

THE XVIII CENTURY WAISTCOAT

THE feminine contagion of the XVIII century ensnared even the costume of gentlemen. Especially is this fact revealed in their extravagant and fanciful waistcoats. Accustomed to the charms and conceits of the feminine attire of the period, the ingenuity and variety which marked the embellishment of the most elegant part of a gentleman's wardrobe has been overlooked.

The development of the waistcoat prior to the XVIII century, may be traced from the doublet, originally worn by soldiers under the cuirass. An essential element in men's costume, by 1660 it was scarcely recognizable, having become a short, straight jacket such as was affected by the cavalier mode. The form gradually lengthened until by 1685 it was a straight, sleeved jacket to the knee worn under a coat of similar cut but greater amplitude. This, with the breeches, composed the "habit complet," a form which, introduced in the days of Louis XIV, has endured, with incidental changes, down to our own day.

After its first appearance, about 1685, the history of the form of the waistcoat (known as the *veste*) is marked by changes in size and placement of the pockets, length and cut of the skirts, and by the existence or non-existence of sleeves. As we have seen, the Louis XIV style was a straight jacket to the knee, with sleeves and innumerable buttons and pockets placed near the hip line. During the Regency and the reign of Louis XV, fullness was added to the skirts of coat and waistcoat by plaits placed at the back, and by 1750 the flare was exaggerated by holding them out with crinoline. At this time the coat sleeve was still full, rather short with a wide cuff so that in many contemporary paintings



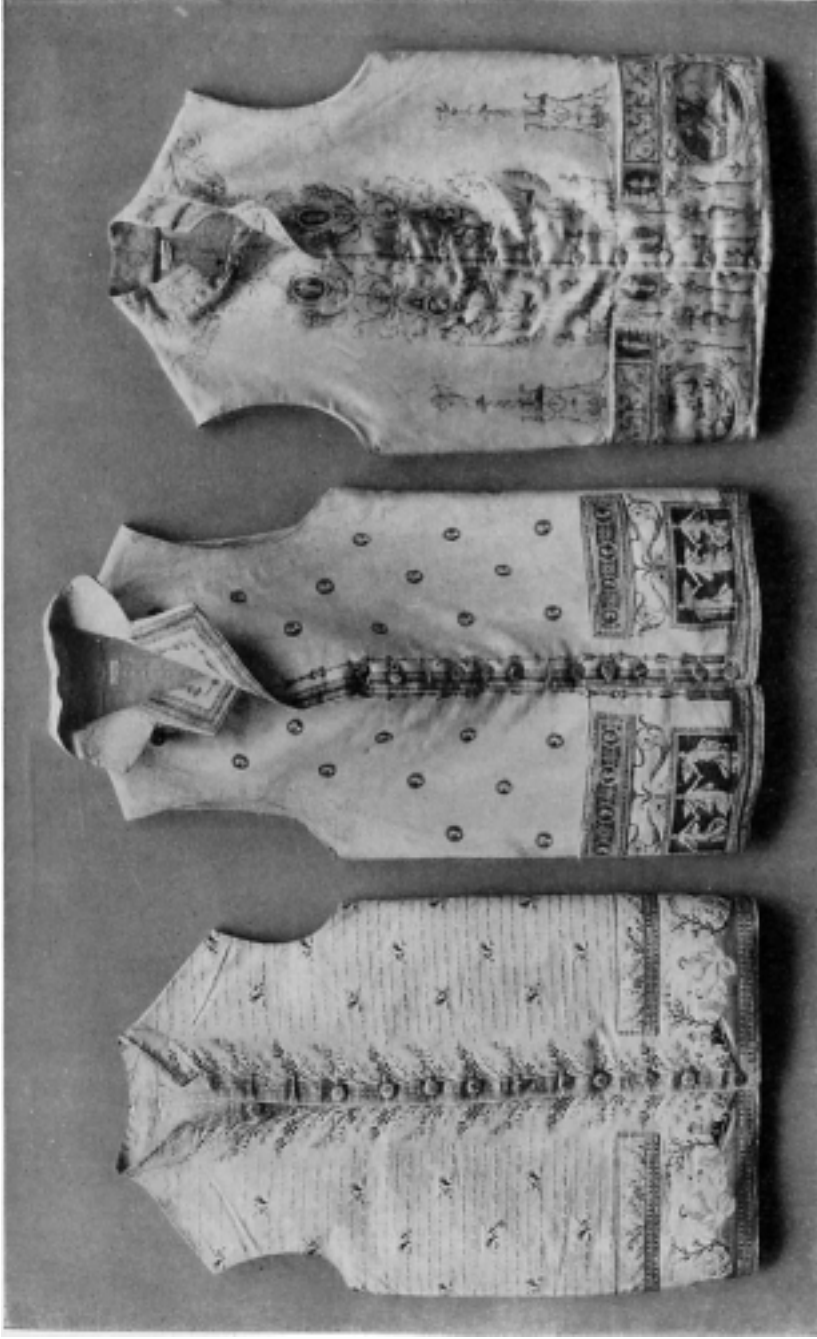
Courtesy Mr. R. C. Greenleaf

"GILET," STYLE OF LOUIS XVI

and prints beneath the edge of the coat sleeve one identifies the smaller cuff of the sleeved waistcoat and beneath that the shirt sleeve with its ruffled band at the wrist. In the third quarter of the century the coat skirts lost much of their fullness and likewise the sleeves thereby causing changes in the form of the waistcoat. Consulting Saint-Aubin, Embroiderer to the King, whose book, "L'art du tailleur," was published in Paris in 1770, we find that he describes three kinds of waistcoats: the "veste"—a sleeved waistcoat with skirts; the "veston"—with abbreviated skirts and small pocketflaps; the "gilet"—the short waistcoat without sleeves or skirts worn with the "frac," ancestor of the modern cut-a-way, which came into fashion at this time.

The original of the "gilet" has been ascribed to the famous actor, Gilles, who wore a sort of sleeveless jacket and it is also said to have been an economical device of the Germans. However, it can be accounted for by the evolution of the cut of the coat, for as coat sleeves became tighter, the sleeves of waistcoats were by necessity discarded. The "veston," worn with the "*habit à la française*" and the "gilet," worn with the "frac" are the types fashionable during the reign of Louis XVI, time when it was essential for a gentleman to be able to count his waistcoats by the dozen and even by the hundred. Upon them were lavished in capricious and tasteful decoration the skill of the embroiderer's art.

In a loan exhibition recently held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the different types of the XVIII century waistcoat were shown, including those of woven and printed as well as those of embroidered design. Two of the most sumptuous were the earliest and date from the second quarter of the XVIII century. One of these has sleeves, while both are long skirted and lavishly embroidered in gold thread. Embroidery in gold and silver is more frequently found in the first half of the XVIII century, but a dazzling costume of blue silk embroidered in silver and coloured silks, lent by Mr. H. A. Elsberg, proves that the simple and somewhat drab tastes of Louis XVI, who preferred to dress in gray, were not shared by all his court. Observing the grace of the embroidered design of this costume, the skill of the needlework, and the brilliance of the effect, one is not surprised to learn that at the time of the marriage of the Dauphin in 1745 the costumes planned for the occasion were so costly that people



Courtesy of Mr. R. C. Greenleaf

WAISTCOATS, STYLE OF LOUIS XVI.

conceived the practical but unromantic notion of renting them instead of buying them and that the Marquis de Mirepoix rented for six thousand francs, three suits which he returned to his tailor after wearing them once. The majority of the waistcoats, in this exhibition date from the last forty years of the XVIII century, and most of them were probably made after 1775. Of these a few examples are of woven design, while two are printed and the rest are embroidered in coloured silks in satin-stitch or chain stitch. A few for "la belle saison," lent by Mrs. De Witt Clinton Cohen are white quilted linen.

It was during the reign of Louis XVI that there was such a great vogue for waistcoats and so it is in this period that the embroidered designs are most varied and capricious. A silk waistcoat in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum is decorated with gardening tools and a sun-bonneted lady with a wheelbarrow in the style of the simple tastes affected by Marie Antoinette. The little Chinaman in a fantastic boat in the delightful chinoiserie waistcoat of *tête de nègre* silk, lent by Mr. Richard C. Greenleaf, recalls the first scene of "Le Rossignol." A white satin waistcoat decorated with little monkeys playing musical instruments is another example of XVIII century humour and fancy. The memoirs discuss the vogue for waistcoats and one reads that they were magnificently embroidered with subjects of the chase, cavalry charges and even naval battles and the ingenuous author adds that they were very expensive.¹ Others were decorated with "petits personnages galants" or with amusing episodes, pastoral scenes or the fables of La Fontaine.

The art of embroidery had long been sponsored by royalty for, under Louis XIV, Colbert had established at the Gobelins an atelier for the embroiderers and in such great demand had this delicate art become, that in the XVIII century we find established in the silk manufactories at Lyons some twenty thousand embroiderers²—this in spite of the importation from the Orient of embroidered silks that were sold at a very low price. Moreover, Eastern labour being so cheap, designs were sent from Europe to China and Japan to be embroidered.³ The character of the embroidery of one of the waistcoats, lent by Mr. Greenleaf, suggest

¹Alfred Franklin, *La vie d'Autrefois*, p. 261.

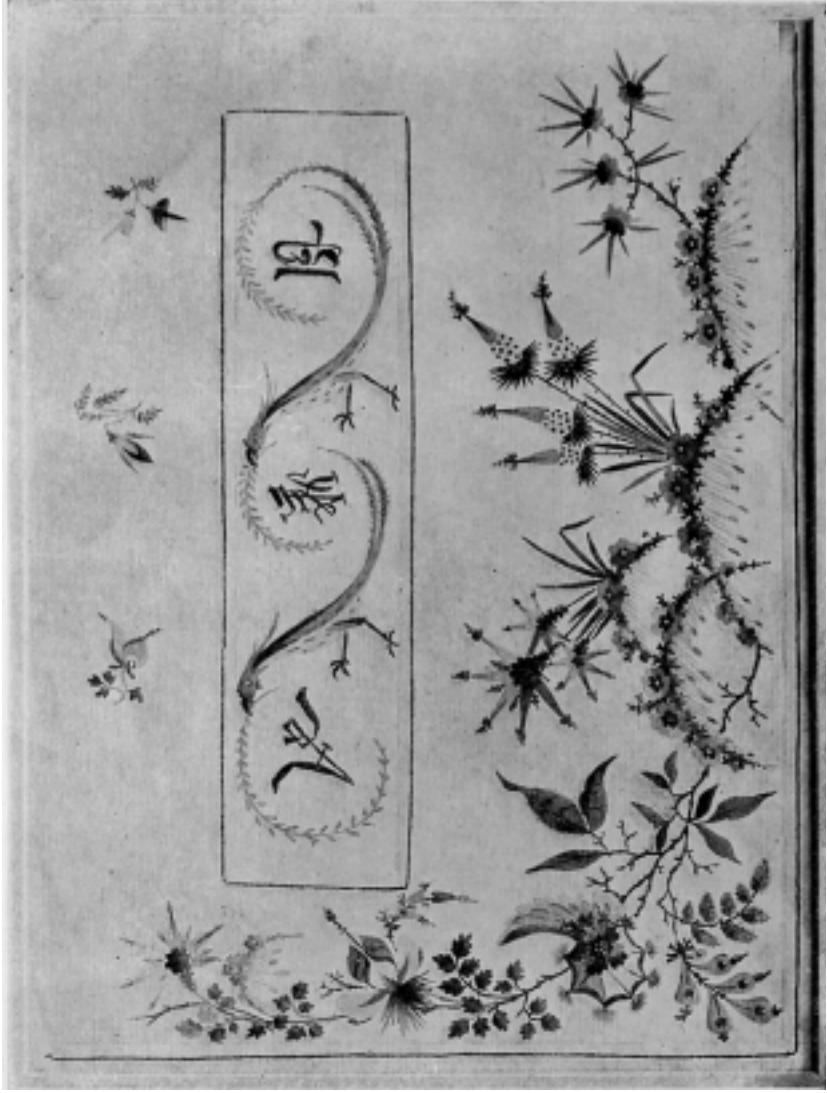
²Henri Algoud, Philippe de Lasalle, *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, 1911, p. 464.

³Paris, *Exposition Universelle*, 1900, *Broderie*, p. 62.

that the design, representing a lively cock fight, may have been worked by Oriental hands.

The existence at Lyons of so many embroiderers would lead us to expect to find the names of celebrated designers as authors of the most inspired work. Although we know that the famous textile designer, Philippe de Lassalle (1723-1803), was responsible for many embroidery designs, the rest must, with few exceptions, remain nameless. The talent of Jean-François Bony (C. 1754-C. 1825)¹ has not passed completely into oblivion and the exhibition at the Metropolitan offered an unusual opportunity to study his work, not only in actual costumes but also in a book of original designs for costume embroidery, lent by Mr. Elsberg. While his masterpiece was the design for Marie Louise's salon at Versailles, his waistcoat designs reveal him as the "virtuoso of embroidery." Illustrated here is a design for waistcoat embroidery from the collection of Mr. Greenleaf. It presents to perfection the delicacy and piquancy which lent such a "cachet" to the embroidered costumes of XVIII century gentlemen.

¹For full account see Henri Algoud, Jean François Bony, *Revue de l'art*, Vol. 41, pp. 131-143. Also, see page 32 of this Bulletin.



Courtesy of Mr. R. C. Grenleaf
SKETCH FOR WAISTCOAT EMBROIDERY ATTRIBUTED TO JEAN FRANÇOIS BONY.