

Children, The Fashion Victims in 19th Century

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I . PROPOSAL

In the many books on period costume, the subject of children's clothes has seldom been treated adequately. Children have always been dressed as miniature-scale models of their parents, from ancient times to the present. Throughout, children's styles have mirrored adult's conceptions of childhood and the value of play. I want to study and re-search the 19th century's clothes for middle- and high-class children to know what children's wear looked like and to see their suitability for children.

II . HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Ancient and Medieval fashions were simple flowing and relatively unconfining. Adults and children dressed alike. But from the early Renaissance, clothing became more and more restrictive of movement, even of breathing. Children were subjected to the adult styles of the Elizabethan ruff, upholstered sleeves, whalebone corsets, tight armholes, high heels, farthingales, powdered hair, wigs, and for boys, miniature swords hung at their sides. Middle- and upper-class children were virtual showpieces for the exhibition of their parents' wealth. The prerogatives of childhood received scant respect; youth was folly and a thing to be dispensed with as quickly as possible.

Fashion, being highly class-conscious, depends for its very existence on exclusivity and thereby enabling the 'top' people to be clearly distinguished from the crowd. The snobbery of fashion was henceforth to be exercised on a wider scale than ever before as the rising middle classes, swollen in wealth, ambition and pretentiousness by the industrial revolution, proclaimed their self-importance by the ostentatious dress of their womenfolk and, increasingly of their children. The family was a prime status symbol, demonstration by its setting and its appearance the prosperity of the proud father who

supported it.

III. CHILDREN'S CLOTHES IN 19TH CENTURY

The skeleton suit and the simple white dress, for long worn by all classes, had no cachet left and were doomed to change. 'Between the years 1820 and 1825 comes the dawn of a new epoch in the history of costume', says James Laver, relating changes in the clothes of children closely to a general change. For the young it was a change for the worse. Repressive ideas, says Pearl Binder in an analysis of what happened, 'stepped on the heels of Rousseau's wild nature... and the children were soon the sufferers'. The idea of a purity of spirit in childhood disappeared. 'Prudery', continues Pearl Binder, 'clapped' pantaloons on to young girls, and boys found their necks encircled by enormous starched collars. Corsets, tight belts and voluminous petticoats encumbered children.

1. Boys

With the eclipse of the skeleton suit small boys suffered a throw-back into dresses similar to those of their sisters. At first the dresses were fairly simple, sometimes shorter than those of girls, but with the same frilly lace pantaloons showing beneath the hems and reaching to the ankles. But as time went on things got worse and small boys began to wear increasingly elaborate dresses. Fashion plates and paintings show robust little boys decked out in dresses thick with frills and underpinned with frilly pantaloons. Long hair came back into fashion, and fancy hats with flowers and feathers crowned the oppressive outfits foisted on small boys by parents. Instead of the comfortable pump-style shoes of earlier days they wore tight buttoned or laced boots.

2. Girls

Girls suffered most from the new fashion. From about 1825 their fuller skirts were braided and tucked; the fitted bodices were very tight, with rows of tucks and leg o'mutton sleeves. Pantaloons were still visible below the skirts of girls of all ages as well as small boys. Hats had never been so large, and probably never so uncomfortable, ranging from huge cartwheels to elaborately trimmed poke bonnets. Four or five petticoats held out the heavy velvet and woolen skirts, as they did those of women, and waists were pulled in with all the agonies of tight-lacing, imposed from early childhood by fashion-ruled mothers.

3. Infants

Even infants were caught up in the elaborate and ostentatious fashions which from

about the 1830s superseded the previous easy simplicity. Long clothes, which had previously usually reached only a few inches below the child's feet, became very long indeed, with skirts of more than a yard. They also became much fuller, like those of older children and of women, and they even featured fashionable puff sleeves in the 1830s and 1840s. Embroidery was used extensively to ornament them. Pelisses for out of doors were heavy and elaborate. Under dresses and pelisses went bodices and several petticoats, and the inevitable binder, now about 4~5 inches wide and some 30 inches long, made either of flannel or of linen sebbing.

IV. CONCLUSION

To hope and strive for the welfare and success of one's children, and indeed of all children, is bound up with all hope and belief in the value of life and the possibility of its betterment through human efforts. Such efforts, however, become meaningless and abortive unless they are based on an endeavour to understand children. It is difficult to believe that such an endeavour underlay the Victorian zeal for decking out their young in fashion which were not based on the wearers' needs or linkings but on the parents' desire to establish their personal importance and wealth or their endorsement of national greatness and grandeur, past or present. They were glorifying themselves, indulging in wishful thinking, perhaps subconsciously seeking an escape from an imperfect present by building their hopes on a better future, symbolized delusively by their dressed-up children. However mixed the reasons, the Victorians showed an extraordinary zeal for dressing up their children as miniature soldiers and sailors, as Highlanders and cavaliers and almost everything except happy, care-free children. Parental tyranny, oppressions and lack of understanding of the child were all rife behind the proud facade of triumphant industry and triumphant imperialism in 19th century.