Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY COSTUME BOY & GIRL H53/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 first half of this period.

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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 picture 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'.

The Statute goes on to specify who could 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.

It is doubtful whether these laws were ever enforced, but the attitude that rich and elaborate clothing should be the prerogative of the aristocracy remained widespread in the Stuart period.

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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.

The design of the clothes in this box represents the fashion of the 1630s and 1640s. Although the figures are labelled a 'puritan' boy and girl this is misleading. The plain clothes they are wearing would have been worn by most ordinary people in England, whatever their political or religious views.

In the mid-seventeenth century an artist called Wenceslas Hollar engraved a series of pictures showing the clothes worn by women in London at that time. One of the pictures (above) shows a woman in a similar costume to that worn by the girl model in this box. The picture is labelled 'A Countrywoman' - that is, a woman from a rural area, rather than a sophisticated London lady. There is no suggestion that such practical clothes were the uniform of a particular religious or political group.

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The boy model in this box is wearing a conical hat. This is often thought of as a 'puritan' badge but, again, the situation is rather more complicated. The famous seventeenth century engraving (above) of Guy Fawkes and his fellow Roman Catholic conspirators who, in 1605, planned to kill King James and the Members of Parliament, shows them all wearing similar hats!

It is probably best to think of the clothes shown on the models as representative of those worn by middle-class people in the first half of the seventeenth century. It may be true that the various groups who wanted to reform the church and who took their Christian faith seriously and tried to reflect it in their personal life were strongest among the middle-classes, but not all middle-class people held such views.

Right: A middle-class Dutch family painted in the 1660s by Peter de Hooch. Darker clothing of this kind would have been the daily style of most people, whatever their religious belief, at this time.

