

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN MAN & WOMAN

AH 21

It is important to remember that Roman fashions changed over time, varied from region to region and that Romans displayed their wealth through their clothes - slaves, for example, did not wear certain clothes and rich people used their clothes to underline to others how wealthy they were.

The clothes shown on these two figures are probably representative of those worn by wealthy Roman citizens in the late first century.

In broad terms the clothes for Roman men and for Roman women were based on the same two basic items.

Firstly, there was the tunic.

Secondly, there was some sort of loose outer-garment the toga is one of the forms that this outer-garment took for men, the palla was an equivalent for women.

The Tunic

Tunics were worn by everyone, from slaves to emperors. In its simplest form a tunic is a rectangle of cloth folded over, with slits left for head and arms.

In the first- and second-centuries rich men wore their tunics with a belt around the waist. They seem to have generally worn bleached white tunics, though senators were sometimes distinguished by tunics with wide or narrow purple stripes. Tunics without a belt seem to have been worn by lower-class men. Wall paintings of such people show their tunics to be brown or yellow, presumably made of unbleached wool. Thicker tunics could be worn in winter. The emperor Augustus is once described as wearing four tunics, an under-tunic, a woollen chest-protector, as well as a heavy toga.

The shape and style of tunics changed over time. In the third- and fourth-centuries long, tight-fitting sleeves appeared. More and more decoration seems to have been added - stripes and patterns around the hems and neck, for example.



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Women's tunics were generally longer than those worn by men. In the first- and second-centuries the seam running along the shoulder was not fully sewn up, but was held together at intervals by fastenings this style can be seen on the model of the woman. At the beginning of the first century married women wore a long dress called a stola over their tunic, which was held by bands running over the shoulders. By the late first century this seems to have fallen out of fashion. If the lady represented by the model is meant to be from this period then she is clearly fairly fashionable. In the third- and fourth-centuries long sleeves and greater patterning became fashionable, as with men's tunics. Women generally wore a belt higher than men, just under the bust.

The Toga

The toga is the most familiar item of Roman clothing. It started out as a practical outer-garment, but gradually became a more elaborate costume which was worn on formal occasions.

In the very earliest days of Rome both men and women wore togas without any tunic. It was a bit like the length of plaid worn in the Scottish highlands three centuries ago - an all purpose piece of cloth, which could be used as clothing or even as a blanket.

By the time of the Empire, though, it had become a status symbol. It could only be worn by a Roman citizen. It was also used to show-off one's wealth. It was made of white wool and a huge amount of material was required - it was often 18 feet (5 metres) long. The poet Horace (65-8 BC) mocks an ex-slave for flaunting his new status with a toga that was only a paltry 3 metres long! It was also worn folded in half which meant, because in places it was draped over itself, that the body was covered with several layers of thick cloth which must have made it quite hot to wear in a country like Italy. It is clear that it took quite a while to arrange a toga properly and that it had to be constantly adjusted by the wearer to keep the folds in good order.



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All of these factors led to the toga becoming an unpopular garment. The poet Juvenal (active around AD100) claimed that 'in many parts of Italy ... no man puts on a toga until he is dead!' In the big towns it was required for ceremonial occasions when putting in an appearance at a town council or before a magistrate, when getting married, or when attending a sacrifice at a temple.

It should be noted that Roman men also wore cloaks (a piece of cloth pinned at the shoulder) and capes (a piece of cloth sewn at the front, a bit like a poncho) over their tunics. It is probable that these outer garments were a much more common sight on the streets than a toga.

The Palla

The palla consisted of a large rectangle of cloth that was wrapped around the body from the shoulder to below the knee. Like the toga it needed one hand to keep it in place. No respectable woman would leave her house without her head covered and her body concealed by it. Women did not wear cloaks and only seem to have worn capes when travelling in bad weather.

Although never as complicated as the toga, the palla does not seem to have been a very practical garment. Rich women with slaves did not need their hands free to carry things, but ordinary women must often have found the garment cumbersome. Nevertheless, it was important to signal one's respectability so the palla continued in use with only slight variation throughout the Roman period. Indeed, the trend over the Roman period was for both men and women to increasingly cover up their body. One writer on Roman clothes concludes that 'women, already well covered in the first century ... ended up with only face and hands visible even in the privacy of their own home' (A.T.Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion*, p. 148).



Statuette found at Silchester showing a female figure in 2nd-3rd century Roman dress.