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Dressing by-the-Book: The Significance of the Sample Book in the Marketing of American Men's Apparel 1925-1930

by
Diane Maglio

Dressing by-the-book, or using illustrated and swatched sample books to buy fashionable apparel, offered the American man extensive assortments of fabrics, colors, and styles, often more than he could get from the local merchant's stock. The sample book was convenient for the seller because he could offer more apparel options to his customers without purchasing inventory in advance of sales. Sample books were used both by retailers selling custom-made clothing for wholesale manufacturers and direct sellers. Direct sellers, representing manufacturing companies, carried a sample book straight to the customer by-passing the retail venue. In this paper two types of apparel businesses were examined which dressed men by-the-book in distinctive clothing, hosiery, pajamas and underwear. The sample books examined are The International Tailoring Company 1925, for men's tailored clothing and Superwear, Incorporated 1930-31, for men's underwear, pajamas and hosiery. Both books are in the textile collection of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology.¹ Garments similar to those sold by these companies were also examined from the costume collection of the same museum.

The International Tailoring Company was a tailor-to-the-trade (also known as merchant tailor)² who sold custom made clothing "...only through reputable local merchants."³ They were reported to be the largest individual clothing manufacturer in the United States doing a business in made-to-order men's clothing.⁴ The tailor-to-the-trade firm was defined by the Federal Trade Commission as "a specialty clothing firm that cut a single garment according to exact measurements of a consumer who had ordered that garment from a retail outlet serviced by the manufacturer."⁵ They functioned since pre-Civil War days but achieved recognition as an important branch of the clothing industry in the late 1800's. Harry Cobrin, men's wear executive involved in The Clothing Manufacturers Association for thirty years of the twentieth century, explained that the service appealed to small tailor shops especially those in rural areas. The sample book service was particularly popular in the Southern states where the roads were less developed and sales possibilities were the greatest.⁶

The International Tailoring Company advertised the prestige attached to using the sample book for the customer who warranted only the best in men's clothing.

...when a man came in for a suit...-I lead him to the sample book and I said, 'here's the kind of clothes you want,' and if he looked at the stock around him, I'd say, 'That stuff is not good enough for you-I keep these for men who don't know-and I'm gradually cutting down on it.'⁷

The "T" in the advertising copy is the regional retailer who wanted his customer to have the high quality and distinctive clothing that the well-dressed man deserved. "The country merchant...was not long in substituting the tailor-to-the-trade book for his very limited stock of woolens."⁸

Having made an arrangement with a tailor-to-the-trade to carry the service, the retail merchant acted as a sales agent. He was supplied a high quality fully swatched book at no charge which had illustrated fashion plates and the latest fabrics. The local retailer took the measurements of the customer according to the guidelines set by the wholesale manufacturer, identified the fabric and model with optional customized details, and sent the information to the tailor-to-the-trade who was usually located in a distant city. The International Tailoring Company had manufacturing plants in New York, Chicago and Toronto. When the finished garment arrived he would deliver it to the customer.⁹

The sample book supplied by The International Tailoring Company is an impressively large book 19" wide, 19" long and 2 1/8" thick. The dark green embossed leather binding with a black leather spine and gold lettering, colored fashion plates, and all wool fabric swatches are details which demonstrate the high quality of the company. The fashion plates are grouped by the customer's life style such as sportswear, formal wear and business wear as well as specific clothing for chauffeurs and clergy. The book also includes a full page of carefully illustrated details of styling options for cuffs, pocket flaps, back yoke treatments, pants and linings. Variations in the styling are a strength of the made-to-measure tailor. A full page dress chart in the sample book itemizes the appropriate clothing to be worn for specific occasions and activities including the proper shirt, cravat, hat, gloves, shoes and jewelry. This attention to the fine points of dress was an added service to the customer. The advice given in the book and substantiated by his local merchant assured the customer that he would be correctly dressed in both clothing and furnishings.

The International Tailoring Company positioned themselves as a fashionable firm in 1925. Prominently featured are illustrations of clothing for outings and the popular sport of golf. The customer could customize a suit of clothing by purchasing a jacket with a variety of back treatments, cuff, and pocket details. The suit could also have trousers, a waistcoat and plus-fours for sport.¹⁰ From the costume collection in the Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology is a man's sport suit dated 1926 in brown and white herringbone tweed (accession number P.84.23.1). The garment features a jacket with four flapped patch pockets with inverted back pleats and plus-four knickers. The sample book suggests one inverted back pleat as the style for an standard model sports jacket although other back treatments could be customized. Illustrations of the back of the trousers or the finish of the knee of the plus-fours are not shown in the sample book. The plus-fours of the museum garment has a back adjustable belt at the waist and adjustable tab knee closures. The jacket is half-lined although The International Tailoring Company advises a quarter lining for jackets with patch flapped pockets. DePinna, a New York retail store, advertised four piece suits in tweeds and shetlands consisting of knickerbockers, long trousers, waistcoat and sport-lounge jackets¹¹ in *The New York Times*, September 1925.

The woolen and worsted cloths featured by The International Tailoring Company represented the latest fashion in quality fabrics. In January 1925, *The National Retail Clothiers* reported that blue flannel, gray cheviot¹² with green and purple accents, windowpane checks in browns and light brown and Glenurquhart checks were the featured fabrics in London for the season, Spring and Summer 1925. The sample book featured fabrics similar to those shown in London including one Glenurquhart check.¹³ A separate supplement of two additional Glenurquhart checks was sent to the retailer which was

inserted in the sample book to keep the offering of fabric swatches current with the latest fashionable fashions. As the largest wholesale merchant in their field, The International Tailoring Company offered four hundred swatches each season and identified all the swatches for fiber content and weave.

The New York Historical Society, Landauer Collections, has a series of full color illustrated brochures produced by The International Tailoring Company for their local retail merchants. These booklets would be mailed free of charge to the retailers own special mailing list. In a pamphlet entitled "Dolling Up" the company assured that "As custom tailors with a world wide knowledge of dress we pretty much know what should be worn and we see to it that our patrons are properly counseled and advised."¹⁴ Competition in the field of merchant tailors was keen. The company regularly and aggressively promoted their name and their services to the customer by the use of brochures and advertising. Full page and double page advertisements were frequently placed in newspapers and journals to the retail trade apprising the market of the latest advancements in the progress of the company.

Because of intense competition The International Trading Company, like other tailors-to-the-trade, often operated under a subsidiary name. When a company thought they might lose a retail connection they would send out another sample book under a different name.¹⁵ "Taylor Made" was a swatch book and brochure mailed by The International Tailoring Company which matched the style of the brochure of the parent company in size, illustration techniques and print. The company offered "The Exclusive Rights To Sell TAYLOR MADE CLOTHES..."¹⁶ to the L. L. & G. C. Bean company in their store in Freeport, Maine. Because of the availability of the sample book, fashionable clothing was accessible to the man living far outside the urban area. The J. L. Taylor Company was another swatch book offered by The International Tailoring Company.¹⁷

The tailor-to-the trade, or wholesale tailoring business, enjoyed its greatest prosperity in the late 1920's employing 40,000 union members in Chicago.¹⁸ In 1925 15.3% of the total industry's suit production was made by tailors-to-the trade.¹⁹ Although The International Tailoring Company was the biggest of these manufacturing firms having offices in Chicago, New York, and Toronto, other companies were supplying sample books to retailers. The Glades Marcus Library at the Fashion Institute of Technology, Special Collections, has sample books from The Meyer Company, 1917; The Majestic Woolen Mills, 1920; and The Scotch Woolen Mills, 1927. These books are similar in size, format, and have swatch pages facing full color illustrations of men's clothing. The Majestic Mills does not identify the fiber content or weave of their sample fabrics. They also repeat fashion plates throughout the book unlike The International Tailoring Company who duplicate no pages of illustrations. The Scotch Woolen Mills differentiated themselves by selling clothing at "... one price \$21.75. Any two piece suit made to order...Styles are strictly correct."²⁰ Although they offer 300 very fine all wool swatches, none of the individual fabric weaves are identified. All the merchant tailor companies claimed to offer the latest in fashion styles to dress the American man correctly by-the-book.

While The International Tailoring Company advertised that they employ "no canvassers nor sell to the customer direct. We do business with merchants only,"²¹ Superwear, Incorporated, a hosiery and underwear company in Minneapolis, Minnesota,

sold directly "to wearer only"²² through a representative carrying a swatch book. Selling straight to the customer was done by "men and women of excellent business ability who [were] engaged in direct selling as a life's occupation" and were either employees or agents of well-established firms.²³ The Association of Direct Selling Companies met in the Benjamin Franklin Hotel in Philadelphia, November 1925 "to establish a special legal bureau for the purpose of combating legislation hostile to direct selling."²⁴ The bureau intended to fight the enemies of direct sellers who wanted to restrict their activities and fields of operations.

The swatch book for the Superwear company is a compact size of 4" x 8" in contrast to the tome supplied by the wholesale tailors. This small size could easily be carried by the representative in a pocket ready to be shown quickly to a prospective customer. The pages of the book are glossy and have fabric swatches of the hosiery, underwear, boxer shorts, and pajama products which they sell. The detailed renderings of the products are in color. The swatches are small (1" x 1") and only one color is swatched of multiple color ways offered for sale. In contrast, the swatches in the wholesale tailor's sample book are 3" x 4 1/2" in size and every color is swatched.

Rayon is very prominently featured in the hosiery and underwear products of the Superwear company. Reports in *Rayon and The Rayon Journal* confirm that "...orders for [rayon] yarns are mounting up for the new year; there is something still more encouraging and that is the complete acceptance of Rayon in the men's wear field."²⁵ The use of artificial silk was a revolutionary change that occurred in the men's underwear business as early as 1925. Rayon was described as having

a smooth unbroken surface [which] does not catch dirt so quickly as cotton. It can be placed in water of any temperature, it can withstand strong soaps better than silk or wool, but great care has to be taken not to put it under any strain while it is wet. It regains its strength when it dries and does not turn yellow when laundered.²⁶

Rayon is referred to as "rayon silk" in the sample book implying a mixture of silk yarn in the fabric. Superwear, Inc. refers to rayon as if it were a type of silk since rayon was often called artificial silk. George H. Johnson commented that the "term has always been a misnomer, since it implied that the fiber is silk, produced artificially. In reality rayon bears no chemical relationship whatever to silk..."²⁷ although the appearance is similar.

The new and fashionable boxer shorts were offered in the sample book. Inspired by the popularity of prize fighting in America, loose fitting shorts imitating boxers' shorts were considered fashionable athletic underwear that was used for sporting and non-sporting occasions. The Reis Company, in their advertisement in *The Saturday Evening Post*, featured a sketch of a handsome young man wearing the new boxer shorts. The copy reads:

So we borrowed an idea from the college campus. We took the athletes track suit and rebuilt it-kept all the freedom that helps to win hundred-yard dashes and put into it all the smartness of the boulevard. The result is the style hit of the season in men's underwear.²⁸

Broadcloth, silk, madras, and fine shirtings were fabrics sold by Reis while Superwear offered fine cotton solid colored broadcloth and an assortment of printed cotton stripe patterns. Roller printed, plain weave, cotton broadcloth fabrics were featured for both pajamas and boxer shorts. "Engraved metal roller machines [were] capable of producing vast yardage at competitive prices."²⁹ Because of the long run of fabric required to print by the roller method, it could be inferred that the Superwear company was doing a substantial business in pajamas and boxer shorts. The prints were variations of striped designs. The roller print method could guarantee a continuous vertical stripe running parallel to the selvage of the cloth.

Superwear featured the one-piece suits of underwear in fancy or plain rayon silk, nainsook³⁰ and broadcloth fabrics. In the collection of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology are one piece sleeveless suits of underwear in fine quality woven cotton, silk and knits of wool and ribbed cotton. The satin ladder striped cotton one piece suit is attributed to the Joseph Horn Company, with the Rocking Chair Trademark label (accession number 73.32.1). The armholes have a 25" circumference and the length of the legs are 16" on the outside seam. The garment has a sewn in waist band with full button front opening and right leg side seam buttoned opening. The new short sleeve sport shirt and the needs of the athlete were considered in the design of the big armhole for active sports. The short baggy pants accommodated the above the knee golf pants for ease of motion. The garments sold by Superwear have a back opening with a button which is a simpler construction than the full side opening at the right leg.

American men had adopted the habit of wearing pajamas after World War I. *The Nation* satirically observed: "In spite of the publicity recently given to pajamas as summer street wear for men, we have no stalwart hope of the arrival of such a fashion in the near future."³¹ Pajamas were offered by the Superwear company in both middy (or pullover) model and button front coat model. A model with the flat English collar and one patch pocket was offered in the finer quality English solid broadcloth. In the collection of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology are pajamas from Lanvin, France dated 1930's (accession number P.89.5.3). The black and white cotton pajamas woven in a zig zag pattern have a full button shirt front with three patch pockets and cuffed sleeves. The matching drawstring pants have cuffed legs. The weight of the cloth is heavy enough to be neatly tailored and have no transparency. They could be worn modestly without a robe or dressing gown.

A company similar to Superwear, Inc. was The Real Silk Hosiery Company established shortly after World War I. By 1930 they employed over 10,000 agents doing a sales volume of thirty million dollars a year. The volume of sales was done on seven million retail sales. The Fuller Brush Company began in 1911 and sold 45 different brushes through 6,000 direct selling agents. The Richman Brothers sold low priced suits by the direct selling method.³² The A. J. Nash Tailoring Company used the merchant tailor system but sold directly to the consumer employing about two thousand sales representatives across America. "Each Nash salesman receives \$3.50 for every suit he sells. They sell suits within a few dozen miles of where they live to their friends and acquaintances."³³ Nash opened his company in 1926 with a capital of \$60,000 and in 1926 generated \$20 million in sales. The volume of units sold and income generated indicate the acceptance of the direct selling method as a viable marketing device.

The American man wanted to buy quality merchandise from reputable people in a convenient venue. The sample book provided the local retailer and the independent agent selling directly to the customer a compact and efficient tool to bring fashionable, distinctive merchandise to the American market. Customers got the latest fashion, large assortments in fabric and styles, good quality with money back guarantees, and convenience by purchasing from the sample book through a local merchant or even a neighbor. These advantages to the consumer encouraged him to dress-by-the-book.

¹ Accession number for The International Tailoring Company is P.93.18.1 and for the Superwear Company is P.93.18.2.

² Harry A. Cobrin, *The Men's Clothing Industry* (New York: Fairchild Publications, Inc. 1970) p. 152. The term "made-to-measure" is also interchangeable with tailor-to-the-trade.

³ *The International Tailoring Company, Sample Book*, Chicago, Spring and Summer, 1925.

⁴ "Needle Strike Ends After Five Months," *The New York Times*, 9 November, 1925, p. 5.

⁵ Cobrin, p. 152.

⁶ Cobrin, p. 152.

⁷ The International Tailoring Company, Advertisement, *Men's Wear: Chicago Apparel Gazette* edition, October 1924, p. 31.

⁸ Cobrin, p. 153.

⁹ Cobrin, p. 153.

¹⁰ Plus-fours were knickers worn for golf that draped four inches over the knee.

¹¹ DePinna advertisement, *The New York Times*, 3 September 1925, p. 19. The lounge suit is defined by Mary Brooks Picken in *The Fashion Dictionary*, NY: Funk & Wagnalls, 1957, p. 216 as a man's suit of athletic lines having broad shoulders, full chest, slim hipline, popular for business wear.

¹² Cheviot is defined by Mary Brooks Picken, *The Fashion Dictionary*, (NY: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1957), as "Close-napped, rough-surfaced, all-wool fabric, similar to serge but heavier and rougher. Originally made from shaggy wool of Cheviot sheep." p. 60

¹³ Glen urquhart plaid is defined as "A popular Scottish pattern for suiting...characterized by two checks of different sizes. Made in a two up, two down twill weave with similar color patterns in warp and filling." *Fairchild's Dictionary of Textiles*, ed. Phyllis G. Tortora and Robert S. Merkel (NY: Fairchild Publications, 1996), p. 247.

¹⁴ "Dolling Up," *The International Tailoring Company*, in the Landaur Collections of The New York Historical Society, n.d. (c. 1922-1925). Other brochure titles include "Taylor Made," "International Dictionary," and "The Spirit of Progress."

¹⁵ "Tailor-to-the-Trade," *The History of the Men's Wear Industry-1890-1950, Men's Wear*, New York, 10 February, 1950, p. 228.

¹⁶ *L. L. Bean, Inc.: A Company Scrapbook*, (Maine, The Anthoensen Press, 1987), p. 22.

¹⁷ The swatch book of the J. L. Taylor Company, series 37 (accession number P 89.86.1) is in the textile collection of The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* "Tailor-to-the-Trade," pp. 227-8.

¹⁹ Cobrin, p. 155.

²⁰ *Scotch Woolen Mills, Sample Book*, Chicago, Fall Winter 1927-1928.

²¹ Advertisement, *The International Tailoring Company, National Retail Clothier*, 1 January 1925, pp. 28-29.

²² *Superwear, Inc., Hosiery and Underwear, Sample Book*, Minn., Fall and Winter 1930-1931.

²³ Paul Nystrom, *Economics of Retailing*, (NY, The Ronald Press Co., 1919, rpt. 1930), p. 297.

²⁴ *Men's Wear-Chicago Apparel Gazette*, 4 November 1925, p. 122.

²⁵ "Stability Assured," *Rayon and the Rayon Journal*, 1 Jan. 1930, p. 36.

²⁶ Elizabeth Dyer, *Textile Fabrics*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1927), p.25.

²⁷ George H. Johnson, *Textile Fabrics*, (NY, Harper and Bros., 1927), p. 76.

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- ²⁸ Advertisement, "They're on the Counter Now!," *The Saturday Evening Post*, 5 May 1928, p. 111.
- ²⁹ Frances Hinchcliffe, *Thirties Floral Fabrics*, (N. Y., Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988), p. 10.
- ³⁰ Nainsook is defined as "Soft, fine cotton fabric, similar to batiste but made of coarser yarns. Light in weight, of plain wave, and resembles a soft-finished dimity. *Encyclopedia of Textiles*, Third Edition, Editors of the American Fabrics and Fashions Magazine (NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1980), p.567.
- ³¹ "The Sweltering Sex," *The Nation*, 14 August 1929, p. 159.
- ³² Nystrom, pp. 300-1.
- ³³ Robert Littel, "Golden Rule Nash," *The New Republic*, 10 March 1926, p. 63.

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