

Compte rendu d'exposition

From Mandarin Silk Ciselé Velvet to Navy Blue Wool Gabardine: Three Centuries of Men's Fashion at the McCord Museum

NICOLAS CHAMPROUX

L'UI – la mode au masculin/Clothes Make the MAN,
McCord Museum

Sponsor: Museums Assistance Program, Heritage
Canada

Curators: Gail Cariou (Guest Curator), Cynthia
Cooper (Curator of Costume and Textiles,
McCord Museum), Eileen Stack (Curatorial
Assistant, McCord Museum)

Dates: 17 May 2002 to 5 January 2003

From 17 May 2002 until 5 January 2003, the McCord Museum in Montreal presented *Clothes Make the MAN*, an exhibition of selected men's fashions over the last three hundred years. Guest curator Gail Cariou and Cynthia Cooper, McCord's Curator of Costume and Textiles, along with Curatorial Assistant Eileen Stack, chose a non-chronological approach to the interaction between men and fashion, focusing instead on eight key themes. The ensemble was set in a dimly lit environment, whose walls were painted a dark steel blue. A few sensors activated soundtracks related to the displayed theme. Finally, the clothes on display were equipped with detectors that prevented viewers from behaving as if they were visiting a shopping mall, a detail that seems to have annoyed a few, at least if we are to believe the comments in the visitors book.

Upon entering the exhibit, the visitor was welcomed by a simple display showing, side by side, an eighteenth- and a twentieth-century three-piece suit. The introductory text suggested a comparison of menswear with women's fashion, the latter a domain that has generally been more broadly acknowledged in museum exhibitions. This approach asserts that men's clothing, like women's, has been and continues to be a means of personal display and self-identification, and that it has its own set of unwritten rules. That is, men's clothes, too, have evolved according to changing cultural, economic and political environments.

This comparative explanation attempts to validate the study of men's fashion as a relevant signifier of the time from which it emanates.

The two suits introduce useful parameters, while acting as an interesting microcosm encapsulating the eight topics addressed through the show. The first of these is a 1750s mandarin silk ciselé velvet suit that belonged to French surgeon and doctor Louis François Badelart (1728–1802) who had worn it as an immigrant when he immigrated to Quebec City in 1757. Next to it, the twentieth-century suit belonged to former Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau. Sewn for the politician by Cosmo Spina, his personal tailor between 1980 and 1984, this 1980 navy blue wool gabardine pinstripe suit is striking in its seeming simplicity and anonymity.

These two garments immediately give rise to one problematic aspect of the exhibition, that of the society represented by the available garments, a problem made even more obvious in the very first theme of the show, "*Masculinity — The Clothes Make the Ideal Man*." The curators chose to fit three centuries of men's fashion into a linear display of six mannequins, unequally dressed yet judiciously, accompanied by engravings of men similarly attired according to the fashion of the time. Although quite elegant, this display sustained a discourse that might be contradictory to the premise of the show. After having proposed that menswear was subjected to the same rules as women's, that of subtle transformations and whimsical renewal, the first section of the show boldly compacted three centuries of fashion into six displays. A more specific slice of history, with a more subtle observation of the changes occurring from one decade to another, might have better convinced the visitor.

Moreover, the point remains that we were looking in this section at a very specific social stratum, the well-to-do. Is the notion of an ideal man

and of its specific dress code justifiably exclusively focused on the rich? Or was the display the result of an incomplete available collection that reflects only this social constituency — the one that has the greatest representation in terms of clothing donated and collected by museums? Fortunately, further sections of the show dealt with the emergence of prêt-à-porter and the possibility for middle-class men to afford sophisticated styles and accessories, thus widening the scope of its discourse.

Another inherent assumption in the interpretation of the clothes and the definition of the ideal man is also questionable, as it rests on aesthetic rather than practical or manufactured aspects of the garment. What was emphasized by the captions was, for example, the lavish embroidery of a 1770–1790 waistcoat, the austerity of an 1875–1900 black wool frock coat and waistcoat, or the casualness of a 1900 crème linen suit. However, what is understood today as the simplicity of a cut or the sobriety of a colour might well have had a different meaning or *raison d'être* at the time of the garment's production.

The section entitled "*Propriety — Jacket and Tie Required*" struggled with the same issue. The notion of propriety, as studied by the exhibition, brings forth two aspects of men's fashion: on the one hand, the separation between private and public space; on the other, social etiquette and clothing as a means to establish a distinction between different social classes. The presentation of high-end pieces in the latter, such as silk top hats and dress suits, can easily find a justification. However, the same cannot be said of the former, which displayed an 1880 paisley printed wool challis dressing gown and colourful Eastern fez of the same period. These were used by men to protect their clothes and hair from the fumes of tobacco when withdrawing in smoking rooms, an activity that was reserved for a specific class. Consequently, the display, although a delightful feast for the eye, must acknowledge a bias toward the exclusive behaviour of high society as a determinant of fashion.

Reverting to the first two garments and reading the complete caption accompanying the 1780 suit, we noticed that it was remodeled in 1790. This was apparently not only to accommodate fashion's shifts but also to extend the life of the outfit, which evidently was worn over twenty years. This comment implies a different perception of clothes in terms of their life expectancy, a notion drastically transformed with the appearance of the automatic sewing machine in the 1850s and of the prêt-à-porter industry in the late nineteenth century.

This particular subject within the history of men's and women's fashion was addressed in the section entitled "*Production — Manufacturing the 'Look'*," and probably represented, to the greatest extent, the original rationale for *Clothes Make the MAN*. According to the McCord Museum newsletter of spring 2002, the seeds of the show were planted in 1993 when Jacqueline Beaudoin-Ross, Curator Emeritus of Costume and Textiles at McCord, offered Ms Cariou, costume curator with Parks Canada at the time, the opportunity to review the records of merchant tailors Gibb & Co., deposited at the McCord Archives. This company was established for two hundred years in Montreal and ceased its operations in 1968. Its records constitute an impressive wealth of information on the men's clothing and tailoring trade in Montreal in the nineteenth century.

Indeed, the menswear exhibition was originally proposed as an examination of this specific topic rather than a survey of different aspects of men's fashion through three centuries of Montreal history. And, in this context, four early twentieth-century shirts by the Royal Dress Shirt Company, displayed in this section, are particularly interesting. Cut in inexpensive white cotton, their shirt front is made of a different fabric, more colourful and sophisticated. By reducing the amount of such expensive fabric, the manufacturers ingeniously brought down the production costs to compete with the handmade tailoring trade. The same was done with the collar, which was removable and washable, hence allowing men to clean, more easily, the part of the shirt that was likely to be soiled most readily. After all, only the visible parts of the clothes were important since a man would never take his jacket off in public. These details may not have been sufficiently prioritized in the captions yet they reveal precious information about a given time, the buying behaviour of the working class and pivotal stimuli in the development of the clothing industry.

The two introductory pieces bring up another aspect of the exhibition: the relation of clothes to the body. The almost invisible mannequins used for display betrayed a discomfort with the idea of the "wearer." This is paradoxical when we consider that one of the very first pieces to be displayed belonged to Pierre Elliot Trudeau, a man whose physical appearance is known to almost every Canadian (not to mention its importance for the man's success, some would say). Other pieces in the show were identified by the name of their wearer rather than by that of their makers, which imparted to them a strong aura of affiliation to one consumer. Other than these

discrete ghosts, the notion of the body as abstract construct permeated the show and was particularly addressed in the sections "*Exposure — Not in Public Please!*" and "*Vanity, Thy Name Is...Man?*" Relevant and funny, "*Exposure*" presented the evolution of the bathing suit and of the trouser fly from button to zipper, and thus explored the influence of morality on the making of clothing through objects so close to the body that they unmistakably illustrate the perception of flesh through time.

Finding a proper way to show such revealing clothes and their relation to the changing canons of physical beauty must have been a significant challenge for the curators. We might very well question the series of blatantly contemporary mannequins posed in a dynamic stretch for the display of a 1925 Monarch-Knit black wool knit body suit or a 1935 high waist black wool swimming trunk by Regent Knit Fashions. Nevertheless, this part of the exhibition expressed very efficiently the concept of a changing garment for a changing time and morality, thanks to the specificity of clothing presented and the narrow historical period covered by the display. When it comes to *Vanity*, our attention is aimed at how men have used clothing to improve their appearance.

A particularly dramatic part of the exhibition dealt with the luxurious garments that certain men have had at their disposal to adorn themselves. This might have been a pretext to show some of the most beautiful examples of the collection, such as a sumptuous 1860 black silk satin waistcoat, colourfully embroidered and perfectly adjusted, that once belonged to Charles-Elzéar Mondelet, a good friend of Papineau. However, the most interesting part of this display brought to our attention the different devices found in men's fashion for the improvement of the body's appearance. The sophisticated structure of an 1884 wool gabardine morning coat by Henry Morgan & Co., achieved through complicated padding and tailoring, found its counterpart in the narrow waist of a 1920 cotton knit drawer that, while pretending to protect the owner's weak back, guaranteed the grace of his silhouette.

The emergence of sports in the early twentieth century gave birth to another important element of menswear to which the section "*Sportswear — From the Field to the Boardroom*" was devoted. Nevertheless, the section on body transformation through the manipulation of what covers it externally found a particular echo in our age of plastic surgery and genetic manipulation, interventions that pursue the same ideal, but through the manipulation of internal structures.

The broad shoulders displayed by Trudeau's Cosmo Spina suit brought attention to other interesting vestiges of this aspect of menswear. An enhanced physical presence, faked by a skillfully designed piece of clothing, influences our perception of the people surrounding us and is the basis for the social construct created by the uniform and its signification. "*Fraternity — One of the Boys*" investigated this territory and presented several artifacts divided in three main displays. One of the displays dealt with the professional uniform and made clear the close relation between the function and the appearance of a man, a symbolic operation so tightly embedded in the social fabric that we tend to forget it. (Obviously, a Canadian Pacific hotel doorman would simply not be the same without his coat.) However, the most interesting display for this section was probably a series of four black leather coats that highlighted the diversity found within a seemingly common dress code. A symbol of rebellion, the 1980–1990 "Eat the Rich" leather vest, hand-painted and abundantly studded, also served as a colourful billboard for displaying the political and social convictions of its wearers. From this perspective, it becomes the symbol of one man's adherence to his clan while allowing for individual expression.

Finally, the "*Gender—Who Wears the Pants*" section brought forth the ambiguity of the last century in fashion and was the only part of the exhibit where women's fashion is actually displayed. Attention was drawn to womenswear that blatantly borrows shapes and codes traditionally reserved for men, such as a circa 1948 gray wool broadcloth woman's coat by Christian Dior, and vice versa. "*Gender*" underlined the strong interdiction against men's cross-gender dressing, a taboo that has traditionally played a fundamental role in men's fashion.

The last element of the show was a series of judicious questions printed on a shiny surface acting as a mirror. Questions such as How do your clothes "make you"? or What is today's masculine ideal and what clothes does this ideal man wear? forced the viewer into an inward observation of the intricate relation between the self and his clothes. Just like the two introductory pieces of clothing, these few questions presented a miniature version of the exhibition and brought forth the discourse underlying the show: men's clothes are discrete signifiers of human activity and, as a vehicle for meaning, are worth a closer look.