

Is it Worth worth?

Fashion and public image of Queens Maria Pia and Amélia of Portugal at the end of
Constitutional Monarchy

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Isabel Burdiel on Queen Isabel of Spain argues that post-revolutionary monarchies would have to fulfill three fundamental functions in order to survive: politically, socially and symbolically. In this sense, the symbolic image of the monarchy would be built from its public image and of the multiplicity of its materializations: the artistic representations of the monarchs, the news about royal personalities, their acts, ceremonies and rites. Thus, clothing and fashion functioned as a political instrument that imposed patterns of behavior, leading to another aspect of the monarchy-show.

In the Portuguese case, and particularly at the end of the Constitutional monarchy, when the Portuguese State was in the midst of a severe financial crisis, and even went bankrupt, Republican propaganda accused Queen Maria Pia of sumptuous expenses related to her wardrobe, being its official residence, the Ajuda Palace, compared to a gigantic closet.

The Queen's spendthrift was a recurring theme in court society, disapproved by her relatives and criticized by many of the courtiers. The Portuguese and foreign periodical press reported excessive expenses on dresses, notably with the French House Worth, founded in 1858 by Charles Frederick Worth, responsible for supplying crowned heads like the Empress Eugénie of France, but also opera and theater stars, as Nellie Melba or Sarah Bernhardt.

In contrast, the image of her daughter-in-law, Queen Amelia contrasted strongly with that of her mother-in-law. Contained in expenses and discreet in public ceremonies, one does not attribute these excessive spending with wardrobe and fashion. However, the analysis of the private correspondence and diaries of people close to the Royal family shows that her public image was criticized, unlike the mother-in-law, understood as a model of Queen, from the point of view of clothing. The aim of this paper is to analyze this double dichotomy and understand the extent to which clothing and fashion have contributed to a public image of the monarchy in its last years.