

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

2006

Peacocks in the Sands of Palm Beach: The Vogue of Men's Beach Robes

Diane Maglio

Berkeley College - New York, Dmaglio@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Maglio, Diane, "Peacocks in the Sands of Palm Beach: The Vogue of Men's Beach Robes" (2006). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 343.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/343>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Peacocks in the Sands of Palm Beach: The Vogue of Men's Beach Robes

Diane Maglio
Berkeley College, NY
dmaglio@hotmail.com

Personally, if two years ago anyone had told me that regular two-fisted he-men would loll around on the beach in one of those “Charvet” linen robes with big wall-paper like figures two feet in diameter adorning them I would have said, ‘Crazy.’ But they are doing it [in Palm Beach]”¹

By 1920, the east coast of Florida was becoming an American Riviera. Journalists followed the habits and styles of socialites, celebrities, and millionaires in this “jewel of all resorts.”² Palm Beach in winter was not only ideal for luxury pastimes of international society but equally important, an opportunity for men to express their love of color in public on the most fashionable beach in America. The multihued, vibrant painting *Decorative Figure on an Ornamental Ground* 1926 by Matisse may have inspired fashionable French shirt maker and furnisher, Charvet, and other manufacturers of textiles and robes to create the outstanding and bold fabrics for the robes men wore on America's Riviera.

Men who formerly gave not a thought to any color scheme whatsoever, now wear “quite startling beach robes...Take all the colors you're able to conceive, mass in heroic flowers ..., reproduce them on chintz or silk, and you have the effect.”³ *Men's Wear Chicago Apparel Gazette* (MWCAAG) photographed a gentleman in Palm Beach looking like a dazzling peacock in a splashy beach robe while the pea hen next to him wears sober clothing. The writer for *Saturday Evening Post* in 1922 observed that it is at Palm where “the most perfect and most brilliantly colored specimens of time killers are to be found.”⁴ America's wealthy men felt able and confident to indulge their craving for color by wrapping themselves in silk, linen and terry cloth robes while they “killed time” on the sands of Palm Beach.

The purpose of this research is to examine the newest ideas in men's beach robes which appeared in winter at Palm Beach and sold in retail stores throughout America the following Spring. I examined retail advertisements and catalogs, trade journal reports and textiles from the collection of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology. I compared photographs and journalists' descriptions of what was worn in Palm Beach, to the textiles and journals studied.

In comparing Palm Beach to other resorts, some considered Palm Beach to be the winter embodiment of the summer resort, Newport, RI, but that was a total misconception.⁵ Newport was “a place of tradition, of memories; its characteristic figures, belong ...to a past not remote and yet utterly gone.”⁶ In the newly developed Palm Beach, there was neither tradition nor memories, but rather a winter resort that featured Bradley's gambling casino and a Ziegfeld Follies show!⁷ Lack of traditional rules prevailed. Palm Beach was more accurately compared to the European resorts of Deauville, Biarritz and Lido. Journalists disagreed as to which was the

¹ Merchaneer, “New Thoughts on Men's Wear Merchandising: Palm Beach Styles.” *Men's Wear* 10 Mar 1926, p.60.

² “Palm Beach as a Fashion Center More Important Than Ever.” *Men's Wear Chicago Apparel Gazette*. 20 Jan 1926, p.71.

³ “Boughton,” “A day in June at a fashionable seashore resort.” *Men's Wear* 22 June 1921, p. 66.

⁴ “Time Killers” *Sat. Eve. Post* April 1, 1922 p. 6.

⁵ Joseph Hergesheimer, “The Golden Littoral.” *Saturday Evening Post* 26 July 1930, p. 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷ Merchaneer, “New Thoughts on Men's Wear: Merchandising Palm Beach Styles” *Men's Wear* 10 Mar 1926, p. 60.

fashion leader between Deauville and Palm Beach. Some considered Deauville “the most exotic, extravagant, wildly mad spot in the world.”⁸ While Palm Beach was credited with the most perfect beach in the world, others thought it lacked the electric atmosphere of gambling, racing, and the demimondaine set of Paris. A group of beach robe devotees in 1926 Palm Beach wore double breasted robes - his opening to the left, hers to the right. In Deauville the same style robe in “bright colors” was reported in 1928. An article in *MWCAG* featured Deauville as the greatest fashion stage where the writer spotted: “... the new bath sheets which I saw many men wearing in preference to a gown; they are the size of a bed sheet, far bigger than anything I have ever seen used in the bathroom. These may be in any colour [or]... printed.”⁹

Although many believed Deauville initiated fashion trends, the beach towel with hole cut through the center was featured as a novelty from Italy in *Vanity Fair* four years earlier. Available in outstanding colors of pink and white, orange and white, or blue and white it was much worn, at the Lido and Venice. The novel idea was determined appropriate for either bath or beach and priced at \$7.75.¹⁰ Toweling was also popular for lining & trimming robes as well as scarves worn around the neck. Trade journal *Men's Wear* reported “The beach robes at Palm Beach are rivaling those at Deauville in their brilliant colorings.”¹¹ At Deauville and the Lido, the most extravagant beach suits and lounging pajamas, are considered in good taste.

Why had Palm Beach captured the fashion imagination of men? Money and power blended with a youthful exuberance not found in the older community of Newport all converged in South Florida. Fashion reporters consistently and frequently referred to the masculine love of color. The correspondent to the British publication, *Man-and his clothes*, was dazzled by what he saw in Palm Beach. He wrote: “color means clothes, and wealth means clothes, so you can understand why there is here an entire lack of what Englishmen seem to be cursed with- Conservatism.”¹² Although Major Ropner was photographed in his velvet leopard skin patterned robe by both American and British trade papers, it was only the British paper that reported he was also seen wearing a brown evening dress. American reporters focused on the daring and novelty of the garment to prove that the boundaries of acceptable men's wear were expanding. The latest trends at Palm Beach were carefully documented by trade journalists from American and European publications. Photographs are frequently printed for comparison to the illustrations to assure retailers and wholesale manufacturers of the accuracy of illustrated garments.

Traditionally, well dressed men wrapped themselves in colorful and luxurious dressing gowns in the privacy of their homes. Retailers catering to an up-scale audience including Kaskel & Kaskel, F. W. Tripler and Brooks Brothers offered dressing-gowns in heavy patterned silk or vividly colored flannels.¹³ A French flannel dressing-gown in squares of cerise turquoise and chartreuse green costing \$60.50 was considered a most suitable Christmas gift for male readers of *Vanity Fair* in 1924.¹⁴ Privately, at home, men expressed their craving for color and bold patterns in front of their family.

⁸ Murdocke. “Deauville-The Greatest Fashion Stage” *Men's Wear-Chicago Apparel Gazette* 19 Sept 1928, p. 78.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁰ *Vanity Fair* July 1924, p. 62.

¹¹ *Men's Wear* 24 February 1926, p. 80.

¹² “Men's Styles from the Playground of the Western Hemisphere,” *Man-and his clothes*, April 1927, p. 19.

¹³ *Vanity Fair* November 1926, p. 96

¹⁴ *Vanity Fair* December 1924, p. 79.

Retailers marketed dual purpose robes appropriate for bath or beach. Lord and Taylor advertised a robe of figured linen as “suitable either for the beach or for one’s bedroom” as the retailer capitalized on the new interest in beach clothing.¹⁵ An ad in *Vanity Fair* cried out: “*Extremely Smart!* These robe sets, consisting of robe, slippers and bag to match, are *the thing* for beach or locker room wear. They are equally suitable as bath or lounging robes.

An editorial selection in *Vanity Fair* featured a dual purpose “beach and dressing- gown made of blue and white striped broadcloth with loose sleeves, something like a Japanese robe. Price \$15.50.”¹⁶ Robes, either for beach or bath were commonly made in style of a wrapper or kimono style. Originally worn exclusively by the nobility in Japan, America’s ersatz nobility, businessmen, appropriated this wrap privately in their bedroom and publicly on the beach.¹⁷ The kimono style permits easy movement from sitting to standing and its loose sleeves allow air to pass through and so very appropriate for summer garments.¹⁸ Illustrated on the beach at Palm Beach is a back view of a man’s kimono robe with the dragon boldly emblazoned.

Beach robes were intended to cover a certain amount of nakedness, for warmth on a breezy day, or protection from the tropical sun.¹⁹ While clothing in the city called for quiet colors, on the beach striking and bold beach robes allowed the conservatively attired businessman to indulge his penchant for color.²⁰ Men daringly enfolded themselves in wall paper-like patterns. These flowered gowns were “exceedingly decorative and it’s all part of the awakening to the immense opportunities for a betterment”²¹ and an opportunity to bring their long buried desire for colorful clothing to be viewed and admired by the international social set. Men and women comfortably socialized in either swimwear or street wear at the new Palm Beach Bath and Tennis Club which was “destined to be one of the most important birthplaces of fashions in the US.”

What inspired these wallpaper patterned robes? The artist Raoul Dufy observed: “Paintings (by modern artists) have spilled from their frames on to our clothes and our walls.”²² A textile design by Dufy entitled *Tortoise* is a water motif in vibrant red. *Vanity Fair* illustrated a gentleman in a patterned robe of open mesh linen, lined with English broadcloth to be worn at the beach.

Although observers of the scene at Palm Beach noted that the “majority of men are of mature years” they were not conservative. Butterfly patterns were considered “very interesting beach robes ... on the sands of Palm Beach.”²³ Emile- Alain Seguy published illustrations of butterflies and insects meticulously drawn from scientific publications with the intention of making accurate images of rare butterflies and insects available to artists and thereby also available to textile and clothing manufacturers.²⁴ Beach robes expressed the flamboyant optimism of mature but not conservative men.

¹⁵ *Vanity Fair* July 1927, p. 79.

¹⁶ *Vanity Fair* June 1925, p. 122.

¹⁷ *Fashioning Kimono* ed. Annie Van Assche; “Interweavings” Annie Van Assche. V & A Exhibition 2005 p. 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7 and 9.

¹⁹ *Men’s Wear* 6/22/21 p. 66 “A Day in June at a Fashionable Seashore Resort” by Boughton.

²⁰ *MWCAG* 3/9/27, p. 77.

²¹ “Boughton,” “A day in June at a fashionable seashore resort.” *Men’s Wear* 22 June 1921, p. 66.

²² Alain-Rene Hardy. *Art Deco Textiles: the French designers* (London Thames and Hudson 2003), p. 7.

²³ “Fashionable Robes at Palm Beach” *MWCAG* 23 February 1927, p. 57.

²⁴ E A Seguy Exhibiton, <http://domin.lancs.ac.uk/info/lunews.nsf/I/01652FD5060E316380256CD1000443B0C>

Other butterfly textile designs of the period include a silk velvet from the textile collection of The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT). The butterfly transforms from a bizarre caterpillar to an elegant creature undergoing a complete metamorphosis²⁵ not unlike the thousands of men of financial standing from cities and towns across the US and abroad who appeared at Palm Beach in butterfly printed robes. Business men of the jazz age transformed from soldier to sheik and from serious office attire to robes emblazoned with butterfly motifs as symbolic of their own transformation to freedom, beauty, and relaxation.

Vivacious expressions of art and commerce converged on colorful robes with dynamic patterns like the huge and complicated design worn by the gentleman at Palm Beach 1927. From the Museum at FIT is a silk printed pattern of oversized sailboats from this period. At Palm Beach an "... atmosphere of freedom ... encourages people to dress up in just the way that pleases them most, regardless of time-worn customs elsewhere."²⁶ Confidence pervaded as peacocks of commerce braved public approbation in robes of daring colors and patterns.

Stripes historically associated with sailors on the high seas in the nineteenth century, were appropriated by men on shore for sport and leisure. In *The Devils' Cloth*, Michel Pastoreau discusses striped apparel at the seashore. As the twentieth century advanced, stripes were frequently seen on the beaches as bathing suits, leisure clothes and robes.²⁷ Stripes have become symbols of athleticism, playfulness, and happiness, all attributes peacocks of commerce want on their muchly earned vacations.²⁸

Men's Wear trade journal, 1926 wrote: "...this publication will have its staff of trained and reliable experts at Palm Beach for several weeks during the height of the season to carefully gather, analyze, and pass on to the retail men's wear merchants ...styles in practically every area of men's apparel."²⁹ That year they reported "a great increase in popularity of beach robes"³⁰ Striped flannels were an important component of robes used.

Trade journals also reported on trends. One article particularly mentioned "a fashion this is seen at many places in Florida not far from Palm Beach.... For brilliant colors there is nothing... [to compare with] ...Seminole Indians in their native dress."³¹ Appropriating colorful striped textiles was Mr. Baruch, New York banker. A man of mature years he mixed striped robe with striped top bathing suit.

Fine shirting makers like David and John Anderson Ltd capitalized on the popularity of the craze for beach robes in Florida.³² They assessed the market in Southern Florida and appraised the vogue for robes. They focused attention on the suitability of their fabrics because they were exclusive and original, with brilliant colorings fast to wash and sun. As an additional bonus, their quality textiles could withstand hard usage³³ and so ideal for these beach ensembles. David and John Anderson fabrics were available from either custom shirt maker or haberdasher.

²⁵ Butterfly Biology. <http://www.thebutterflysite.com/biology.shtml>.

²⁶ "A Variety of Fashions Seen at Southern Resorts," *Men's Wear* 9 February 1921 p. 126.

²⁷ Pastoreau, Michel. *The Devil's Cloth: A History of Stripes and Striped Fabric*. (Columbia U. Press: NY 1991)p.71-73.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.71-73.

²⁹ *Men's Wear* 20 January 1926 p.54.

³⁰ *Men's Wear* 10 March 1926 p 60.

³¹ "A Variety of Fashions Seen at Southern Resorts," *Men's Wear* 9 February 1921 p. 126.

³² *Vanity Fair* June 1928 p.16.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.16.

Retailers understood the importance of following fashionable men. Brooks Brothers and Saks Fifth Ave. were among the elite retailers who had branch stores in Palm Beach. Stuart Chase writer for *The Nation* said:

*Today men everywhere, bashfully or boldly, look at pictures...of men at Palm Beach and think of what they will wear in their muchly earned vacation next summer. Do they envy ... those fellows at Palm Beach...? Yes they do. And envy is the mother of imitation.*³⁴

Mr. Free of F.W. Tripler, a prestigious New York retailer, was an astute retailer with good taste who understood how to dress his customers in the styles and novel ideas at the forefront of fashion.³⁵ He was praised as the merchant who knew where to look for the latest fashion and was “a constant visitor to places where men’s styles are apt to be born [including] the winter season at Palm Beach.”³⁶ A Tripler ad in *Vanity Fair* February 1927 features “New beach and sport apparel [including beach coats]... for Southern and Continental travel.”³⁷ With the wearing of beach robes increasing at the luxury resort, retailers understood this fad was bound to spread to beaches in all parts of the country.³⁸

Another progressive retailer was Marshall Field and Company, Chicago. In their flagship store they opened a “Gulf Stream Shop” devoted to sub-tropical clothing for resort wear. Marshall Field’s was able to stock this unique shop with products from many of its own departments. The manager noted that even European tourists come to the Gulf Stream shop for advice. Here, the store sold more extreme garments to customers willing to take greater risks in their resort wardrobe.³⁹

The beach robe became part of the Listerine mouth wash advertising campaign. In the ad a pipe smoking gentleman wears a patterned robe draped across his body in the mode of an alluring pin up. Yet, unfortunately his bad breath repels the bathing beauties.

In conclusion, the American man of the post Great War period was described by philosopher, George Santayana as beaming with

*...a certain self-confidence and sense of mastery ... [he] is unmistakably young; ... for two reasons: one that he is chiefly occupied with his immediate environment and the other, that his reactions upon it are inwardly prompted, spontaneous, and full of vivacity and self-trust.*⁴⁰

Regardless of age, wealthy and accomplished men felt confident to express their *joie de vivre* by the choice of robes they wore on the sands. Huge wall-paper like prints, bold stripes, and brilliant colors transformed affluent businessmen into peacocks on the sands not only in Palm Beach but later in the season at beaches in other parts of the United States and Europe as well.

³⁴ Stuart Chase, “Pants vs. Plus Fours at Palm Beach,” *The Nation* 26 March 1924, p. 345.

³⁵ *Men’s Wear-Chicago Apparel Gazette*, 4 November 1925, p. 71.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³⁷ *Vanity Fair* Feb. 1927 p. 86.

³⁸ *MWCAG* 9 March 1927 p. 77.

³⁹ Marshall Field & Company Open ‘The Gulf Steam Shop’, *Men’s Wear-Chicago Apparel Gazette* 1-20-26 p. 81

⁴⁰ George Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States* (NY: The Masterworks Program 1920), pp. 109, 111.