

# A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF COLOURS AND PATTERNS IN PERIOD COSTUMES: ANTIQUITY TO CLASSICAL.

By

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## Abstract

An overview of period costumes show that colours and patterns served to distinguish classes, and this helped to promote dignity, decorum, curb excessive expenditure and luxury on the part of the poor, and preserved class distinction. The period under review have been characterize by different colour modes which varied between light to dark, dazzling to delicate, dull to glowing shades. The fact that colours and patterns were used for various reasons, confirms that human beings love colours and do react to it variously and perhaps unconsciously. Every colour and pattern reflected the art and philosophy of that period.

## Introduction

Dress is a medium through which man expresses himself within the social strata in which he finds himself, projecting him as being rich, average or poor. Through his dressing therefore, he consciously creates a personality for himself. This craving for novelty drives him to choose within a wide range of colours, the ones that suit him best and give him aesthetic pleasures. To further increase his personality and upgrade his social stance in his community, he selects his patterns; thus, within his cultural setting, his dress or costume (as in the case of the *Ekpe Efik*) becomes an image-maker himself. Basically, Blanche Payne agrees with most authorities in costume history that clothing provides concealment, protects the body against inclement weather and transforms one into a different personality (1). Kybalova, Hercenova and Lamorova support this transformation when they explained that:

*Man adapts himself to his surroundings, he adopts the current fashion and at the same time, he seeks to distinguish himself by means of this very fashion; he copies others, yet in so*

*doing he attempts to find the style which suits him best and helps him to realize image of himself (18).*

This explains why most people appreciate and have personal colours and also choose to wear certain patterns in clothes. The desire to distinguish themselves is always seen in their choice of colours and patterns.

Clothing conveys mood and a sense of fulfillment to the wearer. The desire to be self-fulfilled led to the acquisition of clothing and eventually to its development in history. Every change in clothing style hides within itself the promise of the ultimate ideal of beauty and, "the consumers, male and female, are only too willing to believe in the possibility of fulfillment and feel obliged again and again to bow to the dictates of new fashion" (Kybalova, et al. 15).

Materials available in different communities are used for clothing to suit the vagaries of nature. For example the Eskimos who dwell in very cold environment make use of fur as a means of comfort. In parts of the Middle East, like Afghanistan, during the winter in the mountainous area:

*Men and women wear long woolen coats called chupans. These are normally white, and can be wrapped round the body like a cloak, or worn over other clothes to keep warm. (Alderton and Stubbs 11).*

The hot and dry climate in Africa, allow for loose, free flowing robes which help to keep people cool. The red skin Indians who lived in North America made their clothing out of animal skin which were dyed red and tied together using ligaments for thread; and the Maoris of New Zealand wear clothing made from bark cloth called *tapa* which came from the paper mulberry tree to protect themselves from rain (Alderton and Stubbs 25). According to Jefferson, the Xhosa of the Bantu tribe used blankets because of the cold climate and the Senegalese cotton *boubou* was wide necked and free enough to allow for the passage of air in hot climate (51). From the above, it is obvious that materials and colours, by their nature, relate to the environment thereby affecting the wearer's choice in time and place.

The human body is the basis of all clothing and each period developed its own conception of the ideal human shape. The composition of a dress influences the body proportion, and the amount and length of material also point to the social position of the wearer. Colours and patterns

serve to enhance dignity and social importance. Throughout history, there are substantial structural differences observed within the social system. There have been a number of styles and its different variations. History shows the desire to define, enlarge or fit the individual in his social sphere. So, the history of costume as Argan noted is largely reconstructed from sculptures and paintings, since very few objects of costume have been preserved and there is little elements (9).

This overview is a survey of the dress styles in the different historical periods, what influenced the changes and, how colours and patterns were effectively used to enhance clothing. Each period will be treated under appropriate subheadings.

### Antiquity

The Egyptians were the major producers of linen because of the flax plant, which they cultivated. The trade in textile, which flourished in Egypt, exposed them to materials like wool, which came from Babylon and cotton which came from India (Hardingham 100). Though early clothing was scanty among the Egyptians, wars introduced changes that also affected, to some extent, the Egyptian mode of dressing. Their dressing varied during the different kingdoms. During the old kingdom, male clothing consisted of a woven loincloth wrapped around the hips and held at the waist by a belt called a girdle. A cape was worn on the shoulders. Wilcox Turner called this principal garment the *shenti*, which he described as "a long scarf wrapped around the hips and held in place by a tied belt or girdle. When worn by high dignitaries, it was finished in front with a pleated apron" (1). During the middle kingdom a long garment called the *kalasiris* was worn. For the women, it was a skirt worn over or under the breast and sometimes held with a strap (Blanche Payne 17). The breasts were exposed, a common feature of the ancient Egyptians. The *kalasiris* and the cape became the standard dressing for ancient Egyptians. Kohler describes the *kalasiris* as being tight fitted and worn by all classes of women in varying colours of yellow, red and occasionally white. He further explained that the labouring classes wore a shorter version for convenience, and the aristocrats wore the longer version elaborately pleated and draped (56-57).

In the new kingdom, men also wore the *kalasiris*. The sleeves were short and tight, loose and long or non at all. The fabric used was of a fine quality and transparent. Kybalova, et al. mentioned that the Egyptian clothing underwent very slight changes because they:

*Adhered to tradition and evidently did not feel any great desire for innovation. This would explain not only the relative uniformity, but also the conservative character of the Egyptian attire (39).*

White garments were predominantly used because of the difficulty in dyeing linen. Nevertheless, the Egyptians were said to be lovers of colours and patterns; for example, the Egyptian loin cloth carried a planned design to beautify and give it status. Payne notes that:

*A stripped or plaid design is indicated in the fabric of the skirt, the lines continuing in logical fashion across the angles of the projection suggesting that it was formed of a single piece of cloth, what held it in shape... (10).*

Giving further details, Wilcox adds that the *tunic* was gorgeously embroidered. He noted that "the Egyptians practices the art of embroidery, done with gold thread made of strips of the metal, beaten and rounded" (3).

The mention of embroidery here indicates patterning. The herringbone pattern among others added richness to the costume. Planned patterning could also be noticed in the way the loin skirt was pleated all the way around, with the front panel represented with horizontal pleats (Payne 11). The Egyptian aristocrats wore theirs with a triangular projection being made of carefully arranged pleats finished at the front. The pleats were symbolic, highlighting the sun's rays, the emblem of *uraeus* which radiated from below the apron upwards toward the belt (Kohler 1). Kohler also added that the cape was also richly patterned and was the privilege of the wealthier classes (67). Payne on the other hand describes in detail the patterning of the ruler's headdress. He sees the patterns as:

*Traditionally shaped folds starting at precise matching angles on each side of the head were brought forward over each shoulder. The rest of the cloth was drawn to the back and bound about the head in a pigtail, similar to the arrangement of the 18<sup>th</sup> c wig (13).*

The climatic conditions of the intense heat, wind and dust enabled this arrangement, which allowed for shade and also circulation of air. The Egyptians' love for colours and patterns could be seen in their feather-patterned gowns with fresh colours of yellow, red, and white. Payne mentioned that "although such colours as red, yellow, blue and blue green were used in the textiles of the old kingdom, which seems to have predominated" (32). He further explained that, the difficulty in dyeing linen in fast colours and the ignorance of the use of dye mordant accounted for the predominance of white.

Davenport supports Payne in the above assertion when he noted also that "Egyptian garments were largely white because of the difficulties in dyeing linen permanently without mordants..." (15). Giving further details of how colours were achieved, Davenport explains that:

*Cloths were dipped in safflower for yellows and carnage reds; native woad for blue; combinations of these for dull green; madder for a fugitive red, kermes (cochineal) for a more permanent red (15).*

For cosmetics, the Egyptians blackened their eyebrows, used blue eye shadow, hennaed their nails and coloured their lips. In addition to fabrics; beads, feathers, painted leathers, all supplied colours to the Egyptian dress.

The Minoans loved a culture, which supported splendor: The men wore loincloths like the ancient Egyptian counterparts, richly patterned and splendidly decorated. But the female costume differed in that they wore a tiered and gathered bell-shaped skirts and either a fitted bodice or brief jackets that showed their breast (Kybalova, et al. 51). Kohler explains this garment further by adding that:

*There are even examples of what are called Volants or Flounces – i.e. narrow strips of patterned materials, the Upper projecting over the lower, and if we are to judge, There were perpendicular lines disposed in fine accordions Pleats (88).*

This shows that there was a highly developed knowledge of the techniques of dressmaking. Kybalova, et al. in their account discover that the skirt always fitted closely over the hips. They note that the skirt:

*Was bell shaped; becoming broader at the hem.*

*It appears to have been stiffened. Usually it was smooth, And almost always come to the ankles, but embroidered And horizontally striped skirts were not unknown, even Flounces were already to be found... (51).*

Their headdress was a turban-like roll of patterned material or tall cap.

The Samaritans, Dacians and Illyrians wore trousers and long coats, which were tucked high up with a longer short, rectangular or semi-circular cloak. The difference in their dressing was seen in their headdress.

According to Kohler, the Samaritans wore Phrygian caps and the Dacians and Illyrians wore a fairly tall, strip conical cap made of felt-like material (85). Like the clothes of the Parthian, coloured and soft materials were used.

The Assyrians and Babylonians all wore long sleeved garments with cloaks or *kalasiris*-like garment Payne registers that "the Kings are shown wearing tunics and shawls completely covered with pattern, which many have been tapestry woven or embroidery" (46).

The straight tunic edged with fringes was called the *Candys*. They were toned of colours in reds, greens, blues and purples (Wilcox 75). The Assyrian king wore the purple *Candys* and a decorated hood with rows of feathers. Pattern motifs consisted of rosettes, squares spirals, circles and triangles. The fringed shawls used as girdles were the trade mark of formal Assyrian costume which Kohler describes thus:

*The richness of the material and the length (as well, perhaps as the colour of the fringes and the manner in which the scarf was worn – plain or crossed) indicated the station of the wearer. (71).*

The fabric often used was wool, and they came in many brilliant colours. The women were regarded as nothing in the society. So married women covered themselves with veil and wore long fringed trimmed tunics and a shawl, which fell off the right arm. Kybalova, et. al. describing the court of the Assyrian rulers, observe that it was; "dominated by ceremony and protocol and the lavishness of their costume expressed their need for 'outward show'" (47).

The Phoenicians wore a large rectangular piece of cloth wrapped around the body and tied on one shoulder. This basic shape survived many centuries with variations on neck hole and single armhole. The loincloth,

which was probably borrowed from Egypt, was also worn with *kalasiris*-like garments. Kohler describes this garment as simple but having material which "was very beautiful, being patterned in various designs, usually with stripes of green, blue and red on a white background" (65).

The richly patterned material was the privilege of the wealthier classes.

Women's dress consisted of several coats worn one on top of another and kept in place with a girdle round the hips. A large circular cape was fastened all down by means of clasps and underneath, dark coloured ribbons crossed over the breast, with the long ends hanging over the back (Kohler 66).

The Medes used the:

*Kandys, a long flowing cloth gown, looped up to a belt at the sides; with or without voluminous sleeves, widening from shoulder to cuff, much as the garment itself widened from shoulder to hem. (Davenport 5).*

Payne describes it as a *kimono-cut* costume made of two lengths of cloth closed only from the waist and held with a sash, but the Persians brought in a belted blouse-like shirt, with sleeves worn over breeches, this bring the first examples of trousers and set-in sleeves encountered in history" Payne 49). During ceremonies in honour of sacred fire. Kohler, in his account notes "the retinue of the priest was dressed in purple. A purple robe – or at least a purple cape – seems to have been the distinctive dress of the chief priest" (78). One major contribution of the Persians was the introduction of the Phrygian cap of felt often with earflaps. This cap was used during the French revolution when it was known as the cap of liberty (Kohler 75). On patterning, Davenport noted that the "nobility used polychrome fabrics brocaded and embroidered in lines, stars, animal and floral motives edged with gold" (5).

The Scythian tribe also wore trousers with a coat opened in front and held by a girdle. Kohler mentions that they:

*Were exposed throughout a large part of the year to inclement weather, and therefore their clothes were made of tanned leather, the separate pieces being sewn together with narrow strips of leather (82).*

This explains why their clothing lacked much colours and even patterns. On the other hand, the Parthians wore trousers and a coloured coat like the Scythians. The upper classes used splendid material mostly coloured and richly adorned. Kohler explains that the clothing of women especially of the upper classes were much gaily coloured and more richly adorned (84).

The peoples of Asia Minor also wore a top coat and tight fitting hose which was richly patterned like those of the Parthians. Kohler describes the material as being woven, not knitted which allowed the material to hand closely to the body (92). Women wore a long loose undergarment and a cloak with gay colours, rich patterns and dainty trimmings.

### Classical Period

The early inhabitants of the Greek peninsular wore a form of hose and sleeved tunics just like the Persian's indicating their origin from the north. Later, the classical style of clothing developed into the *peplos*, *chlamys*, and the *chiton*.

Most authorities in costume history agree that the *chiton* consisted of two rectangular pieces equal in length and to the wearer's height; and in breadth to the distance either from elbow to elbow or from finger tip to finger tip. The *chiton* was worn by both sexes but the males used a girdle below the breast and over the shoulders to produce sleeves (Kohler, Payne, Kybalova, et al.).

The *chiton* had various lengths. Boys, soldiers and laborers wore the short form while the long *chiton* was worn by priests, senators and magistrates. Further description of the *chiton* by Davenport had it that:

*It was made of stuffs; probably crepe-like, similar to materials still woven in Greece; linen or the gauzy materials from Cosin Asia Minor, patterned in murex purple. It was, therefore, more ample made of two pieces sewed together, frequently pleated, and long, sometimes trailing (46).*

Popularly known later as the *Ionic chiton*, it was later made with linen or silk.

The *peplos* was a tubular garment in shape due to the way it was worn. It was folded at the upper extremity and opened at the right side, hanging in broad folds from the shoulders, and belted above the waist to form the *Kolpos*. Kybalova, et al. describe it thus:



the *peplos* was left open down one side, its wearers were graphically described as 'women who show their hips'. Over it they wore a short cloak also made from a rectangular piece of material. This Doric dress constituted a new and unique principle in clothing: it did not need cutting out and had no seams (75).

Davenport in his contribution adds that:

*The peplos upper edge was folded over to hang down on the breast, it was folded around the body, caught together on each shoulder by pins, leaving the arms uncovered, and though open down the right side, was held in place by the girdle over which it bloused (46).*

It was sometimes worn over the *chiton*. Also, made of wool, dyed in various colours of indigo or saffron and patterned. It served as a blanket in cold climate.

The *chlamys* was a cloak doubled or pinned over one shoulder, which could be, and often worn alone. Kybalova, et al. noted that it was worn by youths and soldiers at knee length; and was a higher version of the *himation*. The *himation* on the other hand was, "a square of wool with weighted corners, slung over the left shoulder leaving the right arm free, or worn, by married women, with the corner over the head like a shawl" (Davenport 47). The *himation* could be worn along as a complete garment. This brings to mind the Ghanaian wrap called *Kente* which could be worn alone.

According to sources on Greek costume, the Greeks loved coolers and used it lavishly, though their architecture had no paint (Payne 85). All woolen garments, *peplos*, *himation*, and all the various cloaks or plaids were richly coloured. Kohler noted that:

*A favorite colour (and one that indicated some distinction) was an intense dark red or purple. The trimmings usually took the form of coloured stripes or braids with pattern either woven or embroidered (107).*

In addition to this, Davenport specifies that the colour of the himation were gamut of natural wool colours; white, natural, browns, and black; or dyed scarlet, crimson or purple; woven pattern, selvages and embroidery" (47).

Commenting further on the issues, Kybalova, et al. mentions also that the Greeks loved colours but favoured white, yellow, purple and lilac. Certain colours carried meanings; yellow was said to be solemn, red distinguished the commanders of Sparta. On patterns, they said, "the most popular patterns were stripes, lozenges and circles" (58).

Payne also notes that the Greek costume employed geometric patterns used boldly on the *chalmys* and the *peplos*. Kohler quickly adds that the patterns on the *peplos* "were checks, wavy lines stripes, or flowered designs. The wraps were also of dainty patterns, and were braided at the edges" (96). Infact, the Greek dress was said to be like the window drapery because of the rich folds within it. "These folds occur everywhere in Greek art of certain period and are the result of a rigid archaism and conventionality" (Payne 17).

Authorities in costume history all agree that the Romans wore a woolen-sleeved shirt called the *tunica* and a woolen wrap called the *toga*. These persisted as formal and ceremonial dress throughout the Republic until the end of the Western Roman Empire.

Annette posits that the *toga* was a semicircular wool cloth three times the length of the wearer and was worn halved along its lengths in draped complicated folds. The size and shape of the *toga*, as well as the colour and the border, indicated social position (1). Kohler specified it has an amazing size. "In length it was nearly three times and in width about twice the height of the wearer" (112).

Only trueborn Roman was allowed to wear the *toga*. Slaves and exiled citizens were not allowed to wear the *toga*. Davenport records that:

*Women, wore a sleeved, long, girded Tunica and Stola, as an outdoor wrap. Palla, which might be draped over the head; but not obviate the necessity for wearing a veil or other head covering (73).*

Another kind of wrap was called the *pallium*, which was like the Greek *himation* used over the *tunica* and was said to be the characteristic garment for scholars, made of fine wool (Davenport 73). The *lacerna* was just like the Greek *chlamys* used by soldiers. It was light and short and worn by everybody sometimes in place of the *toga*.

Another Roman dress was the *dalmatica*, cut like the tunic but wider with very wide short sleeves; without a girdle but was decorated by the *clavus* (Davenport 74). It was worn by the religious. It survives today as mass servers dress in the Catholic Church.

Kybalova, et al note that the *toga* was very impressive and "lent its wearer a solemn and dignified appearance. It also made him adopt an attitude of repose or move in a slow and relaxed manner" (75). It had a characteristic white background for the citizens. Wilcox elaborates on this thus:

*The ordinary citizen wore a plain white toga. Magistrates, Priests and boys up to sixteen years old of the upper class wore the purple-bordered toga. The embroidered purple toga worn with the gold embroidered tunic was the ceremonial dress of Magistrate and Generals and became the traditional costume to the Emperor. (19).*

Payne upholding the importance of the colour purple writes that: "tyrian purple, the richest in hue as well as the most costly of purple dyes was in no doubt reserved for the Emperors" (103). As earlier noted about the size and colour, Russell agrees with Davenport on the various *togas*. In summary, the *toga praetexta* was designed with a purple border and worn by senators. *Toga virilis* was white for all citizens. *Toga Pulla* was dark coloured for mourning. *Toga picta* with purple borders was worn at triumphant occasions and *Toga candida* often white for those running election. (Russell 49; Davenport 73).

On patterns, the snake was the symbol of fertility and of a fruitful harvest. It was therefore widely used as a motif. Other design motifs include running animals and foliage, squares and roundels, which formed patterns on the tunic (Payne 103).

During the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople was the centre of the Christian Empire, and this influenced the style of dress into that which completely sealed the body making it tight and stiff unlike the airy clothes of the Greeks and the Romans. The Roman Empire imperial system had disintegrated and Byzantine influence became of paramount importance (Davenport 75). Kohler comments that:

*Due to the Christian religion, the body was entirely concealed. Both sexes wore a long,*

*straight tunic with long sleeves... made of silk or linen and confined at the waist by a girdle. (33).*

Payne adds that "the regalia prescribed for rulers and their attendants equaled in magnificence the setting in which they moved" (119).

In the Byzantine Empire costumes were made of:

*Heavy, richly decorated materials, shot through with gold. A large area of the dress was covered with precious stones its edges were decorated with golden borders. (Kybalova, et al 87).*

And Payne also notes that Byzantine fabrics were stiffer, heavier and richly patterned with animal, trees, heroic figures, eagles and hunters (122). He further explained that the *tunics* were made of "coloured wools of green, yellow, red and purple with polychromatic decoration" (123). Also, the *Paladumentum*, which replaced the Roman *toga* was decorated with purple and used by the Emperor. Other wore different colours according to their ranks. In differentiating between the male and the female costume. Wilcox observes that:

*The materials used in the masculine costume were usually of solid colour with embroidered contrasting bands of colour, while the feminine costume employed patterned fabrics (34).*

The peasants were ordered to wear dark and unobtrusive colours that quickly distinguish them from the gentle folk at a glance (Kybalova, et al 101).

There was a gradual transition from classical to medieval clothing as the Byzantine Emperor continued for another thousand years with both sexes seen wearing the *tunic* as the basic garment.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that since the dawn of time, different periods have had their own style of dress. We have noted how costumes were used to identify people in authority. To achieve this distinction, colours and patterns were used effectively. For example the King of Persia's *kandys* was said to have been

either purple, crimson or saffron, with a white stripe down the centre front while his lesser priest or magicians wore a plain white shirt with a belt which was the only ornament allowed (Davenport 5).

In Egypt, colour was used in the dress of royalty, gods and the dead. Entertainers' costumes were often yellow and dark blue, the colour of mourning. For patterning, Davenport records that:

*The Egyptian expert leather workers, used the spotted patterns of hides, and initiated them in paints; they cut leather into netted patterns. Leopard skins were worn by Kings and priest (15).*

Another important characteristic of the dress of this period was the draping style, except in Persia where the breeches were introduced.

The Greek costumes heralded many colours and patterns especially in the *himation* which ranged from white, browns, black, scarlet and purple. For them, colours carried meanings especially warm colours. Patterns were used boldly on the *Chlamys* and *Peplos*. The colour purple was very important for the Romans since it was reserved for the Emperors. It is also important to note that the colour on the border of the *toga* determined the station of the wearer. The abundant traces of colour on statues and relics prove that ancient costumes were not in monotone and certainly not white (Kohler 111). Colours and patterns effectively reinforced mood and style, distinguished between Emperors and peasants, and became an object of beauty in their own right.

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