

A Portrait of a Gentleman: Men's French Luxury Fashion During the Renaissance

Jazmine Brown

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Professor Sauro

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The Renaissance is notorious for its high level of artistry and creativity. Within European nations, lovers of the arts recognize this era as one of the greats—a celebration of skill, knowledge, and beauty. The costuming of the period, however, should not go unnoticed. Spain acquired much wealth and power, forcing others to follow in their footsteps for fashion trends. They were at the forefront of demonstrating luxury and showing off their riches. The Spanish Empire was so relevant that men of nobility or high socioeconomic status within other European countries began to replicate their outfits alongside specific regional influences. For instance, *Portrait of a Gentleman* by Jan Gossaert portrays an unknown man in luxurious French garments with subtle references to Spanish menswear.¹ The work is an overall exemplary depiction of this due to the usage of gold, fur, and black as symbols of wealth.

The man's clothing in the painting demonstrates French regency due to similarities in dress to King Francois I of France.² Having inherited much wealth through his family, Francois acquired the throne with a grave amount of access to whatever he desired. Not to mention, France was prosperous—leaving him to only improve on what he inherited. “Blessed with an enlarged and relatively stable kingdom, Francis was determined to enhance it, and his own reputation, further.”³ People below the privileged elite were (and are) privy to what the wealthy do and wear, aspiring to rise to their ranks. King Francois I was one of the most influential figures—not only in what he obtained through commissions but also in his style of dress. He was, essentially, at the forefront of men's fashion during the mid-16th century. Being the cause

¹ Fig. 1, Jan Gossaert. *Portrait of a Gentleman*. 1530. Oil on panel transferred to canvas, 25 x 20 1/8 in, The Clark Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.
<https://www.clarkart.edu/artpiece/detail/portrait-of-a-gentleman>

² Ibid.

³ Glenn Richardson. *Renaissance Monarchy: The Reigns of Henry VIII, Francis I and Charles V*. London: Arnold, 2002.

for beard growth⁴ and representative of sheer opulence in France, Francois was a man to be desired and gawked at. His relevancy to Gossaert's work stands as an eye-opening understanding of King Francois I's power over the French people and the entirety of Europe. "In his biographer Leonie Frieda's words, the King 'never ceased to dazzle when it came to his appearance, wearing sumptuous clothes made of crimson velvet and embroidered with silver and gold, and surrounded by a retinue of men and horses clad in the same colors.'"⁵ With Francois' association with silver, gold, and crimson, one can assume they are symbols of royalty and wealth. The man in Gossaert's work⁶ exhibits a similar color palette, excluding the silver. Gold, especially, appears as embellishments to his dress compared to Francois' portrait in Figure 2.⁷ Both are seen wearing gold necklaces—an accessory that was on the rise in popularity due to Francois (although the chain in Gossaert's work is more reminiscent of Germanic costume).⁸

Additionally, both men wear almost identical hats with gold aiguillettes accompanied by a decorative feather. There is no surprise that "gold has been highly valued for so long that which objects it was included have often been destroyed to extract it".⁹ It continues to reign supreme as

⁴ Justine De Young. "1520-1529." Fashion History Timeline. Fashion Institute of Technology, June 20, 2019. <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1520-1529/>.

⁵ Lydia Edwards. "Preface." In *How to Read a Suit: A Guide to Changing Men's Fashion from the 17th to the 20th Century*, 8–19. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020. Accessed April 26, 2022. <http://www.bloomsburycollections.com/how-to-read-a-suit-a-guide-to-changing-mens-fashion-from-the-17th-to-the-20th-century/preface>.

⁶ Figure 1, Jan Gossaert.

⁷ Fig. 2, Unknown. *Francois Ier (1494-1547), King of France*. 2nd quarter of the 16th century (1525-1550). Oil on wood (oak), 0.96 m x 0.74 m (37.79 in x 29.13 in), Louvre Museum, Paris, France. <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010062204>

⁸ Fig. 5, Lucas Cranach the Elder. *Duke Henry the Pious (1473-1541)*. 1514. Oil on wood, 184.5 cm x 83 cm (72.6 in x 32.7 in), Old Masters Picture Gallery, Dresden, Germany. <https://skd-online-collection.skd.museum/Details/Index/246875>

⁹ Rebecca Zorach. "Everything Swims with Excess: Gold and Its Fashioning in Sixteenth-Century France." *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 36 (1999): 125–37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20167479>.

a material to be yearned for solely due to its economic status. It should also be noted that those that acquire it are most likely to be rich and have the monetary surplus to splurge on gold items. Portraits during the Renaissance were only commissioned by wealthy people; thus, what they wore throughout the process was well-documented as garments and accessories for the elite.

Moreover, the man in the painting demonstrates Spanish influence in his dress.¹⁰ Power and established status cause others to follow in another's footsteps, imagining their presence in a rich world. The middle and lower classes view royalty and those who have a seat at the table as gravely important—they see them as leaders. Spain, like Alexander the Great (but not to the same scale), was larger than life and obtained great fortune and influence over the European population. “[...], with its territory reaching from Europe to the Philippines, [Spain] soon amassed a huge amount of wealth, and consequently became not only a center for art patronage (the commissioning of artworks), but also a place where imported materials, goods and ideas fostered new approaches to art.”¹¹ By acquiring a large amount of land and having access to trading and exploration, Spain was able to coerce the people around them, including those that they conquered. Access to the world allowed Spain to acquire pieces of culture and develop relationships with them. Overall, Spain was a force to be reckoned with during the mid-16th century and, because of this, controlled fashion trends (especially for court dress). The principal rule of fashion, according to the Spanish, was to wear black clothing. “Spanish style had long been influential throughout the Catholic world and beyond, but by the 1520s the Spanish court

¹⁰ Figure 1, Jan Gossaert.

¹¹ Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank. “Introduction to the Renaissance in Spain.” Khan Academy. Khan Academy, July 1, 2018. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/xa6688040:spain-portugal-15th-16th-century/beginners-guide-art-spain/a/introduction-to-the-renaissance-in-spain>.

had become a true epicenter of fashion. [...] It was the golden age of black.”¹² Nowadays, black can be associated with darkness and despair. Although that may have been the case during that period, it mainly represented power and elegance. Black is a very consuming color—it yearns for attention through its subtlety. Hence, the color was perfect for becoming the symbol of authority and regency. A prime example of black being the color of choice in Spain is an unknown artist’s work called *The Somerset House Conference*.¹³ The work portrays English and Spanish officials in a peace treaty meeting to end a war between the two countries.¹⁴ Similar to gold, the color has gained recognition and becomes attributed to royalty. Black is a prominent feature of the man’s outfit in Gossaert’s painting¹⁵; it is the chosen color for his coat—an essential part of menswear during the mid-16th century. *The Somerset House Conference*¹⁶ was created in 1604 (over 30 years of separation from Gossaert’s work); nonetheless, the date demonstrates the slowness of fashion trends at the time. As we move further in time, the course of fashion begins to compress into smaller increments of time. The stillness of the black trend displays to the viewer how everyone looked towards Spain for what to wear. Thus, the color inherits Spanish ties solely based on the country’s impact and prestige.

¹² Masters, Adrian. “BLACK.” In *New World Objects of Knowledge: A Cabinet of Curiosities*, edited by Mark Thurner and Juan Pimentel, 67–76. University of London Press, 2021.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1vbd275.13>.

¹³ Fig. 3, Unknown. *The Somerset House Conference*. 1604. Oil on canvas, 81 in x 105 ½ in, National Portrait Gallery, London, England.
<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw00166/The-Somerset-House-Conference-1604>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Figure 1, Jan Gossaert.

¹⁶ Figure 3, Unknown.

Lastly, the embellishments seen in *Portrait of a Gentleman*¹⁷ create additional correlations between the unknown man and his position in life. The fur, in particular, is placed on the man's shoulders to express his financial success. "From the fourteenth to seventeenth century, the kings and queens of England, for example, issued royal proclamations to regulate furs and fur apparel and, especially, to reserve the more exclusive furs of marten, fox, gray squirrel, and ermine for the aristocratic and clerical elite."¹⁸ Fur has been used for centuries as a means of keeping warm; it was a matter of using the entirety of an animal after hunting it down for food. Once the concept of fur trading began, the material (especially beaver fur) became more of a commodity and was less known among the elite for its primal function.¹⁹ Not to mention, those with immense wealth can afford to spend money on things for pleasure and not focus on its function. The fur in Gossaert's work may have been an additional precaution for colder climates; yet, it is not the essential fabric of choice throughout the outfit.²⁰ A more eminent use of fur in one's outfit is seen in Hans Holbein the Younger's *Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve* ('*The Ambassadors*').²¹ The man on the left, Jean de Dinteville, is a representative for King Francois I of France as a manner of participating in English diplomatic meetings.²² Although his dress is a more practical method of including fur, it still demonstrates the material's connection to luxury. Dinteville's coat could have only depicted an inner layer of

¹⁷ Figure 1, Jan Gossaert.

¹⁸ Julia Emberley. "Fur." In *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*, edited by Valerie Steele, 115-117. Vol. 2. Detroit, MI: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2005. *Gale eBooks* (accessed April 30, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3427500258/GVRL?u=drexel_main&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=0c011dee.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Figure 1, Jan Gossaert.

²¹ Fig. 4, Hans Holbein the Younger. *Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve* ('*The Ambassadors*'). 1533. Oil on oak, 207 cm x 209.5 cm (81.5 in x 82.5 in), The National Gallery, London, England. <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/hans-holbein-the-younger-the-ambassadors#VideoPlayer95491>

²² Ibid.

fur for its pragmatism; however, the amount of it and its placement in unconventional placement (specifically in the puff sleeves) explains how Dinteville is far removed from only utilizing the material for its initial purpose. Similar to Gossaert's work, it is primarily an accessory and meant to improve upon his outfit and elevate its overall expense. Furthermore, in the embellishment realm, blackwork embroidery was heavily used to accentuate the exposed portion of a man's chemise.²³ Gossaert's painting demonstrates the prevalence of the craft through the man's linen chemise cuffs.²⁴ During its humble beginnings in the 15th century, "Italian and Spanish needlework [...] [used] red or black silk thread in geometric, stylized patterns on linen garments for both sexes, such as shirts, smocks, coifs, and caps."²⁵ The chemise was originally supposed to be hidden from others; nevertheless, fashion changes. People intended to display its pristine beauty, alluding to how much money they obtain and the privilege of clean garments. The added element of the blackwork embroidery stood as a symbol for the wealthy since it included expensive silk thread and illustrated complex and intricate designs. Additionally, with its Italian and Spanish roots, blackwork continues to emulate expensive quality, thus making those rich by relation if incorporated.

In conclusion, *Portrait of a Gentleman* by Jan Gossaert²⁶ portrays a man in Spanish-inspired French garments with luxury elements such as fur, gold, and black fabric. Although the man in the painting is unknown, there are plenty of indications of luxury dress during the mid-16th century. It also declares the power of the elite in fashion as fur, gold, and black still stand as

²³ Dorling Kindersley. "Chapter 3: 1450-1624 Renaissance Splendor." Essay. In *Fashion: The Definitive History of Costume and Style*, 1st ed., 78–113. New York, NY: DK Publishing, 2012.

²⁴ Figure 1, Jan Gossaert.

²⁵ Dorling Kindersley. "Chapter 3: 1450-1624 Renaissance Splendor."

²⁶ Figure 1, Jan Gossaert.

parts of fancy, elegant garments. Not to mention, the painting exhibits the importance of portraits and how they inform us about past fashion trends. With such integral information, people can utilize the trends of before to produce new designs and enforce the continuation of change in the fashion industry.

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