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**SYNTHETIC FIBERS, SHOWY CARS AND SPORTSHIRTS:  
LIBERATING THE FASHION SPIRIT OF “THE MAN IN THE GRAY FLANNEL SUIT.”**

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We want to sing the man at the wheel,  
who hurls the lance of his spirit across the earth,  
along the circle of its orbit. (F. T. Marinetti)

The Futurist Manifesto of 1911 celebrated technology, the beauty of speed and racing cars that had “great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath” a description suitable to the showy cars of the 1950s.

F. T. Marinetti’s man at the wheel does not immediately resonate with the middle class man in gray flannel memorialized by Sloane Wilson in his novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. The public perceived the protagonist Tom Rath, as “...a guy who would never go on the road with Jack Kerouac.”<sup>1</sup> At the onset of the story the respectable Rath owns a \$70.00 neatly pressed and spotless gray flannel suit.<sup>2</sup> The confluence of synthetic and man-made fibers, auto upholstery, and men’s sport shirts presented a broad opportunity for individual expression in informal fashion both in clothing and inside the auto and contributed to the fashion liberation of the “squarest guy in the world.”

The spirit of the 1950s embraced the future through the race for space, the fascination with science fiction and the important use of synthetic fibers across product lines. New cars were passports to outer space, advertised General Motors while *Time* magazine identified the consumer as the man who was “in tune with the future through his dashboard, which looks like an intergalactic control panel.”<sup>3</sup> American men sampled the attitude of the Futurists by driving dream cars with spectacular tail fins, dazzling chrome trim and upholstery of synthetic fibers and dressing in “joyful” leisure shirts all created by teams of designers and scientists building fashionable living through chemistry. By examining automobile reupholstery sample books, manufacturers spec sheets and a collection of Adrian of Hollywood sport shirts in the textile and clothing collections of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology I observed a harmonious compatibility between men’s sport shirts and the interior fabrics of their living room on wheels. What emerged was a picture of a man with a more complex sense of style and interest in fashion than would be surmised by the image of the man in somber flannel. The purpose of this paper is to show the futuristic innovations in manmade fibers were adopted by men in their dream cars and sport shirts as expressions of a colorful and liberated fashion spirit in private life. The term “synthetic fibers” will encompass all manmade fibers<sup>4</sup> as rayon, nylon and polyester were commonly designated “synthetic” at that time.

Affluence, affordable clothes and dream cars of the future were available in the present to middle class consumers with increasing discretionary income. Both home and auto interiors made lavish and creative use of synthetic or “miracle fibers” and fashion was paramount in the rapidly changing designs of autos

<sup>1</sup> Wilson, Sloan. (Wilson 2002). *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Da Capo Press Cambridge MA 1983 ed. 2002 rpt 1955 , Afterword.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid , p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> AUTOS: On the Slow Road May. 12, 1958.<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,863441-1,00.html#ixzz0dHwBqwNs>

<sup>4</sup> Using the definition of synthetic : “1. made by chemical process: made artificially by chemical synthesis, especially so as to resemble a natural product.”  
<http://www.bing.com/Dictionary/search?q=define+synthetic&FORM=DTPDIA&qpv=synthetic+definition>

and interior decoration and the marketing of dream cars. Dr. Edmund Bergler's research in *Fashion and the Unconscious*, 1953 discovered "... ample evidence to prove that men 'follow the styles' as obediently, if not as assiduously, as women. The difference seems to lie in their willingness to adopt what might be called accessory variations, and their reluctance to accept a basic change."<sup>5</sup> The automobile became a kind of accessory and an opportunity for distinctive fashion expression. *Colliers Magazine* reported: styling was "practically everything"<sup>6</sup> in marketing autos.

The auto industry unveiled yearly models under a cloak of secrecy and consumers were motivated by powerful advertising to make fashion forward replacements. The "future" studio at General Motors employed 675 stylists to predict automobiles of tomorrow. Designers worked in tandem with engineers who made dreams come true, profitably.<sup>7</sup> Over 100 experimental cars were presented by auto manufacturers<sup>8</sup> and seen by more than a million people at Motorama Shows of Dream Cars in the 1950s. Men became accustomed to monitoring the fashion cycle of automobiles. Chatham Manufacturing Company worked with Ford and General Motors to produce auto textiles aided by the creativity of Finnish textile designer, Marianne Strengell. At first she criticized the terrible quality of Chatham fabrics that she considered "shiny, glossy" and caused you to skid when you sat down.<sup>9</sup> Strengell developed textural, tweedy fabrics made entirely of "artificial fibers" during her 6 years with Chatham. She claimed she used yarns "differently" which may mean using filament yarns in staple form to eliminate the "horrible gloss." Chatham's tweedy upholstery fabrics were compatible with Galey and Lord's men's leisure wear fabrications.

Both Chatham and Collins and Aikman designed and marketed new fibers and fabrics for a fashion conscious auto industry.<sup>10</sup> Chatham designed fabrics directly for automotive interior stylists. They showed pattern ideas in drawing form or hand loom samples. For 1956 models they presented doobby patterns using novelty or boucle yarns either "slideable" or heavily textured. Chatham called them "bright and quite gaudy" or extremely conservative.<sup>11</sup> From the Museum at FIT are new textile development spec sheets for auto upholstery designed by Collins and Aikman and their exclusive nylon and metallic fabric branded Candalon. While fabric weight and strength, abrasion resistance, dye and light stability, soil resistance, cost and machinery limitations were factors, most important concluded Chatham, was customer appeal. The auto industry functioned like the couture by introducing fashion kept secret until the yearly unveiling.

*Modern Textiles* reported a 20% increase of manmade fiber production in 1955 over 1954. In this breakthrough technological phase of manmade fibers, new fibers were designed for specific application rather than existing fibers adapted by diverse methods of mechanical spinning and weaving. The first application of U. S. Rubber Co.'s innovative Trilok for auto upholstery was covered by *The New York Times* Dec 7, 1955.<sup>12</sup> Trilok was an unusual polyethylene fiber whose eccentricity was put to practical use. *Life* magazine simplified the process to their mainstream readers: "When dunked in boiling water the plastic shrinks, buckling the rest of the material into ridges and hollows. The result is a... fabric which is

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<sup>5</sup> Edmund Bergler, MD, *Fashion and the Unconscious*, (Robert Brunner NY 1953) p. 244.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Hine, *Populuxe* (Alfred A. Knopf New York 1987), p. 84.

<sup>7</sup> AUTOS: The Battle of Detroit. *Time Magazine*. Nov. 01, 1954

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,823693-1,00.html#ixzz0dI0M5WN5>

<sup>8</sup> *Automobile news*: 100 years issue, "Fabulous Fifties."

<sup>9</sup> [www.aaa.si.edu](http://www.aaa.si.edu) interview with Marianne Strengell and Mr. Brown

<sup>10</sup> *Automobile Textiles* ed. Michael Ravnitzky. Society of Automobile Engineers, Inc PA 1995, p. 252.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 252.

<sup>12</sup> *New York Times* - Dec 7, 1955

so airy and resilient that at least two auto makers are considering using it to upholster their cars.”<sup>13</sup> The '57 Olds touted “Tech-Style” interiors for the Starfire '98 sedan using “Cool, Springy” Trilok upholstery.<sup>14</sup> The surface dimension of Trilok fabric is harmonious with the Alfred of NY crochet knot textural weave of Arnel and Nylon blend that was advertised as: washes easily and dries in a hurry.<sup>15</sup>

Dazzle in automobiles was achieved by heavy chrome trim on the body and bright filament yarns combined with metallic yarns woven into the upholstery. A Detroit secretary rapturously sighed, “Chrome is my favorite color,” as she examined a trailer load of new automobiles. Manmade fibers played a leading role in translating the luster of chrome to upholstery textiles. The 1953 Cadillac featured the “Dagmar” - protruding points on the front bumper named for the popular TV personality. Men had “masterful control of [the] car” claimed advertisers, drawing parallels to sexual power. Feeling masculine afforded men more freedom to indulge the fashionable side of their personality. While the exteriors flashed masses of chrome trim, upholstery made extensive use of metallic fibers.<sup>16</sup>

Crawford H. Greenewalt convinced the Du Pont Executive Committee to spend \$30 million on new research facilities<sup>17</sup> he would need to penetrate the market as a fashion leader since the public perceived the Du Pont Company as a chemical business driven by scientists not a fashion business driven by artistic designers. To shift their image from science to fashion Du Pont commissioned Dorothy Liebes to create experimental textiles and expand the market for their miracle fibers. *House and Garden Magazine* called Liebes “The effervescent high-priestess of the hand loom whose superb textures, fresh colors and new materials [for Goodall Manufacturers, Maine] initiated a revolution in machine-weaving techniques.”<sup>18</sup> Liebes with her spools of many-colored threads was featured on the cover of *House and Garden*, 1949. A letter to Liebes April 6, 1955 offered congratulations in her new position “to do some really wonderful things with man made fibers. Dupont is indeed wise and wonderful.”<sup>19</sup>

*Independent Woman* magazine described the insertion of gleaming gold, silver or copper metallic yarn into interior fabrications as a Dorothy Liebes innovation.<sup>20</sup> Lurex, the metallic yarn that cut out fancy prices with the added benefit it could be “tossed into the Bendix...”<sup>21</sup> was the creative innovation of the Dobeckmun Company. Liebes worked with Dobeckmun as yarn stylist creating a multi colored palette of metallic yarns for home and auto textile applications.<sup>22</sup> “Everybody wanted to have Lurex” said Marianne Strengell. “Taj Mahal,” Strengell’s leading achievement in auto upholstery, was woven with metallic fibers imparting simple luminosity to the 1959 Lincoln Continental interior.<sup>23</sup> “I want textiles to

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<sup>13</sup> *Life* Feb 6, 1956 p. 23 Trilok

<sup>14</sup> “Oldsmobile Sets Sights on Styling.” *The Hartford Courant* Feb 22, 1957

<sup>15</sup> *Gentleman’s Quarterly*, Summer 1958.

<sup>16</sup> *The Milwaukee Journal*, Feb 12, 1956.

<sup>17</sup> [http://www2.dupont.com/Heritage/en\\_US/index.html](http://www2.dupont.com/Heritage/en_US/index.html)

<sup>18</sup> “California Forty-Niners,” *House and Garden* 1949, p, 29

<sup>19</sup> Letter. Rochester Institute of Technology Karl Durall [sp unclear] to Dorothy Liebes. April 6, 1955.

<sup>20</sup> Walker, Hannah Reid. *Independent Woman*, Oct. 1949, p. 305.

<sup>21</sup> *Time* Dec. 31, 1951.

<sup>22</sup> Znamierowski, Nell. Dorothy Liebes Retrospective Exhibition sponsored by the textile fibers Dept. E. I. Du Pont De Nemours and Company March 20 –May 10 1970 Museum of Contemporary Crafts council NY

<sup>23</sup> Megan Elisabeth Fiely, “Within a Framework of Limitations: Marianne Strengell’s work as an educator, weaver, and designer. A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS May 2006, p. 86.

<http://books.google.com/books?id=0nxzw0wdIREC&pg=PA152&lpg=PA152&dq=1959+lincoln+taj+mahal&source=bl&ots=uAUxJgViVC&sig=PVnYS0syjctFm5IOAZ1LrDQqJY&hl=en&ei=PG3cS->

be background for people,” she said. A sport shirt of Cupioni fiber would be fitting in the foreground. Cupioni was the man made substitute for dupionni silk imitating the uneven and irregular yarns with a rayon structure.

In concert with the fashion excitement generated by new autos, *Esquire* 1951 heralded equal enthusiasm for men’s fashion:

Sound the trumpets-ring the bells-...The Great Day has finally arrived.  
Call it the Emancipation of the Male... Dull and drab are  
replaced by light and bright. Bulk and weight give  
way to ease and freedom.<sup>24</sup>

With wrap-around windshields offering 18% more glass area and visibility<sup>25</sup> *Time* magazine maintained: “You’ll like being looked at in your beautiful ’58 Chevrolet.... You know you’re being looked at-and you couldn’t look better.”<sup>26</sup> Smart sport shirts were worn by men who would be seen in the latest model autos - particularly from the waist up. While *Esquire* sounded the trumpets, trade journal *Daily News Record* reported to the men’s wear industry that play clothes including short sleeve shirts were the best opportunity for retail growth over any other field in the men’s business.<sup>27</sup> Futurists integrated their philosophy of art with a Manifesto of Men’s Clothing extolling comfort, joyful practicality and illumination. In the 1950s, light and bright synthetic fibers and metallic yarns which were easy to maintain replaced bulky spun fibers.

Adrian, celebrated Hollywood women’s designer claimed men had taken second place in the matter of brilliant plumage long enough.<sup>28</sup> He along with French Couturiers and other American high fashion designers were lending their names to creative men’s leisure shirts. In the clothing collection of the Museum at FIT are yarn dyed and printed Adrian sport shirts for men. The press described the collection as fascinating while still maintaining “he-man” qualities<sup>29</sup> assuring the male consumer that an interest in women’s designer shirts would not compromise virility. The sport shirt model Adrian uses throughout the collection is high quality single needle seaming with “broad yokes [to]...flatter the masculine figure.”<sup>30</sup> Straight hem bottoms with placket finished side vents are designed to be worn outside trousers and would be comfortable for driving. The disappearing neckband collar, a trend from about 1949, gives support through the back of the neck and lies flat on the chest.<sup>31</sup> Adrian sport shirts were manufactured through a licensing arrangement with Damon Creations. Shirts retailed for \$15.95 to \$55.00 while mass brands retailed for upwards of \$4.00. Otherwise traditional regimental cotton stripes were infused with gold metallic yarns.<sup>32</sup> Mitered stripes on the left side panel go through the pocket reflecting the Adrian design aesthetic established in his high fashion women’s wear. Complex shoulder treatments and pocket variations on Adrian shirts would be seen through expansive windshields and from the driver’s side window. Novelty yarns create texture in both sport shirt and De Soto upholstery.

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[WnAYbI8wSqidGpBw&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CAYQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=1959%20lincoln%20taj%20mahal&f=false](http://www.lincolnjournal.com/mahal&f=false)

<sup>24</sup> “Convertibles for Mr. T.” *Esquire*, May 1951 p. 86.

<sup>25</sup> AUTOS: The Battle of Detroit Nov. 01, 1954

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,823693-1,00.html#ixzz0dI0M5WN5>

<sup>26</sup> Advertisement, *Esquire* May 1958, p. 21.

<sup>27</sup> Stamy, A. W. “Short sleeve sport shirts round out work-play” *Daily News Record*. January 5, 1951.

<sup>28</sup> Addams, Bett, “Mr. Adrian turns Talent to Creating Men’s Apparel.” *The Miami News*, 4 September 1951.

<sup>29</sup> *Pittsburg Post Gazette* 10 December 1954.

<sup>30</sup> *Pittsburg Post Gazette* Dec. 10, 1954

<sup>31</sup> *Daily News Record* January 15, 1951 p. 34.

<sup>32</sup> Addams, Bett, “Mr. Adrian turns Talent to Creating Men’s Apparel.” *The Miami News*, 4 September 1951.

Bold patterned sport shirts were publicized as “psychologically sound and beneficial.” Adrian prints in silk shantung inspire conversation and draw attention to the fashionable wearer. The abstract geometric drawing technique creates a dynamic canvas and was offered in two color combinations: one with the Adrian label and a second created exclusively for Bonwit Teller Men’s shop.”<sup>33</sup> The Shooting Star discharge print design of an Adrian textile reflects the interest in outer space. Keeping with his high fashion image, Adrian uses silk. Silk shantung translates easily to synthetic fiber applications for the popular base of business. Cohama, textile converter, features a rayon and silk slubbed yarn similar in appearance to Adrian’s fabric.

Designer names were visible in men’s consumer products. Parisian Couturiers leased their names to men’s shirts; George Walker was publicized as chief of styling at Ford and Liebes and Strengel were recognized textile designers. Christian Dior’s red shirt shimmers perhaps indicating a manmade fiber while a green and silver rayon shantung design by Dior has a straight hem bottom meant to be worn outside of trousers.<sup>34</sup> “Dashing Styles for He-Men” were created by Elsa Schiaparelli of Paris and Hattie Carnegie of New York. Mme. Schiaparelli complained: “Men are cowards . . .they are afraid to depart from the well-trodden rut in their habits of dress.”<sup>35</sup> Reflecting the spirit of the futurists, Pauline Trigere described the new men’s wear as a “revolution [that] will have to start with more ‘joyful’ sportswear” as she foresaw the growth of new man-made fibers in the next 10 years.<sup>36</sup> Prestigious Fifth Avenue, NY retailer Bergdorf Goodman and upscale sport shirt designer Alfred Shapiro used acrylic yarns as wool substitutes for knitted sport shirts. Bergdorf designed their private label cut and sewn knit shirt using DuPont Orlon while Shapiro enabled the wearer to monogram his shirt of Chemstrand Acrilan.

The outspoken Shapiro ridiculed lifeless attire and “Businessmen, in their charcoal suits [who] look like a bunch of ten pins at the end of a bowling alley.” Like the futurists who fought against fashion timidity and colors arranged in wishy-washy patterns, Shapiro promoted individuality for men through vibrant colors, textures and exclusive manmade fiber blends in his leisure shirt collections. Claiming: “. . .most men pretend indifference to clothes because they feel this is the manly thing to do,” Shapiro believed men were in fact deeply interested in looking as well as possible.<sup>37</sup> Fine hand details otherwise found in bespoke shirts are part of the Alfred aesthetic. Mitered collars<sup>38</sup> which frame the face could be seen through the wider windshields. Alfred’s own pioneer blend of 50% Cupioni 50% Cotton for Skinner Textiles produces the luster and luxury of artificial silk with traditional cotton while “air conditioned” Ban Lon Nylon shirts will “breathe.”

Edward M. Ruttenber, *Daily News Record* journalist, argued “. . .men must have some emotional safety valve. Circumstances do not permit them to lead the daring adventurous lives they prefer.” Dressed in colorful apparel and driving futuristic autos were mild deviations from routine that eased up life’s tensions.<sup>39</sup> After trying on a new shirt Ernest Dichter looked in a mirror. “Why? To discover how I have changed . . .what transformation had come about.”<sup>40</sup> A new aspect of men’s “gray flannel” image was revealed in his personal space, the auto and his private wardrobe, the leisure shirt. In the final pages of

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<sup>33</sup> *Gentlemen’s Quarterly* May 1959 p. 74.

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.google.com/products?hl=en&q=sport+shirt+1950s&ved=0CBMQrQQwAA&show=li&sa=N&lnk=next&start=20&gnum=20>

<sup>35</sup> Roe, Dorothy. *Miami News*, November 12, 1953, p.53.

<sup>36</sup> *Gentlemen’s Quarterly* May 1959 p. 74

<sup>37</sup> Roe, Dorothy. “Fair Sex Agrees Changes needed in Attire of Men,” *The Rock Hill Herald* 4 February 1956.

<sup>38</sup> *The Miami News* February 9, 1958.

<sup>39</sup> Ruttenber, Edward M. *Daily News Record* Feb 1951.

<sup>40</sup> Dichter, Ernest.

*The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* Tom Rath sets out to buy a new car and take a road trip with his wife.<sup>41</sup> We would like to imagine it was a showy car and he was wearing a splashy sport shirt.

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<sup>41</sup> Wilson, Sloan. *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. 2002 rpt 1955 Da Capo Press Cambridge MA p. 97