

# A HISTORY OF FASHION

J. Anderson Black &  
Madge Garland

Updated and revised by  
Frances Kennett





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*Frontispiece: An exotic costume of about 1910 made for Madame Poiret by Paul Poiret, one of the most eminent designers of his time (Scala; Paris, Coll. Mme Poiret)*

*Right: This mid-seventeenth century gentleman wears his jacket open below a high waist to reveal his undershirt. The popular lace collar and diagonal sash and hat, together with the mid-calf boots and decorative garters, reflect the assertive taste and dress during this period. (The Mansell Collection, London)*



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# Contents

Foreword by Madge Garland 7

## **From the Ancient World to 1870**

*by J. Anderson Black*

MESOPOTAMIA TO MYCENAE 13

The Ancient World

CLASSICAL PERFECTION 31

Greece and Rome

BYZANTIUM AND THE DARK AGES 45

Fall of Rome to the Norman Conquest

THE FEUDAL AGE 59

The Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries

CHURCH AND STATE 69

The Thirteenth Century

DEFENCE OF RANK 77

The Fourteenth Century

CHIVALRY IN FLOWER 87

The Early Fifteenth Century

CLASSICISM REVIVED 95

The Early Renaissance

THE AGE OF OSTENTATION 103

The Sixteenth Century

CONFLICT OF THE FAITHS 125

The Seventeenth Century

THE AGE OF ELEGANCE 145

The Eighteenth Century

LIBERTY, EQUALITY, FRATERNITY 161

The French Revolution

THE ROMANTIC PERIOD 175

from 1815 to 1850

VICTORIAN VIRTUE 191

From 1850 to 1870

## **Fashion's Past 100 Years**

*by Madge Garland*

FIN DE SIECLE 207

From 1870 to 1900

EDWARDIAN OPULENCE 219

From 1900 to 1920

THE JAZZ AGE 231

The Twenties and Thirties

AUSTERITY AND THE NEW LOOK 243

The Forties and Fifties

KALEIDOSCOPE 259

The Sixties and Seventies

Glossary 289

Costume Collections 293

Bibliography 294

Index 295

Acknowledgements 303







# FOREWORD

*Below: Clothes express rank and status—in this twelfth-century manuscript illumination the clerical figure is clearly distinguished from the Emperor Henry IV and Matilda, Countess of Tuscany, whose richly coloured and decorated garments could only have been worn by the most important personages in medieval Europe*

A history of the way people dress is concerned with the story of man's first and most faithful addiction—his intense pre-occupation with the appearance of his own body. This obsession is hardly surprising as the body is all we have to begin life with and is the only thing we can be sure of keeping until death. Far less understandable is man's frequent dissatisfaction with what nature has given him, and this book illustrates some of his efforts to improve on his natural attributes. From time to time, people have desired larger heads, longer necks, smaller feet, a more pronounced bosom or a tinier waist. Had man been given the power, he might well have endowed himself with as many limbs as a Hindu deity but, frustrated, he has mutilated himself in countless different ways. Above all man has used clothing as a means of aspiring towards his fantasies of a better, or at least different, body.

It is a story in which myths, legends, fairy and folk tales and erotic taboos have all made their contributions, but so have such mundane considerations as political alliances, scientific discoveries, mechanical inventions and the conditions of international trade. Aesthetics are of course important, though always





*On these pages: Each age uses different means to achieve its ideal of elegance. The sumptuous materials and elaborate detail of the early seventeenth-century costumes on the right contrast vividly with the sensuous simplicity of the neo-classical gown (far right) painted by Ingres nearly two centuries later*



subservient to contemporary taste. Modesty comes and goes, but commonsense has always been absent and the most elementary anatomical facts have been consistently ignored.

Indeed, it is the unexpected traveller or the surprise mechanical or chemical innovation which have influenced fashion far more than any ostentatious queen or self-conscious designer. Merchant adventurers sailed into the unknown, founded the East India Company and the Indian Empire, and England found herself with a fabric novelty on her hands—muslin, forbidden by law to be imported into France because the silk textile workers threatened to strike. In this way a new fashion was set. Cotton seeds from the Orient germinated in America's virgin soil, leading both to a large increase in the slave trade and to voluminous cotton petticoats being worn by women the world over. A monk hid silkworms in his sleeve, and the resulting silk industry changed the dressing habits of the West. A trade treaty was made with the Indians in northern Canada and furs never seen before in Europe covered women's shoulders. The mainstream of change has constantly been diverted by such happenings or, less frequently, by a personality so





challenging that what he or she preferred was copied by lesser folk. Fashion is rarely 'set', however; more often it develops, with strong reactions between one generation and the next.

When man's pre-occupation with the appearance of his body becomes a true obsession, the fashion-conscious beauty or the over-dressed dandy materializes. Sometimes the desire to alter the human frame makes use of such optical tricks as the farthingale or the crinoline. Sometimes a fashionable figure is obtained by the sheer weight of machinery employed. The instruments of torture used by humans on themselves in the pursuit of fashion comprise an arsenal of horrors. The wooden planks of the Chinook Indians to elongate the skulls of their infants, the mutilated feet of pre-Revolution Chinese women when the smallness of the bride's foot was in direct ratio to the size of her bridal price, the high necks of the Burmese women who added ring after ring until, if they were removed, their weakened necks would break—these are only a few of the means which man has used against himself in an endless search to alter the body given to him.

Most vulnerable of all, the isthmus of flesh between the pelvis and the rib-



cage has attracted the greatest attention. The first pictures of civilized Europeans, the Minoan frescoes at Knossos, illustrate both men and women with tiny, corseted waists, and throughout the centuries innumerable variations of the corset have formed an essential part of changing fashions.

Most historians have attributed the origin of clothing to three causes: a need for protection against the elements, a desire for modesty and a love of display connected with sexual attraction. The first has only a limited role, for humans have always preferred decoration to comfort, which was hardly known before the last century when ideals of

courtly grandeur gave place to middle-class demands for bourgeois comfort. Earlier races were harder—the Patagonians who inhabited a cold mountain climate, and the Marquesans a hot island climate both thought themselves suitably dressed in pigments alone, the British wore woad not wool, while North American Indians preferred feathers to furs. Very few styles of dress, therefore, have been designed to protect the wearers from any kind of climatic excess.

The desire for modesty can be expressed in clothing, but it is rarely a factor that determines fashion. Concepts of modesty vary enormously, and each period and each civilization has





*Left and right: Clothes express the personality of the individual, creating an instantaneous but lasting impression. The figures in Manet's painting, *The Balcony*, all convey something of themselves through their costume—the bourgeois gentleman's slightly flamboyant elegance, a degree of primness about the lady at the right and the provocative assurance of the girl at the front. On the right, Corcos' young woman of the 1880s projects a calm independence, anticipating the liberated woman of today*

developed totally different ideas of which parts of the human body should or should not be exposed. Women have gone bare-breasted when fashion decreed, as in ancient Crete or during the Directorate period of the French Revolution. On the other hand, they have sometimes covered even their faces in deference to custom, and Moslem women in some parts of the world wear the yashmak covering the entire body to this day. Victor Hugo wrote a violent letter of reproof to his fiancée in 1822 because she had lifted her skirts high enough to permit a glimpse of her ankles when crossing the road. As late as the 1950s, a nude photograph of Marilyn Monroe was suppressed at great expense because it was thought that it would be disastrous to her popularity. More recently, attitudes have changed and various degrees of nudity have been incorporated into fashion.

The love of display connected with the erotic urge is definitely the most important of the three factors contributing to the development of fashion, and the desire to attract is clearly the major reason for dressing-up. A drastic indication of this is to be found in the habit of certain African tribes whose women, when they are old, dispense

with all covering, there no longer being any need for it.

Added to a love of sexual display, and intimately connected with the place people occupy in society, is the wish ostentatiously to display wealth and power. Until lately clothes were the easiest and most straightforward means of telling people just who you were and what you were worth, and this book is full of pictures of magnificent clothes intended to proclaim the wearer's status.

It is noticeable that clothes connected with sports, such as skiing and golfing, (where physical performance is all-important), have traditionally shown little difference between the sexes. This is also true of the overalls of factory workers, the tights of dancers and acrobats, and above all, it is true of the blue jeans of today. Before the Second World War male and female jackets could be discerned by whether the flap fastenings turned left or right, but this difference is now retained only for formal clothing. The prevalent play-clothes of today are the same for both He and She.

If, as many people believe, our coverings are the outward reflection of our philosophy of life, then today's fashions indicate that equality of sex, income and class are well on their way.

Most of the illustrations in this book show people of rank or wealth because in the past they were the only ones who could afford, or were permitted, to wear colourful clothes. They were also the people whose persons were recorded by the artists of their time. Now matters are very different, and the crowds that gather from all over the world to gaze at the creations of their ancestors in museums—while busily photographing each other—have the merit of adding notes of brilliant colour to the fashion scene.

Fashion is all pervading. Certain elements in dress remain constant throughout the detailed changes of shape, design and decoration. Corcos' young woman of the 1880s, for instance, displays in her posture and dress the essence of femininity projected in soft folds of fabric, the flattering line of her arms and shoulders, and the frame of ornament provided by her lace collar. Fashion has always reflected the individuality and personality of the social being and will continue to do so. Even the rebels against fashions of the time seem, to later eyes, to reflect them. Others, more successful, merely set a new fashion.

MADGE GARLAND











# MESOPOTAMIA TO MYCENAE

## The Ancient World

*Left: The most important Sumerian garment was an ankle-length skirt which was either made of fur or a fur-like fabric called kaunakès. These warriors, depicted on a Sumerian mosaic from Mari, wear the long woolly pagne-skirt (which is a form of loincloth) and a leather stole reinforced with metal studs*

### Mesopotamia

In the third millennium there were two distinct peoples in the Valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates: the Akkadians to the north and the Sumerians to the south. It seems that the Sumerians were dominant for several centuries, at least during the first Ur Dynasty (about 2800–1600 B.C.). They were a highly sophisticated people with enormous technical resources, capable of producing advanced machinery and buildings and the most intricate goldwork. Their fashions and customs were adopted throughout Mesopotamia.

Unlike that of Egypt, Mesopotamia's soil is damp and fertile and no garments have survived the millennia of decay. We therefore have to rely entirely on other sources, such as statues and bas-reliefs which, although highly stylized, display a distinctive style of dress and show its development over the period.

The first and most striking feature of Sumerian dress is its simplicity.

The basic form for both men and women was a simple ankle-length, wrap-around skirt usually made in a fur called *kaunakès*, the torso being left bare.

In statues and bas-reliefs, the material is portrayed as having a thick flounced

texture. This has given rise to a certain amount of controversy for most experts consider that the material used was sheepskin with the wool worn outwards, the symmetrical flouncing suggesting that the wool was trimmed and combed. But actual sheep, depicted at this period, have the same neat flounces which are possibly a stylized method of depicting wool. Fragments of woven material found in Sumerian tombs have led to the alternative theory, supported by some authorities who feel it is inconceivable that a nation as sophisticated as the Sumerians would have sweltered in sheepskins, that the material used was in fact a fabric with a woven back into which tufts of wool were knotted, much in the manner of rug-making, giving the effect of a fleece. This cloth was known as *kaunakès*. It is not known which of these two versions is the correct one, but the overall appearance of the Sumerian costume was of a long, shaggy skirt.

One of the finest three-dimensional statues ever discovered in Sumeria is the seated figure of Ebih-il, Superintendent of the Ishtar temple at Mari. He is wearing an ankle-length flounced skirt tied at the waist. At the back there hangs an eight-inch tail of the same fabric which





might be the surplus material from the waist-band, but is probably meant to suggest the animal skin from which garments were originally made. A slight variation on this basic style is depicted in a votive plaque of Ur-Nanshe of Lagash. A longer piece of material has been used and the surplus thrown over the left shoulder to form a loose cloak, in the fashion of a Scottish kilt and plaid.

Both the statues mentioned above are of nobility, but the Royal Standard of Ur shows the dress of a wider cross-section of society. This mosaic, found by Sir Leonard Woolley in the Royal Tombs of Ur, depicts farmers, fishermen, musicians and soldiers. The form of dress is identical for all the figures but, with the exception of one seated figure, the skirts are portrayed without any discernible texture. The seated figure suggests that this could not have been an oversight on the part of the artist, and this suggestion is reinforced by the presence of sheep which are similarly depicted. It seems that either these skirts were made from sheepskin with the fleece removed or they were of linen without the tufting. Whichever of these alternatives is true, the flounced skirt appears to have been the preserve of the nobility and the army.



Above: The skirt and stole were the principal items of Sumerian costume. This limestone votive plaque of Ur-Nanshe of Lagash, dating from the third millennium B.C. and now in the Louvre, shows figures of nobility dressed in the pagne-skirt with its stylized textured surface. The figure has its surplus material thrown over the left shoulder to form a loose cloak or stole

Right: A detail of mosaic from the Royal Standard of Ur, dating from early in the third millennium and now in the British Museum, shows how ordinary people such as farmers or soldiers dressed. The men wore calf or ankle-length skirts and cloaks

Left: The splendid sculpture of Ebih-il, the bearded superintendent of the Ishtar temple at Mari, now in the Louvre, shows the figure dressed in the characteristic Sumerian long skirt. The garment is tied at the waist and, at the back, the excess waistband forms an animal-like tail which is allowed to hang loosely







*Right: The diorite statue of Gudea, now in the Louvre, shows the figure draped in a long, carefully-arranged shawl. Surplus material forms a half-cape over the left shoulder, but the right arm is left bare. Made from a single piece of material, this garment prefigures the Greek himation or Roman toga, two thousand years later.*



#### **Accessories and decoration**

This simple, almost primitive, attitude towards clothes does not mean that the Sumerians were uninterested in their appearance. Their personal grooming, for instance, appears to have been meticulous. Some men shaved their heads and sported neatly trimmed beards without moustaches, while others had long hair and beards. Women's hairstyles were varied and complex and wigs may have been worn. Certainly wigs and wigstands were found in the tombs at Ur. One woman portrayed in a plaque from Khafajah exemplifies the sophistication of women's hairdressing. All the hair has been drawn up to the crown of the head, then plaited into six braids from the crown to the base of the skull. Here the small braids are plaited into one thick one which is passed round the head and across the top forming a coronet. The craftsmanship of contemporary gold-work discovered in the tombs is quite astonishing, showing an elegance of design and a fineness of execution which is in marked contrast to the simplicity of the Sumerians' basic costume. The most impressive single collection came from the grave of Queen Pu Abi of about 2500 B.C., which was full of lapis lazuli, cornelian and gold.