25 March 1960, Volume 131, Number 3404 **SCIENCE**



SCIENCE, which is now combined with THE SCIENTIFIC MONTHLY, is published each Friday by the American Association for the Advancement of Science at National Publishing Company, Washington, D.C. The joint journal is published in the SCIENCE format. SCIENCE is indexed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*.

**Editorial and personnel-placement correspondence** should be addressed to SCIENCE, 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C. Manuscripts should be typed with double spacing and submitted in duplicate. The AAAS assumes no responsibility for the safety of manuscripts or for the opinions expressed by contributors. For detailed suggestions on the preparation of manuscripts and illustrations, see *Science* **125**, 16 (4 Jan. 1957).

**Display-advertising correspondence** should be addressed to SCIENCE, Room 740, 11 West 42 St., New York 36, N.Y.

**Change of address notification** should be sent to 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C., 4 weeks in advance. If possible, furnish an address label from a recent issue. Give both old and new addresses, including zone numbers, if any.

**Annual subscriptions:** $8.50; foreign postage, $1.50; Canadian postage, 75¢. Single copies, 35¢. Cable address: Advancesci, Washington.



# The Lab Coat as a Status Symbol

A neat, white, knee-length coat is universally recognized as the uniform of the scientist. The lab coat's primitive function as a utilitarian garment, protective against the dermolytic and vestidemolitive hazards of the laboratory, has bit by bit been replaced by its function as a status symbol. Just as we recognize a bishop by his mitre, or a burglar by his mask, we recognize a scientist by his lab coat. But in recent years the lab coat has become more than a mere workaday uniform. The soldier peels potatoes, cleans his rifle, and even fights his battles in his uniform; the modern scientist rarely works in his lab coat. When work is unavoidable, he will be found in his shirtsleeves, in a coarse brown smock, or in plastic. His lab coat, clean, pressed, possibly even starched, hangs safely behind the door, to be worn only when he is lecturing or greeting official visitors. Like spurs and shakos, the lab coat has been promoted to a new role; it is rapidly becoming, not merely the uniform, but indeed the *dress uniform* of the scientist.

Dress uniforms are worn solely for symbolic and ceremonial reasons, not for practical purposes. Nevertheless, their once-useful features are conscientiously preserved; an infantryman's sleeve buttons, or the spiked helmet of an uhlan, are examples. The lab coat is fraught with potentialities for such symbolic survivals. Detachable buttons were highly functional on garments subject to the vicissitudes of frequent vigorous laundering. The modern lab coat should of course be safely dry-cleaned, but the Chinese puzzles formerly used to hold the buttons in place might well be retained, and even elaborated into conspicuous ornaments—no longer detachable, of course. The utilitarian lab coat always bore stains characteristic of the work of its wearer. These could be symbolized by chevrons or flashes of suitable color; purple and red (hematoxylin and eosin) for the histologist; black and orange (sulfuric acid and bichromate) for the chemist; greenish yellow and scarlet (pus and blood) for the pathologist; blue and brown (ballpoint and coffee) for the statistician. Compact patterns of small holes or a bit of fringe on the cuff might be other symbols reminiscent of the days when lab coats were worn in the lab. Vertical as well as horizontal status could be shown by such insignia; undergraduates would wear unadorned white; graduate students might claim the right to a single, grey, grime-colored insigne; Ph.D's would wear the colors of their specialties; and Nobel prize-winners, like admirals-of-the-fleet and field marshals, would be privileged to blossom out in creations of their own tasteful design.

These developments cannot be pressed; they must evolve slowly, guided by tradition and respect for the past. But they should be taken seriously. Scientists have momentarily achieved a position of high prestige, but in a democratic society (as in any other) prestige without symbols is but fleeting, while symbols without prestige may endure forever.—F. E. WARBURTON, 6171 Sherbrooke West, Montreal, Canada. [Reprinted, with permission, from *The Malpighii,* the newsletter (circulation, 18) of the Malpighian Society of Montreal, Vol. 2, No. 2 (14 Jan. 1960)]