



Passion for Fashion (94)

Tue, 8th Dec 2015 GMT/BST

Lot 31

Estimate: £1200 - £1800 + Fees

A rare boy's skeleton suit, circa 1785-95, of buff nankeen cotton, with self-covered buttons, the breeches buttoning onto the waist front and back, narrow sleeves, simple lapels, the trousers with small falls, and pockets to the sides, chest 59cm, 23in, waist 51cm, 20in (2)

In the early 18th century boys and girls alike wore dresses. Boys, when they reached the age of six, were then 'breeched' and given miniature versions of adult dress to wear. Reformers, including Rousseau in his 1762 treatise 'Emile', advocated that children should wear comfortable clothes that allowed ease of movement with no belts. Skeleton suits were commonly worn by little boys in England from the 1780s as reflected in paintings of the day, including Reynolds portrait of Viscount Althorp wearing a 'skeleton', 1786, another by Joseph Wright of Derby of the Arkwright children, dated 1790-91. Made of hard-wearing but comfortable and easy to launder cotton, they were worn with shirts with wide collars, sometimes accompanied by a pastel coloured silk sash. Trousers at the time were only worn by sailors and agricultural labourers. It was not until a century later that men generally were to adopt them as part of their everyday dress. The suit with its trousers buttoning onto the jacket was both comfortable and practical. Trousers gradually spread from younger boys to older boys and became general wear for men in the second quarter of the 19th century.

Although skeleton suits were commonly worn, very few have survived. There is a similar example in the V&A Museum of Childhood collection.