Conspicuous Waist: Making and modifying the eighteenth-century men's waistcoat

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Introduction

Very large numbers of completed eighteenth-century waistcoats survive in the world's museum collections, and many of them have never been exhibited. Museums also hold partly-finished waistcoats (waistcoat pieces or panels, *gilets en pièces* in French), uncut waistcoats woven or embroidered in professional workshops ready to make up, and designs (*cartons de broderie* in French) and samples for them. One third of the total men's clothing collection at the Palais Galliera, Musée de la Mode de Paris, is waistcoats (Dato and Gorguet-Ballesteros 2022: 177). Waistcoats are also one of the most frequent items of eighteenth-century men's clothing to appear at auction and are common in private collections of dress; rarer are complete suits.[1] For such a commonly worn and surviving garment, there is surprisingly little academic work published on the subject of the waistcoat, although in recent years, excellent PhD/doctoral micro-studies have been conducted in the UK and Italy (Saxe 1927; Lesley and Osmun 1952; Butazzi 1976; Davin 1988; Arrizoli-Clémentel 1993; Baudis 2008; Piettre 2015-2016; Baker 2019; Dato 2023). Many waistcoats are claimed to have been a part of marriage suits, others for court, public or diplomatic service, some have a clear provenance, and other such claims are assertions. Many were worn on a special occasion and therefore they have much to yield about what men felt and thought about their wardrobe choices. They therefore also relate to the life cycle of men, a topic which is relatively understudied in fashion research (Vickery 2013).

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[1] My chapter is dedicated to the Swiss-based costume collector Martin Kamer, who died during its completion, 16 December 2023. My debt to him for access to his collection and his friendship over 25 years is inestimable. Much of his collection is now in museums in Berlin, Los Angeles and Antwerp.

Waistcoat typologies

The eighteenth-century waistcoat was central to many men's dressing in West Europe and their colonies. It provided respectability, protective warmth and a show of fashionable display. This was a garment that might be made of cloth (woollen), silk or cotton and that was frequently embroidered for those who could afford it. Such embroidery was expected for attendance at court or in the presence of the aristocracy, but embroidered clothes were also worn outside those settings. In the first part of the eighteenth century it was often woollen or heavy-weight silk for winter. The most expensive examples were of figured (woven) silk whose motifs became smaller and less ponderous over the course of the century [Figure 1]. Embroidered decoration was also popular, becoming the dominant mode in the last third of the century. Many women, including elite ones, embroidered waistcoats (this will be the subject of some of my forthcoming research) but many needs were served by a substantial professional and ready-made embroidery industry in England and France. The main examples I will give are English and French with some allusion to Italy and Spain and some digression to the colonies. Most desired were Lyon-made waistcoats for their quality and fashion quotient, although they were not always obtainable. In the last third of the century, a new type of embroidered waistcoat appeared, the 'pictorial' waistcoat, made mainly in Lyon, but also in Paris. These were produced within a faster fashion cycle and retailed at cheaper price points than the older woven, brocaded silk examples.

The waistcoat was often described in written source such as inventories, letters and diaries and was something partial to individual preference as well as fashionable agreement.[2] The waistcoat is also an intriguing syntactical garment within the fashion system as it is neither wholly an inner or outer garment – it sits above a shirt and beneath a jacket – yet it was not always worn exactly that way. A study of the waistcoat is therefore useful for understanding how men modified their clothing in the past, including regional and climatic contexts. The main examples here will be Colonial and Federal North American. My chapter proceeds by considering both written and visual sources and is underpinned by an earlier opportunity for me to study about fifty of the French and English waistcoat collection of the Royal Ontario Museum. I had the good fortune to be a Veronica Gervers (Research) Fellow there in 1998

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[2] For an excellent Facebook page debating matters of the waistcoat see the *18th Century Menswear* page administered by Mark D. Hutter, Neil Hurst and Jay Howlett, consulted December 2023. They work at the museums of Colonial Williamsburg.

during my PhD research on macaroni men (https://www.rom.on.ca/en/collections-research/research-community-projects/veronika-gervers-research-fellow/peter-mcneil). The waistcoat is therefore a very useful garment to analyse when we try to assess that difficult topic - what clothing might have meant to men in the distant past.

Conspicuous Waist: Evolution of a Garment

The waistcoat or 'vest' for West European men was a new late seventeenth-century English fashion. Prior to this, the focus of the male body revolved around long, stockinged legs, wide breeches and doublet. A small waist and the neck for elite men was splendid and eroticized via rich materials and textures. These were not ensembles revolving around opening up the centre of the body which is part of the effect of wearing a partly-open waistcoat. An item called a *vest* which opened at the front was carefully introduced via court and stage presentations by King Charles II of England in 1666. The King had made a decree that following the Plague and the Great Fire of 1665-1666, dress reform was required to manage luxury.

There is a dispute about the meaning of this suit introduced in England. Some have claimed that it was an attempt to introduce a more moderate attire and that it eventually transformed into the three-piece suit. David Kuchta emphasises that it was often made of wool and emphasised what he calls 'modern masculinity' (Kuchta 2002: 80-81). Aileen Ribeiro has critiqued his view that the introduction of the suit was about economy and Puritanism. She argues that it might be derived from eastern dress inspired by diplomatic missions, including richly dressed Russians, to celebrate the accession of the King in 1662. It was frequently made of splendid material, not just the broadcloth woollen (a 'fulled' [treated] cloth, finished with a napped surface that could be cut without unravelling, often called 'cloth' at the time) that is generally mentioned (Ribeiro 2005: 236). This was sometimes called 'Persian' dress by contemporaries who had seen Persians in Italy at that time. Samuel Pepys described visiting Sir Phillip Howard dressed 'like a Turk' and inspecting his collection of Chinese 'vests': 'glorious Vests, wrought and embroidered on cloth of Gold, but with such lively colours, as for splendour and vividness we have nothing Europe approaches [sic]… also Flowers, Trees, Beasts, birds &c. excellently wrought in a kind of sleeve-silk [fine embroidery thread] very natural' (Jirousek 2019: 130). Other work by Jirousek suggests that the 'Eastern provenance of the

concept of a layered vest and coat over breeches and shirt is certainly not specifically Persian' and that the centre closing of the layered vest and coat worn by Charles II in 1666 was more like the Turkish approach (Jirousek: 135). Turkish suits of rich cloth of gold and silver had been sent as diplomatic gifts to Elizabeth I by the anti-Spanish Ottoman Empire, so these garments were not entirely unknown in England (Biedermann, Gerritsen and Riello 2017: 19).

Waistcoats might also have developed from the doublet, worn by solders under a cuirass. By the 1660s the garment had become a short, straight jacket. By the 1680s it lengthened to become a straight, sleeved garment worn to the knee under a coat of similar but fuller cut (*justaucorps* in France) – with breeches this created the *habit complet* (or *habit à la française*, or *l'habit complet européen*, or *habit habillé*) or what later became known as a suit, although the *habit complet* always had knee breeches and therefore is quite different from a nineteenth or twentieth-century suit. Elite men also wore comfortable, finely knitted jackets with long sleeves in the early seventeenth century. Many of these jackets are believed to be Spanish (Cora Ginsburg/Titi Halle 1995:, n.p.). Many are in surprisingly vibrant greens and reds.

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the skirts of both waistcoat and coat become fuller, such that they flared out, often stiffened with buckram, coarse linen and other linings. These are sometimes called jerkins in English. In the period of Louis XV the *veste* went to mid-thigh: in the period of Louis XVI to the hips (Join-Diéterle 1998: 115). In the third part of the century the skirts lost much of their fullness and there was a growing emphasis on the man's body itself. The 'waistcoat' lost its skirts and finally ended just above the hips in the 1780s, when it commonly became called a *gilet*. It was straight cut and tight, with horizontal slits for pockets with corresponding pocket welts (Baker: xiv). It continued to grow shorter in the following years. The *gilet à basques* had curved fronts whereas the *gilet droit* was square-cut (Piettre: 27). Both jacket and waistcoat acquired a small upright collar (called a 'cape' in English, confusing for future generations) in the 1770s, that continued to grow higher in subsequent decades.

Three types of waistcoats and three different words therefore appeared in French wardrobes – the *veste* (sometimes but not always sleeved and with skirts; horizontal pockets covered by flaps, often scalloped), the *veston* (smaller skirts and small pocket

flaps) and the *gilet* (short and sleeveless, typical of the years closer to the Revolution, and well represented survivals in museums and private collections). The word does not seem to have had such nuance in the English language, although the term *gilet* is sometimes found. The garment provided a notable field of display of ornament, demanding close inspection but also resolving visually from afar as the decoration was richest at the borders and amplified the effects of the suit jacket, which might was sometimes but not always made of a more austere cloth and was generally open early in the century to show the waistcoat beneath. Their rich decoration and material exemplar are the reason why many were collected by late nineteenth and twentieth century museums which tended to focus on collecting textiles for their co-joined technical and aesthetic quality before they focussed on three-dimensional fashion (Rothstein 1996: 56). The V&A has more than 300 examples excluding those acquired with coats or suits. Waistcoats with plain silk fronts, unembroidered, are rarer survivals and under-represented in collections, perhaps because they wore out or were not retained in the past (Rothstein 1996: 117-118; Maeder 1983: 189-198).

Waistcoats early in the century had a winged effect. Dancers and dancing masters wore especially flared ones to mirror the skirts of the young women they instructed and to be seen clearly on stage. Their pleats were at the sides and later moved towards the centre back. This type of flaring mode was considered effeminate by the English who often conflate the idea of the dancing master with the man of fashion. Anne Buck quotes Sarah Osborn in 1722:

> I believe the gentlemen will wear petticoats very soon for many of their coats were like our mantuas. Lord Essex has a silver tissue coat, and pink color [sic] lutestring waistcoat, and several had pink colour and pale paduasoy coats, which looked prodigiously effeminate (Buck 1979: 20).

Some suits were completely matching, but painted portraits and miniatures show that men also seemed to have the ability to harmonise their dress by mixing colours and patterns together in jacket, waistcoat and breeches. Wealthy men sometimes took advice about how to do this from their agents in centres like Paris.

Waistcoats did indeed change the proportions of the natural body. The dress of the male elites in the *ancien-régime* was suffused with a decorative loading that now seems quite feminine to us, but at the time suggested the appropriate respect that needed to be shown to others in a court. Its colours, materials and attributions also could be used to

relay messages concerning affiliation and allegiance (Grieg 2013: 99-130). This courtly dress proposed an urbane elegance in which graceful technologies of the body and dress were fused in a seamless performance. Christian Huck, following Daniel Roche, describes a society shifting from the 'richly embroidered clothing of women (and aristocrats)' which emphasised generic and abstract features (rather like the development of a 'pure' spoken French which emerged from the court of Louis XIV) to a more visually divided set of gendered looks for men and women whose appearance 'marks the emergence of modern society' (Huck: 288).

For court, men were generally expected to wear embroidered garments which made the clothes more splendid, expensive and personally distinctive [Figure 2]. Tabitha Baker charts the development of embroidery as something originally reserved for the court and the church to a form of consumption 'that oscillated between necessity and desire, and between etiquette and fashion' (Baker: 2). She notes that it represented luxury, was laborious to make, was entirely hand-made, and could not be part-mechanised until 1828 (Baker: 2). Christian Huck describes new luxuries directed at men as resulting not just in claims of effeminacy but in shaking the foundations of the economic belief in 'natural' desires which might now be replaced by 'artificial' ones. Thinkers at the time teetered between disapproving of this trend or accepting that it was good for a new concept of the marketplace (Huck: 281-282).

It is important to emphasise that embroidery reinforced relationships between male and female clothing as both women's gowns, petticoats and stomachers and men's suits for the well-to-do were commonly embroidered. Unlike later periods, there seems to have been a blurring of the fabric selected for both men and women in the first half of the eighteenth century: in 1661 Samuel Pepys had a waistcoat made from his wife's petticoat (Baumgarten 2002: 194) and The Countess of Hardwicke complained in 1755 that 'Mr John has drest Lord Royston… in a velvet [that] would have been agreeable to me: by which I means I am at present unprovided' (Buck: 20). Anne Buck described contemporary men reporting green poplin embroidered with pearls, diamonds and gauze in 1778; silks with coloured borders in 1779; in 1791 the Duke of Bedford wore to court a suit embroidered in 'silver, blue foil and stones in wreaths of flowers for the borders and seams and the ground covered with single brilliants and silver spangles' that had cost perhaps 500 pounds, likely an exaggeration (Buck: 21). Such clothes resembled the rich clothes expected of women at court and were generally paid for using credit, not fully paid for decades.

Imported lengths of cloth (French silk, Dutch linen, Indian cottons) were taxed or later banned at various dates in England. Waistcoats and waistcoat pieces were constantly being smuggled across from France when there was a trade blockade and even Charles James Fox had his burned at Customs. Susan North has analysed at length a pair of 1750s French 'waistcoat shapes' (embroidered, un-cut waistcoat lengths) in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum that were tambour-embroidered in pink and green flowers with festoons and subsequently seized at Customs (North). They were smuggled inside luggage and concealed in the timbers of ships, rather like drugs are today. Men sewed foreign cloth inside the garments they were wearing or hid it in the back of their breeches. Made-up clothing was less often seized and tended to have duties levied, rather than being confiscated, although Indian cottons were generally taken. At times the seizures were burned to make a wider public point. Merchants were permitted to on-ship to other countries and much contraband entered that way.

Such garments might be very expensive. Adam said a fine gold or silver waistcoat would cost 16-18 pounds in London. This was about a year's wage for an artisan without a family: a female domestic servant made about 2 pounds and a footman about 8 pounds (https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/about/coinage accessed 18 March 2025). Robert Adam revelled in the quality of waistcoats on offer in Lyon, describing the fine gold and silver embroidery and cloth whose colour excited him: 'rich, rich, vast, rich red silks of a Red colour' (North 2008: 95). Such valuable clothes were often stolen. Horace Walpole wrote to Sir Horace Mann on 2 August 1750 of the story of a highwayman being caught for selling a laced waistcoat to a pawn-broker, who happened to carry it to the very man who had just sold the lace. 'Laced' meant garnished with a wide, twisted-garland ribbon of silver or gold thread, often simulated with other lesser-value metals.

A vast repertoire of decoration was possible in terms of both textiles used and ornament applied to the edges of the waistcoat. It might fully match or complement embroidery on the suit jacket. Customers often had a cloth waistcoat made up by a tailor and then took it to an embroiderer to further embellish (a *gilet brodé* in French) (Dato and Gorguet-Ballesteros: 177). Dato therefore calls them an 'intermediate' ready-made object (Dato: 244). Specialist London warehouses sold ready-made waistcoat shapes pre-embroidered and ready-to-wear 'of the newest and most admired patterns, suitable to the Season' and for suitable wear in the East or West Indies (Lemire in McNeil: 260). In French, such garments in which the textile was sold with the edges already woven or embroidered is called 'à bordures' (Dato and Gorguet-

Ballesteros: 179). Embroidery could incorporate a wide range of materials apart from silk or woollen thread: chenille (feathery yarn), glass, pastes, faceted quartz, sequins (paillettes), coiled wire, dyed or natural fur (the Victoria and Albert Museum has an English acidic-green dyed rabbit trimmed example c1780, and I own a fragment of a pale yellow one simulating moss roses or strawberries c1770), swansdown, bird feathers, insect wings, ribbons, straw, leather, paper and knots. [Figures 2-3]. *Rapport* work was satin stitch on net designed to be appliquéd swiftly and sold via retail shops. *Guipure* was raised work over vellum or paper. Embroidery was also made with glass. A recent research project on reflection in 18th century culture explained that Louis XV's embroiderer, an artistic figure of high standing, Charles Germain de Saint-Aubin, suggesting covering 'whole backgrounds with white or yellow *jais*', cylindrical glass beads that could imitate silver or gold and 'reflect various light rays which combine very pleasantly' (Maxwell 2020; 2021-2022). For court, the diamond embroideries associated with the French rulers were not a myth (Baker: 183). The spread of sparkling and reflective artefacts around the world amplified Imperial projects, displaying new wealth in artefacts as different as crystal chandeliers and silver casters to hold fine, white, slave-produced sugar. Men constructed domestic and sartorial appearances 'through and with glass' as looking or spy glasses, glass pastes on buttons, sword hilts or snuff boxes (Ray, n.p.).

Professional male and female embroiderers worked in Lyon and Paris but the guild structure only applied in Paris. They were a part of the ancient guild of *Brodeurs, Découpeurs, Egratigneurs, Chasubliers* (Embroiderers, Cutters [of raised paper covered decorations], Incisors, Makers of Chasubles [priestly vestments]) dating back to 1272. This was a male guild with a six year apprenticeship which did not permit widows to take on apprentices. In 1776 the guild was restructured and the embroiderers were joined by lace and button-makers to become the *Passementiers-brodeurs*. Some women were permitted to join the guild and Baker speculates that they might have been the ones selling the new pictorial waistcoats that came in later in the century (Baker: 243). Embroiderers commonly made 'orders' to signify honours (akin to brooches) which in paintings are often mistaken for jewelled artefacts, although some were gems (Baker: 177-178). Paris had 262 master embroiderers before the Revolution: 11 following it (Scheuer: 93). Paris also had large numbers of illegal women workers (*faux-ouvriers*) who supplied subcontractors to meet demand (Baker: 266).

It was embroidery rather than brocaded silk that was preferred in the last third of the century. The embroidery of men's waistcoats sometimes but not always echoed that of the suit, or contrasting waistcoats might be worn: pale silk satin (*gros de Naples*) grounds for such waistcoats were common in the last third of the century. (Buck: 29). White waistcoats were

generally reserved for ‘undress’ or informal wear in the English Summer called ‘negligence’ in the 1770s (Buck: 32). The colour ‘oyster’ was very popular in France, perhaps because it harmonised with neo-classical design and interior decoration which was often bleached of colour: Piettre notes that 94/100 waistcoats of that period in the Palais Galliera collection are of that tone (Piettre: 27). As Buck remarks, in the second half of the century there were often small units of embroidery scattered all across the waistcoat surface and the general effect of the embroidery lightened up (Buck: 29). These were often finely drawn flowers or abstract motifs, squares, or dots. The English silk expert Nathalie Rothstein noted in her essay for *An Elegant Art* that small-field embroidery became so popular that by the 1770s-1780s, woven silks (known as *petits façonnés*) were also developed to emulate it (Rothstein 1983: 70) . These were cheaper, too, as they were made on simper looms which required only one worker (Dato 2023: 246). Waistcoats also tended to be more splendid than the rest of the suit at this time with embroidery across their edges, pockets and buttonholes.

In Lyon, embroidery was a ‘free trade’ but Lyon embroidery was given the same legal protection as woven silk in 1778. People could be prosecuted for copying other’s designs. Lyon tamboured silk was a fast four-five week turn around, swifter than the more traditional Parisian embroidery which took about three months to deliver (Baker: 198). Mainly women worked to make or sell embroidered fashion products. About 6000 embroideresses worked in there in the 1770s, where they worked in long and harsh conditions with 14-16 hour days (Scheuer: 89). The city was noted for its skill in using spangles and satin stitch silks (Baker: 133). This contributed to a distinctive Lyon product in which finely drawn flowers, feathers and bridging motifs were rendered in shaded embroidery that could look quite three dimensional. It also enabled the new fashionable shaded or pictorial embroideries to develop. *Cabinet des Modes* described seasonal shifts in waistcoat types: striped bronze, green and violet ones in winter 1785; Lyon embroidered ones showing ruins, cascades, pyramids, farms with labourers, one hundred types of quadrupeds and reptiles embroidered and painted on one garment for Summer 1786. Printed and hand-coloured engravings of scenes such as allegorical scenes were sometimes stitched into already embroidered gilets, an example of multiple media embedded in a garment (Maeder: 196; cat. no. 287). These were designed by pattern-drawers (*dessinateurs*) who benefited in Lyon from the proximity to a free museum of subjects such as flower paintings (Piettre: 27).

Surviving waistcoats and *gouache* designs for them include borders of turkeys, cows, roosters, monkeys drinking and singing, silver ships, Chinoiserie figures, a boat with ostrich feathers, gardens, insects, bullfights, boar hunts, mythological theatre, ‘amatory passages

bucolic or unruly' and scenes from the 1785 opera Dido and Aeneas (Lesley and Osmun: 5). Their novelty is surprising even today. These waistcoats could arrive quicker, cheaper, and with greater variety and were on-sold by *marchands-merciers* in Paris including women entrepreneurs. A French satire of 1777 described the wonder of illuminated shop windows stuffed with embroidered garments which the author compared to greenhouses: 'One sees there plants, flowers, and fruits of all the seasons and all the nations, perfectly imitated' (Maxwell, online cat., author's file). It took about nine days for a woman to complete an embroidered Lyon waistcoat (Baker: 289).

There were claims that some men of fashion owned 300 such pictorial garments (Scheuer: 103). Portraits of men wearing such waistcoats are not common for some reason (were they too fashionable to be useful for a serious portrait?), but one by Joseph Duplessis or follower was on the art market at Sotheby's in 2000 (author's file). Roche's study of inventories found that the *gilet* was more popular with the aristocratic elites than artisan and working men who maintained the less fashionable *veste* (about 50-60% of such men owned a waistcoat) and that it started being listed as such in 1789. Roche also discovered that it was a generational garment with younger men preferring it to their fathers: cut-off clothes, after all, fit better and suit younger, slimmer figures (in Baker: 99). It is important to emphasise that the innovation of these waistcoats did not just rest in their new, fashionable design. Moira Dato argues that the Lyon silk merchants capitalised on the taste for pictorial waistcoats by shipping to Paris and other French cities as well as long distance trade, exporting abroad pre-embroidered waistcoat shapes (Dato: 136). Lyon waistcoats were exported to England, Italy, Spain, Poland, Germany, the Low Countries, and Switzerland (Dato and G-B: 192). They also arrived in North America (Dato: 237). Italian importers tended to request the latest embroidered waistcoat shapes of 'bon goût' (good taste) without specifying exactly what they should look like (Dato and Gorguet-Ballesteros: 195). This sped up the import and meant that pirated copies were less likely. Parisian mercers, on the other hand, generally worked from samples (Dato: 148). They were sometimes called 'vestes de fabrique' in Italy, which referred to the Grande Fabrique, the Lyon silk industry (Dato: 241). Some French merchants who had formerly been in the area of trimmings became exclusively devoted to embroidered waistcoats. So fashion can be thought of as not just a taste or a trend but as a business and production strategy that shaped a new consumer marketplace in which 'fashion stakeholders' such as financiers and even scientists shaped fashion as much as the consumers (Riello 2017: 59).

There were summer and winter weights for waistcoats and in England, for the King's birthday, all men had to wear a new one, which was sometimes made up patriotically

in local stuff. Clothing worn by those in the rival court of the Prince of Wales was often lavish and cosmopolitan: 'The Prince of Wales appeared in a chocolate coloured silk tabby coat, richly spangled all over with fine silver spangles, and embroidered on the seams; the waistcoat was of white filé, ornamented in the same manner' (The Bon Ton 1791: 141-142). The King, notorious for his lack of interest in fine clothes, 'was dressed, as he always is on his own birth-day, very plain' (The Bon Ton: 141). Purple was a colour reserved for Royalty in mourning: George II wore a purple coat and silver waistcoat on the death of his father in 1727 (Buck: 23). Later, Royals wore white for mourning: the King wore such a white and silver waistcoat to court in 1774 (Buck: 24).

Some waistcoats were also made up from embroidered Chinese export silk, just as some women's embroidered gowns and petticoats were exported ready to cut. They were generally obtained by the various East India Companies trading from Canton. These garments often have fairly conventional floral embroidery with a slightly different air (the European flowers and garlands appear a little stiff and conventionalised) and Chinese silk has a different texture, weight and width than that woven in the west. The Victoria and Albert Museum has exhibited a remarkable bright blue silk waistcoat and men's nightgown made of an Imperial Chinese patterned silk featuring a dragon motif that might have been worn in China by a European favoured by the court or sent as a diplomatic gift (such textiles were never exported and the dragon was a prerogative of the Emperor and high officials). This highly luxurious example has peacock feathers entwined around some of the silk yarn. The silk might be earlier than dated by the V&A Museum, possibly early Qing, i.e. last third of the seventeenth century. The fashion of the garment and its sewing appears to be c1740 when the garments were made up in Italy (https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1134859/banyan-and-waistcoat-unknown/ consulted 13 February 2024).[3]

Protecting the body

There has been some suggestion in literature that the decorative embroidery running along the vertical edges of the waistcoat has some precedence in 'evil eye' embroidery seen in French Breton peasant costume to safeguard the wearer, just as the waistcoat 'protected' vulnerable parts of the body from attack and the cold (Cuisenier 1987: 178; figs. 33-34). Brittany maintained older provincial superstitious customs and practices well into the

[3] For the dating of the silk, my correspondence with Dr Mei Mei Rado, 13 February 2024.

nineteenth century. Such 'evil eye' imagery and talismans exist since ancient times, in different cultural contexts, and can incorporate motifs, colours or amulets. Native North American Western sub-Arctic caribou garments, for example, often have ochre lines drawn around the seams, which as well as indicating tailoring or waterproofing boundaries, may have offered symbolic protection to the vulnerable borders of the body Berlo and Phillips 1998: 147).

This concept of 'protection' has a very practical role in the cooler European and North American colonial climates in which waistcoats were typically worn. Waistcoats were considered central to management of the thermoregulation of the body, which was a very important matter to the eighteenth-century mindset. Winter waistcoats were sometimes backed and sleeved with woollen cloth (*thedandydealer*: Instagram, accessed 2024). Silk (particularly when lined) is also surprisingly warm. Many narratives exist of prominent men dying of lung diseases when they allowed their waistcoat to get damp and went walking in them. Horace Walpole wrote to Mann on 21 March 1751 with an account of the Prince of Wales's death: 'very hot… he unrobed, put on a light unaired frock and waistcoat, went to Kew, walked in a bitter day, came home tired, and laid down three hours upon a couch in a very cold room at Carleton House that opens into the garden.' George III is said to have died as a result of walking around is his damp clothes after hunting (Roberts 2021: 615). This connects the waistcoat to other protective and symbolic items of menswear: the attention paid to cravats and later ties for the neck, for example, probably related to protection of this vulnerable part of the body that was at risk both in warfare from sword cuts and during cold weather. The cravat began to be worn in the later seventeenth century at the same time as the elements of the three-piece suit began to coalesce. Generally the top few buttons of the waistcoat were undone to allow it to fall down. How much it fell down and in what way relates to the important matter of 'negligence', a very important topic for men's dress that also awaits its comprehensive author.

We should not assume that all men dressed in the same way. Elaborate waistcoats were worn by men of different social groupings. There are many accounts of well-to-do English artisans wearing fine clothes but how widespread this was is now impossible to know. Walpole wrote to Horace Mann, on the 6 October 1753, on the subject of richly dressed tradesmen:

> *Last week when I was in town, I went to pay a bill to the glazier who fixed up the painted glass: I said, 'Mr Palmer, you charge me seven shillings a day for your man's work; I know you give him but two shillings; and I am told that it is impossible for him to earn seven shillings a day' – 'Why no, Sir,' replied he, 'it is not that, but one must pay house rent, and one must eat – and one must wear' – I*

looked at him, and he had on, a blue silk waistcoat with an extremely broad gold lace – I could not help smiling. I turned round and saw his own portrait, and his wife's and his son's – 'And I see' said I, 'one must sit for one's picture: I am very sorry that I am to contribute for all you must do!' Adieu! I gave you warning that I had nothing to say.

Men working in the luxury industries such as London cabinet-making seem to have worn fine clothes as a part of their job. In 1784 Mrs Fanny Craddock claimed she saw her milkman on an evening stroll wearing' a fashionable suit, with an embroidered waistcoat, silk knee-breeches and lace cuffs' (Fairchilds in McNeil: 217).

French historians have used inventories and statistical analysis to build their picture of everyday clothing. Daniel Roche argues that the waistcoat was less important than the great coat in protecting French men in the winter and that the 'piling on of garments' was more connected to class; working men and servants owning far fewer waistcoats than the well-to-do until the end of the century, when their incidence increases to 75 percent in police reports (Roche in McNeil: 90). Their elaboration also increases: Roche recounts a 25 year old tavern boy found drowned in the Seine who was wearing striped violet nankeen jacket and trousers, two waistcoats, one red silk, the other dimity piqué, blue stockings, and pointed shoes, one of which was lost in the water (Roche in McNeil: 90). This late 18th-century obsession of fashion with bright colours and admixture of patterns offended classical thinking. As Stafford notes in her study of aesthetics and science, within neo-classical vision, 'colour… was the antagonist to fixity. It was connected to change and superficial appearances that seized the eye' (Stafford 1991: 206). She also argues persuasively that this period hated 'mixtures' (Stafford: 211). This aesthetic argument partly stemmed from the tension regarding polytheistic Roman empire and monotheistic Christianity, which particularly disliked the concept of male and female deities, let alone hermaphrodites (Stafford: 213). Dufresnoy noted that artists should avoid 'objects full of hollows, broken into little pieces' that were 'barbarous and shocking to the eyes' and that they should avoid 'all things which… corrupt their natural Forms by a confusion of their Parts which are entangled in each other' (Stafford: 226). Lessing reminded artists that the civilized Thebans enacted a law commanding idealization in art. 'Digressions towards outlandishness were legally punishable' (Stafford: 226). These are some of the many and varied reasons why outlandish clothes for men later became socially unacceptable. The other reasons relate to new ideas about the body and health (the body should not be restricted by tight, French-style clothes), the cult of Englishness (the English elites spent much of their time in the country

where urban clothes made of silk and velvet were simply not practical for riding and sport), and new masculine ideals that emphasised inner character over external beauty and fashion.

Modifying Dress

Men from different places and social groupings adjusted West European dress and men have always innovated for practicality in country, regional and remote areas. Linda Baumgarten's invaluable works stems from her perspective as curator of the clothing collections of Colonial Williamsburg, and she contends from a study of the clothing as well as written records that North Americans modified standards of British dress. She describes a 'cultural rift' from European norms that included leggings of leather, coarse cotton or woollens sometimes called 'Indian boots' that protected their legs and stockings for hunting and warfare (Baumgarten: 68). Baumgarten documents a number of innovations: men wearing just a waistcoat and linen over-gown/wrapper to teach in Summer 1774, rather than a jacket (Baumgarten: 110). Some Southerners declined to wear wigs, substituting them with caps (Baumgarten: 54, 110). A contemporary remarked: 'In Winter they dress mostly as in England' (Baumgarten: 193).

Managing the cold was of great concern to several prominent North Americans who hated the cold and suffered from cold-related ailments. Thomas Jefferson, something of a design innovator (he slept in an unusual centre-alcove bed from which he could exit at either side) wore drawers under his breeches and under-waistcoats beneath his shirts to manage his rheumatism: 'I have no doubt that cold is the source of more sufferance to all animal nature than hunger, thirst, sickness, and all other pains of life and death itself… I shudder at the approach of Winter' (Baumgarten: 27-28). Virginia Governor Lord Botetourt owned 10 such under-waistcoats (Baumgarten: 30). The North Americans did not wear much French silk until after the Revolutionary Wars as direct French trade was prohibited. They were also infamous for refusing to accord with the customs at the French court: Benjamin Franklin did not even wear a wig, as the one he had bought did not fit, and the painter Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun said he looked like a big farmer. As well as the encouragement of homespun woollen and linen mixes, they wore cotton velvet at court, which was less showy than silk velvet. Patriotic symbols were swiftly embedded into North American clothes: Peter Speer wore a wedding waistcoat brocaded with winged eagles in 1801 (Baumgaten: 104).

Salem loyalist, Samuel Curwen, lived in England 1775-1784. He owned two striped silk waistcoats (black and green, and red and green), a brown silk velvet one, and two of white cotton. Later he purchased dove and gold striped silk, yellow, black-spotted silk,

green, black-spotted Manchester silk, a plain black silk, a Marseilles quilted white cotton [white on white embroidery sometimes in French knots and cord quilting], black shagreen (a silk fabric with a grained ground) lengthened, black moleskin or long piled velvet. He also owned white baize sleeves that could be tied on to the waistcoat sleeves for cold weather (Buck: 95). To give a sense and value of his total and rather large wardrobe, Curwen owned 23 Irish linen shirts and 9 cotton and linen ones; 20 stocks for the neck and 13 cravats in cambric muslin; 39 pairs of stockings in colours ranging from purple and white speckled to black and blue striped; four wigs; one pair of boots and 7 pairs of shoes. One of his waistcoats and 8 of his shirts were later stolen (Buck: 96). Curwen's detailed diary explains that he had seasonal habits: in June 1779 he removed his under-waistcoat (likely a padded or flannel garment worn under the silk one) and in January 1783 he switched his linen shirts for cotton ones. In April 1782 and 1783 he commented he could generally dispense with his greatcoat (Buck: 96). Fine quilted linen might be richly embroidered and laid over an inferior linen lining. Waistcoats might be 'lined with fustian (napped linen/cotton), for warmth' (Cora Ginsburg: Titi Halle 2013: 10). Men also modified their existing waistcoats as tastes changed and they shortened: Baumgarten mentions several fine silk damask ones that were modified by the tailor where it would show least – across the top of the pocket flaps (Baumgarten).

Waistcoats for European men might also be made of non-Western materials: one famous example is the unfinished waistcoat of Tahiti tapa cloth for Captain Cook to wear at court following his third voyage, embroidered by his wife Mrs Elizabeth Cook, c1779, but never worn by Cook as he was murdered in Hawaii (Figure 4). European waistcoats fascinated some non-western peoples: the famed scientist-explorer Sir Joseph Banks, well known as a macaroni in his youth, wore such fashion clothes on his famous journey with Lieutenant James Cook to the South Pacific in 1769. The shipboard illustrator Sydney Parkinson noted that 'Mr Banks lost his white jacket and waistcoat, with silver frogs' [tassels] when they were stolen after he stripped naked one evening and gave his clothes for safe keeping to the indigenous woman Oborea near 'Atahourou' (Tahiti/French Polynesia) (Beaglehole: 282). European clothes were of fascination to Tahitians for their novelty, coloured dyes and possible parodic potential: Lt. James Cook also lost his stockings and two other sailors their jackets the same evening.

Turning to eighteenth-century written and pictorial sources themselves we see there was also a great deal of attention paid to the waistcoat. Printed books are tools and

shapers, commodities and media. As Huck remarks, ‘many of the graphic products circulating in the eighteenth century contained depictions of one of the most prominent visual spectacles on the streets of London, dress’ (Huck: 162). Waistcoats were sometimes personified in eighteenth-century texts, standing in for the behaviour and morality of their owners. Such accounts are called by the charming name ‘it narratives’. Chloe Wigston Smith speculates that these object stories are not simply novelties, but that which written and visual descriptions of clothes detached from bodies ‘become protagonists of commodity culture’ as well as assertions of the ‘material status of objects’. (Wigston-Smith 2010-2012, 350, 380). *The Memoirs and Interesting Adventures of an Embroidered Waistcoat*. was published in London by J. Brooke in 1751: ‘In a few days will be published, the Second Part, in which will be introduced the Episode of a Petticoat, containing some secret histories of several well known LADIES’ (Memoirs: 1751). This was a satirical text without images. It concerned the tale of a waistcoat that can speak, once owned by a noble Lord, and purchased by a man of the theatre and then sold on for being damaged and worn by a range of less respectable characters.

Fashionable Crops

By the 1790s waistcoats were so short and cutaway in the centre front that it was reported in England of the fashionable ‘crop’: ‘If his waistcoat be so short as to meet his breeches just above the pit of his stomach, and a chain dangles from each pocket, as if a watch was inside – and if a gallows closed in blue or crimson satin, keeps the breeches suspended from the clavicle… you may set him down for a first-rate fashionable crop’ (The Bon Ton 1791: 271) . The crops were known for very high waistcoat collars (‘capes) ‘pressing with upright stiffness to the *cartilage* of the ears’ (The Bon Ton 1791: 270), which they paired with coats worn off one shoulder, hands in their coat pockets, and sometimes red belts from which they suspended a child’s rattle, and ‘a handkerchief tied around one of the arms’ (The Bon Ton 1791: 276). ‘Box-lobby loungers’ were young men who hung around the theatres and disrupted the evening. One called them ‘not men, but coats, waistcoats, and breeches moving upon spindles’ (*Public Advertiser*, 1791) (Amman: 184). These Anglophile looks were fashionable on the continent, too [Figure 6].

Coda

By the 1780s, *gilets* were worn with new soft collars that made it appear as if several waistcoats lay on top of the other, waistcoats of 'conspicuous waste' as the title of a 1950s exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art put it, but also representative of the

scrambling of the logic of fashion. By the 1790s, sometimes two were worn together, of different lengths and colours (Ribeiro 1988: 119). Some were made of cashmere, such as 'Kasmir' shawls (Maskiell in McNeil: 214). Similarly, two watches, one often false (a *fausse montre*), were worn simultaneously, hanging from tassels decorated with other metal and gem-set seals and fobs on either side of the breeches, jangling as one walked. All of this has implications for thinking how fashion relates to the wider 'Enlightenment' project which sought explanation, rationality and classification. The latter looked for infallible guidelines, laws and principles, yet fashion sought continuous change, movement and even misrule. Furthermore, the body and the dressed body were part of wider cultural understandings and philosophical structures. As Barbara Stafford notes in her history of perception: 'For the age of encyclopedism, the human body represented the ultimate visual compendium… Whether ideal or caricatured, perfect or monstrous, it formed the model for proper or improper man-made assemblies and artificial compositions' (Stafford: 12). Reformers, whether they be Cartesians or Augustinian Jansenists, demanded the usurpal of the Baroque and Rococo. The 'showy ostentation… of the cosmetic imagination' was to be cleansed as a 'part of what became the Neoclassical drive to wash language, art, and morals of the excesses of liberty' (Stafford: 204). In the first half of the eighteenth century very elaborate clothes for men had been requisite within court culture and mainly about power, mutual respect, duty and display. In the second half of the century a new set of concerns began to emerge about men wearing very fine clothes. A part of this was a pan-European questioning of finery and a newer focus on more simply dressed, Enlightenment bodies in which more elegant movement and a clearer image of the natural male body was possible. Over the top fashion figures constricted by clothing often became the subject of satire. Although Napoleon attempted to revive the Lyon silk and embroidery industries with his mandated dress for attendance in Paris, embroidered and brocaded clothes for men became much less common and more associated with being in service – livery – or what we would now call public service – diplomats and military men. The part embroidered or silk-satin waistcoat hung on, nonetheless, particularly for younger men, for their wedding dress and Summer dress in metropolitan centres such as Paris. We could therefore conclude that it retained a certain playfulness, eroticism and ludic quality that has never entirely disappeared. A masculine garment still worn with some resemblance to the original after 350 years is worthy of further investigation. My next look at this garment will therefore consider some of the emotional and erotic charge of the waistcoat, a common gift at marriage, often hand-embroidered by wives and lovers.

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