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Photographs by Erill Fritz

Bespoke Menswear
Tailoring for Gentlemen



*h.f.*fullmann

Introduction

Bespoke tailoring is ... a garment made by hand, using needle, thread, shears, and an iron, and involving several fittings.

What is bespoke menswear?

Buying an item of handsewn, bespoke clothing can mean one of two things: opting for pure luxury or making a conscious statement about reducing a wardrobe to bare essentials. There are billionaires who spend very little money on clothes and wear only poorly fitting, ready-made suits, while people who are as poor as church mice may possess just two or three tailored suits but wear them for decades.

Bespoke tailoring is expensive, in the sense that most people cannot normally afford it—but it is comparable in price to other handmade products. How much would you pay for a custom-made window frame in wood? What would a handmade concert guitar cost? What would be the price of a new iron garden gate worked by hand? Is a bespoke suit—cut from the finest cloth and handsewn—expensive just because a ready-made suit would cost perhaps a tenth as much? How can you put a value on a garment that has been made just for you?

If you have to tell someone why a handsewn buttonhole is beautiful, they should be buying their clothes ready-made. There are no rational arguments for choosing handmade clothes; at least, not when handmade clothes are compared with any good industrial product. If a ready-made suit costs Euros 500 (say US\$ 700) and a tailored suit costs Euros 5,000—ten times as much—the higher price cannot be justified by saying the quality is ten times better. If properly looked after, a ready-made suit of average quality may last a long time; it may also fit passably well. It might even look good. There are people, however, who have no problem with paying ten times as much for a bespoke suit and this book is an attempt to explain why. Not by arguing the point rationally, but instead by showing how much skill and craftsmanship goes into the manufacture of handmade clothes. You may enjoy such artistry but still prefer to stick to buying other kinds of clothes; or your curiosity may be aroused and you may even find yourself so enthused that you have to try bespoke tailoring for yourself.

The death knell for handmade bespoke tailoring has been sounding for decades—an extensive range of ready-made suits has been available since the 1920s. These days, that range is considerably wider still and, thanks to manufacturing in countries where wages are extremely low, considerably more affordable. That said, 90 years ago, a man would expect the highest quality from his tailor. Ready-made was fine if you couldn't afford anything else or if you needed clothes in a hurry. Nowadays, however, for most people handmade clothing is curiosity known only by repute, or from films, and people's understanding of bespoke tailoring is minimal, although the desire to know more about it is sometimes greater. This book has two goals: to help correct that lack of knowledge and to inspire such curiosity.



Three countries, three tailoring traditions

Great Britain is rightly considered the home of gentleman's tailoring; between the end of the 19th century and the 1920s, British tailors developed basic forms that still make up the backbone of the male wardrobe to this day. The high quality of cloth from Yorkshire and Scotland also contributed to the renown of British tailoring, which remained the epitome of elegance, solidity, and style into the 1960s. Every other country in the world also had its tailoring traditions, however, as the well-heeled who did not travel to London to order clothes would patronize local suppliers instead. While such suppliers could obtain the famed British fabrics, they used the local cutting traditions from their own countries to shape the clothes. However—and this is what makes classifying regional styles so difficult—they always did so according to the tastes of the client. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some basic lines, although these are becoming more and more blurred nowadays. This is partly the result of world travel and people's greater mobility—and the loss of regional identity that this entails—as well as being partly connected with the tidal wave of images in the modern media, making every fashionable trend accessible around the world immediately. A British client can order locally whatever he has seen in an Italian tailor's store window while on a city break to Milan, or in a magazine chanced upon at the airport in New York.

The British line

A high waistband, flared coat-tails, and a clear shoulder-line that falls gently, are considered typically British features. A somewhat heavier lining is traditionally selected, as many British tailors recommend a shaped, slightly curved chest. The armhole is seated relatively high but does not affect comfort. The sleeve is cut close to the arm and narrows toward the wrist. The pants are cut rather more generously behind so as not to constrict, even when climbing stairs or sitting. The leg opening is narrower than in Germany and the length less generous. These are just rules of thumb and may be ignored entirely by tailor and client alike. The detailing is what makes British tailoring easier to identify: the buttonhole in the lapel is made considerably longer than on the Continent and a plain buttonhole is generally preferred over a keyhole buttonhole. Pocket flaps are also somewhat larger and the lining on the pants is usually more modest: knee-padding is not standard procedure, for example. Pants are also often styled for suspenders, i.e. with a high cut and waistband that is adjustable at the back or the side.

The Italian line

It is just as hard to pin down a typical Italian line as it is to pin down a typical Italian; both can be elusive. It is more a matter of varying regional sartorial traditions, although these are becoming less important. However, the main differences between the tailoring of the north, from workshops in Milan or Bologna for example, and ateliers in Rome, Naples, or Palermo, remain as significant as ever. Tailoring in the north is extremely "English": sports





The workshop owned by Massimo (on the left in the picture) and Lorenzo Cifonelli is located a stone's throw from the Champs-Élysées; there is a world of difference between their atelier and the commercial premises on the street.

Cifonelli

Parisian bespoke tailors with Roman roots who have invented their own complete look.

The Rue Marbeuf in Paris is a small side street off the Champs-Élysées. Any fan of classic shoemaking will know it as the bespoke shoemaker Berluti has his store here, but no. 31 is also of interest for fans of bespoke tailoring since this little alley is also home to Cifonelli, one of the best tailor's in Paris. The name is Italian, however, and the roots of the company lie in Rome, where Giuseppe Cifonelli opened a tailor's store in 1880. The Parisian branch was founded by his son Arturo in the 1920s and Giuseppe's nephew Adriano took over the business in 1972. The traditions of this sartorial dynasty are now being continued by Adriano's son Lorenzo and his cousin Massimo. They credit their grandfather Arturo with having developed a special kind of shoulder seam and forward-cut sleeve fitting. The so-called "Cifonelli shoulder" allows for maximum freedom of movement with a very high armhole and a tightly curved chest. Karl Lagerfeld is supposed to have remarked that he could recognize one from a distance of a hundred meters. Even though both Cifonellis would concede that the cut causes them occasional problems, they have loyally retained the look created by their grandfather—and for good reason, as their clients seem to like it. These include many celebrities, although exactly who is not revealed; names are only released after the death of the individual in question—we now know that Italian actors Lino Ventura and Marcello Mastroianni commissioned garments here, as did President François Mitterand. It is a Paris institution with a global fanbase.

Types of fiber

Wool

The terms “wool” and “suit” have been paired together for centuries, and to this day there is no other material for suits, pants, or overcoats that can match the shape retention, elasticity, and robustness of wool.

Cashmere

Cashmere is the epitome of a luxury fabric, with the best-quality grades coming from Mongolia. Unlike sheep’s wool, the soft belly hair of the cashmere goat is not shorn, but is carefully combed out.

Vicuña

Vicuña is made from the hair of a species of South American camel. There are very few of the animals left and the raw material is thus very rare and also very difficult to obtain—the price of vicuña can be astronomical.

Cotton

Cotton is especially pleasant to wear in summer, but it crumples and crinkles easily, and quickly loses its shape. If you don’t mind that, you’ll do well with a suit made from this plant fiber.

Wool and synthetic blend

A small proportion of synthetic yarn in a light wool can increase its shape retention. This is only really necessary in hot and humid climates; blended fibers are rarely used elsewhere.

Cotton and synthetic blend

Synthetic fibers are more than frowned upon by fans of handmade clothing, but as with woolens, a small amount of synthetic fiber added to cotton can also help a suit to keep its shape in humid conditions.

Linen

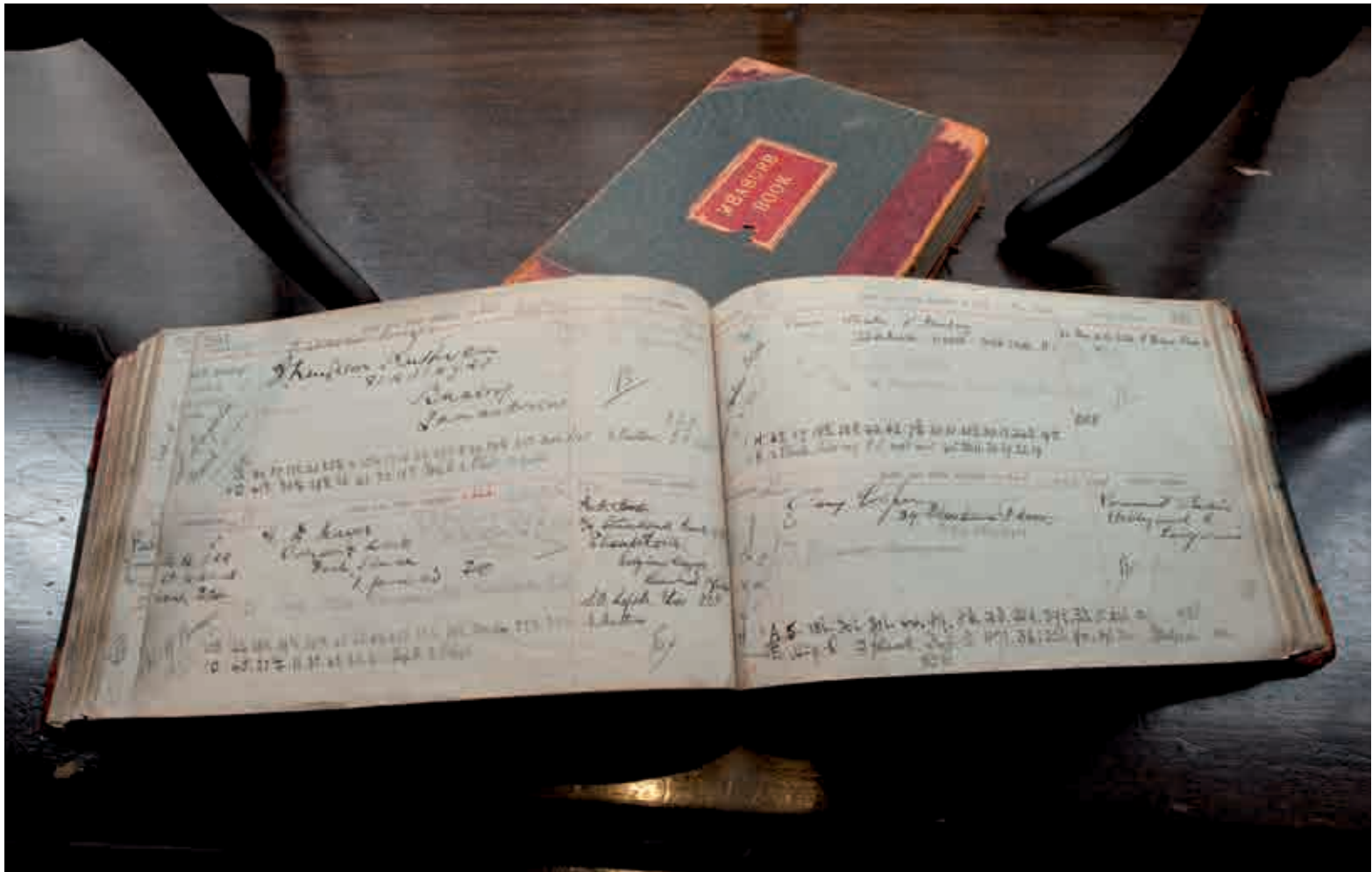
Linen is made from the fibers of the flax plant. It is famous for crumpling, although this lessens over time with better grades of linen. Once the creases have been removed, the linen look is classic.

Wool and silk

Wool and silk yarns can be blended in different ways to create quite different fabrics. The silk element is sometimes just a decorative thread, such as in a check; at other times it can determine the character of the entire fabric.

Silk

Silk only returned to gentlemen’s tailoring after World War II. It was first used for evening wear and then later as a material for suits and sports coats.



The history of the cutting system

The measurements and details of clients were recorded in weighty account books. The volumes held at ANDERSON & SHEPPARD contain the names of several gentlemen of historical importance.

The first manuals for tailors appeared in the 16th century and were initially concerned with cutting techniques; they contained no specific instructions for making up garments or the art of cutting to shape. The oldest relevant document of this kind dates back to H. Niedermayr the Younger and was written between 1544 and 1568. The Spanish *Libro de geometría práctica y traça* by Juan de Alcega from 1580 and the French *Le Tailleur Sincère* by Le Sieur Benoist Boullay from 1791 are both purely collections of cuts.

Christophoro Serrano's *Geometría del arte de vestir*, which appeared in 1619, is deemed to be the earliest systematic approach to the difficulties posed by the drawing up of cutting plans, but most tailors took no notice of it and continued with their methods of trial and error. Cuts that had proved their worth were used again and again, with a greater or lesser degree of success. The length and width of an already existing item of clothing would be measured using strips of paper or threads with the units indicated as marks or knots. Tailors were not yet able to make an individual cut from circumference measurements—such as the chest—to accommodate the body's three-dimensional shape. Paintings and original garments that survive from the 17th and 18th centuries nonetheless demonstrate that a method based on measurement by eye, experience, and estimation could certainly produce very pleasing results; the artisanal techniques of the tailor were sufficient for the fashion of the time.

Chapter 7

Nicolas Venturini examines the fit of a shirt sample on a new client. It is made of neutral fabric; the actual item will be made later.

The bespoke shirt

The shirt is worn closer to the body than any other item of clothing that is tailored to fit. Strictly speaking, the shirt is the only item of clothing that is tailored to the body, as it is often worn against the skin with no undershirt. How close to the body it is worn is less important—the fabric can be felt directly on the skin in any case, only more so if the shirt is tight-fitting. For this reason, genuine bespoke shirtmakers, i.e. craftsmen who make a shirt from an individual pattern in their own workshops, always work from fittings. The fabric selected for the shirt is not used for the test fitting, however, a sample shirt is sewn first from cheaper spare cloth or from linen.

The majority of so-called bespoke shirts are made in factories, in other words, they are made-to-measure shirts. This is not a problem in itself, although there is a significant difference between the made-to-measure and bespoke versions, and learning to appreciate this difference is a particular pleasure. An authentic shirtmaker will also allow for any idiosyncrasies of the physique, such as a hanging shoulder on one side (which is very common) or a stooped posture. He will seek to eliminate or at least minimize the creases that such variations in the figure would otherwise cause, without—unlike a suit tailor—having recourse to the use of lining or padding—he can only work “from the cut.” A made-to-measure shirt can, in theory, be adapted to any quirks of the figure, although many retailers do not notice such deviations from the norm or have no idea how they might be dealt with. An artisan shirtmaker can also offer maximum freedom of choice in collar shape: the collar can be cut to size on the sample or its outline can be drawn in with pen. While made-to-measure providers may often provide a very large range of collar shapes from which to choose, it is not possible to select a shape that is completely individual.

How much sewing by hand is required for a bespoke shirt depends largely on the place in which it is made. In Italy, you can expect handsewn buttonholes at the very least, and the sleeves, shoulder yoke, collar, and armholes are often also stitched manually. Paris workshops also often work by hand, but in London it is extremely rare, even with the most famous suppliers; they cut out by hand but that’s where it ends. “Handmade” in London means cut out manually and sewn on a machine by a seamstress. If you have a taste for Italian made-to-measure shirts and are looking for a London workshop to make up some unique pieces for you, make exacting enquiries about the techniques they use, otherwise your bespoke shirt may ultimately be more factory-made than the ready-to-wear or made-to-measure ones you are used to wearing; sample shirts are not always considered necessary in the UK, for example. Make enquiries about a company’s working practices beforehand to avoid disappointment.

The effect of the collar

If a shirt is worn with a suit or sports coat, only part of it is seen—the majority of the shirt is hidden. The collar, a small part of the shirtfront, and an inch of cuff are all that are visible. Of these, the collar is without doubt the most noticeable as it is closest to the face, so its shape must be selected carefully. Fashion is only a secondary consideration, as it rarely produces collar shapes that are equally flattering to every shape of face. The harmonious interplay between collar and face can have a very positive effect on an individual's appearance. A round face will not look any thinner above a large collar and a long neck will not be shortened by a high collar, but if you stick to collar solutions that make the best of the hand—or rather, neck—that you have been dealt, this is all to the good. The most important thing is to be aware of the effect that each different collar has: if intuition and taste eventually take you in a different direction, then at least it will be with full knowledge of the possible alternatives.

One point that should be considered before looking more closely at the effect of the collar is that the face is, of course, a part of the body, although only a very small part. Nevertheless, we generally only look at our head when we look in the mirror. A rather obvious point, but it is one that should be mentioned. However, to judge the full effect of a collar, we should view ourselves from head to toe and from all sides. Spacious fitting rooms with triple full-size mirrors are provided in bespoke tailors' and shirtmakers' stores for just this purpose, although ready-to-wear providers rarely provide such an opportunity for sizing ourselves up critically. As we go about our daily lives our bodies are seen in their entirety by other people, so mirrors that only show a part of the body are hardly worth bothering to look in. A collar that seems far too large when inspected at close quarters in a tiny shaving mirror may shrink to entirely acceptable proportions when viewed by a third party. It is therefore not exclusively a matter of the width and height of the collar in relation to the neck and head, but rather its relationship to the whole body. But what is a well-proportioned collar?

The secret of a good bespoke tailor or shirtmaker resides in their skill in emphasizing the good points of a figure and hiding any slight imperfections, thus creating a harmoniously balanced appearance. This trick is achieved by reducing the appearance of any part of the body that is too wide, large, or long, enhancing the appearance of any narrow areas, and lengthening those that are too short. This is achieved by using neighboring areas as a counterbalance: a short torso appears to be extended by placing the waistband of the pants on the hips; a long torso is made to look shorter if the waistband sits higher up the waist. Wide hips can be offset by giving the chest and shoulders a little more width than usual. A relatively short coat or a high waist can make short arms seem longer.

Bespoke shirtmakers offer a range of collar shapes, such as these at TURNBULL & ASSER. However, only a genuine linen tailor can make a collar that suits a client's face and personality perfectly.





ALUMO's idyllic Swiss surroundings match the style of production. The weaving mill produces environmentally friendly, sustainable goods. The "finest Swiss cotton" is green.

Swiss fabrics by ALUMO

It is a trade secret that the most exquisite shirt fabrics are made in Switzerland. If in doubt, just ask—but be sure to ask the best shirtmaker's.

The top grade of cotton for fabrics is extra-long staple cotton made from Egyptian fibers. The warp and weft of this cloth—the threads running down and across the fabric—are made from twisted thread. "Twisting" means that two or more lengths of yarn are wrapped together under tension to make a single thread. The way a fabric has been colored is also an important issue—in the case of yarn used to make high-quality goods, a light-blue shirt, for example, is woven from light-blue yarn while a pattern contains several different shades of yarn. This makes the fabric colorfast, even where it is subject to considerable wear: cheap shirts lose their color at the edges.

The quality of fabrics can be described, but it is much easier to tell the difference between good and very good material by touch. Even someone who is not familiar with textiles will notice the difference immediately when comparing fabrics by touching and holding them. A wide range of different weaves is available, catering for all current fashion trends. Poplin, batiste, or voile are a good choice for fine business shirts, end-on-end or herringbone suit a blazer or sports coat, Oxford or twill for corduroy pants or jeans. Top-quality shirt fabrics not only score highly with their silky, soft feel and refined sheen, they also shrink very little and last for years. They become softer with every wash and feel even better with time.

Glossary

B

Balance The proportional relationship between the length of the front and the length of the back of a garment when worn. A person with a rounded back requires more length in the rear section of a garment, for example.

Balance tape A second tape measure with which the tailor checks the customer's stance, such as for a stooped posture.

Basic pattern A garment made up in one of the usual ready-to-wear sizes. A made-to-measure client will try this on and any alterations that may be required are noted.

Basting Layers of fabric are temporarily stitched together with basting stitches, usually with white cotton thread. One or more layers of cloth can be basted loosely together with a double basting thread or attached to the lining. The particular advantage of this is that where a number of layers are attached, such as at the armhole, they all stay soft and flexible. Before working on the front section of a garment, a tailor will connect the outer fabric with the lining using ordinary basting stitches.

Belt loop A loop of material through which the belt is threaded to keep the belt in position.

Bespoke Individually tailored, also known as "custom tailoring."

Blazer A double-breasted gentleman's jacket in dark blue with gold buttons, in a style borrowed from naval uniform; not unlike a single-breasted club jacket.

Braid A strip of silk on the pants outseam. A single strip of braid is appropriate for a tuxedo, a double strip for tailcoat pants.

Breast welt pocket The classic pattern for a breast pocket, sometimes also found with a curved shape.

Breeches Also known as riding pants.

Buffalo horn Material for buttons on suits and sports coats.

C

Canvas To give a coat or jacket a lasting shape around the chest and lapel, the outer fabric is often lined with a canvas that is generally woven from linen. In handmade garments and top-quality made-to-measure wear, the canvas is sewn to the outer fabric and not, as is the case with industrial manufacturing techniques, simply fused to it. Sewing in the canvas is known as felling.

Club jacket A jacket that was originally worn as a smart-casual outfit in sports clubs. Either in dark blue or the club colors, sometimes also in stripes.

Collar The part of a jacket or coat that covers the neck. The collar is attached to the neckline and consists of an upper and lower collar. The collar is separated from the lapel by the crochet seam.

Crochet seam The seam between the collar and the lapel, also known as the gorge seam.

Cross seam Connects the front and back sections of the pants. Double-stitched.

Cuff (sleeve) A second layer of fabric at the end of the sleeve that looks as though it has been turned over.

Cuff (pants) A folded seam at the end of a pant leg that resembles a turned-up edge. A sporty detail that is never used for the pants of a morning coat, tuxedo, or tailcoat.

Cutter A bespoke tailor who works from measurements to make a cutting pattern for a customer before transferring this to the fabric and cutting it out.

D

Dart Used to model or three-dimensionally shape a garment by drawing or holding in the fabric, as with a chest dart in a coat, for example.

Decatizing Removing from fabrics any sheen that may have unintentionally been acquired during ironing, etc.

Double-breasted A jacket with two rows of buttons, usually of three buttons each. The top two buttons do not do up and are merely decorative. A double-breasted jacket should always be done up when the wearer is standing, otherwise it will gape open and spoil the overall look of the suit.

F

Felling Folding a piece of fabric over on itself and sewing it to the layer of fabric beneath with stitches that are as small and invisible as possible; a lining can be felled, for example.

Finishing The refinement process undergone by a fabric after weaving, which gives it a sheen and a nice feel.

Fishtail An English term for the tail of a shirt that has been specially cut for suspenders.

Fitting A test fit of an unfinished garment. A tailor will fit a suit twice for new clients, and then subsequently only once.

Flap pocket A fold of material topping a pocket in some garments.

G

Gilet French term for a vest; also in common use in Austria and Switzerland.

Glen check A colored (usually blue or red) over-check on a Glen Urquhart check.

H

Hacking jacket Actually a riding jacket, from the verb “to hack,” meaning to ride. Typical features are a close fit, a high waist, a long back vent, and angled pocket flaps. The hacking jacket is a forerunner of the modern sports coat.

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