

Bianca Sfondrini

BALE

The White Fashion Book

9010

#ffffff

R 255  
G 255  
B 255

C 0  
M 0  
K 0  
Y 0

H 0  
S 0  
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**Author**  
Bianca Sfondrini

**Teacher**  
Andrew Tucker

**Design**  
Natália Madalosso (Donmi Design)

London College of Fashion

Welcome to RAL9010, the first edition of a collectible series exploring colour as artefacts, something to hold, examine, question and display. Each volume will unpack a single hue through a multicultural lens, blending aesthetics and fashion into a chromatic archive of both historical and contemporary culture. This inaugural volume, the first of a limited-edition series, features a colour that is often mistaken for silence, when in truth, it speaks volumes. Commonly seen as the absence of colour, white actually carries meanings that go far beyond just 'emptiness', 'neutrality' and 'sterility'. Worn in coronation halls and wedding ceremonies, as well as in temples, kitchens and tennis courts, it has been reflecting - note that the choice of this term is not coincidental - social codes, religious beliefs and aesthetic systems to signify power, purity, mourning, birth, and much more. From royal courts in Europe and the Middle East to sacred rituals in Shinto shrines and Emirati wedding halls, from the severe dignity of papal vestments to the delicate intimacy of lingerie, white is the colour that marks life's most significant and opposite moments, namely birth and death. White can represent nothingness and possibility and, as white light contains all the colours of the spectrum, it's presented as an inclusive, impartial colour, favouring no single hue and refusing to take sides. Rather than a lesson of style, this book is an invitation to look more closely not just at fabric or form, but at symbolism, history and cultural resonance. Through fashion, white becomes more than a colour. It becomes language, a way to understand who we are, where we've been and what we choose to express.

# ON WHITE

Since ancient times, colour has been one of the most powerful means of expressions, be it to signal strength, status, exclusivity or rarity. From emperors and monarchs to religious leaders and luxury brand founders, those who understood the power of visual language have always been adopting a specific palette. This is due to the fact that, more than just decorating, colour communicates. A signature hue can command reverence, provoke desire or convey belonging. And, among all colours, the one that has always been provoking the most debate, fascination, and contradiction, is white.

Surprisingly, white holds one of the longest and most enduring presences in human visual history. Its first appearance dates back to the Paleolithic Age as part of the cave paintings of Lascaux (southwestern France), where humans were used to depict animals, handprints and sacred symbols through natural pigments like chalk and calcite. These findings, dating back to over 17.000 years ago, testify white's place as one of the first colours ever used for artistic and communicative purposes.

Later on, among ancient civilisations, white continued to carry significant spiritual and societal weight. For the Ancient Greeks it symbolised divine light, sacredness and maternal nourishment, with reference to the colour of the milk. In Ancient Rome, a plain white garment called toga virilis was worn by male citizens on ceremonial occasions, while the so called toga candida - word that came to form the root of the modern term 'candidate' - was worn by public officers. What's more, white's symbolic depth extended across nearly every major world religion. For early Christians, who adopted most of Romans' costumes, it has long represented purity, humility and virtue, whilst during the Middle Ages it became associated with martyrdom and mourning, often worn by widows as a sign of grief and devotion. In 1566, at the behest of Pope Pius V, the official colour of papal vestment became white, which from that moment came to be an emblem of sacrifice and sanctity in Roman Catholicism. In Islamic and Shinto religions, white is worn by pilgrims undertaking spiritual journeys, whereas in both Western and Japanese traditional weddings, white bridal attire symbolises purity and spiritual transformation. On the contrary, in many Asian and Indian cultures, white marks mourning, death and the passage to another realm.

Later on, white's fashion influence extended beyond religious practices, starting from the neoclassical revival of the 18th and 19th centuries, inspired by Greco-Roman aesthetics, which brought white garments to prominence especially among European aristocrats. Here men used to wear powdered white wigs and stockings, while women favoured flowing gowns in pale tones adorned with delicate embroidery. Between 1815 and 1830, white came to be adopted as a royal colour and became the flag of monarchist France, and it later symbolised anti-Bolshevik sentiment during the Russian Civil War, as the colour of the White Army.

But, beside political or religious statements, white has been massively used in domestic life as well, mainly for practical reasons. Particularly throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, it reigned as the colour of undergarments, bedsheets and nightwear, in that - contrary to what one might think - unlike dyed fabrics white linens could withstand repeated boiling and bleaching, in a way that they could be used multiple times.



## A Colour in Question

Despite its massive use among multiple fields and across a number of countries, white's very identity as a colour has often been contested by scientists, artists and philosophers, and the answer depends on the frame of reference.

From a scientific standpoint, white is indeed a colour, formed by the combination of all wavelengths in the visible spectrum. In simple terms, when red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet light overlap, they result into what is perceived as white, which is therefore considered as the sum of all the visible colours. Reflecting and scattering all visible light, white is in a direct opposition to black, which conversely absorbs it.

In pigment and print, however, white functions differently. Because it cannot result from the combination of other hues, it is usually perceived as a blank surface, that is, the absence of colour rather than its totality. For this reason, it does not appear on the traditional colour wheel and is classified as achromatic.

This ambiguity lies at the core of white's striking duality, which I like to refer to as its 'dark side': spiritual enlightenment and renewal on one hand, identity erasure and rebirth on the other. More than perhaps any other hue, white operates as a mirror, reflecting the beliefs, values, and anxieties of the cultures, institutions, and individuals that embrace it.

With that being said, the aim of this book is to show that, across centuries and continents, white has been anything but neutral; its meanings have shaped identities, rituals and revolutions, and continue to do so.

R [RED]; O [ORANGE]; Y [YELLOW]; G [GREEN];  
B [BLUE]; I [INDIGO]; V [VIOLET]



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# Royal White

## Across civilisations,

few colours have proven to be as twofold as white. Particularly in Europe, it has long been bound to purity and sanctity, draping monarchs and socially relevant groups in a veil of moral authority: it dressed the sovereign hand, the coronation robe as well as the ceremonial glove, shaping power in its most visible forms. In the courts of the East and Middle East, white took on a parallel but distinctly political role. Here it wasn't merely a symbol of inner virtue, but an outward badge of dynastic allegiance, noble privilege and imperial favour. To wear white could mean one stood in the good graces of a shah, a sultan or a caliph, as well as marking as part of the highest educated elite. Particularly in the Islamic world, white was a true political uniform, a way of declaring allegiance to a particular caliphate or dynasty, hence soldiers, courtiers and officials clad in white visually proclaimed which house they served. What binds these traditions together is the way white made power visible. From the gilded chapels of France to the palaces of Isfahan, from the Mughal courts of Delhi to the imperial halls of Beijing, this colour set its wearer into an elevated, distinguished and beyond-ordinary-reach status. Across empires and dynasties, white has become the colour of assertion, a claim to legitimacy, heritage and right to rule.

# Royal White IN THE WEST

Across Western courts, white was never one thing — but always a thing of power. In France it glittered as spectacle; in Britain it stood for ritual and diplomacy; in Spain and Italy it embodied austerity and moral authority; in Austria it affirmed dynastic continuity. Whether powdered onto wigs, painted onto faces, or stitched into coronation robes, across d Western courts whiteness was a visible marker of power. Be it a form of spectacle, diplomacy, dynastic continuity or moral authority, this colour proclaimed rank, commanded respect and ensured that status was not only held, but mostly seen.

## THE RENAISSANCE: Symbolism and Prestige

In Renaissance Europe, fashion and beauty were carefully staged performances of class, where, whiteness, whether in cosmetics or garments, was a cultivated marker of privilege. Pale skin was deliberately manufactured with powders and paints, - often lead based and dangerously toxic - to distinguish outdoors labourers from nobles, for whom a pale, powdered face signified leisure, wealth, and cultural refinement. Among the most powerful white garments, such as lace ruffs, embroidered silks and gleaming pearls, was ermine fur, which pristine winter whiteness came to symbolise moral integrity and incorruptibility. So powerful was this association that in 1381 Duke John IV of Brittany founded the Order of the Ermine, whose motto “Potius mori quam foedari” (“Rather die than be dishonoured”) turned the animal’s spotless pelt into a moral emblem. Draped over the shoulders of Louis XIV of France or lining the coronation mantle of George VI and Elizabeth II, ermine fur wrapped the monarch in a cloak of purity and prestige, becoming an obligatory trim for coronation robes and official portraits from the Renaissance onward.

## NEWSPAPER: THE WHITE

### France: Whiteness as *Spectacle*

In 17th century France, white was a colour of theatrical display meant to amplify monarchy’s visual splendour. Hence, Particularly with Louis XIV, the Sun King, court ceremonies came to be elevate into an art form, where white ermine mantles lined with gold embroidery were meant to reinforce king’s divine aura, while white gloves - ritually burned afterwards so that no one else might wear them- were used to sanctify the royal hands. By the 18th century, French fashion scene pushed whiteness even further, to the point that lace collars, powdered wigs, silk stockings and satin gowns filled Versailles with shimmering brightness. In this context, white no longer meant modest restraint, bit rather luxury at its most dazzling: French aristocrats whitened their faces, wigs and garments until they gleamed in candlelight, creating a living tableau of radiance. This ides of whiteness as spectacle fell into an aesthetic of excess which reflected France’s unrivalled role as the stage for European fashion.

### Spain and Italy: White as *Authority* and *Austerity*

In Spanish courts, white carried a different inflection of austerity and gravitas, rather than theatricality. Sixteenth-century Habsburg monarchs, such as Philip II, were often depicted in portraits that paired stark black garments with lace or linen ruffs and collars, which whiteness symbolised restraint and incorruptibility echoing the country’s austere Catholic ethos. Also in Italy, white conveyed both nobility and moral weight: in papal Rome popes adopted white cassocks as formal dress, a tradition which solidified in the late Middle Ages and is still visible today. Papal white reinforced the notion of moral authority, and when paired with gold or scarlet it also made the papal figure a political sovereign beside the spiritual one. Hence in this Mediterranean area, whiteness meant authority through restraint, power cloaked in sobriety rather than extravagance.

### England and Britain: From *Coronations* to Mourning

Across the Channel, Britain was adopting white as a colour of state ritual and symbolic balance. In the same way as it happened in France, English monarchs wore ermine-trimmed robes during coronations, and again, white gloves were invested with sanctity before being ritually destroyed. Yet in Britain, white took on additional layers of meaning. By the Tudor period, it was indeed recognised as a colour of mourning, a tradition that gave the shade the dual symbolism of splendour on the throne and sobriety in grief. This ambivalence materialised again when Queen Elizabeth (the future Queen Mother) visited Paris with George VI in 1938. As she was still in mourning for her mother, appearing in black would have lent the visit an air of heaviness, which would have been ill-suited to a diplomatic occasion. Therefore, royal couturier Norman Hartnell proposed white instead, creating what later came to be known as the “White Wardrobe.” The success had been extraordinary. In Paris, the Queen appeared at state banquets and garden parties in voluminous white crinolines embroidered with silver, as well as in tailored lace dresses paired with wide-brimmed hats. Captured by famous photographer Cecil Beaton, she projected dignity, grace and hope during an extremely precarious moment, namely before the Second World War. From that moment, white in Britain became not just ceremonial, but above all a tool of soft power diplomacy.



### Austria and Central Europe: White for *Dynastic* Display

In Central Europe, particularly with the Habsburg, white took on dynastic connotations, as testified by a number of portraits representing Empress Maria Theresa and her daughters, whose luminous white silks and pearls emphasised chastity and dynastic virtue. Moreover, white gowns were a common feature of imperial weddings, serving as visual affirmations of noble purity and sanctity of alliances. Unlike the dazzling whites of Versailles, Austrian whiteness was a more intimate emblem of dynastic continuity and feminine virtue: white silks shimmered less for spectacle than for symbolism, signalling fertility, loyalty and legitimacy within one of Europe’s most powerful ruling houses.



# Unlike one might think, wigs are far older than Versailles.

Their story begins in ancient Egypt, where both men and women were used to shaving their heads and crown themselves with wigs made of human hair or plant fibres, fixed with beeswax and resin. These headpieces, besides ensuring protection from the desert sun, were powerful social signals. Indeed, while the wealthiest Egyptians wore towering wigs perfumed with scented cones of animal fat, some more modest versions served as markers of class and propriety. We can state that, across the ancient world in general, from Assyrians to Romans, wigs have long appeared as both adornment and disguise. However, it was not until the seventeenth-century Europe that the wig came to be turned into a proper high fashion item. This is because, when King Louis XIII of France began to bald in the 1620s, he began covering his thinning hair with a perruque. Later on his son Louis XIV - the Sun King himself - raised the practice to a spectacle, turning this accessory into a courtly essential with forty-eight wigmakers at his service. His English cousin Charles II, returning from exile in France in 1660, brought the style across the Channel, to the point that the 'peruke' - or 'periwig' - became the emblem of restoration, nobility and refinement. At first, wigs were practical as much as fashionable. Syphilis was rampant in Europe, as well as Lice which made this accessory a practical and hygienic convenience: men were used to shave their heads and sent their wigs to wigmakers for boiling and delousing. But what began as necessity quickly met luxury - and price told the tale. By the late seventeenth century, an everyday wig might cost around 25 shillings (roughly a week's wages for a London labourer), while the grand, cascading perukes of the nobility could reach 800 shillings (around £40 in 1700, equivalent to over £8,000 or \$10,000 today). This kind of outlay is what minted the nickname "bigwig, a term that soon entered the language to describe the elite who could afford the largest, most ostentatious pieces. Needless to say, materials tracked status too, with human hair at the top and horse or goat hair for tighter budgets. By the eighteenth century, wigs had acquired their most iconic form: powdered white. Starch dusted with lavender, orange blossom, or orris root cloaked wigs in pale refinement, masking odours and signalling status. Some powders were tinted blue, pink, or violet, but off-white

and greyish tones were the most sought for. Fragrance and colour transformed hair into a coded symbol of maturity, authority and wealth especially for men. Women, meanwhile, were rarely used to wearing wigs, hence they built their coiffures into soaring, architectural creations padded with false hair and scented powder - Marie Antoinette's sky-high styles being the most notorious. In such a ostentatious society, the wig's grandeur was matched by its cultural reach. In portraits of the American Founding Fathers, powdered curls signified learning and respectability, although George Washington himself never wore a wig and chose to powder his own hair instead. His successors, namely John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and James Monroe, did then adopt wigs continuing the European tradition in the early American republic. In the military, wigs were as much about order and symbolism as about style. Officers wore carefully styled campaign wigs or tightly bound queues, often maintained at regimental expense reinforcing the officer's elevated standing. On the other hand, ordinary soldiers lived a different reality: enlisted men were expected to maintain their appearance out of their own pockets, to the point of having to pay for the starch used to whiten and stiffen their hair. Moreover, the cost of powder was deducted directly from their wages, turning this queue into a daily reminder of hierarchy. Interestingly, some styles became inseparably linked with military identity. The Ramillies wig, introduced after the British victory at the Battle of Ramillies in 1706, was a short wig gathered into a pigtail and tied with a black ribbon, practical enough for campaigning yet still formal. By Napoleon's era, French infantry grenadiers and chasseurs wore their hair, or wigs, powdered and queued, a flash of old-regime ritual persisting even amidst the revolutionary fervour. Such details reveal how the wig, far from being a frivolous accessory, was woven into the very fabric of discipline, class distinction and martial pageantry. Yet by the close of the eighteenth century, the tide was turning. Enlightenment ideals and the French Revolution recast wigs as symbols of aristocratic excess, with hair powder becoming a political flashpoint. William Pitt's Hair Powder Tax of 1795 (one guinea per annual certificate) made this habit an expensive indulgence, hastening its demise, whilst in France, the guillotine sent wig-wearing nobles to their fate. Natural hair then became a declaration of equality and reason, and by the dawn of the nineteenth century wigs had all but vanished from everyday fashion, replaced by cropped, natural styles favoured by Queen Victoria's court and her consort Prince Albert. Still, wigs did not disappear entirely, as we see in law courts where barristers and judges wear them as emblems of tradition and impartiality. Nowadays, wigs survive as part of Britain's legal theatre, in some Commonwealth courts, as well as in the costume dramas that continue to shape our imagination of the eighteenth century. From Egypt's scented cones to Versailles' perfumed clouds, from London's 'bigwigs' to today's barristers, the wig reveals how fashion can serve as shield, spectacle and status at the same time.



# The Glove

From being a shield to a cultural symbol and mark of **power**, throughout the centuries the white glove has been carrying more than just fabric on skin.

Worn by monarchs, butlers, brides and fashion icons alike, its meaning has shifted across times and countries, yet always carrying its universal meaning of elevated

*elegance.*

# ROYAL HANDS:

## Power and Purity

From altars to coronation halls, white gloves have long wrapped themselves around notions of sanctity and sovereignty. In medieval Europe they hold a high ritual weight, with knights removing them before lords as gestures of allegiance, and clergies wearing them as emblems of spiritual purity.

During their coronations, French kings were also used to be presented with ceremonial white gloves as sacred gift, which was burned afterwards to prevent any profane use. Crafted from fine lambskin or deerskin, this garment embodied the symbolism of flawlessness and consecration. In Britain, this tradition crystallised into the Coronation Glove, a single glove which was placed on the sovereign's right hand after the Sovereign's Ring. Made of kid leather and embroidered with coats of arms, thistles, shamrocks and acorns, not only it was an object of devotion, but also a masterpiece of craftsmanship. Among the most renowned examples of coronation gloves are those preserved from the reigns of Elizabeth I, Queen Victoria and Edward VII. Elizabeth I's glove, cut from fine white leather, was richly decorated with gold embroidery and finished with a dramatic gold-fringed sleeve. Its luminous detailing set the tone for her coronation, shimmering as both sartorial detail and dazzling emblem of regal authority.

Nearly three centuries later, Queen Victoria revived and elevated the tradition. Her coronation gauntlet, still made of supple white kid leather, extended some 35cm up the forearm and carried the embroidered arms of the Howard family in vivid red and blue silks, with metallic-gold details. Additional touches, such as the intricate gold embroidery, purple satin trim and a dangling gold tassel, conveyed a combination of heraldry and sumptuous ceremonial luxury.

Edward VII's glove, crafted for his 1902 coronation, likewise began as a white kid leather foundation, but its decoration was even more elaborate. On the back, the arms of the Duke of Newcastle appeared in red, white, and blue silk thread, framed by shimmering gold. The cuff was worked with a botanical fantasia of acanthus leaves, vines, and lilies in gold embroidery, a richly symbolic design that married English heraldry with natural motifs.

In each case, the pristine whiteness of the glove provided a both physical and symbolic canvas, marrying material refinement with layers of national symbolism and ritual weight.

ROYAL

# Uniforms and Social Rituals

11 AUTHORITY WITHOUT NOBILITY:

By the 15th century, gloves slipped from the sacred spaces of altars and coronations into the rhythms of daily life. And although their religious aura began fading, their symbolic charge endured finding new expressions in uniforms which demanded authority, precision and decorum. Nowhere was this shift more visible than in the 19th-century eminent households. The archetypal immaculate white gloves- was as much a ritual butler's uniform -black suit, white waistcoat and costume as a working dress, where the gloves did not signal servility but rather dignity and control. Paradoxically, while the gentleman of the house removed his gloves indoors, the butler put his on. If monarchs sanctified the white glove and butlers codified it, society's elite turned it into a social ritual: in several western military uniforms, it became a formal component embodying discipline and exactness; in medicine and hospitality it signified hygiene and trust, whilst in luxury services - from the opulent salons of the Ritz Paris to the spotless carriages of Japanese railway conductors - it came to represent courtesy, discretion and immaculate professionalism.

By the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, white gloves had become inseparable from the rituals of high society, be it weddings, opera nights or royal receptions alike. Debutantes were used to appear before courts with gloved hands, their whiteness a quiet proclamation of virtue and readiness for marriage, and likewise, brides adopted them as natural extensions of the veil. In the strictest circles of etiquette, gloves were not to be removed in public, in a way that that to wear them was to cloak oneself in an aura of refinement, decorum and status. In such an era of fashion etiquette and social custom, gloves' length and materials began evolving into a language of their own, with each style carrying its own code of occasion. The most dramatic were the opera gloves, stretching some 55cm in silk or kid leather to reach the elbow, worn only at the grandest galas and evening receptions. By contrast, wrist-length gloves, often made of cotton or lace, lent a lighter touch and were perfectly suited to daytime garden parties or casual visits. For summer, delicate semi-transparent designs in lace or muslin were favoured, embroidered with subtle motifs that seemed to whisper modesty and refinement.

Nowadays, the white glove continues to be an enduring symbol which designers continue to reimagine in modern runways, be it as a retro nod, a dramatic accessory, or a subversive twist.

# Royal White in the Middle East

As in the West, also across the Middle East white was not simply an aesthetic choice but rather a political statement. Nevertheless, unlike in Europe where white was tethered to ideas of sanctity and

morality, here it spoke the clear language of power, loyalty and sovereign favour, representing dynastic identity, opposition, honour or trust.

## The Umayyads (661–750 CE\*)

Many countries in the Arab League have incorporated in their national flags the so called Pan-Arab colours, namely white, red, green and black, each of which is tied to an era or dynasty in the Arab world and therefore carries deep historical significance. Their origin can be traced back to the 14th century, when the Iraqi poet Şafî al-Dîn al-Hillî, in one of his fakhr poems (lit. “panegyrics”), wrote of white as symbolising noble deeds, black as representing hardships, green as evoking the fields upon which battles were fought and red as the colour of swords. Among the dynasties that most contributed shaping this symbolism, the Umayyads stand out. Also known as the Banu Umayya, they were a powerful Meccan family from the Quraysh tribe, deeply involved in regional trade. They founded the first Islamic dynasty, ruling the caliphate from 661 to 750 CE with Damascus as capital. For them, white became the official colour of banners and attire, symbolising legitimacy, peace and authority, besides setting them apart from their rivals, the Abbasids, who - not surprisingly- adopted black. Within this political scene, white was hence deeply woven into the fabric of authority as a symbol of dynastic power, identity and loyalty.

When the Fatimids rose to power in North Africa and Egypt, they chose white as their dynastic colour, following the line of the Umayyads as a deliberate contrast to the Abbasids. Against Cairo’s urban landscape, processions of caliphs were a true spectacle

## The Fatimids (909–1171 CE)

of brightness, with courtiers robed head to toe in white silk as a chromatic declaration of independence and sovereign power.

When the Abbasids established their rule from Baghdad,  
**The Abbasids (750–1258 CE)**

\*For the purpose of clarity and universality, dates are here noted in the BCE/CE system, an internationally recognised standard equivalent to the Christian-rooted BC/AD.

they claimed black as their dynastic colour, which made white charged with a new subversive meaning. We can say that, within the Abbasid domain, to appear in white was not a matter of purity or elegance but rather a sartorial risk, a visible nod to the rival Umayyads or Fatimids. In this political theatre, cloths came to represent a strong and clear duality between rebellion and alliance: black robes and banners affirmed loyalty to Baghdad, while white garments signalled sympathy with Damascus or Cairo.

In Safavid Iran, white robes took the form of the khil’at, literally “robe of honour.” These garments, usually made of silk, were bestowed by the shâh (lit. “king”) as tangi-

## Safavid Persia (1501–1736 CE)

ble signs of royal favour: to receive a khil’at was to be clothed in authority itself, wrapped in a fabric of legitimacy. White here it became the colour of triumphant justice, among diplomats, commanders and courtiers, whose main role was to carry the shâh’s grace into the world.

In the Ottoman world, white was reserved for moments of prestige and ceremony. Nowhere was this more visible than in the janissaries, the sultan’s elite household troops, whose tall white felt caps (börk) made them guardians and emblems of imperial authority. White kaftans likewise were used to signal the highest offices at court, and among Ottoman miniatures viziers often appeared draped in a luminous white glowing against a backdrop of jewel-toned silks - a visual cue that, again, whiteness was closely tied to the concept of power. Interestingly, while the sultans themselves preferred robes of saturated, opulent hues, the brilliance of their guards and state-men in white was a way to amplify the aura of a radiant court encircled by royal light.

## The Ottomans (1299–1922 CE)

# Royal White in the East

Across a number of Asian countries, white has never been regarded as absence of colour, but rather as a deliberate expression of status and refinement. In Mughal India it enveloped emperors and courtiers in an aura of elegance; in China it became the visible token of intellectual rank among scholars and bureaucrats; in Japan it embodied noble austerity, whilst in Korea it grew into a defining element of collective identity. While the Middle East turned white into a political emblem of rivalry and allegiance, the East wove it into a language of learning, restraint and cultivated nobility, yet remaining unmistakably regal as a colour through which power revealed itself in its most visible form.

## Mughal India (1526–1857 CE)

In the opulent Mughal court, white was everything but a neutral choice; woven in fine silks or diaphanous cotton muslins, this colour carried connotations of refinement, noble rank and cultivated restraint. Courtiers were used to wear white garments delicately embroidered with silver thread, which shimmer against the pale cloth acted as a subtle, unmistakable emblem of wealth and proximity to the throne. This hue's cool austerity provided a striking counterpoint to the saturated jewel tones and densely patterned brocades of the courts, allowing whiteness to stand out through contrast, rather than excess. For the emperors, indeed, white could carry a different weight; when donned by a sovereign, it suggested not only authority, but also a form of measured modesty, a conscious balance against the dazzling splendour of gem-encrusted velvets and gold-woven silks. In this visual paradox: white was a hue of simplicity that nevertheless proclaimed the wearer's power to command the rarest and most refined fabrics.

Yet whether on emperor or courtier,  
the meaning was consistent:

white was a fabric language of hierarchy, a visual code that separated nobles from commoners, rulers from subjects. To wear it at court was to step into a world where textiles spoke as eloquently as words, and where colour itself became a marker of legitimacy, privilege and belonging.



# Imperial China

## Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368–1912 CE)

Although yellow was the exclusive preserve of emperors, white held a special place as well within the carefully regulated codes of court attire, particularly regarding its seasonal cycle. Especially in the heat of the summer, officials were used to wear white silk robes whose cool luminosity was both practical and symbolic: practical because the pale cloth absorbed less of the oppressive sun compared to darker colours, and symbolic because its lustre suggested clarity, restraint and unblemished service to the throne. Here ceremonial halls were turned into a living performance of elegance, where the fluid shimmer of silk

For the scholar-official elite, white carried an additional cultural resonance that extended beyond ceremonial context. It embodied austerity and refinement, the understated dignity of those who governed not through displays of wealth, but rather through intellect and learning. To don white was to mark a distance from vulgar luxury, embodying the ideal of moral clarity that Confucian thought held at the centre of governance. In its simplicity, this hue was a projection of a subtle grandeur, allowing power to be expressed not through extravagance but rather through disciplined restraint.

# Japan

## Heian Court (794–1185 CE and beyond)

In Japan, courtly life revolved around a highly codified system of colour, season and status. Within this elaborate hierarchy, white silks held a singular prestige, in that their production demanded a high amount of labour - namely bleaching, refining and weaving to a flawless finish - and their upkeep required constant care. It was precisely this fragility that made them a luxury, for only nobles of wealth and standing could sustain garments so susceptible to the slightest blemish. White, in this sense, became an index of privilege, an impractical perfection that ordinary life could not permit.

At the Heian court, where aesthetic codes reached extraordinary heights, layered robes in pale or white tones projected an aura of noble austerity. This restraint, far from diminishing the overall splendour, carried its own form of brilliance: to wear white was to embody an elegance that avoided excess yet radiated authority, a quiet magnificence that spoke of cultivated refinement; the interplay of pale layers, glinting hair ornaments and the subdued shimmer of silk created an image of restrained grandeur, an aesthetic of dignity deeply rooted in the ideals of courtly taste.

In later centuries, white still continued retaining this dual resonance of purity and prestige: it appeared in the robes of emperors during rituals of state and in the garments of warriors, for whom white could symbolise both ceremonial gravity and readiness for sacrifice. Whether on the body of a court lady, an imperial priest or a samurai, this colour became a fabric of dignity and honour, a thread of continuity tying together Japan's vision of power, discipline and refined restraint.

# Korea the “White-Clad People”

Therefore, we can state that whiteness was truly inseparable from Korea's social fabric, as every day and elite's robe, a thread together purity, national wear white was never matter of but rather a visible declaration of belonging, identity and cultural pride.

In Korea, white has held such a pervasive cultural presence that the Korean people were long described as the *paek ui minjok*, the “people of white clothes.” This association was not confined to the aristocracy but extended into the daily life as well, where plain white garments were visual emblems of a collective identity. For centuries, peasants and townsfolk alike clothed themselves in simple white hemp or cotton, their attire expressing not poverty but a shared sense of purity, humility and solidarity, as a true cultural signature. For the *yangban*, the scholar-official elite, white carried additional layers of meaning, embodying the Confucian ideals of restraint, discipline and moral integrity. In contrast to opulent hues and lavish ornament, it signified an elevated identity rooted in intellect and virtue rather than in material excess. The deliberate plainness of garments turned simplicity into a mark of nobility, an austere dignity that set the ruling class apart while aligning them with philosophical ideals of order and ethical clarity.

both people's uniform ceremonial chromatic waving notions of morality and identity. To in Korea simply a fashion,

Across diverse cultures and centuries, the colour white has been chosen for moments of profound spiritual and ceremonial significance. Whether woven into the solemn robes of Western clergy, the luminous gowns of brides, the ritual garments of Japanese Shinto weddings or the flowing attire of Islamic pilgrims, it is considered the hue of purity, clarity and transcendence;

# SACRED WHITE

On the contrary, in eastern countries such as China and India, it carries meanings of mourning and rebirth, as well as sacred devotion. Though expressed through different fabrics, forms and traditions, the symbolism of white is remarkably consistent, as a turning away from worldly concerns and a movement toward the eternal, the divine or the collective. This chapter explores how sacred white has shaped ritual dress and spiritual expression across civilisations and countries, revealing the human universal search for

PURITY, PEACE AND  
TRANSCENDENCE.

# Papal Robe

Representing centuries of ecclesiastical tradition, the religious dress of the clergy and consecrated members of the Roman Catholic Church is rich with symbolism, cultural significance and historical continuity. Nowhere is this more visible than in the attire of the pope, whose daily white cassock is a widely recognised symbol of purity and holiness. Yet the history of this white robe is far more complex, and far older, than most people imagine

Across the ancient world, colour was never merely ornament, but rather a language of symbols, be it of the divine, the natural or the human sphere. Among these hues, none was as pervasive and profoundly charged as white. Whether carved into marble, woven into linen or shining in silver, this colour stood as a beacon of purity, power and transcendence. In ancient Egypt, it gleamed from the limestone pyramids and the linen of priests, radiating divinity and eternal renewal; in ancient Greece, it became the colour of marble temples and philosophical ideals, representing harmony, clarity and the pursuit of truth; in ancient Rome, it cloaked senators and emperors alike, embodying dignity, authority and civic virtue. Though each civilisation wove its own meanings into it, all recognised in white a quality beyond the temporal, something sacred, eternal and enduring. To trace white through these ancient cultures is to uncover not just an aesthetic preference, but also the shared belief that whiteness embodies purity, order and divine light.

Despite its symbolic aura, the cassock itself is essentially a practical, long medieval tunic, deriving from the caracalla, a robe popularised in the 3rd century by the Roman emperor Caracalla. Adopted by clergy as early as the 5th century, it eventually took on distinctive religious associations. Traditionally featuring 33 buttons down the front to recall the years of Christ's earthly life, this garment came to be white for the pope, scarlet for cardinals, purple for bishops and black for priests. In earlier centuries, popes were more likely to wear the common dress of their time, only gradually adopting garments of greater dignity and symbolism as papal authority expanded, particularly after Roman emperor Constantine (4th century CE). Even so, some pontiffs warned against clerical vanity, insisting that holiness and learning, instead of attire, should distinguish clergy.

## The Cassock and Its Origins

## Layers of White: The Papal Attire

Today, the pope's ordinary dress is composed of a number of components. At its heart lies the white cassock, an ankle-length robe with long sleeves and a line of thirty-three buttons running down the front; traditionally made of wool, the cassock embodies innocence, holiness and charity, namely all the virtues the pope is called to model in his ministry. Perched on the head is the white zucchetto, a small skullcap whose origins were purely practical, as it served to warm the shaved heads of tonsured clergy inside the cold churches. Today, it signifies both authority and consecration, and the pope wears it through most liturgical celebrations removing it only during the most solemn moment of the Eucharist. Around the waist falls the fascia, a wide, shiny sash whose fringed ends hang gracefully on one side; more than an ornament, it speaks of devotion and a readiness to serve, a constant reminder of the pope's role as shepherd to his people. Over the shoulders rests the pellegrina, a light and functional short cape stitched to the cassock that recalls the capes once worn by medieval pilgrims. Finally there is the pallium, a narrow band of white wool draped over the shoulders and marked with six red crosses; fixed with small pins symbolising Christ's wounds, it represents the fullness of papal authority. The pope also bestows similar palliums upon newly appointed archbishops so as to visibly bind them to their pastoral mission. Depending on season and ceremony, splashes of red may feature the ensemble in the form of a red mozzetta, cape or hat, as subtle echoes of the times when crimson was the dominant colour of papal dress.

Papal garments are traditionally produced by Roman tailors whose workshops line the streets around the Vatican. Among these, Raniero Mancinelli has served popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis, starting from the 1960s. The Gammarelli family, whose business has been running for over 200 years and is now led by Alessia Gammarelli, has clothed none less than eight popes, maintaining this precious artisanal traditions across generations.

Long before the world grew accustomed to seeing the pope in white, red and royal purple were the dominant papal colours, as they recalled the cloak placed over Christ after His scourging - a reminder of His suffering and sacrifice on the cross. Popular opinion holds that the pope's white cassock was first introduced by St. Pius V (1566-1572), who, as a Dominican, chose to keep wearing his order's white habit after his election. While Pius V certainly has certainly been crucial in solidifying the tradition, this explanation is far too simplistic, as papal use of white dates back to at least three centuries before him. The earliest detailed mention of the papal cassock comes in the Ordo XIII, a ceremonial manual compiled around 1274 under Pope Gregory X: here it describes how a newly elected pope was dressed in two colours, namely red for certain vestments and shoes, and white for the cassock and socks. With this being said, the first pope to be attested wearing white as official habit was Dominican Innocent V, elected in 1276, who played a significant role in popularising white papal dress. As scholar and preacher, he continued to wear the Dominican habit during his short pontificate, and his example likely influenced successors making the white cassock a recognised mark of the papal office long before Pius V. Hence, by the 16th century, when Pius V was chosen, we can say that the custom was already firmly established, though his Dominican roots did help cement the association once and for all.

## From Red to White



# The Privilege of Wearing White

The established protocol is for visitors to appear before the pope in black attire; for women, this traditionally means a long dress with long sleeves, high neckline and a black mantilla, as sign of humility and reverence. There is, however, a striking exception, named *le privilège du blanc* (lit. 'the privilege of white'): granted only to certain Catholic queens and princesses, this rare honour allows them to appear before the pope in white garments and veil. This custom originated in 1870, when Pope Pius IX granted it to Queen Isabella II of Spain in recognition of her monarchy's devotion to the Church. Since then, only a handful of Catholic royal women have been allowed to exercise it, namely Queen Letizia of Spain, Queen Mathilde of Belgium, Queen Paola of Belgium, Queen Sofia of Spain, Grand Duchess Maria Teresa of Luxembourg, Princess Marina of Naples and Princess Charlene of Monaco. Their striking white attire, in contrast to the customary black worn by others, stands as a powerful symbol of honour and of the deep-rooted ties between their dynasties and the Catholic Church.

# THE NUN

More than a uniform, a religious habit is a visible sign of commitment, a declaration that the wearer has embraced a life entirely dedicated to God. The word habit itself comes from the Latin habere (lit. 'to have' or 'to hold'), implying far more than garments and speaking of a way of life embraced and held onto with devotion. For nuns, the habit embodies specific vows and values, such as simplicity, humility and a profound dedication to faith and community.

Though styles vary from one religious order to another, the main purpose of the habit is to conceal vanity, mark out a life of prayer and to serve as a daily reminder of vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. In the Middle Ages, habits often resembled the dress of poor widows or women of modest means, therefore underscoring humility; ironically, what once was a way of blending in now makes nuns almost stand out, their ancient attire being so strikingly distinct from modern fashion.





## THE COLOURS OF FAITH

The colour of a habit is never accidental but reflects the spirituality of the order. While many people picture nuns typically dressed in black, habits can also be brown, grey or white, depending on the religious order they represent. Black, the most common, stands for humility and renunciation of social standing; white, on the other hand, carries associations of **purity, innocence and spiritual renewal**, with orders such as the Cistercians or Poor Clares wearing it to emphasise contemplation and devotion to God. In many orders, the so called novices (those taking their first steps within the religious community), begin by wearing white to signal their initial commitment and their openness to a life of purity as they prepare to take final vows.

## COMPONENTS OF A HABIT

Despite the differences from one order to another, the habit usually shares a common structure. At its heart is the tunic, the main garment, long and modest, falling to the ankles and serving as a sign of simplicity and detachment from worldly concerns. Over this rests the scapular, a long strip of cloth that drapes front and back; more than decoration, this is a symbol of humility and servitude, a constant reminder of the nun's vow to live in devotion to God. The head is covered with a veil, whose length, style and colour may, again, vary depending on the order; whether short or flowing, black or white, the veil always carries the same meaning of purity, withdrawal from earthly concerns and complete devotion to God. At the waist, a cincture or belt, often little more than a simple rope, is tied as a sign of chastity and discipline; from this frequently hangs a rosary, always close at hand, as a visible token of the nun's life of prayer and her ongoing religious devotion.

## WHERE HISTORY MEETS LEGEND The Dominican Habit

Among religious orders, the Dominicans stand out for their distinctive white habit. Legend says St. Dominic originally decided to adopt white after a remarkable event. At the very beginning of the order's creation, Dominican friar and Catholic priest St. Reginald of Orléans fell gravely ill. After St. Dominic's numerous prayers for his healing, Reginald recovered, sharing a vision of the Virgin Mary showing him a white scapular. For this reason, St. Dominic introduced the white scapular into the Dominican habit, a tradition recalled each time a new friar, nun, or sister is received for the first time. For Dominicans, white symbolises purity, simplicity and light; their habit consists of a white tunic and scapular, a black veil for the nuns and a black mantle worn for prayer and special occasions. Large rosaries, often hanging from the belt, emphasise their commitment to prayer, while the stark contrast of black and white reflects their mission of study, preach and contemplation.

Although the style of habits varies from one Catholic order to another - and even across different branches of Christianity - their meaning as a whole remains the same, that is, to symbolise the vocation to live as a servant of God. From its very beginning, the nun's habit stands as a striking and unmistakable emblem of religious devotion, speaking of purity and poverty, of simplicity and humility, of a **life completely consecrated to God.**



# China

In China, colour is considered as a second language, a true way of reading the world. At the heart of this language lies the ancient Theory of the Five Elements (五行, wǔxíng), which links wood, fire, earth, metal and water with five cardinal colours, namely green-blue, red, yellow, black and, as you may guess, white.

## WHITE AMIDST BALANCE AND DUALITY

Among them, white (白, bái) is perhaps the most complex and paradoxical; tied to the element of metal and to the season of autumn, it speaks of endings, decline and the quiet passage of time; white belongs to the constellation of the White Tiger, a guardian of the west, and embodies the stillness of fading light. Yet at the same time, it represents purity, simplicity and clarity. This duality - life and death, brightness and loss - renders white among the deepest symbols within the Chinese culture.

Unlike in the West, where the signature colour of grief is black, morning in China is marked by white: funeral garments of plain cloth or coarse hemp, white chrysanthemums and paper flowers, as well as envelopes of white or silver money all reflect the solemnity of farewell. The tradition dates back as far as the Zhou Dynasty (1046 BCE to 256 BCE), when undyed linen robes symbolised purity and respect for the deceased. Even to this day, white flags are used to mark the houses of the bereaved together with lit candles, as a way to keep the memory alive.

Still, white in Chinese culture is not only sorrow; in art and poetry, it appears within images of resilience, honesty and spiritual beauty, and within Taoism is the colour of simplicity and wuwei, namely, the principle of living in harmony with the natural flow of life.

Hence, monks and priests often wear white robes as a sign of humility and devotion.

Yet the boundaries remain clear: whilst weddings and joyful occasions are painted in red and gold, white is a reminder of mortality. Since ancient times, this colour has carried the shadows of fate and loss, such that a white flower tucked into a woman's hair was once used to foreshadowed tragedy, while, on the opera stage, a white face was a clear mark for the traitor role.

## NEW SHADOWS OF WHITE

Since time has softened its edges, modern China has begun to embrace white in new alternative ways, such as the clean lines of fashion and interior design, the elegance of white ceramics, or the simplicity of a white jade pendant. Brides may now walk in gowns of ivory silk, as the colour is started to be seen as a symbol of refinement and grace especially under Western influence.

White in Chinese culture is an extraordinary complex and multifaceted symbol, embodying absence and presence, grief and renewal, the end of a cycle and the promise of clarity; it encompasses the silence of autumn and the brilliance of snow, the mourning of the past and the elegance of the present; above all, white is balance, between life and death, purity and loss, as a reminder that in every ending lie the seeds of a new beginning.

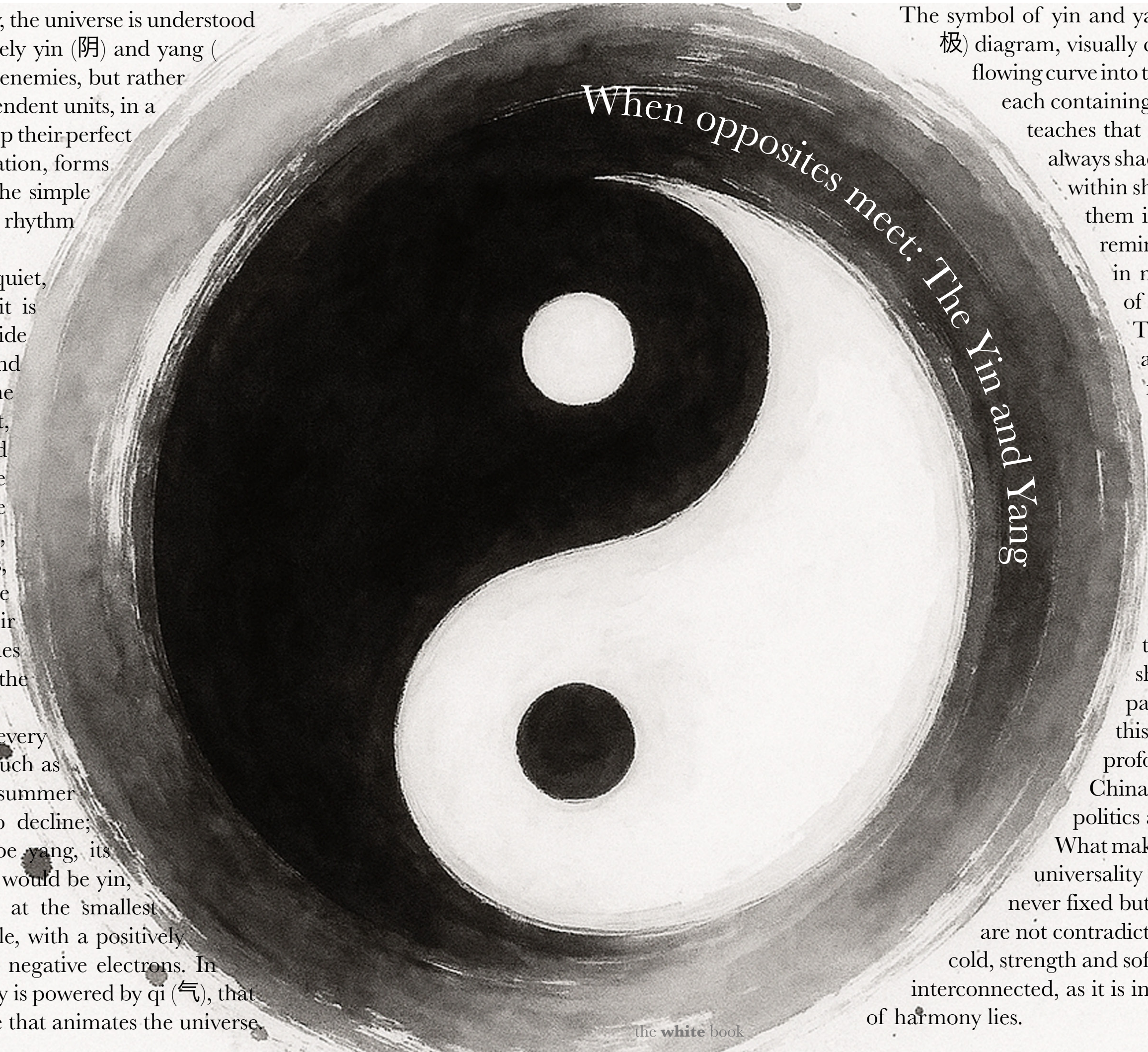


*For centuries, these colours have shaped rituals and ceremonies, tracing pathways of harmony between humanity, nature and the cosmos.*

In ancient Chinese philosophy, the universe is understood as a dance of opposites, namely yin (阴) and yang (阳). These two forces are not enemies, but rather complementary and interdependent units, in a state of constant motion to keep their perfect state of balance. Their unification, forms a whole that is greater than the simple sum of its parts, shaping the rhythm of existence itself.

Yin embodies the inward, the quiet, the cool and the receptive; it is associated with the shaded side of the hill, the moon, night and the rounded qualities of the feminine. Yang, by contrast, is outward, bright, warm and active, as the sunlit slope, the day and the sharp masculine traits. Where yin contracts, yang expands; where yin rests, yang acts. Yet neither of the two could exist without their counterpart, for each carries within itself the essence of the other.

This balance is reflected in every aspect of the natural world, such as the day flowing into night, summer into winter, and growth into decline; the crest of a wave would be yang, its trough yin; a flower's stillness would be yin, the bee's arrival yang. Even at the smallest scale, atoms hold this principle, with a positively charged nucleus balanced by negative electrons. In Chinese thought, this interplay is powered by qi (气), that is, the vital energy or life force that animates the universe.



The symbol of yin and yang, known as the Tai Chi (太极) diagram, visually consists of a circle divided by a flowing curve into two halves: one black, one white, each containing a dot of the other. This design teaches that nothing is absolute, as there is always shadow within light, as well as light within shadow; and the line that divides them is never rigid, but curved, as a reminder that opposites are always in motion within an eternal cycle of constant evolution and change. The origins of yin and yang are extremely ancient, with references found as early as the Zhouyi (lit. 'Book of Changes'), written during the Western Zhou dynasty around the 9th century BCE. By observing the cycles of the sun, moon, and stars early thinkers are said to have seen the patterns of yin and yang woven into the turning of the seasons, the shifting of shadows and the passage of time. Over centuries, this apparently simple yet deeply profound idea has woven itself into China's philosophy, medicine, art, politics and everyday life. What makes yin and yang timeless is their universality in showing that the world is never fixed but always moving, that opposites are not contradictions but partners; warmth and cold, strength and softness, light and darkness are all interconnected, as it is in their balance that the essence of harmony lies.

# IN THE EAST *india*

Far from being merely decorative, colour within Indian culture is a language of *devotion, identity and sentiment*.

From ancient scriptures to contemporary rituals, each hue has its own place, and among them, white holds a strikingly multifaceted role, at once colour of purity and peace, yet also of mourning and renunciation.

Traditionally, likewise in China, white is the colour of funerals, representing the absence of colour and the emptiness left by loss. Mourners are used to wear plain white as well as widows, who, especially in earlier times, were expected to only wear white as a sign of detachment from materialistic pleasures and social life. In this context, white reflects both grief and transcendence, as a symbolic withdrawal from the vibrancy of earthly existence.

However, white in India is not only the colour of sorrow, but also of *spiritual pursuit*. Monks, sages and Brahmins often wear white robes to signify purity, wisdom and humility; indeed, the Brahminical tradition, white garments reflect sacred knowledge and ritual authority, marking the wearer as a spiritual guide. During meditation, temple visits and rituals, white is usually chosen for its calming effect.

## WHITE

## CANVAS

The cultural resonance of white extends into one of the greatest and most renowned festivals of India, that is, the Holi. As an exuberant festival of colours, it may seem surprising that participants often begin the day in plain white garments. The reason is both practical and symbolic: white acts as a blank canvas, turning into a vibrant masterpiece as powders and dyes are thrown, embodying the themes of renewal, equality and joy that define the festival. Historical depictions of Holi often show participants clad in white, later drenched in brilliant hues, and in modern times Bollywood films have further cemented this image of white attire during Holi as both tradition and cultural icon.

## THE MANY FACES

## OF WHITE

Beyond festivals, white in India holds a significant position in both politics and public life. Mahatma Gandhi famously adopted the khadi (a simple, handwoven white cloth) as both personal uniform and political statement, that is, to refuse Western attire, turning white into a symbol of self-reliance, protest and moral integrity. This symbolism still resonates, as many Indian politicians, from village leaders to figures on the national stage, favour spotless white kurtas, dhotis or veshtis (all these are traditional Indian garments). For men politicians, white in meant to convey honesty and transparency within their public service; for women, however, the association of white with widowhood has made it a less common choice in this field.

The symbolism of white extends beyond Hindu tradition. In Islam, pilgrims wear simple white garments (called ihram) during the Hajj to Mecca, symbolising equality before God and detachment from physical existence. Finally, in Buddhism, the dream of a white elephant is said to have foretold the birth of the Buddha, making this colour a symbol of purity, wisdom and divine destiny.

Across India's diverse regions, white continues to resonate with multiple meanings, namely mourning and renunciation as well as purity, spirituality, truth and peace. It can signify withdrawal from the 'colours' life or become the backdrop on which lively hues explode in celebration.

## WHITE INDIAN HERITAGE:

## THE KASAVU

Traditional costumes in Kerala (a state located in southern India) are instantly recognisable for their unique blend of white and gold, exuding both simplicity and quiet grandeur. At the heart of this tradition lies the kasavu, a the shimmering thread, once made of real gold or silver, that adorns the borders of garments. More than an aesthetic detail, kasavu is a true cultural signature, as marker of purity, prosperity and grace.

The most iconic expression of this heritage is Kerala's kasavu sari, a long unstitched drape worn by women, usually in pristine white or cream with a radiant golden border. Originally woven by hand using fine metallic threads, these saris date back to no later than the Buddhist Era. Even today, they are worn by Malayalis on auspicious occasions such as weddings, the harvest festival of Onam, the New Year festival of Vishu, temple rituals and funerals as well.

Men wear kasavu too, their traditional garment being called mundu: this is a rectangular piece of white cotton cloth wrapped around the waist and legs, often paired with a coordinating upper garment named veshti. Such combination is known as a kasavu mundu, and, as much as the sari, is deeply tied to Kerala's cultural identity.

# TRADITION AND MEANING

The cultural power of kasavu lies in its duality: with white represents purity, simplicity and clarity, and gold conveying prosperity, sanctity and celebration, such union creates a harmony that is both understated and majestic, restrained yet resplendent.

In Kerala, a sari can be worn during conceptually opposites occasions depending on its details: a two-inch golden border becomes bridal attire, while a finer, coloured border is suitable for funerals. In dances such as Mohiniyattam (dedicated to the female divinity of Vishnu) or Thiruvathirakkali (featuring a group of women performing in a circle), luminous kasavu garments heighten the sense of ritual grace, while during Vishu (the traditional New Year festival of Kerala) a new kasavu cloth is placed before the Vishukkani (a ceremonial display around a lit lamp) as a symbol of prosperity and new beginnings.

Originally worn as the two-piece mundu-neriyathu (a lower wrap with a separate upper drape), the sari later evolved into the single-piece style that is still popular today, and while real gold thread has largely been replaced by synthetic zari (metallic yarn), the symbolic meaning of kasavu continues to endure as a garment of devotion and dignity.

## WOVEN

Beneath the elegance of kasavu lies an extremely meticulous craftsmanship. Traditionally, yarns were hand-spun, soaked for days in water, softened by stamping, stretched in the cool hours of dawn and finally starched with combs made of coconut fibre, before the weaving process to begin. Even in modern days, the simplest sari can take three to five days to produce, while elaborate wedding saris with intricate motifs may take a month or even more.

Kerala's kasavu weaving is located across three clusters recognised with a Geographical Indication (GI) tag: Balaramapuram, near Trivandrum, distinguished for its fine thread counts and pure zari; Chendamangalam, known for its unique pre-weaving process that render the yarn extremely soft; and Kuthampully, where artisans incorporate patterned jacquard borders with human or floral motifs. Each cluster carries its own history shaped by royal patronage and artisan communities, such as the Shaliar and Devanga weavers, and supporting them today means sustaining a centuries-old craft.

## HERITAGE

## KASAVU IN

While the kasavu continues to evolve, designers experiment with silk variants, coloured borders, embroidered pallus (the decorative end of the sari), and motifs of peacocks, elephants or temple art. Bollywood has made a remarkable contribution in popularising the image of actors wearing pristine white kasavu saris during Holi scenes, cementing the garment as both tradition and modern icon. Styling has adapted too, with women pairing the garment with richly coloured blouses, statement jewellery or minimalist accessories, some draping it with belts or fusion elements and others favouring jasmine-adorned braids or temple jewellery for a more classic look. Beyond temples and festivals, the kasavu sari is now seen at fashion shows, office parties and even red-carpet events, its versatility and elegance proving timeless. The kasavu sari is, more than just clothing, memory and belonging, connecting its wearers to ancestral rituals, celebrations and traditions; to wear a kasavu is to step into history with pride, embodying purity and prosperity and carrying forward a living heritage

## MODERN TIMES

# Saudi Arabia & Islamic Countries

As for many western country, in Islamic tradition the colour white carries profound symbolic meaning. Across the Muslim world, it represents purity, peace, simplicity, and spiritual cleanliness, embodying a state of inner devotion and humility before God and finding expression in clothing and religious practices as well.

The thobe (also known as a thawb, dishdasha or kandoura depending on regional variations) is a long, ankle-length robe traditionally worn by Muslim men. While it can be made in a range of colours, white is by far the most prevalent choice especially in the Arabian Peninsula. Worn for both daily use and formal occasions, the it symbolises spiritual purity and equality and is often accompanied by the ghutra, a square or rectangular headscarf (in plain white or patterned in red-and-white or black-and-white) held in place by a rope band called egal. Beneath the thobe, men commonly wear white cotton pants (serwal) and an undershirt for the sake of comfort, modesty and simplicity of attire.

White clothing holds a special significance during religious rites, with men undertaking the Hajj or Umrah pilgrimage wearing two seamless white sheets (ihram) to reflecting humility and absolute equality before God; during the-

se sacred journeys, women are used to dress in white as well, often choosing white robes (abayas) and headscarves (hijabs or khimars). Moreover, in Islamic funeral practices, the deceased is wrapped in a plain white shroud as a sign of purity, peace and soul's homecoming to God beyond the marks of status or wealth.

Though the thobe is most closely associated with the Arab world, its cultural reach extends far beyond the Middle East. In South Asia, for example, similar garments are known as jubbah and often feature ornate designs reflecting local traditions. Variations in fabric, style and cut across different regions (such as the use of wool for Levant's winter and lightweight polyester for the Gulf area) shows the adaptability of this garment while preserving its essential modesty and elegance.

The preference for white attire in Islamic tradition is considered Sunnah a practice dating back to the Prophet Muhammad. As such, white has become one of the five key colours embedded within Islamic culture, alongside green, blue, black and gold. Among them, white serves as a universal expression of purity, equality and peace, whether seen in the simple ihram of pilgrims, the elegant lines of a thobe or the luminous walls of a mosque.



*W*EDDINGS IN *W*HITE

# The Western Gown

## ANCIENT TRADITIONS

When picturing a Western bride, we, more often than not, expect to see her dressed in white: flowing fabric, delicate lace or satin, perhaps a veil, and an air of timeless elegance,

*are all attributes that are nowadays commonly expected. Yet this image, so deeply ingrained in the Western cultural imagination, is far from ancient, resulting from centuries of cultural shifts, royal influence, fashion revolutions and social change. From Roman flame-coloured veils to Queen Victoria's lace, from a display of wealth to an emblem of purity, the wedding gown has always been reflecting far more than fashion. Embodying ideals of status, identity, love and aspiration. The white gown carries both history and evolving expression of self-identity, each dress becoming a bride's own story woven into the fabric of time.*



*In antiquity, brides were used  
to wear a number of different  
colours, each tied to a specific  
and rich symbolism.*

## BEFORE WHITE

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In Ancient Rome, for example, the typical bridal attire was composed of flame-coloured veils, which shades were said to resemble torches that brought warmth and light into their new homes. In Ancient Greece, instead, brides dressed in violet or red, their waists bound with a girdle for the groom to untie a gesture that symbolised the loss of virginity.

# Wealth and Status

## THE MIDDLE AGES

By the medieval period onwards, particularly within European courts, weddings were less about romance than about consolidating power and wealth through political alliances. Therefore, bridal garments were meant to display her family's fortune, and velvet, silk, fur, and embroidery in jewel-like tones of green, burgundy or blue were usually the first choices. White considered to be impractical and reserved for select occasions, though there were notable exceptions – her marriage in 1558, despite this colour being associated with especially among royalty. Princess Philippa of England wore white at her wedding in 1406 as well as Mary Queen of Scots during her marriage in 1558, despite this colour being associated with mourning at that time. For most women, however, the wedding dress was simply the finest garment they owned, which was long repurposed after the ceremony and never worn only once. Before its bridal association, white already had a wide symbolic resonance: in Christian tradition, it was the colour of baptismal gowns as a symbol of purity and new beginnings, as well as the attire of debutantes presented at court. Yet it was actually blue, rather than white, to traditionally represent purity, faith and the Virgin Mary, while white garments were often less about morality than about wealth: their impracticality and difficulty to remain clean was indeed a sign of privilege and wealth.

## THE EMERGENCE OF WHITE

The true turning point came in 1840, during the marriage of Prince Albert and Queen Victoria. Breaking with royal traditions in rejecting the traditional red, she chose instead white satin gown overlaid with Honiton lace and crowned with a wreath of orange blossoms in place of jewels. And, despite her decision being more aesthetic than moral or religious – the pale shade was better for its narrow waist, voluminous skirt and veil, white quickly moved from emblem of wealth to symbol of innocence, virtue and romance, though the connection was more invention than truth.

By the end of the nineteenth century, white was firmly established among elite brides, though gowns were often restyled to be worn in later occasions – even Queen Victoria herself repurposed her own dress. It was only in the twentieth century, as clothing became more affordable with the Industrial Revolution and society grew more prosperous after World War II, that the white wedding gown became a single-use garment and an almost universal tradition. Couture houses reinforced the trend by closing their summer collections with bridal looks, while Hollywood films and glossy magazines spread the image of the radiant white bride around the world.

*A new tradition*



Nowadays the *white* wedding gown, despite remaining iconic, keeps evolving into shades of ivory, cream, ecru or champagne, with some brides even rejecting white shades in favour of bold colours, trousers or tailored jumpsuits. With fusion gowns blending cultural traditions, and minimalist satin slips coexisting with elaborate couture, white is no longer a rigid symbol but a creative canvas upon which each bride can write her own story.

## *White and Beyond*

A FABRIC OF MEANING

Throughout the decades, the *white* dress has been continually reinvented: Edwardian gowns embraced lace sleeves, corsetry, and long trains to embody grace and restraint; the rebellious spirit of the 1920s brought beaded flapper dresses with short hemlines and drop waists; the 1950s saw a revival of opulence under the influence of Christian Dior's "New Look," with its cinched waists and voluminous skirts. Finally, the later decades saw a celebration of individuality, with the bohemian styles of the 1970s, the extravagance of Princess Diana's puffed sleeves in the 1980s and the sleek minimalism of the 1990s.

## *Towards Modernity*

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

# Shiromuku

Shintoism, the major indigenous religion of Japan, has long infused Japanese culture with ritual and symbolism, and nowhere is this more evident than in the wedding ceremony. Central to the traditional bridal costume is the shiromuku, an all-white kimono whose history and meaning span centuries. Its origins trace back to the Heian period (794–1185 CE), when noble women were used to wear the jūnihitoe, an elaborate formal dress composed of twelve layers which was exclusive to the imperial court. Over time, this pure white bridal style left the palaces of Kyoto and came to be embraced by the warrior households of Muromachi (1333–1573 CE) and Edo periods (1603–1867 CE), among whom it became the formal attire for marriage with its solemn white carrying a dual meaning of elegance and family alliances. This way, what began as the preserve of courtly women evolved into the established bridal garment among the samurai classes, and its use grew even more widespread after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, when Western fashion began to influence Japanese fashion. Indeed, the admiration for white Western bridal gowns gave new prestige to the shiromuku, which symbolism came to be easily aligned with that of purity and innocence.

## *White as Death and Rebirth*

The word shiromuku itself carries a layered meaning: shiro means ‘white’, and muku means ‘plain’ or ‘pure’. To wear white was to arrive without imprint, ready to be ‘dyed’ into the colours of the groom’s family and traditions. This is because, in a society where marriage was historically seen as the joining of families rather than individuals, the shiromuku marked a bride’s departure from her own lineage and her rebirth into another. Some interpretations even link its whiteness to the shiroshōzoku, the white burial robes of the dead, suggesting that the bride symbolically died to her old family and was reborn into her husband’s. For this reason, the bridal ensemble often included two stages: the shiromuku for the ceremony and a vividly coloured uchikake - often in red and embroidered with auspicious symbols - for the later reception, marking the passage from symbolic death to rebirth.

## *Patterns of Blessing*

The shiromuku is traditionally made of silk and, being all white, what changes in it is the woven pattern, which is visible only when caught by the light; among the most common ones, cranes speak of fidelity and long life, pines of resilience, plums of grace and perseverance, flowing water of purity and adaptability, clouds of divine blessing, and lastly, the motif known as shippō, consisting of overlapping circles, embodies harmony and endless prosperity. These subtle motifs imbue the fabric with depth, transforming a plain white into a canvas of auspicious wishes.

Accessories complete the ensemble and are equally rich in symbolism. The most distinctive is the watabōshi, a voluminous white hood worn exclusively for weddings, concealing the bride’s face until the ceremony is complete and shielding her from misfortune - much like a Western veil. Another headpiece, the tsunokakushi (literally ‘horn-hider’), symbolises the bride’s resolve to conceal jealousy or anger and approach marriage with gentleness. At her side she may carry either a hakoseko, a small case once used to hold makeup or charms, or a kaiken, a short dagger that conveyed both protection and readiness to defend the family. A folding fan, the sensu, symbolises the expanding future of the couple, while the wide obi sash and the elegant zōri sandals with split-toe tabi socks complete the costume allowing the bride to move with grace.

# *‘Marriage before the Gods’*

Conversely to what one might think, the wedding ceremony itself, called shinzen shiki (literally ‘marriage before the gods’), is far younger than the costume itself, emerging only in the early 20th century. First performed in 1900, when Crown Prince Yoshihito married Princess Kujo Sadako at the Imperial Palace, it set a new standard that spread throughout Japanese society, influenced up to a certain extent by Western criticism that Japan was lacking a ceremonial marriage. Before then, marriage was primarily a domestic affair marked by the bride moving her trousseau (the hanayome dogu) into her husband’s household, followed by a simple family gathering rather than a formal ritual. The shinzen shiki as we know it today revolves around ritual acts of purification and union, particularly the san-san-kudō which is the drinking of three cups of sake three times. Nowadays the bride may wear either the pure white shiromuku or a colourful uchikake, while the groom dons the black montsuki haori hakama, a formal kimono marked with his family crest.

## *Eternal White*

Though nowadays fewer couples choose traditional Shinto weddings, with Western-style ceremonies outnumbering them, the shiromuku endures as a living emblem of tradition; its plain white surface, enriched with hidden patterns and layered meanings, embodies not only purity but also transformation and beginning of a new life. This way, the Japanese bride embodies the multilayered symbolism of the colour white, as emptiness, as possibility, or as a canvas upon which her future will be written.

# Ancient

# White

Across the ancient world, colour was never merely ornament, but rather a language of symbols, **be it of the divine, the natural or the human sphere.** Among these hues, none was as pervasive and profoundly charged as white. Whether carved into marble, woven into linen or shining in silver, this colour stood as a beacon of purity, power and transcendence.

In ancient Egypt, it gleamed from the limestone pyramids and the linen of priests, radiating divinity and eternal renewal; in ancient Greece, it became the colour of marble temples and philosophical ideals, representing harmony, clarity and the pursuit of truth; in ancient Rome, it cloaked senators and emperors alike, embodying dignity, authority and civic virtue. Though each civilisation wove its own meanings into it, all recognised in white a quality beyond the temporal, something sacred, eternal and enduring. To trace white through these ancient cultures is to uncover not just an aesthetic preference, but also the shared belief that whiteness embodies purity, order and divine light.

# EGYPT

White in ancient Egypt was both practical and profound. From the linen robes of priests to the limestone-clad pyramids that gleamed across the desert, it permeated everyday life while serving as a constant reminder of purity, divinity and eternal renewal. More than a colour, it was the very essence of clarity and sacred truth, a thread connecting earthly existence to the eternal order of the gods.

## Colour as Essence

In the world of ancient Egypt, colour had never been just a matter of decoration; known as *iwen*, meaning both ‘appearance’ and ‘essence’, it was considered an intrinsic quality of all beings and objects, each hue expressing ideas of divinity, order, fertility, chaos or eternity. These associations were deeply rooted in Egypt’s natural environment and spiritual worldview, infusing every aspect of daily life from clothing and rituals to art, architecture and kingship. Among Egyptians’ vibrant palette, white held a position of singular importance. Called *hedj*, it was regarded as the colour of purity, sacredness and truth, hence closely tied to the gods themselves. Moreover, it was the colour of rebirth and afterlife as well, representing a vital part of funerary rituals and temple worship.

## The Colour of the Gods

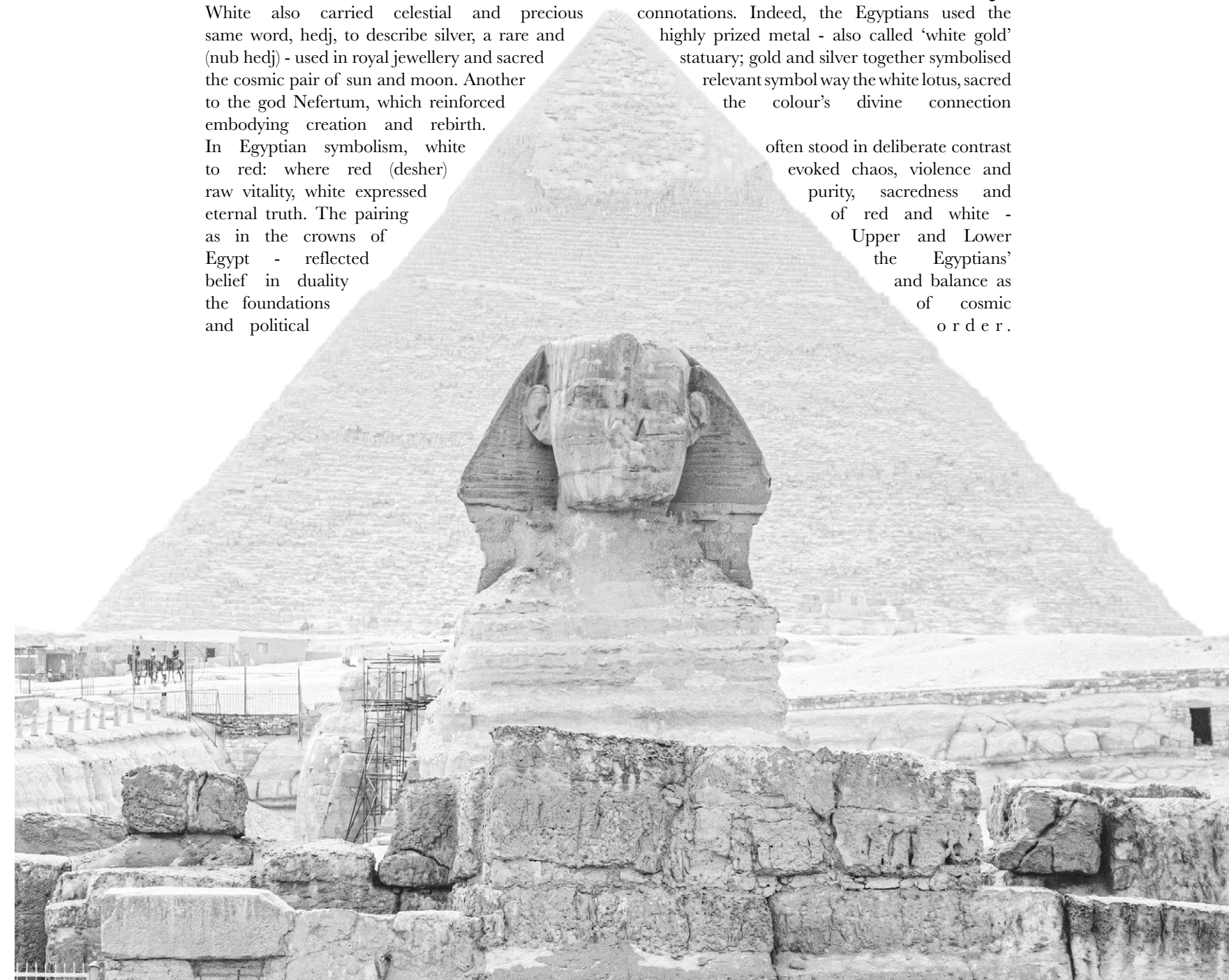
White permeated Egypt’s sacred spaces and rituals: priests, who were required to embody cleanliness and clarity, were used to wearing white linen as their standard garment; ritual tools, offering vessels, canopic jars and even embalming tables were commonly made of luminous white alabaster. The bull embalming tables, for example, honoured Osiris, the god of the afterlife, whose presence was evoked through the sanctity of the colour. White animals such as oxen and hippopotamuses were likewise seen as sacred, their colour linking them to divine purity. Likewise, the monumental landscape of Egypt was once permeated by a white brilliance: most pyramids were originally sheathed in gleaming white limestone, their surfaces reflecting the desert sun and creating a dazzling vision of cosmic power. Although time and erosion stripped away much of this casing, the pyramids stood for centuries as radiant symbols of eternity and the sacred. Temples, too, were adorned with white stone, underscoring the divine presence within.

## Holy White

White also conveyed authority and kingship, so that pharaohs, believed to be divinely chosen, favoured white in their clothing, regalia and monuments. The most enduring emblem of royal power had been the *Hedjet*, or White Crown of Upper Egypt: conical in shape and often paired with the *Deshret* (the Red Crown of Lower Egypt), it symbolised not only dominion over the Two Lands but also unity and cosmic balance. The combined double crown, the *Pschent*, represented Egypt’s unification of 3100 BCE and was referred to as the ‘two powerful ones’, signifying divine kingship and universal order. Yet white was not confined to the royal and the sacred, as Egyptians generally favoured this colour in clothing because of its cool practicality in the desert climate. Scenes in tomb art often depict men and women in white linen garments, reflecting both daily attire and the aspiration toward spiritual cleanliness. Certain items, like white sandals, were reserved for priests and ritual use, but overall, white garments were an integral part of Egyptian life.

## Pairs and Duality

White also carried celestial and precious connotations. Indeed, the Egyptians used the same word, *hedj*, to describe silver, a rare and highly prized metal - also called ‘white gold’ (*nub hedj*) - used in royal jewellery and sacred statuary; gold and silver together symbolised the cosmic pair of sun and moon. Another relevant symbol was the white lotus, sacred to the god *Nefertum*, which reinforced the colour’s divine connection embodying creation and rebirth. In Egyptian symbolism, white often stood in deliberate contrast to red: where red (*deshet*) evoked chaos, violence and raw vitality, white expressed purity, sacredness and eternal truth. The pairing of red and white - as in the crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt - reflected the Egyptians’ belief in duality and balance as the foundations of cosmic and political order.



# GREECE



## THE DOUBLE SHADES OF GREECE

From posterity's perspective, the history and aesthetic tradition of Greece has always been written in white, so much so that the language itself has two distinct words for it: Λευκό ('leuko') and Άσπρο ('aspro'). Indeed, we generally see this colour as being so deeply interwoven into the fabric of Greek identity that the first thing coming to our mind when thinking of that country is, more than likely, the pale colour of the ruins, marble pillars and statues that appear in postcards, souvenir shops and museums, as fragments of an ancient world that have inspired architecture, fashion and entire visions of beauty for centuries. Yet this whiteness is, beneath the surface, just an illusion, as the temples and statues that we now see as stripped marble were once drenched in bright colours; deep reds, rich blues and glowing golds once made Athens a city alive with pigment, until when the paint began fading to leave nothing but bare stone behind. This is exactly the way which a new idea of beauty came to life, although what remained was not the riot of colour that once surrounded the philosophers and mathematicians of Greece's golden age, but rather a pared-down minimalism that seemed to embody purity, restraint and timelessness. From this transformation was later formed the narrative that pure elegance could truly be achieved only through whiteness, simplicity and absence of ornament, whereas, in reality, it was exactly the massive use of colours, patterns and decorations that was once associated to these ideals, witnessing the flourishing of democracy, philosophy, art and science. But, as it turns out, later history has written another story.

### FORGOTTEN HUES: the Fading of a Memory

Fashion carried this vision forward, in that χιτώνας ('chitons') and πέπλοι ('peplos') - cloths draped around the body, originally bright and patterned - appeared in sculpture as pale stone, with their colours being forgotten and their folds frozen into an image of idealised purity. Centuries later, these silhouettes were revived in white by the sculptural pleats of Madame Grès, Halston's flowing silk gowns, as well as in the crisp linen dresses that drift across summer terraces of mid-20th century resort fashion. It may seem paradoxical that, in this context, the later interpretation of white has erased history as much as it has created it. Perhaps, this loss of colour that has given rise to a new aesthetic, may be emblematic of the fact that creativity can emerge as much from what has been forgotten as from what we have been remembered, and that beauty, more often than we realise, often lies in the idealised perception of reality rather than reality itself. Just as white is now always at risk of being stained, the vision of Greek whiteness survives only in an echo chamber of a fragile, and incomplete aesthetic.

### DIVINE WHITENESS

However, this doesn't mean that whiteness was not symbolic in Ancient Greece; it was, in the contrary, the signature colour of the gods. Divine garments and jewels were described as shining with a brightness that signified purity and power: Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty, was often depicted wearing a white hue, her radiance tied to a sacred force that set her apart from the mortal world; Zeus, too, was surrounded by whiteness, as myths traced his authority back to the pure white milk of his mother, a symbol of divine origin that artists later echoed in the marble robes carved around his figure. Among the more elusive figures was Khione, goddess of snow, born of Boreas and Oreithyia, gods of the North Wind. Summoning frost and storms, she embodied the chill beauty of winter, her whiteness carrying such severity and allure that snow itself became divine, as natural force connecting natural landscape with the gods' realm.

### RITUALS AND SOCIETY

The same symbolism was translated into ritual life at the Χαλκεία ('Chalkeia'), a feast honouring Athena where young girls, known as the Άρρηφόροι ('Arrephoroi'), were meant to wear white robes when presenting the sacred peplos to the goddess - their clothing a mark of ritual purity and of their temporary service to the divine. But, beyond the sacred, whiteness could also signal status; for men, the brightness of their robes revealed their place in society, in that bleaching fabric was costly and only those with enough resources and leisure time could maintain their garments of an immaculate white. As divine radiance and ritual purity, social privilege and mythic presence white in Ancient Greece was a language, more than a colour, signifying hope and renewal in the temples where it gleamed, while also serving as a protective colour in rituals to invite good fortune.

# ROMA

From the veils of the Vestal Virgins to the chalked togas of politicians, whiteness ran through the Roman society like a thread that bound people, rituals and ideals, until the colour itself became part of what it meant to be Roman.

## A Language of Whiteness

The story of Rome's relationship with the colour white begins with language itself. The Latin adjective candidus (lit. 'shining white') is the root of both terms 'candor' (frankness) and 'candidate', a reference to the brilliant togas worn during Roman election campaigns as symbols of **purity and moral integrity.** Hence, the dazzling chalk-rubbed toga candida (as it was called) proclaimed not only their political ambitions but also their moral values. Candor, Romans believed, was the foundation of society, and WHITENESS BECAME ITS MOST VISIBLE EMBLEM.

## The Toga: a White statement

From the earliest days of Rome, the toga set its citizens apart. Derived perhaps from Etruscan traditional dress, it began as a practical woollen wrap, worn by both men and women, to quickly evolve into the quintessential Roman garment. Its sheer size and elaborate folds required advanced skills to drape, so much so that wealthy families often had a specific slave in charge of this complex task. Though heavy, cumbersome and unsuited to labour, the very impracticality of the toga became a statement, the one of the ruling-class attire in opposition to the working class. Over time, this garment came to be restricted to male citizens alone, while women start adopting the stola, a long, flowing dress that became associated with the concept of femininity.

The whiteness of the toga was imbued with multiple layers of meaning, with variations in its form coming to mark different occasions: the toga pura (plain, undyed wool) was the everyday garment of free men; the toga praetexta, distinguished by its broad purple border, was worn by magistrates, priests and freeborn children as a symbol of dignity and legal protection; the toga virilis (lit. 'toga of manhood') marked a boy's passage into adulthood, around the age of sixteen, granted in a family ceremony during the fest of Liberalia. Casting aside the purple-edged toga of childhood, a boy stepped into the pure white folds of manhood, proclaiming his duties, privileges and place within Roman society. Foremost among these was the toga candida, whitened to a dazzling brilliance with chalk, the very garment from which our modern word candidate is derived.

## Holy White

Within Roman culture, was never confined to politics, as it belonged just as much to the sacred. Nowhere was this more visible than in the cult of Vesta, goddess of hearth, home and family, whose presence was not carved in stone or painted on walls but rather lived in the ever-burning fire inside her dedicated temple. Around that fire stood Rome's most revered priestesses, the Vestal Virgins, who dedicated their whole lives to the guard of that flame. Clothed in white, they embodied purity, their vows of chastity believed to safeguard the very survival of the city and their garments being seen as a reflection of bridal whiteness - the same colour that marked the beginning of families and the promise of continuity for Rome itself.

On her wedding day, a Roman bride would step into marriage clothed in a simple white gown, the tunica recta, woven in one piece to embody purity and unity. Over it, she drew the flammeum, a vivid yellow-orange veil which was meant to resemble the colour of flames. The white of her dress marked innocence and new beginnings, while the fiery veil cast her as a living torch, bringing light, warmth and fertility into her husband's household.

In life as much as death, white characterised Romans attire, for funeral garments were thought to purify the soul, protect the living from mourners and offer the hope of a spiritual renewal.

## White Under the Surface

The symbolism of white permeated Roman architecture as well; polished white marble was the material of choice for temples and public building, its reflective brilliance creating an atmosphere of grandeur, wealth and divine presence. Yet - just as is the case for Greece -, our modern vision of Rome as a city of blinding white marble is misleading. In truth, Rome was a true riot of colour, with statues painted in bold hues, walls glowed with frescoes and marbles covered in red, yellow, green, and black arranged in dazzling patterns. Just as Egypt's white pyramids lost their limestone casing, so too Rome's painted surfaces faded with time, leaving us with the illusion of a monochrome world. The whiteness we imagine today, indeed, reflects more Renaissance's taste for purity than the actual ancient reality. Still, for the Romans, whiteness was held in high regard, in that the care required to keep a toga clean, the deliberate chalking to make it shine, as well as the discipline needed to wear it properly, made it not just a garment but a true moral exercise. To wear white with dignity was to embody Roman values of order, discipline and tradition, whilst improperly draped folds were seen as a disgrace and public signs of disorder; so much so that Roman law itself linked the right to wear the toga with citizenship, whereas slaves, exiles, and foreigners were excluded.

## The Afterlife of White

By the late Empire, however, the toga started fading, as its unwieldy bulk and elaborate style gave way to more practical garments like the tunica (the basic garment of both men and women) and the pallium (a long, rectangular cloak draped over the tunic). By the time of Constantine Empire, in the fourth century, the toga had become little more than a ceremonial garment, a relic of an earlier age. Yet the meaning of white survived, continuing to embody authority, purity and sacrifice to carry its symbolism far beyond the fall of Rome. The Christian Church inherited this legacy, and since 1566 the pope himself has been wearing white, a sign of virtue that recalls Rome's ancient habit of embodying values of truth and authority.

# MORAL WHITE WHITE MORAL MORAL WHITE

In Korean society, white has been less a statement of rupture than a rhythm of continuity, embodying Confucian ideals of integrity, humility, and moral rectitude.

On the contrary, in Revolutionary France, white was a colour of profound ambiguity, streaming from the Bourbon standard as emblem of divine kingship to be later accounted as token of fragile unity between people and monarchy.

Far apart yet alike in their search for identity, both societies turned to white as their chosen language of meaning. Beyond fabric, garment or emblem, here white becomes the medium through which power, virtue, authority and belonging are expressed - A TRANSCULTURAL COLOUR OF IDENTITY.

## Colonial Period: White Resistance and Decline

During the Japanese occupation (1910–1945), white clothing became a battleground of identity. The colonial authorities launched the “Coloured Clothes Campaign,” issuing over a hundred policies between the 1920s and 1930s to restrict or ban white; offenders had garments stamped with ink, with some being denied food rations or education. Still, the campaign largely failed, with most of rural populations still continuing to wear white. In this climate, the white hanbok became, more than custom, a signal of resistance in plain sight, a quiet assertion of identity against assimilation. After liberation in 1945, the tradition quickly waned, as the devastation of the Korean War left the peninsula so impoverished that survival took precedence over symbolic dress. Western garments, particularly surplus U.S. military uniforms dyed into muted colours, replaced the hanbok for daily wear, and by the mid-twentieth century the everyday white attire had nearly vanished except for mourning rituals; brightly coloured hanbok came to dominate weddings, festivals and ceremonies, while white retreated from daily life.

## Symbolism and State Prohibitions

In Korea, the colour white has carried profound meaning for centuries. Shaped by Confucian ideals of restraint and by Buddhist and Taoist philosophies of detachment, it came to embody a moral clarity associated with **innocence, purity, honesty and simplicity** as well as asceticism, nobility and incorruptibility. So deeply rooted was this reverence that Koreans were long known as the *paegŭiminjok* (lit. ‘white-clad people’), with Chinese records from as early as the third century CE describing them as dressing primarily in white. Indeed, this colour was associated with cleanliness, sunlight and heaven, constantly permeating Korean art, myth, folklore and everyday life over time.

When referring to Korean fashion and culture, one cannot fail to mention the hanbok, the traditional dress consisting of *jeogori* (top), *baji* (trousers), *chima* (skirt) and *po* (coat). For centuries, and until the 1950s, most Koreans have been wearing daily a white version of this attire in what later came to be known as *minbok*, or ‘clothing of the people’, whereas brighter colours were reserved only for special occasions such as weddings or official duties. Under Confucian customs, and especially during the Joseon dynasty, white was strongly associated with mourning, in which filial piety required years of plain white attire after a parent’s death; it goes without saying that, because nearly everyone endured losses, people often wore mourning white for extended parts of their lives, to the point that this widespread attachment to white alarmed state officials. To counter the external projection of the image of a nation perpetually in grief, marked by austerity and decline, the court later issued no fewer than twenty-five decrees attempting to ban or discourage white clothing, urging instead the use of brighter colours to symbolise prosperity, vitality and social order. Moreover, authorities were increasingly viewing the upkeep of spotless white garments as wasteful because of constant washing, bleaching, consumed time and resources they required. Yet despite these prohibitions, the practice persisted, and the very effort of maintaining brilliant white - a labour that was mostly carried out by women - added a new cultural significance of honesty, moral integrity and endurance.

## Layers of Meaning

Today, the white hanbok endures not as daily clothing but as a powerful communicative device. Its emotional resonance is wide-ranging, conveying sadness and fate, but also sublimity, asceticism, and, above all, embodying the uniquely Korean concept of *han* - the sorrow of unresolved grief intertwined with the strength of endurance. From mourning traditions to hardship from invasions and political upheavals, the white hanbok has evolved from ubiquitous attire to statement of identity, as visual emblem of protest and purity.

## Modern Reemergence and Contemporary Resonance

Conversely to one might think, the disappearance of white from the Korean fashion scene contributed to heighten the colour’s symbolic force. In modern Korea, the white hanbok has reemerged as a deliberate expression of resistance and purity, appearing in folk plays lampooning authority where its stark presence underscores the voice of the people. Shamans as well wear it in rituals to signify determination and purity, often blurring the boundary between spirituality and protest. Most memorably, the white hanbok was adopted during the democracy movements of the 1980s, where students activists wore it in demonstrations framed as mourning rites transforming a protest into a collective ritual of sacrifice.

Within the Revolutionary France, colour was a powerful political means speaking of allegiance, belief and identity. White, as enduring colour of the Bourbon monarchy, evoked the king's divine authority: first unfurled on the flag of the Ancien Régime and later reappeared in the cockades of the royalists, came to designate episodes of violent royalist reprisals against Jacobins and, later on, Republicans as well (hence the expression 'White Terror'). Yet, by the time it was incorporated into the revolutionary tricolour alongside Paris's red and blue, white had been recast as a symbol of unity between king and people, and eventually of the nation itself.

At the same time, this colour became the most fashionable shade in women's dress. After the Revolution, austere gowns in blanc cassé (lit. off-white) were modelled on the classical simplicity of Greece and Republican Rome. Worn in muslin, their revealing cuts scandalised contemporaries, who dubbed their wearers les Merveilleuses, 'the marvellous ones'. These neoclassical dresses, elevated by figures such as Joséphine Bonaparte, Thérésia Tallien and Juliette Récamier, came to define the new Empire style under Napoleon, despite their lightness offering little protection against northern France's cold climate. Thus, in both politics and fashion, white emerged as a colour of paradox, as much royalist as revolutionary, austere as provocative, restrained as excessive.

The robe en chemise (also known as the chemise à la reine or gaulle) is considered as one of the most iconic and controversial fashion items of the late 18th century. Made from fine muslin, cut straight and

## The Chemise Dress

drawn in with a sash or drawstring, the gown's silhouette was simple and unstructured: this light and informal style was a radical departure from the French court fashion of that time, which was favoured rigid bodices, rich silks and heavy embellishment. The term chemise had long referred to an undergarment, which first appeared as outer garment in the famous Queen Marie Antoinette's portrait by Élisabeth Vigée-Le Brun, at the 1783 Salon. The painting unleashed a heavy storm of criticism from contemporaries, to the eyes of whom the queen seemed to be posing in her underwear, compared to the huge powdered wigs and highly decorated silk outfits that used to characterise French aristocracy of that time. Marie Antoinette could not have foreseen that stepping into a simple muslin gown would ignite debates that spanned politics, economics, gender, and empire. Yet the robe en chemise illustrates how clothing can become a lightning rod for larger social tensions, shaping not only aesthetic trends but also the course of global history.

### Origins

Although the exact origins of the robe en chemise is still debated, two main theories seem to converge. One traces the gown to the French Caribbean, more specifically in Saint-Domingue (modern-day Haiti), where the locally produced cotton was far whiter and finer than what was available in Europe. Here free women of colour, often of mixed French and African ancestry, started to adapt metropolitan styles to the local conditions, favouring airy gowns much more suited to the tropical climate. Adopted by White Creole women, the style eventually returned to France, especially through the city of Bordeaux, to the point that contemporary accounts even describe the queen herself referring to thus as robe "à la créole", acknowledging its colonial roots. Paintings by artist Agostino Brunias from the 1770s and 1780s, featuring Black and Creole women in strikingly similar white gowns, further underscore these transatlantic connections. The second interpretation frames the dress within eighteenth-century European pastoral imagination, where and art and literature romanticised peasant life praising simplicity as main form of elegance. The chemise gown, with its unstructured form and rustic associations, aligned perfectly with this ideal, to the point that, at her private retreat, the Petit Trianon, Marie Antoinette and her entourage would wear muslin gowns and straw hats in imitation of rural life.

## Scandal and Criticism

As previously mentioned, when artist Vigée-Le Brun exhibited the queen's portrait in 1783, an immediate reaction of scandal rippled through the audience, with critics condemning the attire for all it was seen to represent. First, its cotton muslin (imported from India via Britain) was perceived as unpatriotic and harmful to the French silk industry; since the reign of Louis XIV, silk had indeed symbolised France's political and cultural supremacy, and this was forming the backbone of Lyon's economy. Therefore, by favouring cotton, Marie Antoinette was seen as betraying both national industry and national pride. Second, the gown blurred boundaries between public and private attire in that, by resembling a mere undergarment, it was judged indecent and undermining to royal dignity. Moreover, it also fuelled ongoing suspicions about the queen's Austrian loyalties, her perceived frivolity, and her rumoured improprieties and scandals at the Petit Trianon. Also, the garment seemed to embody deeper political and social anxieties, representing a dangerous collapse of the distinctions that upheld the monarchy - between nobility and commoners, luxury and necessity. Simply put, what might have appeared as pastoral innocence could also be read as subversive rebellion, within a society where looseness in dress was being equated with a looseness of morals.

# The *Spread* of the

Though frequently credited to Marie Antoinette, we saw how this attire she was not firstly introduced by her. Yet the queen's influence, rather than in its invention, lays in its amplification, turning the gown into both a fashionable trend and a political statement. Despite the scandal - or perhaps because of it - the chemise à la reine spread rapidly, especially after Marie Antoinette gifted dresses to the Duchess of Devonshire and the actress Mary Robinson in England who popularised the style in their country. Taken up by members of the *Bluestocking Society*\*, the style swiftly crossed borders and was embraced throughout Europe. Though appearing modest, the dress' pristine whiteness, imported muslins and delicate maintenance costs stood out as clear markers of wealth and privilege.

\*Bluestocking Society: An informal circle of educated women in 18th-century Britain, who hosted salons that promoted literature, conversation, and learning over fashionable display. The term, taken from the plain blue stockings worn by one member, later came to denote the broader circle of intellectual women.

Muslin was an expensive luxury fabric imported from the East. However, thanks to the mechanisation of cotton weaving in 1785, the price and availability of muslin fell so much that almost anyone in England could afford it. Indeed, the timing coincided with the Industrial Revolution, where the inventions of new efficient machines enabled mass processing of cotton fibres. Moreover, a powder for bleaching fabric was produced as a faster and more convenient method than the old ways of prolonged exposure to the sun or boiling with ashes then sour milk. This way, from the 1780s white muslin was made into bonnets, kerchiefs, aprons and chemise dresses. In such context, the popularity of the chemise dress strongly fuelled the demand for cotton, accelerating the decline of the French silk industry and tying fashion ever more closely to colonial exploitation; fuelled by slavery, plantation agriculture in the American South grew so rapidly that cotton production saw an increase of five hundredfold, with demand driving it ever higher during later years. In this regard, the simple muslin gown became implicated in the rise of "King Cotton" and the intensification of transatlantic slave economy. The chemise dress was both a garment and a symbol, embodying the contradictions of its age: natural and artificial, innocent and scandalous, liberating and oppressive. For contemporaries, it was a dress that threatened the monarchy, insulted national industry and undermined gendered hierarchies; for the later generations, it came to signify an aesthetics's turning point, from rococo luxury to neoclassical simplicity, from silk to cotton, from the formality of the ancien régime to the ease of modern fashion.

## Economical and Symbolic Impacts

# (R)EVOLUTION Chemise Dress

The beginning of the 19th century saw a fashion landscape which had been dramatically transformed from earlier generation's style. As French Revolution had swept away the ornate and heavily structured dress of the ancien régime, Neoclassicism came to redefine fashion looking back to the graceful simplicity of ancient Greece and Rome as inspiration. For women, this translated into a high-waisted silhouette in lightweight muslin, a fabric coming from northern India produced from finely combed cotton yarn, renowned for its sheer, airy quality. Said to have been traded by the ancient Greeks at the Indian port of Maisolos, the cloth may owe its name to that very place. Muslin reached Europe in the 17th century and flourished throughout the 18th, with English dominance in India expanding its trade. Prized for its airy comfort and versatility it had, by the end of the century, become a symbol of fashionable refinement.

# THE EMPIRE SILHOUETTE

## When the Cell Sets the Style

In the wake of the Revolution, young women embraced muslin gowns as a political statement as much as a fashion choice; rejecting the heavy silks, panniers and embroidery of the ancient court, they adopted simply gathered, high-waisted dresses of fine muslin, in a way to evoke Greco-Roman antiquity. This more egalitarian dress was light, fluid and deliberately opposed to the ostentation of the ancien régime. The new silhouette, which later came to be called Empire Style in France and Regency Style in England, forsook the sculpted hourglass of the earlier gowns for a more relaxed, natural line that no longer needed stays to rely on. Resembling a one-piece chemise with a drawstring bodice, these garments were seen as a symbol of freedom, and cotton, once relegated to undergarments or servants' clothing, was now elevated to outerwear. This dramatic shift towards a new simplicity allowed women to dress with ease and move with freedom, embodying the Revolutionary spirit of liberation; yet, the delicate transparency of muslin was regarded as daringly immodest by many contemporaries. Ironically, the pared-down elegance of this post-Revolutionary fashion traced part of its origin to the prison. During the Terror, women like Joséphine de Beauharnais and Thérésia Cabarrus endured confinement, their hair cropped and their only garment a being plain chemise. What began as deprivation became an unexpected source of inspiration, in that after their release, Joséphine, Thérésia and their friend Juliette Récamier - renowned for her beauty and influence - transformed the humble chemise into a high fashion statement, as well as a powerful symbol of identity and conviction.

## Styling Freedom: les Merveilleuses

The Directory period (1795–1799) saw the flamboyant rise of les Merveilleuses (lit the 'marvellous women' of Paris), alongside their male counterparts, les Incroyables. In the wake of the Revolution and the Terror, they rejected old conventions in conduct as much as in their way of dressing, turning fashion into an arena of excess and provocation. Their gowns, cut from muslin or gauze so thin they were called 'woven air,' clung to the body in a shocking and seductive way. Often styled after Grecian tunics, their garments were sometimes deliberately dampened to accentuate the transparency, worn with sandals and as very little - or none - underwear. Since considered impractical in such revealing clothing, pockets were abandoned and replaced with small handbags named reticules. Within a society exhausted by years of austerity and fear, the Merveilleuses embodied a collective sigh of relief, channeling liberty through luxury, sensuality and scandal, and flouting convention with boldness. Though extensively being caricatured and criticised for extravagance, their influence has been undeniable, in that they made muslin the emblem of modern fashion transforming it from a simple cloth into a revolutionary fabric, one that embodied both political change and cultural liberation.

## Cotton-Made Resistance

Still, muslin's dominance was far from being universally welcomed. For Napoleon, its popularity carried both economic and political struggles for the country, in that with Britain controlling much of the muslin trade, reliance on the fabric meant dependence on imports and a further blow to the already struggling French textile industries. Indeed, determined to restore the prestige of French silks and velvets, he restricted muslin imports and imposed strict rules of formal dress within the court, thereby preserving a market for the traditional luxury fabrics he sought to protect. His efforts, however, did not erase muslin's symbolic power, as its association with freedom, simplicity and rejection of the ancien régime had become intrinsic values of the Revolution itself.

The later Napoleonic Wars further reinforced the trend toward simplicity, as austerity and shifting social structures diminished the dominance of aristocratic extravagance in favour of the middle classes; just as politics sought to break from the old order, fashion embraced freedom of movement, natural grace and pared-down elegance. Typically made in white or pale shades and worn with a shawl, it was both elegant and practical, far more comfortable compared to the corseted fashions of earlier decades.

Despite criticisms and restrictions, the muslin gown has become the defining style of the early 19th century, with its Empire silhouette, high waist and long, flowing skirt, echoing classical statuary and emphasising the body's natural form.



# White *Lingerie*

Starting from the 18th century and up to the early 20th century, white lingerie had become a symbol of purity, refinement and aspiration across Europe. Usually crafted from fine cotton batiste and decorated with lace and embroidery, these delicate garments were considered symbols of elegance and good taste. In the Victorian era, pristine white undergarments signified respectability, while the later Edwardian women embraced white as the perfect canvas for their love of ornamentation. Corsets, chemises and petticoats were most often white as the hidden foundation of fashionable dress in such a way that, although coloured pieces existed, white indisputably was the dominant colour for lingeries.

By the 1910s, department stores and newspapers began to actively promote fabrics specifically for white lingerie; Described in the historic department store Smith & Caughey's autumn/winter 1915 catalogue as "The snowiest, purest fabric for all-white lingerie", it became celebrated as the ideal material for refined intimate apparel. Tarantulle white cotton fabric was a fine fashion fabric of the early 20th, specifically for lingerie and undergarments because of its freshness, cleanliness and refinement - qualities that directly tied to the cultural association of white lingerie with purity, innocence and good taste.



# Advertising *White*



In 1922, magazine *The Ladies Mirror* highlighted the vogue for sheer white muslin and the new ‘teddies’ that reflected the streamlined, tubular silhouette of the 1920s. Originally known as ‘cami-knickers’, teddies emerged in the 1920s as a modern, streamlined undergarment that combined top and bottom into a single piece, perfectly in line with the decade’s sleek fashions. Fashions began shifting by the mid-1920s, when shades of peach, pink and orchid began to eclipse white as the fashionable favourite, as testified by the numerous salmon-pink corsets of the 1940s. The post-war years brought white lingerie back into fashion, in line with the return of ultra-feminine clothing. Teenagers wore form-fitting white slips beneath sheath dresses, while voluminous petticoats, often made of paper nylon and heavily starched, swished under full skirts. Leading brand Berlei promoted white nylon bras and girdles in colourful advertisements, and its iconic Hollywood Maxwell bra was sold in white alongside pink and black; once again, white lingerie was standing for glamour, this time with a modern edge. The 1980s marked a turning point in how white lingerie was portrayed. No longer tied to its decorous, innocent associations, the colour was now being reimagined as daring and seductive. In its 1898 winter issue, *Magazine Fashion Quarterly* styled scantily clad models in white alongside tuxedoed men in dark glasses, casting the color in a new light

“*très chic, très risqué*” (“so stylish, so daring”).

## The *Lingerie* Dress

Parallel to the evolution of undergarments was the rise of the lingerie dress. Popular from the early 1900s to the 1920s, this lightweight summer dress was usually white

or pastel, sheer enough to reveal the underneath slips and lavishly decorated with embroidery, lace, ribbons or ruffles. Worn during garden parties, races and promenades, it was praised by magazine *Harper’s Bazaar* in its 1909 April issue as “one of the most vitally important items of the summer outfit.” The lingerie dress reflected a broader fashion transition, namely from the corseted, curvaceous silhouette of the late 19th century to the slimmer, elongated shape promoted by couturiers

such as Paul Poiret, Madeleine Vionnet, Jeanne Lanvin and Mariano Fortuny, besides many others.

## *Chemise* and *Drawers*

Especially during Victorian era, beneath every style were subtly laying two essential pieces, namely the chemise and the drawers. The first one was a loose, straight-cut undergarment, usually sleeveless or with short sleeves, worn closest to the skin; in the 18th and 19th centuries, it was usually made from linen or cotton and served to protect outer garments from sweat, as well as to shield the skin from rougher fabrics like wool. By the Edwardian period, chemises became increasingly decorative, often trimmed with lace and embroidery, playing an important role in layering beneath corsets and sheer gowns. No respectable woman would not be wearing a chemise, often adorned with Valenciennes lace, ribbons and fine embroidery.

On the other hand, drawers were early women’s underpants, first coming to be widely adopted during the 19th century. Typically made from cotton, batiste or silk, they were knee or mid-calf length, often constructed as ‘open drawers’ with two separate leg pieces joined at the waistband but open at the crotch (mainly for hygiene and practical purposes). Over time, drawers evolved too, from the sturdy Victorian cotton into the delicate Edwardian creations of semi-sheer fabrics and flounces. Even if hidden, white intimates were held as true canvases for beauty.

From the chemise to the corset, from the slip to the lingerie dress, the story of white lingerie reflects a wider evolution of fashion and culture, standing for innocence and simplicity as well as for sensuality and opulence. Yet throughout, it has remained bound to ideas of purity, refinement, and transformation, shaping both wearers’ subjective style and fashion’s public imagination.

### *Everlasting White*

*By the 1990s, lingerie itself had stepped into the spotlight, in a way that white bras, slips and bodysuits were designed to be seen under sheer fabrics or just jackets. Meanwhile, the fitness boom created demand for comfortable basics, hence white briefs, singlets and seamless bras became iconic - with Calvin Klein being the leading brand. Today, although lingerie comes in every imaginable color, white still persists as timeless classic and as symbol of modesty, refinement and style.*

# WASH DRINKING

## white

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This chapter traces how two of the most iconic professional uniforms - the physician's white coat and the chef's jacket - white has become the very fabric of identity: for doctors, the white coat speaks of science, cleanliness and trust; for chefs, the crisp jacket conveys mastery, precision and discipline. Both garments carry within their folds the same paradoxical symbolism, which is, white is vulnerable to every stain and mark, yet that very fragility becomes a declaration of standards, a visible promise that nothing is hidden. To wear white in these settings is to accept the weight of responsibility, a public contract in which fabric and function merge with ritual and meaning.

# DRESS FOR THE DRESSING



When thinking about culinary world, few images are as iconic as a chef clad in pristine white, with its double-breasted jacket and towering toque. And despite the choice of this colour might seem a magnet for tomato sauce, it actually carries a functional and symbolical meaning. Wrapped in a mix of fact and legend, the chef's uniform as we know it today is a relatively modern invention, still its elements trace back more than you might expect. One of the earliest stories comes from 7th century BCE Assyria, whose king Ashurbanipal, fearing assassination, instructed his chefs to wear specific hats -resembling those of the royal court-, so as to ensure their visibility in the palace kitchen. Other myths link the tradition to Greek and Roman festivities, where cooks were used to don laurel-adorned headgears, or to the Byzantine Empire, where displaced chefs reportedly adopted monastic hats as a sign of refuge and solidarity.





## From Dressing to Dress Code

The transformation of the chef's wardrobe began in earnest in the 19th century thanks to the legendary French chef Marie-Antoine Carême (1784-1833). Deemed to be the founding father of haute cuisine, he introduced the now-familiar white uniform while working for the British ambassador at the 1814 Congress of Vienna. Impressed by the impeccable look of military officers, Carême created a likewise commanding outfit for the kitchen: a tall, flat-topped white headgear with a double-breasted jacket, to symbolise hygiene as well as the discipline and purity of the culinary craft. Contrariwise to one may think, this pursuit for a truly spotless presentation was far from being a mere vanity display. As a matter of fact, at that time food was an out-and-out tool for diplomacy and was supposed to reflect the seriousness and elegance of Europe's elite. Carême's vision was later refined by Auguste Escoffier (1846-1935), a French chef who, at that time, was working in the Savoy Hotel in London. Tapping into his own military experience, he revolutionised the kitchen organisation introducing the brigade de cuisine, a hierarchical system which allowed for extreme precision and discipline. Needless to say, part of this hierarchy was the uniform: the height of the toque indicated a chef's seniority, while the number of pleats symbolised their level of mastery - legend has it that 100 pleats meant 100 ways to cook an egg. Among other elements, Escoffier also standardised the essential white jacket, made of durable cotton to withstand heat and splashes while remaining breathable and easy to clean.



globe, so did the white uniform. In Japan, for example, during the Meiji era (1868-1912) - a time when Western influences began to shape local customs -, chefs began adopting a white kimono-style jacket known as happy coat. After the Second World War, during the American occupation, wearing white in kitchens even started to be a legal requirement for hygiene purposes and soon came to be a standard norm on an almost-global scale. From a practical perspective, the choice of this colour has a number of advantages: first of all, it reflects heat; secondly, it can be easily bleached from spills and stains; finally, the cotton-blend fabric has proven to be breathable, durable and easy to move in. Beyond the more function, white conveys a powerful message of purity, professionalism and pride, signalling that the kitchen is not a place for chaos but rather a space for precision and artistry. While the core symbolism of white still persists in fine dining and formal kitchens, the expression of individuality through one's personal attire is becoming ever-more common among contemporary chefs, with toques featuring splashes of colour, modern cuts or personalised embroidery, and uniforms turned into canvas of personal and culinary identity. Whether standing in a Michelin-starred kitchen or teaching the fundamentals to a new generation of cooks, nearly two centuries after its first invention, the veste blanche remains a proud emblem of culinary excellence, a world where the presentation matters as much as the flavour.

# CLINICAL COUTURE:

## THE WHITE

CONTRARY TO WHAT WE MIGHT THINK,  
WHITE HAS NOT ALWAYS BEEN THE COLOUR  
OF CHOICE FOR MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS.

## COAT

On the contrary, until the late 19th century, doctors were commonly used to wear black, an attire which was borrowed from the clergy to represent solemnity, formality and respectability. Moreover, medical practice at that time was uncertain, often entangled with quackery hence a visit from a physician was seldom a hopeful occasion. To summon a doctor was often a last resort, sometimes even a precursor to death, therefore the dark attire reflected gravity of such encounters. Medicine was not yet a profession firmly rooted in science, and the black suit, much like the robes of priests, framed the doctor as a figure of seriousness of healing.

As the scene began to change, of a close, to the rise of science. In century, germ theory, antiseptis, and clinical transformed a intuition-practice into b a s e d with more s t e r i l e



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century drew however, the change thanks modern medical advances in surgical anaesthesia hygiene medicine from driven an evidence-based discipline precise, procedures.

The hospital itself was no longer just a place of confinement for sick people, but increasingly a laboratory of science and progress, and attire followed suit. The first to change their uniform were not doctors at all but rather scientists, who started adopting light-coloured coats for their ability to reflect light, reveal stains and symbolise cleanliness. Gradually, physicians traded their black coats for white ones as well, aligning themselves with an evidence-based science and signalling a new era of professionalism and trust.

Such a change of costume was the main visual assertion that medicine had entered a new era. Until the early 20th century, some medical contexts still preserved black garb: students who has to dissect cadavers were still used to wear black lab coats to show respect for the dead, and surgeons wore dark coats as well until the discovery of anaesthesia allowed for cleaner operations. During these years, Nurses, many of whom had originally come from religious orders and worn the same black habits of nuns, also moved toward white uniforms; such transformation reflected the same cultural associations of cleanliness and virtue and still lingers in the British custom of addressing nurses as 'sisters'. By the 1930s, the transition was nearly complete, until the triumph of antibiotics after World War II, with which the white coat has been firmly established as the physician's emblem. More than a practical garment, the white coat carried layers of meaning: its brightness conveyed purity and order, suggesting moral as well as physical cleanliness, while its very vulnerability to stains imposed a discipline upon the wearer, reminding doctors that any imperfection would be visible and therefore accountable. Its pockets held all the necessary practical tools such as stethoscopes, pens, notebooks or reference cards, yet the coat itself served as a tool too, as barrier against contamination and a visual sign of authority. That was crucial for offering patients reassurance that the person standing before them was competent, trained and ready to help; for doctors it became a uniform of responsibility, one that demanded respect for the privilege of care. This became officially ritualised in 1993, when the Arnold P. Gold Foundation introduced the White Coat Ceremony, a rite of passage for medical students to publicly signal their ethical and professional commitment; such ceremony, quickly adopted around the world, has later on extended beyond medicine to nursing, pharmacy and allied health fields, carrying forward the white coat not simply as a piece of clothing but as an emblem of belonging, integrity and trust. Yet the story of the white coat is not without complexity. In recent decades, some doctors, especially those in paediatrics and psychiatry, have chosen to abandon it, assuming that the formality of this garment could create distance towards vulnerable patients, who may respond less openly to such a imposing figure. This is particularly visible in countries such as Denmark and England, where patients do not expect to see doctors wearing white, while in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Italy the tradition remains strong. Concerns about hygiene have also arisen, leading some hospitals to adopt "bare below the elbows" policies, requiring coats to be removed during examinations to reduce the risk of bacterial transmission. Even patients themselves are divided, with older generations often finding comfort in the authority conveyed by the coat while younger patients sometimes preferring a more casual presentation. Despite these debates, the white coat endures as the most visible symbol of modern medicine. For more than a century it has been woven into the identity of the profession, not only as shield and storage garment but as fabric of meaning. Like the chef's jacket in the kitchen or the bride's gown at the altar, it carries cultural associations of purity, discipline and ritual, demanding that the ideals it represents - cleanliness, competence, commitment - BE LIVED AS WELL AS WORN.

# Active White

## The Colour of 'MATCHING' SPORTS

Few colours have travelled so seamlessly from the drawing room to the playing field as white. And the association of specific sports with this colour stretches back centuries, long before the modern games took shape.

In both tennis and cricket, white was originally seen a marker of class and a reflection of social order, before coming to be the visual signature of the games themselves.

Indeed, what began as gentlemen and ladies stepping onto grass courts in the very clothes they wore to dine, gradually hardened into a tradition that still endures today.

In cricket, the typical attire grew out of centuries of sartorial experiment - from lace and stockings to coloured sashes and spotted shirts - before practicality, symbolism, and convention together established white as the game's "blameless livery".\* Likewise, in tennis this colour came to symbolise privilege, refinement and decorum, while also serving the practical purpose of providing relief from the heat and concealing perspiration. Across both sports, the white uniform has created a performative stage where fashion and class meet athleticism and discipline.

\*Diana Rait Kerr, *Bat, Ball, and Field: The Story of Cricket* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1950).



## The Colour of the **Game**

Long before tennis became the sport we know today, the colour white had already staked its claim on the court. The earliest ancestor of the game emerged in the 12th-century France, where monks were used to amused themselves with a simple handball game played against monastery walls. Over time, this diversion evolved into the so called jeu de paume (lit. 'palm game'), its name owing to the fact that it was originally played with the hand before paddles - rackets would not make their entrance until later years. By the 16th century, the jeu de paume had become a favourite pastime of French and English royalty, to the point that King Henry VIII himself was a keen player and required grand indoor courts to be built at Hampton Court Palace.

## The P R I V I L E G E of Wearing White

It was right during this era that white clothing began its long association with the game; nobles appeared in finely tailored garments of pale linen and silk, not much because of their practicality, but mostly because of their symbolism as markers of prestige. Indeed, much like during ancient times, white was notoriously difficult to keep clean, hence only those who has the privilege of being untouched by manual labour could afford wearing it. Right from the start, then, the colour carried associations with refinement, wealth and exclusivity.

It was not until the 18th and 19th centuries that the game gradually moved outdoors, evolving into what came to be the lawn tennis. By the Victorian era, the connection between tennis, whiteness,

and social standing was firmly established; white reflected the summer sun and helped to keep players cooler, but, even more importantly, it concealed the tell-tale marks of perspiration, an unseemly reminder of the body that polite society preferred to ignore. To the upper classes, pristine whites stood as symbols of cultivation and ease, perfectly aligning with the values of their times. By the time lawn tennis swept across Britain in the 1870s, spreading rapidly through country estates and garden parties, the colour white had become inseparable from the sport, less as a matter of athletic necessity than of upholding an image.

# White Heading to W I M B L E D O N

As the game shifted outdoors and made its way across the Channel, it evolved into lawn tennis, where the habit of wearing white carried a set of social cues that were far beyond practicality. In an era where only the wealthiest social classes could afford keeping pale garments spotless, white became the ultimate badge of privilege; while helping deflecting the heat of the summer sun, its real value lay in disguising perspiration, a sight the Victorian elite deemed unbecoming.

By the mid-19th century, lawn tennis had become, more than a sport, a true social stage. Unlike most pastimes of the period, it allowed men and women to play together, turning the court into a rare and respectable meeting ground between the sexes. Rather than the athletic performance, here was fashion to set the tone: men appeared in blazers and flannel trousers, whilst women turned to corsets and long skirts styled after the 'lawn dress', a garment already linked with garden parties and summer outings. Here, the whiteness of their attire spoke less to athleticism than to the prestige of those who were wearing it.

With the rise of organised competition, tradition hardened into rule. The first Wimbledon Championships in 1877 saw players in white from the outset and, by the 1890s, both British and American clubs had enshrined the practice into official codes, making tennis whites a hallmark of the sport's elite character.

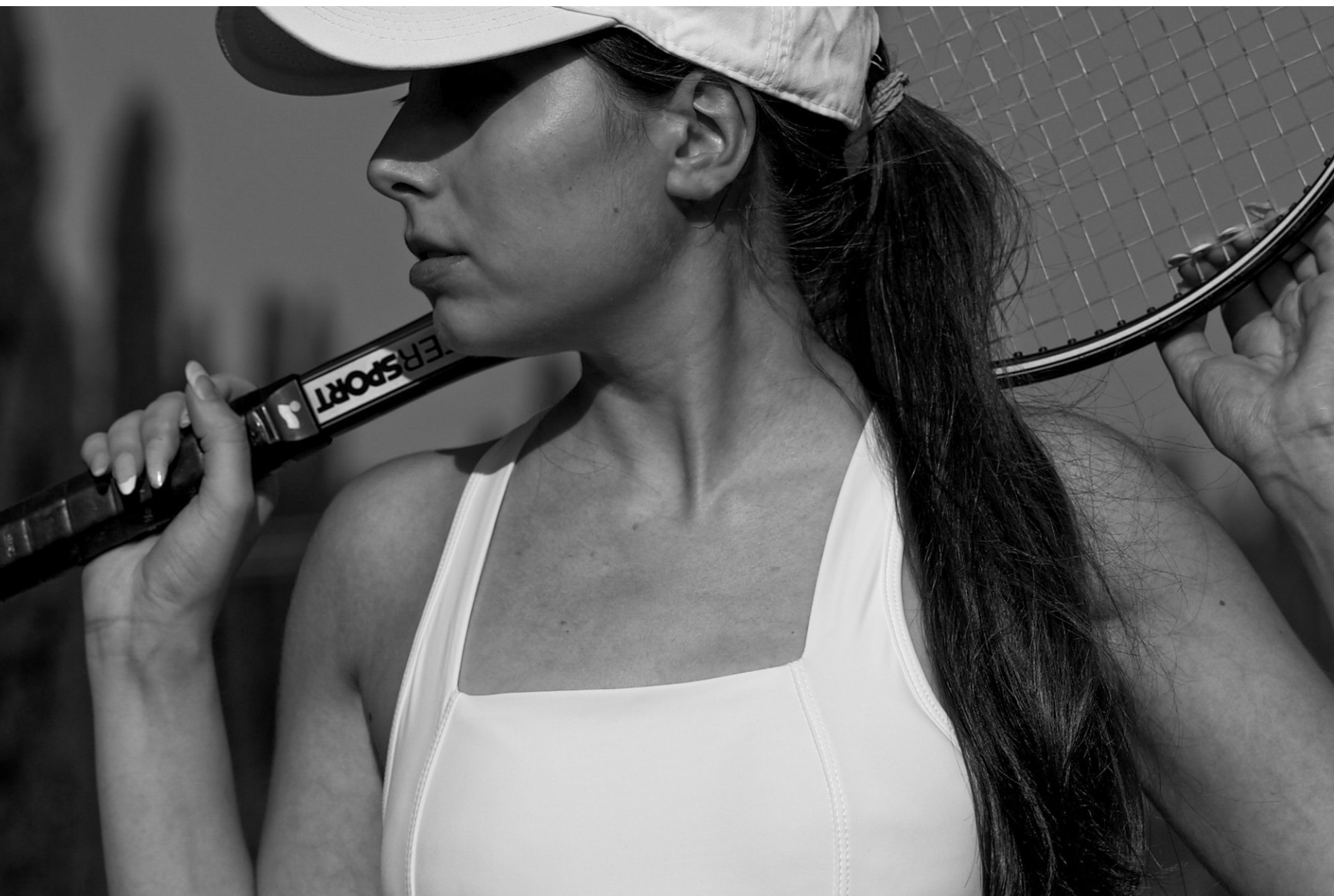
# Women Pushing B O U N D A R I E S

Even so, players - especially women - soon began to test the limits of what was considered acceptable. In 1887, fifteen-year-old Charlotte ('Lottie') Dod turned up to Wimbledon without a corset and in a calf-length skirt, attire that allowed her to move with unprecedented speed. Despite her opponents muttering about unfair advantages, Dod's victory made a statement, that is, fashion on the court could serve performance as well as appearance.

Three decades later, French champion Suzanne Lenglen provoked outrage in the press by stepping out in short sleeves, a calf-length skirt and a floppy hat. Despite the widespread harsh criticism, she won the championship in that very outfit and, with her bandeau head wrap and theatrical style of play, became one of sport's most iconic international celebrities.

Scandal struck again in 1949, when American player Gertrude ('Gussy') Moran, after being denied wearing colour at Wimbledon, showed up in the court wearing a short dress revealing her lace-trimmed underwear. Despite the press howl, her defiance ushered in the acceptance of shorter skirts and built-in shorts for women. Such acts of defiance contributed to propel tennis style ahead, even though Wimbledon continued to remain steadfast in its rules.





## M E N Redefining Style

Men left their mark on the style of the game as much as women did. During the 1920s, the modern polo was inadvertently created by René Lacoste, who decided to cut the sleeves off his shirt for greater ease of movement; with its airy fabric, unstarched collar and soon his signature crocodile emblem, the design became a worldwide staple. A decade later, Fred Perry followed suit, reshaping the sport not only through his play but also through his innovative attire, from the practical sweatband to his own polo shirt crowned with a laurel wreath. Over time, their designs came to be adopted far beyond the genteel world of tennis, becoming true fashion symbols of identity and true fashion staples that still endure today.

By the middle of the 20th century, the heavy flannels of earlier decades had yielded to shorts, ushering in a sleeker silhouette for the men's game. British player Bunny Austin led the way, still it was the Swedish Björn Borg to transform the tennis style into a true international phenomenon. With his flowing hair tied back by his signature headband, his cling-fit shirts and daringly brief shorts, he embodied a new kind of sporting icon, part champion, part style idol, whose image resonated far beyond the baseline.

## White Beyond the C O U R T

Over time, tennis whites transcended the game itself, inspiring fashion houses ranging Gucci to Hermès; filtered into everyday wardrobes through staples such as the iconic Adidas Stan Smith sneaker, Lacoste's and Fred Perry's polos, the tennis attire has become a fashion inspiration reaching well beyond the lines of the court.

As technology and taste continue to evolve, modern tennis whites are cut from breathable, sweat-wicking fabrics designed for speed and comfort; designers experiment with asymmetrical cuts, sustainable material, and even UV protection built into the cloth. Wimbledon, however, remains unwavering in its demands, with no cream, no off-white and never a trim more than a centimetre wide.

The result is an image that has been enduring for more than a century, with figures in pristine white framed by emerald lawns and cobalt skies within a tableau of elegance, discipline and tradition. What started as a sartorial whim of nobles in indoor courts has become one of sport's most enduring rituals in such a way that, although tennis white still echo their aristocratic origins, it has come to stand for something larger: style, innovation and a timeless grace that extends well over the game itself.

# CRICKET

## the Colour of Runs

Much like in tennis, few sights in sport are as evocative as cricketers wearing immaculate white scattered across a green field. Yet, despite the colour feels so inseparable from the game as though it had always been so, the story of white came as staple of cricket dress is far more intricate than it might seem. When cricket first emerged in the 16th-century England, players were used to wearing whatever daily attire they owned. As the game increasingly took hold among gentlemen, the scene started to resemble more a social gathering rather than a game, featuring lace-frilled shirts, silk stockings, buckled shoes and three-cornered hats edged with gold braid. It was in that very context that clubs started to adopt their own flourishes as signs of belonging, recognition and identity.



# WHITE (S)

## A PATCHWORK of colours

The early 19th century brought about some changes, yet not uniformity; coats, waistcoats and tall beaver hats kept enduring, while breeches gave way to trousers, shirts shed their frills, collars stiffened and wide bow ties appeared. Some players wore braces and belts with heavy clasps, others favoured straw boaters or a short white flannel jacket, namely, the prototype of the modern blazer. With Oxford in dark blue, Cambridge in light, Harrow in stripes, Winchester in their distinctive school caps, and the All-England XI in white scattered with pink spots, the cricket ground looked like a carnival of colour, patterns and ribbons, each team signalling its pride in school or club.

## The TRIUMPH of White

By the 1880s, the tide had turned and, as colours started to recede, white shirts and trousers emerged as the signature dress of a respectable cricketer. The choice owed more to pragmatism than to poetry, in that - being cricket a summer sport - white reflected the heat better than darker shades. Beside practical reasons, it bears keeping in mind that in the Victorian period, white was tied to concepts of purity, discipline and fairness, values that aligned perfectly with the spirit of cricket. A team in spotless whites, arrayed against the emerald of the pitch, embodied such an elegance and order that almost seemed to transcend the game itself.

## A GENTLEMAN'S game

By the late 19th century, cricket attire had settled into its classic form, featuring long white trousers, a white shirt and a woollen sweater, collectively known as 'flannels' or 'cricket whites'. Tradition soon attached itself to these garments: in Australia, the soft green cap introduced in the late 1800s became a treasured national icon, called the 'Baggy Green'; in England, the Marleybone Cricket Club introduced touring blazers in 1903, and caps for Test players were formalised in 1908 with the blessing of King Edward VII. Even umpires adopted white coats as early as 1861 to ensure visibility. Flannels carried symbolism well beyond function, representing order, discipline and respectability; their very impracticality (prone to grass stains and ball scuffs) suggested a certain elegance in striving to keep them immaculate, within a gentleman's ritual where appearance was inseparable from values.



## 'TESTING' whites

Cricket whites held their place unchallenged until the 1970s, when the rise of limited-overs matches,\* often played under floodlights, made a white ball essential. This because the red ball worked perfectly for daytime matches, standing out clearly against green grass and white clothing, whereas in day-night matches it was almost impossible to see against the dark evening sky. Still, despite the white ball proving to be much more visible under artificial lights, it was almost invisible against the all-white clothing of the players. The solution came with Kerry Packer's World Series Cricket in 1978, which shattered centuries of tradition by introducing coloured kits: Australia took the field in gold, the West Indies in coral pink, and the 'Rest of the World' in blue. Dismissed by traditionalists as 'pyjama cricket,' it nevertheless marked the opening chapter of a new visual era, where uniforms became canvases for national pride and commercial spectacle.

Though colour transformed the newer limited-over formats, traditional Test matches (played over five days) endured in white, preserving their aura as cricket's most traditional and prestigious form.

\*cricket games designed to be completed in a single day, unlike traditional Test matches that can stretch across five days.

## The Colour of CONTINUITY

Today, cricket uniforms balance heritage with innovation. Heavy wool and buckskin have given way to lightweight synthetics, engineered for breathability and moisture management. Shirts are tailored for mobility, collars are minimal, and the once ubiquitous cable-knit has largely been replaced by sleeker designs. Moreover, logos and sponsorships have turned jerseys into branding tools as much as uniforms, in which each nation displays its own identity: Australia's whites paired with the Baggy Green remain a symbol of unity; India's blues and saffron dominate limited overs; the West Indies' maroon celebrates Caribbean pride; England retains its understated whites for Tests, echoing continuity while adopting technical fabrics. Yet, amid all the innovation, whites endure as marks of Test cricket and image of the sport itself. To see players in crisp whites scattered across a green pitch is to glimpse not only a game but, above all, a tradition stretching back centuries. From the discarded undershirts of Georgian gentlemen to the flannels of Victorian players and the Baggy Greens of modern Tests, cricket whites are, more than clothing, a tableau of continuity, a visual shorthand for the values and history they embrace.

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