Lydia Edwards

How to Read a Suit

A Guide to Changing Men's Fashion from the 17th to the 20th Century

HAT Tricorne hats were of military origin but became fashionable civilian wear

COLLAR For most of the century, coats were collarless. This example shows a small standing collar, popular from the 1770s onwards

BUTTONS The only decoration comes in the form of very large metal buttons, which became extreme in size during the 1780s

WAISTCOAT Single-breasted styles were popular during the 1780s and often featured plain metal buttons

BREECHES Close-fitting styles were fashionable, reaching to just below the knee and finished with a row of buttons

FABRIC Though made in a striking yellow, the wool of this suit suggests an affinity with "Anglomania", a love of all things British that promoted plain and countrified styles

SLEEVES Slim sleeves continue the slender silhouette, finished with black velvet cuffs

COAT This coat is long and lean, its fronts clearly sloping away towards the rear

STOCKINGS Plain white stockings were fashionable for most of the century, made from silk or cotton

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Acknowledgments

This book would not have come together half as happily as it did without the support of some wonderful people. My thanks first go to my editor, Frances Arnold, for her endless advice, encouragement, and belief in me. Yvonne Thouroude has also been wonderfully helpful and supportive and put up admirably with my stream of questions!

Dr. Karin Bohleke, of the Fashion Archives & Museum at Shippensburg University, has given her time and expertise with extraordinary generosity. Many of the beautiful nineteenth- and twentieth-century photographs in this book are from her personal collection and are reproduced here with generous permission. Along with Annika Neilson-Dowd, Karin made the selection and delivery of my Fashion Archives suits easy, stress-free, and lots of fun.

Many museums and historical societies have offered invaluable assistance, and I am grateful to several for their unrestricted access: in particular, the Rijksmuseum, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the New York Public Library, Rhode Island School of Design Museum, and the National Gallery of Victoria. I also appreciate the individual advice and generosity of Allison Tolman from the Maryland Historical Society, Matt Jacobsen of oldmagazinarticles.com, and to the following for their permission to use treasured family photographs: Maureen and Leon Levy, Anna Hueppauff and the Tsoulis family, Brett Smyth, Daniela Kästing, Gary Wright, and Clare Simmonds.

As ever, love and thanks to my oldest friend Romanie Garcia-Lee for her professional advice as well as personal interest and support. Other dear friends who more than deserve a special mention are Louise Hughes, Nina Levy, Anna Hueppauff, and Tina Moss. I'd also like to thank my UniPrep 'family' at Edith Cowan University and Fleur Kingsland at WAAPA.

My parents, Chris and Julia, have encouraged and supported me throughout my life, and the writing of this book has been no exception. Extra thanks to my dad for such precise editing and proofreading!

Most of all, thanks to my husband Aaron, whose support, encouragement, and humour give me confidence in my writing and research.

Finally, my appreciation to everyone who read and enjoyed *How to Read a Dress*. I hope you find this new book interesting and informative.

LEFT
Atwater, A.J.
by C.M. Bell,
c.1873–1890,
Library of Congress,
Washington, D.C.

We have highlighted in bold throughout the text particular words and terms where we feel a definition would be useful and have put a definition in the Glossary at the back of the book (p. 190); these usually appear at the point at which they are first used. Use the Glossary to remind yourself of the terms as you read through the text.

Preface

Before the Suit

Long before the birth of the three-piece suit, notions of masculinity were deeply rooted in clothing. Of course, the idea of "measuring" historic masculinity is in the first place highly problematic, as Michael Antony puts it: "How can we possibly measure the masculinity of another age? We cannot measure the sperm counts or testosterone levels of the sixteenth century or the eighteenth."[1] Perhaps not, but as he continues, we can use art and literature to compare how the appearance and manners of men and women have changed over the centuries. Fashion is one of the most important indicators of how men constructed their own sense of what it meant to be "a man," and of how women perceived an "ideal" manly figure. Works of art (and sometimes, extant garments) give us the best chance we can hope for of uncovering more and creating a contemporary framework of understanding. This brief background will provide an outline of western European masculine clothing in the century and a half leading up to the birth of the modern three-piece suit. The aim is not to give a comprehensive overview, but to allow a comparative vision of how masculinity was sartorially constructed in the immediate preamble to the birth of the modern suit. It will also include four initial "analyses" of doublet, hose, and breeches in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

On the face of it, men's fashions from the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries seem far more complex and elaborate than the suit, particularly its nineteenth- to twenty-first-century incarnation. In *The Three-Piece Suit and Modern Masculinity: England, 1550–1850,* David Kuchta puts this down to the fact that, since the suit's inception in 1666, "male gentility has been associated with modesty and plainness in dress." In this way, Kuchta explains, the three-piece suit brought about "the fashioning of a new masculinity, a new ideology about the morality, politics, and economics of elite men's consumer practices, an ideology still present today."[2] One of the surest ways of recognizing and tracing this "new masculinity" is, of course, through clothes—the most obvious signifier of status and, as

Laura Gowing expresses it, a "public significance of sexuality" expressed through items such as the codpiece and padded hose.[3]

Our twenty-first century ideas of what constitutes "manliness" or "machismo" are so ingrained that it can be hard to step back and appreciate that what seems like a particularly "feminine" adornment would not have seemed so to a sixteenth or seventeenth-century viewer. Ideas around "effeminacy" were commonly linked to a man having excessive amounts of heterosexual intercourse, rather than as a sign that he was homosexual; frequently, ideas around what constituted "feminine" behavior were more closely linked to manners than to clothing. Only once men's clothes lost their fussiness in the eighteenth century—and women's became far more voluminous and adorned—was any male regression to excessive ornamentation received negatively. The importance of status—through, as it would later be termed by Thorstein Veblen, "conspicuous consumption"—cannot be underestimated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[4] Displaying yards of lace, ribbon, and costly fabrics was the most obvious way of indicating individual or familial wealth and power: a most masculine trait. Nevertheless, such fashions were, of course, not universally worn and never wholly approved of. For a brief period of time following the English Civil War, the quiet, plain dress of Puritans received greater attention and elements of it were adopted in fashion more broadly.

From the late medieval era until the mid-seventeenth century, breeches or "hose" and a **doublet** were considered appropriate dress for men. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, they were often worn under a longer tunic or kirtle, but by the early sixteenth century they were regarded as a complete "suit" rather than merely underclothes. The phrase "a suit of clothes" was used long before what we now recognize as a "suit" came into being—meaning simply the wearing of several complete garments to cover the male body. In the sixteenth century they were known as a "suit of apparel" when the doublet and hose were made from the same fabric.[5] Like the three-piece suit that would be introduced the following century, this suggested a unifying principle, later perceived as—in Anne Hollander's words—an "abstract, tripartite envelope."[6]

Hose were initially made with legs and feet attached—essentially a pair of tights. Over time they split to form two sections known as "upper" and "nether" stocks or hose. The "upper" came to be known as "breeches" and were eventually cut fuller than the lower hose, either ending at the knee (the "Venetian" style) or hip (the "trunk" or "round hose," also known as "slops" when especially loose-fitting). For wealthy men, it was common for elaborate *panes* (vertical strips of material through which contrasting fabrics could be seen) to cover the hose. When the short variant was worn, thighs were covered with canions:

close-fitting extensions that finished above the knee and required stockings to cover the rest of the leg.

The doublet (so-called because it was made "double" with a lining) can be described as a fitted jacket worn over a linen shirt. Its original purpose was to support the hose as well as provide warmth, and the two were joined through lacing at the waist. The **shirt**'s function largely remained the same until the twentieth century, when standards of cleanliness rose and were more easily achieved. However, its aesthetics, and the amount put on display by the wearer, was subject to change. In this period, it kept the doublet clean by separating it from the skin, and the need for frequent laundering (and, if finances allowed, multiple shirts) made it an important part of the "domestic economy" of a household. It could, however, still feature extensive and elaborate "blackwork" embroidery on collar and cuffs, and doublets could be chosen that exposed more of the shirt beneath according to the wearer's preference. **Waistcoats** existed in the sixteenth century but were a minor garment, worn beneath the doublet and so rarely seen. A final layer was the tunic or **jerkin**, which could be described as the overcoat of the sixteenth century, the most visible garment. Because of this it was generally made of the best cloth the wearer could afford. From the elite to the layman, this garment elevated an outfit to "formal," and was required for most activities outside the home.

The layers and bulk of an elite man's clothing almost equaled that of women during the sixteenth century, making the "envelope" of the Tudor man one of power and dominance. Excessively broad shoulders led to a nipped-in waist from which flared the doublet's pleated skirts. Baggy hose finished above knee level and slim (ideally muscular) legs accentuated this top-heavy silhouette. Wide shoulders also served to diminish the head, an interesting construct at a time when Renaissance ideals relating to the worth and dignity of the human mind were being championed. In England, this shape was largely dictated by the whims of Henry VIII, who began to pad his clothing in an effort to hide a rapidly expanding waistline.

Courtiers followed suit, and in the spirit of padding and bolstering, two of fashion history's most notorious accessories developed. The first of these, the codpiece ("cod" meaning scrotum, and "piece" referring to the original flap of fabric), was introduced in the 1460s for reasons of modesty as the hemlines of men's tunics rose ever higher. At this point, it was nothing more than a fabric pouch attached to the hose with ties; by the middle of the sixteenth century, it was more a symbol of status and, it might be assumed, fertility. However, as Will Fisher has explained in his work surrounding gender in the Early Modern period,

LEFT
Hendrick Goltzius, *Officers in Peascod Doublets*, 1587, Rijksmuseum

ideas around virility and the codpiece may be "sexual rather than reproductive," at least in the case of Henry VIII—whose large codpieces were often alluded to in terms of his number of wives rather than the number of children he fathered.[7]

Other research has suggested less prurient reasons behind the adoption of bombastic codpieces. Grace Q. Vicary wrote in 1989 that the codpiece could have been developed as a protection against disease—most specifically, the 1494 syphilis epidemic. Its function was both to protect the clothing from medications that caused staining, and to make it difficult to distinguish who was suffering from the infection.[8] Whichever is correct, there can be little doubt that by the time the extravagant padding and external decoration of codpieces became fashionable, any original prophylactic purpose had been left far behind. Codpieces were shaped and decorated to fit with the ornamental bolstering of doublet, hose, and jerkin, and this was particularly evident in the 1560s and 70s, just before it finally fell from fashion. As the codpiece declined in size towards the middle of the century, the **peascod belly** rose to prominence. The peascod was a padded or bombasted point at the center front of the waist, sometimes stuffed with rags or sawdust to maintain its shape. It was cut to produce an overhanging section of fabric that extended below the natural waistline, creating a peaked dip at the navel. This look became so fashionable that doublets were specially sculpted at the waistline to accommodate it, with the rest of the garment fitting close to the body to heighten its distinction. In its most extreme form the codpiece arched over at the tip, and the head of the peascod, as described, extended down beyond the natural waistline. Because of this, when worn at the same time, one almost seemed to be pointing down or up to meet the other. These doublets were teamed with jaw-height ruffs and capes worn over one shoulder. By the end of the century a man's shoulders were almost back at their natural width, leading into long, close-fitting sleeves ending in frilled cuffs. Beneath this the bulbous **trunk hose** continued to grow in volume until only the tip of the codpiece showed, resulting in an uneven silhouette of long, spindly legs and arms with portly torso; wide hips; and tall, stiff neck.

At the start of the seventeenth century, the male "suit" consisted of a doublet with sharply pointed waistline with long overlapping square tabs, shoulder wings, and, by 1620, a high standing collar. (Even though the codpiece had by now fallen from fashion, the pointed waistline was enough to still, in Susan Doran's words, "[draw] attention to a man's haunches and private parts."[9]) The waistline gradually rose until it was fairly high, creating a truncated torso that sat above a waistline sometimes bolstered with decorative ribbon loops. However, by the 1630s the most common and fashionable hose were long and straight, finishing past the knee where they were met by a pair of boots. This created a taller figure than seen in the previous century, as well as a far softer and more easy-wearing set of clothes.

LEFT
Doublet and breeches worn by Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden, c.1620s, Royal Armory, Stockholm

RIGHT
Frans Hals, *Portrait of a Man*, early 1650s, Metropolitan Museum of Art

During the first half of the century there was some fluidity between male and female styles with the doublet or "jubon," for example, cut very similarly for both. Decorative ribbons and ties were placed in parallel positions on bodice and doublet, and the high waist with deep tabs was seen on the clothing of each. The softness of female skirts was mirrored in the line of men's breeches, with their gentle gathering at waist and knees (illustrated well in this surviving example from the Swedish Royal Armory). The 1630s saw a continuation of this looser fit, to such an extent that poet and cleric Robert Herrick wrote in 1648: "A sweet disorder in the dress/Kindles in clothes a wantonness."[10] In this context, "looseness" was equated with "wanton" behavior or outlook, a flaw that Herrick and others also attributed to the rapid changes in fashion (for men, seen particularly the length and width of breeches) at this time. The French influence of Charles I's wife, Henrietta Maria, was named by some as the cause of not only the speed of new fashions, but the perceived extravagance of them:

> Hence [from France] came your flashed doublets . . . and your halfe shirts, pickadillies . . . your long breeches, narrow towards the knees . . . the spangled Garters pendant to the Shoe, your perfumed perrukes or periwigs . . . a thousand such fooleries, unknowne to our many forefathers.[11]

To some extent this was to change after the execution of Charles I in 1649, though it would be inaccurate to assume that all men wore either the bright, extravagant clothing of royalist Cavaliers or the somber, modest dress of Puritans. The reality was probably somewhere between the two, with men borrowing aspects from each aesthetic but veering more towards the plainness favored by Cromwell's Protectorate. From the 1650s onwards, the looser silhouette seen in the last analysis of this preface continued—across Europe—to become more so. Dark colors were popular, but increasingly elaborate lace collars and ribbon loop ornamentation, sometimes brightly colored, were infiltrating the black. They adorned high-waisted doublets and skirt-like petticoat breeches, which are examined at the start of the first chapter and represent one of the most extreme male fashions in history. This was a supremely feminine garment that could hang as wide and loose as a woman's petticoat, and for this reason was heavily satirized. Its short lifespan was also due to practical concerns: breeches were usurped in the 1660s by the new and slim-fitting coat, which was too narrow to accommodate them. From then on men would, in the words of one "father to his son" (1701), "take Notice that Cloaths (sic) consists of Four Things, viz. First, Linnen, Secondly, Shoes and Stockings, Thirdly, Hat and Perriwig; and Fourthly, the Suit, or Coat Waistcoat and Breeches."[12] It would remain so for the next 100 years.

After Cornelis Anthonisz, Portrait of King Francis I of France,

1538–47, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

This early sixteenth-century print beautifully portrays the excessively broad shoulders and powerful stance of men's costume at the time of Henry VIII. Francis I ruled France from 1515 to 1547 and was known to be a fashionable and bold dresser. In his biographer Leonie Frieda's words, the King "never ceased to dazzle when it came to his appearance, wearing sumptuous clothes made of crimson velvet and embroidered with silver and gold, and surrounded by a retinue of men and horses clad in the same colors."[13] A similar color scheme can be seen in this representation, teamed with the most fashionable accessories of the period—most notably the codpiece, which had become prominent and indispensable by the 1530s.

The neckline and cuffs of a thigh-length white shirt can be seen at neck and wrist. This was the foundation garment worn by all men. For the elite, shirts would be made from linen fabrics such as cambric and lawn, both bright white or even transparent.[14]

The **gown** is lined with fur that turns back to form a collar and revers. It also edges the gown's hem and the sleeve slits, which are caught at intervals with gold or jeweled beads.

Voluminous gowns were worn open and finished at the knee, and it was their puffed sleeves that provided much of the sought-after width. These were a clear status symbol and were only worn by men in the highest ranks of society—and, in much simpler styles, by certain professions.[15]

Hanging sleeves were wide, long tubes with a central slit for the arm to pass through. They finished level with the gown's hem or, as here, just below it.

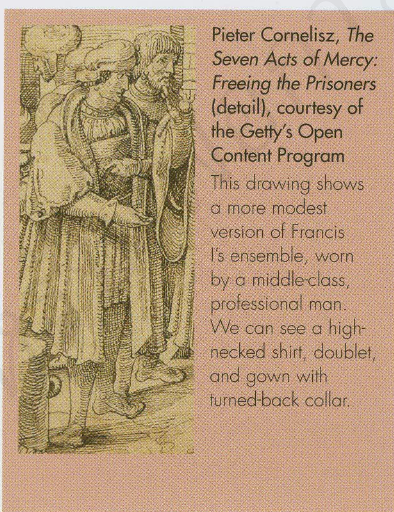
Black bonnets, sometimes referred to as caps, consisted of a stiff brim with soft crown. They could be decorated with feathers, as shown here, or jeweled hat badges that hinted at religious or intellectual interests of the wearer. These remained fashionable in various forms throughout the century and were referenced in *Hamlet* (1603): "Your bonnet to his right use: 'tis for the head."[16]

Doublets were close-fitting, waist-length, sleeved garments usually made with a low, square neck as seen here (this would rise after c.1540).[17] For the wealthy it was a perfect base on which to display elaborate ornamentation such as jewels, velvet, or gold trim and frequently, as seen on this example, slashings in the surface of the fabric. Sections of shirt fabric were sometimes pulled through to create small puffs. For lower-class men, doublets were purely practical garments worn for warmth, and to hold up the hose.

Pleated skirts would protrude either from the doublet (as seems to be the case here: the center front slit was a common feature on a skirted doublet) or a separate garment known as a **jerkin**, also contemporaneously as a coat or jacket (both terms appeared in Henry VIII's household accounts). This was a full skirt attached to a usually sleeveless body that was open from chest to waist, cut in a deep U or V shape.[18]

Short, full trunk hose were attached to the waist of the doublet with laces; these had graduated to hooks and eyelets by the 1570s.[19] Bands of fabric in a contrasting color form the outer layer, an effect known as **paned**.

Shoes during this period were flat with extremely broad, square toes. This was a practical shape in comparison to fashionable styles of the previous century, the very long-toed "piked" styles amongst them. For those wanting to display their leisured status, shoes could be decorated with slashing (seen here), stamping, openwork, and embroidery.[20]



Pieter Cornelisz, *The Seven Acts of Mercy: Freeing the Prisoners* (detail), courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program

This drawing shows a more modest version of Francis I's ensemble, worn by a middle-class, professional man. We can see a high-necked shirt, doublet, and gown with turned-back collar.

Johannes Wierix, Unknown man with carnation,

1578, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

This depiction of fashionable late sixteenth-century dress was made by accomplished engraver Johannes Wierix. Here we can see a detailed rendering of both the shape and surface decoration of garments, making Wierix a valuable reference for fashion historians. In terms of color, we can surmise that these garments would probably have been made in shades of red, blue, yellow, green, or black: the most difficult dyes to produce and therefore the most expensive and fashionable.[21] The figure, with a faintly mocking, perhaps self-satisfied expression, holds a carnation in his left hand: a symbol of conjugal felicity or marriage. These floral associations also relate to the exaggerated peascod belly of the doublet, which is discussed here and in the preface.

As is clear from this example, in the second half of the century men's ruffs generally sat higher at the back than at the front. From its humble origins as a slim ruffle appearing at the neck of a shirt, by this period the ruff had become larger and significantly more complex in construction. The one shown here is detachable and made with a center-front fastening. Closure would be in the form of ties, buttons and holes, hooks and eyes, or pins.

Sleeves were not usually sewn to the jerkin, but attached separately with ties. These were hidden from view by the shoulder tabs or wings: a similar design can be seen in this leather fencing doublet, c.1580, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Wide, rounded Venetian hose first became popular at around this date. They were pleated at the waist, with much of the fullness to the back and sides, sometimes achieved by "bombast" (padding made from horsehair or wool). They then tapered to fit snugly to the knee where they were, in Philip Stubbes's words, "tied finely with silken points, or some such like."[22] The fabric is gathered onto a narrow band (decorated with tabs) at the knee, and finished with a row of buttons and ornamental tassels at the side.

Soft hats with gathered crowns, such as this one, were especially common in France. The band would often be decorated with jewels, feathers or, as here, small bunches of flowers.

The peascod belly was a shaped, padded protuberance at the center front of the doublet. It is very evident on this example and was widely ridiculed in its time, described as "[a] monstrous big-bellied Doublet" by Philip Stubbes.[23] The peascod's shape was inspired, as the name suggests, by peapods, which were likened to male genitalia and suggested associations of virility and sexuality. It is also said to be suggestive of marriage and betrothal.

This sleeved jerkin, possibly made from slashed leather, is cut to mirror the doublet beneath (but usually not padded). It is worn open, revealing the widest point of the peascod. Towards the end of the century it also became fashionable for the doublet to be worn open or "unlaced"[24]: in contemporary parlance, "unbracéd." The term appears in Shakespeare several times, including *Julius Caesar* (which would usually be performed in contemporary fashionable dress):

> Is Brutus sick; and is it physical
> To walk unbracéd, and suck up the humours
> Of the dank morning?[25]

By the 1570s, the codpiece had more or less disappeared from the court of Elizabeth I, and elsewhere by the end of the decade. The voluminous folds of this new style of breeches initially meant that the codpiece was simply hidden from view; as the breeches grew in popularity (as well as volume), it gradually fell from fashion entirely. These breeches would have fastened at center front with a tied or buttoned fly.[26]

For the wealthy, silk stockings—knitted or cut on the bias to cling to the leg—were essential.

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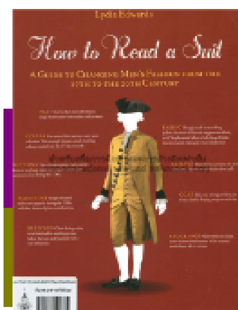

How to read a suit : a guide to changing men's fashion from the 17th to the 20th century / Lydia Edwards.

Author	Edwards, Lydia
Published	London, UK ; New York, NY, USA : Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021
Detail	230 p : ill ; 26 cm
Subject	Fashion design Men's clothing
ISBN	9781350071209
ประเภทแหล่งที่มา	Book

"สำหรับเพื่อการศึกษาและอ้างอิงเท่านั้น"