American Menswear

From the Civil War to the Twenty-First Century

Daniel Delis Hill

[Contents]

American Menswear from the Civil War to the Twenty-First Century

[Preface]

Relatively few comprehensive books on the history of American menswear exist. Fashion survey texts are limited by space and consequently treat the topic only in the most general terms, usually focusing on suits and sportswear, but omitting categories such as outerwear, sleepwear, underwear, swimwear, headgear, neckwear, footwear, and accessories. One exception is the definitive *Esquire's Encyclopedia of Twentieth Century Men's Fashions* by Bill Gale and Oscar Schoeffler (1973), but the text concludes at the beginning of the 1970s, leaving a substantial gap of four decades. Even if a researcher can find a copy of that volume in a used books store, he can expect to pay a few hundred dollars for it. Equally rare is William Harlan Shaw's *American Men's Wear 1861–1982* (1982), one of the "series of theatre-related volumes published by Oracle Press"[1] primarily as a picture reference book with little substantive text. Other important texts on menswear focus on European perspectives. Farid Chenoune's *A History of Men's Fashions* (1993) is an excellent study of French and British styles with a few American pop culture references (and is also an expensive rarity when available). Vittoria de Buzzaccarini's *Elegance and Style: Two Hundred Years of Men's Fashions* (1992) covers Italian menswear into the 1960s. Maria Constantino's *Men's Fashion in the Twentieth Century* (1997) and Diana de Marly's *Fashion for Men* (1985) are both short but well-detailed histories of British menswear. Cally Blackman's *One Hundred Years of Menswear* (2009) is predominantly a pop culture picture book with captions, also with a British emphasis.

Other texts on the subject of menswear carve up the topic into categories that are hard to navigate when researching a chronology of men's dress and style. Colin McDowell's *The Man of Fashion: Peacock Males and Perfect Gentlemen* (1997) separates British men's dress into assorted garment types mixed with identity themes. Similarly, *Jocks and Nerds: Men's Style in the Twentieth Century* by Richard Martin and Harold Koda

(1989), examines the dress styles of a dozen masculine types. In 2009, Robert Bryan and the Council of Fashion Designers of America produced *American Fashion Menswear,* which is likewise divided into categories that make a chronology difficult to follow.

Thus, this book on American menswear undertakes three objectives. Foremost is the compilation of a detailed, well-illustrated chronology of men's fashion and masculine style in the United States from the Civil War era through the first decade of the twenty-first century. Second is an overview of the democratization of men's fashion by mass production, mass distribution, and mass marketing. Third is a historical and sociocultural introduction to each era with an assessment of the evolving and shifting ideas and ideals of masculinity in America during each period.

Although this study also includes an abbreviated look at American menswear in the first half of the nineteenth century, its primary focus is fashions and styles since the Civil War for several reasons. During the 1850s and 1860s, a number of innovative advances in apparel manufacturing methods, technology, distribution, and marketing converged at the cusp of the Second Industrial Revolution in America. Most important of all was the introduction of the foot treadle sewing machine of the 1850s, which revolutionized ready-to-wear manufacturing by cutting garment production time up to 90% over handsewn methods. In addition, refinements in the power loom and its conversion from water power to steam and then electricity made possible the high-speed production of a huge array of cheap woven and knit textiles to feed the growing ready-to-wear industry. Another key advance at the time was the Union Army's development of proportional tables for standardized garment sizes that were quickly adapted by civilian clothing makers, ensuring a more accurate fit for consumers.

With such an abundance of mass-produced clothing came new concepts of mass distribution and mass merchandising. In the 1850s and 1860s, large department stores were established in many U.S. cities, bringing under one roof the complete range of ready-to-wear and accessories for the entire family. At the same time, the earliest mail-order services were established, first by magazines in the 1850s and then by specialty catalog retailers soon after the war.

In tandem with the growth of department stores and mail-order businesses emerged new strategies of fashion marketing and mass media. Catalogs became profusely illustrated, some in color, with plates that showed men not only what the current styles of fashion were, but also how the clothes should fit and which accessories were appropriate for the well-dressed man. (Color Plate 1.) Similarly, retailers set up lavish window and counter displays to demonstrate the newest styles and the correct way in which to dress. In addition to the illustrated mail-order catalogs, mass distribution magazines of the time like *Godey's Lady's Book* (1830–98), *Vogue* (1892 to present), and *Harper's Bazaar* (1867 to present) often included fashion reports and illustrated style editorials on men's fashions. Also complementing the fashion guidance of catalogs and store displays was a barrage of illustrated advertising by ready-to-wear makers and retailers in magazines and newspapers, on posters and handbills, and stuffed into mailers.

Coinciding with these developments in manufacturing, commerce, and mass media was the emergence of a new form of men's fashion in the 1850s. The sack coat suit introduced from England quickly became the
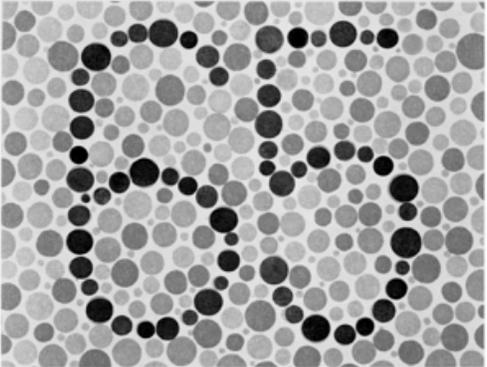
Figure 1. Since the mid-nineteenth century, American ready-to-wear makers and retailers have continually inspired, urged, and coaxed men into a fashion awareness through mass marketing. Some advertising messages served as style guides for the unsure male, others appealed to certain masculine lifestyles, and still others, such as this 1965 color ad for Mohara suits, made their point through humor. (Color-blind men would not be able to see the "65" in the green and pink dots.)

Only 1 out of 25 men is color-blind. The other 24 just dress that way.

And please don't give us that old song and dance about there not being any good colors to choose from. Haven't you seen the new J&F Mohara' suits? Pacific Mills wove the fabric for us in all the right colors for Spring '65. And we added all the right fashion details. Because J&F dates their suits. Like cars. Just look for the suits with the 1965 tag on the sleeve. Twenty-four out of twenty-five men will be able to spot them in a minute.

J&F MOHARA SUITS

ubiquitous and standardized style of masculine dress throughout America. The sack coat suit was comfortable, practical, and fashionable for all socioeconomic classes as well as easy to manufacture for ready-to-wear makers. (Color Plate 2.)

From these mid-nineteenth-century developments of ready-to-wear mass styling, mass production, and mass distribution, coupled with mass advertising and mass media, emerged a democratization of fashion across the country. Fashionable clothing was no longer solely the purview of the social or economic elite. The factory worker could dress as smartly in the most current clothing styles as the factory owner. The American male was inculcated with the notion of fashion aspiration. He learned from these many marketing channel sources about fashion cycles and style obsolescence. By the end of the 1800s, most average working men could afford at least one ready-to-wear suit for Sundays and special occasions that had been mass manufactured in America and sold through a local retailer or by mail order. Remarkably, these symbiotic principles of the American ready-to-wear industry are still the formula with the same success as 150 years ago: inspiring, urging, and coaxing men into a fashion awareness and mass consumption. (Figure 1.)

In addition to the well-illustrated chronology of menswear categories and the historical and cultural introductions to each era, this study also examines ideas and ideals of masculinity and identity as expressed in dress. As many researchers and scholars have assessed in recent decades, dress is more than simply the clothes on our backs. In *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning* (1992), Joanne B. Eicher defines dress as "an assemblage of body modifications and/or supplements displayed by a person in communicating with other human beings."[2] That communication through our choices in dress, says writer John Harvey, is the "persona we perform." "Styles of clothing carry feelings and trusts, investments, faiths and formalized fears," asserts Harvey. "Styles exert a social force, they enroll us in armies—moral armies, political armies, gendered armies, social armies."[3] And for the widely assorted armies of average American men over the past 150 years, a continuum of dress and masculine identity has expressed and demonstrated the collective persona of each generation. Key to that continuum has been conformity—a conformity to standardized tenets of behavior and conformity expressed visually in dress, which for each man and the society in which he lived gave clarity to the

meaning of masculine identity in ways beyond a mere representation of gender. The blue serge sack suit of the Victorian man communicated a masculine identity of bourgeois authoritarianism in a brotherhood of familial patriarchs. The bulky sack suit of the Edwardian man conveyed his identification with the robust leadership of America—husky Teddy Roosevelt and ponderous William Taft. The trim drape cut suits of the years between the two World Wars projected the powerful athleticism of the youthful warrior who did battle against foreign aggressors and against economic calamities. The gray flannel suit of the 1950s Ivy Leaguer reflected the gray conformity and complacency of American men in the post-World War II years. Even in our postmodern era when individuality and self-expression have prevailed in men's fashion, the rigidly padded suit of the 1960s and 1970s was a unifying identity against the frightening style melee of the Peacock Revolution. The broad-shouldered power suit of the 1980s Greed Decade proclaimed the chauvinism and success of the yuppie. And the skinny look suit of the 2000s has been an assertive differentiation of the millennial masculine identity for Gen X'ers and Gen Y'ers.

The legacy of this linearity of American men's dress and masculine identity has been commented on by every generation since Victorian times. (Figure 2.) Typical was the assessment by a contributing editor to *Printer's Ink* in 1922 who complained, "The American [male] is very conservative in dress. He hates like the deuce to look different from other men, even to look better dressed. There is a monotony about men's dress in this country that is comical."[4] However, contrary to the often-voiced complaint that men's clothing styles hardly change, regular and significant changes have obviously occurred. Sometimes the shifts evolved so glacially that only in looking back over several years was the distinction apparent to the men who had experienced it such as the sack coat phases described above; other times, change was tectonic like the startling suddenness of the 1960s youthquake that overturned comfortable, decades-old conventions of masculine style and identity such as short hair and inconspicuousness in appearance and demeanor.

Moreover, there are important reasons for focusing on *American* men's dress and identity. Not only are there significant differences in the sociopolitical meanings of masculinity between the Latin-Mediterranean and Anglo-Germanic cultures of Europe and that of pluralistic America, but we also have distinctive forms of dress and identity that are relatively meaningless elsewhere in the world. The dress and accoutrement of American cowboys, for instance, might be adaptable to the outbacks of Australia or the Argentine pampas, but in London and Paris, the look would appear like an incongruous American movie costume. Yet on the streets of Manhattan or Chicago or Los Angeles, the tribal dress of an urban cowboy would garner little if any attention. Likewise, grunge, the Seattle youth look of the early nineties, was popularized in the United States by rock bands such as Pearl Jam and Nirvana, but where the music of grunge bands achieved international fame, the look did not. Even body modifications differ, as in the case of circumcision wherein two of every three American males are circumcised for cultural, aesthetic, and hygienic reasons as compared to fewer than one in ten in the rest of the world (excluding Judeo-Islamic regions).

By contrast, some distinctive tribal styles of European subcultures

Figure 2. The common complaint that men's fashions hardly changed was used for an ad campaign in the 1950s promoting a new look, ironically, for a menswear commodity product that actually had not changed in a hundred years. Ad 1958.

Figure 3. "Advertisements more truthfully reflect the customs, manners, and ideals of a nation than any other one thing," noted a marketing trade journal in 1927. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the pluralism of American masculinity was reflected in targeted niche marketing such as the Dockers "Wear the Pants" campaign of 2009–10. The "call of manhood" messages included having to "endure strange and humiliating rites of passage...like wearing skinny jeans" for heterosexuals, and dressing to "attract the touches of friends, boyfriends, and even the occasional stranger" for gay men. Left ad for *GQ*; right version for *Out*.

that must be included in world (or EuroAmerican) fashion histories are irrelevant in this work. The dress of England's Teddy boys in the 1950s and the look of the *zazous* of France in the 1940s were peculiar to those times and places, and had no impact on American fashions. And even when the styles of European subcultures were appropriated by Americans, they were transformed into something different from the original context. The mods of England, for example, were impeccably groomed and custom-suited teens of the early 1960s, but with the "British invasion" of the Beatles, Rolling Stones, and the Who, mod instead became for American youth a Peacock Revolution of sexualized, flamboyant fashions and long hair. Similarly, the dress of the British punks of the mid-1970s emerged as a protest look (and abrasive, confrontational attitude) of lower-working-class teenagers against the restrictive British class system. But in America, the punk look was stylized and homogenized by urban, middle-class teens solely as a rebellious look to shock parents and other authority figures, without the abusive behavior of their English counterparts.

To illustrate both the historical clothing and the way in which masculine identity was visually communicated in society, this study has relied extensively on period images from popular culture, especially advertising. In 1927, an American marketing trade journal asserted, "Advertisements more truthfully reflect the customs, manners, and ideals of a nation than

any other one thing."[5] (Figure 3.) Since the earliest development of advertising as an industry in the mid-nineteenth century, marketers have understood how best to give customers what they wanted. For ready-to-wear makers, that meant providing images and props in illustrations with which the American male consumer could readily identify. The masculine identities of men as husbands, fathers, breadwinners, protectors of home and hearth, sportsmen, and (heterosexual) lovers were commonly represented in the artwork and photos of magazine and newspaper ads, and later in the new media of movies, television, and the Internet. The Victorian man might just as easily recognize himself in many of the images of manly roles—and clothing—depicted in the ads and TV commercials of the new millennium as those of his own time.
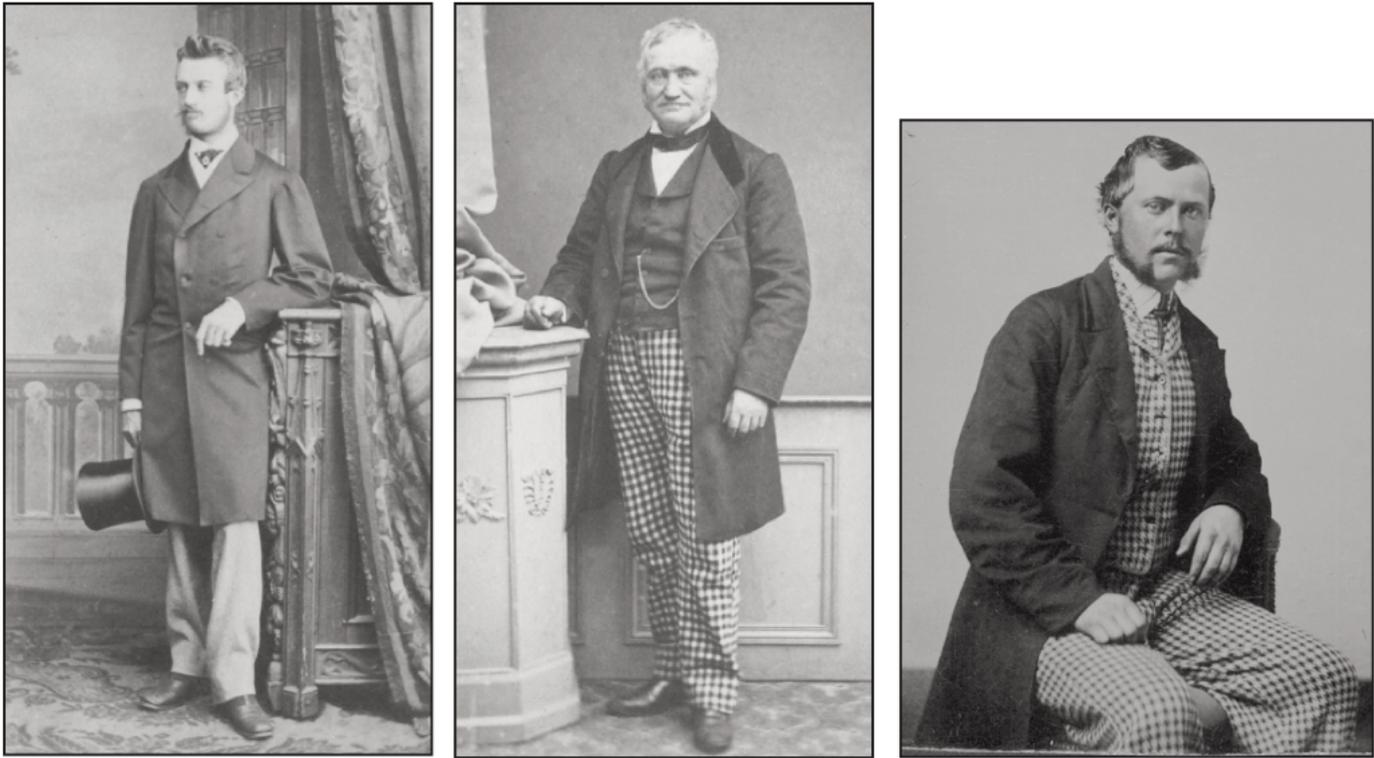
Figure 2-18. The narrow, boxy frock coat called a Prince Albert was worn with a vest and trousers of contrasting colors and patterns. It was primarily a semi-dress suit worn only in daytime as business attire for executives and professional men or for social events. Photos, c. 1860–75.

in America were maintained. Those who could afford to keep up with the changing subtleties of men's fashion could also be informed of the social conventions of dress whether through their tailors or the many reports in the society columns of newspapers and gazettes. Men of the bourgeoisie knew, for example, never to wear a dress coat in daytime and never to wear a frock coat to an evening event. Even the finer points of etiquette governed not only what and how clothing was worn but also the decorum attached to the garment. For instance, among the more complex accouterments of masculine dress were hats. Choosing from among the vast array of shapes, textures, and colors for the correct accompaniment to a suit could be perplexing enough without the added uncertainty of when to remove a hat and what to do with it once in hand. Manipulating a hat could be a telltale sign of a man's social finesse or lack of polish, and a hat faux pas could be a scorching embarrassment for the socially ambitious.

For the masses, fashion became more democratized through mass production and mass distribution of ready-to-wear. The exigencies of the Civil War had prompted rapid improvements in the machinery and methods of clothing mass production, and distribution became broader and ever more expedient to market. One of the most significant steps in improving the quality of ready-to-wear was ensuring a proper fit. As noted in chapter 1, the Union Army collected the measurements of over a million soldiers from which proportional tables were compiled representing the typical form and build of the American male. From these statistics developed the first attempts at standardized sizes. Similarly, garment con-
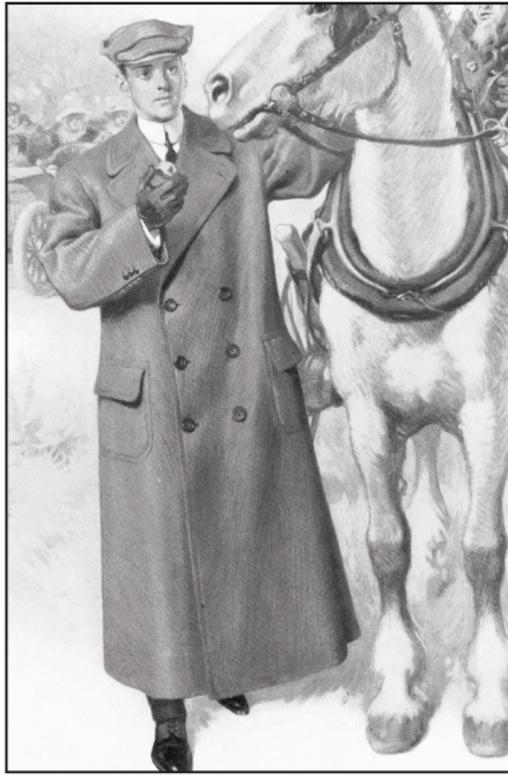
Figure 3-22. The Edwardian coat is notably defined by its massive bulk and capacious, tent-like shape irrespective of length. Ankle-sweeping hemlines typified most outwear of the era although businessmen preferred the knee-length chesterfield, and commuters often opted for fingertip-length topcoats. Left to right: chesterfield, greatcoat, overcoat with military collar, and short topcoat from Hart Shaffner and Marx catalogs 1907–1909.

from "nine to ten inches more than one-half the wearer's height."[33] For a man of six-foot height, the coat length was about forty-four to forty-eight inches long. However, the details that differentiated a chesterfield from a Newbury, Newmarket, Berkeley, Blantyre, Gatwick, or any of the other dozens of styles of coats featured in tailor's guidebooks or menswear catalogs are far less precise. All of these forms of outerwear could be made with or without velvet collars, flap pockets, fly fronts, sleeve buttons, skirt vents, or any number of similar details. Hence, the descriptions and illustrations herein are based on those varieties where editorials or catalog copy is exact.

In general, Edwardian men's outerwear came in three lengths—fingertip, knee-length, and ankle-sweeping. Most styles were massive and shapeless. The capacious, tent-like cuts were necessary to adequately cover the padded bulkiness of suit jackets. (Figure 3-22.)

The chesterfield was regarded as the most versatile overcoat of the era—"the only overcoat that can appropriately be worn on every occasion...suitable for morning, afternoon or evening wear."[34] It was cut to hang loosely from the shoulders and extend to either just below the knees or, for younger men, almost to the ankles. The velvet collar that distinguishes most chesterfields was attached to silk-faced lapels.

Coats that were labeled ulsters usually featured a half-belt in the back or sometimes even a wide belt all around. Even with the belt treatments,

suits in 1920 and revolutionized both men's and women's swimwear designs. During the early 1920s, the length of the trunks gradually shortened, armholes and tank scoopnecks became deeper, and the backs and sides were pierced with wide openings that created thin straps of material. (Figure 4-35.) For two-piece models, trunks were secured with belts of white canvas or sometimes of multicolored horizontal stripes. The pierced swimsuits were popularly called "crab backs" because the cutouts and straps resembled the silhouette of a crab.

However, for the mature man, or the less athletically built man, or the more modest young man, swimsuits of longer, loose-fitting woven flannel trunks and jersey knit tops of assorted color combinations were also common.

The sleek fit of the new knit swimwear was especially appreciated by
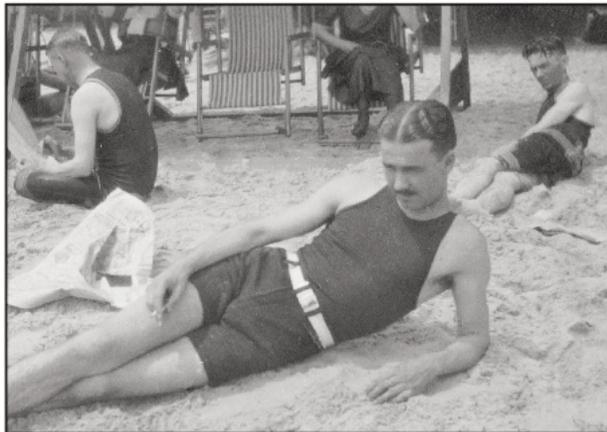

Figure 4-35. Between the end of World War I and the end of the 1920s, men's swimwear dramatically changed from a styleless commodity garment to an ever briefer fashion item. Knit and woven versions were produced in riotous colors and patterns never seen on beaches or poolside before. New methods of knitting technologies made swimwear more formfitting and revealing. More and more skin was exposed. At the resorts, some men began to appear in trunks only without the usual tank or crab back tops. Left, photo, c. 1920; right, Jantzen ad, 1929.

Shu-Lok fastener, 1957

"Snap-Happy Preps" with changeable trim, 1957
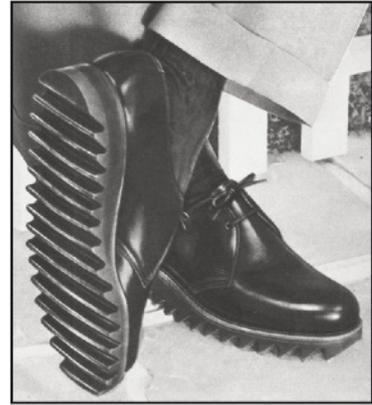
Ripple sole oxfords, 1957

Saddle oxford, 1954

Suede chukka boot, 1956

Australian bush boot, 1956

Open-front buckle, 1958

Continental look slip-ons, 1958

Figure 6-33. The heavy, rounded shoes of the postwar Bold Look gradually evolved into the trim, sleek Continental styles of the late 1950s. Among the nontraditional shoes of the era were styles engineered with lock-fastener tongues, changeable trim, and springy ripple soles. The Australian bush boot, chukkas, and other low boot styles were hugely popular with young men in the second half of the decade, setting a boot trend that would extend through the next decade.

deeply angled rubber ridges that bent backward as the wearer stepped forward. In 1956, the Melbourne Olympics inspired a fad for the Australian bush boot made with elastic insets at the sides. With the popularity of the bush boot came a resurgence in the suede chukka boots as well as monk-front "jodhpurs" and other forms of low jeans boots. The bush boot is often credited with initiating the boot frenzy of the next decade.

The variety of jewelry for men greatly diminished in the conservative postwar years. Wristwatches, wedding bands, and sets of matching tie clips and cuff links were the most acceptable jewelry for the traditionalist American man. Mass-merchandise catalogs of the 1950s still offered a few signet rings, but gone were the pages of pocket watches, key and watch chains, charms, shirt studs, tie stick pins, and collar pins.

For both the Ivy Leaguer and the Continental dresser, the newest jewelry flash was any of the new expansion bands for wristwatches. A Montgomery Ward's catalog suggested that men could "dress up that old watch with a smart new expansion band...All are designed to fit snugly, yet comfortably on any man's wrist, look flatteringly trim and tailored. Moreover, they are so convenient to wear—easy to put on and remove, no unfasten-
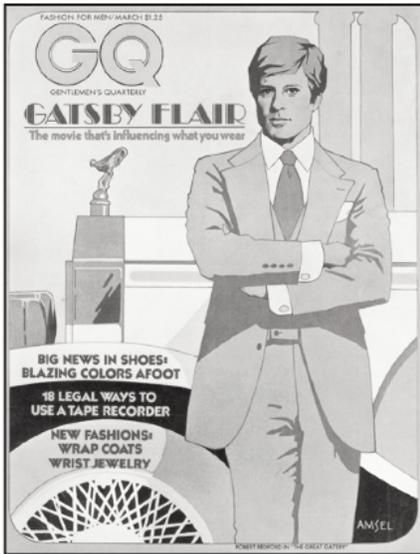
Figure 7-19. The shaped look of the English drape cut from the 1930s was revisited in a number of Hollywood movies in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Gatsby look on the cover of *GQ*, 1974.

hemlines disappeared and legs widened, often finished with deep cuffs. The 100% machine washable polyester fabrics seemed barely to bend, disguising the body beneath. Permanent creases were knife-edge sharp. (Figure 7-18.)

In 1976, *GQ* examined the evolution of suitings thus far in the decade. "The past few years have seen somewhat 'good taste' cautiously offset by literally hand-me-down ideas about recycled clothes. The first few years had been " a 'resting period'—a time when innovation was conspicuously discreet and new design talents who came to the fore did so on the overly secure foundation of period revivalism."[35] These revivalisms were especially influenced by Hollywood. The engineered, hard-lapel suits that dominated much of the 1970s received their first inspiration from the costumes worn by Warren Beatty in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). As *Men's Wear* recognized in 1969, the "traditionalists revisit the '30s" for their suit design inspiration.[36] Other hit movies of the time, such as *Cabaret* (1972), *The Sting* (1973), and especially *The Great Gatsby* (1974), revisited the vintage suits of the 1920s and 1930s, adapting the English drape cut silhouette to modern synthetic fabrics and engineered constructions. (Figure 7-19.) The peacock influence endured in the color palettes of men's suiting. With the new rage of polyester double knits, suit fabrics were made in a wealth of rich colors and patterns.

Figure 7-20. One of the most popular forms of the casual, unconstructed suit styles of the early 1970s was the vest suit. Early versions were worn belted, but, by 1972, vest tops were more commonly worn open. Vest suit from Celanese, 1971.

Figure 7-21. The knicker suit was among the historical costume revivals that appeared at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s. New interpretations were narrower than the original plus fours and were matched with a padded, shaped jacket. Knicker suit from Clubman, 1970.

jeans, rolled trouser cuffs, shirts buttoned up without neckties, and even berets. What emerges is a relaxed and spontaneous way of dressing.[64]

And that *unstudied* sense of style and spontaneity that *Esquire* noted was the hallmark of the American male's casual dress made all the easier by the vast array of mass marketed sportswear styles from which to choose.

Because of the broad pluralism of sportswear, many ready-to-wear makers and retailers increasingly focused their merchandising strategies on niche marketing, particularly by age groups. The Gap, Benetton, Abercrombie and Fitch, Banana Republic, and other similar chains provided a safer, more generalized look for young men in the 18–24 age demographic. (Figure 8-29.) Street looks were distilled and tamed: baggy jeans were given fake street looks with acid- and stone-washed finishes; "worn" T-shirts bore non-controversial captions and images; khaki cargo shorts and pants were standard commodities; board shorts changed prints year-to-year but kept the oversized fit. For thirty-something (and up) men, the heirs to the old haberdasheries of yore were Bachrach's, L.L. Bean, Eddie Bauer, and the sedate men's shops within department stores. There a standardized and predictable inventory of relaxed-fit jeans and chinos, Bermuda shorts, knit polos and rugbies, and tartan shirts were available in mix-and-match separates collections that did not require much style-consciousness to coordinate.

Despite the balkanized niche marketing and generic merchandising of sportswear, many trend currents were universally adopted by designers and ready-to-wear makers. In the 1980s, the big look of power suits translated into big shoulders, big textile patterns, and big details in sportswear. The shoulders of shirts and sweaters were padded; logo sweatshirts were cut fuller and with bigger sleeves; pockets were oversized and given larger dimensions with pleats and bellows; pegged trousers were made fuller through the hips with multiple pleats and wider through legs.

Another trend for a few years in the mid-1980s was the *Miami Vice* look inspired by the TV crime drama. Unconstructed sports jackets in sherbet colors were worn with the sleeves pushed up to the elbows. Underneath, equally colorful crewneck T-shirts without screenprints or collarless button front shirts in textured linen and cotton blends complemented or contrasted with the jackets. Poplin or cotton duck pants were in a complementary third color or neutral. Deck shoes without socks and big, dark sunglasses completed the look.

Among the most important foreign influences on American sportswear were the Italians. By the 1980s, the labels of Armani, Versace, Zegna, Ferré, Valentino, and Missoni among others were recognized in America as high style and superior quality. To appeal to the American market, Italian designers
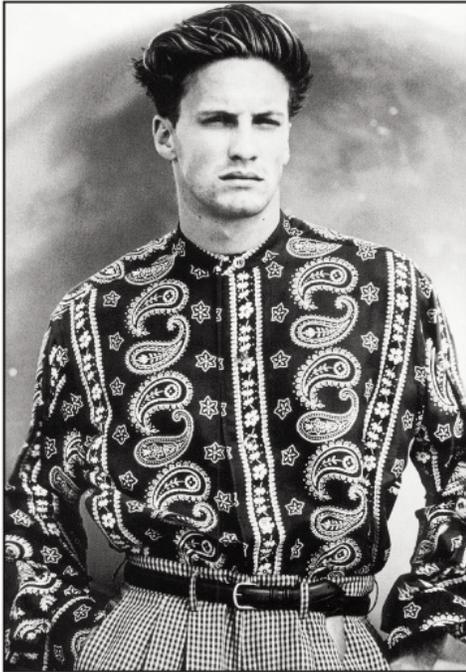

Figure 8-30. Gianni Versace's bold and dramatic use of vividly colored prints and pattern mixing influenced even his archrival, classicist Giorgio Armani. Top, paisley print shirt and checked trousers by Armani, 1993; bottom, scarf print shirt by Versace, 1992.