

## **REIGNING MEN: FASHION IN MENSWEAR, 1715–2015**

The exhibition *Reigning Men: Fashion in Menswear, 1715–2015* explores the history of men’s fashion from the early eighteenth century to modern day. Frequently, menswear is overshadowed by more ornate women’s fashions. However, regardless of gender, fashion has always been a means of rebelling, reinventing, fitting in, and showing off. These curriculum materials are intended to help teachers discuss the clothing in the *Reigning Men* exhibition and explore what these fashions can tell us about the times, places, and cultures in which they were first worn in order to engage students in both local and world history. These fashion “statements” serve as intimate historical documents that have the power to personalize history and help students compare trends and conflicts of the past with contemporary issues.

From the European “macaronis,” a group of young men who were both celebrated and mocked for their outlandish style in late-eighteenth-century England, and the French Revolutionaries (1789–1799) to the American zoot-suiters of the 1930s and ’40s, men have worn exaggerated and ostentatious suits in defiance of social pressure to blend in. Those who wore the clothing represented in this packet challenged expectations and asserted themselves as style- and history-makers. The macaroni embraced the flamboyant styles they encountered on their travels through France and Italy (such journeys were customary rites of passage for young gentlemen of means), and once they returned home, they utilized these foreign styles to differentiate themselves from more subdued mainstream English fashions. French Revolutionaries discarded traditional dress distinctions and ornate aristocratic styles to embrace the unrefined clothing of the previously downtrodden. And zoot-suiters, most of whom were members of disenfranchised minority groups, stuck by their bold, jazz-inflected style in the face of widespread hostility and even physical violence. Ironically, the men’s clothing of the French Revolution is perhaps the most conformist of the fashions presented in this

packet—possibly because during that time of great upheaval and social change, men who did not subscribe to the unconventional dress codes of the Revolution could be thrown in jail or sentenced to death.

It is important to remember that the clothing in this exhibition was not made to be displayed in a museum. These everyday items were worn by people who participated in history and were subject to the same wear and tear—if not more—of clothes worn by people today. The macaroni suit, which dates to 1770, is nearly 250 years old, and the zoot suit was likely worn by someone who would be in his late nineties today. Given the tumultuous circumstances of the times in which both the zoot suit and the French Revolutionary apparel were worn, it is rare to find examples of such clothing intact. LACMA is fortunate to have a complete zoot suit and multiple examples of clothing from Revolutionary-era France.

The suits represented in this packet illustrate the significance of men’s clothing, both flashy and subdued. While personal style may seem minor or superficial, the styles discussed in this packet prove that clothing can have the power to ignite riots, send people to jail, or support revolutions. These pieces of clothing, in addition to prompting discussions about the men who wore them and how they reflect social, cultural, and historical contexts of their respective time periods, may also provoke students to consider the images they themselves present to the world through their own choices of clothing.

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## CREDITS

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