

‘Despots of elegance’: Men’s fashion from macaroni fop to Regency buck

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The NGV Fashion and Textiles collection is broad in scope and celebrates dress as an important form of cultural expression that reflects and responds to contemporary life. Is men’s fashion political? Absolutely. Despite the myth that men don’t care much about their appearances, men’s fashion has for centuries responded to politics and social change. Three hundred years ago the suit was adopted by well-to-do gentlemen in polite company – but the suit could also be worn with a twist. Exploring the NGV Collection, I want to explode the myth that men’s dress was dull, and that men didn’t care. They most certainly did.

In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the cost of fine clothing was enormous, and both women and men desired luxurious cloth and the finest accessories. Men embellished their hats with jewels. They tied components of their dress together with ailettes (metal bows). On their caps and hats were aigrettes – egret-feather plumes or sprays of gems. They wore pompoms on their high-heeled shoes. Their stockings were embroidered up the inner leg (these designs were called ‘clocks’). Both genders loved furs. Men wore more virile ones, such as lynx and wolf. The Chinese favoured garments padded with fur or cottons to keep warm (Europeans developed warmer interiors with more focus on fireplace technology). The Peter Lely portrait, *Sir John Rous, 1st Baronet of Henham Hall*, 1660 in the NGV Collection (Gift of the Countess of Stradbroke through the Australian Government’s Cultural Gifts Program, 2012), shows what would have been called ‘undress’; that is, the subject is wearing a sumptuous silk wrapper possibly derived from a knowledge of Indian or Persian dress. Such loose clothing was also useful as it looked more classical and timeless for the purpose of portrait painting.

For a Renaissance court, the aim was to look spectacular. The theory came from Aristotle, who said spending was a good thing when it came from a leader. Pomp, on the other hand, was a bad thing as it lacked the gravitas or connection to the idea of a just ruler. Dress historian Maria Hayward, writing on the splendid clothes of Henry VIII, notes that ‘visually and financially there would have been very little difference between magnificent and luxurious dress. Both would be sumptuous and expensive. The difference ... is a moral one.’¹ Young men showed their upper breasts (a very rare occurrence outside work-

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ingmen's culture) in fine-quality drawn-linen shirts. Embroidery of the finest quality snaked around the silk satin garments of men and women. Charles I, son of James I, paid nearly three hundred pounds for a scarlet silk suit with gold and silver embroidery in 1629, whereas a portrait by a great artist of the time such as Daniel Mytens cost only seventy pounds.²

Sumptuous fashions, textiles, jewellery and the whole range of decorative arts within new classicising architectural frameworks reinforced the notion that the ruler's grace and power could never be copied, but only experienced by his courtiers as a type of radiation.³ A metaphysical interest in beauty extended also to the beauty of objects. Yet it was all transitory, and the transitory nature of fashion, youth, beauty and the way that was judged within the Judeo-Christian tradition means that fashion often has acquired negative social meanings.

The most expensive garments for men two hundred years ago were the clothes required to visit or appear at court, in the presence of the aristocracy. The *habit à la française* (c. 1760) in the NGV Collection (credit line) – which just means a three-piece suit in the new

1. Maria Hayward, 'Luxury or Magnificence? Dress at the Court of Henry VIII,' *Costume*, vol. 30, 1996, p. 37.
2. Aileen Ribeiro, *Fashion and Fiction: Dress in Art and Literature in Stuart England*, Yale University Press, London and New Haven, 2005, p. 96.
3. See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, 2 vols, Blackwell, Oxford, 1982.

French manner – is an example of an early transnational or global fashion for Europe and the United States. However, it was also worn by the English in India and the West Indies in the eighteenth century, although often in a different, lighter colourway, even pure white. The commonplace that women's dress is more likely to be associated with floral textiles is disrupted by the presence of the NGV's French *Suit (Habit à la française)*, c. 1775 (Presented by the National Gallery Women's Association, 1978). Stylised newly fashionable flowers of the time, likely jasmine and baby's breath, meander along the embroidered edges of the coat and waistcoat. The suit also pink, a colour newly fashionable in the eighteenth century and for both men and women, but then for the next two centuries associated with the feminine. Imagine this garment's potency at the time: Queen Marie-Antoinette owned a suite of furniture by Georges Jacob in which similar blooms were carved and painted all over – very appropriate for garden viewing and sociability in the informal setting of her English park at the Petit Trianon.

Clothes such as the *habit à la française* were associated with a fashion subculture called the macaroni men. But why the term 'macaroni'? Macaroni men were cosmopolitan in outlook and had supposedly been on the Grand Tour through France and Switzerland to Italy, where they partook of Italian food, including pasta. A 'macaroni club' is meant to have existed in London but this might be made up as part of a joke. Clubland was connected with gambling and feasting, and the term 'macaroni' placed it in contrast with the masculine values of the 'roast beef of England'. Pasta shapes such as gnocchi or hollow tubes were connected in British minds with nonsense and carnival, as well as the idea of a 'numbskull' or an empty-headed person, a bit of a joker. It also referred to a mode of burlesque Latin poetry.

What did the macaroni men resemble? They had very high hair with a toupee at the front, wore the modern French-style suit with very tight sleeves and a high jacket, liked modish colours such as pink, green and yellow, continental textiles such as silks and velvets, wore thin slippers with rosettes or paste buckles, and a tiny hat called a *Nivernois*, named for the French ambassador in London. Accessories

were important and included large nosegays or corsages, fine-needle lace, snuffboxes made of materials from silver to porcelain, hanger swords of the popular new material stainless steel, and chatelaines with seals and fobs dangling from their waist.

Who where they? Some were very wealthy and closely connected to the Whig aristocracy, such as Charles James Fox, later one of the most famous politicians of his era. Portrait painter to the future prince regent and his circle, Richard Cosway was a wealthy socialite who came from humble beginnings. A freed slave known as Soubise or Julius Soubise drove around London in his carriage. The court preacher, the Reverend William Dodd, was a macaroni and famously executed as one of the first 'white-collar' criminals. Swiss-born Britain-based painter Johan Zoffany was called one in his youth. Merchants in luxury industries dressed elaborately, and the famous explorer-scientist Sir Joseph Banks was satirised as a macaroni, later having his scientific credentials ridiculed by his enemies for his youthful interest in dress and general dilettantism. Banks had a silver-tasselled white satin waistcoat and jacket stolen one night while he was in Tahiti, so it is startling to think that macaroni fashion might have been worn by a First Nations man, fascinated by European dress and textiles from only slightly later than the NGV's English embroidered example (*Waistcoat*, c. 1805) (Felton Bequest, 1958).⁴

A part of the macaroni pose was generational. These younger men rejected the nativist rhetoric of their fathers and grandfathers, as well as the general thrust of British male dressing. It is not the case that men in the eighteenth century wore only dark colours but it is certainly true that they preferred broadcloth, or what we now call super-fine woollens. These can be dyed in a surprising range of colours but were not acceptable in a country such as France for court. The English loved their new Lyons embroidered waistcoats and Italian

4. On macaroni dress see Peter McNeil, *Pretty Gentlemen: Macaroni Men and the Eighteenth-Century Fashion World*, Yale University Press, London and New Haven, 2018. European clothes fascinated Tahitians: Lieutenant James Cook also lost his stockings and two other their jackets the same evening. J. C. Beaglehole (ed), *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks, 1768-1771*, vol. 1, Trustees of the Public Library of New South Wales, Sydney, 1962, p. 282.

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fur-lined jackets and capes. England did not have any active sumptuary laws so technically anyone could wear whatever they liked that they could afford. But England had very strict customs bans in order to protect its own textile industries. Many of the fine foreign clothes were smuggled in, and court cases were held as to whether gentlemen could wear their foreign-bought clothes back to England. A great deal of ink was spilled mocking and complaining about expenditure on men's fashion and its trimmings: lace, gimp, braid, tassels and embroidery. We see these desires in the 1768 NGV portrait *Gaetano II Sforza Cesarini, Duke of Segni* by Pompeo Batoni (Everard Studley Miller Bequest, 1962), an artist who was able to capture the effects of fine watered silk and silver gimp, painting both the young men and the older generations visiting and residing in Rome.

War throughout the eighteenth century also stopped people from seeing firsthand what the French or Italians were wearing. The macaronis popped up straight after the Seven Years' War (which ended in 1763) and people like Fox and Banks went straight to the continent to see all the new ideas in art, architecture and fashion. This was also an extremely prosperous period for Britain, with enormous wealth generated by Englishmen in India known as the 'nabobs', and British naval supremacy on the rise around the globe. The great townhouses of eighteenth-century London designed by Robert Adam such as Northumberland House were constructed in this period. The macaroni took their place in this new atmosphere of heightened luxury,

urbanity and a world perceived as more feminised than before. To moralists and emerging economists, too much of this money was flowing abroad.

In the last third of the eighteenth century in Western Europe, the types of practical clothes worn by men in the country came more and more to influence fashion. Henry Meister, in his *Letters Written During a Residence in England* (1799), noted:

In England gentlemen employ all the time they can spare from public affairs, or private business, in the exercise of riding or walking, in the diversions of hunting or shooting, at the theatres, or in tavern clubs or societies.⁵

The adoption of boots, chamois knee-breeches, soft, round riding hats and riding crops promoted new, informal modes of fashion that surprised the older generation. Such clothing placed a premium on youth, a good figure and new ideals of manly deportment, which can be connected back in time to older ideals of the equine-ready body. The ideas move forward in time towards the cult of sport and youth that dominates masculine fashion today and therefore relate to wider questions of mobility – both real and metaphoric – over time. As Anne Buck notes, by wearing rural dress, English men also signalled that they preferred dress that was practical and profitable, rather than urban-leisure focused.⁶ The frock coat (*fraque* or *frac anglais*), with easier fit and small collar, and the long, straight, caped riding coat (*redingote*) became the height of fashion in France from 1774.

Men's chamois leather breeches were one example of new, comfortable fashions influenced by the cult of the horse. Although they were not formal dress, they began to appear regularly in men's portraits from the 1790s. Ann Hollander notes that wool, leather and

5. Henry Meister, *Letters Written During a Residence in England, Translated from the French of Henry Meister, Containing Many Curious Remarks upon English Manners and Customs, Government, Climate, Literature, Theatre, &c.&c.&c., Together with a Letter from the Margravine of Anspach to the Author*, T.N. Longman & O. Rees, London, 1799, p. xx.
6. Anne Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*, Batsford, London, 1979, p. 204.

linen created for men a sense of 'poetic harmony with his natural domain', rather than the sense of opposition created by glossy and smooth textiles such as satin and silk.⁷ Boots, English style 'jockey caps', whips and other equestrian accessories became the epitome of glamour for French men in the decade before the revolution. Such tastes were expensive: as the Prince de Ligne wrote, 'Horses and gigs will be the ruin of young men in Paris.'⁸ In the NGV Collection is a beautiful portrait that used to be considered Circle of David but now is attributed to the painter Jean-Pierre Saint-Ours, *Head of a man*, c. 1795 (Felton Bequest, 1937). Here the young, rather dreamy man wears a very high linen stock, or bandana, and a glamorous high beaver hat useful for the outdoors. He has his own hair, long sideburns and is resolutely modern.

No man of social standing wore trousers in the eighteenth century until after the French Revolution, including artisans. Trousers were for active workers such as river-men and sailors. This was also the case for the North Americans, who complained of the luxury of the French and other continental courts and wore either simple black or even homespun cloth to make their point.⁹ Nonetheless, they kept their knee breeches, as pantaloons were too far from the respectable fashion ideal.

Revolutionary dress might be its own topic. Suffice it to say, it became dangerous to appear like an aristocrat or a court supporter. The wearing of knee breeches, wigs, fine textiles and accessories became suspect. Aristocrats disguised themselves as peasants in order to survive. Jean-François Sablet's c. 1794 portrait *Daniel Kervégan, Mayor of Nantes*, held in the NGV Collection (Purchased with funds donated by Andrew Sisson, 2010) is set in a dark and undistinguished space and shows a man who is also not distinguished by fashion. He wears his own hair, or what is left of it, is wrinkled and rather despondent looking, as well as a loose, unfitted greatcoat with falling lapels,

7. Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits*, Knopf, New York, 1994, p. 81.

8. Colin McDowell, *The Man of Fashion: Peacock Males and Perfect Gentlemen*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1997, p. xx.

9. Whitney A. Jones, 'George Washington: Dominion, Democracy and Dress', (master's thesis, SUNY Fashion Institute of Technology, 2009), p. xx.

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an untidy, checked stock at his neck, and a red waistcoat, a colour associated with revolutionary fervour. The textiles are rough and utilitarian, his arms folded together to keep warm, but his snuffbox to one side indicates he has not abandoned all of his old little luxuries.

BOHEMIANISM

In 1799 Napoleon made his coup d’état, and fashion changed once again. Napoleon had little time for misfits, but Paris was spawning just that. The *barbus* were outlandish artists and artisans such as hairdressers and tailors who wore little beards and capes. It appears that some even showed their chest in a décolleté manner, a fashion that had not been seen since the Renaissance and that did not return until the 1960s. This is a very important aspect of men’s fashion for the subsequent two centuries: bohemianism, which had many later resurgences, such as the deliberately scruffy hair and clothes worn by young men in the 1830s–50s, seen in many surviving daguerreotypes, and with the hippy and flower power movement a century later in the 1960s, flowing on to punk.¹⁰

In complete contrast to this sloppy bohemianism was the revival of court dress enforced by the Emperor Napoleon. For court, Napoleon insisted upon silk or velvet embroidered suits. Knee breeches were reintroduced as compulsory. The new format, with a Neoclassical shape, placed new emphasis on the shoulders, which were meant to be broad. There was extensive use of gold and silver thread, and it was this period that created the dress uniforms and template for dress that had to be worn at courts by diplomats and visitors in Europe until World War II. The old court dress of the Ancien Régime under Louis XVIII was now laughed at, yet the informal *frac* was considered unacceptable as being too informal, and so the only alternative was to focus on military dress as de facto court dress. An officer wrote:

10. Michael Langkjaer, ‘Rock Military Style: Motivations Behind the Military Look of 1960s Rock Musicians’, in Peter McNeil and Lousie Wallenberg (eds), *Nordic Fashion Studies*, Axl Books, Stockholm, 2012, pp. 271–91.

Since the court has become completely military ... it is no longer possible to go to the palace in *habit bourgeois* [civilian dress] ... so in order not to become confused with the footmen, I must demand permission to wear épaulettes.¹¹

The Napoleonic Wars generated new military dress that brought about countless fashions, for example, ‘hussar-style’ jackets with fur trims and elegant frogging (little boys’ jackets continued to be braided in hussar and other military styles into the late nineteenth century).¹² The NGV Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun portrait *A junior officer of the French Royal Infantry*, c. 1773–75 (Gift of Krystyna Campbell-Pretty AM and Family through the Australian Government’s Cultural Gifts Program, 2019), is a good example of this fusion of a gentlemanly demeanour (powdered wig, fine linen) with military dress and epaulettes. Despite the appeal to our contemporary eyes of early nineteenth-century officers’ dress, such dress was met with great resistance from upper-class English and French men. Unlike the splendid and very expensive habit habillé of the old regime, rank might be legible but not always status. To some men, uniformity felt like livery. By the 1850s all British government officials had to wear civil uniforms, distinguished in rank by the amount of embroidery. Full court dress for particular occasions with a bag wig and sword continued until 1939.¹³ The element of obligation is particularly important for subsequent countercultural attitudes and developments around prescribed and military dress.

BUCKS OF ELEGANCE

The fashion periodical, which had embraced images, stories and news about men from its birth in the 1760s, seemed to turn away from men after the French Revolution. The more entrenched association of

11. Philip Mansel, ‘Monarchy, Uniform and the Rise of the Frac, 1760–1830’, *Past & Present* vol. 96, no. 1, August 1982, pp. 131–32.
12. Clare Rose, *Making, Selling and Wearing Boys’ Clothes in Late-Victorian England*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2010, pp. 61–63.
13. Mansel, ‘Monarchy’, p. xx. See also Alexander Maxwell, *Patriots Against Fashion: Clothing and Nationalism in Europe’s Age of Revolutions*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2014.

women's light reading and amusement with the world of fashion does not mean that men themselves lost interest in clothing. In fact, the years after the revolution created in England and France an intense period of reflection and fascination by and for men's fashion. It was the period of the 'dandy'.

A great many satirical prints from around 1800–10 depict men preparing their toilette, with copious amounts of perfume, make-up and linen, as well as corsetry and even fake calves attached in their stockings. Such mannerisms were often associated with military dress as the uniforms of the early nineteenth century were splendid in colour and cut very tight. The famous fop the comte d'Orsay in 1859 wore tonal colours such as a blue satin cravat, and his gloves were scented with different eaux de cologne. The writer Barbey d'Aurevilly wrote that before the term 'dandy' became widely adopted in the 1790s at Eton, the 'despots of elegance' were known as 'bucks', an English term that refers to a male animal.¹⁴ 'Buck' or Beau Brummel was the heroic ideal, and he was not just noted for his fine dressing, but also for his house in Chapel Street, his library, his furniture, his horses, his snuff boxes, his canes and his Sèvres porcelain.¹⁵ It was a complete lifestyle package.

The English dandy of the Regency period, who stripped back his wardrobe to the essentials of the finest shirt, cravat linen and woollen broadcloth, with perfectly blacked boots by a maker such as George Hoby of St James Street and accessories such as a white thornwood cane, became a pan-European ideal. Dandies were meant to be thin, and it has been demonstrated how at this time the medical condition tuberculous as a wasting disease was connected to positive beauty attributes of liveness, a white, flushed complexion, large pupils, false hair (as hair was weakened by the disease), sensitivity and glamour for men and women of the affluent classes (for the poor it was seen as degeneration).¹⁶

14. J.A. Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Du dandyisme et de G. Brummell*, Paris, 1861, p. 58.

15. Rees Howell Gronow, *Regency Recollections: Captain Gronow's Guide to Life in London and Paris*, Ravenhall Books, Welwyn Garden City, 2006, p. 157.

16. Carolyn A. Day, *Consumptive Chic: A History of Beauty, Fashion and Disease*, Bloomsbury, London, 2017, p. 83.

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Such men were called the 'lions of the day both in London and Paris': for example, the extravagant Captain T, who kept perfect English carriages and horses, lived in two different hotels at the same time, and dressed in wide trousers and a coat 'remarkable for its wide, bagged sleeves ... and a pair of golden spurs with rowels of the circumference of a small dessert plate'.¹⁷ The actor 'Romeo' Coats appeared in Bath and the Haymarket, London, in gaudy satin and furs, real diamond buttons and buckles, and a 'singular shell-shaped carriage, drawn by two fine white horses'.¹⁸ The foppish Lord Petersham promoted a new type of greatcoat and claimed to use a different box of snuff every day of the year: when complimented on a pretty Wedgwood box he lisped, 'Yes, it is a nice summer box but would not do for winter wear'.¹⁹ The NGV holds many fine snuffboxes: some were table boxes, such as Parisian manufacturer Philippe Bourlier's gold *Snuffbox*, c. 1774–75 (Felton Bequest, 1962), while others were papier-mâché or wooden and painted with erotic scenes designed to be shown to other men, such as *Snuffbox*, 1825–47 (Gift of John H. Connell, 1914), deco-

17. Gronow, p. 105.

18. *ibid.* p. 169.

19. *ibid.* p. 186.

20. *ibid.*

21. L.P. Shanks, *Baudelaire: Flesh and Spirit*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1930, p. 42.

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rated by Samuel Raven. Such dandies directed even the appearance of their grooms: Petersham was well known for his equipage of fine brown horses with matching harnesses, and a groom dressed in the same colour coat to the ground with a cockaded hat.²⁰

Poet-dandies of mid-nineteenth-century France continued some ideas of the older rococo courtier. One such poet-dandy described staying in bed all morning, drinking chocolate, seeing the hairdresser and tailor from his bed, taking lunch at the famous restaurant Grand Véfour (still in existence), looking at the bookshop, florist and glove shop, then dinner and a visit to an actress or theatre and bed around 2 a.m.²¹ It was a delightful period for well-to-do fashionable men and it was very much about being young, thin and optimistic, rather like the 1960s. Fashionable suits had tight, puffed jacket sleeves that stayed in fashion in the 1830s and were often made in rich tones such as plum and claret, and in cloths including cotton plush (velvet). The first engraving for a tailor in the colony of New South Wales shows just this.²² Such attire was accompanied by natural hair and hearty good looks. Subsequent periods remained fascinated by early dandyism. London in the 1960s had a pop singer called Beau Brummell: a cross between a teddy boy and a Regency dandy, he had a large quiff of his own blonde hair and was photographed opening a new menswear shop, arriving by open carriage.

France remained a centre of fashion production and innovation in the nineteenth century. However, much of the fashionable template was now derived from English rather than continental taste. A disciplined sobriety became desirable. John Harvey has pointed out how attention to perfect linens led to the ideal 'scrubbed cleanliness' of the later Victorian period.²³ An aniline dye for black came on the market in 1863, making black easier to fix.²⁴ Careful inspection of cloth and clothing was the basis of this approach to fashion, which ironi-

22. I.G. Maelzer, a Jewish tailor, arrived in Sydney from Calcutta by 1831. One engraving survives in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia, the other is with Peter McNeil.

23. John Harvey, *Men in Black*, Reaktion, London, 1995, p. 32.

24. Aileen Ribeiro, *Clothing Art: The Visual Culture of Fashion, 1600-1914*, Yale University Press, London and New Haven, 2017, p. 349.

cally was also meant to be inconspicuous. Riding dress, exemplified by an 1889 hunting jacket by London tailor Henry Poole (*Hunt coat, pink*) in the NGV Collection (Purchased, NGV Foundation, 2008), was both beautiful and reinforced the connection of man and the horse.

The dandy also functioned as something of a safety valve between the old values of the aristocracy (which depended on inheritance and birth) and those of the ascendant middle classes (which depended on money and work). Such foppery was sometimes but not always projected onto suggestions of homosexuality, generally associated with foreigners and cosmopolitan affectation. There is always a flip with men and fashion – some people felt that men showing an interest in fashion were simply skilled at getting access to women.

The other function of the dandy was to shock the bourgeoisie and to cultivate the self as a work of art. There was a general rejection by the younger generation of artists and writers of the materialism and vulgarity of contemporary society in which profit-making had replaced older aesthetic ideals. In the late nineteenth century, avant-garde artists in Paris were already wearing second-hand clothes from two generations earlier, which they adopted to appear 'bohemian'. The fashionable and well-connected Australian artist Charles Conder picked things up from the flea markets in the 1890s in a deliberate attempt to insert himself into an older Paris ethic, as well as to economise: 'he would gaze at them through shop windows, and regret the few francs that could transform him into a Marsay or a Rubempré [characters from Balzac]'.²⁵ The Australian artist Rupert Bunny was also well known in Paris and London as a highly attractive, well dressed and sophisticated expatriate who was friends with Oscar Wilde and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.

It is this passionate desire to be thoughtful and distinctive in appearance that has kept the spirit of dandyism alive as an inspiration to the present day. The focus on the self as a work of art – *Bildung* in German thought – is the basis of the Romantic notion of creating the self through aesthetic choices. It also encouraged the notion that fashion is for the young and the outsider. Men's clothes, although they

25. John Rothenstein, *The Life and Death of Conder*, Dent, London, 1938, p. 51.

had lost the extreme mannerism and patterning of eighteenth-century court dress, retained a syntax of cut, tonal colour and texture. The rise of weekends, vacations and the cult of sport among working people emerged strongly in the United States in the 1910s. Clothing in the twentieth century would be further transformed by athleticism, informality, new forms of transport and working, subcultural styles, music and, sadly, also by war.