

PEACOCK REVOLUTION

American Masculine Identity and
Dress in the Sixties and Seventies

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PREFACE

The Peacock Revolution in menswear of the 1960s came as a profound shock to American society. Young men grew their hair long and dressed in clothes that greatly alarmed most traditionalists who viewed the new styles of men's dress as effeminate and even subversive. Pop culture, mass media, and especially the fashion industry seemed to collude in this perceived corruption of youth. "What I design for young people should shock," declared Pierre Cardin in a 1968 interview.¹

To the baby boom generation, though, the Peacock Revolution was about more than fashion fads. The radical changes in men's clothing reflected, and contributed to, the changing ideas of masculinity initiated by a youthquake of rebellious baby boomers coming of age in an era of revolutions. New ideas of masculinity emerged from the counterculture of activism that surged across America for civil rights, students' rights, women's liberation, gay liberation, Red Power, and Black Power, and against the Vietnam War, the draft, armed occupations of campuses, and the Establishment in general. From these movements came new forms of protest and street dress that altered conventions of masculine identity, ranging from long hair to unisex clothing. Moreover, the peacock dress of baby boomers was a welcomed nontraditional visual identity that was a distinct departure from that of their fathers—the conformist herd of men in gray flannel suits. And rather than concerns about effeminacy in their clothing choices, most youthquake men regarded their peacock shock dress as a personal expression of individuality and modernity. But most important of all, girls were attracted to the sexually confident peacock.

But the Peacock Revolution did not spring into existence suddenly and without warning. To better understand how the Peacock Revolution developed and why it was such a shock to post-Second World War American culture, this study examines many of the socio-economic, sociocultural, and sociopolitical factors that led to the emergence of the youthquake peacock in the early 1960s, and sustained him into the mid-1970s.

Chapter 1 lays out the evolution of the American idea of manhood and masculine identity before 1960. In the early years of the nation, the self-made man was the ideal, replacing the Old World patriarch whose socio-economic

power was derived from a hereditary class system. By the late nineteenth century, though, the self-made man encountered challenges that undermined his masculinity. Industrialization and urbanization threatened his individualism and self-determination as an ever-increasing number of men moved to cities and worked for wages. With fathers away at work, their sons were left in the care of women much of the time, inciting a national anxiety about the feminization of future generations of American men. Seeming to validate these fears, medical science discovered a new mental disorder called homosexuality, which confirmed the dangers of a feminized male. In addition, women began to demand equal rights with men, and increasingly entered male domains in the workplace and colleges. By the mid-twentieth century, women had achieved the vote and, during two World Wars, had proven that masses of women could work on an equal footing with men. Consequently, a crisis of masculinity confronted the American male. The established social order of separate spheres—men as patriarchs and breadwinners, women as housewives and mothers—seemed to dissolve further with each new generation. Instead, masculinity came to be codified into an orthodoxy of behavior and characteristics, ranging from excellence in sports and with machinery to resisting emasculating influences of women and especially any hint of effeminacy.

Throughout this one-hundred-and-fifty-year evolution of ideas and ideals of manhood, the visual representation of masculinity was short hair and a simple, sober three-piece suit. Even as socio-economic and cultural challenges to masculinity developed over time, the visible self of American men remained fairly constant, with only glacial changes until the development of the sack suit in the 1850s, which then became the standardized uniform of masculine identity for the next hundred years. For post-Second World War fathers, their expectations were that their baby boomer sons would likewise conform to the traditions of masculinity and dress identity that they and their fathers before them had learned and accepted.

But, as the first baby boomers entered their teen years in the early 1960s, many rejected the conformist conventions of manhood and the materialistic values of their fathers. Instead, they looked to the emerging counterculture for purpose and a new identity. In Chapter 2, the pre-1960s foundations of that counterculture are examined. On the leading edge of nonconformity in the immediate post-Second World War years were the Beats, who expressed their disaffection with the prevailing consumer society through their writing and poetry. By the 1950s, young followers of the Beats, who came to be known as Beatniks, demonstrated their youthful rebellion against social norms by adopting a bohemian lifestyle in urban slums. Two other types of nonconformist men of the era were bikers and playboys, the former viewed as criminal gang members, and the latter, as selfish and immature young men who negated their obligations to society as respectable husbands and fathers.

Also discussed in Chapter 2 is the emergence in the 1950s of the teenager as an important and unique consumer demographic. Their collective spending power on rock and roll music, movies, magazines and comic books, soft drinks, and snack foods contributed tens of millions of dollars to the postwar economic prosperity. Consequently, industries such as entertainment, publishing, and prepared foods manufacturers developed new consumer product niches and marketing that targeted the teenager. Growing up in the 1950s, the baby boomers observed all this special attention focussed on their older siblings, and upon becoming teenagers themselves in the 1960s, felt likewise special and entitled.

Unlike the teens of the 1950s, though, who were anxious to get through adolescence and on to adulthood, the baby boomers embraced their youth and exulted in their historic time and place. In Chapter 3, the interweaving of the youthquake, the counterculture, and the Peacock Revolution of the 1960s is detailed. It was an era in which young people fostered a Generation Gap by which they sought to establish their individualism and identity separate and distinct from anyone over age thirty. The youthquake generation boldly challenged authority; they organized and participated in social justice movements to effect significant changes ranging from civil rights to ending the Vietnam War. And in spite of the role models of their silent majority parents, the young wanted to be heard.

Through these efforts, youthquake men also developed new concepts of masculinity. To their parents, activism against the Establishment was immature rebellion at best, and at worst, for draft resistance and antiwar activities, an unpatriotic display of cowardice. For youthquake men, though, facing intimidation and violence from police, national guardsmen, and sometimes bystander mobs demonstrated courage and manly resolve. Moreover, their long hair and nonconformist dress were displays of bravery in the face of social opprobrium and hostility from the Establishment. They were also open to the sexual revolution, including the idea of sexual equality with women. And they experimented with radical, nonconformist forms of masculine identity in dress, inspired in large part by the Peacock Revolution in menswear.

The development, evolution, dress styles, and social significance of the Peacock Revolution in America are chronicled in Chapter 4. As with all revolutions, there were three phases, with some overlapping: a prescient beginning (c. 1960–65), a feverish middle (c. 1964–74), and a Thermidorian conclusion (c. 1972–75).

Early indicators of the pending revolution included the development of experimental styles of menswear of the late 1950s, such as the slim cut Continental suit and sexualized clothing like formfitting jeans and bikini underwear and swimwear. For most dress historians, though, the launch of the revolution occurred with the 1964 British Invasion of boy bands like the Beatles, who introduced to American youth long hair and mod fashions from London's

Carnaby Street. The immediate demand by youthquake men for granny print shirts, ankle-slim hiphuggers, and fitted suits inspired US ready-to-wear makers to produce Americanized versions. Famous women's fashion designers entered the menswear market, expanding on the innovative looks from Swinging England and adding the cachet of branded labels to men's clothing. Through the second half of the 1960s, the American menswear industry found fresh ideas from Hollywood, such as Romeo shirts and sculpted adaptations of Gatsby suits. Street styles inspired bell-bottoms, prewashed jeans, tie-dyed and flower power print shirts and pants, and handicraft accessories for the mass market. The hippies' multiculturalism led to the Nehru jacket and loungewear kaftans. Red Power protest dress launched Apache scarves, fringed suede jackets, and moccasins. Black Power unity dress popularized African heritage styles such as the dashiki and Afro hairstyle, and, to a broader market, African print textiles. Blaxploitation films brought the Peacock Revolution to urban black baby boomers as neo-Edwardian suits, high heel platform shoes, and vividly hued nylon shirts. From the sexual revolution came see-through shirts and fashion underwear.

For many parents and traditionalists, the Peacock Revolution was especially worrisome. They feared that long hair on men, the colorful clothes, the beads and pendant necklaces, the sexual exhibitionism were symptomatic of the feminization of America's young men. And, even more frighteningly, such effeminacy in dress would turn men into homosexuals, who, at the time, were regarded as mentally ill by the medical establishment, as criminals by law, and as sinners by religious dogma. This anxiety also reflected the pervasive misogyny in American society; that is, since gays were womanly, and women were weak, the very defense of the nation against communism might be in jeopardy.

Certainly, most American young men did not dress as flamboyant peacocks day to day. Dress historians argue that "the reality is that many men, even young men, did not succumb to the trend, and few of those who did adopt the new styles continued to experiment with new expressions of masculinity for long."² Yet, the vast majority of youthquake men were indeed impacted by the Peacock Revolution. The sexualized slim cut of trousers, the body hugging fit of shirts, bell-bottom cuffs, the shaped suit jacket, synthetic textiles, and colorful prints were all peacock influences applied to every variety of menswear. And long hair on men became a ubiquitous masculine identity that endures today.

The final phase of the Peacock Revolution occurred in the early 1970s with men's high heel platform shoes, glittery glam rock fashions, man bags, and earrings. At the same time, the end of the Vietnam War and a global economic crisis brought a close to the counterculture fervor. A regressive conservatism permeated America. A second wave of baby boomers entered the Me-Decade of the 1970s as self-absorbed yuppies, dressed for success in conformist, conservative clothes and short hair.

One final point about this study. Much of this era is in my living memory. As a high school student during 1967–70 and college student during 1970–74, I remember well the turbulence of the times. Color TV brought it all into our living room each night, and current events periodicals opened discussions in the classroom. As *GQ* assessed some years later, “The Sixties shot most of our lives from cannons . . . It was the most exciting roller-coaster decade. The ‘ups’ were sky-high and the ‘downs’ sank to Hades depths. We were never on an even keel. Intense, yes, but never boring. During the Sixties we never once whined for the ‘good old days.’”³ Like the majority of baby boomers, though, I was not a counterculture activist. I didn’t even grow my hair long until 1971, and then only to my collar. But in coming of age during the late 1960s and early 1970s, I experimented with peacock shock fashions—selectively. For example, the photos in Figures 8 and 16 feature actual clothes I wore as a teenager—a 1968 Nehru jacket and chain pendant, and a 1970 vest suit. And even though most of my closet contained the standard fair in menswear, the influence of the Peacock Revolution was evident in my permanent press fitted shirts in paisley prints, slim cut bell-bottom hiphuggers, skinny rib knit tops in vivid colors, and shiny buckle shoes (1960s) and platforms (1970s).