

STUDIEN ZUR MATERIELLEN KULTUR

Karen Ellwanger

Wool Gives Men Courage –
Some Aspects of the Use of
an Assignment of Meaning to
Wool in Clothing



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I Wool gives courage	3	<p>'On December 1st (1897) the raw North American winter set in. An icy north-eastern wind swept through the barren land, so that my face burned as if touched by fire; <i>but my good woollen clothing</i> – wool gives courage! – let me look confidently to the future [...] and jauntily I strode forth!'. This letter of the 'German world traveller' von Rengarten may be found, with the subtitle 'Wool and Bravery', in the <i>Monatsblatt</i> of the clothing reformer and hygienist Gustav Jäger (1832-1917) (vgl. Jäger 1899, S. 27). Over and over again similar 'experiences' of readers were published in the high-circulation organ of the organised Association of the 'Woollens'ⁱⁱ, as Jäger's followers called themselves: whether it was surviving being struck by lightning thanks to the effect of wool clothing (mentioned are the 'speed of reaction', 'energy' and 'power of resistance') or that wool quite generally was made known as a means of enhancing mobility and so (as it is argued) of fostering health and finally achievement. These didactic anecdotes repeatedly debouch into phrases like 'Wool will plucky men, and makes them, too' (cf. <i>ibid.</i>)ⁱⁱⁱ</p>
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The 'Woollens' were the prelude to a clothing reform movement that spread throughout Germany beginning in the last third of the nineteenth century (cf. Ellwanger & Meyer-Renschhausen 1998, pp. 87-102). If at the height of the movement, round the turn of the century, the reform of women's clothing in the sense of a comprehensive reorganisation of the female body was at the centre of interest (the chief points of attack were the corset and the

i The *Monatsblatt* was founded in 1882 as successor to *Neues deutschen Familienblatt*, in which Jäger had published his insights about clothing since 1872.

ii The German 'Wollenen' is a pun, meaning not only the 'Woollens' but also those who make demands. *Translator's note.*

iii Cf. also *Monatsblätter* 1/1883, 4/1888, 2/1893 and 1/1898.

cut of clothing), in its first phase it was above all about men's clothing; the goals here were the hygienic optimisation and backing of greater requirements of mobility through clothes.

The medium of these endeavours was the material. Two sharply distinguished positions, organised into nearly enemy camps, opposed one another: on the one side the vegetarians and animal welfare campaigners round Heinrich Lahmann, who propagated cotton, and Sebastian Kneipp, who favoured linen, and on the other side the 'Woollens' around Gustav Jäger. For Jäger, wool (meant here by the way is not only sheep's wool, but also camel hair wool) served the purpose of physical and psychological purification and refreshment; he assumed that wool, by virtue of its capacity to warm, is sudorific and at the same time ventilating, and so frees its wearer from 'listlessness' and 'malodorous' materials.^{iv} *Jäger speaks in this connection of the 'guidance of affects'.*^v

II Properties of wool and their significance

It is astonishing at first glance that at the end of the nineteenth century wool could receive such a pronounced charge of meaning when it had already been firmly established since the end of the eighteenth century as the leading material for fashionable middle-class men's clothing – and not

iv Here Jäger stands in the tradition of an older medical discourse; in the seventeenth, and still in the eighteenth, century wool (and incidentally also linen) were conceived to be materials that had a cleansing effect by drawing superfluous juices from the body. Cf. Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing. Dress and Fashion in the Ancien Regime*, Cambridge, 1996 (French, 1989), here p. 468.

v Further, and highly illuminating, analyses Jäger's approach may be found in the articles by Alexander Gabriel, Ulrike Murmann and Peter Wörz in Christel Köhle-Hezinger, Gabriele Mentges and Projektgruppe (eds.), *Der neuen Welt ein neuer Rock. Studien zu Kleidung, Körper und Mode an Beispielen aus Württemberg*, Stuttgart 1993.

least because wool was looked upon as a simple, inconspicuous and not particularly significant material.

The art historian Thomas Raff, however, has pointed out in his articles on an 'iconography of materials' that 'every material [...] [possesses] an abundance of natural qualities of which only a few are felt to be particularly conspicuous and characteristic and are highlighted' (Raff 1994, S. 33). With regard to wool, the focus appears to have fallen on quite diverse aspects, depending upon the historical constellation. Wool in fact is one of the highly complex textile materials; there are 50 properties alone according to which it is evaluated with a view to its use in the textile and clothing industry or to its sales value (cf. here Döhner 1964, pp. 129-259), ranging from fineness, crimp or length of its fibre to its gloss, bulk, capacity to be felted and milled, and thermoplasticity. Jäger refers specifically to properties of wool^{vi} like its heat storage and capacity to absorb moisture, the effect of which he calls 'cleansing'; its surface roughness, which is commonly called 'scratchy' but which Jäger describes as 'stimulating blood circulation' or 'toughening'; and finally its elasticity.^{vii} This last characteristic of wool was enhanced by new methods of manufacture: as a result of technical innovations carried out in co-operation with a southern German textile business, Jäger, who originally propagated flannel clothing (flannel was then a woven, carded woollen material which, in the form of a relatively sturdy, warming and water-resistant vest, was often worn by, for example, sailors), could instead now promote

vi Not to be underestimated in accounting for Jäger's interest is the fact that wool, because of its importance for trade and industry, was first subjected to a thorough systematic and experimental study in the nineteenth century; cf. M. Erdl, *Wollkunde* (1843), and Wilhelm von Nathusius, *Das Wollhaar des Schafes* (1864), quoted in Reumuth 1964, p. 344f.

vii All the cited characteristics are used continuously in Prof. G. Jäger's monthlies.

jerseys of knitted rather than woven woollen materials that were far more elastic and clung more closely to the body.

If we compare the material and its manner of being worn (namely, directly on the skin) of Jager's 'wool regime', which also invoked organic-vitalist associations by its inclusion of coarser kinds of wool, with the established fine cloth and worsted fabric used in men's fashion (which was always lined), it becomes clear that the former was centred in quite different qualities of wool with very different connotations.

III On the use of wool in clothing until the eighteenth century: a short history of attire

According to the historian of clothes Ingrid Loschek (cf. Loschek 1994, pp. 425-436), there is already evidence of wool fabrics in Mesopotamia and cotton fabrics in Mexico from the 7th and 6th centuries B.C. In southern Europe, wool and linen have been used since 4000 B.C., that is, since the early Stone Age. In Greek antiquity woollen materials (of sheep's wool) were, according to Loschek, the original fabric of the chlaina worn by men and the peplos worn by women, both which were manufactured by women in the home and then milled and coloured outside by specialists. Roman clothing like the tunic (which was later made of linen) and all overgarments were also made of sheep's wool (cf. *ibid.*, p. 426).

In central Europe, sheep's wool has probably been known since 3,500 B.C. If in the Bronze Age the material consisted of black or brown natural wool, 'whose filaments were heavily crimped and contained thick, stiff 3-5 cm long wire hairs of the primitive sheep' (*ibid.*, p. 427), the wool of the Ice

Age was of better quality, free of kemp fibres.^{viii} Wool was worked into hairy loden and flannel-like carded wool in plain weave, but also into finer wool qualities in twill weave. Loschek thinks that 'men's frocks, trousers and cloaks' were made of woollen material, but that women wore 'shirt garments and coat cloaks' of linen (cf. Loschek, p. 427).

In the Middle Ages all the outer garments of the higher estates were mainly of wool; the monofilament Friesian, Flemish and London cloth, which was manufactured in several steps, was prized in particular.^{ix} Also used were linen, silk, and in part cotton. Peasants wore linen materials of short flax or hemp fibre or cotton waste, and as outerwear coarse wool, often not woven but rather felted.

In early modern times until the eighteenth century, various silk materials were the most important material of the feudal nobility, and to some degree also the middle-class, for social functions; at the courts of Louis XIV and XV only clothing made of (French) silk, velvet and brocade was to be worn.^x Following the abolition of state import restrictions, cotton enjoyed a relatively brief vogue in the last quarter of the eighteenth century as the socially distinctive material of the feudal nobility and middle-class women, especially in the form of the so-called 'English fashion'.^{xi}

viii Wire hair cannot be yarned; through breeding the Leit-(Stichel) and Gruppenhaare (down) of the sheep can gradually be assimilated to one another. Doehner, 'Entwicklung und Wachstum des Haares', in Doehner and Reumuth. 1964, p. 51.

ix By 'cloth' was understood a wool fabric (manufactured from woollen yarn, that is, yarn of fine, crimped and shorter wool fibres) in plain weave (the simplest kind of weave) that, after weaving, was milled or napped, so that the structure of the fabric was less apparent.

x In addition to a certain degree and outside the *grande parure*, in spite of the state import restrictions, light cotton materials. Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth Century Europe*, p. 38f.

xi This holds especially for light muslin. This is woven cotton whose light haft and flowing fall arises from the soft twist of the yarn. Thomas Meyer zu Capellen, *Lexikon der*

No later than the seventeenth century wool was generally no longer looked upon as a particularly imposing material^{xii}, although cloth of high quality continued to be manufactured from it. In particular, fine qualities of wool (certain Spanish Merino wools) were no longer reserved to specific feudal estates by the dress code, as was still the case in, for example, the fifteenth century.

After the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, and the Thirty Years' War, clothing and the material out of which it was made stood at the centre of discussion in the seventeenth century over wealth and poverty, luxury and frugality. Clothing was the standard according to which agreement with ethical and moral requirements and personal conduct were measured – by Catholics as by Protestants (cf. Roche 1994, p. 5). The debate about luxury clothing, typified by the use of certain textile materials, is to be seen in this context, as is also the role played by black cloth as the sign of moderation and not least of the Protestant opposition to the rich colourfulness of the garments worn by Catholic dignitaries, but also as a sign of enlightenment and rationality. At the same time, a discourse developed about the legitimacy of consumption that became predominant in the eighteenth century: luxury products, too, had their justification insofar as economic prosperity rested on their production (one thinks, for instance, of the differentiation of

Gewebe, Frankfurt a. M., 1996, p. 202. Cf. Erika Thiel, *Geschichte des Kostüms*, Wilhelmshaven, Locarno, 1980.

xii This conclusion is reached after a perusal of diverse histories of clothing and their documentation of the fashionable classes and the clothes they wore for social and formal functions. Because the significance of materials in research on clothes has hitherto hardly been treated, I can produce no direct support for this inference. Cf. in addition to Thiel, 1980, Max von Boehn, *Die Mode. Menschen und Moden im siebzehnten Jahrhundert*, München 1913, *Die Mode. Menschen und Moden im achzehnten Jahrhundert*, München 1909, and Francois Boucher, *A History of Costume in the West*, London and New York, 1987 (enlarged edition); 1983 (enlarged French edition).

textile manufacture in the new silk-producing centres). It is within this field of tension that the far-reaching changes in clothing in the eighteenth century took place.

IV Wool in the clothing of the eighteenth century

The French historian Daniel Roche has studied the wardrobes of selected eighteenth century Parisian households – nobility, their servants, up-and-coming middle-class groups (independent artisans and shop owners, functionaries and public officials, e.g., lawyers), and wage earners; his sources were a good 600 inventories from 1700 and a good 700 from 1789 (cf. Roche).^{xiii}

In 1700, the wardrobe of servants and that of wage earners consisted mainly of woollen garments; that of artisans/shop owners and officials mostly of linen garments, with less than a quarter of wool; and in that of the nobility wool hardly played a role (under 10%) and was worn only in winter as practical clothing. The materials favoured by the nobility were in general lighter, more colourful and more varied in stitch, cut and colour than those worn by the middle-class and lower classes, which were coarser, sturdier and duller in colour (cf. Roche, 127ff.). In 1789 we can note a greater range of variation of materials and a tendency to use lighter materials so as to streamline the figure. At the same time, however, the materials have become strikingly differentiated according to sex. The proportion of woollen garments among the nobility has more than doubled, but it is the men who wear the now fashionable material; women wear more than ever silk and light cotton ma-

xiii No comparable data are available for Germany.

terials. Among servants, artisans, shop owners, and wage earners cotton has become the main material of attire (cf. Roche, 138ff.). When these data are evaluated according to sex, it also comes to light that women wore less wool and favoured instead lighter materials of silk and cotton. The forms of clothing have become so similar that Parisian women workers and women servants can no longer be distinguished at first glance. Among middle-class and lower-class men, on the other hand, the wearing of woollen materials (among public officials, wool mixtures) has increased.

Fashionable woollen materials^{xiv}, that is, materials that were in the focus of social attention, are associated at the end of the eighteenth century with 'masculinity'.

V The stuff of middle-class masculinity

It is specific wools, produced through new methods of sheep farming^{xv} and technical innovation, that find ever wider use in the course of the nineteenth century. In addition to cloth made of woollen yarn, established as a material for uniforms and (in its finer form) particularly suitable for travelling clothes, light worsted fabric became increasingly widespread.^{xvi}

xiv In addition, traditional woollen materials continued to be worn in the countryside throughout the nineteenth century.

xv After the decline of the famous Spanish Merino breed as a consequence of the Napoleonic Wars, the Merino sheep was increasingly bred in Germany and France. In Germany the 'electoral sheep' ('Elektoral-Schaf') was developed out of the Merino sheep, which was bred to produce very fine wool and essentially influenced the international wool trade up to about 1860, particularly that in the finest wool cloth. In France the Rambouillet sheep was bred out of the Merino sheep, and its wool treated to produce worsted yarn. Later overseas competition became too great and it became possible, by using improved machinery, to produce better yarn out of coarser fibre; see Doehner and Reumuth 1964, pp. 509-562, here p. 515f.

xvi Worsteds fabric is woollen material that rests on a certain kind of yarn production:

These woollen fabrics become the exclusive material for a new kind of middle-class men's clothing, that of the suit with waistcoats: overlapping, mobile individual parts instead of the stiff, ostentatious, affixed clothing elements of the *ancien regime*. Anne Hollander has called this fundamentally altered principle of attire 'dynamic coherence', and quite euphorically compared it to modern views of the state and its parliamentary self-regulation.

The foundation for the effects of the suit is its simple, loose-fitting and softly falling woollen material, which idealises the male body^{xvii} and makes the suit appear as its 'natural' covering: 'Now appear', according to Hollander, 'the noble proportions of his male figure, which have been generated exclusively by the use of natural materials, conferring on him an individual moral strength and integrity that flourishes without artificiality in its aesthetic purity [...]. His clothes gave him an honest look, for the stitching was salient and the weave of the simple material was visible [...]' (Holländer 1995, p. 147).

A glance at the debate about materials in art and architecture furnishes an interesting parallel. Thomas Raff has sketched how, in theories of art since the sixteenth century, 'an antithesis or conflict between the costliness of a material and the intellectuality of art' was postulated that culminated in the 'idealist aesthetics' of Hegel and went down in the writing of art history in the nineteenth century as a criterion of evaluation.

combing eliminates the medium-length and shorter wool fibres. Owing to its longer fibres with a thinner diameter, worsted yarn generally has a greater twist (and so is smoother, sturdier and lighter) than the simple woollen yarn that was normally processed into cloth. Worsteds fabric was not milled and its weave remained visible.

xvii The reception of antiquity was probably not an inconsiderable influence on the discussion in view of the fact that 'not only rural clothing, but also heroic togas were actually manufactured out of wool', Anne Holländer, *Eros und Anzug*, Berlin, 1995 (USA 1994), p. 143.

In idealist art theory the 'material'^{xviii} of the art work is fundamentally deprecated and 'the costly materials assigned the role of the "scapegoat"'. But because the material is after all unavoidable, a canon of aesthetically appropriate materials emerged: 'Since it cannot be avoided, the material of a "true" work of art should be as far as possible not cheaper than marble and not more costly than bronze' (Raff 1994, p. 25).

I think a comparison can be drawn here to the demand for 'lightness' and 'simplicity' in the materials of clothing that came to the fore in the eighteenth century. I think that wool, as the rightful material for fitting out modern masculinity, not ostentatious but also not cheap, receding behind the rationality of the wearer, shows a few similarities to the assignments of 'true' materials in art, whereas the materials of women's clothes satisfied at first only the demand for 'lightness' and were looked upon for a long time as inappropriate 'artistic' materials.

For the fitting out of middle-class 'masculinity' specific characteristics of wool come to the fore.: the fact that wool is plastic as well as elastic becomes the key to the modelling of the male body in custom tailoring and remains useful in ready-made clothing – and it is the prerequisite for enabling middle-class freedom of movement and comfort. Important, too, is the resilience of wool fibres^{xix}, their crease recovery. This guarantees relatively smooth and uniform surfaces that permit of movement, but do not fix them; that can receive influences and contacts, but do not store their traces as

xviii Raff uses this concept to distinguish the argument against materiality as such, which debouch in the establishment of a hierarchy of more or less material genres of art, from another that discusses individual materials.

xix Helpful here would be a study of the possible connection of the fascination of such material characteristics with the discussions in nineteenth century physiology that revolved round 'elasticity'.

does velvet. On the other hand, an important part is also played by the temperature deforming of wool which keeps visible the capacity of this at first glance unimposing and flexible material to receive permanently unambiguous formative intentions, so to say clear lines: by using steam and pressure, creases can be worked into it and fixed.

Sheep's wool fabrics in their new methods of industrial treatment, which emphasised certain characteristics of wool, and within an orbit of connotations that partly tie in to the sartorial history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and partly were defined by modern technical mentalities in the polar gender tension of the nineteenth century, became the guiding material of men's attire: a material with considerable force of distinction.

The material of the men's suit distinguished itself not only from women's clothing, but also from the clothing of the lower classes. Susanne Breuss has pointed out that the urban working class of both sexes clothed themselves mainly in cotton by the beginning of the nineteenth century, and refers to Engels's description of English circumstances: 'Linen and wool have nearly disappeared from the wardrobe of both sexes, and cotton has taken their place. [...] Fustian has even become the nickname for the costume of the worker – "fustian jackets" workers are called, and also call themselves this in contrast to the gentlemen in broadcloth^{xx}, which is likewise used as a designation for the middle-class' (Engels nach Breuss 1991, p. 70).^{xxi}

xx A sturdy cloth made of the wool of English-bred sheep that produced somewhat coarser wool.

xxi Friedrich Engels, *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England*, Leipzig 1845, quoted in Susanne Breuss, 'Der Stoff, aus dem die Kleider sind. Aspekte der Kleidermaterialien', in Markus Barnay, Wolfgang Brückner and Christine Spiegel (eds.), *Kleider und Leute*. Katalog zur Vorarlberger Landesausstellung, 1991, Bregenz 1991, pp. 68-81; here p. 70.

VI Wool in women's clothes

In the last third of the nineteenth century wool was again used in the outer garments of middle-class women (cf. Thiel), and no later than with the entry of women into modern fashion in the 1920s, wool was also introduced into haute couture. This occurred not only in the form of the tailored suit made of what was then regarded as 'masculine' wool fabrics, but also in the treatment of knitted fabric^{xxii}; wool hunting jerseys [Woll-Jägers Trikots] were not able to establish themselves in fashion as a material for outer garments. Wool pullovers appeared to lend their wearer a chic sportiness, even a certain resilient elegance of youthful health: 'Tanned young people of both sexes walked in liltily [...] and tucked into their breakfast with a hearty appetite. [...] The women almost all wore close-fitting jackets of wool, so-called 'sweaters', white or coloured, and looked very pretty when they dug their both hands into the side pockets and stood about chatting'.^{xxiii}

For the most famous couturier of the 1950s, Christian Dior, who in variants of his 'New Look' once again fitted out modern 'femininity' as a curvaceous counter-image to 'masculinity', wool (along with silk) was the 'king of textiles'. In his self-advertisement presented in the form of a handbook, *ABC of Fashion*, he commends attending to the best quality wool: 'sometimes we have to compare twenty or thirty wool qualities in order to fabricate a small black dress'. He measures the quality of a material in women's fashion by its softness and flexibility; knitwear as a material for outer garments now receives a feminine connotation: 'A black jersey of the softest wool (you see again, good material is requisite) is probably the best piece of clothing that

xxii One thinks of Chanell's jersey dresses

xxiii Admittedly, this appearance proves deceptive in the course of the plot of *The Zauberberg*. Thomas Mann, *Der Zauberberg*, Frankfurt a.M., 1967 (Berlin 1924), p. 49.

a women can have in her wardrobe'. Dior liked to stylise himself as an artist, as a sculptor; of the manifold characteristics of wool, plasticity occupies for him the foreground: 'Wool has, above all other materials, the advantage that one can treat and form it with a hot iron'; it is therefore 'ideal for costumes and close-fitting dresses' (Dior approx.. 1956).^{xxiv}

In men's clothing, knitted fabric of wool was unable to establish itself as street or office wear and remained a kind of practical attire. At most, wool fabrics have become simpler, less expensive and more informal since the 1920s; material like tweed, homespun and flannel have become more widespread (cf. Thiel). After a phase during which blended fabric was propagated, it appears today that the 'classical' men's suit of fine (and now newly treated) wool quality is enjoying another boom – a sign of the nearly uninterrupted continuity of power of the middle-class man's costume.

xxiv Christian Dior, *ABC der Mode*, Berlin, without year of publication [approx. 1956], headwords 'Stoff' and 'wool', no page reference given.

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