young women photographed in 1866 are dressed in a very fashionable style. Note that both are wearing very full long skirts that train in the back. They are tightly corseted and the bodices of their gowns have high necklines and long sleeves. Photo: Severa

As one can see from the clothing of the women in **Figure 7** there was very little of a woman's body exposed. In fact, she wore several layers of clothing including a camisole, a corset, a corset cover, pantaloons or long bloomers, a crinoline or hoop, and at least one petticoat, often two, under her gown. The gown usually had a high neckline, long sleeves, and a skirt that was full enough not to reveal the legs or often not even the feet. In contrast, the figure of the bell ringer illustrated in **Figure 8** wears hose or stockings that cover but at the

same time expose her legs. Over that she wears a short draped tunic that exposes one breast. Many of the female figures on the organs wear gowns that are adaptations of chitons and himations, the draped and wrapped garments worn by women in Greece and in modified forms in Rome before the Christian era. These draped gowns are often worn in a manner that exposes the breasts of the wearer. While these styles are provocative they could be justified as reflective of the earlier Grecian and Roman eras, see **Figure 9**.

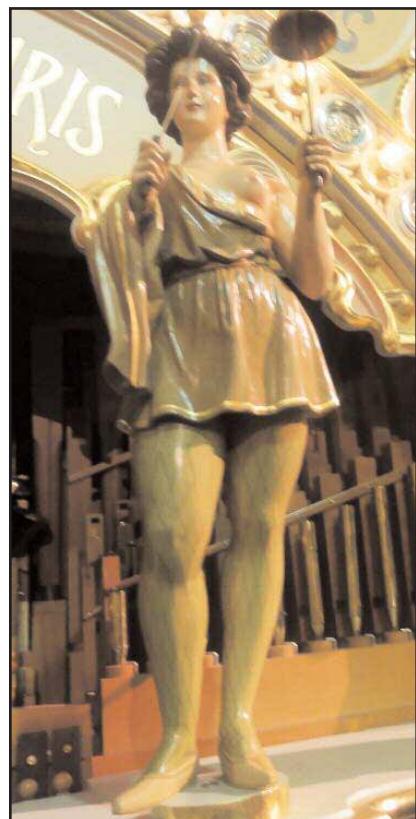


Figure 8. The female bell ringer on this Limonaire organ wears a short tunic created by draping rectangles of fabric secured on one shoulder and belted at the waist revealing one breast. She wears hose to cover yet reveal her legs.



Figure 9. A lyre player with her upraised torch wears only a Greek himation wrapped around her lower torso. This semi-nude figure is acceptable only because she can represent a much earlier historic period.



Figure 10. Not surprising for the era is this snake charmer, clearly a circus or street performer, she wears only a jerkin or vest for a bodice. Its cut reveals much of her chest and arms. She wears trunk hose or very short pants and stockings which cover her legs.



Figure 11 (above). At the lower front of this Van Steenput Freres organ, a bell ringer is dressed to represent a clown. Particularly noteworthy are the bicorne hat with a conical peak, and the ruff around her neck. She wears a draped overskirt but no underskirt so her pantaloons are clearly visible.



Many organs have figures representative of circus or street performers. The clown and snake tamer on the Van Steenput Freres organ pictured in **Figures 10, 11 and 12** are examples of this category. The snake tamer is wearing a short vest over a decorative shirt with matching trunk hose (short bloomers) and hose or stockings. She wears a pair of high boots and a bicorne hat to com-

plete the circus look; see **Figure 10**. The clown bell ringer also wears a bicorne hat as well as a corset over her chemise (shirt) which has a ruff (ruffled collar) at the neckline. She wears pantaloons, an under garment, with a short draped skirt over them. To finish her outfit she wears stockings and slipper shoes; see **Figure 11**. The conductor on this organ wears the traditional clothing of a German or Austrian hunter as seen in **Figure 12**. Again there is little or no similarity to the clothing worn on the street during this period. There are many other similar examples such as those seen in **Figure 13**. Notice that all the female bell ringers are wearing short tunics or jackets with colored hose and some type of sash or shawl. In each case legs are visible and clearly provocative. Seagraves suggests that figures carved for the English market were dressed as “paraders,” women who paraded across the stage or outside the theater in risqué outfits displaying legs covered only by hose and intended to entice men into live shows or cinema.



Figure 13. Three female bell ringers are dressed in a variety of outfits, but all feature garments that cover the lower torso, end at the hips, and reveal their legs covered only with hose.

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Figure 12 (left). The conductor on this organ is dressed in the clothing of an Alpine hunter or gamekeeper. Note the colored shirt, the short leather vest, leather breeches, gaiters wrapped with leather thongs worn over his shoes, and a pistol inserted in the sash around his waist.



Figure 14. Fashionably dressed for their time, these dancers wear apparel from a period at least 50 years earlier than when the organ they adorned was manufactured. The women's gowns feature a waistline directly under the bust, short puffed sleeves, and a gathered skirt that drapes softly around the legs.



Figure 15. This orphan figure probably came from a dance organ as her dance position suggests. Her 1880's gown is stylish, featuring a tightly laced bodice that ends below the waistline. Her skirt is two layers with the draped overskirt pulled to the back to provide the concentrated fullness needed for a bustle. She has pulled up both the overskirt and underskirt to reveal her flat slippers and white stockings.

There are some examples of carved figures which wear clothing that more closely reflects what was worn in a relatively recent period; the most common of these are dancers wearing the gowns of the 1810s. In **Figure 14** the women are wearing gowns with high Empire waistlines and some fullness in the long skirts. Gowns such as these would have been worn by women for evening dances and parties. These figures are not provocative, but the clothing is definitely out of style for the period in which the organ was built. However, they certainly evoke thoughts of the activities engaged in by those who listen to these organs.

The most unusual figures are those who are dressed in clothing that was stylish at the time the organ was built. I have seen only two examples and both are orphans, separated from the organs that they once adorned. The first is a statue, seen in **Figure 15**, dated to the 1880s who is wearing a bustle gown; the overskirt is pulled to the back to create the concentrated back fullness which was stylish for that time period. She has pulled up her skirt to reveal her ankles which makes her provocative while still being stylish.



Figure 16. The young woman on this carte de visite from 1886 wears a typical jacket and skirt for this time. Her jacket is tightly laced up the front over a velvet inset panel and extends below the waist. Her separate skirt has an underskirt that has a pleated flounce, or ruffle, ending about 2" above the floor and a draped overskirt where the fullness is pulled to the back to create the fashionable bustle.

As you can see, the woman pictured in **Figure 16** on page 34, is wearing a similar jacket which also laces in front and a draped overskirt pulled to the back to form a bustle. The photograph was taken in the middle 1880s. The second example is dressed in the style of the early 20th century. Her most striking feature is a very fashionable hat which has a broad turned-up brim and is trimmed with Ostrich feathers. Her gown is shortened to above the ankle and she wears it with high-top boots and a shawl; see **Figure 17**.

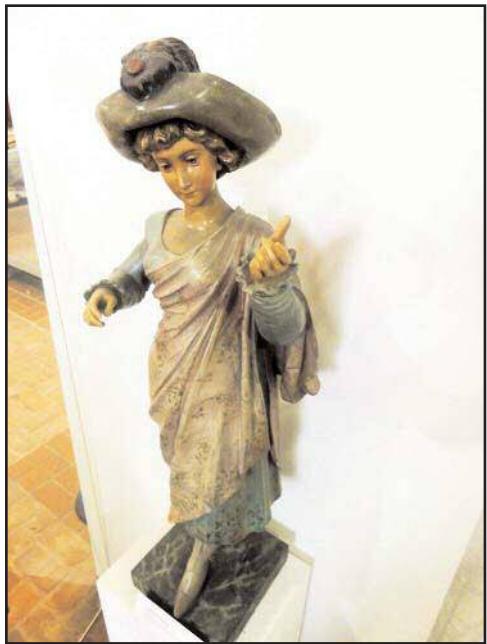


Figure 17. Judging from her apparel, this woman was on an organ probably manufactured in the 1910s. Her clothing is very typical of this time period when skirts ended well above the ankle. She has a huge hat with a broad upturned brim, trimmed with an ostrich feather worn over an upswept hairdo. She also wears a large draped shawl and high-top boots.

As we know, there are many dimensions to the numerous facets of mechanical music. It's so easy to listen to the music and give scant attention to the mechanics or, as illustrated in this article, the apparel worn by the figures pictured, and described in the authoritative narrative and

captions. This, of course, is just one of the many reasons our hobby has such wide appeal and is so thoroughly entertaining. The authors hope that readers will never see the figures on mechanical organs in the same way. The evolution of clothing is a fascinating dimension of humanity and is typically taken for granted. Looking at the apparel worn by organ figures gives us both insight into what people wore in the past three centuries and its interpretation with a sometimes whimsical wink.

This article came about from a discussion initiated by Dr. Suzanne Hendricks at her first COAA organ rally. From there it became a quest for more information and photos. The authors hope that additional information will be discovered to further this unique aspect of mechanical organs. COAA plays an important role in the publishing of such articles for today's enthusiasts and those who will be studying what is in print today as they do their research into the near and far future.

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Suzanne Hendricks is a retired professor of history of costume and fashion at the University of St. Catherine, St. Paul, MN. She recently became acquainted with mechanical music and immediately was drawn to the apparel worn by the carved figures on organs.

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