

# SUITS YOU

---

1 It is now theorised that Alexander wore an ancient version of Kevlar as his armour. Specialists at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay have reconstructed Linthorax – laminated layers of linen, which Plutarch describes Alexander wearing at the battle of Gaugamela in 331 BCE, and which may be depicted in the famous 'Alexander' mosaic recovered from Pompeii.

It is recorded of Alexander the Great, that in his Indian expedition he buried several suits of armour, which by his directions were made much too big for any of his soldiers, in order to give posterity an extraordinary idea of him, and make them believe he had commanded an army of giants.<sup>1</sup>

R. BRIMLEY JOHNSON, *MANNERS MAKETH MAN*, 1932

## SUIT PSYCHOLOGY

Perhaps the ultimate elite suit – or set – of clothes is the suit of armour. Designed to accentuate the physique of the wearer to make him appear more impressive and powerful, as well as to offer protection, it retains its ability to command attention even when standing as an empty sentinel in stately homes and museum collections. While they are very different in appearance, the fabric suits of civilians are still a kind of carapace, designed to present the wearer and their body in a specific way.

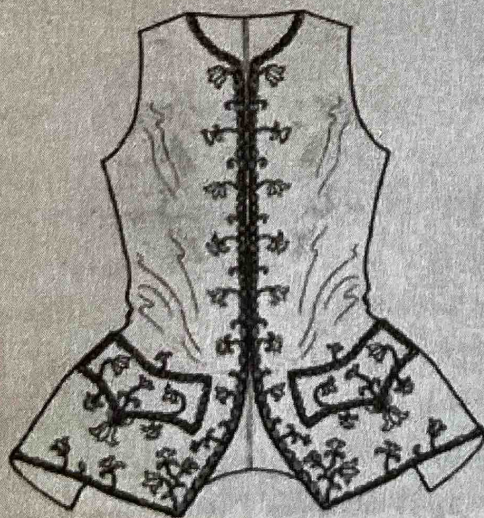
In fashion terms, a suit is two or more garments of the same or contrasting fabric, designed to be worn together. For European men of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries this meant a doublet and hose, or doublet and breeches, but for eighteenth-century Scotsmen it meant a jacket and trews. For women, the suit was a bodice and skirt 'habit' for riding. The suit's evolution – with or without the addition of a waistcoat – is interwoven with the history of Westernisation. The suit still represents status; it can be a statement of individuality or, more often, of conformity. It is no exaggeration to call the suit an act



of social engineering - a quasi-conscious manipulation of human behaviour through clothing - that is still very much part of the modern wardrobe.

### PEACOCKING

Previous eras had seen complete outfits composed of matching or complementary components, but the suit reached a form recognisable to modern eyes in the eighteenth century. It was mostly a three-piece ensemble - jacket, waistcoat and breeches - in a range of fabrics and colours. Suits for professional wear were usually of wool or blends of wool, silk and linen. Their colours were relatively sombre, their buttons somewhat subdued. Suits for showing off at social events were inevitably of silk, glimmering with embroidery and embellishments. Some royals took such decoration to extremes - in July 1791 George, Prince Regent to King George III, was dressed to celebrate his father's birthday. The *St James's Chronicle* described his suit of rich-coloured striped silk with a waistcoat embroidered with silks, silver and semi-precious stones. The coat and waistcoat were covered in spangles and had diamond buttons to match the ones on his breeches. According to the *Chronicle*, it formed a most magnificent appearance.



*Eighteenth-century elite suits boasted beautifully embroidered waistcoats in very pretty colours.*



Prince George was a peacock, and a plump one at that, but he was not unique in presenting his wealth and position by means of his suit. The royal courts of Europe were all places of extraordinary display. Silk took up dye like no other material, reflecting light and acting as a glossy background for dazzling, multicoloured embellishments. Suits might shine with medallions, spangles, pearls as big as peas, jewels, silver thread, glass, gold foil and silk ribbon embroidery. Such was the cost of the haberdashery, let alone the fabric, that metal threads from suits were sometimes unpicked and recycled. This was known as *drizzling* or *parfilage*, and was considered a pretty pastime for leisured ladies. However, theatre-goers were not safe from the drizzling tools of unscrupulous gold-collectors out to add to their collection - the gold could be recovered from textiles through burning, then sold for reuse.



A suit from the 1740s with a skirted jacket, deep cuffs and breeches - perfect for the elite Georgian gentleman.



Surviving suits from the eighteenth century are testament to a superb standard of embroidery at the time, both professional and domestic. Classical motifs and *chinoiserie* were popular, but it was flowers that bloomed on most men's suits of this era, in sprigs, bouquets, vines and cascades.<sup>2</sup> When taken to extremes, a man might be accused of excess or bad taste, but pastel fabrics or flowered embellishments would not invite charges of effeminacy. Suits gloried in colour and in the stylised beauty of the natural world.

Like the plumage of real peacocks, part of the lavish suit's function was to intimidate other males and attract females on the lookout for a wealthy mate. Of course there was always the danger of not looking beyond the suit to see the character of the man beneath: 'Good Heav'n! To what an ebb of taste are women fallen, that it should be in the power of a laced coat to recommend a gallant to them!' cries a young man in Richard Sheridan's 1813 play *A Trip to Scarborough*.

All this excess is undoubtedly alien to most modern suits. While there was a slight trend for embellished female suits in the 1980s, this was a *faux luxe*, often with hasty machine embroidery and plastic sequins. True suit exuberance, eighteenth-century-style, survives now only in the theatrical splendour of the Spanish bull-fighters *traje de luces* - suit of light - or perhaps in the encrusted suits of London's famous Pearly Kings and Queens.

Such splendour came at a price. During the French Revolution of the 1790s some aristocrats paid for their extravagant ways with their life. Court clothes, which had kept thousands of French silk merchants, weavers and embroiderers in trade, became symbolic of privileged decadence and disloyalty to the new regime. In these turbulent years of political upheaval some canny men kept a set of court suits *and* a set of more sober revolutionary costumes so that they could dress to tally with the prevalent political mood. The revolution was a sobering influence on suits and was partly responsible for the muted styles and colours worn by the modern male.

2 *Chinoiserie* is the fashionable use of Chinese and pseudo-Oriental motifs in objets d'art, fabric, furniture and even architecture.



## THE NEW SIMPLICITY

Contemporary with unrest in France was a shift in the way gentlemen showed superiority of birth and breeding. Ironically the icon of this shift was not an aristocrat, but the uncommon commoner George 'Beau' Brummell, whose name should by now be familiar. When he inherited his fortune in 1799, he set about spending it not on spangles or silks, but on plain-seeming suits of superfine wool. Superfine suits have a longer, smoother nap than broadcloth, which is a plain-weave wool with a light nap. With his athletic figure, exquisite taste and strong character, Brummell became synonymous with the new vogue for subdued suits.



*George 'Beau' Brummell in the suit style that he made famous.*

For a while the Prince Regent - admiring Brummell - aspired to dress with as much quality and restraint. Dark coats of green or blue were eased onto his considerable frame over comparatively plain, short waistcoats and set off by buff-coloured pantaloons. Ostentation and extremes of fashion were now considered vulgar. Brummell was reported to say, 'If John Bull turns around to look after you, you are not well dressed; but either too stiff, too tight, or too fashionable.' John Bull here signifies the stereotypical bluff Englishman. The fashion for apparent simplicity carried its own superciliousness, of course,



and Brummell sneered at those he considered badly dressed. One gentleman found himself under scrutiny and demanded to know, 'Is there anything the matter with my coat?' 'For heaven's sake my dear fellow,' sneered Brummell, 'don't misapply names so abominably! It is no more like a coat than it is to a cauliflower - if it is, I'll be damned!'

At this time the coat in question was a *tail coat*, a form of jacket with long tails. These tails were vestiges of the excessively wide, stiff coat skirts of the seventeenth- and earlier eighteenth-century male coats. Coat tails, if worn correctly, were not divided when sitting down, but flipped up behind. A style known as the *spencer jacket* was also popular with both men and women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It reached just below the shoulder blades in length and was neatly tailored, fitted and fastened. It was said to have originated with the 2nd Earl Spencer, who burnt his coat tails while warming himself by the fire. According to the story - quite possibly apocryphal - he pragmatically ordered his valet to neaten the ends, and so the fashion was born.

### MADE TO MEASURE

Ideally a suit would be built around a straight, strong figure. A good fit could show off a physique honed by riding, boxing or perhaps fencing. However, not all gentlemen were so energetic. For less magnificent figures the tailor had techniques of cut to hide any defects, and to show the figure to best advantage. If a less-than-athletic gentleman seemed to cut a fine figure in his suit, it was really the underpaid (if *ever* paid) tailors who deserved the credit.

Tailoring was a respected but often poorly paid profession, mostly associated with men. By the eighteenth century London's West End tailors had gained a reputation for world-class quality, a reputation that is still alive today. Tailors gained customers by word-of-mouth recommendation. Occasionally their names can be found on paper or parchment labels hidden in a yoke-lining



3 Frogs or frogging are decorative additions of braid, often in a military style, that loop around buttons as a fastening.

or back pleat of the suit jacket. Suit labelling today still tends to be discreet - in contrast to the modern fad of blazoning a designer name prominently on leisure wear.

The best tailors were famed for their sense of self-worth. In a *Punch* magazine cartoon of 1863 a rotund bewhiskered gent in a loose, wrinkled suit is being measured at a West End tailor's. This new customer begins to say, 'I've had my clothes from -' The tailor interrupts him, 'Clothes! Jus' so, Sir! He! He! We may concede you to be Clothed, Sir! But we re'lly can't call you Dressed; we can't, indeed!'

A first-class tailor mastered all the skills of cut, fit and finish. There were many different systems of cutting, and the best of these were shared in tailoring journals. Victorian gentlemen were measured for their suits with a humble yet crucial innovation - the standard inch tape. The measuring tape was said to have been invented by a tailor named George Atkinson, inspired by seeing a scale of inches used in foot measurements. In the right hands, the tape ensured that a suit would be a perfect fit.

English lawyer and world traveller William Hickey described a 1799 outfitting:

I went to a tailor named Knill, to whom I had been recommended as a fit person to equip me *comme il faut*. He advised my having a dark green with gold binding, dark brown with the same, a plain blue and, for half dress, a Bon de Paris with gold frogs,<sup>3</sup> all of which he spoke as being much worn and of the highest *ton*. I bespoke the four suits accordingly.

A fictional fop of 1772, featured in an article in the *Ladies' Magazine*, was far less impressed with his tailor. His diary entry reads:

Mr Casaque came to try on my pea green suit. Memo: sleeves too wide, pockets too high, skirts too long, and most frightfully made altogether: shall not pay his bill these two years by way of punishing him.



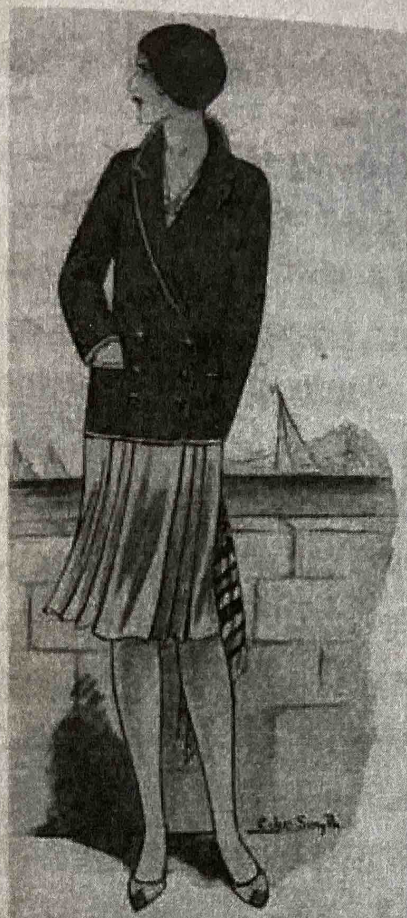
## PADDING, PINCHING, DARTING, STUFFING

As fashions changed or as the wearer changed shape, a suit could be altered. Eighteenth-century tailors could 'take out a fish' in order to improve fit. This meant adding darts, a technique of cutting out a narrow triangle of fabric, then stitching the edges together. Wrinkles were always a concern. One gentleman confessed, 'I have imbibed strong prejudices against wrinkles even in my coat for fear they may next invade my face.' The early nineteenth century saw the introduction of a waist seam onto the skirted coat - called the *frock coat* - which avoided many fabric wrinkles at least.



A frock coat dating from 1915.





*A double-breasted jacket and loosely pleated skirt suit from 1929.*

Fashions in female suits changed far more dramatically than the male suit, which tended to have minor shifts in cut, colour and detailing. Suits accorded with the currently fashionable silhouette in much the same way as dresses. They were often of fluid, knitted fabrics in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly the easy-fitting knitted wool or rayon jersey made popular by Gabriel 'Coco' Chanel from the First World War onwards. Forties' suits suffered from wartime clothing constraints (more on that shortly), while suits of the Fifties seemed to upholster women rather than allowing them freedom of movement - something that came in the Sixties.

Tailoresses - the now-outmoded term for female tailors - are often overlooked in histories of costume, but they were quietly present throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their skills were unquestionable, even if unlauded. In the tailoring trade they were noted for their abilities in handling expensive fabrics, in moulding the canvas structures of complex suits and in exquisite hand-finishing. While there were few



famous tailoresses, men in the tailoring business knew a good thing when they saw one - in the 1950s royal couturier Hardy Amies approached a tailoress working at a rival fashion house. 'Did you make what you're wearing?' he asked. When she replied that she had, he offered to hire her on the spot. For the record, Amies' offer was declined, and the tailoress eventually became a hand-finisher with a Savile Row tailor.



*Bold design details and a loose fit - an almost unisex look from 1971.*

As we've already seen in an earlier chapter, there was great ambivalence over women wearing trousers before the later twentieth century. Therefore trouser suits were rarely seen before the 1960s. Gabrielle Chanel offered a black sequined trouser suit for her 1937 collection, but it wasn't until Yves Saint Laurent famously designed a female tuxedo suit in 1966 that the world of couture began to take trouser suits seriously. Barbara Hulanicki, under her *Biba* label, specialised in trouser suits cut from comfortable synthetic jersey; Ossie Clark subverted the strict lines of tailoring with flower-power



flowing lines and Celia Birtwell prints. It took the cracking of the 'glass ceiling' in the world of work during the 1970s and 1980s, and the notion of *power-dressing*, to give the female suit full focus as a corporate 'look'. The 1980s work suit was often in bold colours with strong shoulders, the overall cut boxy.

As for men, we now turn back in time once more to see how their suits underwent a quiet but definite revolution during Queen Victoria's reign, resulting in the generic off-the-peg two-piece *lounge suit* of the modern man.

### PROPERLY SMART

The story of the lounge suit is inextricably bound up with the gradual easing of class hierarchies. By the nineteenth century the suit had become a signifier of aspiration, as well as a sign of established status. Wearing a suit was essential if one wanted to be considered respectable, and respectability was now an aspiration of working-class people too. However worn and grubby a labouring man's working suit of wool or corduroy might be, he would always have a better-quality Sunday Best suit, even if it meant swapping it for a ticket at the pawnbroker's during the working week. With the advent of affordable photography, even poorer men began to pay for studio portraits of themselves with all the accoutrements of a gentleman on display.

There was a tremendous social anxiety among working- and middle-class people about not being 'properly' dressed. The tailoring trade also put pressure on professional men to keep distinguished from those in 'trade'. Even in a limited palette of colours and styles, the suit could still speak volumes about the class and bank balance of the wearer. As the Industrial Revolution mechanised trade, so tailoring was often fragmented into unskilled sweatshop piece-work. This mass-production of suits satisfied a growing demand from the middle- and working classes, keen to dress above their allotted station.

Profiting from the proven commercial success of nine-



teenth-century mass-production methods, new department stores of the twentieth century offered 'off-the-peg' suits, and while claiming to maintain quality. Marks & Spencer were able to lower prices the requisites for one-off occasions - as they still do. It was all encouraging to the aspirational male, if depressing to the skilled tailor. Local tailors, tailoresses and dressmakers were once the staple of every small or middling town - but industrialisation and globalisation have almost wiped out such businesses, leaving only a few modern alterations shops in their passing.

However, even as lower classes dressed 'upwards', there was a new taste for informality trickling down...

If one suit jacket represents elite men of Queen Victoria's reign, it is the frock coat. In dark hues with long skirts and silk-faced revers (lapels), the frock coat exuded dignity, confidence and Establishment. It also had strong links with professional men, as we'll see presently. The frock coat had battled for dominance with the tail coat at the start of the nineteenth century, winning the fight from the 1830s, after which it reigned supreme for elite men for at least another sixty years.



*A typical morning coat.*