

From Sumptuous to Sumptuary Law Why you ARE what you wear and why it matters

The word sumptuous – used to describe lush surroundings, rich desserts or luxury clothes - has a history as rich as its meanings.

The word first appeared in English in the 15th century. Its origins are in the Old French somptueux and the Latin 'sumptuosus, from sumptus meaning 'expenditure'.

In our modern world it's easy to believe – to hope even – that there are bigger things to worry about than how we dress. There's an argument certainly for saying that **ought** to be case. But, be that as it may – it isn't.

Human psychology, the British class system, all manner of factors in fact mean that the phrase 'you are what you wear' means literally that.

Virginia Woolf put it well when she said: 'Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than to merely keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us.'

But how so?

Well one reason behind our obsession with style arguably lies in sumptuary laws.

Sumptuary Laws

Never heard of them? Well they've been around for a jolly long time. As [this article in the Encyclopaedia Britannica](#) explains, sumptuary laws are of ancient origin with many instances found in ancient Greece.

But these laws existed across the globe. Feudal Japan had sumptuary laws as did Europe in the Middle Ages. So this concept of controlling who could wear what and own what was not restricted to our society.

So, what are sumptuary laws then? [Black's Law Dictionary](#) describes them thus: **'Laws made for the purpose of restraining luxury or extravagance, particularly against inordinate expenditures in the matter of apparel, food, furniture, etc.'**

This article, [Controlling the Uncontrollable](#) explains: **'In Elizabethan England, these laws attempted to restrict the sumptuousness of dress in order to curb extravagance, protect fortunes, and make clear the necessary and appropriate distinctions between levels of society'**. After all, if one couldn't at a glance

distinguish between a milkmaid and a countess where on earth would we be?! It was thought that the very fabric of society would unravel.

Ultimately, as the article goes on to explain, these most complicated statutes were a lost cause.

It seems that, according to some sources, a young gallant entering London might be stopped to have his sword measured. If found to be too long it would be broken. Similarly appearing at Court in an oversized ruff would be unlikely to send you to the Tower. But if the Queen was filled with mirth at the sight then you could kiss your career goodbye.

If the cap fits

There was though one lasting effect on the fashion industry from that period. In 1571 parliament passed legislation requiring all males, with the exception of noblemen, aged six and over to wear a woollen cap on Sundays and holidays. With a fine being imposed if not complied with.

As [this article in the Independent](#) explains: 'the wool trade was the foundation of the English economy, and the Tudors were determined to protect it.'

The law was repealed in 1597 but by then the flat cap had gained critical mass and was everywhere by the early 20th century.

In the 1950s Andy Capp, a Daily Mirror cartoon strip, became the nation's favourite layabout and the Labour Party became concerned about its 'flat cap' image.

So, it's somewhat ironic then that the decline of the working man, of manual labour, has left the flat cap to the landed gentry.

Know your place

Whether directly a result of early sumptuary laws or not, it's certain that clothes-related terminology around your professional status has entered the English lexicon.

As [this Wikipedia article](#) states: 'Groups of working individuals are typically classified based on the colours of their **collars** worn at work; these can commonly reflect one's occupation or sometimes gender.'

You're familiar with the term 'white-collar worker'? Well white-collar workers are named for the white-collared shirts fashionable among office workers in the early mid-20th century.

To be a blue-collar worker denotes membership of the working class and therefore a person who does manual work. This arises because, in the early 20th century, such workers often wore sturdy, affordable shirts in blue denim or cambric.

There are in fact a whole range of collar classifications though white-collar and blue-collar are arguably the best known.

But does it matter now?

Well yes. It does. In all manner of ways.

To return to the Virginia Woolf quote earlier: ‘...They change our view of the world and the world's view of us.’

What that means in practical terms is this:

If you’re giving a talk or an important presentation you’re more likely to be taken seriously if you look the part. Step up to the podium in frayed jeans and a baggy T-shirt and, no matter how well you know your subject, you may well have your work cut out to convince your audience.

Conversely, stand tall in a smart suit (whether male or female) and people will believe you’re somebody that knows something. You’re an expert right?

Remember the big shoulders in the 1980s? It wasn’t called power dressing for nothing.

‘Style is a reflection of your attitude and your personality.’

Shawn Ashmore

If, like many of us you’re in a style rut, or you need to improve or change your professional image but aren’t sure how, there’s no need to despair. There are people out there that can help.

Based in Swindon, Reshma Field who runs [Ishbel’s Wardrobe](#) is one such person.

Nina Garcia said ‘Style Strategy’ is about shopping smart, staying chic and making it all last. It's about showing women how to shop for value without compromising style.’

And Reshma can help you to do exactly that with her independent colour analysis and wardrobe edit services. As she says herself: ‘The advice I offer isn’t trend driven. It’s about finding lasting fashion that makes the most of YOU.’

Her services go beyond colour matching though. Because there's little point in knowing what colours you should be wearing and in what proportions if you're wearing the wrong style. Hence, she offers style and wardrobe edit services to complement the colour matching.

So why not get in touch with Reshma and make an appointment to step inside Ishbel's Wardrobe and find a whole new you?

You can call her on: **01793 264644** or email her at info@ishbelswardrobe.co.uk