Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

THIRTEENTH CENTURY BOY AND GIRL H291

The two figures in this box represent two children from the fourteenth century. At this date all clothes had to be hand spun, then woven into cloth and finally they were cut and stitched together for the person they were intended for. Clothes were not bought off-the-peg, as they are today. The picture, bottom left, shows a fourteenth century tailor's workshop. The male tailor is measuring a lady customer, while two seamstresses can be seen busily sewing.





Spinning and weaving were usually done by women in medieval society. The twelfth century manuscript image on the left shows Eve, the first woman, spinning, while her child sleeps in its cradle at her feet.

Wool was the main material used for clothing. Other kinds of cloth such as silk and cotton were known, but were rare and very expensive. Cotton cloth was known in England in the thirteenth century and is mentioned in an Act of Parliament in 1212, during the reign of King John. At this time no one in Europe had actually seen a cotton plant. Writing in 1350 Sir John Mandeville reported that in India 'there grew there a wonderful tree which bore tiny lambs on the endes of its branches. These branches were so pliable that they bent down to allow the lambs to feed when they are hungrie.' The picture below right shows Mandeville's lamb-tree!





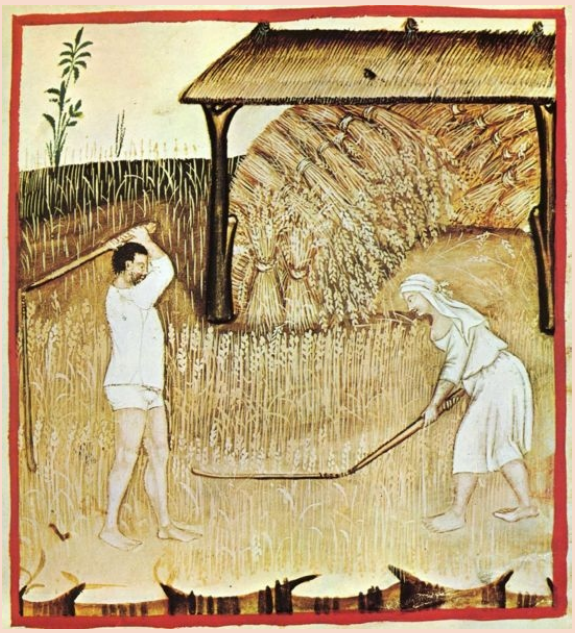
Medieval Fashions

Clothes in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were loosely cut and covered the whole body. Women were expected to cover their heads. The illustration of the woman spinning on the previous page illustrates these general features.

The fourteenth century, by contrast, was a less modest century. Some costume historians have suggested that it was during this period that 'fashion clothing' first began. Draped garments were replaced by curved seams and the beginnings of tailoring, which allowed clothing to more closely fit the human form. Lacing and buttons also allowed a snugger fit. The veil was discarded or greatly reduced. In general, more of the body was exposed to view in a way which people in previous centuries would have regarded as scandalous.

Medieval society was divided into three groups - knights, clerics (monks and priests) and peasants. The vast majority of people belonged to this latter group. For them expensive, fashionable clothing was out of the question and their everyday wear would have been fairly coarse and practical. The two illustrations below are from a German manuscript which was made in the early fourteenth century. The illustration on the left shows rich, courtly figures dressed in expensive and revealing clothes. The peasants on the right are wearing clothes that are perhaps equally revealing, but only because they are doing hot, sweaty work in the fields!





Children's Clothing



What did children wear in the Middle Ages? The evidence is meagre. Not much actual clothing has survived. A girl's dress has been preserved in a grave in Greenland, for example, but such survivals depend on exceptional circumstances. We have to rely more on paintings and illuminated manuscripts. Adults are pictured far more frequently than children. There is also far more visual evidence from the fourteenth century, than from the thirteenth.



The pictures on this page all show children. The picture at the top right and bottom left are from the *Codex Manesse*. This is a very important German manuscript containing poetry. It was made about 1304, so the clothes that are worn probably reflect fashions at the end of the thirteenth century. The picture on the left is from a late thirteenth century Italian manuscript and shows a school. The picture on the lower right is also of a school, though in this case from about 1350. A child is being thrashed!



Broadly speaking, as can be seen in these pictures, children seem to have worn very similar clothes to those of their elders. The one big exception to this rule is that unmarried girls appear to have worn their hair uncovered, while married women were expected to wear a head covering in public. This is illustrated in the model of a girl in the box. Otherwise her clothes cover her entire body, as they would a married woman. Even young girls, though, would have worn their head covered in church.



Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

THIRTEENTH CENTURY BOY AND GIRL H291



The *Codex Manesse* tends to show the upper class figures wearing clothes which come down to the ankle. Servants, though, wear short gowns, often exposing half of the lower leg. This can be seen in the contrasting figures shown on the left.

The clothing on the model of a young boy in this box, which exposes most of his legs, is more typical of the fourteenth century than the thirteenth. Perhaps he belonged to a very fashion-conscious family! He certainly must have come from a wealthy background, as he is wearing shoes.

Exposing legs, even though covered with hose, was viewed by some people disapprovingly. It was thought to be rather saucy. Certainly, one of the things that attracted Chaucer's Wife of Bath to her much younger fifth husband was his shapely legs. She first spots him at the funeral of her fourth husband:

And Jenkin, our good clerk, was one of them.
So help me God, when rang the requiem
After the bier, I thought he had a pair
Of legs and feet so clean-cut and so fair
That all my heart I gave to him to hold.
He was, I think, but twenty winters old,
And I was forty, if I tell the truth.

The boy model is also wearing a hood with a long dangling tail, another item which was very fashionable in the fourteenth century, called a liripipe. The origin and meaning of this word are unknown.

Hoods like these were first worn by academics as part of their formal dress. Over time, liripipes became steadily longer, sometimes down to the ankles. The widespread popularity of this kind of hood is illustrated by the fact that they are known to have been worn in Greenland, perhaps the most isolated place in Medieval Europe. In 1921, a graveyard at Herjolfsnes was excavated and many pieces of well-preserved fourteenth century clothing were discovered, including the liripipe in the photograph on the right. The Norse settlements in Greenland were so remote and precarious that they were abandoned in the fifteenth century.

