

PART IV  
**Fashion, Modernism,  
and Modernity**



## FASHIONABLE MASCULINITIES IN ENGLAND AND BEYOND

### Renunciation and Dandyism, 1800–1939

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The design, production, selling, and wearing of men's clothing through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has had a significant impact on the visual culture and social experience of the modern world. It has also determined many of the underlying influences that have contributed to the development and expansion of fashion more generally, not just in terms of the shaping of men's bodies, but also in relation to the dress of women and children.<sup>1</sup> Yet its examination has been relatively neglected for most of the period we might associate with the rise of dress and fashion history as a serious focus of scholarship. It is only over the course of the past two decades that we have seen a flowering of journals, exhibitions, and monographs addressing the role played by the male wardrobe in the fashioning of social relations, taste, and the experience of modernity. My own doctoral work in the 1990s and related publications at the time drew on the 'cultural turn' and a re-focusing of the history of gender to consider the formation of masculinities in relation to patriarchy in a more nuanced way, revealing overlooked patterns of masculine consumption.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Clare Rose, *Making, Selling and Wearing Boys' Clothes in Late Victorian England* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Farid Chenoune, *A History of Men's Fashion* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993); John Harvey, *Men in Black* (London: Reaktion Books, 1995); Christopher Breward, *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, Fashion and City Life 1860–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, 4/4 (2000); David Kuchta, *The Three-Piece Suit and Modern Masculinity: England, 1550–1850* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Michael Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy: A History of Men's Dress in the American*

Previous to this, the properties of masculine dress had remained the specialist preserve of economic and business historians (the history of modern industrialization is, after all, a history of the production and distribution of textiles destined, in large part, for military uniforms, workwear, and suits). Art and literary critics, and some designers and curators were likewise engaged in assessments of male dress (sartorial decoration held a special attraction for a generation of commentators in the 1960s and 1970s interested in the formal, aesthetic, and psychological aspects of male costume), but in general the study of men's clothing and the motivations of male consumers were considered a minor aspect of the wider history of fashion.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter draws on the advance in scholarship of the past three decades to consider the arguments around the material, philosophical, and political qualities of men's dress as a fundamental armature for the description and experience of fashion itself. It will trace its status as a vessel for local tradition, trade, and global connection in an age of competing empires; and it will investigate the adaptability of male clothing as an instrument of style and oppositional statement in relation to cultural identity. The functional and symbolic meanings of masculine fashionability are varied and complex. Its forms, particularly that of the English business suit, which over the course of the nineteenth century

*Republic, 1760–1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Brent Shannon, *The Cut of His Coat: Men, Dress, and Consumer Culture in Britain, 1860–1914* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006); Laura Ugolini, *Men and Menswear: Sartorial Consumption in Britain 1880–1939* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007); Peter McNeil and Vicki Karaminas (eds.), *The Men's Fashion Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2009); Kate Irwin and Laurie Anne Brewer, *Artist, Rebel, Dandy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press and Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 2013); Christopher Breward, *The Suit: Form, Function & Style* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016); Shaun Cole and Miles Lambert, *Dandy Style: 250 Years of British Men's Fashion* (New Haven and London: Manchester Art Gallery and Yale University Press, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm* (New York: Viking Press, 1960); Norah Waugh, *The Cut of Men's Clothes 1600–1900* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964); Hardy Amies, *ABC of Men's Fashion* (London: Newnes, 1964); James Laver, *Dandies* (London: Routledge, 1968); David T. Jenkins and Kenneth G. Ponting, *The British Wool Textile Industry, 1770–1914* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1987).

came to concretize a widely shared (and often contested) understanding of 'normative' masculine behaviour, have bequeathed a stubborn lexicon for modern sartorialism which leaves a legacy even in the early twenty-first century (Figure 21.1).

For the century and a half covered here, the narratives within the fashionable male wardrobe of metropolitan Europe and North America, as it was understood in a vastly expanding field of fashion's visual and material culture, illustrate a dynamic tension between seeming continuity and even ossification, and a surprising element of change and adaptation. The evolution of style was often captured in the detail of clothing rather than in radical shifts of form or silhouette, and can be reconstructed through representations including portrait and modern history



**Figure 21.1** Eugène Atget, *The Window of a Parisian Men's Outfitters*, photograph, 1926. From *The Studio*, vol. 98, London Offices of the Studio, London, 1929. Hulton Archive: Getty Images 2619192.

painting and graphic art, commercial and amateur photography, fashion plates produced for the trade, literary description in diaries, biographies, travel writing, and novels, and its survival as items in museum collections. On the streets and in the clubrooms of London (the city most closely associated with setting trends in male fashion throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), early nineteenth-century aristocratic dress was cut close to the body, heavily influenced by military uniform and sporting (particularly equestrian) dress, and already anticipating the rigorous simplification of dark woollen coat, waistcoat and trousers over white linen or cotton shirt that would signify the suit of business attire by the end of the century.<sup>4</sup> The style of the 1810s and 1820s, however, prioritized calf-enhancing and full-length pantaloons (a bridge from the knee-length breeches of the late eighteenth century), swallow and tailcoats shaped to a slim waist, and elaborate neckties around high collars, all in a range of white, buff, blue, and black tones.

By the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s, the attenuated elegance of the Regency had given way to a more ebullient sense of Romanticism. The fashionable male figure in the first part of Queen Victoria's reign celebrated a relative 'loudness' in pattern, texture, and colour which translated into a greater use of checks and plaids, velvets, furs, and brocades in the trimmings and accessories, and greens, browns, and maroons in the dyes. The latter half of the century, by contrast, saw a retrenchment through the 1860s and 1870s into concealment and constraint: high-buttoning collars at the neck, lowering and capacious waistlines on enveloping frock coats, fuller sleeves and straight stove-pipe trousers echoing cylindrical top hats, all in more subdued tones and dulled surfaces. From the 1880s to the first decade of the twentieth century and beyond into the 1920s and 1930s a sense of finesse and diversification and a return to more flattering fits made deliberate reference back to that earlier age of elegance. Morning coats and lounge suits, together with a proliferation of garments designed for travelling, sporting, and leisure pursuits, marked a commercialization of fashionable masculinity that saw many of these styles adapted for the

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Breward, *Fashioning London: Clothing and the Modern Metropolis* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

mass market and for womenswear. As some fashion theorists have claimed, this broader democratization of a set of garments originally designed for aristocratic lifestyles unlocked the essence of modern fashion itself (Figure 21.2).<sup>5</sup>

This linear-style trajectory is of course reductive, judged by the terms of contemporary fashion historiography and method. But it is also instructive and deeply woven into the very warp of masculine fashionability as a particular phenomenon of late modernity. It is reductive because it aligns to that earlier moment of costume history when what was considered distinctive about fashion was the nature and manifestation of change itself, and because it chooses to focus on change as it was experienced at the centre of the colonial project, at the heart of the British Empire, rather than among its subjects or elsewhere. It is instructive because through such changes in shape and silhouette, broader structures of racial, sexual, and



**Figure 21.2** James Tissot, *The Circle of the Rue Royale*, oil on canvas, 1868. Found in the collection of the Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Fine Art Images / Heritage Images / Getty Images 2610290.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits: The Evolution of Modern Dress* (New York: Kodansha, 1994).

social power have been widely inscribed, revealed, and understood, and because its lexicon established a language that both the menswear industry (particularly its distribution, advertising, and retail aspects), and critics and theorists of modern culture could profit from and adapt. Thus, more recent published research has moved on from the study of these dominant sartorial codes to consider, for example, the articulation of masculine style in the context of historical Black or queer cultures, or to re-focus away from London to consider the discourse of male fashion in New York, Shanghai, or Paris.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the territory of male sartorialism, taken up as a metaphor throughout its development by adjacent disciplines from political economy to art and architectural theory, continues to attract attention from writers and curators as an ideal vehicle for exploring wider social themes.<sup>7</sup> We will explore some of these more complex, and global perspectives in the remainder of the chapter.

#### CODES OF RENUNCIATION AND DANDYISM

Men may be said to have suffered a great defeat in the sudden reduction of . . . sartorial decorativeness which took place at the end of the eighteenth century . . . Men gave up their right to all the brighter, gayer, more elaborate, and more varied forms of ornamentation, leaving these entirely to the use of women, and thereby making their own tailoring the most austere and ascetic of the arts . . . Man abandoned his claim to be considered beautiful. He henceforth aimed at being only useful.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Shaun Cole, *Don We Now Our Gay Apparel: Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2009); Valerie Steele, *A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press and the Fashion Institute of New York, 2013); John Potvin, *Deco Dandy: Designing Masculinity in 1920s Paris* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> *Vestoj: The Journal of Sartorial Matters*, 7 (2016).

<sup>8</sup> John Carl Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth Press, 1930), 110–11.

In 1930 the London-based psychologist John Carl Flügel produced what has been perhaps one of the most influential of twentieth-century fashion ideas. In his concept of ‘the great masculine renunciation’ he described a subconscious rejection of ‘ostentatious’ dressing by late eighteenth-century men of taste in England. Brought about by the rise of industrialization, late capitalism, and a Protestant work ethic in an age of revolution, he suggested that this shift towards sartorial sobriety was a reflection of a more serious, and a more morally repressive society. This was perhaps an unsurprising conclusion for a pioneering Freudian and advocate of moves towards freedom of expression in the design and choice of male attire to reach. Flügel was a founder of the Men’s Dress Reform Party in 1930s Britain, which championed ‘unisex’ garments and a progressive sexual morality, and born to a generation of new thinkers who rejected many of the principles of ‘Victorianism’.<sup>9</sup>

More recently, the social historian David Kuchta has suggested an earlier simplification of the elite male wardrobe, less a reflection of the growing influence of the sober values of a rising mercantile class, than a consequence of the philosophical and religious debates around the divine right of kings and aristocratic duty that had begun in the 1630s. Flügel had suggested that ‘as commercial and industrial ideals conquered class after class, until they finally became accepted even by the aristocracies of all the more progressive countries, the plain and uniform costume associated with such ideals has, more and more, ousted the gorgeous and varied garments associated with the older order’.<sup>10</sup> Kuchta makes counter-claims for the replacement of what he has termed ‘the old sartorial regime’ (or courtly discourse of ‘magnificence’ and conspicuous consumption) in England, with the deliberate redefinition of the construct of responsible governance, clothed, quite literally, in the gentleman’s suit by the restored Stuart monarchy: a smart uniform of modern political manners.<sup>11</sup>

Whether one takes Flügel’s later chronology and psychoanalytical emphasis as a guide or Kuchta’s rooting of change in the political

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Burman and Melissa Leventon, ‘The Men’s Dress Reform Party 1929–37’, *Costume*, 21/1 (1987), 75–87.

<sup>10</sup> Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes*, 113.

<sup>11</sup> Kuchta, *The Three-Piece Suit*, 17–50.



theory of an earlier historical moment, the concept of 'renunciation' is in many ways an attractive and compelling idea, essentially binding sartorial developments to the emerging political values of modern Western democracies. But as a universal argument for the genesis of a particular style of dressing, both interpretations fall a little short. They are perhaps too Anglo-centric and overarching. The simple reformative idea of uniformity in modern men's dress, encapsulated by the introduction of the suit, also arose at various times across Europe and beyond, for example in Mughal India, the Dutch Republic, Gustavian Sweden, tsarist Russia, Directoire France, King Radama's Madagascar, late imperial China, Edo Japan, and Atatürk's Turkey.<sup>12</sup> Reformed British aristocrats and newly emancipated gentleman capitalists may well have adapted the dark suit as an appropriate badge at particular moments of rapid societal and sartorial change. But prioritizing this at the expense of a more complex understanding of the opportunities and motivations driving men to acquire and wear fashionable clothes, or the many material possibilities residing in the design and reception of dress itself, is to narrow the range of possible interpretations.

Despite these limitations, if English renunciatory dressing, in its denoting of revised but essentially entrenched social hierarchies, signified an essential adherence to a sense of political order in radically changed times, by the turn of the nineteenth century a new cult of Romanticism and individualism that raged across Europe set masculine fashion at the centre of an entirely new and revolutionary set of moral, artistic, and sartorial codes, which fashion and literary historians have embraced within the wide-ranging concept of 'dandyism'.<sup>13</sup> It was a liberating 'whiggish' phenomenon that stood rather in opposition to the conservative notion of renunciation and proved to be equally long-lasting and pervasive in terms of its cultural reach. The English novelist Bulwer Lytton captured the early spirit in his novel *Pelham* of

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Fee, 'The King's New Clothing: Redressing the Body Politic in Madagascar 1815–1861', in Beverly Lemire and Giorgio Riello (eds.), *Dressing Global Bodies: The Political Power of Dress in World History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 153–81.

<sup>13</sup> Rhonda K. Garelick, *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

1828, where the eponymous hero sets down some instructions for modern self-presentation:

Keep your mind free from all violent affections at the hour of the toilet. A philosophical severity is perfectly necessary for success ...

A man must be a profound calculator to be a consummate dresser ... there is no diplomacy more subtle than dress ...

The most graceful principle of dress is neatness – the most vulgar is preciseness ...

Dress contains the two codes of morality – private and public. Attention is the duty we owe to others – cleanliness that which we owe to ourselves ...

Avoid many colours and seek by one prevalent and quiet tint to sober down the others. Apelles used only four colours, and always subdued those which were florid by a darkening varnish ...

Inventions in dressing should resemble Addison's definition of fine writing, and consist of 'refinements which are natural, without being obvious'.<sup>14</sup>

Fictional characters like Pelham abound in the novels, satires, and plays of the early nineteenth century. Elegant, elite, and exclusive, and most often represented dressed in exquisite black and white, they intensified the magnificent exuberance of the old-style courtier, refashioning it for a more democratic age: more a refinement perhaps, than a renunciation? Loosely based on the habits of just a few metropolitan men made famous through their collective tendency to promote their celebrity through the singular arrangement of their costumes and manners, these cyphers of modernity, styled 'dandy' in contemporary satirical and popular terminology, stood as a new and controversial code of fashionable behaviour.<sup>15</sup> The idea of dandyism, though perhaps trivial in itself, revealed in its broader cultural agency the ways in which urbanism, capitalism, industrialization, colonialism, and Enlightenment theories of

<sup>14</sup> Edward Bulwer Lytton, *Pelham, Or the Adventures of a Gentleman* (Leipzig: B. Tauchnitz Jr, 1842), 180–2.

<sup>15</sup> Dominic James, *Oscar Wilde Prefigured: Queer Fashioning and British Caricature 1750–1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).