In Fine Style: The Art of Tudor and Stuart Fashion

The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace

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For the Tudor and Stuart elite, luxurious clothing was an essential component of court life. Garments and accessories — and the way in which they were worn — conveyed important messages about wealth, gender, age, social position, marital status and religion. Through the evidence of portraiture, In Fine Style: The Art of Tudor and Stuart Fashion traces changing tastes in fashionable attire and the spread of fashion through the royal courts of Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. Using paintings, drawings and prints from the Royal Collection, and rare surviving examples of clothing and accessories, it explores the style of the rich and famous of the Tudor and Stuart periods.

The word ‘finery’ was first used during the 1670s as a descriptive term for elaborate and showy dress. In the 16th and 17th centuries, entry to the inner circle at court, and subsequent political and professional success, was largely driven by personal appearance. A key obligation for the courtier was to reflect the glory of the monarch through splendid attire. Sartorial competition led to an insatiable search for the novel to distinguish the wearer from their rivals. The English were often satirised by their European counterparts for the frequency with which they changed their fashions and for mixing styles of clothing in a strange manner. In William Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice (1600), Portia mocks her suitor, the English baron, Falconbridge, ‘I think he bought his doublet in Italy, his round hose in France, his bonnet in Germany and his behavior every where.’

Both Henry VIII and Elizabeth I enforced laws dictating the fabrics, colours and types of garment that could be worn at each level of society. ‘Cloth of gold’ (which incorporated gold-wrapped thread), crimson-dyed fabrics and certain types of fur were reserved for those of the highest status. On the preparatory drawing for his portrait of William Parr (c.1538–42), Hans Holbein the Younger, ‘King’s Painter’ to Henry VIII, notes that the sitter wore a gown of purple velvet. This fabric was usually reserved for royalty, so reflects Parr’s standing in the royal household as captain of the Gentleman Pensioners.

Costume and paintings were frequently commissioned to mark important events, such as elevation to a knightly order, marriage or a little boy’s transition from skirts to breeches at the onset of adulthood. Most elite clothing was custom-made and far more expensive than the equivalent today. The cost arose from the labour-intensive and time-consuming production methods (the creation of a piece of white linen from flax involved over 20 processes and took several months) and the price of raw materials (which could include pure gold and silver bullion). Handmade lace was frequently used to decorate garments and could be one of the most costly elements of an outfit. The clothes worn in paintings were often more expensive than the paintings themselves. In 1632 Charles I paid the leading court artist
Sir Anthony van Dyck £100 for a portrait of the royal family, while spending £5,000 a year on clothing (more than £400,000 today).

Monarchs and their court were admired for their fashion sense and innovative style. Henry VIII's Spanish consort, Catherine of Aragon, is credited with popularising blackwork embroidery and one of the most striking, yet invisible, elements of Tudor fashionable dress – a hooped underskirt known as the ‘farthingale’, which created the distinctive conical shape of Princess Elizabeth’s red gown in William Scrots’ portrait (c.1546). In 1666 Charles II introduced the precursor of the three-piece suit – a long vest worn under a coat, instead of a short doublet and cloak. The fashion spread so quickly that three weeks later the diarist Samuel Pepys recorded wearing his own version. The same year Catherine of Braganza announced that she would start a trend for shorter skirts to coincide with the launch of the new vest by her husband.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, men’s clothing tended to emphasise features associated with masculinity, such as broad shoulders and long muscular legs. Male fashions matched those of women in the luxuriousness of materials and complexity of design, and elements of masculine dress were adopted by women. Samuel Cooper’s miniature of Frances Teresa Stuart (c.1663) and the portrait of Mary of Modena by Simon Verelst (c.1675) show the sitters attired in elaborate riding habits, which took their inspiration from male garments. By 1620 the matter of women wearing doublet-style bodices, hats and male hairstyles was of sufficient concern to be raised in church sermons under the express wishes of James VI and I.

A fashion closely associated with England during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods was a style of embroidery inspired by the natural world and linked to the Renaissance interest in the symbolism of flowers. Elizabeth I was characterised as the ‘Empresse of Flowers’ by John Davies in his poem Hymnes of Astraea (1599), and floral imagery frequently appears in portraits of the Queen. Contemporary herbals would have been an important source of inspiration for the lavish embroidery seen in Marcus Gheeradts’ enigmatic Portrait of an Unknown Lady (c.1590–1600). The subject wears a highly decorated costume, possibly for a court masque. Her headdress, constructed from puffs of muslin, is embellished with pansies, and her garments are embroidered with a serpentine design of flowers and birds.

High-maintenance and impractical clothing conveyed a clear message to the viewer that the subject of the portrait enjoyed a privileged lifestyle, and had plenty of spare time to devote to the pursuit of fashion and the lengthy process of dressing. For example, wearers of an elaborate ruff, like that seen in Nicholas Hilliard’s miniature of Elizabeth I (c.1595–1600), would have needed servants to set the layers and pleats with hot pokers and starch once a week. Similarly, the copious folds of Anne of Denmark’s elaborate skirt in Marcus Gheeradts’ portrait (1614) would have required daily pinning into place. The fashion for extending the fingers of gloves beyond the fingertips was a trend associated with Elizabeth I, who was particularly proud of her hands. It remained popular not only because of its royal origins, but also because long-fingered gloves in pale colours signalled that the sitter was of a high status and did not undertake manual work.

Just as today, the fashion accessories of the Tudor and Stuart period ranged from the quirky – a purse in the shape of a frog – to the ostentatious. Among the most important jewels of the period was the pear-shaped pearl known as ‘La Peregrina’ (The Wanderer), presented to Mary I by Philip II of Spain as a betrothal gift. Weighing 58.5 carats, it was the largest pearl in existence at the time of its discovery. It can be seen in portraits of both Mary I (by Antonis Mor van Dashorst, c.1554–59), and Margaret of Austria (by Pantoja de la Cruz c.1605), who was given the jewel when it reverted to the Spanish crown on Mary’s death.
The exhibition also explores the role of artists as stylists. The painter Sir Peter Lely modified the dress of his sitters to suit his own artistic sensibilities. Lely’s portraits show female courtiers, such as Frances Teresa Stuart (c.1662), wearing the artist’s own interpretation of fashionable clothing, which resembles unstructured lengths of shimmering silk fabric over a white linen shift. The loose classical-style drapery suggests the sitter is familiar with ancient texts and is consequently well educated and of high status. This is echoed by her apparent state of ‘undress’, a manner of attire only considered appropriate for the elite.

**The exhibition In Fine Style: The Art of Tudor and Stuart Fashion is at The Queen’s Gallery, Buckingham Palace, 10 May – 6 October 2013.**

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**Tickets and visitor information:** [www.royalcollection.org.uk](http://www.royalcollection.org.uk), T. +44 (0)20 7766 7301.

**A selection of images is available from** [www.picselect.com](http://www.picselect.com). For further information and photographs, please contact the Royal Collection Trust Press Office, +44 (0)20 7839 1377, press@royalcollection.org.uk.

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