Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

TWELFTH CENTURY COSTUME H18

The style of clothes which you wear depends on a number of factors: how wealthy you are, what social class you belong to, what job you are doing or event you are attending (are you going to a party, or about to mend the car?) and so on.

It would have been the same in the twelfth century. Our knowledge, though, of the styles and details of clothes from this period is limited. Few items have survived and we have to rely on scattered illustrations from the period for evidence.

The illustrations on this page are from the *Hunterian Psalter*, which is owned by the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow, Scotland. No one knows where this beautiful manuscript was made, but most people think it was actually created in England. It is thought to date from about 1150 to 1170 AD. Such pictures give us clues about clothing from the period.



The illustration on the left, for example, shows a man who is almost certainly a noble. He is riding a horse, which no poor person would have been able to do, and he also has a hawk on his hand. Hunting with hawks was an exclusively aristocratic sport.



Another illustration which is believed to show two noble figures can be seen on the right. Like the illustration of the horse rider, these figures are wearing long gowns, in this case with decorative collars.



The illustration on the left, however, shows two peasants, who made up the bulk of the population, at work in the fields. They wear shorter tunics and one of them is stripped to the waist. Harvesting took place when the weather was warm. The illustration on the right shows two poor people in their winter clothing, huddled in front of a fire for warmth.



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In twelfth century England all clothes were hand-made. Most clothing would have been made from local homespun wool. This may have been undyed, though simple dyes were widely available and fragments of cloth that have survived often feature chequered patterns. The rich, though, could afford imported silk cloth from the Byzantine Empire and probably also cotton.





For all classes the spinning of yarn and the weaving of cloth would have been a time consuming business. These tasks were part of the role of women in society. Even aristocratic women were admired for their ability to spin, weave and stitch. The illustration on the left shows Eve, the first woman, spinning, while her child sleeps in its cradle at her feet.

The basic garment for both men and women was the tunic, just as it had been for the Romans. In its simplest form a tunic is a rectangle of cloth folded over, with slits left for head and arms, which was belted around the waist. In the later Roman Period sleeves were added to this basic garment. The Anglo-Saxons and Normans, also, wore long sleeved tunics.

The model of a woman in this box clearly represents a member of the upper class. All women from this period were expected to be well covered up. Apart from the face and hands, very little was left uncovered. Her collar, belt and sleeves are decorated with bands of tablet woven cloth. Tablet Weaving is a weaving technique in which wooden 'tablets' are used to create patterned belts or straps. It was widely practised in early Medieval Europe. The photographs below show a modern enthusiast practising the craft.





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The model lady's dress is moulded to her figure and has tight fitting sleeves. Similar sleeves can be seen in the illustrations from the *Hunterian Psalter*. On the other hand, there was also a fashion for wearing sleeves which were tight to the elbow and then widened into a trumpet shape. Sleeves of this kind can be seen in the late eleventh century, as in the illustration on the left. This is one of the few women shown in the Bayeux Tapestry.

Dresses with flared sleeves are often referred to as bliaut. They seem to have peaked in popularity in the twelfth century, particularly in areas of French influence. The photograph on the right shows a twelfth century statue of a woman on Angers Cathedral, France, wearing such wide and drooping sleeves.



The costume model is also wearing a looping belt or cincture (in French, *ceinture*) around her waist which is knotted over the abdomen. Such items of dress offered the opportunity for decorative display. A similar belt can be seen on the statues shown on the lower right, this time from Chartres Cathedral, France. The neck of her gown is also fastened with an expensive and showy jewel.



The photograph on the left shows a modern attempt to create a twelfth century dress, in this case with the bliaut style of flared sleeve.



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The clothes on the male model are in many ways similar to those on the female model. Both are wearing long gowns, although the male figure's costume has the fashionable flared sleeves discussed on page 3. The illustration below left is from a twelfth century French manuscript and shows a man wearing a similar baggy-sleeved gown.





Both men and women would have worn undergarments. Such underclothes may have consisted of an inner tunic (French *chainse*) or shirt with long, tight sleeves, and drawers or *braies*, usually of linen. Men also wore tailored cloth leggings called *chausses*, made as separate garments for each leg.

The man's collar, like the woman's, is highly decorated. He wears a hat on his head. A somewhat similar collar and hat can be seen in the illustration below right, from the *Hunterian Psalter*. A cloak is fastened at his neck. The photograph below left shows Geoffrey V, Count of Anjou, who died in 1151, as depicted on his tomb. He is shown wearing similar clothes to the model, including a long cloak.



