Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

THIRTEENTH CENTURY MAN & WOMAN H40





The two figures in this box represent a wealthy couple from the thirteenth 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. Spinning and weaving were usually done by women in medieval society. The twelfth century manuscript 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 on the right shows Mandeville's lamb-tree!

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Thirteenth Century Female Fashion



Clothing fashions in the Middle Ages were as prone to change as they are today. For example, in the twelfth century dresses called bliaut, with sleeves that flared at the elbow to create long decorative trails at the wrist (left), were very popular. In the thirteenth century the fashionable sleeve was the exact opposite - the upper sleeve was wide, while the lower sleeve was much tighter, narrowing to the elbow and wrist. The model of the lady is wearing just such a sleeve.

Individuality in women's costume was expressed through their hair and headdress. One distinctive part of thirteenth-century women's headwear was the barbette, a chin band to which a hat or various other headdress might be attached. This hat might be a 'woman's coif', which resembled a pillbox hat. The hair was often held by a net called a crespine or crespinette, visible only at the back. The model is wearing all three of these items - barbette, coif and crespinette.

Over her shoulders the model is wearing a dark mantle, fastened with straps across the chest. Her shoes are pointed, a fashion which became popular in the thirteenth century. Jewellery was not very showy in this period. A simple brooch would be used to fasten the neck opening of the tunic.

The drawing of a woman on the right was made in about 1230, by a travelling French mason/architect called Villard de Honnecourt. The style of clothing which she is wearing is very similar to that found on the model in this box.





Left: The tomb of Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122-1204), Duchess of Aquitaine and Gascony and Countess of Poitou. She was one of the wealthiest and most powerful women in Europe during the Middle Ages. She was married to King Louis VII of France and then to King Henry II of England. She is wearing a coif similar to the one worn by the model in this box.

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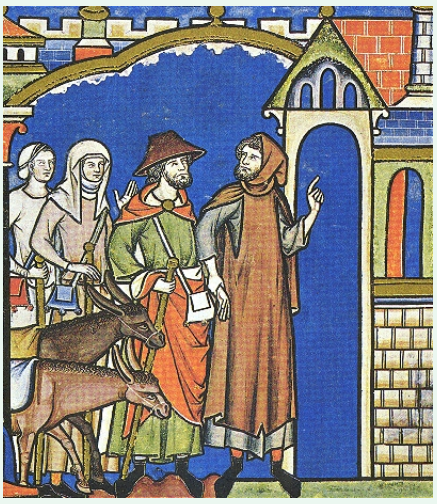
Thirteenth Century Male Fashion

The male figure in this box is wearing a patterned undertunic, with was often referred to as a cote. As with women in the thirteenth century, it was fashionable for this to have full-length sleeves tight to the wrist. Such sleeves are sometimes referred to as Magyar sleeves. Overtunics like this were belted at the waist, with the fabric gathered up to provide a blousy fullness at the upper body.



Over this the model is wearing a thick hooded garment. This overtunic has very wide armholes, to accommodate the magyar sleeve. The academic gowns, which are worn at modern university degree ceremonies, have the same design (left). This kind of over tunic was called a cyclas and was also worn by women. In this case, the cyclas has had a hood of matching colour added. A hooded cyclas was sometimes referred to as a ganache or gardcorps.



The image on the right is from the Morgan Bible, which was made in about 1250 in northern France. The man to the right is wearing a very similar set of clothes to those on the model in this box.



Men also wore hose, shoes, and headdress. They often also wore long braies or leggings. As with women, men's shoes were often slightly pointed, as can be seen from the detail from an illustration in the Morgan Bible on the left.



The man is wearing a coif on his head. Again, this was a fairly common form of headdress at the time. The drawing on the right, made by Villard de Honnecourt in about 1230, shows an identical example. Men's head coverings were less fancy than those worn by women.