

LORGNETTE: FASHIONABLE EYEWEAR FOR WOMEN

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Our University of Missouri-St. Louis Museum Studies interns at The Archives & Museum of Optometry (AMO) have the opportunity to conduct research in our collections to fulfill course requirements and complete class projects. Brittany Golden has taken advantage of her time at AMO to delve into the history of one of our more interesting objects--the lorgnette. We would like to share some of Brittany's research and insights with you this month and highlight some of the beautiful lorgnettes we hold in our collections. The following information has been adapted from her unpublished manuscript "Lorgnette: Fashionable Eyewear for Women."

The lorgnette is a unique style of eyewear that has become obsolete in practical use, but that makes a fascinating object for material culture historians because of the extent to which its form often belies its primary function. Not to be confused with its more straightforward cousin, the opera glass, the lorgnette refers to a pair of spectacles held to the eyes by the wearer using a single handle rather than secured to the head by temple arms or other mechanisms.¹ The lenses of the

lorgnette fold into a case which can also serve as a handle when the device is extended. Many lorgnettes are designed with a loop on one side of the case so that they may be attached to a chain or chatelaine.

In design, the lorgnette is similar to the pince-nez—a popular spectacle design for both men and women in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries—but lacks a bridge with "pinching" pads to secure the spectacles to the nose.



Sterling Silver Lorgnette with Chain, 2017.FIC.0077.
The Archives & Museum of Optometry.



Pince-nez with Hairpin, 2016.FIC.0186. The Archives & Museum of Optometry.



Early 20th Century Opera Glasses, 2014.719. Image courtesy the British Optical Association Museum, The College of Optometrists, London.



Oxford Pince-Nez with Rose-colored Lenses, 2017.FIC.1227. The Archives & Museum of Optometry.

FROM THE MUSEUM

More elaborate lorgnettes bear a resemblance to the scissor glasses of an earlier era. Unlike scissor spectacles, however, the lorgnette's bridge assembly, folding lenses, integral case and (occasionally) detachable handle distinguish it.



French Empire gilt scissors-glasses circa 1805. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Scissors_glasses.jpg. Public domain.

The Englishman George Adams I is credited with creating the first lorgnette in the late eighteenth century for use as an occasional reading aid.^{2,3} However, the device enjoyed its peak popularity in the late nineteenth century. By this time, the lorgnette had become more fashion accessory than vision enhancer, and many Victorian-era lorgnettes did not feature magnifying lenses at all.⁴ Instead, the lorgnette became an accoutrement of middle-class women which was meant to confer the qualities of discernment and sophistication upon the wearer.⁵ Like the optometrists featured in this issue who had parallel careers as forensic specialists, boxing referees and astronauts, the nineteenth-century lorgnette lead a "double life" as an optical device and a social symbol.

The etymology of the term lorgnette provides a clue to its most important function for the class-conscious Victorians. The word lorgnette is derived from the French verb *lorgner*, which means "to inspect" or "to regard" with a particular intensity, usually surreptitiously, and possibly with malicious intent—as a cat does with a mouse.⁶ With a lorgnette one could literally "look down on" one's perceived inferiors or inspect the fitness of a companion with the expectation of finding him lacking.



Marie Dressler & Lionel Barrymore in MGM's film "Dinner at Eight," 1933.

Although not exclusively used by women, the nineteenth-century lorgnette tended to be a feminine accessory and provided a more expressly gendered companion to the quizzer or quizzing glass, a popular eighteenth and early-nineteenth century prop meant more for displaying one's erudition than for enhancing sight.⁷ The lorgnette could be viewed as the obvious feminine companion to the discerning man's monocle. It is in this way, perhaps, that the lorgnette so distinctly embodies the era in which rigid gender and class norms were imposed on polite society.



This tortoiseshell lorgnette pivots at the bridge to perform double-duty as a quizzing glass. 2017.FIC.0082, The Archives & Museum of Optometry.

Initially, the lorgnette was used to connote prestige and refinement, but over time it acquired a negative association with affectation and snobbery that persisted well into the twentieth century. The lorgnette or quizzer became ubiquitous as a costuming element in portrayals of the 'Grande Dame' and other tropes used for communicating the pretensions of the upper class.⁸



Margaret Dumont as the quintessential "Grande Dame," Mrs. Claypool, wields a quizzing glass to inspect her fellow dinner guests in the 1935 Marx Brothers film, "A Night at the Opera."

Gradually, the lorgnette fell out of favor but outliers can be found. For example, this pair of tortoiseshell lorgnette were a mid-century import from British Hong Kong. Perhaps they will enjoy a resurgence in the new millennium!



Cat's eye lorgnettes in tortoiseshell, circa 1950. 2016.FIC.0088, The Archives & Museum of Optometry. Donated by Dr. Irving L. Shapiro, May 1978.

The Archives & Museum of Optometry is fortunate to hold a diverse collection of lorgnettes made from organic and inorganic materials and featuring elaborate accessories and designs. A few unusual examples are featured here. To see more of our collection, visit our gallery online at www.bit.ly/amolorgnette.



Butterscotch Bakelite lorgnette with pendant attachment. 2015. FIC.0017, The Archives & Museum of Optometry.



Sterling silver Oxford-style lorgnette with folding lenses and decorative detachable handle. 2016.FIC.0023, The Archives & Museum of Optometry.



Tortoiseshell lorgnette with aperture handle for correcting myopia. 2016.FIC.0089, The Archives & Museum of Optometry



Tortoiseshell lorgnette with ear horn handle. 2017.IMG.0329, The Archives & Museum of Optometry



Sterling silver lorgnette with dual spectacles. 2017.FIC.1356, The Archives & Museum of Optometry

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