

Good clothing in 18th century europe essay example

[Art & Culture](#), [Painting](#)



Introduction

The clothing that the people of 18th century Europe wore has the ability to fascinate us like some objects of their material culture do. Clothing is intimate, for example, an eighteenth century garment seen in a museum collection, usually elicits an instinctive urge to touch it. To some of us, we have the desire to experience the elaborate decoration, the beautiful fabrics and the tactile qualities found in 18th century Europe clothing no longer with our own clothing. To other people, these desires are raised by the need to understand the people from the past a little better.

How the clothes were made

Clothes during this era were made using a multi-step process that included painting, mordant dyeing and resist dyeing. The printing blocks used were made from teak wood. They can be found today in antique stores or curio shops. They can still be used if they are in good shape. The process started by sizing the fabric with a preparation of plant extracts and fatty milk which had tannic acid. The fabric to be prepared was then dried thoroughly. The design outline was then printed onto the fabric by an ink which turned black when the ink encountered the tannic acid on the fabric. This ink is an iron oxide mixed with fruit juice or sugar.

The design portions that were to be red were painted or printed with a mixture of brazilwood and alum. When printed, the mordant was made into a paste and the fabric was then dyed in hot- water dye vat that contained madder root or chay (*Oldenlandia umbellata*), both of which are dyes. The fabric was then cleaned with cow dung to remove the tanning agent

thoroughly. All sections of the fabric that were not supposed to be dyed blue were covered with wax resist made of beeswax and resin. The fabric was then dyed in Indigo vat by dipping it severally, like three to five time, to get a beautiful blue color. This wax was then removed by dipping the cloth several times in hot water, washing it, drying and sizing it.

The last step involved use of thickened yellow dyes made from saffron or pomegranate peel, turmeric, and mixed with alum, painted directly onto the fabric over blue portions if green color was desired. Unfortunately, many examples of 18th century clothing yellows have faded leaving behind the blues and the reds. An example is branches and leaves which were once green are now blue and the areas that were yellow are now tan in color. By 1730, dyers had developed a way of directly painting indigo onto the fabric. The method that was originally used involved a recipe of orpiment also known as arsenic trisulfide which is hazardous to the dyer.

Single-color copperplate was the popular printing from around 1760 to 1800 which made prints available with finer lines than it was possible using wooden blocks. This method produced textiles which were large-patterned toiles and were predominantly used for drapery and upholstery rather than clothing. The roller printing process, another printing process, was developed in 1783 with limited fabrics available at first. It became more widely used by 1810-1815. The roller-printed fabrics with brown grounds became very popular in the late 1780s and 1790s (Mara, E. Riley, <http://www.marariley.net/chintz.htm>).

Social status clothing.

The social organization pattern in Europe, established first in the middle ages, continued into the eighteenth century. Social status was determined by division into the traditional orders or estates and not by wealth or social standings. This division of society was supported by Christian teachings which supported the need to meet the responsibilities of one's estate.

In every town, there were sumptuary laws which defined carefully who could wear different types of clothing. In most cases, the nobles were the only people allowed to wear silk. Only the royal families were allowed to have gold or silver thread woven in their clothes. The princes were the only people who were permitted to have certain precious furs lining their collars. These laws defined socially appropriate colors too. These colors followed the famous model of imperial purple of the Byzantines. Naturally people craved to wear clothing restricted to a social group which was above them. The nobles, for example, tried to sneak threads of gold into their clothes while the merchants tried to wear silk.

Textile used

Silk, wool and linen were the most used fabrics during this period. During this period, the Europeans also began to import painted cotton materials from India. These materials were appreciated in Europe because of their bright colors, laundering ease and lightweight hand. The merchants also appreciated these materials as they expanded their trade networks. Their population increased as a result of Europeans exporting the technology of block printing to India. These made these fabrics cheaper and easier to

manufacture while the Indians adjusted their designs to suit the European taste.

These cotton materials were serious contenders in the European textile market even though some countries passed legislation against the manufacture, import, and sale of printed and painted cottons. France and England are a good example of countries that passed these kinds of legislations. Mills in England, Germany, France, Switzerland, and the Netherlands began to produce their own version of printed cotton, however, most printed cotton continued to be made in India until the 1790s.

These cottons were created using a combination of mordant dyeing, relief painting, resist dyeing and hand painting. All dyes were derived from vegetables until the nineteenth century. These dyes were derived from madder that creates a range of colors from red to pink, purple and black. Blue and yellow colors were added by penciling the colors onto the fabric using the hand.

Floral designs were mostly used for the printing of the cotton materials. Fabrics were imitating beautiful European flowers such as carnations, tulips, daises and roses. Bolder designs with twisting stems became more fashionable in the 1780s. Small floral spring designs that had tiny motifs on pastel backgrounds became cheap in 1790s which made them very popular for the working class. Some clothes also veered off from the backgrounds of white to incorporate red, yellow and brown.

These cotton materials had a number of names in Europe. In France they were called *indiennes*, French for Indians, they were known as *toiles imprimes* and *toiles peintes* meaning printed and painted clothes

respectively, no matter their place of origin. In England and their American colonies there were a number of terms that were used: calico, which was derived from the Indian port of Calicut, was the name generally used for Indian cotton fabric. This included cotton materials that were printed, plain, dyed, stained, woven with colored stripes etc.; chintz is another term that was used. It is a Hindi word meaning variegated. It was a term used for printed or painted calicoes. The term *Indiennes* was used by English and American colonialists to refer to French imitations of the Indian printed cottons.

Throughout eighteenth century, most fabrics had a white background till the 1790s. Design was mainly brown, red, pink or purple which possibly had yellow or blue accents. These designs usually consisted of striped motif or sparse florals in a spring. Most of these fabrics were made using a technique known as copperplate printing which was invented in 1760s in Europe by the famous Jouy textile manufacturing industry.

Different types of clothing description

The women clothing style maintained a conical shape of the torso while the skirts shape changed throughout the period. The wide panniers disappeared for most part by 1780 and the false rumps, which had hip-pads or bum-pads, were put-on for a time. The usual women fashion at the beginning of this period was a low-necked gown which was put on over a petticoat. Most of these gowns had skirts which opened at the front to show the petticoat which was worn beneath. To generally simplify the dress, the bodice which was open with a separate stomacher was replaced with a bodice whose

edges met center front.

The *à la française* robe also known as sack-back gown which had back pleats which hang loosely from the neckline, made last appearance during this period. A bodice which was fitted held the front of *à la française* gown nearer to the figure. The robe *à l'anglaise* or close-bodied gown featured back pleats sewn in place to closely fit to the body, it was then released into the skirt and could be draped in various ways. The gown *à la polonoise* became very fashionable by mid-1770s. It featured backs of the gowns' skirts being pulled into swags which were either through pocket slits or loops of the gown. Short gowns or bed gowns with front-wrapping -thigh-length remained fashionable during home morning wear. These gowns were of lightweight printed cotton fabric and were worn over petticoats. Bed gowns became the staple upper garment for British female working class over time.

The costume of a jacket and petticoat, another clothing type, was an informal alternative to the dress. It was based on working class fashion and it executed finer fabrics which had a tighter fit. Caraco was a jacket like bodice which was worn with a petticoat. It had elbow-length sleeves and by 1790s, it had full length, tight sleeves. The traditional riding habit employed a tailored jacket like a man's coat which was worn with a waistcoat, a high-necked shirt, a petticoat, and a hat. The jacket and a false waistcoat-front alternatively made a single garment. A simple riding jacket and a petticoat, without a waistcoat, could be worn later in the period for ridding was another alternative to this habit. Riding coat or joeseph was another alternative to the traditional habit. It was usually of unadorned, simply trimmed fabric, with full-length tight sleeves with broad collar lapels or revers. On the types of coats

worn, redingote was later worn as an overcoat with the light-weight chemise dress.

The other garment worn by women was the smock, or the shift which had a low neckline and elbow-length sleeves. They were full in the beginning of eighteenth century but they increasingly narrowed as the century progressed. During this time, drawers were not worn. Strapless stays were cut high at the armpit so as to encourage a woman to stand using a fashionable posture of having the shoulders slightly back. The waist was not small particularly. The stays used were laced snugly but comfortably, only those interested in extreme fashions laced tightly. These stays offered back support for heavy lifting. Middle class and poor women were, therefore able to work in them. As this relaxed fashion took hold in France, stays were replaced by a lightly boned garment known as "un corset". This style however did not gain much popularity in England where stays were used throughout this period.

Panniers also known as side-hoops remained an essential court fashion which disappeared everywhere in favor of a few petticoats. There was the use of free-hanging pockets which were tied around the waist. They were accessed through pocket slits found in the side-seams of the petticoat or the gown. Quilted or woolen waistcoats were put on over the stays and under the gown for warmth. Finally, the ladies shoes used during this period had curved heels and were mostly made of leather or fabric. The shoe buckles remained fashionable till they were abandoned together with high heeled shoes and the other aristocratic fashions in the years past the French revolution.

For men's dressing, at the beginning of the 18th century, the male silhouette differed greatly with that of today. A male outfit typically consisted of a full-skirted knee-length coat, a waistcoat or a vest, linen underwear and a linen shirt with frills. The lower legs were shown and this was an important part of the silhouette. Men wore leather shoes which had stacked heels of medium to low height, with silk stockings. The whole group could have been topped by a shoulder length full bottomed wig and tricorne hat which had an upturned brim.

The male silhouette slowly changed as the century progressed. By mid eighteenth century, the wig was usually tied back and by the end of the century it was out fashioned except for the most formal occasions. The undergarments and the knee breeches changed very little. The coat skirts slowly became less full and the front was usually cut into a curved line to the back. The waistcoats became shorter. The upper leg began to show more and more such that by the end of eighteenth century breeches fitted better since they were made of knitted silk. Male shoes became low-heeled with pointed toes and they were fastened with straps and detachable buck on the vamp.

In conclusion, I would say that clothing in eighteenth century was very captivating. There were very beautiful clothes made with various fabrics available by then. This period experienced a rapid improvement in the fashion and the way people dressed. It led to inventions of safer and more efficient ways of painting clothes. This essay is not enough to explain all the details of the clothing in 18th century Europe. Nonetheless, I have tried to

explain a general overview of this century clothing.

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Works cited

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