

Tudor fashions contrast with 'modern drab'

Tudor fashion is all the rage in London, with two new exhibitions showcasing the dress sense of renaissance England. How did modern clothes become so dull?



HISTORY
THE ARTS

Nobody would ever accuse Queen Elizabeth II of being a bad dresser. Her signature looks - soberly cut dresses in pastel colours; white gloves; headscarf and tartan skirt - have made her an icon of modern style and a regular in the best dressed lists. Right now, however, Her Majesty may be feeling overshadowed by an even more regal figure: her own distant predecessor Elizabeth I.

This first Elizabeth, along with several other members of the Tudor and Stuart dynasties, is starring in two separate exhibitions of English renaissance fashion, one in the Victoria and Albert Museum and one in Buckingham Palace itself.

The walls of the Queen's Gallery are now lined with royal portraits - a catwalk show of 500-year-old monarchs and their courtiers, dripping with jewels and pearls, gleaming in richly coloured silks and cloth of gold.

The Tudors, from Henry VII to his grand-



Trendy Henry: Henry VIII with his wife Jane Seymour and son Edward (Unknown artist, 1543-7).

daughter Elizabeth I, presided over a century of comparative peace in England. Power, which had long been fought over by feuding barons, was centralised at the magnificent royal court.

Here, wealthy nobles jostled for status and for the favour of the queen or king. But with the civil wars now ended, they competed not with swords and spears but through the medium of fashion. Expensive fabrics, imported from Italy or the East, were arranged into peacock-like displays of wealth. Fine embroidered doublets were artfully slashed to show off layers of precious dyed silks worn underneath.

Ladies' gowns split at the waist to reveal elaborately patterned petticoats, supported by frames of willow or whalebone. Sleeves were stretched or folded, lined with silk or satin and trimmed with jewels, pearls and fur. Shirt collars evolved into extravagant lace ruffs which seemed to grow wider every year. Getting dressed could be a major operation that

took hours of work from maids, hairdressers and seamstresses. A Tudor courtier often wore more wealth on his or her back than a labourer could earn in a lifetime.

The contrast with today's society is striking. The most powerful people now - presidents, prime ministers, billionaires - have largely adopted the simple uniform of the business suit. Turning up to a modern international summit in jewel-encrusted silks would probably be regarded as rather bad form.

Dressing Down

There is a strong argument that this is no bad thing. The magnificent fashion of the Tudors and Stuarts was the product of an unequal, competitive, status-driven society. The rich sweated in uncomfortable layers of silk and satin. The poor starved.

Modern dress reflects a more practical and more democratic world. Even so, some will wonder, do clothes really have to be so terribly drab and dull?

Q & A

Q Tudor fashion looks ridiculous!

A Perhaps it does. But modern fashion might look just as ridiculous in 500 years time. Imagine what people in the future will think when they remember that Lady Gaga wore a dress made out of raw beef!

Q Lady Gaga is hardly representative of modern fashion.

A I suppose not, but even everyday fashion could end up looking strange. Think of the things teenagers wore in the 1970s and 80s: neon leg warmers, perms, bell-bottom trousers. They all look pretty odd now, but once they were at the cutting edge of fashion.

Q I don't want future me to be embarrassed

by my past self! What can I do?

A Not much! All you can do is embrace the ridiculousness of it all.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'People who care about clothes are boring and superficial.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?



RAINFORD
HIGH

READING HOMEWORK

1. Describe the typical dress of a Tudor male and female, according to the article.

2. Do you think that all Tudors wore clothes like those described in the article? Why do you think some did and some didn't?
