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MEN'S CIVILIAN CLOTHING- #205

THE CUT OF THE COAT

"Having now reached its maximum fullness, from c.1745 until the end of the century the coat was gradually and gracefully to subside. The side seams, which were under the arms slightly towards the back while the coat was full, began to move further in to the centre back, and the shoulder-seam also dropped back. The fullness of the side pleats was reduced, the fronts straightened and then curved towards the sides. A narrow standing collar appeared c. 1760. The sleeves diminished in width but grew longer. By 1770 the narrow back (which by then had lost the extra centre back pleats) the fewer and shallower side pleats, the sloping front edges, the high standing collar and the long sight [sic] sleeves with small fitting cuff. All contributed to produce the fashionable slender tilhouette [sic]." [Waugh p.52-53]

"As well as these fashionable coats there were also simpler and more practical ones, made in cloth [wool] for outdoor wear. The country coat, while following the fashionable silhouette, was looser and simpler in cut. Single- or double-breasted, with a turned-down collar, it could be buttoned up for protection against inclement weather. This type of coat was called a frock and was increasingly worn from 1730 when the dress coat became so extravagant." [Waugh p.53]

"All eighteenth-century coats have the top of the centre back vents, side pleatings of the skirts and the pocket line on the same level round the body (this varies a little in height); the seams of the coat are stitched down to this level. The front and back side fullness, when pleated, is firmly stitched together inside at the top and then only caught at the bottom where there is often a button. The narrower and longer skirts of the 1780's and 90's are caught in several places. The necks of the early collarless coats are usually finished with a half-inch band tapering off to nothing. The fit on the shoulders and round the armholes is awkward to a modern eye as there is rarely any padding or interlining unless some physical defect has to be disguised." [Waugh p.57]

All eighteenth century coats have the full length of the centre front edges and centre back skirts strengthened with a firm strip of linen, or buckram, about four inches wide. A small piece of firm linen, sometimes backed with paper, is attached to the top of the side pleats and top of the back slits. Until c. 1760 the very full coats have the front skirts, from the pockets down, interlined with linen or buckram, which is often covered with a thin layer of teased-out horsehair. The pleats of this coat are also interlined with a thin woolen material or teased-out wool fibres–this is lightly caught to the silk lining (there is no other interlining)." [Waugh p.57]

"In the second half of the century interlining in the skirts and pleats is very rare.

"All coats, except great-coats, are lined, usually with silk. In cloth coats all edges are cut and left raw." [Waugh p.57]

THE CUT OF THE BREECHES

"Rolled stockings were the fade-out of the old boot hose. The wide tops gradually shrank and became cuffs which fitted over the knee, a fashion which lingered on until the 1740's. The breeches were almost hidden under the long coat, waistcoat and rolled stockings so that they were cut more for comfort than fit. From the second half of the century, with the front of the coat cut away and the shorter waistcoat, much more of the breeches were shown, and consequently they became more fitted to the thigh and over the knee; c. 1770 for undress wear bunches of laces often replaced the knee buckle. From c. 1750 also the centre front fly was replaced by 'falls'–a flap opening. Backs were still cut full." [Waugh p.55]

For the working classes in England and the colonies, leather breeches seem to have been common. Buck [p.148] quotes a 1781 letter from rural England as mentioning them. Wardrobe inventories in rural Pennsylvania [Gehret p. 127] and North Carolina [Wash. Co. Will Book], indicate that leather breeches were fairly common items in those areas as well.

WAISTCOATS

Waistcoats became shorter and less full during the eighteenth century, at the same time as the coats. Waistcoats could be either sleeved (sometimes also called a jacket) or sleeveless.

It should be noted that unless the man was laboring in extremely hot conditions, a waistcoat was almost always worn while working. In many cases, a coat was worn as well. There are numerous paintings and drawings which illustrate this, both immediately before and after the Revolutionary War period. Paul Sandby's figures in "The Cries of London" series c. 1759 all wear waistcoats and most wear coats, no matter how tattered and worn the clothing. The workmen illustrated in Diderot's Encyclopedia are also good examples of this. Most wear waistcoats and many wear coats. The only men shown with only shirt and breeches are blowing glass, working in bakeries, etc. They are depicted on the job in a shop or factory and not in the presence of women. In Pyne's British Costumes, even the slaughterman and coal heaver are shown wearing waistcoats. Ellen Gehret [p.157] refers to a series of drawings done in the early 19th century depicting workingmen in Southeastern Pennsylvania. Again, the men are wearing waistcoats or jackets. In the Will Book from Washington County, NC, all of the men owned a jacket (waistcoat), along with at least one coat. Hunting shirts were much less frequently owned than were jackets and coats.

HEAD COVERING

The majority of the workers in Diderot's Encyclopedia are wearing a head covering, whether it be a cocked hat, round or flop hat, knit hat, or close-fitting skull cap. This skull cap

appears to be similar to the design worn by men while not wearing their wigs. Illustrations in other sources confirm the wearing of a head covering at all levels of society.

Since the wearing of wigs was a sign of social level, even some laborers wore cheap wigs, although most wore their own hair. [de Marly p. 52]

NECK WEAR

Most of the working men in drawings and paintings by Sandby and Pyne, as well as others shown in deMarly and Buck, wear a neck cloth of some type.They are plain, spotted, or colored and may be worn tight around the neck over or under a buttoned shirt collar, or loosely over or under an unbuttoned collar. Buck (p.138-139) and Gehret [p. 154] agree on the fact that the working man nearly always wore a neck cloth.

RURAL VS URBAN DRESS AND INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL CLASS

In urban areas of England, the main difference between servants and their masters was the elegance of the material, rather than the cut of the clothes. This is seen in paintings of servants in very stylish garments. Travelers commented upon this aspect of English culture. On his way to service in the American War, an officer in von Specht's Regiment from Brunswick visited Portsmouth, England in 1776. His comments on women include the following: "All wear long dresses; the lowliest serving maid sweeps the street in a long dress and a kind of head dress and sunbonnet, and goes to market in a red coat. Fashionable dress is so general that one can only distinguish the better class of women by the beauty of their clothing and the size of their hats." [Diary p. 330; see also de Marly p.72, Buck p.531]. While he did not comment on men's dress, the same rule probably applies. De Marly feels that within about a 100 mile radius of a large town like London, the latest styles began to penetrate fairly quickly, [p.72].

In rural districts, fashion, especially among the lower classes, lagged far behind. Photographs of 19th century working dress from isolated areas look remarkably like 18thg century paintings and drawings from the same location. It might be reasonable to assume that in such areas, fashion might be up to 50 years behind.

Servants were sometimes provided with articles of clothing by their masters and mistresses [Cunnington p.40-42]. Thus, the upper class of servants in town might have clothing of relatively nice material. The working poor would have whatever was least expensive. In rural areas, fabric of local manufacture would dominate, followed by reasonably priced goods brought in by merchants and itinerant traders.

FABRIC

Since the cut of the coat varied little between rich and poor, it was the fabric and decoration that differed. Existing museum pieces are nearly always the dressiest clothes of the upper class. Determining the proper material for working class garments must be based on the fabric available to the person in the 18th century at reasonable cost. Records of locally produced flax, cotton or sheep would indicate the possibility of wearing linen, cotton, or wool. In addition, local records could be checked to see what was brought in by traders, held in merchants' inventories, mentioned in wills and estate inventories, etc. In urban areas with good shipping, such as London, India cottons and other imported fabrics were easy to obtain. The same could not be said for more isolated areas in England or America.

The Will Book for Washington County, NC records garments in many of the household inventories. The type of fabric is indicated for about half of the garments, which include suits of clothes, jackets, coats, breeches, shirts, gowns, and petticoats. Materials are mentioned with the following frequency:

Various kinds of wool-14 (cloth, broaddoth, sagathy, stuff, etc.)
Linen–12
Cotton–7
Leather–6 (5 pair breeches, 1 hunting shirt)
Velvet–3
Silk–2
Virginia cloth–2
Calico–1 (gown)

When the Will Book is silent about the fabric, we can only conjecture. It would seem reasonable, however, to assume that the ratio was approximately the same as that listed above. Washington County was part of the Watauga Settlements on the North Carolina frontier, so this ratio might also be acceptable for any southern frontier areas.

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