

18th Century Days – Clothing Workshop Information

FABRICS AND COLORS

The most common fabrics in the 18th Century were wool, linen, cotton, and silk. Wool (from sheep) and linen (from the flax plant) could be processed and woven locally, and was therefore less expensive and more available. Cotton and silk were largely imported and were therefore more expensive. Men and women may have had a few cotton items, but usually only the upper classes could afford silk. They also did not have closets stuffed with clothes. A woman probably had one gown, made of fine wool or perhaps a printed cotton, which she considered “best” and would have worn to church on Sundays or for festive occasions. If she was getting married, her wedding gown would be her “best”. Her other clothes would be for working. Men would have one suit, most likely made of wool broadcloth, which would be his “best”.

These “best” clothes probably never saw a laundry tub, in fact, most of the outer garments may have only seen the tub a few times, if at all. The shift, shirt, and stockings would be washed with some frequency, as they were the clothes closest to the skin.

Since many fabrics were dyed at home, the colors would be produced with natural dyes. Indigo produced various shades of blue, onion skins or marigolds could produce pale yellows, and black walnuts hulls produced deep browns. Reds could be produced using dye from the madder plant. Green was produced by a double-dye bath of blue followed by yellow.

The local merchants might be able to procure fabrics in other colors, and perhaps some printed cottons, from Boston for sale in his shop, so other colors and finer fabrics could be purchased by the family, if they could afford them.

MAKING CLOTHES

The sewing machine was not invented until the mid-19th century, so most of the family’s clothing was made at home by hand. The local tailor or seamstress might be hired to make a special garment. Hand-me-downs were common, and very often an older garment, when worn in a few spots or simply falling out of fashion would be cut up and made into something new. There were no grommets, snaps, zippers, or velcro. Women’s garments were usually closed with lacings, hooks and eyes, and pins. Most men’s clothing used buttons (buttons on women’s clothing were usually strictly decorative).

WOMEN’S CLOTHING

Women in the 18th Century wore a shift, pockets, stays, petticoats, a gown, a kerchief, an apron, long stockings held up with garters, shoes, and a cap.

The shift was a long, calf-length garment, worn next to the skin, that is equivalent to today’s underwear. Depending on whether her family was wealthy or not, her shift might also be her nightgown. The sleeves around the 1770s were 3/4 length and covered the elbows (which were considered ugly in the 18th Century and were always covered), and it was made of white or off-

white linen. Pockets were actually pouches that a woman would tie around her waist by means of a cord, and her gown and petticoats would have slits to permit access. This is how a woman would carry all of her personal items. They were very often embroidered with crewel wools. Stays were the precursor to what became the corset in the 19th Century. Contrary to popular opinion, they are not uncomfortable. In the 18th Century, the ideal shape for a woman's body was conical, and the stays helped to achieve this look. Petticoats, what we today think of as skirts, were from mid-calf to ankle-length. The petticoats would be made of wool, linen, cotton, or silk, depending on whether they were for working garments or dress garments. The gown would be made of these same fabrics. The gown bodice and the skirt could be cut as one, in a style called *en ferrou*, or the bodice and skirt could be cut separately and sewn together at the waist. In both styles, the fabric of the bodice and skirt is the same, and usually the front of the gown skirt was open, revealing the petticoat underneath. The kerchief was a square piece of linen, wool, cotton, or silk, folded into a triangle, and was worn about the shoulders and around the neck, to protect a woman's skin from the elements (and provide a modicum of modesty – 18th Century gowns were very low-cut by today's standards). The apron was usually made of wool, because it is naturally flame-retardant (cooking in those open fireplaces could be dangerous), although linen was also used. For dress wear, an apron might be made of very fine white linen or may be embroidered. These were certainly not used around the fire! The stockings came up over the knee, hence the need for garters (often made of wool tape) to hold them up. Caps were made of white linen and came in a variety of styles, and were almost always worn, indoors and out.

For outdoors, a woman would put on a woolen long or short cloak in the cold weather, her bonnet (which was most often made of black silk, but did come in other colors and fabrics) or her straw hat, and her mitts (fingerless gloves which came up to about the elbow – she might also wear these around the house in the winter). If she was wealthy and could afford to have her hair done in the latest styles, she might have a calash to help protect her hair from wind and rain. The bonnet or hat and mitts would protect her skin from the sun, as white skin was prized. Only those who had to work in the fields had tans.

A woman might also have a shortgown, a bedgown, or some style of jacket which might or might not match her petticoat. In the 18th Century, people were less concerned with color coordination than we are today.

MEN'S CLOTHING

Men in the 18th Century wore a shirt, breeches or trousers, a neckcloth, waistcoat, frock coat, long stockings held up with garters, shoes, and a cap or hat.

The shirt was long, about knee-length, and had to be pulled over the head, as it only buttoned at the neck and wrists. Depending on whether the family was wealthy or not, his shirt might also be his nightshirt. It was most often made of white, off-white, or checked linen. The breeches would reach just past the knees, and the trousers would be ankle-length and looked very much like today's pants, although a bit high-water for today's sensibilities. Both were fairly tight-fitting around the thighs and rather baggy in the seat. This bagginess allowed a man to sit comfortably. They did not have a zipper; instead they closed with a front fall that buttoned just below the waist. Breeches could be made of wool, linen, cotton, or silk. Trousers were more of

a working garment and would have been made of linen or wool. The neckcloth could be either triangular or a long rectangle made of linen, cotton, or silk, and as the name implies, was tied about the man's neck. The waistcoat (pronounced *weskit*) was very similar to today's vest, although cut longer. By the 1770s, the waistcoat had gone from being nearly knee-length earlier in the century to upper-thigh length. This could also be made in wool, linen, or silk. The coat or frock coat was the outermost garment, also made of wool, linen, or silk. The tails, or skirts, would reach about knee-length, have buttons down the front (which might have been functional or may have been merely decorative), and cuffs, and the skirts would sort of sweep away from the front. Upper class gentlemen might have embroidery on either the waistcoat, the coat, or both. A man was not considered "dressed" unless he had his coat on, as shirtsleeves showing was considered "undressed" (however, he might take off his coat if working at some particularly dirty task). The stockings came up over the knee, hence the need for garters (often made of leather straps with buckles) to hold them up. For indoors, a man would probably put on a linen workman's cap.

For outdoors, a man would put on either a long cloak or a great coat made of wool in the cold weather, and his cocked hat or round hat, both made of wool felt.

CHILDREN'S CLOTHING

Up to about the age of five, little boys and girls were dressed alike. This means that even the boys wore dresses! Their clothing consisted of a shift, a gown or small frock, and a cap which laced under the chin. When children reached the toddler stage, they would often wear a pudding cap. This was a padded cap which would protect the head in the event of a fall. After about age five, boys dressed in smaller versions of their father's clothes, while girls would continue to wear a gown similar to what she wore when younger, until she was of an age to wear stays, at which time she would start to wear clothing more like her mother's. Generally only upper class children wore stays when very young.

If you have any questions about any of the information in this article, please feel free to call me at (508) 429-4424 or e-mail me at tj_chamberlain@verizon.net. I am always happy to discuss 18th Century clothing (as my husband will tell you!).

Workshop Outline

- Where did 18th Century clothing come from?
- What was it made from? How did they produce the colors?
Use dyed yarn swatches to illustrate colors.
- Describe clothing: men's, women's, children's.
Use examples on racks to illustrate: women's jacket & petticoat, men's suit, straw hat, etc. You can also use the paper dolls to explain a woman's gown, etc.
- Coloring activity pages
To take home.

At any point during the workshop, distribute the caps and hats to the children (make sure they are all returned!). You may want to suggest that they only put them on if they are comfortable about it and they don't have a rule at home about wearing other people's hats. There is also a set of girl's clothing and a set of boy's clothing for the children to try on. Select one boy and one girl from each group to try them on, in order to get the full effect of how the clothes appeared.

Suggested Questions

Here are some examples of questions to ask the children throughout your presentation (and some of these will inevitably lead to others). Encourage the children to think – please don't give them the answers.

Why were clothes made from wool and linen? Does anyone know what linen is made from?

Why were elbows covered?

Why were aprons made of wool?

How was the clothing made? Did they have sewing machines?

Why would women wear mitts outdoors in the middle of the summer?

Did they have velcro?

These are intended only as examples; other questions may occur to you from your reading, or from the children themselves.

Paper dolls are from *American Family of the Colonial Era* by Tom Tierney, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1983.

Coloring activity pages are from *Everyday Dress of the American Colonial Period* by Peter F. Copeland, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1975.

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