



Question-1

Why are 19th and 20th centuries important in the history of clothing?

Solution:

Before the age of democratic revolutions and the development of capitalist markets in eighteenth-century Europe, most people dressed according to their regional codes, and were limited by the types of clothes and the cost of materials that were available in their region. Clothing styles were also strictly regulated by class, gender or status in the social hierarchy.

After the eighteenth century, the colonisation of most of the world by Europe, the spread of democratic ideals and the growth of an industrial society, completely changed the ways in which people thought about dress and its meanings. People could use styles and materials that were drawn from other cultures and locations, and western dress styles for men were adopted worldwide. The French Revolution transformed many aspects of social and political life. The revolution also swept away existing dress codes, known as the sumptuary laws. Let us look briefly at what these laws were.

Question-2

What were sumptuary laws?

Solution:

In medieval Europe, dress codes were sometimes imposed upon members of different layers of society through actual laws which were spelt out in some detail. From about 1294 to the time of the French Revolution in 1789, the people of France were expected to strictly follow what were known as 'sumptuary laws.' The laws tried to control the behaviour of those considered social inferiors, preventing them from wearing certain clothes, consuming certain foods and beverages (usually this referred to alcohol) and hunting game in certain areas. In medieval France, the items of clothing a person could purchase per year was regulated, not only by income but also by social rank. The material to be used for clothing was also legally prescribed. Only royalty could wear expensive materials like ermine and fur, or silk, velvet and brocade. Other classes were debarred from clothing themselves with materials that were associated with the aristocracy. The French Revolution ended these distinctions.

The members of the Jacobin clubs even called themselves the 'sans culottes' to distinguish themselves from the aristocracy who wore the fashionable 'knee breeches'. Sans culottes literally meant those 'without knee breeches'. From now on, both men and women began wearing clothing that was loose and comfortable. The colours of France – blue, white and red – became popular as they were a sign of the patriotic citizen. Other political symbols too became a part of dress: the red cap of liberty, long trousers and the revolutionary cockade pinned on to a hat. The simplicity of clothing was meant to express the idea of equality.

Question-3

How were sumptuary laws protect the home production against imports?

Solution:

Some sumptuary laws were passed to protect home production against imports. For instance, in sixteenth-century England, velvet

caps made with material imported from France and Italy were popular amongst men. England passed a law which compelled all persons over six years of age, except those of high position, to wear woollen caps made in England, on Sundays and all holy days. This law remained in effect for twenty-six years and was very useful in building up the English woollen industry.

Question-4

What were the new materials used for clothing?

Solution:

Before the seventeenth century, most ordinary women in Britain possessed very few clothes made of flax, linen or wool, which were difficult to clean. After 1600, trade with India brought cheap, beautiful and easy-to-maintain Indian chintzes within the reach of many Europeans who could now increase the size of their wardrobes.

Then, during the Industrial Revolution, in the nineteenth century, Britain began the mass manufacture of cotton textiles which it exported to many parts of the world, including India. Cotton clothes became more accessible to a wider section of people in Europe. By the early twentieth century, artificial fibres made clothes cheaper still and easier to wash and maintain. In the late 1870s, heavy, restrictive underclothes, which had created such a storm in the pages of women's magazines, were gradually discarded. Clothes got lighter, shorter and simpler. Yet until 1914, clothes were ankle length, as they had been since the thirteenth century. By 1915, however, the hemline of the skirt rose dramatically to mid-calf.

Question-5

What were the impacts of the World War on clothing?

Solution:

Changes in women's clothing came about as a result of the two World wars. Many European women stopped wearing jewellery and luxurious clothes. As upper-class women mixed with other classes, social barriers were eroded and women began to look similar. Clothes got shorter during the First World War (1914-1918) out of practical necessity. By 1917, over 700,000 women in Britain were employed in ammunition factories. They wore a working uniform of blouse and trousers with accessories such as scarves, which was later replaced by khaki overalls and caps. Bright colours faded from sight and only sober colours were worn as the war dragged on. Thus clothes became plainer and simpler. Skirts became shorter. Soon trousers became a vital part of Western women's clothing, giving them greater freedom of movement. Most important, women took to cutting their hair short for convenience.

By the twentieth century, a plain and austere style came to reflect seriousness and professionalism. New schools for children emphasised the importance of plain dressing, and discouraged ornamentation. Gymnastics and games entered the school curriculum for women. As women took to sports, they had to wear clothes that did not hamper movement. When they went out to work they needed clothes that were comfortable and convenient. So we see that the history of clothing is linked to the larger history of society.

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