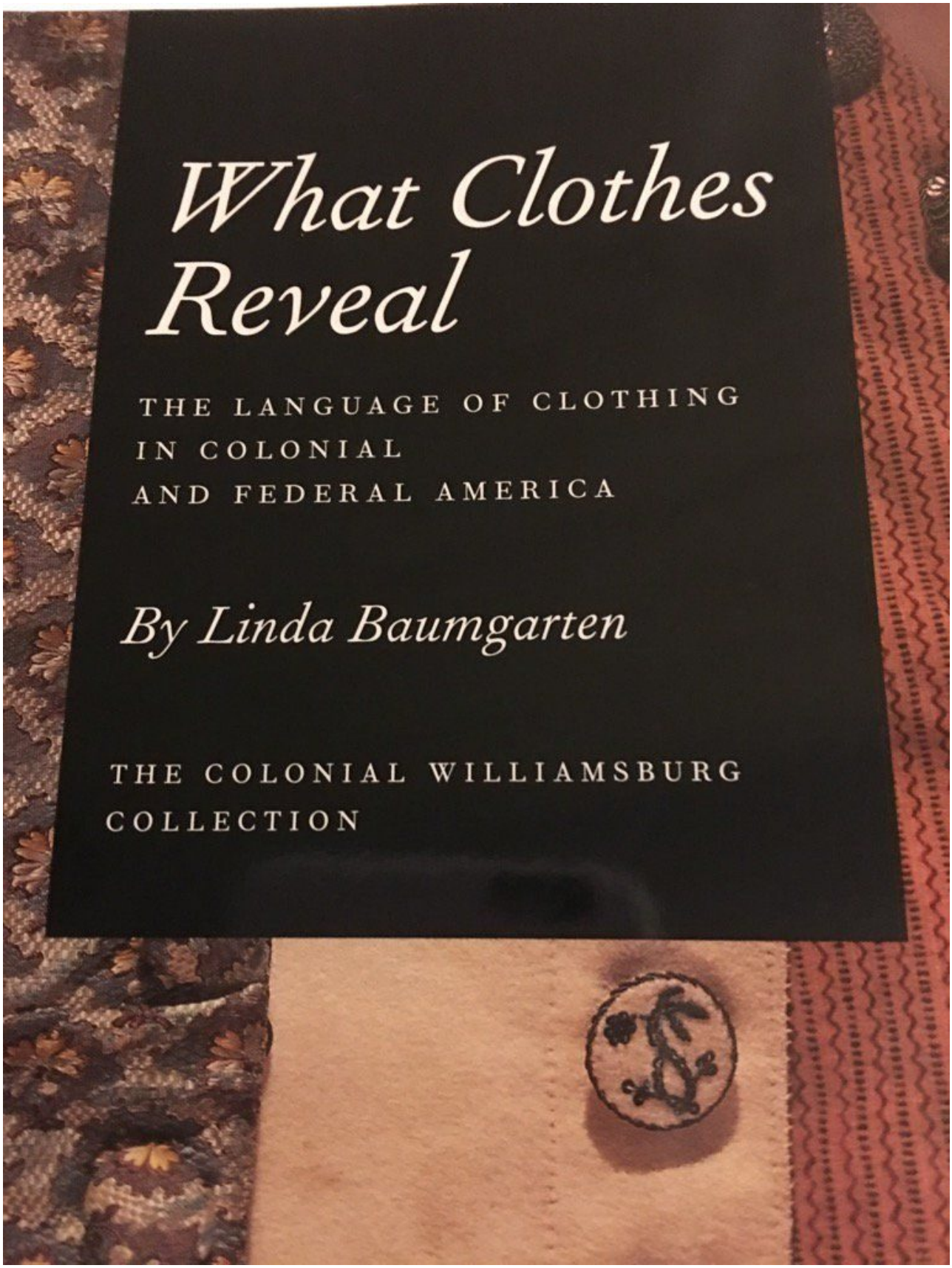
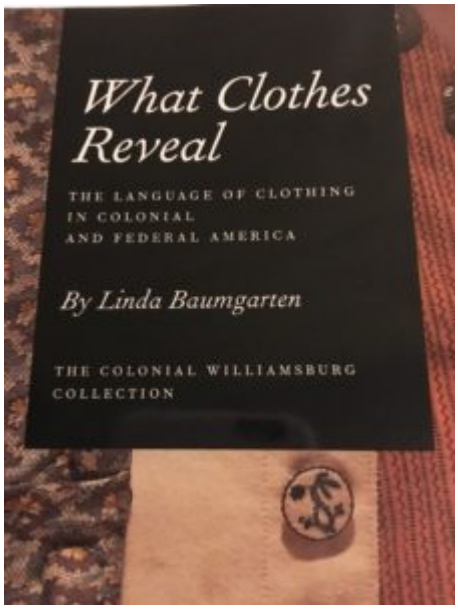
Redressing Early America





What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America

Hats off to Linda Baumgarten and Colonial Williamsburg. They have put together a book that is an exhibit catalogue, synthesis, and a piece of decorative art itself. Like the museum, *What Clothes Reveal* is worth its high price of admission.

The book's jacket reveals the ambition and the splendor: not one but five men's suit coats from the eighteenth century grace the cover, layered as if being displayed for a genteel purchaser. Each one is carefully wrought, down to the dozen or so fabric-covered buttons. The back flap features four pairs of women's shoes, in bluish green, tan, and a beige-ish yellow, arranged in a circle, toes tastefully pointed inward . . . exquisite, really. There are more than 350 illustrations of men's and women's fashions in the volume—artifacts from the collection and period illustrations that fill in the gaps. As in contemporary exhibits, sidebars, projected on what appears to be a blue linen background, address particular issues and problems like bed gowns, the confusing names of imported fabrics, how suits were made to fit, and the "Scarlett O'Hara myth" of tight corsets and tiny waists. If you are interested in how and why stomachers were worn, or how our founding mothers managed lactation fashionably, or who wore breeches and when—and you like to see what you are reading about—then this is the book for you.

In thematic chapters *What Clothes Reveal* seeks out the general public and scholars alike. Baumgarten begins with perhaps the most interesting question of all: how did these clothes survive? How do they make it into a museum? The introduction and first chapter serve as a primer on connoisseurship and some of the basics of eighteenth-century clothing: styles, court dress, undergarments, fabrics. Some of the most beautiful costume pieces adorn these first chapters.

We then move on, as the fashion history scholarship has, to questions of

meaning. And here the work gets more general, introducing contemporary material culture scholars' perspectives on how everyday life's meaning is mediated by, understood through, and thus best recaptured by objects. As the subtitle reveals, Baumgarten employs the structuralist notion of dress as a system of meaning, being akin to a language. A fashion is like a trope, an article of clothing like a word well or ill chosen from a widely shared but culturally bounded repertoire. This explanation—itself a metaphor—has its limitations. It snags especially on the eighteenth century's own penchant for metaphors of clothing.

For example, Thomas Jefferson's famous rapprochement with his old friend and political enemy John Adams occurred after Adams, cheekily complimenting him as a "Friend to American Manufactures . . . of the domestic kind," sent him "two Pieces of Homespun": his son John Quincy Adams's leather-clad *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* (1810). The package of books got separated from the letter, so Jefferson did not get the joke at first, thinking that there were actual textiles from Braintree on their way south. The thought inspired him to wax poetic in his response to Adams about the "economy and thriftiness" that placed one sheep for every person on Virginia farms, increased production of cotton, hemp, and flax, and ultimately made "every family in the country a manufactory within itself." After Adams then explained about the books, Jefferson apologized for his flight of rhetoric. Adams replied that such words had been exactly what he had wanted—suggesting that each man sought to continue a conversation that had always mixed national politics and the stuff of everyday life.

Such rhetorical and archival (not to mention presidential) stuff may seem far removed from the material and artifactual realities clarified by Baumgarten's study and the visit to the museum it permits—but is it really? Adams knew very well Jefferson's penchant for dressing up and dressing down to make political points, as when he had greeted the British ambassador and spouse in his "down at the heels" slippers. (Adams's own great-grandson Henry, with his usual combination of brio and solid research, would later observe that "Jefferson, at moments of some interest in his career as President, seemed to regard his peculiar style of dress as a matter of political importance, while the Federalist newspapers never ceased ridiculing the corduroy small-clothes, red-plush waistcoat, and sharp-toed boots with which he expressed his contempt for fashion.") The point is that some analytical distinction between language and clothing needs to be kept in order to appreciate how historical actors interwove them.

The structuralist approach tends to conflate language and other aspects of culture. As a result, common meanings are stressed and specific, often political actions are underrated. What we gain in Baumgarten's approach, for example, to James Fenimore Cooper's close attention to clothing in his (not coincidentally named) Leatherstocking tales, we lose in her assumption that Cooper mainly reveals widely shared myths about the recent frontier past. The problem is not that Americans did not imagine leather goods like hunting shirts

and moccasins as part of a self-sufficient, passing frontier past. Baumgarten rightly calls such beliefs myths, reminding us several times that neither Americans not Indians were self-sufficient with respect to clothing during the eighteenth century, except for brief and highly politicized intervals. The problem is that seeing Cooper as someone who captured existing myths makes it hard to see how, as Alan Taylor pointed out in *William Cooper's Town*, he was also creating them, for purposes at once personal and political.

Not everyone agreed about the meanings clothing revealed, even if they would have agreed that clothing had meaning. Perhaps the uses of clothing became more creative during this period precisely because of such disagreements. Certainly slaves and other working people found meanings and uses for clothing they made, acquired, and altered that the original owners of those gowns and jackets would not have acknowledged. Jefferson repeatedly relied on the common symbol of homespun, much as he wore the best clothes he could find while in France, but when he dressed even further down as president he knew that his slippers would be understood differently by different people. As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has suggested, it may be time for the very material as well as symbolic complexities of clothing to guide our understanding of culture and history. Clothing may make a better metaphor for culture than language makes for clothing.

Fortunately *What Clothes Reveal* does not get caught in the tight-spun webs of myth. Baumgarten does a tremendous service in comparing ordinary and fancy clothing. She does even better by stressing the common threads. Dress historians have successfully pieced together the scraps of evidence that show how high and plain styles both overlapped and differed in a period when clothing, because of its great value, was regularly recycled. Instead of apologizing for the non-American origins of most of the textiles in the collection, Baumgarten details the adaptation of metropolitan styles to colonial and American contexts, a running theme of the study. A final chapter explores subsequent alterations and returns to the artifacts themselves, many of which are not in their original shape. Refreshingly, there is not a whiff of condescension in this work toward any maker or wearer of clothing. Because they shared and shaped the goods, and because of the beauty and usefulness of what they created and adapted, for Baumgarten early Americans join a democracy of meaning-making, one which opens up the subject rather than restricting it to textile experts and collectors.

I'd still rather have just one of those suits in my closet. Imagine the effect on my students were I to give my "consumer revolution" lecture in period attire! But I will settle, happily, for the book on my shelf.

Further Reading: The exciting possibilities of clothing as the "stuff" of early American history have been demonstrated by, among others, Jonathan Prude, "'To Look Upon the Lower Sort': Runaway Ads and the Appearance of Unfree Labor in America, 1750-1800," *Journal of American History* 78 (1991): 124-60; Karin Calvert, "The Function of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America" in Cary

Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert eds., *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville, Va., 1994), 252-84; James Axtell, "The First Consumer Revolution," *Beyond 1492* (New York, 1992); Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York, 1992), esp. chap. 3; Shane White and Graham White*, Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1998); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York, 2001); Michael Zakim, "Sartorial Ideologies: From Homespun to Ready-Made," *American Historical Review* 106 (December 2001): 1553-1586; Catherine Anne Haulman, "The Empire's New Clothes: The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth Century British North America" (Ph.D diss., Cornell University, 2002). My own sampler projects appear as "Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic," *William and Mary Quarterly* 56 (1999), esp. 250-54, and "Why Thomas Jefferson and African Americans Wore Their Politics on their Sleeves: Dress and Politics Between American Revolutions" in Jeffrey Pasley, Andrew Robertson, and David Waldstreicher, eds., *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill, forthcoming). The Adams and Jefferson letters referred to are John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 1 January; 3, 10 February 1812; Jefferson to Adams, 21, 23 January 1812, in Lester J. Cappon ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters* (Chapel Hill, 1959), 2:290-97. The passage from Henry Adams is in his *History of the United States of America During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson* (1889-91. repr. New York, 1986), 126-27.

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