Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

STUART LADY & GENTLEMAN H52/A



The style of clothes which you choose to wear depends on a number of factors: how wealthy you are, what social class you belong to, the event you are attending (are you going to a party, or about to mend the car?), whereabouts in the country you come from, the fashion fad of the moment, the time of year … It was just the same in Stuart England.

The Stuart era of English history began with the coronation of James I in 1603 and lasted up to the time of Queen Anne, who died in 1714. This includes the Civil War period when, for about ten years, the monarchy was abolished. The style of the costumes in this box dates from the 1650s and 1660s.

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It is important to remember that until the nineteenth century most clothes were made for (or by) the person for whom they were intended, rather than being ready made. In the seventeenth century the diary writer Samuel Pepys frequently records visiting the drapers to buy lengths of cloth and then visiting, or being visited by, his tailor, to be measured and have the item of clothing he has ordered fitted. The following entries, for example, date from between April and August 1660: 'This morning Pim [his tailor] spent in my cabin, putting a great many ribbons to a suit … Afterwards called at Mr Pim's about getting me a coat of velvet … saw Mr Pim, the tailor, and I agreed upon making me a velvet coat … I called on Mr Pim and there found my velvet coat (the first that ever I had) done, and a velvet mantle.' The portrait on the right shows a seventeenth century tailor at work.

Another big difference between attitudes to clothes then and now is that from the early Middle Ages to the seventeenth century British monarchs constantly issued laws to forbid ordinary people from wearing the same kind of rich clothes that were worn by aristocrats. These were called sumptuary laws. For example, in 1574 Queen Elizabeth's government issued a Statute of Apparel. The Act complained that fancy clothes led to the import of 'unnecessary foreign wares' and the 'wasting and undoing of a great number of young gentlemen … and others seeking by show of apparel to be esteemed as gentlemen, who, allured by the vain show of those things, do not only consume themselves, their goods, and lands which their parents left unto them but also run into such debts and shifts as they cannot live out of danger'.

Although the law claimed that it was designed to prevent ordinary people from wasting their money, its main purpose was probably to maintain boundaries between the upper and lower classes. The statute goes on to specify who can wear what: 'None shall wear in his apparel: Any silk of the colour of purple, cloth of gold tissued, nor fur of sables, but only the King, Queen, King's mother, children, brethren, and sisters, uncles and aunts; and except dukes, marquises, and earls, who may wear the same in doublets, jerkins, linings of cloaks, gowns, and hose; and those of the Garter, purple in mantles only …' and so on.

Middling and poor people would either have bought a length of cloth and made up the required item themselves, or have depended on cast-offs. Many female servants were given old dresses by their mistress. Clothes were often passed from child to child within a family. Mending and patching worn clothes was common for both men and women.

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The models in this box are dressed in clothes that would have been worn by wealthy people in the mid-seventeenth century, as they are made from expensive material and their elaborate design would have involved many hours of work. Even among the rich, however, such clothes would only have been worn for special occasions - when going to church or attending social occasions. Much of our evidence for what people wore during this period comes from portraits, but only the rich could afford such luxuries and they inevitably dressed in their finest clothes when being painted.



The lady is wearing a dress of silk in a style fashionable from the 1630s to the 1650s. At this date sleeves ended just below the elbow and dresses were developing a low neckline - the stiff ruffs of the previous generation were on the way out. Hair was worn elaborately curled. The painters of the period always made great efforts to capture the sheen of such gorgeous dresses. The painting on the right by Sir Anthony Van Dyke shows Henrietta Maria, the wife of Charles I, in a dress of a similar style. It was painted in 1632.



The gentleman is wearing clothes from the same period. The painting on the left by Daniel Mytens shows Charles I. It was painted in 1631 and the similarities with the clothes on the model are striking. The king is wearing a slashed doublet with paned sleeves (that is, made from strips of cloth), breeches, and tall narrow boots with turned-over tops. Up until the 1620s a collar wired to stick out horizontally, called a whisk, was popular. By the 1630s a collar with long points was popular; today, it is called a Van Dyke collar after the painter, Anthony Van Dyck.

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What were ordinary, everyday clothes like in this period?

It is easier to find evidence from the Netherlands, as there was a tradition there that did not exist in England of painting scenes from everyday life . The three pictures below were painted by the Dutch artist Pieter de Hooch in the 1650s. Two of them show a mother and child going about their ordinary lives. The third shows a middle class family in their best clothes. They clearly liked much less fancy clothing than English courtiers! Although fashions were different in the Netherlands, there were also lots of common features and these pictures help us to imagine how people from less privileged backgrounds would have looked.





