

## Men's Trousers – Women's Skirts



*"[...] herein, was hosen sein,  
weiber sollen draussen bleiben!"*

I. V. Zingerle, Kinder- und Hausmärchen (1852)

As is well known, trousers were not only a part of clothing, in our cultural sphere they were a part that pointed beyond itself from the late Middle Ages until our century. Trousers marked the male sex, were considered *pars pro toto*. Their possession symbolised masculinity, male potency and superiority, their absence the loss of the same.

However, this identification pattern is not compelling, but is solely based in its traditional attribution. Trousers themselves have no gender.

A look at other cultures shows that trousers were often not only regarded as gender-unspecific, but even as exclusively female clothing, a fact that was noted with astonishment in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. Cultures in cold geographical zones, for example, developed an almost identical "Arctic" type of clothing for women and men, consisting of a tight-fitting sleeve jacket and long trousers. The inhabitants of the Arctic Circle, the Inuit and the Greenlanders, made their two-piece suits exclusively from animal materials, leather or fur. The "tropical" type of clothing, defined by loose garments made of fabric such as loincloth, skirt or wraparound, also did not know any differentiation according to gender. A combination of both types can be found in national costumes of Asian cultures, whereby in Southeast Asia it was not uncommon for trousers made of silk or cotton to be assigned to women and dresses to men. In certain regions of Japan and Korea, women also wore trouser-suits, and on the Indian subcontinent, long trousers called *Pajdschama* (pyjama), combined with transparent dresses, were known equally as rich women's and men's clothing.

Why are bifurcated garments in Western cultures significant for masculinity, one-piece dresses for femininity? Why were trousers considered "typically male" and skirts "typically female"

until the recent past? Why did the dress behaviour of Western European women and men differ in such a conspicuous way? These questions are explored here, and plausible answers are sought for the establishment and consolidation of the dress tradition that is still strongly anchored in our society.

Text: © Gundula Wolter. For notes see Hosen, weiblich.

Picture credit: Hosen, weiblich, Fig. 02: *Kampf um die Hose*, c. 1850/60. Landesmuseum für Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte, Münster (Kat. Nr. 6/1). Private archive.