Dressed for Transport: Men and Women on the Move
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The history of costume has been influenced in many ways by what people needed to wear in order to move about. The development of trousers, for example, is thought to have evolved from the need to protect the legs when riding horseback. One explanation for the seemingly arbitrary buttoning of men’s coats left over right—the opposite of women’s—has been offered by Helmut Nickel, the former Curator of Arms and Armor at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who has suggested that the Scythian warriors on horseback held their bows in the left hand and pulled the string across from left to right with the right hand. The bowstring draw might have been impeded had the coat been lapped right over left. Necessity in costume quickly becomes an element of status, then the accepted, then the appropriate (with gender roles defined), and finally, especially in men’s costume, simply “the way things are done.” For example, the cuff buttons of a modern man’s suit sleeve are the vestiges of the multiple buttons necessary to hold the wide cuff in place and out of the way in the late 17th and 18th centuries while, at the same time, providing a means of displaying wealth because buttons, often bejeweled and of precious metals, could be quite costly.

Regardless of the desire for display, a male prerogative until the 19th century, men’s clothing has historically been better accommodated for movement than women’s. Trousers allowed men to ride astride while the trailing skirted riding habits considered appropriate for women forced them to ride side saddle for centuries. Rigidly defined gender roles complicated dress, and, again, men were generally assigned clothing of greater practicality and durability. Even small decorative details defined men’s clothing from women’s. For example, the coat itself was only adapted for women’s fashionable dress in the late 18th century. Before that time only women’s riding habits had coats tailored as a man’s, or decorative trimming placed in the say way as was customary for a man. As mentioned earlier, by the 18th century accepted gender roles determined whether the coat buttoned left over right or right over left.

Historically the concept of practicality and durability in men’s costume has also been a function of the accepted fashion and sense of appropriateness. The construction of an 18th century coat, with its high and tight armscye, would be considered exceedingly restrictive today. Even the fit of a suit coat from the 1960s feels too tight compared to the less structured clothing of 1997. Just as the concept of appropriate apparel for the beach has changed markedly for both men and women, each mode of transportation has had a costume considered to be the proper thing to wear at a particular moment in fashion history. The Sartorial Art Journal, published in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by the Mitchell Company as a trade publication for merchant tailors, kept a close watch on propriety as well as fashion for the men who wore custom tailored suits. From season to season the well dressed gentleman might change the spacing of his buttons or the width of his lapel. Each July, for example, the latest yachting costumes were described and their pattern drafts explained in the most minute detail. Women could go to merchant tailors for riding habits and riding costumes because these featured tailored jackets, so illustrations and pattern drafts for a few items of women’s apparel can also be found, and give an interesting point of comparison with other kinds of women’s fashionable dress.

Today clothing for both men and women is remarkably less restrictive in both structure and propriety than any person living in the 18th or 19th century could have imagined. Technological change has made possible modes of transport and modes of apparel not dreamed of by our 19th century forebears. “Miracle” fibers first made apparel wrinkle free and easy to care for. Now newer fibers have made fabrics even lighter and more comfortable. Environmental awareness and recycling programs have given us “polar fleece” made from plastic pop bottles that is warmer and lighter still. The space program has given us Velcro. As standards of behavior relaxed and as lifestyles focused on leisure and comfort, fashion for men relaxed as well. Since Georgio Armani made an unstructured jacket for men, and Ralph Lauren made the late 20th century American version of English country style popular, the fashion industry has not looked back. Apparel for active sports has been adapted for multiple functions and is considered appropriate for a wide variety of occasions. Air conditioning has created mini comfort zones in almost all types of conveyances, eliminating the need for a specialized traveling wardrobe for warmth and protection from dirt and dust. As men and women have gained freedom from rigid gender roles, clothing has become more androgynous.
Bibliography


