

## Fashion on Coins III: Clothes

By Carol Schwyzer, © MoneyMuseum

"Fashion is not just a matter of clothing. Fashion has something to do with ideas, and therefore how we live," the author Oscar Wilde (\*1854, †1900) believed. Fashion is part of our culture: it mirrors the social circumstances and the spirit of an époque.

Since time immemorial clothes have been part of the history of human kind. As a second skin, they protect us from heat and cold and other environmental influences. In addition they allow the individual to draw attention to his or her appearance or to change it. Even Ötzi, the 5,300-year-old man out of the ice, wore a goatskin jacket effectively combined with light and dark stripes. Clothes are simply not just useful; thanks to them you can please, seduce, impress or document that you belong to a group.

Up into the 20th century fashion was a matter for the upper classes. It enabled the powerful and influential to present themselves as was fitting and dissociate them from the bulk of the people. Currently fashion seems – thanks to mass production – to have become more democratic. The fine differences in material and tailoring, however, still remain.

This picture tour shows how fashion changed on coins.

## Erotically packaged



**Stater, minted by the Cretan town of Gortyn, around 320-280 BC**

Europa, the princess with the beautiful eyes (from Greek *eurus* = far and *ops* = eye), is seated in a plane tree. She wears a see-through chiton, which seductively emphasises her breasts.

The beauty after whom a continent was named was sexy, also for Zeus, the father of the gods. In the figure of a white bull he abducted her to Gortyn on Crete, where he fathered three children with her under the aforementioned plane tree.

In ancient Greece the chiton was worn next to the body by men (knee-length) and by women (down to the ground) as a slip next to the body. It often served as the only article of clothing. It consisted of a square of material stitched together on one side, was draped and held together by belts, needles and broaches.

The Greeks' chitons were made of natural and simple materials such as linen or wool. Cuts as we know them today were unknown to the Greek clothing of antiquity, it was based on rectangular pieces of material which could be placed and draped in various ways around the body.

## Practical and adapted to the way of life



**Siglos, minted under the Persian king Darius II (423-404 BC), Sardis, around 420 BC**

A completely new kind of clothing was introduced by the Indo-Germanic nations of horsemen (Scythians, Medes, Persians), who in the 1st millennium BC advanced from the Ukraine to the Middle East as well as eastern and central Europe.

Being cattle breeders, they used the skins and hides of their animals for their clothing. These could not be draped and wrapped like material, but had to be cut up and stitched together. This style was kept in the materials that were used later. At the same time, the clothing was adjusted completely to the practical requirements of a belligerent nation of horsemen: belted shirts with sleeves, long trousers and boots.

On this coin the Persian king Darius II the Great, kneeling in the battle position of an archer, ready to hurl his spear and to overcome the enemy with volleys of arrows. Over long trousers he is wearing the typical Persian shirt in a lengthened form as was usual for members of the court. The characteristic skirt pleated at the side resulted from the width of the robe being pinned up on the belt.

## Decreed by the state



Denarius serratus, minted under the Roman mint master Aulus Postumius Albinus, Rome, 81 BC

The man on this coin no doubt represents an ancestor of the mint master. Lucius Postumius Albinus, who was praetor in Spain in 180 BC, is wearing the toga over the tunic, the characteristic garment of the Roman citizen. To this he had put on the calceus prescribed for the toga, a shoe with leather shoelaces, which extended above the ankles.

It was in the toga, a piece of cloth (usually made of wool), measuring up to 6 metres in length and 3.5 metres wide, that the Romans' interpretation of the state was reflected. The rather impractical wrap-around garment indicated the difference between the free Roman citizen, the togatus, from all the foreigners and serfs. The toga was the state garment and national costume, which forced those who wore it to adopt a dignified demeanour through the draped quantity of material.

The different variants of the toga were subject to rigid rules, which did not permit any individual latitude. Higher magistrates and priests as well as pre-pubescent boys wore a toga with a purple-coloured edge. The simple men's toga was white, or dark in the case of bereavement or religious ceremonies. The completely purple toga with gold embroidered signs of dignity could only be worn by the victorious general at the triumphal procession.

## Paralysed by luxury



**Histamenon, minted under the Byzantine emperors Basil II and Constantine VIII (976-1025), Constantinople**

The partition of the Roman Empire into Western and Eastern Rome in 395 AD subsequently resulted in a different cultural development of the two empires. When the last emperor was deposed in 476 by the Germanic tribes Western Rome fell; Eastern Rome, on the other hand, was to last another 1,000 years. Accordingly the clothing also underwent a different cultural development in both areas. In what was formerly Western Rome, clothing adopted Germanic elements, while oriental components entered into Byzantine garments.

This coin shows the brothers Basil II and Constantine VIII, who officially governed Byzantium jointly. Basil, who ruled de facto alone, holds the higher-ranking position (seen from the front on the left) and wears the dalmatika, the tunic reserved for members of the government, which is embroidered with the austere, circular, golden ornaments of the time. Over the long-armed tunic Constantine wears the magnificent semicircular state coat, the paludamentum, which is closed with sumptuous clasps on the left shoulder.

The exquisite clothing of the two emperors shows the preference of the Byzantines for splendour and glitter. Since Justinian I had introduced silkworm breeding around 550 a veritable cult with expensive, interwoven silk materials developed. The gowns and ornaments were at times so heavy that their wearers were hardly able to move any more and so gave the picture of a figure paralysed by luxury.

## Uncomfortable, but beautiful



Ducaton, minted under Vincenzo I Gonzaga, duke of Mantua (1587-1612), 1589

Under the Renaissance ruler Vincenzo I Gonzaga, Mantua blossomed into a centre of art in Italy. That the duke had good taste is shown in his portrait on the coin. He is wearing an artistically decorated suit of armour, and the expression is of a sense of beauty and at the same time a fitness to fight.

What is conspicuous is the ruff, which presents the good-looking, naturally styled male head of hair on a platter, so to speak. The ruff originated in the 16th century from the end of the collar that was pulled up from the frills of the collar. It was usually made of white, strengthened linen and was "quiffed" with curling tongs. Under the influence of the Spanish court and its formal fashion – Spain with its overseas colonies set the tone as a world power not only politically, but also culturally – the ruff became the fixed outdoor component of the male and female dress in the whole of Europe.

This was, however, not comfortable, especially after the ruff had assumed the inviting form of the so-called millstone collar in 1580. It forced its wearer to remain immobile and required longer spoons so that he was able to eat at all. But beauty has to suffer, in those times like today.

## The form perfectly presented



Double taler, minted under Adolf Friedrich I, duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin (1592-1628), Gadebusch, 1613

In this portrait of Adolf Frederick I a baroque ruler presents himself in an accomplished pose. The duke appears leaning slightly backwards in chain armour, which is like an elegant court costume. The chain armour is additionally refined by the collar being pulled up. The waist, accentuated by the belt, seems to be very slender for a man.

The duke together with his gown and the slightly propped up arms forms a triangle. The head with its high brow, classical nose and goatee also makes a triangular impression. The collar as well as the middle part of the gown with the waist repeat the triangle. Thus an ingenious total art work is created, in which the clothing and the person go together. Here fashion draws attention to the biological body by a second costumed body to such an extent that an aesthetically exaggerated, fictional image of the real body emerges.

## Powerful and yet feminine



5 roubles, minted under the Russian czarina Catharine II (1762-1796), St. Petersburg, 1765

What does a female ruler in the rococo era indicate when she has placed herself on the coin with a plunging neckline? With the low neckline she consciously stresses her femininity and erotic charisma. "Look, I'm not just your ruler, I am also an elegant and attractive woman," Catherine the Great seems to be saying.

Born as a Prussian princess, Sophie Auguste Friederike von Anhalt-Zerbst-Dornburg was called to Russia to marry Peter, the good-for-nothing Russian successor to the throne. Alone and left to her own devices, but clever, charming and energetic, she managed to become an enlightened, autocratic ruler of one of the most powerful states in the 18th century. "My heart cannot live one hour without love," said the passionate woman, who had more than 20 lovers known by name, including the famous field marshal, Grigory Alexandrovich Potemkin.

Depending on the fashion, the neckline was disapproved of at certain times and at others was widespread. In the rococo era – influenced by the trend-setting French court – low-cut necklines and the crinoline for upper-class ladies was a must.

## Low-cut necklines in the widow's veil



Taler, restrike of the taler minted under the Hapsburg monarch Maria Theresa (1740-1780), Günzburg, 1780

The rococo era is often called the age of women. Not only such women as Anne of England, Maria Theresa of Austria, Catherine II of Russia or – unofficially – in France Louis XV's beautiful and educated mistress determined the fortunes of European monarchs in the 18th century. The fair sex also formed the sought-after centre of life at the courts. Accordingly the fashion with crinoline, ribbons and a tight bodice presented itself with feminine playfulness. The low neckline revealed the breast and directed glances at the symbol of feminine identity.

The Hapsburg ruler Maria Theresa, too, presents herself on this taler with a magnificent swelling breast. However, it is not eroticism and the power of seduction that is central here: the mother of 16 children radiates – in spite of her fashionable neckline – maternal maturity. Her bosom tends to have a nurturing effect; you could have a good cry on it and obtain consolation. The widow's veil, which the monarch had worn ever since the death of her beloved husband Francis Stephan of Lorraine in 1765, emphasises the impression of the worthy and yet sensitive mother of the country.

## Immortally classic



1 franc, minted under the French emperor Napoleon I (1804-1814), Paris, 1810

Like the franc, on which he had his portrait placed, the small Corsican Napoleon Bonaparte was a child of the French Revolution. Not through aristocratic birth, but by brilliant military achievements as a general, he rose to become the first consul of France in 1799 and the French emperor in 1804.

On the coin he appears to be quite unassuming and natural, with short hair and uncovered chest. Without a wig and also without court pomp, such as the last French kings loved. The "empereur" only carries a laurel wreath.

Since antiquity the laurel wreath had been regarded as a mark of distinction for outstanding achievements. In ancient Rome the military victors carried it on returning to Rome. Later it crowned the emperors of the powerful Roman Empire. By choosing the laurel to appear on his coin Napoleon took up a classical symbol, one that was always present and which will no doubt never go out of fashion, for in the timeless laurel the vision lit up to rule a great, strong empire and to place himself in the ranks of such heroes as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar.

## Demonstrating authority in uniform



Baht undated, minted under the Thai king Rama IX (since 1946), 1963

On this baht King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand – officially Rama IX – is wearing the uniform of the highest commander-in-chief of his country. Although the time when kings reigned absolutely over Thailand is long over: since 1932 the military had repeatedly seized power by means of coups. Nevertheless the king with an interest in natural science, who often personally takes care of the concerns of his subjects, is considered to be an honoured integrating figure. In the crisis in 1992, when the conflict between democrats and the then ruler Suchinda Kraprayoon escalated, Bhumibol demonstratively appeared wearing the uniform of the highest commander-in-chief. He thereby signalised authority, which finally ended the conflict peacefully.

The kind of uniform as we still know it today began to develop in the age of absolutism. For anyone like Louis XIV, the epitome of the absolute ruler, who constantly waged war, needed an army that appeared cohesive and visibly uniform. Consistent clothing creates and places affiliation with a formation over the individual personality. Rank and function of the individual are recognisable from such details as stripes, epaulets and insignia.

## A matter of lifestyle



5 euros, a commemorative coin designed by Karl Lagerfeld for the 125th birthday of the French fashion creator Coco Chanel (\*1883, †1971), issued by the French Republic in 2008

For a long time fashion expressed – in addition to beauty – that one was rich enough to wear splendid clothing, which allowed no other activity but decorative posing. But then the 20th century brought with it the emancipation of women and the invention of off-the-peg garments which allowed to engage in sports and work and which were available to all social strata.

Coco Chanel was the epitome of a modern woman. She lived a self-determined life, had numerous lovers without ever marrying and designed fashion until her death. She started with herself personally and became an example. If she cut her hair off, everyone cut off their hair. When she wore shorter skirts, the whole world wore short skirts. The fashion designer revolutionised fashion by means of plain functional models with distinct lines. Instead of a corset the woman seen by Chanel wore clothes made of cotton jersey that were loosely lapped around her body; and in place of the colours that changed every season she wore the classic "non-colours" black, white and beige. For Chanel fashion and lifestyle were inextricably combined. What was beautiful for her was not the idle society lady, but the active woman living life to the full.