

THE IMPORTANCE OF WEARING CLOTHES

by
1890-
LAWRENCE LANGNER

With an introduction by James Laver
formerly of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London

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The artistic body painting and decoration which antedated clothing is shown in this fanciful portrait of ancient Britons published March 10, 1804, by J. Wilkes, London. The blue woad used as paint doubtless afforded little protection against the British climate.

Introduction

by James Laver

Late of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London

When we consider the importance of the subject of Lawrence Langner's book, we may well be astonished that so few psychologists have seen fit to study the clothes we wear with any degree of sustained attention. Perhaps the first attempt to deal with the matter was made by the early Fathers of the Church, but their attitude was rather theological than psychological. What psychology they had was too simple; clothes (so soon as they were anything but mere coverings for the body) were Vanity. The Puritans of the Reformation period and after, took very much the same line; clothes—fashionable clothes—were a device of the Devil, a perpetual incitement for the lust of the eye and the pride of life. Later writers who had lost this moral impetus were inclined to think that they had explained the whole matter by talking of the "Follies of Fashion." They believed, in short, that the extraordinary changes which have taken place in dress during the last few hundred years needed no explaining, being completely arbitrary and meaningless. It is surprising how many people hold this view even today.

Carlyle was perhaps the first to bring a massive mind to bear on the subject; and *Sartor Resartus* starts with some really illuminating notions. But Carlyle soon grew tired of clothes as such and, jumping on several of his hobbyhorses, like the man in Stephen Leacock's story, "galloped off in all directions." Oscar Wilde, after demanding "a notable and joyous dress" for men, ceased, in middle life, to attire himself like little Lord Fauntleroy and adopted the garb of the conventional dandy. He did not really understand the problem at all.

The man who made one of the most important contributions to our understanding of the whole question was Professor J. C. Flügel, of the Department of Psychology in the University of London, author of the treatise which appeared in 1930 under the title *Psychology of Clothes*. Flügel deals comprehensively with every aspect of the subject, but his most valuable suggestion lay in his insistence on the essential ambivalence of our attitude to clothing of all kinds. We tend, he said, to regard clothes from two incompatible points of view; on the one hand, as a means of displaying our attractions, on the other hand as a means of hiding our shame. He compared clothes to "a perpetual blush upon the surface of humanity." He also invented the notion of the "shifting erogenous zone" which has been used by others, including the present writer, as a starting point for explaining the perpetual changes of female fashion.

Lawrence Langner proposes an entirely new line of inquiry, and on many counts is peculiarly fitted for the task he has undertaken. He is not a professional psychologist, although he is certainly fully acquainted with psycho-analytical literature. He has spent a large part of his life as an expert on inventions, and in the course of his work has been involved in many patents relating to clothing. Inventions of all kinds come within his purvey, and some of the originality of his attitude to clothes lies in his regarding them primarily as inventions. But his avocation is, and has long been, the theatre and, as a director of The Theatre Guild and founder of The American Shakespeare Festival, he has had ample opportunity of studying both modern and historical costume. From his own vast experience in both fields, he is able to draw some most illuminating conclusions.

In psychology he is a disciple rather of Adler than of Freud, and it is this different slant which distinguishes him from most of those who have tried to use the new psychology to explain the clothes we wear. Adler laid it down that "the psyche has as its objective the goal of superiority"; and, starting from this dictum, Langner elaborates his whole theory, it must be admitted, in a most convincing manner. Our author is firmly convinced that without the invention of clothes and all the psychological consequences that have flowed therefrom, civilization would never have progressed as far as it has. It is clothes that make it possible for governments to obtain obedience, religions reverence, judiciaries a respect for law, and armies discipline. In a Turkish bath all hierarchy as well as a certain amount of adipose tissue is dissolved away.

That Lawrence Langner has entirely unravelled the complicated web which students of the psychology of dress must strive to unravel, he would be the last to claim, but he has certainly written a most stimulating book, perhaps the most stimulating since Flügel's, and thrown a flood of light into some dark places of the human soul. Tennyson, pondering his "flower in the crannied wall" was moved to write:

Little flower, but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all
I should know what God and man is.

So perhaps if we could understand the full significance of a woman's hat we would know not only what God and Man is but, peradventure, Woman too.