Moralists have for centuries inveighed against the vanity and extravagance of women’s clothes. Saint Jerome in A.D. 384 wrote, “Nowadays we may see many women load their presses with garments; changing their gowns daily, they are yet unable to get the better of the moths.” An heretical monk of the same century, Jovinian, advising the wise man not to wed, gives among his reasons: “A married woman hath many needs, precious robes, gold and gems, great expenses. . . . Then he [the husband] must listen, all night long, to her wordy complaints ‘This woman goes abroad better clad than I. . . . I, poor wretch, must hang my head down among my fellows.’” A French abbot, writing in the first years of the twelfth century, berates the young women of his day for their immodesty, their “winking eyes, babbling tongues, and wanton gait”—they might be yesterday’s flappers—and also for “the quality of their garments, so unlike to the frugality of the past, that in the widening of their sleeves, the thinning of their bodices, their shoes of cordovan morocco with twisted beaks—nay, in their whole person we may see how shame is cast aside.”

Despite similar fulminations by preachers and satirists in every succeeding century, feminine fashion became a national, then an international preoccupation of the Western world and remains so today. Fashion as an industry is an integral part of our economic fabric. It is a vested interest of which we could not divest ourselves if we would. The erratic pulse of fashion supplies the stimulus which pays the wages of thousands of skilled garment workers and keeps profitable millions in capital invested in manufacturing plants, wholesale and retail establishments, including the vast affiliated fabric industries, and also all the related media of publicity, including fashion magazines and trade papers. If women en masse were suddenly to decide that any given season’s fashions were so well designed as to be permanently alluring and flattering and refused to buy any new styles for three years, the consequences would be nothing short of a major financial and industrial catastrophe. Indeed, if following the fashion were not so easily encouraged as a private foible it would probably have to be preached as a public duty.

It was not until the fourteenth century that changes in the fashioning of garments became frequent and arbitrary enough to constitute what we today call fashion, as is demonstrated by the early efforts to control its extravagances by law. Note that men were as directly involved as women. In 1327 a device was set up in the Piazza Grande at Modena to measure the trains on women’s dresses and determine whether they exceeded the prescribed length. In 1390 a Florentine decree forbade women to have trains more than two yards long and also forbade men to wear short doublets. These were short enough to shock the more conservative members of their own sex accustomed to long gowns and cloaks. An Italian author of the day writes that the young men of his
native Pistoia had adopted such short jerkins as to be positively indecent and adds that they were ornamented with gold, silver, and pearls. In 1340 pointed shoes for men were forbidden in Milan. In England and France, where they were known as poulaines, the points reached a length of ten or twelve inches or more and were even imitated in armor. They became so fashionable that in England, by a decree of Edward IV, they were limited to the nobility. No knight under the estate of a lord might wear shoes having points exceeding two inches in length. The vanity of Englishmen in wanting to display their legs and by padding their shoulders and chests to reduce the apparent size of their waists, was so widespread that the same law provides that “no knight under the degree of a lord, esquire or gentleman shall wear any gown or jacket that is not long enough when he stands upright to conceal his buttocks” and forbids any yeoman or person of lower degree from wearing “in his body any bolsters or stuffing of wool or cotton.” Throughout the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century men’s doublets, tightly fitted and padded, in their tapering shape dipping to a point in front and sharply accenting the waist line, were very similar in form to the corseted bodices of the women. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century males, including the most virile, were as concerned with setting the fashion or following it as the supposedly weaker and vainer sex, as elaborately and extravagantly dressed, often more so.

Follow the history of fashion and nothing apparently could be more irrational. But if one cannot indict a whole people, one cannot dismiss as fops or fools five centuries of the dominant classes of Europe, including some of its ablest monarchs, statesmen, administrators, merchants, and men of affairs, as well as many of its most cultivated men and women. Fashion could not have been imposed so continuously if it had not had its roots in social needs as well as in individual vanity and the desire for personal aggrandizement, if it were not somehow related to the structure of society.

We can obtain a first clue to this connection if we ignore changes in style from decade to decade and view the history of fashion in a longer perspective. It then becomes apparent, I think—at least in the centuries I am reviewing—that political, moral, and economic factors fundamentally influence the design of costume as much as the perennial ingenuity of dressmakers and tailors. Clothes are essentially symbolic, and the type and range of their variation determined by the society we live in and more or less willingly subscribe to. Because it is primarily aesthetic, fashion attempts, in terms of form, color, and texture, to find a visible expression for the character of the men and women who, we presume, can appropriately dominate the world we belong to and believe in. Fashion in its own way reflects current ideals. The frontier of modern fashion was, of course, the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth with the establishment of effective republican forms of government, the mounting prestige of democratic ideas. Before this the avowed purpose of fashion was to make as conspicuous as possible differences in rank, lineage, and wealth; since then it has aimed to minimize them.

The change was immensely accelerated by other revolutionary changes that occurred at the same time—the growth of modern industrialism and the dominance of the business man, the rapid spread of popular education, which opened up endless opportunities for the self-made man, not only in business but in every other field of activity. Fashion promptly reflected the influence and prestige of this new type of industriousness and efficiency, abandoned the velvets, brocades, satins, frills, and furbelows with which men had clothed themselves for centuries, and, within the space of a generation, evolved a sober, increasingly uniform type of male clothing. The contrast was most marked in men’s attire because the emancipation achieved at first most directly affected them. Because for the better part of the nineteenth century women were still restricted and sequestered to a considerable degree, particularly those who aspired to be ladies, women’s
Portrait of Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618) in the National Gallery of Ireland. Reproduced from The Eighth Volume of the Walpole Society, 1919-1920, plate v
fashions could revive, even for everyday wear, the sweeping trains of previous centuries, duplicate in hoop skirts and crinolines the farthingales of the Elizabethan age, the panniers of the courts of Louis XV and XVI, and echo their elaborate trimmings. But with the emancipation of women achieved and the equality of the sexes accepted both as an ideal and as an accomplished fact, in sports, business, and the professions, fashions in women's clothes have shown the same trend toward a democratic simplification as men's. The essential line and texture of women's fashions today tends to be such that it can be easily duplicated for women of moderate means; most prevailing fashion ideas are conceived with that end in view. Indeed, fashion tends to be more democratic than current democracy. For the class struggle still exists under the name of free enterprise, and many class privileges are still well entrenched. Dressing as we do makes many of us appear to be more democratic than we really are.

Contrast Miriam Beard's account of Florence at the time of the Medici and other merchant princes. "Display was part of the economic competition in those times. The successful business men of Florence vied with one another in the extravagance of their robes and jewels. . . . This peacock rivalry was not the mere expression of vanity. . . . It was necessary for even the busiest man to display his credit on his person. . . . Hence a large part of old letters is taken up by discussing what other men wore. We find for instance one business associate writing to another and criticizing a third in what, in a woman, would be regarded as a catty manner. 'John came to the party in a dress of gold brocade with black velvet trimmings, open at the throat to show an eagle done in pearls. It made a good show, though it was not very expensive but what you would call pretty.'"

The ambitious courtier sustained his career in the same way. A portrait of Sir Walter Raleigh in the National Gallery of Ireland shows him in a doublet and short trunk hose every inch of which is covered with an intricate design made of pearls. An art historian points out: "Early in life he was noted for the magnificence of his clothes even at a court where external appearance carried such weight and a period when the extravagance of fashion at Spanish, French, and Austrian courts made dress a matter of international competition. For clothes such as Raleigh wore were not a mere foible of vanity but part of a deliberate program in his career."

Today such ornamentation has been abandoned because it is superfluous. With the ramifications of every kind of publicity and printed information we know who's who, or we can find out in any one of a number of Who's Who's, Bradstreet's, the Directory of Directors, the Social Register, if not Burke's Peerage. But in epochs when large sections of every population were illiterate, information largely circulated by word of mouth, and in feudal and aristocratic societies based on the stratification of classes, where acquiescence in precedence and privilege was an essential part of conduct, the surest way to make such distinctions plain was to make them strike the eye. Pomp everywhere heralded power; powerful and privileged persons were as obviously resplendent as the crafts of weaving, embroidering, and tailoring could make them. Today, when we still believe rigid regimentation to be necessary, as in conducting a war, we supply insignia which enable every soldier and sailor to recognize and salute his superior. In centuries when the regimentation of classes was believed to be as effective a way of conducting society, fashion supplied the insignia. The most striking contrast between clothes, both men's and women's, to the end of the eighteenth century and those since, is not only their cut and shape, but the degree of their ornamentation and the materials of which they were made, the obviously symbolic color of precious metals and the glint of precious stones. There was an almost continuous gleam and glitter of cloth of gold and silver, brocade of silk and velvet on gold and silver grounds or patterned in gold and silver thread; gold and silver embroidery, gold and silver lace, galloons and fringe; jewels, particularly pearls, but often diamonds, studding not only cos-
tumes but hats, gloves, ruffs, hose, and shoes.

How definitely the materials of which clothing was made and the degree of its ornamentation were considered insignia of rank is shown in the English sumptuary laws for a period of about two hundred years, from Edward III to Henry VIII. These prescribe in precise detail the kind of gold and silver cloth, brocade, or tissue, including the lining of coats and sleeves, the amount of gold and silver in embroidery, mixed with pearls and precious stones, even to the neckbands of shirts, which barons, earls, knights, and their wives might or might not wear. But it is significant that the attempt to confine such display to the nobility was never successful. It was used at the end of the Middle Ages by the increasingly affluent mercantile classes as a mark of distinction. A fourteenth-century example of civilian dress, a man's coat of brocaded silk with a pattern of eagles and lions in gold, probably woven in Sicily, is preserved in the textile museum at Lyons. Edward III found it necessary, in 1364, to forbid tradesmen, artificers, and yeomen from embellishing their garments with precious stones, cloth of silk or silver, or from wearing gold or silver on their girdles, garters, or chausses—that is, their long hose. In 1388 an Italian chronicler, Musso, describes the extraordinary sumptuousness of both men's and women's clothes in Piacenza, and mentions silks worked with gold, cloth of gold, three to five ounces of pearls on a garment, also gold galloons at the wrist and neck, women's caps with wide borders of gold and pearls, headdresses of pure silver set with precious stones.

Throughout the Renaissance, fashions in Italy remained resplendent and lavish. Venice encouraged the use of gold and silver brocades, one of its celebrated products, particularly on public occasions such as the investiture of the Doge. The Doges' wives, Dogeressas, were even more resplendent on such occasions, according to contemporary accounts—one in a dress of cloth of gold with deep hanging sleeves caught at the shoulder with gold brooches, a jeweled girdle of gold cord, a mantle of stiff gold brocade, and a train of the same material. Another was attired in a mantle of gold embroidered in silver in high relief; the ladies of her suite wore gowns of silver cloth with raised flowers of gold. A French writer in 1586, in a discourse on the high cost of living in France, ascribes it to "the waste of stuffs of cloth of gold, silver and trimmings of silver and gold. There is not a cape, mantle, collar, robe, breeches that is not covered with one or the other or lined with cloth of gold and silver."

The importance of clothing as an essential way of demonstrating one's station in life was so generally accepted that anyone of means was willing to spend a very large proportion of his income for that purpose. The cost of clothing was amazingly high. Dürrer's diary, of his second journey to the Netherlands in 1520, records the fact that at Antwerp for a fur-collared, velvet-trimmed coat of camlet—the best grade of woolen cloth—he paid 37 florins, more than four times as much as he received for his portrait in oils of Bernard van Orley now in the Dresden Museum, namely 8 florins. In a valuation of the wardrobe of a Florentine lady made in 1449 a single skirt is valued at 80 florins. Donatello paid 10 to 15 florins annually for the house he lived in. Mino da Fiesole bought a house for 100 florins and rented it for 12. Other residences were bought for 200 florins. A gown might cost more than a house. The wedding dress of one Filipa di Peruzzi did, as a matter of record, cost 269 florins, her going-away dress 289. But gowns for daily wear could cost as much; the more expensive fabrics sold for 20 to 40 florins a yard, were woven in narrow widths, 18 to 20 inches, and using 10 to 15 yards to a gown was not uncommon. In Venice, about 1440, four robes of cloth of gold in the trousseau of a Doge's wife cost 2,000 gold ducats, about one tenth of the value of the palace into which she moved, which had been bought by her father-in-law twenty years earlier for a little over 20,000 ducats.

The metal brocades used by Henry VIII are valued, in his household accounts, at 33 shillings a yard. Nine or ten yards could easily have been required for one of the voluminous
coats he wore, at a cost of £15 to £16—approximately half the annual salary that Holbein received as a court painter, which was £30, and almost that of the royal astronomer, who received £20. An Elizabethan actor, Alleyn, paid £20 for a single velvet cloak with sleeves embroidered in silver and gold and lined with black satin striped with gold, or one-fifth the annual salary fixed for Elizabeth’s court painter—£100. There was evidently sound reason for Ben Jonson’s remark in Everyman out of His Humour, “First, to be an accomplished gentleman ... t’were good you turn’d four or five hundred acres of your best land into two or three trunks of apparel,” and for a French courtier’s complaint during the vogue of lace ruffs and elaborate edgings, “I am wearing 32 acres of my best vineyard soil about my neck.” As a literary cynic the Duke de la Rochefoucauld prided himself on seeing through appearances, but he was careful to maintain his own, spending annually an amount equivalent to $15,000 today on his wardrobe. As late as 1773 one could read in The London Magazine, “The modes of dress are of incredible expense. The ladies have spring, summer and autumn silks and brocades, gold and silver stuffs some of which are bought at the enormous price of 30 guineas a yard.” The decreased social importance of ornamentation makes even the most fashionable clothing today require a very much smaller proportion of a wealthy person’s income.

The shimmer of gold and silver continued during the fashions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a mark of social status and affluence. Massachusetts as early as 1634 ordered that “no person either man or woman shall hereafter make or buy any apparel ... with any lace on it, silver, gold, silk or thread.” Their use evidently persisted, for in 1651 another statute limited them to the upper classes: “No person within this jurisdiction, whose visible estates, real and personal, shall not exceed the true and indifferent value of 200 pounds, shall wear any gold or silver, lace or gold or silver buttons ... upon the penalty of ten shillings for every such offense.” And the court declared its “utter detestation that men and women of meane condition, education and calling should take upon them the garbe of gentlemen by wearing of gold or silver lace, or buttons or poynets at their knees, or walke in great boots. ...” Thus even in Puritan New England gold and silver remained the distinguishing mark of the gentleman. Madame de Sévigné describes a gown given to Madame de Montespan as “gold upon gold material, in gold, brocaded with gold upon which was a border of gold mixed with a particular kind of gold, forming the most divine material that could be imagined”—surely nothing could be more golden. She also described a coat of the Prince de Conti of figured black velvet on a straw-colored ground which was set off with diamonds, and the diamonds very large. An advertisement in an English newspaper in 1712 describes “a green silk knit waistcoat with gold and silver flowers all over it and fourteen yards of gold and silver lace thick upon it.” An inventory of a Venetian lady’s trousseau in 1774 shows it to have been almost as resplendent as those two centuries earlier—a complete dress of gold with a cloth-of-gold, petticoat, that is, an underskirt, embroidered in silver, another trimmed deep with silver flounces, another with deep flounces of gold lace, a green bodice richly embroidered in gold, and even a riding habit embroidered in gold and silver thread—to mention only a few items in a lengthy list.

The changing symbolic value that fashion can acquire, both as to form and color, is illustrated by the revolution in men’s dress that began in the first years of the nineteenth century: the renunciation of ornament—although embroidered waistcoats survived sporadically until the 1840’s—the acceptance of dark brown, blue, bottle-green, and black woolens, rather than silks and velvets, as a mark of elegance and gentility, and the adoption of long trousers. Worn by the ancient Gauls, trousers had been preserved as a practical working garment by peasants and sailors, as is shown by Amman’s woodcuts of 1568. They were part of the uniform of Nelson’s sailors in the 1770’s and were also worn before the Revolution by French workingmen. But
Jost Amman’s woodcuts of a sailor and a peasant. Reproduced from the “Panoplia omnium illiberalium mechanicarum aut sedentiarum artium genera continens . . .,” 1568

it was after the Revolution, when they had been worn by insurgent mobs who dubbed themselves sans culottes (without knee breeches), and also by the first Revolutionary armies, that trousers came to be accepted as a typically republican form of attire. Civilians who wore them could be suspected by conservatives of harboring opinions subversive to the established order. A prominent London club declined to admit any member wearing them. A nonconformist chapel in 1820 provided that “under no circumstances should a preacher be allowed to occupy the pulpit who wears long trousers.” Trinity and St. John’s Colleges in Cambridge decreed that any students appearing in long trousers at chapel or hall would be considered absent. In 1833 the King of Saxony replied to some gentlemen asking whether they could appear at court in long trousers, that they should have shown more loyalty to the royal house than to make such a request.

It can of course be pointed out that nothing could be more superficial than to judge a man’s convictions by the length of his trousers. But the original association of knee breeches with royalists and aristocrats remained fixed. In 1853 an American Secretary of State, Mr. Marcy, issued a circular requesting all ambassadors abroad to present themselves at court in the simple dress of an American citizen in order to show their devotion to republican institutions. This caused immense trepidation in our embassies and became a minor diplomatic crisis. But our ambassadors finally made the daring attempt and were received by Queen Victoria and the Queen of Holland.

A poet could also feel the symbolism of men’s clothing. Baudelaire, reviewing the salon of 1846, wrote: “The black suit and redingote have not only their political beauty, the expression of universal equality, but their poetic beauty—the expression of the public soul,” though he added that the men wearing them all seemed as gloomy as undertakers. This pervading somberness has been somewhat lightened, generally to combinations of slate, sand, dust, ashes, powdered earth, and
blues the color of fountain-pen ink in varying degrees of dilution. But our common reactions to brighter color in men's attire show how color in clothing has also acquired a symbolic value. The brighter blues, greens, yellows are accepted for sport or country wear. But for work the duller, subdued tones are the mark of efficiency, seriousness, responsibility. A turquoise blue shirt and a necktie of pigeon-blood red or a tweed coat verging on jade green might appropriately be worn by a curator of Far Eastern art. But if you were to consult a doctor or a lawyer and found him dressed in as bright a tweed or a salmon pink shirt and canary yellow necktie, you would, despite yourself, have at least a momentary qualm as to whether you had put your case in the right hands.

Unbending, informality, being at ease is also part of the process of democratization. Styles that required rigidity of poise, punctilio in manner, what used to be called deportment, have gone out of fashion for women as well as for men, along with the rigidly boned corset. We unbend generally: almost all our furniture is made to lean back on or recline in; we sit upright only at church or meals. Stiffness and a certain amount of discomfort are no longer a mark of upper-class distinction. Physicians, lawyers, statesmen, bankers are not expected to dignify themselves with high hats and frock coats or cutaways. The high hat is obsolescent, like the cutaway coat, except at diplomatic and wedding receptions. So is the sheen of satin revers, the patent-leather shoe, the gold-headed cane, the prominent gold watch chain, the rigid derby, the starched cuff, the starched shirt, the stiff collar. Even business men have adopted the soft felt hat once characteristic of farmers, poets, and philosophers, the almost soft low collar that was originally the Byronic collar, a sartorial symbol of a revolt towards romantic freedom. Except for our evening swallowtails, the aristocratic fashions of yesterday are perpetuated in the liveries of servants. The only ornamental members of the male community today are the doormen of expensive apartment houses, night clubs, and moving picture palaces.

The creased trouser hides the anatomical deficiencies of the average male's leg and is comfortable enough for most sports. The short sack suit or the double-breasted one is loosely and easily fitted with a bit of padding in the shoulder and will also help to conceal sedentary paunchiness. Pants, coat, and vest provide a sufficient number of pockets for all the paraphernalia of efficiency, such as wallet, pencils, fountain pen, notebooks, memoranda. Doctor and lawyer, artist and scientist, professor and business man are dressed virtually alike except for their personal degree of tidiness or untidiness. And this costume has become symbolic not only of democracy but of modern industrial efficiency. Wearing it is a sign that one belongs to the modern Western world. When in 1925 Turkey under Mustafa Kemal determined to become a modern nation, it outlawed its national costume for both women and men, including the fez. European clothes are now worn even in the smaller villages. Persia followed Turkey's example three years later with men's clothes, in 1936 with women's. Modern fashion has become an international symbol of a growing international uniformity which is in the making.

A loan exhibition, Peasant and Native Costume, showing gay and ornate provincial dress from Europe, the Near East, and Central America has been arranged by Mr. Simonson and is now on view in Gallery H 18.—EDITOR.