Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

FOURTEENTH CENTURY MAN & WOMAN H41

The two figures in this box represent a wealthy couple 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 on the 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 on the right shows Mandeville's lamb-tree!





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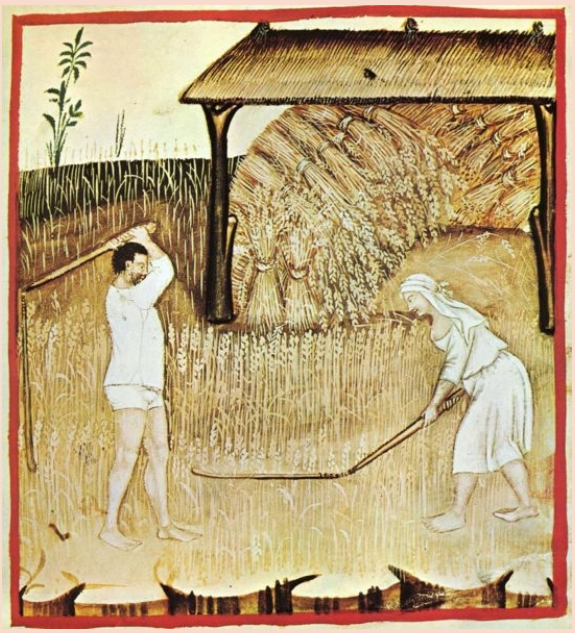
Fashion in the Fourteenth Century

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!





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Fourteenth Century Male Fashion

The model of a man is wearing a short jacket called an arming coat or gipon. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries men wore long gowns that reached to the lower leg or floor. During the fourteenth century the length of male hem-lines was reduced, until all that was left was a tailored top that fell a little below the waist - a silhouette that is still reflected in men's costume today.



The gipon is believed to have begun life as a padded jacket worn under plate armour. Decorative versions were also worn over the armour to display heraldic decorations, as in the wall painting of Edward III's sons on the left. Gradually they were worn without any armour at all. The photograph on the right shows a gipon that belonged to Charles du Blois (1319-1364), Duke of Brittany.



Such jackets exposed the legs to public view. This was not approved of by everybody. A French chronicle records: 'Around that year (1350), noblemen and their squires, took to wearing tunics so short and tight that they revealed what modesty bids us hide. This was a most astonishing thing for the people'.



The model is wearing a parti-coloured pair of hose (stockings). A fashion for clothes made of two contrasting fabrics, one on each side, was especially popular at the English court. Sometimes the hose would be different colours on each leg. Checkered fabrics were also popular. Hose were tied individually to a breech belt to keep them up (left).

Hose allowed men to show-off their well-shaped legs. Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400), author of the *Canterbury Tales*, has a character called the Wife of Bath fall in love (at the funeral of her fourth husband) with a young man called Jenkin who is dressed in such clothes:

> 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.

Continued on next page.

The model is wearing a hood with a long dangling tail, 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.



The fringe on the liripipe has been dagged - that is, it has been cut into points and leaf shapes. Again, this was a characteristic decorative feature of fourteenth century clothes. Sometimes the dagges could be extremely long, as can be seen in the copy of an illustration from a fourteenth century manuscript on the left.



Above: An image from the Luttrell Psalter, made about 1330, showing a rich family having a meal.

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Fourteenth Century Female Fashion



Fourteenth century women were not allowed to expose their legs in the way that men were. However, the model figure is clothed in a tight-fitting underdress, over which she has a sideless surcoat. Such sideless dresses, often edged or entirely made with fur, became fashionable in the second half of the century. They are often shown in manuscript illustrations (right - see also the illustration from the *Luttrell Psalter* on page 4). They allowed a woman to show off her figure and were condemned by some as 'the gates of hell'!



Until the fourteenth century women had their heads covered. In the thirteenth century women wore a 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 (left). The hair was often held by a net called a crespine or crespinette, visible only at the back.



In the fourteenth century many women gradually discarded the barbette and coif, leaving only the crespinette. The hair was often wound into ramshorn curls at the side of the head and held in place using it. The painting on the right shows Margaret of Dampierre (1350-1405), Countess of Flanders, wearing her hair in this fashion. Gradually the mesh crespinette turned into a stiff wire cage called a caul. The statue on the left, of Queen Joan of Bourbon (1337-1380), shows an example of a typical caul.

