

Importance of Sans-culottes Movement

Sans-culottes were a prominent political group at the end of the eighteenth century, and played a large role in the French Revolution. The sans-culottes movement was important to the Revolution of 1789 and later revolutions, because it was one of the first working class groups that incorporated both a political stance and a social condition.

The Members of Sans-Culottes



The sans-culotte consisted of the working-class. During the height of the sans-culottes movement, Momoro remarked, A sans-culotte is someone who goes everywhere on foot, who isn't loaded with money like the rest of you, but lives quietly with his wife and children . . . on the fourth or fifth floor. The reference to the upper floors comes from the fact that the poorer workers tended to occupy the top floors or attics of apartment blocks. Such descriptions are evocative, but misleading. The sans-culotte did not necessarily represent the poorest section of the urban crowd, as pictured above. Some were poor, but the militant sans-culottes were more often than not skilled workers and shopkeepers from the middle class.

The elite members of the sans-culotte preferred the trousers of the working-man. They disdained the breeches of the aristocracy or upper-middle classes. They felt that all classes were equal and, therefore, should not be segregated by fashion. In the picture above, the members are working-men and hold the pike to symbolize their militancy. The pike was a common weapon of the lower class, because it was easily constructible. It evened the playing field between the lower class revolutionaries and the king's army. The sans-culotte depicted in the caricature to the right is also wearing the typical sans-culotte garb.

This caricature is of a *Parisian Sans-culotte* drawn between 1792 and 1793. Taken from (Furet and Ozouf, 362)

Socially, the sans-culottes were anything but cohesive. The politics of any member of the movement, or French society for that matter, depended on personal vendettas, professional jealousies, literacy, and economic factors. Although their politics could differ, sans-culottes did hold one opinion in common: they were against the rich.

- Sans-culottes believed in the ideology that all men were equal.
- Ideally, each citizen would own one piece of property, such as a farm or shop, and no one would control large enterprises or estates.
- The sans-culotte were not opposed to the concept of private property, but did despise the indulgent wealth by the bourgeoisie and the elite aristocrats.
- Food should be taken from big landowners and grain-merchants and to be given to small workshops.
- They called for a radical Republic based on Direct Democracy.
- They wanted a tax on the rich.



Clothing that would have been worn by Émigrés and other wealthy within French society



The eighteenth century, which included the influential years of the Enlightenment, brought clothing changes of various natures. It was the French Revolution, however, that turned men in trousers against men in breeches and exposed the yawning gap between classes.

After the first years of the Revolution, the calls for group identity in dress ceased. The mood changed to encourage men to wear what they wanted. The Incroyables nicknamed the “Invisibles” for the outlandishly high-necked collars that masked their faces, were brought together by mutual political and social outlooks. They vied among themselves as to who could sport the most exaggeratedly cut garments: abbreviated vests, coats with swallowtails, and voluminous trousers. Other social forces helped reinforce the concept of trousers as the pants of choice for men by the early nineteenth century. Most of Europe had been at war for years, and trousers and boots were easier to wear and provided more effective covering. Dressing for warfare had always been a major stimulus in the development of men’s fashion, and it was no mistake that so many military men stood out as fashion leaders.

<http://www.nypl.org/blog/28?page=3>



Dress during this period goes through a massive shift. Late 18th Century women's dress collapses from its padded and puffed look to a thin, often translucent silhouette. As the French Revolution progressed, different women's styles were adopted that appeared to have reference to the revolutionary politics, social structure and philosophy of the time. In the early 1790's, for example, the "English" or man-tailored style was favored as it hinted towards the leanings of constitutional monarchy. There was a brief fashion for plain dresses in dark colors during the Terror of 1792, but when the Directory took over French fashion again went wild, trying out "Rousseauesque" fashions in "Greek", "Roman", "Sauvage" and "Otaheti" (Tahitian) styles.



"Rousseauesque" Fashion