



CHANGE AND PERMANENCE IN MEN'S CLOTHES

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Every visitor—or at least every male visitor—to the Costume Institute's current exhibition of Adam in the Looking Glass is peppered with questions. Where do men's fashions originate? How much is useful and how much is vestigial encumbrance? Why do men and women today think about clothes so differently? Why have men's styles usually been static except from about 1300 to 1800 when they changed from year to year?

Almost every discussion of men's clothes begins with speculations why they have developed so little during the last hundred years—years that have altered the whole world's way of living more than any thousand years before. It is indeed curious that a woman should feel odd in last year's hat, while a man can wear a suit twenty years old without being noticed, or walk down the street in his grandfather's fur-lined overcoat feeling conspicuous only in being ultra-smart. Indeed, if a gentleman of 1840 should materialize at a formal dance today, his tailcoat and broad shirt front would not look out of place. But of course styles for formal oc-

casions ordinarily survive longest because they depend most on ancestral precedent. The king of England's coronation robes were invented centuries before his old gilded coach first rolled from the carriage-maker's shop, pitching and swaying on its leather "springs." In our naïve surprise at the stodginess of men's clothes today we forget that, viewed in the larger light of history, all clothes have normally been static. A Roman's toga hardly changed in a hundred years, or a pharaoh's dress in a thousand, and Chinese clothes have varied in color and in decoration but hardly at all in cut since time out of mind.

As a matter of fact, the pharaoh's regalia outlasted Egypt's greatness, and the Roman's toga survived in the New Rome on the Bosphorus; for fashions often outlive the civilizations that

ABOVE: Woodcut from the title page of an early book of cutting patterns, "*Libro de Geometria*," by Juan de Alcega, Toledo, 1589. In this picture the author illustrates the use of some of the tailor's tools. Dick Fund, 1941



*This engraving, *The Lovers* by the Master ES, shows the pointed shoes and pinched jacket that were once fashionable in France and Germany. German, about 1460-1470. Dick Fund, 1922*

they express. Indeed fashions seem to regroup historical epochs in larger units. One sweep of styles flowed from the early Greeks through the high Middle Ages, as the draping of yard goods gradually evolved into long shirts and cloaks that hung almost as simply. During those two thousand years men and women dressed practically alike. (When Achilles disguised himself as a girl, or the mythical Pope Joan as a theological student, their disguise must have felt like their normal clothes.) This long age of epicene dress produced literature that seems to us to ignore the full impact of love on an adult. Love is good for a guffaw in *Lysistrata*, for poetic cerebration in the *Symposium*, for adolescent experiment in *Daphnis and Chloe*. Only Catullus wrote about love as we do, as a transforming obsession, and he died young. With the trouba-

dours and Dante Western man left his family or clan and became an individual facing other individuals. Henceforth literature is double-starred with pairs of lovers: Paolo and Francesca, Troilus and Criseyde, Anthony and Cleopatra (a Roman political scandal that the Renaissance transformed into a heroic tragedy of love), the Misanthrope and Célimène, Anna Karenina and Vronsky.

As our modern literature of love emerged men and women discarded the cloaks of the high Middle Ages and began to dress differently from each other for the first time since the Egyptians and Minoans. Man changed from loose chain mail to fitted plate armor, stripped his legs to tights and decorated his torso, while woman billowed out into the flowing skirts of the maternity styles that enabled her to carry on



A Portrait of a Young Man, by Bronzino. Italian, about 1535-1540. The first published tailor's patterns were designed for cutting such intricate fashions as the doublet in this painting. Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929

her almost continuous child-bearing unobtrusively. All the quick mad pranks of the next five hundred years did not affect the basic innovation that had begun about 1300 when the *tailleur* appeared to cut (*tailler*) and fit for men, and the *couturier* to sew (*coudre*) and assemble for women.

The new craft of tailoring was resisted by the Greco-Roman tradition of sophisticated draping in Italy, where clothes in the latter Middle Ages and the Renaissance conformed to the body like a glove to allow for muscular freedom. Leon Battista Alberti would have found it harder to surprise his friends with acrobatic stunts had he worn Northern clothes instead of Italian ones. But French and German tailors, who are said to have been the first to organize themselves into guilds, pinched and padded men like Procrustean despots. Northern jackets and shoes so deformed men's bodies that Vasari blamed Dürer's nudes on his drawing from prentices "who must have had bad figures, as

Germans generally have when naked, although one sees many who are fine men in their clothes."

The new styles that exaggerated the difference between the sexes enabled man to express preoccupations peculiar to his masculinity. Caesar had consoled his dismay at baldness by sneaking a toupee, or by shaving his whole head like a soldier in camp who had to reduce the shelter for lice. But now a man wore the most wonderful hats indoors and out, in bed, and before the altar, and dreamed up wigs that became his crowning glory. Tights or stockings allowed him to display a muscular leg, which was so important that St. Simon rarely fails to note if a courtier's leg was "well nourished" or "dry." Since athletic sports were closed to women until very recently, man also expressed his masculinity by changing from his everyday clothes for violent exercise. While the Greek had simplified matters by shedding everything, the medieval jousting went to the other extreme by encasing himself in a flashing shell of steel topped with plumes.

Our modern idea of sport clothes as something between these extremes—a covering that does not hamper action—seems to have appeared first among the pioneers of handball tennis, who simply stripped off their jackets and put on doeskin gloves as early as 1431 and morocco leather slippers by 1560. But in 1632 water sports still required as fancy a costume as jousts, for the Duke of Lorraine swam in a flowered cotton jacket with elbow sleeves and a broad straw hat completely lined with Chinese taffeta. We have lost a world of fantasy in our plain, specialized uniforms now prescribed for swimming, golf, tennis, dancing, riding, and weddings. The change in clothes has been accompanied by a change in the ideal of masculine behavior. In the seventeenth century when men powdered, studied the conduct of a clouded cane, and titivated their curls and their lace, Tallemant des Réaux called a man effeminate for continuing to bathe and exercise daily after he had outlived his good looks.

Medieval and renaissance clothes not only expressed a man's masculine preoccupations, but also registered his station in life more ex-

actly than before or since. In the settled and stratified society of Europe from the late Middle Ages until the French Revolution state funds were spent by hereditary nobles, who changed fashions quickly for reasons that are clear. When a man ruled because he had taken the trouble to be born a duke, learning to read and write only laid him open to competition from the vulgar without making him one quartering more ducal. How then could he keep ahead when the peasant's toe was forever kiping the courtier's heel? The most conspicuous way to set himself above his imitators was to change expensive fashions too fast for poorer men to follow. For five centuries the nobles led a hare-and-hound chase by discarding fashions that were then picked up by all and sundry. Sumptuary laws merely stimulated the pursuers by teasing. In 1617 Fynes Moryson said: "All manner of attire came first into the city and country from the court, which, being once received by the common people, and by the very stage-players themselves, the courtiers justly cast off, and take new fashions." Even Philip Stubbes, in his violent *Anatomy of Abuses* of 1583, sourly allows a certain license to the courtier by saying of expensive shirts, "If the Nobilitie or Gentic onely did weare them it were somedeal more tollerable."

The courtier could also distinguish himself by wearing clothes too awkward for a working man, such as boot tops so wide that he had to walk straddling, or shoes with points two feet long. Some of the seventeenth-century French styles were not only cumbersome to wear but required an expert valet to tie up the dozens of points, or laces. When a suit had five hundred and seventy-six buttons most were probably ornamental, but some must have needed a good deal of time to do and undo. And a man certainly could not dress himself alone in clothes that rustled with bowknots tied from over three hundred yards of ribbon. Such extravagancies might have led Pascal, had he respected order less, to anticipate Veblen's theory of conspicuous waste. He went as far as was possible for a seventeenth-century Frenchman by saying: "To go bravely dressed is not all vanity, but a manner of showing that many people serve a man

who shows by his hair that he has a coiffeur and a perfumer, and so forth. Now it is not a mere external or trinket to command many hands.



Detail from the Conversion of St. Paul, by Benozzo Gozzoli. Florentine, about 1460-1465. The clothes worn by the man who is running allowed freedom of movement. Rogers Fund, 1915



James Stuart, Duke of Lennox, by Van Dyke (1632-1641). Court fashion was both fickle and elegant. Gift of Henry G. Marquand, 1888

The more hands a man commands, the more powerful he is, so to go bravely dressed is to display one's power."

But the courtier's policy of inimitable whim found a counterpoise in the professional man's resistance to innovation. For there is no doubt but that professions stabilize fashions. The soldier, the butler, the sailor, the monk, the judge, and the priest have always distinguished themselves from the rest of men by conserving fashions that were discarded by the world of elegance as long as a thousand years ago. A practiced eye can pick out the banker, the artist, the traveling salesman, the professor, and (though

he does not think so) the detective. In any society that is governed by officials, like ours or that of Rome, Egypt, and China, men are bound to dress traditionally. Because no man is born a judge or a priest he celebrates achieving such status by doing all he can to identify himself with his fellows and predecessors.

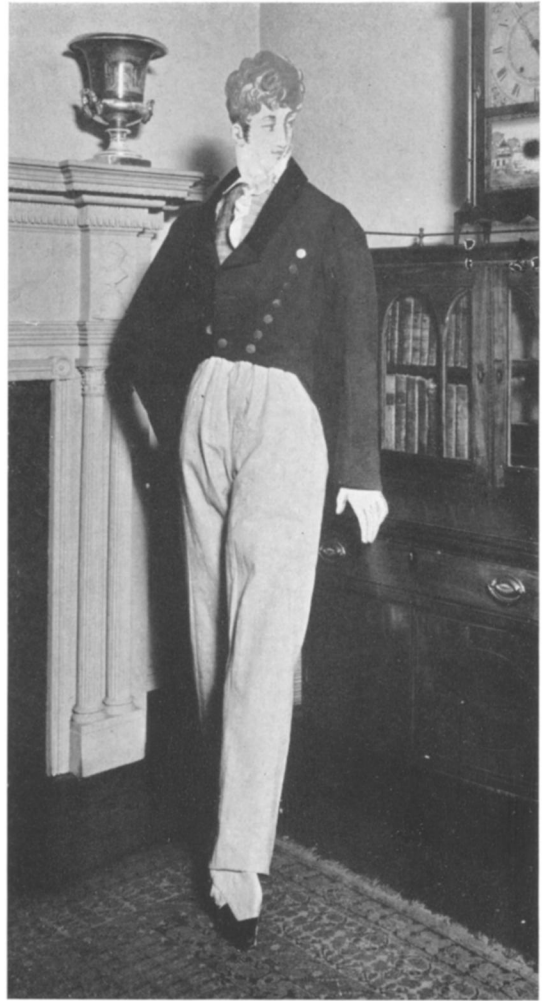
Long after ecclesiastics had standardized their clothes Louis XIV's soldiers followed suit when the rich and centralized government of France began to equip and pay for a standing army. The uniformity that was first imposed on the foot soldier has gradually crept up the ranks until today only generals enjoy the quaintness of a sartorial license. When a standardized secular dress was still a new idea for laymen, Charles II decided to adopt, and thereby launch, a fashion that he promised never to alter. He did this a few weeks after the Great Fire of London in order to save his subjects' money, at the very moment when Louis XIV, with a power unhumbled by revolution, was forcing his nobles to ruin themselves by wanton expenses. On October 15, 1666, Charles II appeared in a black and white suit that is said to have established the combination of trousers, waistcoat, and jacket that has prevailed to this day. When Pepys first wore the new style three weeks later, he makes one feel the embarrassing strangeness of it by saying, "Was mighty fearful of ague, my vest being new and thin, and my coat cut not to meet before upon my breast."

Keeping warm was a problem that our central heating has let us forget. Indoor and outdoor dress were more alike when breath fogged in the snuggest room and Louis XIV's water froze on his table. Then, as autumn chilled into winter, a man simply added shirts and stockings until he was wearing up to a dozen of each, and often needed his cloak, gloves, hat, and muff indoors more than out. Today men dress the year around as though they were outdoors in October and women as though they were indoors in August. Winter and summer, men's clothes differ little in weight and not a bit in cut, until habit makes them like a daytime skin. A woman, on the contrary, is reminded of her clothes as often as she changes from short skirts and long sleeves in the

day to long skirts and no sleeves at night. Frequent contrasts of weight and constriction make her more willing to experiment with entirely fresh forms. Thus we have the new anomaly of the unchanging man and the inventive, ever varying woman. Or is it so new? Roman women, after all, dared vary more than Roman men by curling up architectural coiffures and showing themselves in oriental silks from which half the threads had been pulled until the flimsy rest clung to the body like net. They could be inventive because they lived with independent means in a society governed by professional men, where most of them by being women escaped from professional categories. This is also true of modern women.

Modern man's drabness of dress has antecedents in the tradition of wearing black. In the early 1400's the Burgundian court seems to have begun the wearing of black for distinction. Charles the Bold, the richest and most sophisticated prince north of the Alps, posed for Roger van der Weyden in plain black velvet, with no jewel except the collar of the Golden Fleece and no rings on the hand that grasps a wooden dagger handle. From Burgundy the wearing of black passed to France and to Spain, reappeared in Rembrandt's sitters, and has been permanent in Calvinist Switzerland. England, being outside the orbit of Burgundy and the Hapsburgs, took less kindly to black. Charles II soon abandoned his black and white economy fashion because he disliked seeing his courtiers look "like magpies." And yet black is supposed to have been established as obligatory for men's formal wear by Bulwer Lytton's *Pelham, or the Adventure of a Gentleman*, published in 1828, which "recommends dark as safest" for men's clothes and specifies "a white waistcoat with a black coat and trousers, and a small chain of dead gold, only partially seen." Social fear had come to stay.

It is odd that trousers should now stand for man's timidity in dress, for two thousand years of wear by northern hunters and tribesmen formerly associated them with roughness and revolution. Scythians and Persians were wearing them by 400 B.C. About 120 B.C. Caesar's soldiers adopted them from the region around Nar-



Wedding suit, blue broadcloth and white flannel, American, 1828. Evening dress today is a descendant of such styles. Lent by the Museum of the City of New York to the Costume Institute exhibition, Adam in the Looking Glass

bonne in southern France, which they called Gaul in Trousers (Gallia Bracata), and Scandinavian peat bogs have preserved them to this day on medieval corpses. In 1742 wide overalls were worn by men who rode post into the north of England in order to protect themselves from the mud and cold. The old example of sailors' trousers and of Indians' leather stockings was familiar in America in 1778, when Lord Carlisle wrote home from the Delaware in June: "The gnats of this part of the river are as large as sparrows; I have armed myself against them



Scarlet wool cape, probably Italian, late XVIII century. From Adam in the Looking Glass

by wearing trousers, which is the constant dress of this country." In 1809 another Englishman described a man as "dressed in the American style, in a blue suit with round hat and pantaloons."

The Gallic origin of trousers and their association with plebeian labor made them a French revolutionary symbol of opposition to courtly knee breeches and powdered wigs. In the 1790's the "Gallic" trousers and the wild "Brutus" haircut were (like the recent black shirts and brown shirts) a political kind of fashion that woman, as a less political animal, has rarely

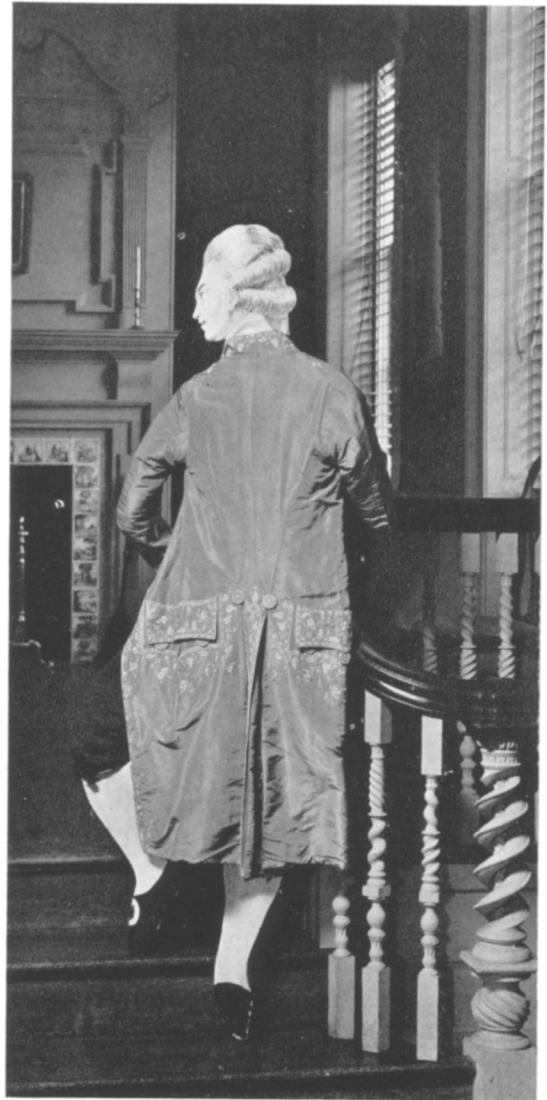
adopted. Trousers and cropped hair denoted radicalism even outside France. In 1791 Walpole heard that eight smart young Englishmen who had cut their hair and discarded powder thought themselves "not fit to appear so docked" at a Windsor Castle ball. Madison and his cabinet in knee breeches were opposed by Americans in pantaloons who combed their hair forward "as though they had been fighting a hurricane backward." In 1812 trousers still had such disturbing connotations in England that two Cambridge colleges ruled to count as absent any undergraduate who presented him-

self so dressed at hall or chapel. Yet two years later the soldiers returning from Waterloo had made trousers fashionable among civilians, and soon they became as deeply identified with the forces of reaction as the very bourgeoisie that had won the gains of the French Revolution.

Men have certainly dressed timidly since the French Revolution broke the self-confidence of the hereditary nobility and gave their vested power to whoever could seize and hold it. A modern man whose power depends on money or a job knows that it is here today and gone tomorrow, whereas a noble in the old stratified monarchies relied on a power that was as permanent as his name. Louis XIV, as the apex of European society, had the assurance to dazzle some oriental ambassadors by wearing cloth of gold with 14,000,000 francs worth of diamonds on his hat, coat buttons, rings, garters, shoe buckles, cane, and sword, in a vestment so ponderous that he had to change after lunch. Should we today make the most modest display, we would fear punitive taxes and righteous publicity and be as embarrassed by confessing to class distinctions as our great grandparents were by sex. As Isaac Walker, the New York tailor, wrote in 1885, "It is becoming more and more difficult to assign a man his place in society on the evidence of his costume, and this state of things will last for a long time to come." And last it will as long as our uniform makes the rich man comfortable in inconspicuousness, the poor man happy in looking like the rich, and all of us able to duck the vexing question of where we belong in the social jumble. The dominant class will innovate fashions, as always—which means, in our century of the common man, that the poor legislate for the rich. Thus reforms in dress will come from the same level as reforms in spelling—not from the benevolent inventors of Esperanto, but from road signs saying THRU HIWAY SLO. The day laborer has already given his blue shirt to the chairman of the board, and the street cleaner his comfortable cottons to the whole city in summer. We will add these gifts to our caddis-worm case of vestiges—the sleeve buttons, the trouser cuffs, the vent at the back of the jacket, and the whole lapel with its nick and button hole—and we will

conserve them as peasants used to conserve the courtiers' castoffs. After all, who cares where fashions come from, what they look like, or how they feel or fit, just provided they comfort us with an assurance of correctness?

Adam in the Looking Glass, the current exhibition at the Costume Institute, will remain on view throughout the summer. The galleries' entrance is on Fifth Avenue at 83rd street.



Embroidered olive green taffeta suit, French, about 1775-1790. Gift of Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss, 1943. From Adam in the Looking Glass