

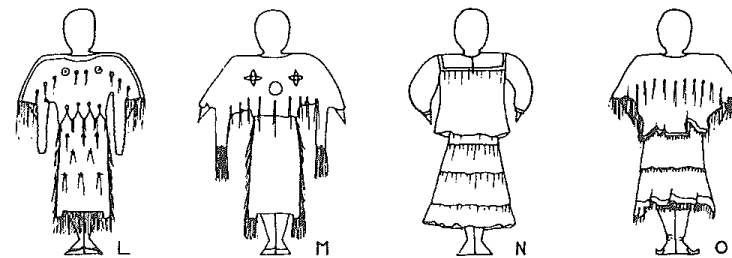
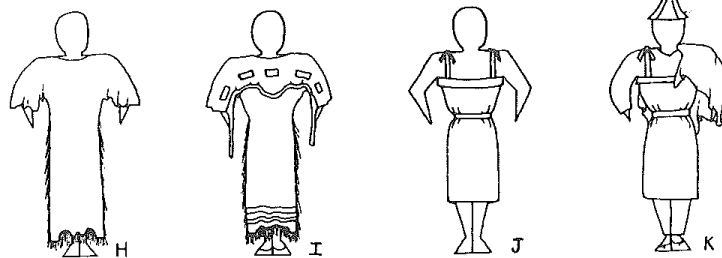
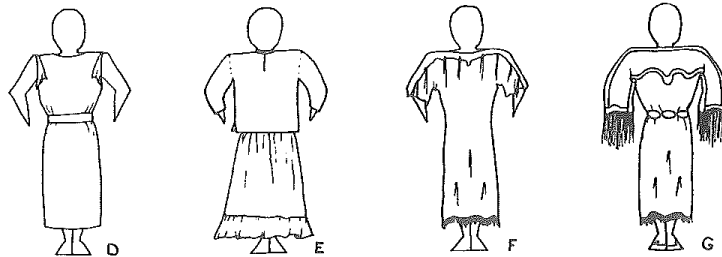
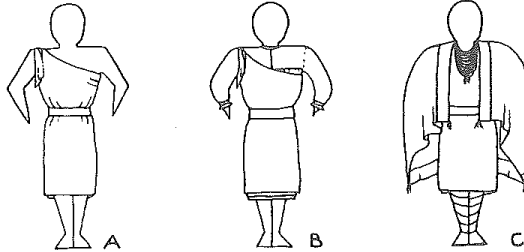
DENVER ART MUSEUM

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INDIAN WOMEN'S CLOTHING: Fashion and Function

LEAFLET 109

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1. INTRODUCTION. This leaflet is designed to give some idea as to the workings of clothing style change among Indian women; of the existence of clothing for different purposes; and about how these differences are produced. The basic styles constantly referred to are described in Leaflet 107.

2. CHANGE IN FASHION exists among Indian women, but moves very slowly because of the absence of commercial pressure and the natural conservatism of the people. Changes occur most prominently in detail rather than in the basic design. These changes in detail in turn are related to the introduction and availability of new materials which can be combined with old basic styles or decorative details. White influence has been a strong factor in fashion change since its inception 450 years ago but has varied considerably in importance, and by geographical or tribal areas. (This text is not concerned with style changes involving the clothing entirely of White origin worn by practically all Indian women today, but only with the purely native clothing, alone or in combination with White elements.)

It is difficult to evaluate changes which have been due to intertribal influence in a short leaflet. Dislocation of tribes due to the coming of the Whites has definitely been a factor, however. An example is the introduction of the fashion of wearing silver ornaments into the southern Plains and, by later extension, the Southwest, following the arrival of the New Jersey Delaware in Texas in the 1830's.

Another factor is the custom of the "give-away" which frequently introduced articles of clothing from one tribe into another, thereby potentially changing the styles of the receiving tribe. A "give-away" is a social function at which presents are given to family, friends and visiting guests.

Intertribal marriage must also have been instrumental in bringing about style change. A talented Cheyenne woman, for example, marrying into an Osage band would almost certainly result in a style change of a minor nature which might become firmly established.

A difficulty in determining the details of style change is the uncertainty about the identification of clothing and other specimens in museum collections. Formerly—and too frequently today—specimens were assigned to the tribes among which they were collected. Thus, what may appear to be a new style in a tribe is actually a dress from another tribe obtained by capture, trade or give-away. In addition to this difficulty there is a fundamental lack of knowledge about clothing of many tribes at different periods.

3. EXAMPLES OF STYLE CHANGE. Among the Pueblos the old black wool dress (A) is now worn over a sleeved cotton underdress, often with a lace edged petticoat showing below the skirt (B). At Zuni one woman, some 50 years ago, introduced a new style. The Hopi woman's dress with diamond weave edges was, through the influence of this woman, adopted in preference to the local embroidered dress. In the 1870's Navaho women abandoned their native wool blanket dress (D) in favor of the very wide full cotton skirts worn by White women of the period (E). About 1900 the introduction of a new material, velveteen, resulted in a new type of shirt among both Navaho women and men (E).

On the Plains there was everywhere a substitution of commercial cloth for skin, with small detail changes in style because of the new material, but

the retaining of the basic cut. At present it is the style for young women of Southern Plains tribes to wear long, very white, skin dresses on formal occasions. Dresses of this type do not appear in old collections and photographs.

Many Great Lakes tribes created a new style by the adoption of silk as a medium, through appliqué embroidery, for use of the ancient quill and birchbark designs on skin or cloth dresses.

Among the Iroquois the ancient costume was a long wrap-around deer skin skirt. When European cloth became available it was used for the skirt, still as a wrap-around. An upper garment, previously lacking, was evolved in the form of a long calico tunic. The front of the tunic was taken from the costumes of White women, while the back was adopted from the court coats of European male officials. Thus, by combining various different elements, the Iroquois woman created a new dress style for herself.

4. FUNCTION IN CLOTHING. Much more clearly established in the field of Indian women's clothing than style change is the use of different costumes for different occasions. Provided she is not reduced to ultimate poverty, no Indian woman will go to a social function in a work dress, or vice versa. Equally clear in many cases is the differentiation between formal dresses for social or religious wear. There naturally existed variations in dress to suit weather changes.

On the whole the difference between a work dress and a formal dress lay in the addition of parts or ornamental features to the work dresses. These latter were the equivalent of the "basic dress" of our fashion designers, one which could serve for various purposes if worn or decorated in differing ways.

Changes in function seem to have been less affected by White influence than style variation. There is abundant evidence that dresses of different types were being worn by many tribes before White influence made itself felt. In the better accounts of tribes at the time of first White contact there are descriptions of clothing which clearly indicate this custom.

5. EXAMPLES OF DIFFERENCE IN FUNCTION. The Jicarilla Apache work dress was a long, perfectly plain and unornamented deer skin costume (F). It was quickly made into a formal dress by adding an elaborate oblong cape-poncho of skin colored with earth paints and trimmed with beads. Beaded boots rather than plain ones, and perhaps a Navaho silver belt, completed the change (G).

Pueblo women changed their black wool house dress (A) into a formal by wearing in addition an embroidered shawl of white cotton, high white puttee boots and masses of jewelry (C).

On the Plains the basic dress was long neck-to-ankle affair with little or no decoration (H). For formal wear a dress of the same cut, but heavily beaded on the bodice and at the bottom of the skirt, was worn (I).

As an example of adjusting the dress to the weather, the Naskapi of Labrador may be cited. The basic dress of this tribe was a painted deer skin slip sustained by shoulder straps (J). To make this costume wearable in winter a unit made of sleeves and covering for the chest and shoulders, or separate sleeves, was put on under the straps of the slip. A robe of caribou skin and a peaked skin hat finished the transformation (K).

Among the Kiowa there was a clear differentiation between a formal dress for social uses and one for religious wear. Both were of deer skin, but the social dress with its skin tabs and fringes, and bead medallions and pendants has a somewhat frivolous air (L). The religious dress, in contrast, achieves an impression of solemn dignity by its white simplicity, sweeping fringes and lack of ornamentation save for a few delicately painted stars and moon on the bodice (M).

The Mescalero and Chiricahua Apache illustrate a change of another sort. The former skin clothing of these women was long ago abandoned in favor of a sweeping cloth skirt and blouse combination known as a "Mother Hubbard" (N). But when their daughters come to marriageable age they are introduced to society in a two-piece debut dress of deer skin trimmed with metal jinglers, fringe and colorful beadwork (O).

6. MODERN WOMEN'S CLOTHING. Today the native dresses are nearly extinct for daily wear, only surviving to some extent for ceremonies or for wear at Indian fairs, rodeos and the like. Most Indian women dress exactly, or approximately, as White women do. Only moccasins persist in some quantity for daily use, and many young Indians have given up even these. Mail order catalogs and the beauty parlors have left little of the aboriginal Indian but her features and coloring.

Compiled by F. H. Douglas from examination of the great collections, observations in the field, and study of many old dated photographs. Book references to the subject are so slight and scattered that no reference list is given.