

Introduction

There is a proverb in John Heywood's *Proverbs in the English Tongue*, published in 1546, which is still familiar: "I shall cut my cote after my cloth." Its inclusion in that early gathering shows that even at that date it was old. We now take it as an admonition to live within our means; with sumptuary laws such as "No man under the degree of a knight . . . may use more than 3 yards of cloth for a long gown" still in force, in Heywood's time it would have meant the same.

Yet there is another, more far-reaching meaning. The simple traditional garments of many cultures, changing infinitely slowly over long periods of time, have both consistency and incredible variety. What are the influences that govern their shapes and forms?

The body with its need for movement is a variable constant in the development of clothing. Climate has less influence on the cut and shape than might be expected, for some bundle up against the heat as much as others do against the cold. The terrain in which clothing is worn certainly influences its shape, for the movements necessary for life on a mountain-side are quite different from those of a person who spends most of his life on horseback on a plain. High social status, with its accompanying wealth and leisure, is reflected more in trimming and elaboration than in basic cut. The Pharaoh wore very fine and beautifully pleated linen but his garments were not basically different from the simple wrap-around skirts of his artisans and workmen. Attitudes towards the covering of the body have always had a considerable effect on the making of clothes. If a hampering garment could be casually dropped off while performing a task, it meant that it did not need to fit as well, or be fastened in place as securely, as in those parts of the world where the body was expected to be covered at all times. These factors are all important, but the material from which a garment is made is the factor that has the most influence on the particular shaping of it.

Basically, two separate developments eventually merge into one: cuts based on the shape of animal skins, and those dependent on the rectilinear form

of loom-woven cloth. Throughout the circumpolar regions garments are now frequently made of cloth, but their cut reflects the fact that in ages past they were made of skins.

Simple fabrics can be very similar in appearance regardless of period or area of origin, but man, with his infinitely varied cultures, has devised many shapes and sizes of looms with very varied capacities. These fit the cultures from which they come, some being for those accustomed to work standing, others where a squatting position was customary, and still others for various sitting positions either on the floor or raised above it. If, as in the ancient



Mediterranean world, the loom was wide and capable of making a fair length of material, the resulting garments were wide and draped, whereas in the east the looms were narrow and the garments were seamed and comparatively tight. This is reducing the vast and rather nebulous problem of interpreting patterns of dress to the most simple terms, but the indigenous clothes of many parts of the world bear out this rather sweeping thought.

With today's ease of manufacture we take textiles for granted and the wasting of cloth does not worry us. But for those closer to the processes



of production the attitude changes, and an extreme economy of material was practised in the cutting of traditional garments. This does not necessarily mean that very little material was used. Extra and unnecessary length could be employed for purposes of opulence, but full benefit was obtained from it and nothing was left over.

In ancient times, weaving far outstripped the techniques of cutting and sewing, with the result that garments were made with the cut edges as straight as possible and with selvages cleverly utilized to save the sewing of hems and to give strength where needed. Garments were cut neatly with little wastage from widths produced on the customary loom of the area. Smaller pieces, particularly underarm gussets, were often cut from finer and sometimes older material.

If there is a strong tradition of cutting a garment in a certain way due to the customary local width of cloth, that method will hold firm long after the introduction of materials of a different width from a more advanced loom. In the same way, if it is an area where, in ancient times, skin was the basic clothing material, the cuts of the cloth garments will often only make sense if it is borne in mind that the maker is subconsciously trained to work in a non-cloth tradition.

Few really old garments have survived, but the combination of those in the ROM with others published or available for research elsewhere,

along with the almost limitless supply of pictorial and written records and our own large and very varied collection of comparatively modern traditional garments, presents material ample enough to provide many researchers with a profitable lifetime of work. It is tantalizing that it is generally impossible to do more than touch the surface, and wonder what is under it.

The cuts of many garments in the Royal Ontario Museum collections have been worked out and the pieces re-arranged to see how they came from the original width of material. It has been a fascinating study opening up all sorts of possibilities for research. This small publication is only an introduction in the most general terms to the idea, since volumes of writing and many illustrations would be required to give any continuity to a subject which embraces the history of clothing throughout the whole world. Scattered examples will illustrate specific points that seem important to the author.

Detail from Pl. 4.