

Asymmetrical Brown Silk Natural Form Extended Description

c. 1880. Natural form two-part asymmetrical brown silk taffeta and satin dress, with a front-buttoning, slightly bustled 'princess line' sheath overdress and a floor-length underskirt with a train.

The calf-length taffeta overdress is made in the figure-hugging 'princess line' style, cut in long panels without a waist seam, and has a complex asymmetrical construction and hem line. Six main shaped pieces extend from the bodice into the skirt: two front panels, two side panels, and two back panels. The two front panels close at center front with thirteen large flat brown shell buttons from the neck to the hips. The panels are shaped with two long darts each, running from below the bust to over the hips, boned only at the waist and up, and with a horizontal dart between the second dart and the side seam that defines the waist above the hips. The side panels are placed directly below the arms and narrow to the waist before flaring over the hips. The dress bodice is flat-lined with brown cotton to the hips, and there is a 10.2 cm / 4 in. wide waist stay made of the same fabric, closing in front with five hooks and eyes.

The dress uses the contrasting textures of satin and taffeta in its embellishments. The bodice is fairly plain, decorated only with a 2.54 cm / 1 in. high standing band collar over a narrow bib-like yoke, both in brown silk satin. The fitted three-quarter length sleeves, which have a curved two-seam construction and small pleats at the elbow on the outside seam, have cuffs flared with six pleats in back and have a brown silk satin asymmetrical band with two buttons.

The skirt of the overdress is complex.

- The right front and right side panels end just below the hips and have horizontal skirt panels added to them.
 - A swath of fabric emerges from the right side seam from the hips, draping to the calf in large, slightly angled horizontal pleats that wrap around to the front where they are caught by a vertical satin appliqué completely edged with piping.
 - The pleats leave the other side of this appliqué as a softly ruched drape, which crosses just below the center front button placket to the left front side, where stitches firmly capture it into a vertical ruffle bound with satin and capped with brown satin bows at top and bottom.
 - Below this, a triangular satin appliqué simulates a turned-back skirt.
 - The hem between the right side seam and the ruffle is at a diagonal angling down toward the floor at the faux turn-back and is decorated with an appliqué of pointed satin scallops bound with more satin.
- The left front and left side panels are calf-length.
 - The fabric beneath the horizontal waist dart on the left front panel appears to fall unbroken from the bodice to the hem.
 - This is banded with four horizontal elements of pointed scallops in satin, topped with satin-bound taffeta knife pleats which run from the vertical ruffle at left front around to the left side seam.
- The back panels reach almost to the floor, and create the effect, in back, of a three-tiered skirt once the underskirt is in place.

- Each back panel has one 50.8 cm / 20 in. long dart that begins at the shoulder seam, angles toward the small of the back, then flares out over the hip.
- There is a 61 cm / 24 in. long center-back seam, reaching 26.4 cm / 10.375 in. past the waist.
- The left and right side-back panels are the same length but are treated very differently.
 - The fabric from the left side-back panel is gathered up halfway down its length at the left skirt side seam with large horizontal pleats, forming the puff of a low asymmetrical bustle drape.
 - This drape wraps over the right side-back panel and around the entire back of the dress below a satin bow at center back, taking the left center-back skirt panel with it, until it is caught halfway down the right side seam of the skirt.
 - The shape is supported with an internal stay tape sewn to the lining.
 - The vertical edge of this skirt at the left, and its hem, are bound with a wide satin band, and it has a false satin turn-back appliquéd just below where it joins the seam.
 - The skirts of the right center-back and side-back panels hang straight beneath the bustle swoop to form longer skirts reaching from side seam to side seam, making the dress appear to gain an additional layer across the back.
 - These panels use the full 50.8 cm / 20 in. width of the fabric, and narrow gores are added on either side to make them wide enough to cover the back of the skirt.
 - They peek out from beneath the upper skirt, almost reaching the floor.
 - They are decorated with another false satin turn-back.
 - The hem has a satin band over a finely-knife-pleated frill finishing it all the way around to the right side seam, at which point the trim turns ninety degrees and rises to meet the shorter right side seam.
- The skirt is fully lined in brown cotton.
- The underskirt is a separate floor-length garment with a train.
 - This is made of a plain brown cotton fabric, reserving the silk taffeta only for where it shows beneath the overdress.
 - Along the back hem, the underskirt uses the same brown silk of the main dress in four rows of taffeta ruffles topped with a band of satin.
 - Another long vertical satin panel marks the boundary between the back and the front of the dress at the right.
 - The front is trimmed with squared-off satin tabs over pointed satin elements nestled between taffeta box pleats.
 - The train is lined with a dark brown polished cotton and has two rows of stay-tapes controlling the spread of the fabric.
 - Small fabric-covered buttons at either side ensure the two skirts cannot drift apart to show the cotton.
 - It has an integral bustle pad of five rows of ruffles at center back.

Professionally made. Machine-sewn and hand-sewn.