

Teaching Guide

Why Shirts Have Buttons The Origins of Clothing



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Contents

Why Shirts Have Buttons contains a 23 minute program and this study guide. Catalog number LS-1259-02. Owners of the video may reproduce the pages in this guide for classroom use.

Summary

You've seen histories of clothing that give a century-by-century account of what people wore. We start with what we wear today and trace it back to its often fascinating and entertaining origins.

Buttons

True or false? Buttons were invented to hold clothes together. False. At first, buttons were wearable art, not fasteners.

Shoes

High heels and colorful, ornately decorated shoes were originally a "guy thing." Women's long dresses hid shoes.

Shoelaces

Thomas Jefferson made the news by giving a speech wearing shoes with laces. Why?

Who put the zip in zippers?

Why were zippers invented? Why do so many zippers bear the mysterious initials YKK?

Military Influence

What men wear today began as part of a military uniform. Consider: zippers, bomber jackets, trench coats, ties, khaki.

Colors

Women wear colorful clothes, men stick with black and neutrals.

Wristwatches

The wristwatch was originally a piece of jewelry for women. A man would carry a watch on a chain in a watch pocket. Find out how World War I changed this.

Shirts

Who ever decided to put those tiny buttons on the flaps of shirt collars? Would you believe they were invented to make playing a sport easier?

Sport Jackets

What does a sport jacket have to do with sports? Why do many men's suit jackets have a slit in the back? Hint: It too was "invented" to make a sport activity easier.

Why do men wear pants?

Throughout history men wore garments with a silhouette more like a mini-skirt than modern day trousers. For centuries, soldiers went into battle wearing what we would call skirts.

Formal Dresses

Today's formal wedding dresses are not unlike what upperclass women once wore to take a stroll in the park.

Hats

Around the turn of the century, women wore huge decorative hats. Five million birds a year were killed just to make feathers for hats. The Audubon Society was founded in 1896 to protest this fashion trend.

Dressing Up

We think of dressing DOWN as an expression of freedom. But our forefathers dressed UP to show their independence. They had ancestors who lived in a time when only the rich and powerful could wear fine clothes.

Objectives

Is this video merely a collection of fascinating trivia about clothing and fashions? **Why Shirts Have Buttons: The Origins of Clothing** is not a vacation from the “real” learning. It goes to the heart of education.

Clothing is more the vehicle in this video than the subject matter. The video shows that the actions and decisions of history influence our activities TODAY. A key goal of education is to teach students they are influenced by the past and their actions in turn, will influence the future. History shows the sometimes tragic results of the failure to understand this seemingly simple idea **Why Shirts Have Buttons** uses clothing to teach viewers that they are indeed influenced by the past and can, in turn, influence the future.

Why Shirts Have Buttons takes a small area of everyday life (how we dress) and shows very specific examples of the past reaching out to shape everyday behavior. Most of these influences are typically “under the radar” of traditional studies. Studying the role of wars and rulers of the past is important, but it makes more distant the idea that history is a living force shaping how we live now.

Script Excerpts: Why Shirts Have Buttons

SHOES

In the 21st century shoes are plentiful. Most people have three or more pairs. But this abundance is surprisingly recent.

Around 1900, especially in rural America, many wore no shoes until the ground began to freeze. In the winter kids wore hand me downs often so oversized they had to be stuffed with rags to hold them on.

Shoes were worn until they fell apart. Inexpensive, mass produced shoes are a 20th century invention. In the 18th century a new pair of shoes required at least two weeks worth of wages.

Of course the shoes were “straights—”no right or left. They were so uncomfortable that the wealthy had servants wear the new shoes for a few months to “break them in.”

Shoes were worn until they fell apart. Inexpensive, mass produced shoes are a 20th century invention. Men’s shoes in the 17th and 18th centuries were elaborate and colorful. Shoes as fashion began as a guy thing. Color in shoes might seem a hot new fashion but is really a return to tastes found centuries ago.

Women’s dresses typically trailed to the ground, so their shoes were nearly invisible. Women’s shoes were slipper-like and helped reinforce the idea of women as weak creatures who live almost entirely indoors.

High heels for women began not as a fashion statement, but as a practical way to keep long dresses out of the mud and filth that passed for city streets. Many men wore boots for the same practical reason. Most walking hundreds of years ago was done in dirt and mud.

ZIPPERS

The zipper, as we know it today, wasn’t patented until 1917. It was first known as a “hookless fastener.”

It was first used by the army in World War I and later by B.F. Goodrich Company on its rubber boots. The zipper was certainly faster than a row of buttons. In fact, it was Goodrich who gave the device a name that mimicked the sound of its operation.

BUTTONS

True or false? Buttons were invented to hold clothes together. False. At first, buttons were decorations, not fasteners. A button by itself is decoration. Only in combination with a buttonHOLE does a button become a fastener.

The earliest shirts pulled over the head and had no buttons. Peasants couldn't afford buttons. Even today a shirt with buttons is more "dressy" than a shirt with no buttons. Of course, buttons today are mere fasteners, not status symbols. But our clothes still bear signs of buttons as status markers. Extra buttons abound. Men's suit jackets often have buttons that seem to serve no useful purpose – on sleeves for example.

And why bother with tiny buttons on the collar of men's dress shirts? They are awkward to button. As hard as it might be to believe, the button down collar dress shirt of the 21st century was "invented" as a form of athletic wear. In the 1890s, British polo players wore flannel trousers and a shirt. They complained the collar flapped in the breeze, so they invented a buttoned down collar. After all, a shirt with no collar would not be proper.

POCKETS AND BELTS

Pockets didn't exist before 1500. Today's pockets combine two ideas — a small cloth purse hung from the waist with a drawstring and a slit in the clothing to reach the bag. The bag was first stitched to the clothing and became today's pocket.

The modern belt began as a strip of cloth around the waist. It wasn't a great way to hold up pants. That's why, for hundreds of years, men wore suspenders. Belts didn't replace suspenders. It was the combination of belts with belt loops sewn onto pants that proved superior. The belt loop was to pants what the buttonhole was to buttons — it made them practical.

WHY DO MEN WEAR PANTS?

Worldwide, they often don't. Many cultures feature a robe-like outer garment for both sexes. Throughout history, men wore a garment with a silhouette more like a mini-skirt than like modern trousers. For centuries, soldiers went into battle wearing what we would call skirts.

The first pants were probably a robe-like outer garment fastened so it would not get in the way during physical labor. Pants were for laborers, robes for the wealthy and the powerful. The fact that priests and judges still wear robes is a testament to this ancient belief.

WHY DO WOMEN WEAR SKIRTS?

From the Greeks to the Romans to Medieval Europe and later, one rule of clothing held true. The more you wore, the higher your social status. This was especially true for women.

Women in the 18th and 19th century weren't so much dressed, as they were upholstered. Fabric was expensive. So to be draped in yards and yards of fabric was to display considerable wealth.

Today's traditional bridal gowns look remarkably similar to dresses once considered everyday fashion.

SUITS

We consider a sports jacket for men "dressing up." But it was once, as its name suggests, clothing to wear during sports.

Even the slit in the back of men's jackets has athletic origins. The slits were added to riding jackets in 18th century France to make it easier to mount and ride a horse.

Businessmen, even up to the 1920s, wore frock coats. From the 1870s on, the frock coat shrank into a modern-looking jacket.

MILITARY TIES

The necktie has military origins. The French picked up the custom from the invading Croat army. The original word for a necktie is cravat, French for Croat.

Before 1850, armies wore bright colored uniforms.

Since most fighting was a close range, the colors helped distinguish friend from enemy. As guns gained range and could kill at a distance, armies realized bright colors marked them as targets. British troops in India around 1846 used a light brown fabric that was harder to see at a distance. The color was “khaki,” the Hindi word for “dust colored.”

Today’s trench coat was first made by Thomas Burberry of London in 1910. It was worn by soldiers in the trenches of World War I. Burberry still sells the classic trench coat complete with military style epaulets and a strip of cloth near the shoulder called a “gun flap.”

Next time you zip up a jacket, remember that this convenience was born out of the need for speed in wartime. Leather “bomber jackets” were first worn by fighter pilots in the British Air Force during World War II.

Even the wristwatch has a military history. Men used pocket watches which they hung from a chain and kept inside a watch pocket. World War I soldiers found pocket watches impractical so began strapping them to their wrists. After the war, the “wristwatch” remained both a convenience and a symbol of courage

HATS AND DRESSING UP

Fashionable hats were first worn by men. Around the turn of the century women wore hats piled with decorations and feathers. Feathers were so popular for this fashion craze that five million birds a year were killed to make hats — some species were pushed near to extinction.

In 1896, a group was founded in Boston to protest this “barbarous fashion.” They succeeded in passing laws that stopped the trade in plumes. The name of that group? The Audubon Society. As European immigrants poured into the U.S. at the end of the 19th century they wore hats to advertise they were not “ignorant newcomers.” Most men wore hats in public, even for “hanging out” on streets. Pictures from the American frontier reveal that even rustlers and bad buys wore clothing that would be “too dressy” for today’s casual workplace. Jackets and vests were common.

We think of “dressing down” as a sign of freedom. But at the turn of the century, dressing “up” was a sign of freedom. These people had ancestors back in the “Old Country” who lived in a time when only the wealthy could afford to dress up. Some countries had “sumptuary laws” which reserved the best clothing for the upper classes.

TUXEDO

The tuxedo was first worn in 1886 to the Tuxedo Park Country Club’s autumn ball. Ironically, the tuxedo was seen as a casual alternative to formal evening wear. In fact, it was so casual that at first it was worn “only when ladies were not present.”

More Facts on the Origins of Clothing

Mourning

In the 19th century, a woman whose husband died followed strict rules of what to wear for the years of mourning. For the first year she could wear only black. Her jewelry was limited to a brooch made from the deceased husband’s hair. A woman who could not afford a new black dress could dye an old one. During her second

year she could add a little decoration. After two and a half years, half-mourning colors such as violet, gray and white were allowed.

A husband who lost his wife was expected to wear black clothes and a black armband for several months. The end of World War I in 1918 changed mourning habits. The U.S. lost over 125,000 soldiers, and the sight of so many women in black crepe was a painful reminder. By 1920, women wore mourning for only a year.

Shoes

Shoes made of wood were the first protective footgear. The Dutch, Germans, French and English all wore them for the workplace. The word “clog” comes from an old English word meaning a chunk of wood. The Dutch called them *klompen* and the French *sabots*.

Mothers today hearken back to these days when they yell at their kids to “Lift your feet when you walk and stop *clomping* around like that.”

The French word *sabot* still lives in our language as well. During the early days of the Industrial Revolution, French and Belgian workers protested miserable working conditions by throwing their sabots into the machines to shut down the factories. We remember the disgruntled workers when we speak of “*sabotage*.”

Stockings

When women’s dresses rose above the knee (around the mid 1920s) they replaced heavy dark stocking with sheer silk or the new “artificial silk”—rayon. In May of 1940, women lined up for blocks to buy the first stocking made from nylon. It looked as good as silk but held its shape, breathed, and was easier to clean. But with

World War II came the need to use nylon for parachutes, so women’s demand had to wait.

Sumptuary Laws

Back in the early American colonies, some laws existed telling people how they could (or couldn't) dress. Massachusetts said not to dress above your class. Virginia said only government officials could wear gold on their clothes. And Massachusetts said only men with little money shouldn't wear buttons, nor women silk hoods or scarves.

Corsets

Clothing for women and girls in the 1700s was extremely constricting. Corsets made breathing difficult and panniers (support hoops) made a woman so wide she could hardly walk up stairs or sit in an armchair. Surgeon General Dr. Benjamin Rush branded these fashions as "ridiculous and expensive" and claimed they were invented by men in order to divert ladies from improving their minds and to maintain authority over them. English feminist Mary Wollstonecraft agreed, calling fashion "but a badge of slavery."

Hats

The Boston Tea Party is well known as a protest against taxes. But tea wasn't the only source of unjust taxes. In 1732, Britain passed the Hat Act forbidding the colonies to export beaver felt hats made in the colonies. They wanted the Colonists to buy British made hats and pay a heavy tax for the privilege. Americans paid up to four times as much for cloth and clothing as people in Great Britain. The *Boston Gazette* noted in 1765, "A colonist cannot make a button...but some ...respectable buttonmaker in Britain bawls and squalls that his honor is...injured, cheated, and robbed by the rascally Americans."

What we don't wear can be just as much a signal as what we do wear. In the past hundred years we've gone from rather formal hats for men and women to wearing no hats at all. What does this mean? The hat of past ages served as a sign of social class. Hatlessness is an expression of social equality. Men no longer "tip the hat" to women in recognition of gender differences.

Caps

Americans are more likely to wear a cap than a hat. today's typical cap did indeed start as part of a baseball uniform worn by the Cincinnati Red Stockings as long ago as 1870. The cap is another example of the influence of sport on clothing.

Derby

A "derby" is a felt hat with a rounded crown named after the English earl of Derby. He also ran an annual horse race starting around 1780. His name stuck to both the horse race and the hat. The original derby was rigid enough to offer some protection to riders thrown from a horse. The derby may have been the original "crash helmet."

Sneakers

In the late 1800s Charles Goodyear worked with rubber for footwear and came up with a shoe useful for tennis, croquet, and yachting. These rubber-soled shoes were called "sneakers" because they were so quiet compared to shoes with hard leather soles.

In the 1910s, sneakers became popular for kids under the Keds brand. Keds was a combination of *kids* and *ped* (Latin root for "foot.").

Kidwear

During most of Western history, both boys and girls went from infant “swaddling clothes” into skirts. Boys often wore long gowns until toilet trained, some until they were five or six years old. During the 1800s, boys often wore a kilt-like pleated skirt.

Teen Fashions

A group of people known as “teenagers” didn’t really exist until the 1940s. Of course, people aged 13-19 existed, but adolescence as a stage of life is a 20th century invention. The word “teens” didn’t exist, there were no teen fashions, no teen music, no teen clothing. Teens were simply adults. Attention to teen clothes, fashions, and interests began after World War II.

The “youth revolution” of the 1960s turned fashion upside down. Instead of young people dressing like adults, as they had for centuries, adults began to dress like teens. The trend continues today with fashion trends “aging up” instead of trickling down.

Ready To Wear

Before 1860 clothing was made by copying other clothing. Only in 1859 did paper patterns for sewing become accepted. In 1863 Ebenezer Butterick began selling patterns. Some companies packaged whole kits that included cloth, thread, and trimmings. A simple dress would be about a buck, and a gown of silk or satin would run to \$25.

Before the 1880s, fashionable clothing was for the rich. When the garment industry began to mass produce affordable clothing, they naturally imitated the styles and fashions of the upper class. European immigrants came from societies in which dress was a privilege of the upper

class, so they took readily to mass produced clothing. Style and fashion changed from being a privilege of the few to being a fascination for the millions.

The Sears Roebuck catalog in 1887 summed up ready to wear clothes when they described them as “Goods suitable for the millionaire, at prices in reach of the millions.

The newly invented sewing machine were first used by professional dressmakers and tailors. A typical family would hire a dressmaker each spring and fall for about 75 cents a day. Once women learned to operate sewing machines (sort of like becoming computer literate today) they could take a shirt that took 14 hours and cut the time to an hour and a half. The sewing machine was a huge labor saving device – more so than today’s microwave or automatic dishwasher. In the 1850s, the *New York Tribune* realized the importance of the sewing machine and predicted that because of it, “*People will...dress better, change oftener, and altogether grow better looking.*”

Handkerchief

We think of a handkerchief as a practical item to use when you have a cold or a sneezing fit. But that’s not how it began.

Back in the 15th century, French sailors back from China reported seeing field workers use a linen cloth as a protective head covering while working in the fields. They brought some back, and fashion conscious French women were impressed by the quality of linen. They adopted the headwear and named it *couvrechef* which means a covering for the head.

The British took up the fashion and Anglicized the word to “kerchief.” The coverings were carried in the hand until needed in the sunlight and so were called hand kerchiefs. In other words, they began as a fashionable sun protector for the head

Wigs

Around 1675 upper class men adopted a fashion hot in France -- wigs. They cut their own hair short or even shaved it off to make room to wear a wig. The most elaborate had hair that fell below the shoulders.

These wigs were expensive status symbols. In fact “wig snatchers” roved the city streets like today’s car jackers. Puritan ministers preached against overly fancy wigs they called “bushes of vanity.” But other ministers wore wigs themselves. Today’s phrase “big wigs” is a reminder of the days when the term was literal.

Swim Wear

In 17th Century England, bathing was common but swimming quite rare. Bathers immersed themselves in the cold sea or warm spas for its curative effects.

In 1900 women’s “bathing costumes” were black, knee-length, puffy-sleeved wool dresses with long black stockings and laced-up footwear. Bathing bonnets shielded them against the sun.” They didn’t know about skin cancer, but they did know that a sun tan branded them as a laborer. By the 1920s, women wore short taffeta shifts (favored by older women), or form fitting, sleeveless wool tank suits with built-in undershorts which stopped at mid-thigh.

Resources

The Sneaker Book: Anatomy of an Industry and an Icon by Tom Vanderbilt (The New Press, NY. 1998). This colorful paperback is a wonderful and highly readable look at how fashion has changed in the past fifty years. This isn't a book about sneakers any more than **Moby Dick** is a "book about whales."

Where Will This Shoe Take You: A Walk Through the History of Footwear by Laurie Lawlor (Walker and Company, NY. 1996). You might find this book in the juvenile section at your local library. It's a well researched look at footwear through the ages. Nicely multi-cultural as well.

Dressed for the Occasion: What Americans Wore 1620-1970 by Brandon Marie Miller (Lerner Publications, Minneapolis. 1999). This book is part of Lerner's "People's History" series and will most likely be found in the juvenile books section at your library. Miller tells the story of American fashion from George Washington to Elvis Presley.

Zipper: An Exploration in Novelty by Robert Friedel (W.W. Norton and Company, NY. 1994). Yes, a whole 288 page book about the zipper. Friedel's objectives for the book are similar to those of our video. He writes, "One of the goals of this kind of history is to understand better what the things that we make and use in our daily lives reveal about ourselves—values, ambitions, intentions, and prejudices that we may not even be conscious of. The zipper does this extraordinarily well because it is ubiquitous yet superfluous."