

## Fashion Plates

How do people know how they should behave? For nineteenth-century women, there were laws that governed what they could and could not do, and strong social conventions about what was proper (see **Could and Should**). In the 1830s, the first ladies' magazines appeared, and the most popular, *Godey's Lady's Book*, delivered the message about appearance and behavior in a new form: color illustrations known as fashion plates.



W. B. Chambers, *Sarah Josepha Hale*, 1850. *Godey's Lady's Book*, 1850, frontispiece. New-York Historical Society Library, AP2.G58, vol. 41.

When Sarah Josepha Hale became *Godey's* editor in 1837, she wanted to drop the plates, which she thought promoted extravagance. But they showcased the latest dress styles, colors, and fabrics, readers loved them, and they remained. Because of the technology then available, the plates were printed as single sheets, then hand-colored individually by an all-female staff numbering 150. Then, they were bound into the magazine, page by page. The plates were original artwork, and they drove the magazine's sales for decades.

Fashion plates were designed to show off clothing. The settings and the people wearing the clothes were less detailed, but they subtly conveyed important meaning about "ideal" women. Consistently, the women were white, pretty, slim, and usually dark-haired and young. They were shown quietly at home, engaged in a peaceful domestic moment: doing needlework, or greeting friends. Children were often present, but rarely men. The homes were elegant and expensive.

*Godey's* was widely read, even by mill workers, but ladies' magazines were written for and marketed to middle-class white



women. They were a popular form of the prescriptive literature that reinforced the idea of "true womanhood," one of the terms historians used to describe the idealized woman of the mid-nineteenth century.

Fashion plates were especially powerful because they were visual. They set a standard for the "true woman" that few real women could meet, though many tried.

But when female reformers argued for abolition or temperance or women's rights, or decided to wear the bloomer outfit, they not only ventured uninvited into public political arenas, they flew directly in the face of what it then meant to be a woman.

The fashion plate above appeared in July 1848, the same month the Women's Rights Convention was held in Seneca Falls.

"Godey's Paris Fashions Americanized," *Godey's Lady's Book*, July 1848. Hand-colored engraving. New-York Historical Society Library, TX1.G58, vol. 37.

### Discussion Questions

- ★ Based on this image, what are the characteristics of the ideal woman of the 1830s?
- ★ How does this image differ from the day-to-day reality of most of the women who would have seen it?
- ★ How does this image compare with images in women's magazines today?

Sources: Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 18, Issue 2, Part 1 (Summer 1966).