

## 5.1 Gender and dress

Most cultures differentiate between men's and women's dress. These differences may be seen in fabric, colour and style, as well as in the accessories that accompany clothing. In western culture this differentiation has gradually evolved. During the 19th century the differences between men's and women's clothing became more pronounced. Men abandoned the coloured silks and satins, embroideries and lace that they had worn for centuries. The trouser suit, typically in muted colours, became the ubiquitous male outfit.

In the 1920s, after World War I, it became fashionable for women to take on a boyish appearance, cutting their hair short, flattening their chests and wearing calf length, shift dresses. Trousers, previously only male attire, very gradually became acceptable for women.

### Buttoning up

Men's coats and jackets button left over right. This is inherited from the days when a man drew his sword with his right hand from his left side. The buttons were placed on the right-hand side so that the fabric didn't catch as he drew his sword. A woman's jacket, coat or bodice fastens on the other side, ie her right side over left.

### Pockets

During the 19th century externally visible pockets on men's clothing were widespread and could be accentuated, for example, by a handkerchief or watch chain in a breast pocket. In contrast, women's pockets had been a separate item in the 18th century, worn under aprons or inside skirts. In the 19th century they generally remained hidden from view in the seams and folds of their clothing. Discrete pockets were considered more feminine and therefore appropriate for ladies.

### Children

For much of the 19th century infant's dress did not reflect gender distinctions. Both boys and girls wore long white dresses until they could walk. Toddlers wore shorter loose fitting dresses. From the age of two or three until the age of five or six, children wore pinafores, dresses or suits



*Margaret Moore Smail and her children, 1858, oil on canvas by J Backler; Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW. Margaret Smail with her seven-year-old son and five-year-old daughter.*

with short skirts, however differences in material and trim were used to make gender distinctions. Boy's dresses buttoned up the front and girls up the back.

Between the ages of five and seven, boys were dressed in short trousers and they were given their first short haircut. This was known as 'breeching'. Between 1890 and 1920 children's clothing became more gender specific. Around the end of the 19th century boys began to be put directly into trouser suits rather than skirted suits.

### Colour

Today particular colours are often associated with gender differentiation. However this was not always the case, colour conventions have varied over time. For example, blue for boys and pink for girls, was not common prior to the 1920s.