RCEWA – Man’s Silk/Wool Doublet

Statement of the Expert Adviser to the Secretary of State that the doublet meets Waverley criterion three.

Further Information

The ‘Applicant’s statement’ and the ‘Note of Case History’ are available on the Arts Council Website:

www.artscouncil.org.uk/reviewing-committee-case-hearings
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. **Brief Description of item**

   A man’s silk/wool doublet, English c.1660-1665, by an unknown English tailor, chest = 95cm, length overall = 45 cm. Overall it is structurally sound and unmarked; the silk lining is fragile.

2. **Context**

   The doublet was in the possession of the Mansel-Pleydell family. According to Burke’s Landed Gentry of 1952, William Pleydell lived in Coleshill Berks, c.1425. Charles Pleydell was knighted in 1618 and his heir was Oliver Pleydell of Milton, Oxon. who married Mary Goldsmith of Aveling, Wilts. In 1815, Louisa Pleydell married John Mansel and their children went by the name Mansel-Pleydell.

   The doublet was offered for sale at auction by Bonhams on 16 April 2002, Lot 290 with an estimate, £20,000 to £25,000 and did not reach its reserve.

   The doublet was sold by Kerry Taylor for Sotheby’s at auction on 8 June 2004 (Lot 331).

   Secretariat Note – Background information

   This case had been heard previously in October 2004 (Case 18 2004-05). During the initial deferral period in 2004/05 we were informed by the Museum of Costume, Bath and the Manchester City Galleries of a serious intention to raise funds with a view to making an offer to purchase the doublet. We subsequently learned that the applicant had withdrawn the licence application during the initial deferral period.

3. **Waverley criteria**

   The doublet meets criterion 3, being of outstanding significance for the history of men’s dress and of tailoring in England. It is one of only six doublets dating from the 1660s, known to survive in Britain (see illustrated list, Appendix I).
DETAILED CASE

1. **Detailed description of item if more than in Executive summary, and any comments.**

The Mansel-Pleydell doublet is made of a watered textile of silk and probably wool (we have not seen the results of any fibre-testing). Evidence of thread remaining on the cuffs implies that there might have been ribbons applied at one time, but there is no sign of removed braid or lace elsewhere. It is a finely tailored garment with paned sleeves, that is, sleeves made of very narrow strips of silk, and with narrow piping at the shoulder seams.

2. **Detailed explanation of the outstanding significance of the item.**

The doublet under review is rare, unique and essential for the history of English dress and the scholarship on English tailoring.

Until the 1670s, every man in England would have had at least one doublet and anyone above the rank of gentleman owned many. Probate inventories from this period demonstrate that even a poor labourer had two ‘dublettes’ in his wardrobe and the diary of Samuel Pepys records the acquisition of new ones in the latest style and most fashionable textiles.¹ The study of dress history attempts to communicate the richness and variety of both ‘ordinary clothing’ as well as the fashions of the elite. Only six doublets survive in Britain to represent a whole decade of men’s dress. The 1660s, like the decades of the 1640s and 1650s are poorly represented in terms of men’s clothing. By accident of survival, there are more extant doublets from the period 1620-1640 than 1650-1670.

The Mansel-Pleydell doublet represents the final stylistic form of a garment that had a long history in the male wardrobe. Evolving from a plain, protective arming garment to fashionable dress made of luxurious fabrics and lavishly embellished, the doublet was part of every Englishman’s dress from the late 15th century to the late 17th century. A doublet, cloak and breeches formed the ‘three-piece suit’ of this era. In 1666, Charles II introduced two new garments – the coat and waistcoat – to replace the doublet and cloak as men’s court dress. By 1670, the doublet had vanished from the fashionable wardrobe in England and the Mansel-Pleydell example is a rare representation of the last version of this type of garment.

The Mansel-Pleydell doublet has several characteristics different from other surviving examples dating from this decade. It is notably plain, suggesting a garment for informal occasions. All the known others were decorated either during the weaving process (figs. 2, 4 & 5), and/or with applied lace as in figures 1, 2, 3 & 5). It is beautifully made; the very narrow strips of silk forming each pane of the sleeves is carefully lined, so that a narrow edge of the lighter cream silk can be seen. Only one other surviving doublet has paned

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sleeves, but with fewer, wider panes (fig. 4) altering the drape, movement and shape of the sleeve. The panes of the Mansel-Pleydell doublet graduate in length around the sleeve, allowing it to hang more subtly than the sleeve of the doublet in figure 4.

It is impossible to study the history of 17th-century tailoring without the original clothing. Like other trades, tailoring was learned by apprenticeship and then guild membership; there was no London College of Fashion or Central St. Martin’s School of Art and Design to disseminate technique and encourage creativity. Furthermore, there is very little literature on tailoring until the end of the 18th century. Limited literacy amongst tailors and more importantly, the necessity of preserving trade secrets, meant that few were willing to publish details of how clothes were made. There are only four tailoring manuals published in the 17th century: three Spanish Geometría y traca, dated 1618, 1619 and 1640, and a French tailoring manual, Le Tailleur Sincère, dated 1671. Some Czech tailoring guild records that preserve or copy patterns of 17th-century garments have been recently discovered.

All are very limited in the information they give about the actual making of clothing. Their primary goal was to indicate amounts of fabric needed for each type of garment, an essential concern at a time when the cost of the materials far exceeded the cost of labour. No instructions are given about measurements for sizing, how and in what order to sew the garment together, or how or where to apply decoration—in other words, all the essential techniques that distinguish a well-fitted, beautifully finished garment from a badly made one. Although the manuals are richly illustrated, the diagrams are very schematic, giving little variation in the basic cut of the garment. For example, nowhere in the tailoring manuals does the construction of paned sleeves appear.

The dress historian must therefore rely on surviving garments in order to understand the nature of tailoring in the 17th century. Because all garments were hand-sewn and made bespoke, no two are ever the same, unlike modern ready-made clothes. The V&A’s pattern book series has begun to illustrate the variety of materials and techniques used in 17th-century tailoring, using x-radiography and detailed analysis of cut and construction. The former technique, for example, revealed four different stiffening materials and methods in four doublets, similar in style externally. This emphasis on understanding the historical processes of making is not unique to dress history. It is a subject of exploration in the wider academic community that includes scholarly publications as well as the Making and Knowing project, led by the Center for Science & Society at Columbia University http://www.makingandknowing.org/, in which the V&A has participated.

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The Mansel-Pleydell doublet therefore offers new and important information about doublet style and construction in particular and tailoring techniques in general, unavailable from any other source or object in Britain. It is also essential for the public narrative of fashion history. Museums struggle to satisfy the public interest in historical dress, as its textiles are fragile and sensitive to light exposure. Much of the 17th-century dress in UK collections was acquired in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and is now damaged due to decades of display. Newly discovered examples are required not only to withstand the handling of detailed analysis but also replenish museum exhibits. We believe that the export of the Mansel-Pleydell doublet would diminish the nation’s fashion heritage. We would like to see every effort made to acquire it for a dress collection in the UK.

Public fascination with the dress of the 17th century has always been strong and academic interest in early modern fashion continues to grow. Since the above argument was made in 2004, not a single 17th-century doublet has been offered for sale or donation in the UK.

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