

The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

Philibert

Sylvia Townsend Warner*

How to cite: Warner, S.T. 'Philibert'. *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 2023(1), pp. 112–117 • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/STW.23.1.06>.

Published: 14 December 2023

Copyright:

© 2023, Tanya Stobbs. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/STW.23.1.06>.

This story was first published in *Lilliput* magazine.

Open Access:

The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

* (1893–1978)

Philibert

Sylvia Townsend Warner

Abstract

Warner's 1948 story describes the artistic triumphs of the 'Court Hairdresser' Monsieur Philibert, whose ambitious headdresses powerfully determine the life of their wearers in the French court.

Keywords France; the court; millinery; libertine; virtue; Voltaire.

Editor's note: Lilliput magazine was founded in 1937 by Stefan Lorant and ran until 1960. Sylvia Townsend Warner published three stories in Lilliput: 'A Breaking Wave' (August 1948), 'Philibert' (October 1948) and 'Cuckoo' (March 1949). 'A Breaking Wave' has been reprinted in the collections *One Thing Leading to Another* (1984) and *Dorset Stories* (2006), but 'Philibert' and 'Cuckoo' have not been reprinted until now.

'There is not so variable a thing in nature as a lady's head-dress.'
– ADDISON.¹

Monsieur Philibert was the Court Hairdresser, and the most celebrated artist in the realm. It was he who invented the Representational Coiffure, which allowed a woman of fashion to carry above her head, instead of in it, scenes from classical history, allegories, naval engagements, or the precepts of scientific agriculture. A cushion was secured to the top of the head, the hair was combed over it in colonnades of curls, and the summit of the cushion formed a base for flowers, trees, little windmills, frigates in full sail, harvest wains, or groups of tritons and mermaids. Or anything else that Philibert pleased; for he was a man of invention.

One of his most celebrated heads was the Alpine Scene, created for the Marquise de Mouton Ste. Friperie, a romantic beauty with a taste for lofty landscape and a passion for Jean Jacques Rousseau. This masterpiece contained two mountains, several cascades, and even a little glacier (made of diamonds and emeralds). Quivering on a fine wire above the mountain-tops was a single rose-topaz, representing the sun; and by a sprinkle of pink powder over the white powder Philibert achieved a delightful and exact appearance of the Alpine sunrise.

The Vintage Scene, with wine-press and bacchanals, created for Madame de Han, a southern beauty, was so exhilaratingly bacchic that it brought the lady more admirers than even she knew what to do with. In contrast to this genial creation, Philibert ornamented the English Ambassadors with a head-tire representing the House of Commons and the constitutional liberties of Great Britain. This was exceedingly ingenious and elevating, and political theorists flocked round her.

But of all his clients (the Queen excepted) Philibert preferred the Maréchale des Topinambours. She was young, modest, and amiable. Her hair had a natural wave. Her nose was a nonpareil. Her long neck and sloping shoulders rendered her an ideal support for the productions of his genius.

An artist's pride should be in his work. As a rule Philibert had no difficulty in observing this rule; but in the case of the Maréchale des Topinambours he could not restrain a certain possessive solicitude. To himself (only to himself, for he was a discreet person) he would murmur, 'I launched her. She owes her career to me.'

This was probably true. The young woman had arrived at court with very little ambition, and the most deplorably provincial corsets, and her husband, though a sensible man and an honest soldier, had none of that grace, so essential to those who lead a court life, of making so much of himself that his compliments could seem worth having. In fact, he was considered to be rather a bore, and his distinguished military career was left in oblivion until Philibert conceived the notion of dressing the Maréchale's head with representations of her husband's victories in the field and investments of fortified towns (the little cannon-curls, letting off puffs of gauze smoke and tongues of tinsel flame, undoubtedly led to the Maréchal's appointment to the post of Director of His Majesty's Ceremonial Ordnance).

While decorated with these military honours Madame la Maréchale's charms excited only the most honourable attentions, as her admirers were drawn from the ranks of strategists, military architects, and young men who thirsted for glory as much as they thirsted for love-affairs. When the last siege had been commemorated, Philibert, who scorned to repeat

himself, began to ornament the Maréchale with Pastoral Scenes. These brought her a new following of poets and enlightened land-owners, and she began to flirt. Her flirtations were as innocent as the lambkins that frisked through her locks, and Philibert continued to indulge her with the most delightful sceneries of groves, sheep-folds, and little temples dedicated to Pan and the Oreads, until a Sacrifice to Hymen (in itself, a quite blameless subject) carried his genius too far. Something or other in the Sacrifice to Hymen (perhaps it was the saffron ostrich-tips clustered over one ear) exceeded the bounds of propriety; and Philibert learned, to his horror, that Madame la Maréchale had attracted the sinister attentions of the Prince of Maraschino.

Monsieur le Maréchal failed to notice what was going on, partly because he was a man of few speculations, and partly because he was absorbed in planning the fireworks and feux de joie with which the Ceremonial Ordnance would celebrate the Queen's Birthday. This, as usual, was to be the most elegant festivity of the year. Artists, tailors, cooks, musicians, poets, jewellers, hairdressers, confectioners, gardeners, and astrologers, all were sharpening their talents to produce something unparalleled. Ice was brought from the mountains of Savoy, vanloads of truffles came from Perigord, vanloads of singers from Italy, and the English Ambassadors sent to England for the family garnets.

Philibert was importuned by each of his clients to give her the whole of his attention. In the past he had enjoyed these challenges to his genius as much as nightingales enjoy a full moon, and novelties had flashed from him as profusely as sparks from an anvil. But now he could barely invent a Birth of Venus or a triumph of Ceres. His mind was desperately engaged on the problem of how he could satisfy the Maréchale's expectations without abetting the expectations of the Prince of Maraschino: a problem made no easier by her request that he should design for her a Vintage Scene such as he had made for Madame de Han, only more striking, and much higher. Driven from his usual creative calm he stammered out that he did not think bacchanals very appropriate to her style of beauty. Tossing her head and filling the closet with clouds of powder, she replied that he was quite mistaken. She had been assured by a person of unquestionable good taste that nothing could be more becoming to her than such a scene. And from the light in her eye it was plain enough that the person of unquestionable good taste was the Prince of Maraschino.

Time drew on, and now it was the eve of the Queen's Birthday, and still the distracted Philibert was at his wits' end how to dress this lovely head so obstinately bent to fall on to the most libertine shoulder in France. He fell asleep in despair, dreamed, and woke an hour later in all

the serenity of inspiration. At 10.30 a.m. he kept his appointment with Madame la Maréchale. She was awaiting him in her powdering-closet. Her hair hung loose, and she was looking at herself in the mirror as though she had never till this instant realised how beautiful she was, and found the realisation perfectly delightful.

Philibert's assistants staggered in with all the band-boxes of his trade. As a rule they remained in attendance, ready to hand him a ribbon, a windmill, a volcano, or what you will. Today he dismissed them.

'Why are you sending them away, Philibert? Are they to fetch more band-boxes?'

Bowing, he replied with the solemnity of the artist, 'Madame, they are not even aware of the contents of the band-boxes. My design for the head which I shall today have the honour to bestow on Madame la Maréchale is a secret between my creator and myself.'

Not much impressed, for to tell the truth she had not given him much attention, she enquired, 'I hope at least it is to be lofty. I am quite tired of these dwarfish affairs, no more than half a yard high.' 'It is to be as lofty as the theme,' he answered, and produced a cushion which substantiated his words. From that moment he became absorbed in his work, and she could get no more from him. Certainly, he had never worked more brilliantly. The tresses of hair that he fastened to the cushion assumed curves as graceful and ornate as the curves of a drawing-master's swan, the powder fell as evenly as the first snowfall, the knots of diamonds were as well-placed as constellations in a celestial globe, the bows of blue ribbon were as light as though zephyrs had tied them.

'Yes, that is very nice,' she said. 'Very nice, my good Philibert. But when shall we come to the subject? And what is it by the way?'

These were the words he had dreaded. But his voice expressed only the composure of genius as he replied,

'Domestic bliss, Madame.'

On the summit of the cushion he laid out a grass-plot of the brightest and smoothest green crape, glittering with dew-drops, embellished with doves and daisies, and surrounded with a low hedge of tinsel rose-bushes. In the centre of the grass-plot he secured a gilded summer-house, open on all sides, and wreathed with eglantine. Within the summer-house he placed his group of puppets: a gentleman reading aloud, a lady beside him engaged in needlework, and three charming children. All the puppets were in the height of fashion, and constructed with the greatest elegance and nicety. And from Madame la Maréchale's eyebrows to the tip of the summer-house the height of the head-dress was three feet, two inches.

When he had placed the last few lingering pins he stood back with a sigh of completion. She turned her head from side to side, examining the reflection in the mirror.

'Yes,' she said, 'It is certainly quite original. And it is dignified. And the bows are very pretty. Yes, Monsieur Philibert, I think it will do very well.'

It did excellently well. From the moment of her entrance Madame la Maréchale was surrounded by admiring devotees of virtue. The Prince of Maraschino was unable to get anywhere near her. When he realised the import of her head-dress he concluded that it was directed at him, lost his temper, went away, and never pursued her again. But as the head-dress of Domestic Bliss was undoubtedly the most elegant and becoming head-dress worn that day, besides being the tallest, virtue suddenly became very fashionable; and Madame la Maréchale as the originator of a new mode and a leader of taste had no time to regret the loss of her disagreeable suitor.

(*Lilliput* 23 no. 4, October 1948, pp. 51–4)



Figure 3. Cover of *Lilliput*, October 1948.

Note

- 1 Joseph Addison, 'Ladies' head-dresses', *The Spectator* no. 98 (22 June 1711), 46–9.

Bibliography

Addison, Joseph. 'Ladies' head-dresses', *The Spectator* no. 98 (1711): 46–9.