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Dressing For Success: From Charles VIII To Steve Jobs



Do you still need a suit and tie to dress like a leader? Depends on where you work and who you are, according to this jaunt through the last few centuries. (Photo credit: Shutterstock)

It's hard to imagine that anyone – male or female – does NOT own a pair of jeans, a black turtleneck sweater and a pair of sneakers. It's perfectly acceptable garb for both sexes for, say, a Saturday afternoon running errands or even going to the movies. Granted there may be differences in the materials, workmanship and cost of those garments that will be a status differentiator: a Gucci label may outrank Levis for example. But overall, the “look” is the same and no one objects as long as you're not going to, say, a wedding or a funeral.



But look back a few hundred years, to the 15th century, and we find that royal edicts directed who could wear what and levied penalties and fines for transgressors. To wit, an edict from France's Charles VIII in 1485 forbidding all but the nobility from wearing velvet and silk. That way, you could tell right away who fit which rank by the material of his or her clothing.

The bible of etiquette and dress for that era, and indeed for centuries to come, was penned by Italian courtier Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529), for whom the street in Paris leading from the Tuileries to the Place Vendome is named. Based on the conduct of the ducal court of Orvino in Castiglione's native Italy, *Il Libro del Cortegiano* (The Book of the Courtier) was published in Venice in 1528 and is still available today. And you can catch a glimpse of Castiglione himself if you visit the Louvre and ask to see his portrait, painted in 1514/1515 by his close friend Raphael.

(Art history buffs may be interested to know that the portrait made its way to France, and hence the Louvre royal palace, with Cardinal Jules Raymond Mazzarin [born Giulio Raimondo Mazzarini in Pescina, Italy] – who served as First Minister under Louis XIII and Louis XIV; it was the latter who obtained the portrait from Mazzarin's heirs at the cardinal's death.)

Makeup for Mern?

Fast-forward to the 18th century in France – whose royal court set the world fashion style – and we see even stricter etiquette, with court presentation attire being more important than the wedding gown. After 1760, men's breeches' matching their coat and vest was *de rigeur*. Makeup was an essential part of fashion and social distinction during these halcyon court days: only the wealthy could afford to powder their faces white, and both men and women wore makeup.

By the time Louis XVI became king (1774), France- inspired by the cross-pollination of trans-Atlantic philosophies and the likes of Benjamin Franklin – was becoming more democratic. This was reflected in fashion...though the democratic trend did not end well for the king. Men slowly stopped wearing makeup; women opted for loose fitting dresses in public – not without eliciting public outcry. Indeed, a portrait of French Queen Marie Antoinette in a robe chemise (shirt dress), painted by Elizabeth Louise Vigee-Lebrun for the Royal Academy show in 1781, caused such an uproar in polite society that it had to be removed and replaced with another of the Queen in the more formal robe francaise (French dress) – complete with padded hips and well-girded bodice.



That informal look continued through the French revolution and the ensuing governments in France until Napoleon took power and clamped down on etiquette and dress. Indeed, in 1800, under the French Directorate, women were forbidden to wear breeches or anything resembling men's clothing without getting special permission from the police.

By the end of the 19th century, only the very rich – those with time and money – could afford to indulge in fashion. As many as eight wardrobe changes were required to get through the day: men and women went through bedroom clothing, morning dress, walking outfits, afternoon dress, tea gowns (for women), dinner attire. Women, given the complexity of their garments, seemed to spend more time dressing than actually doing anything.

Two world wars put pay to those habits, and a changing world resulted in a much less formal social structure, with fewer servants. Coco Chanel did away with corsets for women of all social ranks, though morning dresses, tea dresses and cruise wear existed well into the 1950s. By the 1960's, thanks to Yves St Laurent, women were in pantsuits for good, though France's law against women wearing pants and anything considered men's wear was not repealed until 2013. Yes, 2013.

The Entrepreneur's Style

Today, the entrepreneurial culture has introduced its own fashion sense: think of the late Steve Jobs looking cool and in command on stage in black turtleneck sweater and blue jeans. Even banks and accounting firms have relaxed dress codes on casual Fridays. Over-dressing has become a kind of bad taste, even sending an image of trying too hard.

But even if the trend in your office is wearing jeans, you do not have carte blanche to be sloppy. There's an important difference, says Michele Oppenheimer, a Los Angeles-based fashion consultant from high-end shops such as Saks Fifth Avenue.

"Really everything goes today," she answered me in an email. "I recently had a conversation with a CEO of an advertising agency. She is 60 years old. She was concerned about looking old or passé, because the agency's clients were 25, and all wearing jeans and tee shirts.

I told her that she could wear jeans and a tee shirt as well, if her desire was only to fit in with the client. To me, I would want to convey to my client my ability to bring them to the next level, and to help them with my expertise. Therefore the aim would be to look clean, attractive and well groomed without being rigid."

It's not only men who may be undecided about how to exude authentic leadership without looking rigid. Oppenheimer believes that has to come from within.

"If a guy hates ties, he shouldn't wear them, because he will appear stuffy. You can look very smart with black jeans, and a white or black tee, with a leather blazer. It's vital, however, that no matter what you are wearing you are well groomed, hair, and nails."

But just as you are expressing your inner-self with your outward apparel, you may find yourself working for a company that wants you to present their look, their brand. Hence the dress code remains in a few places. Why?

"Because they want their employees to represent the firm, the brand, when on the job," Oppenheimer points out. "For men and women, clothing represents affiliation to a group, and that first impression comes before you hand out your business card."

Author's Note: *Inspiration for this article came from an exhibition at la Musee des Arts Decoratifs in Paris entitled "Tenue Correcte Exigee." For more information please visit: www.lesartsdecoratifs.fr.*

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