FASHION'S CONSERVATIVE THREAD

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From the Emperor's New Clothes to the Eighties' Plain Clothes Man

HANS HOLBEIN THE YOUNGER: "PORTRAIT OF HENRY VIII," GALLERIA NAZIONALE, ROME

"It was publicly acknowledged that intrinsic excellence resided in high rank, and that those of low degree were lesser men. Thus if a man were born a king, he could only feel correctly dressed by appearing in cloth of gold and rows of pearls."

By ANNE HOLLANDER

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The dominance of conservative dressing as a sign of male elegance seems to have initially emerged during the Renaissance. Before then, throughout the Middle Ages, varieties of sumptuousness set the tone for the fashionable man, and plain simplicity cloaked only the priesthood and the poor. Most of that time it was publicly acknowledged that intrinsic excellence resided in high rank, and that those of low degree were lesser men. Thus, if a man were born a king, he could only feel correctly dressed by appearing publicly in cloth of gold and rows of pearls, and if he were born a knight, in suitably fewer rows of pearls and mere silk fabric. Clothed appearance didn't reflect personal taste so much as conformity to a generally recognized sense of hierarchy.

Such a simple sartorial system is continually effective so long as everyone believes that society's ranks are fixed by God and that rulers are better than other people by divine right. But in a climate of social upheaval, all that goes by the board. The power of kings and dukes is seriously questioned when ambitious merchants and clever bankers can personally amass more money than royal treasuries and thus dress more sumptuously than monarchs whenever they choose. Gaudy attire immediately begins to seem like a suspicious, subversive, vain and pushy habit.

For an upwardly mobile middle class, as well as an emergent intellectual and professional class, clothes are understood to reveal not ordained rank but the force of individuality and a sense of personal worth. Gaudy dressing starts to resemble boasting or wishful thinking, suddenly seeming like a revelation of weakness or a form of social outrage. If personal superiority is to be effectively suggested by one's choice of clothes, a superior brand of virtuous modesty is an appropriate component in the outfit.

BRONZINO: "PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG MAN," THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, N.Y.C.

"'Black is more pleasing . . . than any other color; and if not black, then at least some color on the dark side. . . . observes a certain modest elegance, yet not in a feminine or vain fashion.' And there you have the formula for success."

Not only the great merchants but other men of sagacity and talent who gained personal power and influence during the Renaissance, such as Machiavelli, set a new standard for sober gentlemanly appearance based on that ideal, and we still adhere to it. At the time, rulers themselves quickly caught on. Such 16th-century Spanish sovereigns as Emperor Charles V and King Philip II wore simple and somber black, emphasizing their distinctive royal remoteness from the playful glitter of courtly display. Ruling France on her own toward the end of that century, Catherine de Medici also adopted black, with official mourning as an excuse, but perhaps to imitate the new emblem of masculine power as well.

It became increasingly chic for a gentleman to be austerely clad. Bronzino's portraits from the middle of the 16th century reflect how a man's starkly elegant attire could be wondrously set off by a riot of colored silk drapery flowing behind him instead of on him, as if he scorned wearing it. This flattering style of portraiture had a long life, persisting well into the 19th century, when male austerity was at its most conventional.

"The Book of the Courtier," written in the early 16th century by Baldessare Castiglione of the court of Urbino, describes the period's ideal gentleman. About clothes he said, "I prefer them always to tend a little more toward the grave and sober rather than the foppish. Hence I think that black is more pleasing . . . than any other color; and if not black, then at least some color on the dark side. . . . I wish our courtier to observe a certain modest elegance, yet not in a feminine or vain fashion. He ought to consider what manner of man he wishes to be taken for, and dress accordingly." And there you have the formula for success, already discovered by 1514. Polonius simply repeats the idea: "rich but not gaudy, for the apparel oft proclaims the man."

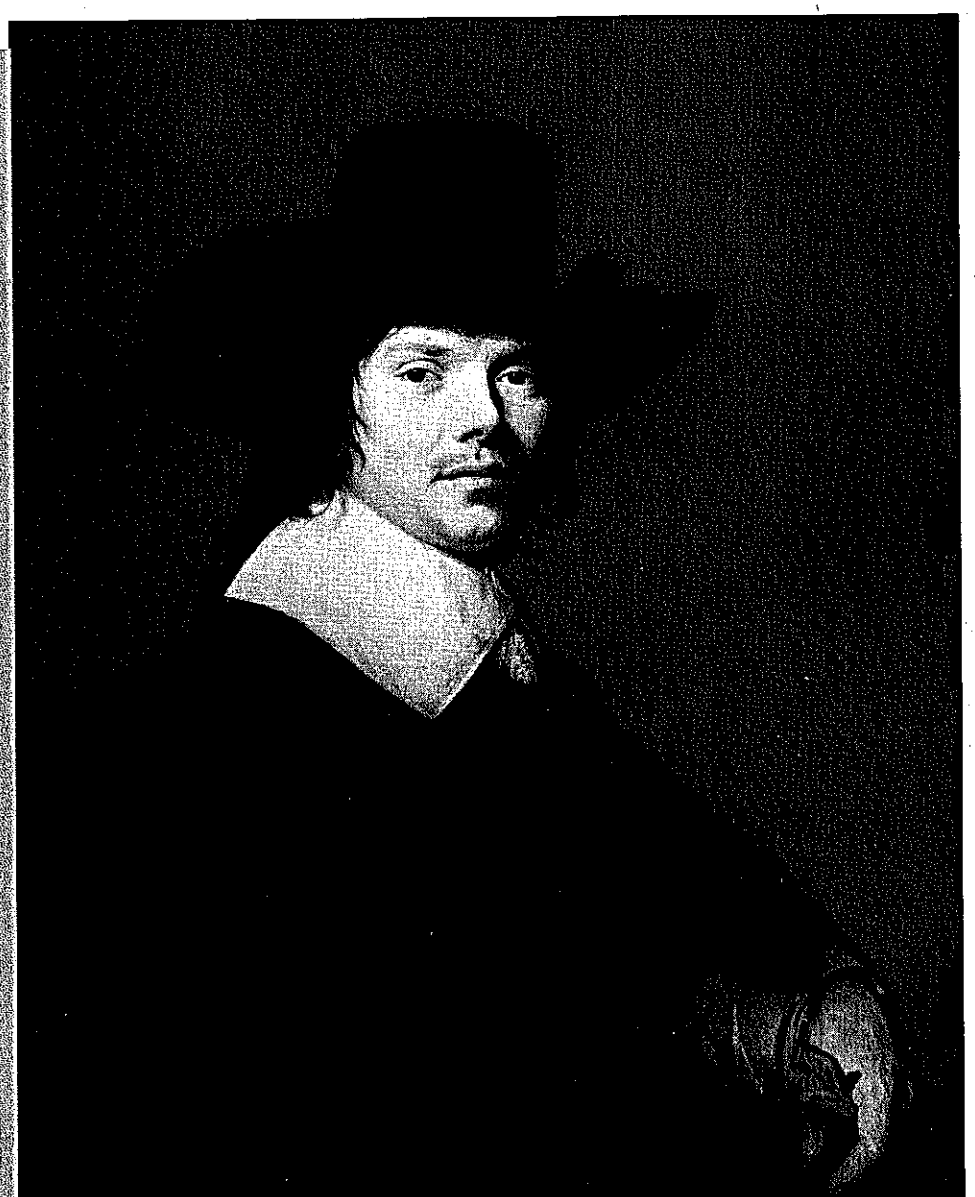
Castiglione praised Spanish austerity in gentlemanly dress, a strong influence in all 16th-century European clothes. The somber Spanish style had a tricky religious flavor, enabling gentlemen to suggest their affinities with monastic self-denial, as well as the clergy's vast psychological and practical power. The dark and attractively ambiguous Spanish model took hold most enduringly among the Dutch Republic's solid citizens in the 17th century. A century and a half after its inception, these men garbed in deep brown and black with brilliant white linen around the neck again confirmed the standard for conservative male elegance. Dutch paintings show that while fruit and flowers might be vividly colored and shaped, the Syndics of the Drapers' Guild must appear in somber shades and uniforms.

The new Puritanical ideals of correct dress in 17th-century Protestant Holland and England obviously rhymed well with much older Catholic views of austerity, despite the bitter religious strife that had split Europe since the Reformation. The high status of modern American and British conservatism in male dressing dates back to that stern but worldly ideal for clothes. It was partly derived from a Protestant sense of mercantile-plus-moral power and partly the result of a new sense of the attraction of military costume, which had been ubiquitous during Europe's Thirty Years' War and England's Civil War. These simple, practical, loosely cut garments of leather and wool—with big pockets and useful buttons, worn with boots, a felt hat, sash, sword and a plain collar—began to appear more attractive and virile than tight velvet doublets trimmed with embroidery. The resultant Baroque mode contrived to be both dashing and restrained, a heady mixture of military swagger and clerical simplicity. The positive meanings of uniformity and conformity were initially demonstrated in the style of this period. The uniforms of Puritan soldiers and Catholic ascetics could successfully blend into a fresh form of compelling image for a free, powerful and rich citizen, whose clothes nevertheless expressed deep respect for the rule of law, the spirit of control and the principle of order.

But it concluded when Louis XIV took over France. Dur- ▶

ing the second half of the 17th century, he turned France into the center of European power, and thus had the ability to impose a sumptuous, formal and ornate style of masculine dress, not only on his own court but on all of Europe. Gentlemen's clothes soon flowered in many knots of satin ribbon, their shoes grew huge jeweled buckles, heads sprouted towering wigs cascading with curls. Brocade and velvet returned, while lace frothed again at wrists and chins. Louis swiftly revitalized his land's economy by officially fostering all the native French crafts and luxury industries, demanding the highest standards of excellence and taste from the makers of lace and silk, as well as of porcelain and furniture, and requiring his courtiers to support them by ordering ever more luxurious adornments for themselves, their women and their homes. The *noblesse* of all Europe envied the glory of Versailles and imitated it as best they could. It was no longer at all chic to be plainly dressed.

Once again it didn't last long. During and after the French Revolution, French male attire veered crazily in various directions, with stylistic anarchy reigning for a period. Napoleon's defeat, however, reinstated the old principle of elegant simplicity for gentlemen. This time, the influence naturally came from the victors, the English aristocracy. British gentlemen, following the venerable customs of their old allies, the Dutch, had, in fact, been quietly refining their own version of plain clothes for some time, riding around their country estates, as well as hunting and shooting, in rough coats and boots. Austrian or Italian dukes might have slavishly copied French court fripperies, but English dukes tended to keep things simple, remaining in the country as much as possible. Their style of plain sporting costume had already acquired a certain vogue in France well before the Revolution; now, the element of countrified ease was added to the ideal image of gentlemanly restraint in dress. Napoleon himself took to the field in an unadorned greatcoat and cocked hat to lead his brilliantly caparisoned troops to glory. He knew how to emphasize his personal superiority, not only against the ranks of soldiers but in contrast to the tyrannous rule of lace-trimmed Bourbon kings.



JOHANNES CORNELISZ VERSPRONCK: "PORTRAIT OF A MAN," THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, N.Y.C.

"The Dutch Republic's solid citizens in the 17th century garbed in deep brown and black with brilliant white linen around the neck again confirmed the standard for conservative male elegance a century and a half after its inception."

After 1800, the English form of elegance assumed the lead in European male fashion under the influence of the famous Beau Brummell. Correct dress for gentlemen once again was based on restraint in color, trim and texture, but becoming most important were the details of cut and fit. During this period, the art of tailoring reached a peak of perfection never surpassed, a standard on

which modern tailoring is based. It was then that collars began to curve perfectly around necks and over shoulders, while lapels opened out, bent back smoothly and then lay flat against the chest. Coats molded and skimmed the body suavely without a wrinkle, buttoning without strain. Cut in many curved pieces, deftly stitched and subtly padded, then steamed into shape, suits of fine wool became the masterpieces of cloth sculpture they still remain.

Seamsters had worked for centuries in silk and velvet, dressing courtiers who observed strict rules of deportment. Such suits had rather stiff basic shapes; their fit was less noticeable than their surface texture and embellishments. Portraits from the 18th century often depict a man's waistcoat buttons forming bumpy wrinkles, the coat looking strained at the armholes or swinging out awkwardly at the hem. The new post-Revolutionary mode for neat, plain wool made fit of utmost importance. Moreover, these avant-garde clothes were meant to be worn neither at court nor in a rough, country ambience but in refined urban society, bearing the gracefully controlled, easy nonchalance demanded by the new dandy style. Clarity of line and a smooth harmony of shape were necessary to keep these unadorned wool garments from appearing dowdy; tailors were challenged to display what cut alone could accomplish. Their craft was an ancient one, and talented, well-trained practitioners rose creatively to the occasion. The simple, perfect form they imparted to masculine elegance in the early 19th century still survives in the men's clothes we today hold in the highest esteem.

The persistence of conservatism in modern male fashion is a rightful tribute to that great tailoring tradition. In the technologically advanced 20th century, we honor skilled handwork—in fact, even fine machine work imitating it. The appeal of modern conservative dressing isn't just its simplicity, restraint and uniformity, reflecting all the previously described attractive suggestions of self-control and dignified modest authority, leavened with a touch of Napoleonic aggressiveness. Every seam of conservative dressing also bears the mark of a great sartorial achievement, for which the English tailors who invented and developed it became world-famous, sought after by kings and bankers, merchants and chiefs alike. The mass-produced standardization of men's traditional attire has been specifically geared to resist crass innovation, emphasizing the same steady refinement of original shapes that characterized development of exquisite hand-tailoring in the 19th century. The man's conservative suit is a technical and imaginative triumph of civilized life—a minor one, no doubt, yet the respect it still commands is well merited, and won't soon subside. GQ

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J.A.D. INGRES, "PORTRAIT OF M. DE NOGENT," FOGG ART MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

"British gentlemen had been quietly refining their own version of plain clothes for some time, riding around their country estates in rough coats and boots."

JOSHUA REYNOLDS, "THE HONORABLE HENRY FANE WITH HIS GUARDIANS, INIGO JONES AND CHARLES BLAIR" (DETAIL), THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, N.Y.C.

"The mass-produced standardization of men's traditional attire has been geared to resist crass innovation. The conservative suit is a technical and imaginative triumph of civilized life, and the respect it commands is well merited and won't soon subside."

SECRETARY OF STATE ALEXANDER HAIG (WITH PORTRAIT OF JAMES MADISON), WIDE WORLD PHOTOS