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0521574544 - The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the 'Ancien Regime'

Daniel Roche

Excerpt

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Part 1

Towards a history of clothing

So you try to best the other 'shoemakers' by building strange
contraptions in your basement?

Walter M. Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*

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1. *Clothing or costume?*

And they knew that they were naked

Genesis, 3:7

Whilst the last decades of the twentieth century have seen the appearance of museums of fashion, a phenomenon by definition short-lived, historians have yet to think how to write about something other than these sumptuous and insubstantial phantoms. In the history of human appearances, they have always taken pride of place, since, without knowing it, they serve to display power: the ostentatious demonstration of a frivolity seen as the natural expression of an art of living, inaccessible to the majority, becomes the mark of supreme distinction. It is an elusive state, in which the extravagance, the folly and the market and symbolic value of the objects mock ordinary ways and plebeian or vulgar habits. In the world of industrialised consumption, the last refuge of elegance is to wear designer jeans. Fashion actively motivates those who care about appearances; frivolous and volatile, it has always stimulated trade and incarnated change. For the West, it has been a 'mistress of civilisation'.¹

Let us leave aside, for the moment, this particular history, though without dismissing it entirely; it is not completely trivial, since it is a way of understanding, even regretting, the passage of time. 'Fashion', wrote André Suarès, 'is the best of all farces, where no-one laughs, since everyone takes part' – or almost everyone. There are, perhaps, too many absentees – the less well off, the real poor. To include them, with their costume and clothes, and their bodies, different though gradually transformed

¹ F. Braudel, *Civilisation matérielle et capitalisme*, vol. I, *Les Structures du quotidien* (Paris, 1967), pp. 270–5, translated by Sian Reynolds as *Civilisation and Capitalism*, vol. I, *The Structures of Everyday Life* (London, 1981).

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by 'the shaping of appearances', we need a different type of history.²

As in the eighteenth century, let us speak of 'clothes', the word best suited to a social and cultural history of appearances at a time when practices, like social status, were in turmoil. The *Encyclopédie* understood by the word 'everything which serves to cover the body, decorate it, or protect it from harm from the atmosphere'. It preferred the term to *costume*, a word of Italian origin, too ambiguous in its double meaning of custom and dress or way of dressing. Thanks in particular to the use of inventories after death, urban social history has perceived the importance of clothing, less perhaps in patrimonies than in life-styles and human relations. The logic of clothing offers a way of understanding and a means of studying the social transformations taking place within urban melting-pots. From this perspective, the history of material culture and the history of social behaviour are directly linked, as Fernand Braudel has shown.

It is a history less anecdotal than it might appear. It poses all the problems, those of raw materials, of the processes and structures of production, of costs and benefits, of cultural constants and variations in time and space. Clothing, changing at will, everywhere both reveals and conceals social position. One understands how the author of the *Structures du quotidien* found in its history a means of distinguishing the stable societies of the East, conservative in their customs, where change only occurred thanks to major political upheavals, from the unstable societies of the West, variously impelled by the 'follies of fashion'. But an East of calm and stability existed within the turbulent West: 'Our villagers are rather Turkish with regard to fashion', observed Jean-Baptiste Say. The clothes of peasant societies and of the poor, mostly rural in origin, change little, which is not the same as not at all. The aristocratic and urban worlds of the modern period, without wholly abandoning their attachment to the distinctive external signs characteristic of strongly hierarchical societies, were caught up in the wind of change by fashions which innovated and distinguished.

We are today able to carry this theme forward. We should recognise the originality of the approach of Braudel as compared with the immobilism of the traditional history of costume. The

² P. Perrot, *Le Travail des apparences ou les transformations du corps féminin, XVIIIe-XIXe siècles* (Paris, 1984).

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latter's chief landmarks are Quicherat,³ Racinet,⁴ and Boucher,⁵ and most work published prior to 1933 is to be found in the massive *Bibliographie générale du costume et de la mode* of René Colas. We can here observe how an object of historical study is constituted. Reading such works, one discovers both backwardness and difficulties. A few recent examples apart, it is a history which has not yet discovered how to respond to the questions which professionals and amateurs have been asking for fifty years.⁶

I believe that a new problematic of the history of clothing is a way of penetrating to the heart of social history. It is another way of posing the essential question: what should be produced? With its train of attendant questions: what should be consumed, what distributed? It is also a good way of trying to observe how the different ideological models which co-exist and compete to regulate behaviour and habits interact in the reality one hopes to attain.

From the seventeenth century, especially after the great movement of religious reflection following the Catholic and Protestant Reformations, clothing was at the centre of debates about wealth and poverty, excess and necessity, superfluity and sufficiency, luxury and adequacy. In the Christian moral vision, both Catholic and Protestant, it served as a means to measure how manners adapted to ethical requirements. For economists who emphasised utility and the motor of consumption, it was still, a century later, the customary example of the human production sought after in order to improve society and life.⁷ The history of clothing tells us much about civilisations; it reveals their codes.

In the French society of the *ancien régime*, we thus find two simultaneous discourses. One was of the stationary economy, in

³ J. Quicherat, *Histoire du costume français depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'à la fin du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1879).

⁴ A. Racinet, *Le Costume historique avec cinq cents planches chromolithographiques* (Paris, 1875–88).

⁵ F. Boucher, *Histoire du costume en Occident, de l'Antiquité à nos jours* (Paris, 1967, 2nd edn 1985).

⁶ In particular, Y. Deslandres, *Le Costume image de l'homme* (Paris, 1976); F. Piponnier, *Costume et vie sociale, la Cour d'Anjou, XIVe–XVe siècles* (Paris, 1970); P. Perrot, *Les Dessus et les dessous de la bourgeoisie* (Paris, 1981).

⁷ I would particularly like to thank here J.-C. Perrot. For examples of texts, see J.-G. de Villethierry, *La Vie des riches et des pauvres ou les obligations de ceux qui possèdent les biens de la terre ou qui vivent de la pauvreté, prouvé par l'écriture* (Paris, 1710); Boisguilbert, *Oeuvres* (Paris, 1966); A. Morizet, *L'Apologie du luxe et le mondain de Voltaire* (Paris, 1909).

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which everyone had their place and ought to consume according to their rank, where clothing revealed status. Since Erasmus, this had been the basis of the rhetoric of the *civilités*, or manuals of 'good manners',⁸ very different from etiquette, where everything concerning clothes characterised, both morally and socially, a type of conduct, that of civil decency. Clothing was 'the body's body, and from [it] one may infer the state of a man's character'.⁹ If, in the more worldly texts on this theme which proliferated in the eighteenth century (from whose titles the word *civilité* had often disappeared), the manners taught were those of the gentleman rather than the universal Erasmian Christian, dress still revealed 'the harmony of the inner and the outer man';¹⁰ everyone should regulate their conduct according to the norms appropriate to their occupation or class. A fundamental tension was thus gradually created within baroque and classical society, which saw appearance and reality opposed in social life.¹¹ It needed all the modesty of a La Salle to return to the Erasmian tradition and rediscover in clothing the proof of moral health, now reconciled with respect for social rank. 'Negligence in dress is a sign of neglect of God's presence, or of insufficient respect for Him; it also reveals a lack of respect for one's own body, which should be honoured as the animate temple of the Holy Spirit, and the tabernacle where Jesus Christ is good enough often to repose.'¹²

In contrast, the practitioners and interpreters of fashion exalted the desire of the privileged, true or false, to distinguish themselves from lesser mortals. Clothes became weapons in the battle of appearances. They were employed to erect a barrier, to stave off the pressure of imitators and followers who must be kept at a distance, and who always lagged behind in some nuance in the choice of colour or way of tying a ribbon or cravat. In a world ruled by the conventions of fashion, innumerable signs thus helped

⁸ R. Chartier, 'La civilité entre distinction et divulgation', in *Historische Lexicon der Politisch Sozialen Grundbegriffe in Frankreich von Ancien Régime zur Revolution, 1680–1820* (Munich, 1986).

⁹ Erasmus, *De civilitate morum puerilium* (pp. 269ff. of translation by B. McGregor in *Collected Works*, volume xxv).

¹⁰ A. de Courtin, *Nouveau Traité de la civilité qui se pratique en France parmi les honnêtes gens* (Paris, 1671), p. 29.

¹¹ Chartier, 'La civilité', p. 13.

¹² J.-B. de La Salle, *Les Règles de la bienséance et de la civilité chrétienne* (Rheims, 1703), pp. 61–2.

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everyone to find their way. But the spectre of the confusion and usurpation of values was then raised. For this, towns proved increasingly fertile ground. In his *Tableau de Paris*, Louis Sébastien Mercier devoted himself to tracing the signs of these shifts and displacements, whose driving forces were imitation and social mobility and whose result was a society less easy to read and a more complex hierarchy of values. Fashion existed in a niche between mimetism and protectionism.

We should remember that a whole economy and a whole society were dependent on it – manufacturers and merchants, the development of new patterns and fabrics, the new shapes and arrangements which were both cause and consequence of sartorial competitiveness. We see here how the real and the imaginary are imbricated in the history of clothing. On both levels, which must be compared without creating false opposites, since reality is a factor in the imagined, and the imagined contributes to reality, we must try to link dialectically ideas and manners, practices and images. This is our first difficulty.

A second quickly emerges when we look at the specific sources for the history of clothing. We need to spend some time on these, since the critical spirit dear to the historian cannot but help to convey how the subject of this research has been constructed. For convenience, we can employ five documentary categories: the clothes themselves, the textiles, pictorial sources (which will be discussed at some length), the sources for family, commercial and social history, and the philological sources.¹³

CLOTHES AS DOCUMENTS: FROM ARCHIVES TO ICONOGRAPHY

As an original and direct source, we must look at old clothes. How can we appreciate the effects evoked or described in the written sources without trying to see them in the flesh? But two questions are posed by every collection of costume and museum of fashion: what is preserved, and what can be preserved?

Old fabrics are rare and fragile, and though specialists can work wonders in the way of restoration, clothes from before the end of the seventeenth century are rarely on display. Further, it is essentially

¹³ Deslandres, *Le Costume*, pp. 19–35, is the best introduction to the documentary problems.

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outer garments which have been preserved. Linen is extremely rare in museums. Yvonne Deslandres is proud of her collection of forty shirts from the eighteenth century, whilst her colleagues in the Victoria and Albert Museum have only one! What we find is fine linen, usually recovered from châteaux, which tells us little about the normal practice of re-use and alteration characteristic of societies of scarcity and peasant life. In a word, direct historical access is socially biased, consisting mainly of aristocratic dress and fine garments, with very few ordinary clothes. They remain, for all that, fundamental, 'since the information they provide cannot be found in any document'.¹⁴ They make it possible to flesh out the dry bones of the archival sources, to discuss shapes, the use of fabrics, the decoration, the variety of cut, the use of embroidery and buttons. They reveal the gap between image and reality. Above all, by a visual education, they teach the distance and the difference between the clothes of the past and our own.

The study of fabrics is inseparable from that of surviving clothes and suffers from the same limitations. Moths love wool, and their centuries of feasting have spared little of the vast quantities of cloth woven, cut and made up in the modern period; whereas silks, cottons, linens and canvas resist better, which gives a festive, or a rural, or a summery air to the collections on display. For a deeper understanding, a knowledge of textiles and all the materials of dress is indispensable, since we need constantly to compare the fabric and the garment whose approximate date and social trajectory is known.

Statistics for the economic history of cloth manufacture, the wool trade, the spread of cottons, the rise of silks or the stability of linen are not unduly hard to find. But economic historians deal more with production and manufacture than with trade. Huge areas remain untouched – the processing of fabrics, consumption and markets, the relationship between the market and family consumption. The direct study of fabrics and materials raises questions about social habits of use, seasonal variations and levels of production. Further, it is important to compare illustrations and surviving fabrics. The original material sheds new light on artistic representations, whilst the pictures sometimes make it possible to identify fabrics or analyse their cut and the techniques of home manufacture.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

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The value of Marie Risselin-Steenebrugen's study of the lace in Flemish portraits of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries becomes apparent.¹⁵ The taste for white linen was a characteristic of the patriciate of the Low Countries. In the paintings, it suggests the wealth of fields of blue flax in spring flower, the skill of workers, the dexterity of lace-makers and the domestic accomplishments of good wives. A series of well-dated portraits makes it possible to trace in detail the evolution of the lace and embroidered white linen which, in a variety of forms – ruffs, collars, sleeves, coifs and the trimming of aprons and caps – gradually became a principal motif of the artists. Impeccably executed, delicate and transparent, exploiting the contrast between the stiff shapes, sober costume and black clothes and the dazzling white linen, skillfully worked in Flemish needlepoint, the paintings testify, through the evolving styles, to the triumph of a controlled luxury. Between the modest fragment of lovingly preserved lace and the striking decorative forms in the paintings of clothes, a suggestive exchange is initiated. The means of perceiving the difference between image and practice, the fabrics make it possible to question a subtle language.¹⁶

PAINTINGS AND ENGRAVINGS OF CLOTHES

With pictorial sources we are on more familiar ground. Sculpture, paintings, drawings, engravings, even money and seals, appear to be a convenient substitute for the clothes we have lost. They portray them both worn and dated. But here, too, there is a problem of bias, since pictures of the great are more accessible than those of the poor, though the latter exist. At a deeper level, the conventions and the significations of the image mean that the work of art is a far-from-simple document. This specificity has to be taken into account in the same way as the literarity of fiction. The clothing portrayed had a role to play within the perspective of a dramatisation of gesture and body; it was sometimes used to support an idea which can only be understood by external reference. The peasant or citizen clothing in genre paintings, from Le Nain to

¹⁵ M. Risselin-Steenebrugen, 'La Dentelle dans les portraits en Flandres du XVIe et XVIIe siècles', in *Actes du 1er Congrès international d'histoire du costume*, Venice, 1952 (Paris, 1955).

¹⁶ P. Hugues, *Le Langage des tissus, textiles, arts, langage* (Paris, 1982).

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Chardin or from Greuze to Boilly, was intended to convey a realism which is opposite and symmetrical to the idealisation found elsewhere. Much remains to be done in this field if we are to progress from exemplary illustration to a more systematic, perhaps even a quantitative, approach. This is beyond the scope of our study. However, it suggests a twofold approach – the study of shapes and that of colours.

Every element in paintings, tapestries and sculpture can be revealing. The 4,000 *ex votos* collected by Bernard Cousin call into question the stability of the rural and bourgeois clothing of ancient Provence.¹⁷ This is one way, amongst others,¹⁸ of approaching the problem of regional dress. This theme, always counterposed to a national history identified with the history of elites, valorises immemorial age and immobility. The folklorists of the nineteenth century, to some degree fabricating provincial traditions, emphasised the beautiful exceptions at the expense of the norm. The history of Arlesian costume is a case in point. The study of the little pictures offered to Provençal churches makes plain that everyday costume was less exceptional and elaborate and, above all, that it was not immune to history. Influenced not so much by fashion as by the major changes in male and female dress, it exhibits few regional characteristics, except at Arles itself. The *ex votos* show the social nuances of appearance in the way items and accessories are deployed, and in revealing signs – the man's hat whose shape was a criterion of distinction, the woman's apron whose presence or absence had connotations of labour.¹⁹ Paintings also allow us to study the history of colour in clothes.

'Cloth and colour make the man of honour.' In paintings we can study the use of dyestuffs, the evolution of techniques, the relationship to shapes and circumstances of use and symbolic functions. Together with the lessons of heraldry and religious and love poetry, the colours of the painted clothes offer a new key to understanding. First, colour was one of the principal elements of 'court civilisation', an obligatory reference conveyed in numerous texts beginning with the tradition of Renaissance Italy and the translation of Castiglione's *Courtier*, immortalised in an unforgettable portrait by

¹⁷ B. Cousin, *Le Miracle et le quotidien, les ex-voto provençaux image d'une société* (Paris, 1983).

¹⁸ See the works of Nicole Pellegrin.

¹⁹ Cousin, *Le Miracle et le quotidien*, pp. 214–21.

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Raphael. 'Colour makes it possible to attract people's attention just as a magnet attracts iron filings', said Ariosto. Colour was also a way of interpreting the social theatre. It indicated function, situation and rank. The judge drawing up an instrument outside the lawcourts or in ordinary session might wear a black gown; pronouncing judgement, he donned the solemn gown of red. From regimental uniforms to the habits of fraternity penitents, past society offers many variations on the theme of colour; it might be forbidden or imposed by sumptuary laws, or dictated by convention, status and role in time: the colours of marriage and mourning, or of the scaffold and ceremony.

Past society attached more importance than our own to colour and adornment in both ordinary and extraordinary life. But the values of the eye were not reserved only to the rich and the powerful; by complex channels, such as the redistribution of the clothes of masters, they reached the lower classes. Thanks to painting, they form a chapter in the history of sensibility and perceptions.

COLLECTIONS OF COSTUME

Among pictorial sources, engravings and prints deserve special mention. They were much more plentiful than books and, of course, than paintings and sculpture. Loose pictures are recorded in more than 50 per cent of eighteenth-century Parisian inventories. They were a basic instrument in the wide diffusion of norms, patterns, processes and styles. The support suggests both utility and dreams. Thus was born the 'fashion plate'. Its diffusion was accelerated by the ability of the printer–editors of the Renaissance to devise and reproduce these collections or *recueils de costumes* (note the double meaning – costume and custom – of the title). Jacqueline Tuffal has counted more than 200 for Europe as a whole for the period 1520–1610.²⁰ Their rate of production in France from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries can be traced in part thanks to Colas' bibliography, though it omits innumerable pamphlets and brochures printed in every European centre. Minimum figures for published books are given on p. 12.

²⁰ J. Tuffal, 'Les Recueils de costumes gravés au XVII^e siècle', in *Actes du 1er Congrès international d'histoire du costume*.