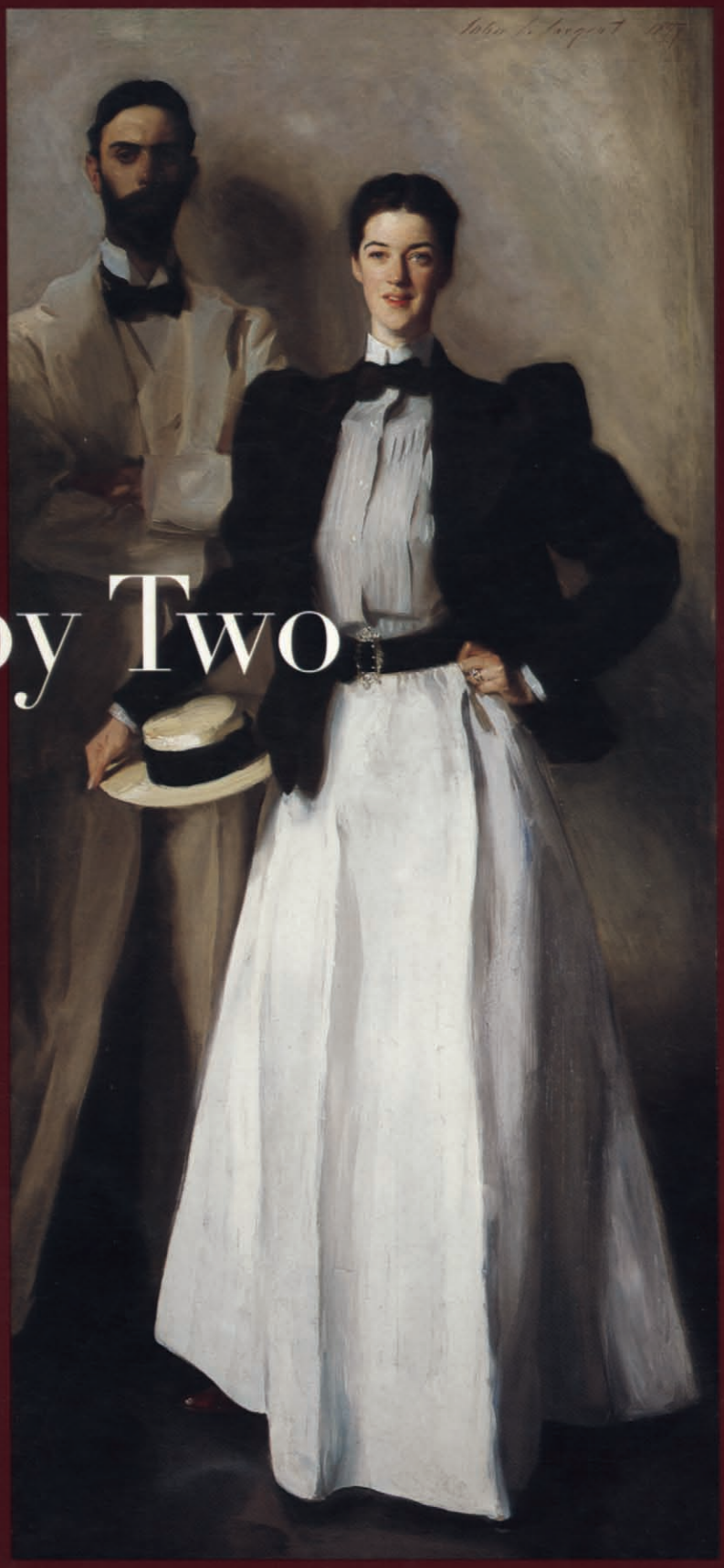
Two by Two



The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Richard Martin
and
Harold Koda

Two by Two

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Sponsor's Statement

It is a great honor for Ermenegildo Zegna to sponsor the exhibition "Two by Two" at The Costume Institute of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which marks the first time that The Costume Institute presents a wide range of menswear coupled with womenswear, covering the eighteenth century to the 1970s. The history of clothing inspires the Ermenegildo Zegna family. Our heritage began with the production of innovative fabric and design. The Zegna family is honored to encourage and support The Costume Institute's dedication and research. We hope that the thousands of visitors who come to see the exhibition will share our appreciation for the art of The Costume Institute.

Gildo Zegna
Managing Director
Ermenegildo Zegna Corporation

Introduction

And of every living thing of all flesh, two of every sort shalt thou bring into the ark.—Genesis 6:19

Fashion specifies our individuality and our identity, and it also signifies our collectivity and the social contract. We expect the genders to be both distinct and complementary. We delight in the manner in which apparel defines what is male and what is female and also what is common to both. As we live our daily lives attuned to male/female compatability and differences, so does apparel reflect a coeducational world.

Two by Two presents a correlated history of women's and men's apparel from the eighteenth century to the 1970s. We do not seek to prove a direct parallel between the evolution of the two, yet we do observe points of profound similarity. We do not seek to elide clothing's practice of gender differentiation, but we can see some transgender crossings. We do not offer a theory of dress on this Noah's Ark of fashion history, but we note that our assembly of the sexes is vividly more true to life than many of the exhibitions of fashion history that give the lion's share of attention to one gender or the other.

Little is intractable about gender and dress. At most times, men and women stand separate in their dressing preferences, yet we recognize a dynamic in fashion that grants the sexes a deliberate accord. In the eighteenth century, men were resplendent in lace trims and accents, floral waistcoats, and rich suits. In the 1830s, it might have seemed as if the shapes, textures, and choices in men's and women's apparel were coming closer and closer together. In the Victorian era, women accommodated their dress to the industrial black and heavy textiles that men in dark frock coats with bowlers and top hats had evolved by the mid-nineteenth century. By the 1860s, the man's three-piece suit was starting to emerge. At the beginning of the twentieth century, sportswear and separates were transforming the wardrobes of women and men and making them more alike. The Gibson Girl and her beau were both wearing starched shirts, wool blazers, and straw bowlers. In the 1940s, both men and women affected a slim-hipped, broad-shouldered swagger. By the late 1960s, the word unisex had entered the popular vocabulary in order to describe the wide-ranging instances of dress interchangeable as to gender. Yet we acknowledge the truism that in contemporary formal wear, the male defers to the grander display of the female.

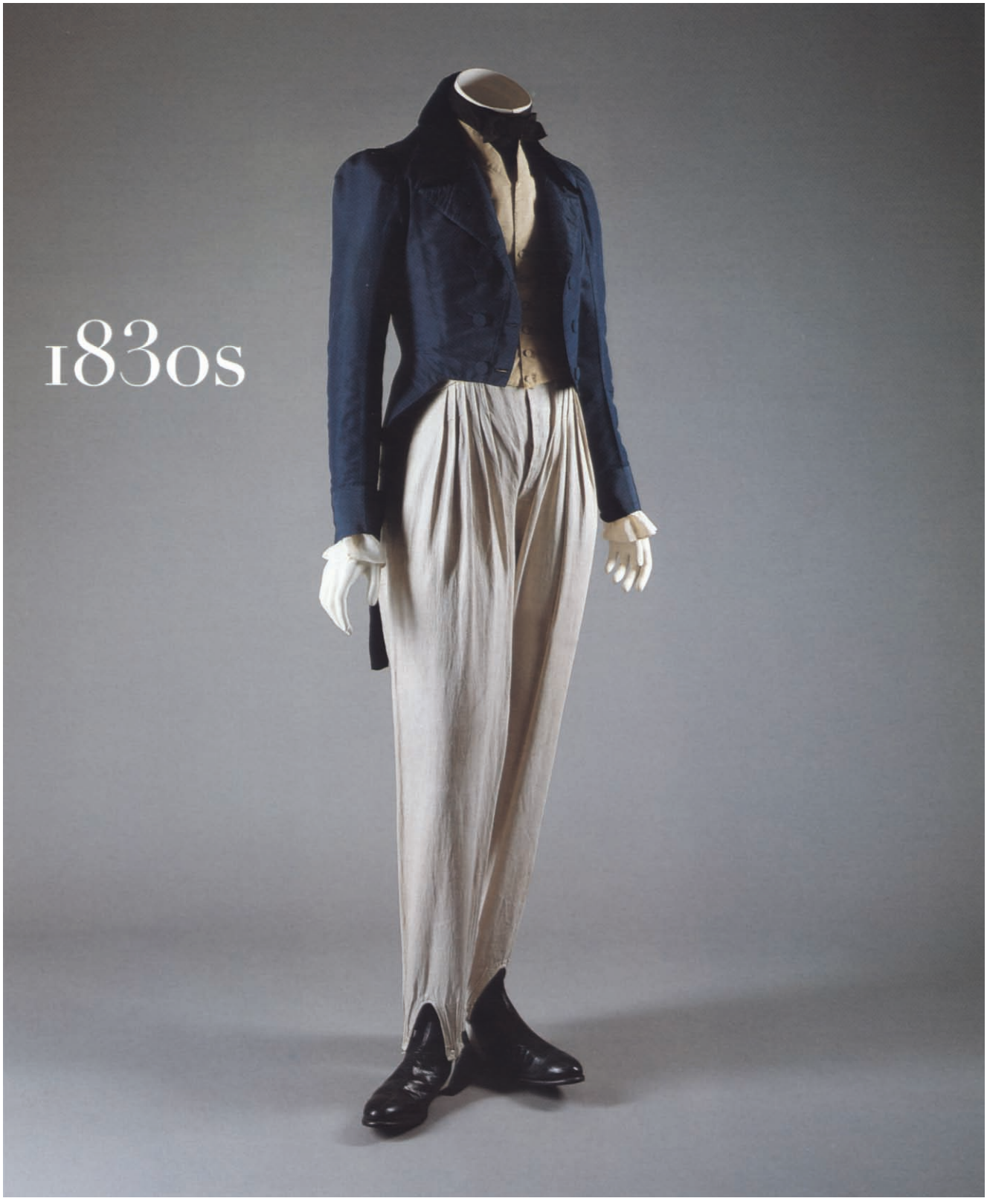
We do not propose a specific system to govern the dress of men and women together. History affords no consistent pattern of gender match or appropriation, though men's clothing more often lends its specific types to women's than the other way around. As clothing is a constituent of social authority, we can rightly assert that a patriarchal society attaches greater value to men's apparel. Even in contemporary dress, while womenswear borrows men's tailoring, the buttoning is still reversed.

Surely, God's instruction to Noah was meant to benefit propagation. However, no other animal on the ark benefits from the propensity to variety and expression that humans achieve through clothing.

English. Dress (open robe), ca. 1760

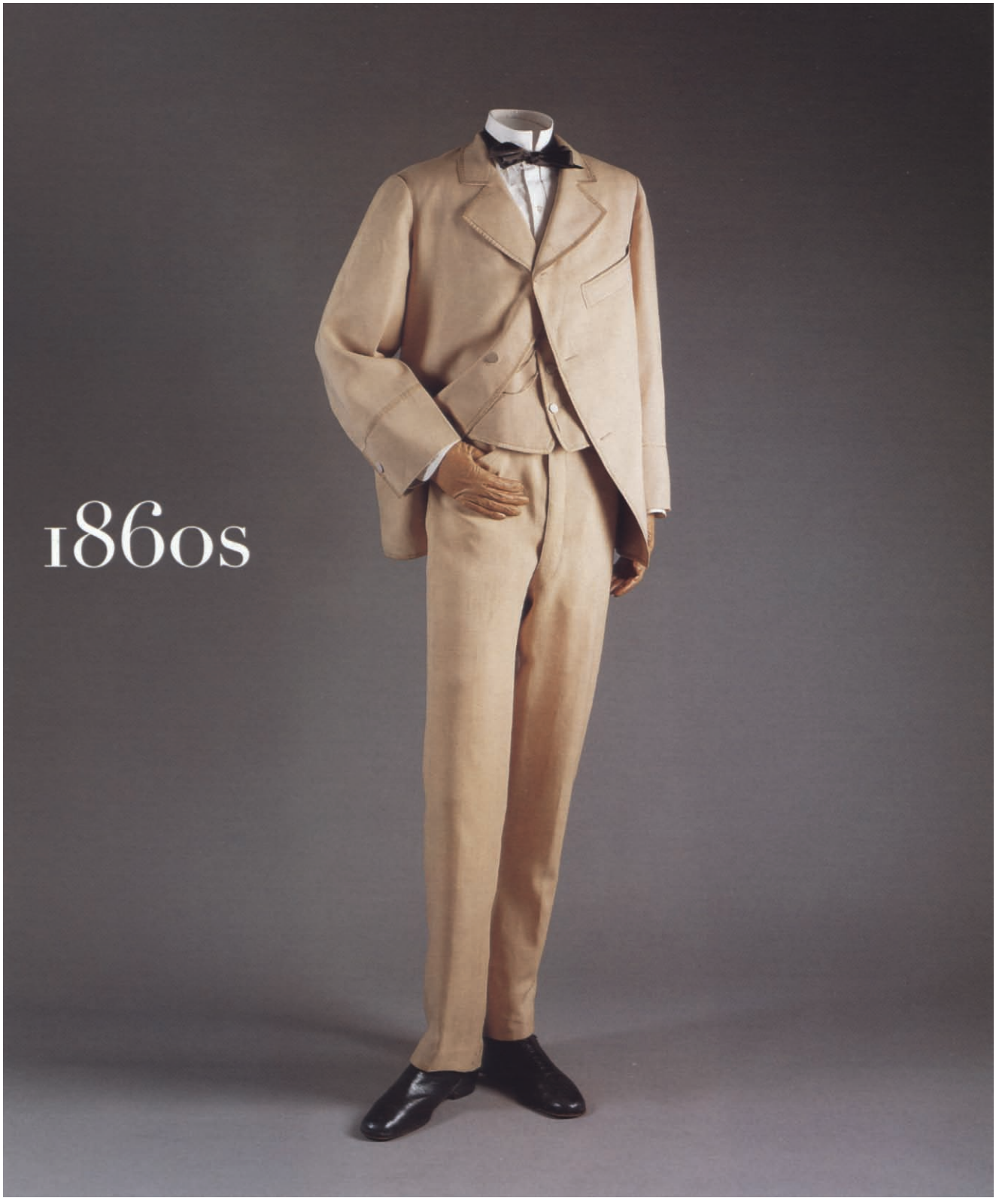
English. Man's suit, ca. 1760

1830s



English. Man's tailcoat ensemble, 1833

American. Dress and pelerine, 1838

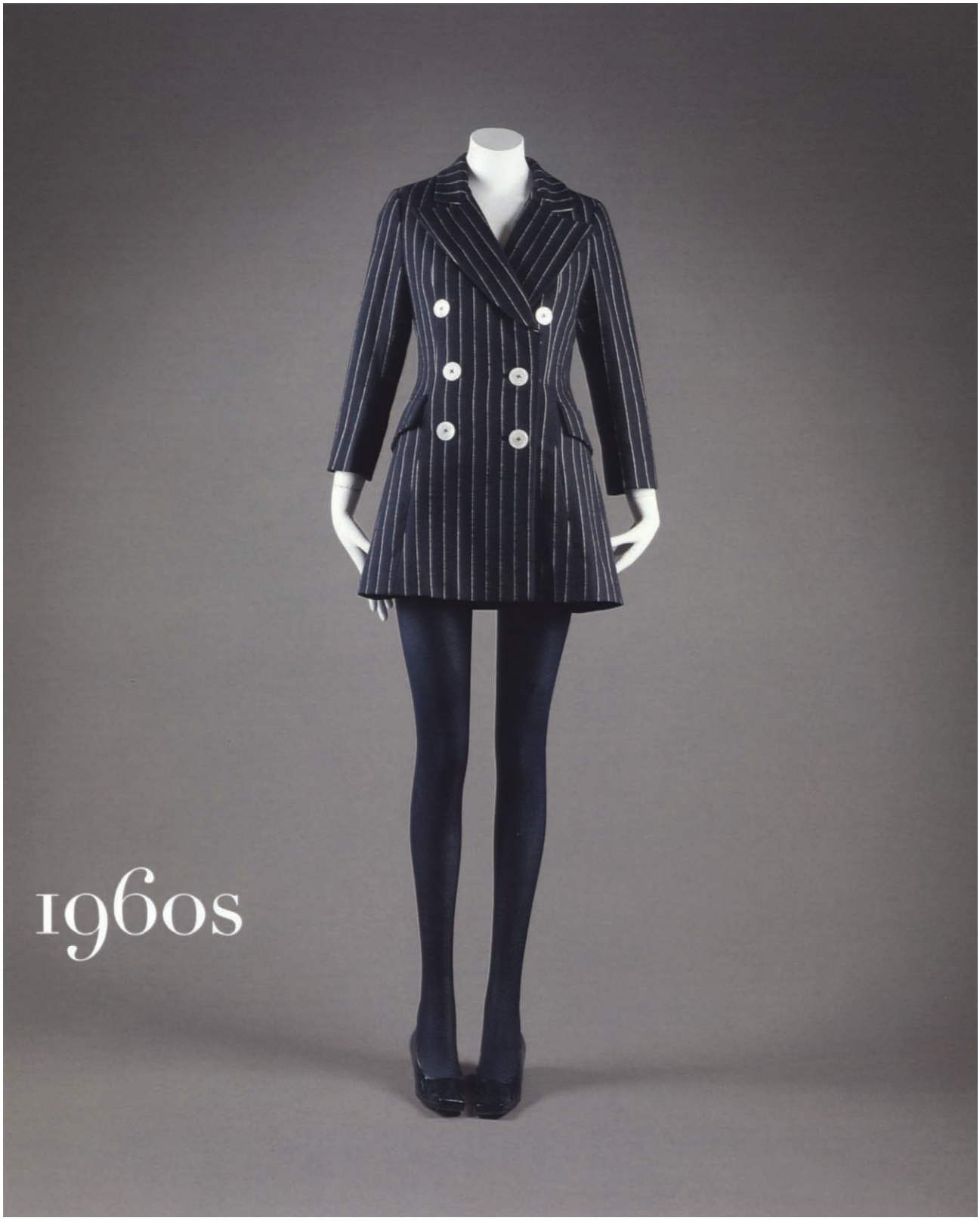


English. Man's suit, 1868

English. Dress, 1866–68

Mainbocher. Evening gown (worn by the Duchess of Windsor), ca. 1938

H. Harris. Formal evening suit (worn by HRH The Duke of Windsor), 1938



Michael Mott for Paraphernalia. Coatdress, 1966

Bill Blass for PBM. Man's suit, 1969

1760s

English
Dress (open robe), ca. 1760
Blue, pink, lavender, green, brown, black, and white floral-patterned silk brocade

The chief characteristic of eighteenth-century women's dress is the rigid encasement of the upper body by means of a corset that configures the torso. Light, elaborately patterned fabrics are pinned or anchored loosely to this understructure. Both menswear and womenswear have lace at the collar and cuffs. The skirts of the time are supported by cane hoops to create ballooning volumes; the open robe consists of a connected bodice and an overskirt parted in front to reveal a matching petticoat.

Bequest of Catherine D. Wentworth, 1948 (TSR 48.187.709ab)

English
Man's suit, ca. 1760
Purple wool with gold-bullion braid trim

Despite its vivid color, rococo braid trim, and lace jabot and cuffs, this man's ensemble is actually restrained for its time. The complicated woven textiles of high court dress, with floral patterns blanketed with floral embroidery, are more characteristic of this gaudy epoch. It has been argued that the precedent for modern man's suit resides in this style of sturdy wool English three-part ensemble, composed of jacket, waistcoat, and breeches.

Purchase, NAMSB (National Association of Men's Sportswear Buyers) Foundation, 1996 (1996.117a–c)

1830s

English
Man's tailcoat ensemble, 1833
Blue silk-faille coat, pale-yellow silk waistcoat, natural-linen trousers

In the early years of the nineteenth century, there was a profound harmony between men's and women's silhouettes in dress. In the Empire style, high waists and puffed chests obtained in menswear to match the silhouette of women's clothing. In the 1830s, menswear accommodated the gigot sleeve of womenswear in its use of a new fullness at the sleeve cap. The typical man's ensemble of tailcoat, waistcoat, and trousers prevailed by the 1820s and 1830s, as breeches were supplanted by long trousers.

Coat: Catherine Breyer Van Bomel Foundation Fund, 1981 (1981.210.4). Waistcoat: Irene Lewisohn Bequest, 1976 (1976.25.3d). Trousers: Estate of Irene Lewisohn & Alice Crowley Fund, 1982 (1982.316.11)

American
Dress and pelerine, 1838
Burgundy silk

The 1830s silhouette was created by a corseted, raised waistline; a bell-shaped skirt shows the lower ankle. By the late 1830s, the gigot sleeve was collapsing at the sleeve cap, but in this case its detachable pelerine or capelet sustained the broad triangulated shoulder line of the period. The similarities between men's and women's fashion extended to footwear: women could wear flat slippers or tiny booties not so different from the boots and walking shoes of men.

Gift of Mrs. James Sullivan, in memory of Mrs. Luman Reed, 1926 (AW 26.250.1ab)

1860s

English
Man's suit, 1868
Tan wool-and-silk blend

As documented by British novelists William Makepeace Thackeray and Anthony Trollope, lounging became the popular pastime of the 1860s, defining the new gait, demeanor, and style. Suits, chairs, and rooms designed for lounging reified the leisure style. By the 1850s and 1860s, frock coat and matching waistcoat and trousers were popularly accepted as daytime attire for men. But a more relaxed or informal three-piece matching ensemble for men developed, lacking tails and instead featuring a boxier-cut jacket that suited the new emphasis on leisure. The lounge suit is an early explicit prototype for the canonical twentieth-century man's suit.

Purchase, Irene Lewisohn Trust Gift, 1986 (1986.114.4a–c)

English
Dress, 1866–68
Fawn and light-brown striped wool-and-silk blend

Dress in the 1860s was characterized by tailored pattern pieces with severely sloping shoulder lines and princess seams forming a diamond shape over the torso. This exaggerated configuration of the pattern pieces appeared in men's tailored garments of the period as well, but because of the accommodation of the corset, it became more explicit in women's clothing. By the 1860s, crinoline hoops had extended to their outermost perimeter. Ironically, at a time when women were increasingly participating in recreational sports, the high-fashion walking costume was most unwieldy.

Gift of Irene Lewisohn, 1937 (CI 37.46.4cab)

1930s

Mainbocher
Evening gown (worn by the Duchess of Windsor), ca. 1938
Black silk taffeta with gold-sequin and glass-bead embroidery

In the early 1930s, women's apparel was marked by the innovation of the sinuous bias-cut gown. By the mid-1930s, there was a strongly historicist romantic revival of the Second Empire. In a world fearful of war, lavishness returned, minus the crinoline hoops of the 1850s but with a strong sense of historical authority. Mainbocher imbued his clients with a sense of both power and propriety.

Gift of Mrs. Harrison Williams, Lady Mendl and Mrs. Ector Munn, 1946 (CI 46.4.1)

H. Harris
Formal evening suit (worn by HRH The Duke of Windsor), 1938
Midnight-blue wool and black silk faille

Formal attire tends to be consciously retardataire, as the persistence of the nineteenth-century evening suit attests. Only subtle nuances in proportion and materials perennially adapted the basic silhouette. Yet the Duke of Windsor was inexorably unorthodox and trend setting in his wardrobe. As a substitute for conventional black, he preferred midnight-blue wool for its photogenic possibilities in black and white.

Gift of the Duchess of Windsor, 1974 (1974.185.3a-c)

1960s

Michael Mott for Paraphernalia
Coatdress, 1966
Navy-blue chalk-striped wool

In the 1960s, menswear was adapted in many ways for women. The mini, by definition feminine, was executed in this case in archetypal conservative menswear material and style, resembling a chalk-striped, double-breasted jacket. Only the womenswear buttons, shaping, and bracelet-length sleeves suggest its Tiresian shifts of gender.

Gift of Mrs. Robert A. M. Stern, 1972 (1972.27.1)

Bill Blass for PBM
Man's suit, 1969
Navy-blue wool with white windowpane plaid

Dissonance and dissent in the late 1960s prompted significant change in menswear. For many designers in England and America, the new paradigm was the Regency and Edwardian dandy. Bill Blass, the first womenswear designer in America to have a major impact on menswear, however, referred in this instance to an assertive plaid suit worn by the Duke of Windsor.

Gift of David Conant Ford, 1976 (1976.368.5ab)

This publication is presented in conjunction with the exhibition "Two by Two,"
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Bequest of Edith Minturn Phelps Stokes, 1938 (38.104)

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