

THE 1930S WERE YEARS OF UNPRECEDENTED GLAMOUR, EXCITING FASHION AND U.S. DESIGN LEADERSHIP.

PAST PERFECT

A brief history of men's style in America. By Frank A. Schipani



Note the tan suede shoes, the ever present handkerchief and even a seasonal flower adding a touch of color to the lapel

The 1930s are most often remembered for the Great Depression and the political rumblings leading up to World War II. In spite of all this gloom, the decade was also an era of unprecedented glamour, exciting fashion and design leadership from American apparel companies as well as retailers that catered to men.

There were no 'name brand' designers then, just tailors, pattern makers, stylists, marketers and sales associates all working under the prevailing code of style: men dressed well every day and especially for evening. Hollywood films from the era are filled with men in tailored clothing, fitted beautifully to the body. (Observe how double-breasted coats did a fine job of hiding a paunch when properly tailored.) It truly was a glamorous period, making me long for the days when nightclubs headlined a big band, a place where we could go to dine, listen to ballroom or jazz music, drink and dance the night away in fabulous outfits.

The illustrations pictured here, originally featured in *Apparel Arts* magazine during the 1930s, look absolutely relevant and appropriate



more than 70 years later! Note that men wore lightweight flannel in the summer, as it draped better than cotton or linen, which were used mostly for casual wear.

So how did we get from there to here? When the war started in 1939, suppliers were severely limited to making only things that supported the war effort. To control fabric costs, for example, most companies were banned from making vests. Conservation was the name of the game and makers focused on basic garments and colors. The styles of the '40s became sedate until the '50s arrived with two distinct fashion points of view.

One was 'Ivy League-inspired': soft shoulders, high button stance and tweedy jackets married to oxford button down shirts and traditional ties, completed with saddle shoes and argyle socks. The other was 'Continental': Roman influenced square shoulders, shorter jackets

worn close to the body, with small side vents or none at all. The fabrics were untextured, and shiny mohair was popular. The pants were tapered, cuffless and worn with tonal silky socks and narrow shoes. The shirt was smooth poplin and ties were shiny, usually with designs. People now recall this as 'The Rat Pack (as in Sinatra and friends) look.' Then the '60s ushered in a British influence: bell bottoms, flower patterned shirts, giant lapels and polyester knit suits—comfortable but unfortunately ugly and tasteless.

Pierre Cardin, Ralph Lauren and Giorgio Armani were some of the first menswear designers who truly made a name for themselves. Of course, designers before and since have contributed to men's fashion in many ways, but none have influenced change quite like these gentlemen.

In 1964, Cardin introduced a longer, body-fitting jacket that

would become a standard. His model, by virtue of its silhouette, made the wearer look sexy and forced every manufacturer to come up with their own 'Cardin' model.

What both Lauren in the '60s and Armani in the '70s did was to establish a point of view that's recognized and accepted globally, each continuing to successfully evolve his collections for the modern man.

From the '60s to present day, there has been no cultural standard for dressing well, due largely to enormous social changes, in particular, our nation's broad acceptance of casual dress, which so often appears sloppy, cheap and unkempt. But when guided by a professional, one can look chic and comfortable whether in a suit or in sportswear. Just leave the sweats and sneakers for athletics!

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