

# Sumptuary Ordinance (1703)

## Abstract

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Laws governing dress, known as sumptuary ordinances, originated in the Middle Ages and were issued by the authorities to ensure that class differences remained outwardly visible. The lower classes were forbidden from wearing certain expensive fabrics such as silk or decorating their clothing with lace or ribbons, as well as prohibited from wearing precious jewelry. The sumptuary ordinance from 1703 reproduced here comes from Schwäbisch Hall in Southern Germany and is a typical example of these attempts to prevent any obvious transgressions of established social hierarchies. Violations of such an ordinance could be punished with the confiscation of clothing and jewelry, fines, or even a prison sentence.

## Source

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### Sumptuary Ordinance

Since unfortunately! among other bad habits, the arrogance, excess and splendor in dress here, within several years, has become a habit, and gets worse almost daily, in that, as soon as a new and foreign costume appears, it is immediately imitated and copied by men and women, of high and low rank, so that there is almost no difference to be seen anymore between high and low, lords and burghers, women and common women, noble sons and daughters, apprentice craftsmen, servants and maids; however, no one dresses like the other, both in terms of the materials of gold and silver, pearls and coral, velvet, satin, taffeta, precious ribbons, lace, cloth etc. as well as the fashions, costume and type of clothing itself, with skirts and camisoles, long mourning coats, all kinds of accessories and head ornaments, precious fur caps and slippers, wraps and bodices, skirts and aprons, etc. and what other such things belong to these persons, but rather one always wants to do it before the other, which in part also originates with newlyweds, who at such a time dress above their station and afterwards retain this dress, whereby such people not only do great harm to themselves and their livelihood, but the common good is thereby desecrated; We have, therefore, in clear consideration and contemplation of this, hereby forbidden such sinful and God-displeasing behavior, and wish to earnestly and well-meaningly command all our citizens and subjects, be they high or low, secular or worldly, male or female, in these present and perilous times, in addition to putting aside all other opulent worldly things, to make an effort to be prudent in their dress and costume, and to do away with all excesses and costliness displayed up to now, both in terms of type and form as well as material, and also not to wear any kinds of strange, flimsy or unstable types and materials and short-lived styles and strange fashions as they are a useless waste of money, which is so hard to earn in the first place; much less to adorn themselves with excessively costly ornaments, patterns, necklaces, rings and the like; instead they and their kin should dress as is befitting for each person according to his or her rank, station and status, as modesty and good citizenship command, including in the special sumptuary ordinance recently published in print. With the appendix that if someone were to disobey such an officially well-meaning decree and were to act outrageously against it, displaying excesses in his clothing, the same person should be dealt with either by taking away the unseemly clothing and other items, or, according to the circumstances, by other severe punishment by fines, prison, or otherwise.

Source of the original German text: *Erneuerte Policey-Ordnung, Des Heil. Reichs-Stadt Schwäbischen*

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*Hall*, Mayer Verlag: Schwäbisch Hall, 1703, pp. 42-45. Available online:  
<http://resolver.sub.uni-goettingen.de/purl?PPN666386021>

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