The Toch

Sherlock Holmes Examines The Shirt On Your Back

It's likely that Sherlock Holmes, who was able to tell a man's personality, marital status, occupation, and problems from the clothes he wore, would have more troubles today. A revolution in clothing-making has made old social distinctions difficult. The next time you're riding on a bus, take a look at the man seated next to you. The cut of his clothes will probably tell you only one thing: whether he's sloppy or neat. It would be hard to draw any further conclusions.

In one famous story, Holmes decided a man was a butcher by the style of his shirt collar. In those days, the shirt you wore was like a neon sign—a definite indication of your job. Bartenders were famous for their candy-striped shirts with contrasting collars, ties for their cardboard-starched white shirts, and a worker was never without his bone-stiff ebony front.

Chassy Shirts

Shirts have long been identified with certain classes and occupations. In ancient Greece, only the slaves were shirtless; everyone else wore loose-fitting robes. To the Romans, a shirt meant a foreigner; they themselves preferred tunics. For the knights of the middle ages, a shirt was more than just a garment—its metal surface protected their lives from the lance. And when they went in for more relaxing entertainment, it was the man with the laciest ruffles who won the hand of the maid in distress.

In the early days of the United States, men of distinction were never seen in public without their lace collars. Even such hardy revolutionaries as Thomas Jefferson and George Washington affected this custom. Generals rode into battle with a proper touch of silk at the neck, and hardly an officer could be found who didn't copy their fashion lead.

Those Casual Americans

It could even be argued that shirt styles helped win the War for Independence. Benjamin Franklin, appointed ambassador to France for the colonies during the Revolution, accused the fancy vestments of the Europeans. He usually appeared at receptions dressed in the simple, honest and unadorned shirts that symbolized the new America. This lack of affectation endeared him to the French, and it was largely through their help that the colonies obtained their military supplies.

The color of a shirt has often had political significance. The British soldiers, known as the redcoats, could have more properly been called the "red-shirts." It was usually the only garment they wore on their chests, and its brightness made a perfect target for the American soldiers. In the Civil War, the shirts of blue and grey separated a great nation for four bloody years. And in many sweet times, radical groups have used the shirt as their rallying symbol. The black shirts of the Fascists, the red ones of the Communists, and the brown ones of the Nazis are an unforgettable reminder of terror.

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