SWORDS INTO PLOUGHSHARES

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
FIGURE 1. Ralph Lauren, Spencer suit, spring/summer 1990
The elements of military dress, with their genesis in function, have become the decorative lexicon of modern attire, although all performed as embellishment long after their first conscripted function. Epaulets once protected shoulder and arm and ball buttons could be used as shot in battle, and sabretaches anchored the saber and served as detachable pockets.
INTRODUCTION

In Stendhal’s novel of modern resolution, *The Red and the Black*, Julien Sorel is faced with choosing between the black cassock of the clergy and the valorous red of Napoleon’s soldiers. Sorel makes a rueful choice of the black, but his sartorial decision is the matrix of a very modern conflict between passion and the social order. The style of the military has enchanted the modern imagination. Despite the waste manifest in war, modern culture has realized its belligerent, aggressive style as an option tinged with sentiments of courage and honor: Stephen Crane’s paean to the warrior, *The Red Badge of Courage*, renders war as exceptional intensity and fervor: “Within him, as he hurled himself forward, was born a love, a despairing fondness for this flag which was near him. It was a creation of beauty and invulnerability.” War renders heroes; war tenders fortitude. Moreover, war offers a modern wardrobe the efficacy of virtue-infused, tested, sentimental, epic dress. Again and again, war’s fiery raiment has become a figure for modern apparel.

“Swords into Ploughshares” strives neither to bury nor to praise war; but one cannot ignore the impact of the military on modern clothing. Effectively, the military is more than a collective glory: it is the testing ground for the utility and accommodation of clothing that may be brought home into civilian service. The prophecy of Isaiah (2: 4), “They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more,” remains forestalled, but not the demonstrable striving in clothing.

The military origin of modern clothing is often neglected, in such instances as trenchcoats, navy blue or khaki, and the cummerbund, most contemporary wearers are probably not wholly mindful of the military matrix of their clothing selection, but such an obscure iconography does not displace the warrior as source. Instead, it suggests the complexity of clothing genealogy. Yet no contemporary wearer could be unaware of the trenchcoat’s aura of protection and its outfitting with many serviceable if dormant elements, or the ship-shape propriety of navy blue, or the exotic aura of the cummerbund and khaki. Does modern life require the shielding of arm and shoulder from saber slashes that occasioned the epaulet? The epaulet has become a detail and adornment of modern dress with its usefulness long defaulted but with an abiding connotation of self-confidence and etiquette. Memories of victory mingle with the pragmatism of war’s determination of declarative and defensive clothing, as such apparel is absorbed into modern dress. A legion of concepts from all branches of the military, tested by the quartermaster and proven in utility, have become standards of contemporary costume, including sailors’ pea jackets and bell-bottomed trousers, colorful sashes initially worn of necessity to serve asitters to carry the wounded off the field of battle, aviator glasses and bomber (A-2 aviator) jackets, braid—first as chest shield and subsequently decoration, olive drab, Eisenhower jackets, and camouflage, among many other items.

“Uniforms,” said Diana Vreeland, “are the sportswear of the nineteenth century.” Impeccable tailoring, with provision for strenuous body movement, rank, pomp, and identity, has made uniforms effective as dress. Today, many men and women wear the all-purpose trenchcoat in atrophied memory of its beginnings as an officer’s coat in the Boer War and ultimately in World War I.

Fashion critic Suzy Menkes recently has written in the *International Herald Tribune* (May 9, 1995), “Fashion wartime images are often uncomfortable and even unacceptable. There is something terrible and trivial about jackboots and neo-Nazi trenchcoats made ‘fashionable’ or Sam Brown belts as a ‘fun’ accessory.” Yet war’s presence is inexorable, impossible for the socially engaged art of fashion to ignore. Of course, uniforms can stand as signs of savagery and oppression. Is fashion playing dangerous and callous war games or fulfilling Isaiah’s vision of crafting fertile ploughshares from sharp swords?
FIGURE 4. American. Suit, ca. 1900
Among the civilian forces, none was more romantic than the Navy. Sailors have offered an assortment of adaptable clothes: drop-front and bell-bottomed pants, pea coats, and middy blouses. Even the color “navy” occupies its central position in modern dress from the mettle of the sailor.
The exposed facings of double-breasted closures evolved into applied trim not only in fashion but in some dress uniforms as well. From the eighteenth century onward, brass buttons came to be associated with the military. In Figure 12, the seed-shaped buttons suggest a double form of the silt button characteristic of Hussar uniforms.
FIGURE 8. American. Day dress, 1858
Braided tabs simulating the closures on eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century uniforms were popular for walking dresses and tailored outerwear in the nineteenth century. The epic of the civilian soldier was thus emulated on the home front.
FIGURE 10. French. Coat ensemble, 1902
FIGURE 11. Hippolyte Lecomte. “Garde du Corps du Roi, 1786”
Khaki, introduced by the British in India for its utility in a dusty, hot climate, has become more associated with the cool supremacy of the English officer than with its utilitarian matrix as an adaptation of indigenous dress.
FIGURE 15. Comme des Garçons. Tabard ensemble, fall/winter 1994–95
FIGURE 16. Sergeant, The Queen's Own Corps of Guides, Cavalry, ca. 1893
If the braid worn by Hussars and Zouaves began as a layer of protection to deflect sword blades, it quickly became a cipher of estimable decoration, implying both personal status and state service as it was absorbed into apparel ornament.
FIGURE 1. Ralph Lauren. Spencer suit, spring/summer 1990. Navy blue silk crepe with gold soutache braid. Courtesy Ralph Lauren

FIGURE 2. English. Riding coat, 1775. Brown goat’s hair-and-silk blend with pale blue silk satin. Mr. and Mrs. Alan S. Davis Gift Fund, 1976 (1976.147.2)


FIGURE 12. American. Coat, 1901-4. Natural colored silk pongee with red wool felt, black silk taffeta, soutache, and brass-button trim. Gift of Mrs. Earl Rowe, 1951 (CI 51.15.3ab)


FIGURE 15.
Comme des Garçons.
Tabard ensemble, fall/winter 1994–95.
Dark khaki milled wool.
Courtesy Comme des Garçons

FIGURE 16.
Sergeant, The Queen's Own Corps of Guides, Cavalry, ca. 1893.
Courtesy Dervis Historical Research, New York

FIGURE 17.
"Gardes d'Honneur, 3ème Régiment, 1814."
Gift of Mrs. Eva Rosencrans, 1967

FIGURE 18.
American. Suit, 1892.
Black wool serge with soutache trim.
Gift of Mrs. William R. Witherell, 1953
(Cl 53.72.9a-c)

FRONT COVER.
British Painter, Unknown.
Major Hubert Gillies, 1st Duke of York's Own Lancers (Skinner's Horse), ca. 1920.
Oil on canvas.
From the collection, CAVALRY ROAD, of Christopher Ross.
Photograph courtesy Konstantin

BACK COVER.
Red, blue, orange, and yellow "camouflage" printed cotton.
Gift of Michael Macko, 1991 (1991.35.1ab)

Battle yields some inevitable rewards in the cummerbund, epaulet, braid, and camouflage put to civilian use with an alacrity and a pacification that bespeaks clothing's significant aesthetic and social roles.

This publication has been issued in conjunction with the exhibition "Swords into Ploughshares" held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from September 7 to November 27, 1995.

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Printed in the United States of America

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Photographs by Karin Willis, The Photograph Studio, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, unless otherwise noted.
FIGURE 18. American. Suit, 1892