Clothes and the Historian

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A historian who is trying to form in his mind a clear picture of people in the period he has chosen for study may usefully supplement contemporary descriptions of what men and women said and did and looked like by seeking out their painted or sculptured portraits. But while portraits – and even photographs too – will show how people wished to appear, only a costume collection carefully displayed can demonstrate three-dimensionally the actual appearance of historical characters.

Clothes express personality, they indicate office or rank; they are most likely to be preserved when they can be associated with a distinguished person or a known character – the vestments of a king or the garments of a saint. Clothes, however, are vulnerable: their enemies are neglect, dirt, fire, and damp, not to mention the moth. Even relics are not immune, and when they perish, substitution is all too frequent. Any curator of a costume collection has had the task of trying to convince an owner that his cherished possession was not presented by King Henry VIII, not embroidered by Mary Queen of Scots, and not worn by Marie Antoinette or his own great-great-grandmother.

There are, however, welcome exceptions and these are of inestimable value for enabling us to see people in the round. Some relics are impeccably authenticated, as when pious folk preserved in the cathedral of


Uppsala, Sweden, the clothes in which members of the Sture family were murdered in 1564, or when descendants kept the embroidered jacket in which Margaret Layton was painted in the reign of James I, or the Indian robes in which Captain John Foot sat for his portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds.

The discovery of costumes has sometimes shown how they can confirm and illustrate written records or the accounts of contemporaries. James VI of Scotland and I of England was described by a detractor, Sir Anthony Weldon:

He was of middle stature, more corpulent through his clothes than in his body, yet fat enough, his clothes ever being made large and easy, the Doublets quilted for stelleto proofo, his Breeches in plates [pleats], and full stuffed. He was naturally of a tumerous disposition which was the reason of his quilted Doublets. . . . His skin was as soft as Taffeta Sarset . . . . His legs were very weak having as was thought some foul play in his youth or before he was born, that he was not able to stand at seven years of age, and that weakness made him ever lean on other men's shoulders. . . . In his apperel so constant, as by his good will he would never change his clothes till very raggis, his fashion never . . .

Other writers were more kindly, but the king, while no doubt flattered to some extent by portrait painters, certainly appears to have been a biggish, heavy man, although his height is difficult to judge (Figure 1).

In 1537 a purple velvet suit, said to have been worn by James I in 1603, was shown in London (Figure 2). No other suit like it is known, and it has unexpected features, unless one has Sir Anthony's words in mind. The doublet is padded, loose-fitting, and not stiffened as tailors' accounts would suggest for this date. The high, rather limp collar is unusual, the cut is old-fashioned for 1603, and the breeches though appearing bulky are really rather small. It must have been worn by a heavily built man with spindly legs, who liked loose-fitting, padded clothes—James I was just such a man. When we look at the suit, we can visualize him almost as well as we can picture Jeremy Bentham, who in 1832 left to London University not only his clothes but his skeleton.

Family tradition associates the doublet in Figure 3 with Charles I of England and sug-
gests that it was claimed as a perquisite by the Earl of Lindsey, who officiated as Lord Great Chamberlain at the coronation of Charles I in 1625. Charles I is known to have been a very short man indeed, probably about five feet three—he only looks of any size when painted standing beside his queen, Henrietta Maria, who was tiny. Dr. James Welwood wrote that "his body [was] strong, healthy and well-made, and though of low stature was capable to endure the greatest fatigues." We realize, however, that he was oddly formed when we consider the account of his attempt to escape from Carisbrooke Castle. His page, Henry Firebrace, aged thirty, had found a suitable window, which he himself could presumably negotiate, but I gave the Signe, at the appointed tyme. His Majesty put himself forward, but then too late found himself mistaken; he sticking fast between his breast and shoulders. . . . I heard him groane, but could not come to help him.

When we look at this doublet—which is made for a short man with a well-developed chest and exceptionally broad shoulders—we can visualize Charles I and confirm the tradition that the garment was his.

Identification of clothes can come in another way. The Verney heirlooms at Claydon House, Buckinghamshire, include a suit: cloak, doublet, and breeches of bister silk damask trimmed with many yards of silk and satin ribbon (Figure 5). The breeches are of a type that was ultrafashionable around 1660, known as "Rhinogreaves," or petticoat breeches, open at the knees, which measure sixty inches about the hem and are fully wide enough to justify the anecdote in Samuel Pepys's Diary:

. . . met with Mr. Townsend, who told of his mistake the other day, to put both his legs through one of his Knees of his breeches and went so all day.

When the suit was first being mounted for display, it was found not to fit an ordinary wire dummy. After shoulder padding was added, the doublet, although tailored with a center slit of a type not unusual in the 1630s to allow for easier movement, remained loose and baggy; the suit, in fact, must have been made for a man with a curved spine. A search in the Claydon archives was then made for any clue as to which member of the family may have had this deformity. A letter of 1653 was found, relating to treatment for Edmund Verney, a boy aged sixteen:

Mun's backbone in which all the fault lies, is quyt aly, and his right shoulder half a handfull lower at least than his left. Herr Skatt hath undertaken the cure, if your sonne will stay here at least three quarters of a yeare.

The cure consisted of putting the boy in an iron harness, but the suit shows that the curvature was not corrected. Here then we can picture Edmund Verney richly dressed for the coronation of Charles II in 1660 (Figure 4) and then laying his best suit aside and retiring to live a country life and grow fat as we read that he did.

Costumes can also help in another field. There are a number of eighteenth-century portraits, many of boys, showing what is known as "Vandyke" dress. The best-known example is Gainsborough's Blue Boy, Jonathan Buttall (Figure 6). Although several contemporary literary references imply that Vandyke suits were actually worn, it was for a long time felt that they were but a painter's convention based on portraits of the previous century, or at best studio properties.

When two Vandyke suits, one of which is illustrated here (Figure 7), were discovered, costume specialists were at once able to say that the material, bright green satin, the decoration, the tailoring, and the cut, especially of the breeches, showed that both suits were made in the mid-eighteenth century. In such suits young men sat for their portraits, and not in seventeenth-century garments adapted to meet a passing demand. It can now be said with certainty that Vandyke suits were a real fashion for fancy dress at masquerades, since both suits were expensive finished and lined, each of the tab-skirts about the waist was carefully hemmed, and the seams were sewn with minute stitches. Vandyke suits made for an actor or for a dummy in a painter's studio would not have needed such elaborate tailoring.

The detailed study of costumes should therefore help to make history more vivid by showing what clothes historical characters actually wore. It may also be of use in the identification of portraits and for solving some problems for art historians.


The quotations in this article can be found in the following sources:

Anthony Weldon, Court and Character of King James I (London, 1650).


I should like to express my thanks to the Earl of Ancaster and to Major Ralph Verney of Claydon for permission to reproduce photographs of their costumes.

6. The Blue Boy (Jonathan Butall), by Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788), English. The Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California