
COSTUME IN DETAIL

The MHS has an astonishing collection of historic costumes ranging from the early 1700s to the 1950s. This online publication explores pieces from the Society's collection. Each issue spotlights a different garment.

Issue 16 | Boy's Suit | 1870s

About:

The MHS

The Madison Historical Society, a nonprofit organization founded in 1917, preserves, collects, interprets, and promotes the history and heritage of Madison for present and future generations.

About:

The author

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Boy's suit, velveteen, cotton, linen, and lace. 1870s. # 81.140 a b c.
Photos by Bob Gundersen.

Left: front detail. Top right: collar detail. Bottom right: back jacket detail.



To Suit a Suit

Hiding behind his mother's vast bustled skirt is a young boy, about six or seven years old. He clutches at her hand and looks out at the world from a face framed by long curls and an intricate lace collar. He is dressed in a manner more similar to his mother, who dons expressively trimmed silk, than his father, who wears a somber, gray wool suit. The boy's blue velvet jacket and breeches paired with a blouse with lace trimming are what we think of today as "girlish." Why did the Victorians, notorious for their strict ideas of gender, require boys to dress in fancy frills and luscious velvet?



The Angel in the Crib

In the nineteenth century, the perception of children changed. In the seventeenth century, children were perceived as innately sinful. In the eighteenth century, children were viewed as morally blank slates. Then, the common practice was to dress infants in long gowns. After the age of four, they were dressed in copies of adult clothing. In the 1800s, however, children began to be thought of as fundamentally sinless. The quotation below, analyzing gender differences in clothing, explains how this influenced children's dress:

"Parallelling this view of children as innocents, children's clothing throughout most of the 19th century worked to obscure gender differences as long as possible, as well as postpone adult clothing until the early teens." Claudia Kidwell and Valerie Steele, *Men and Women: Dressing the Part* (p. 32). Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989.

The belief that children were morally pure past infancy, and the desire to promote that revered trait, spurred the creation of "children's dress." The awareness that innocence would eventually be lost was much sharper regarding boys. The loss was often mourned for a short period by their mothers, but boys were permitted to lose their sweetness and innocence – girls were not. They were expected to retain these attributes into adulthood. Thus, the value of innocence was attached to "feminine" guises, such as frills, velvet, and lace.

The idea that the angelic quality of young boys was gradually lost led to the process of easing boys out of "feminine" dress and innocence and into "masculine" awareness and clothing.



Mary Cassatt, *Mother About to Wash Her Sleepy Child*, 1880, oil on canvas, from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
This work is an example of the "angelic child."

Dressing the Cherub

MATERIALS & TECHNIQUES | Construction

The construction of this suit is common for the era. The pleated linen shirt has a waistband with bone buttons that connect to buttonholes on a canvas panel applied inside the breeches. The breeches are lined with strong, brown cotton twill and close at the hips with an exterior tortoiseshell button and interior bone button. Decorative buttons occur throughout, and every edge is bound by black silk tape.

What a boy actually wore was dependent on his age. As a toddler, he might wear a gown with a short skirt. Following this phase would come “breeching” – the time when a boy received his first pair of the knee-length pants known as breeches. This textbook describes the process:

“After age five or so, boys no longer wore skirts but changed to trousers or knickers. ... Boys’ knickers of the 1870s became more fitted, resembling knee breeches of [the] 18th century.” - Phyllis G. Tortora and Keith Eubank, *Survey of Historic Costume*, Fourth Edition (p. 350), 2005

This suit belonged to a boy past his first trousers, around six or seven. However, the age of the child at breeching could be defined by the mother and by the appearance of “manly” traits in the boy.¹ Further characterizing this suit to one of mid-boyhood is the jacket, worn over the shirt when graduating from a first suit. This suit was intended for special occasions and was thus made of velveteen, which was inexpensive but unsuitable for everyday wear.² This suit would have made the seven-year-old wearer presentable for important occasions and also communicated to others that this boy was on his way to becoming a man.



Boy's Suit, 1870s. Velveteen, cotton, linen, and lace. #81.140 a b c.
Photos by Bob Gundersen. From the collections of MHS.

¹ Kidwell, Claudia and Steele, Valerie. *Men and Women: Dressing the Part* (p. 32). Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989.

² “Fashion Department: Fashions for Children.” *Arthur's Lady's Home Magazine*, Volume 40 (p. 14), August 1872.