

A Perfect Fit

Clothes, Character, and the Promise of America



JENNA WEISSMAN JOELIT



Metropolitan Books Henry Holt and Company, New York

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*To the memory of my grandmother
Rochel Leah Snyder*

One-third of your life is spent in bed,
two-thirds of your life in Clothes.

E. L. BRENTLINGER, 1913

Dear Lord, Bless us and help us all to be stylish.

CURRENT LITERATURE, 1902

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Introduction

Once upon a time, Americans placed their faith in clothing. A snappy suit and a smart hat, they believed, not only buoyed the spirits but made women pretty and men handsome, promoted good health and discipline, and built community. Why, with the right outfit, one could even elude the restraints of class. If you dressed in a becoming manner, there was absolutely no reason to be “tabooed,” asserted the author of one popular etiquette manual geared toward the upwardly mobile. “Your clothes are your visiting cards, your cards of admission.” No wonder, then, that Americans who came of age between the 1890s, when this book begins, and the 1930s, when it ends, endowed their clothes with so much meaning and possibility. Getting dressed was serious business.

The stuff of countless sermons and editorials as well as dreams, clothing loomed large on the national agenda in the years between

1890 and 1930, a period during which the institutions of modern America—the ballot box and the blaze of electricity, the metropolis and the melting pot—came into their own. In a democracy like ours, explained reformer Ida Tarbell, elaborating on clothing’s relationship to the modern polity, how one dressed was not “merely a personal problem” but a national one. Tarbell did not exaggerate. At a time when the challenges of integrating millions of newly emancipated African Americans and newly arrived immigrants weighed heavily on the American body politic, the custodians of American values had much to say about the style, cut, and color of everyday attire. What one wore, they claimed, transforming personal appearance into a civic virtue, was no private affair, subject to fancy or the whim of the moment. What one wore was a public construct, bound up with an enduring moral order. Insisting that America ought to be a nation whose citizens shared the same “national taste in dress,” social reformers, schoolteachers, and religious leaders championed the sartorial imperative—and promise—of fitting in. The “question of clothes,” they asserted, was a vital “element in the growth of the kind of democracy we need in America,” or, as fashion arbiter Mary Brooks Picken put it, in this “great democracy” of ours, the only distinction Americans held dear was that of “appropriateness of dress.” In America, there were no social divisions, she ringingly declared. “Here daughters from every country are blended in the making of American women!”

Those on the margins, from the daughters and sons of the foreign-born to the daughters and sons of African American slaves, took careful note of these declarations and set their sights on dressing like everyone else. Better yet, they aspired to dressing like “Mrs. Astorbilt,” as the ambitious Sonya Vrunsky, heroine of Anzia Yezierska’s immigrant tale *Salome of the Tenements* cleverly puts it, referring, of course, to the worldly Mrs. Astor, the doyenne of high society. For women like Sonya, wearing a stylish ensemble was “in itself culture and education,” a way of

laying claim to America. Many immigrant men felt the same way. “I was forever watching and striving to imitate the dress and the ways of the well-bred American merchants,” recalled one East European immigrant whose entire wardrobe in the Old World consisted of a pair of pants and a few rough-textured shirts. “A whole book could be written on the influence of a starched collar and a necktie on a man who was brought up as I was.” Members of the African American community were equally attuned to the opportunities as well as the obligations of dress. A mixed blessing, the wearing of nice clothes “gives to the average woman a confidence and a poise that seems to be a part of her birthright,” observed one African American woman. But with that poise and confidence came responsibility for setting a good example, for “bearing the burden of posterity and the burden of the race.”

Meanwhile, the triumph of America’s ready-to-wear industry and, with it, the growing availability of attractive yet inexpensively produced hats, gloves, blouses, suits, shoes, and even jewelry—much of it produced by immigrant hands—made possible the promise of fitting in. Stylish clothes, once the exclusive preserve of the well-heeled and the well-to-do, were now within everyone’s reach. Revolutionizing the way America dressed, ready-to-wear transformed the American woman into the “best-dressed *average* woman in the world” and her menfolk into men-about-town. Advertising, in turn, furthered the public’s awareness and acceptance of ready-to-wear by stressing its reliability, probity, and up-to-dateness. Automobile advertisers, in particular, promoted “clothes consciousness” and sparked the public’s interest in ready-to-wear, according to A. F. Allison, secretary of the International Association of Garment Manufacturers. Pictures of handsomely attired people admiring an equally handsome, streamlined car inspired a “desire to appear at one’s best” and brought home to Americans on “every farm, in every hamlet, town and city, the significance and personal value of the well-

dressed look.” Etiquette manuals and magazines like *Vogue*, a “fairy godmother” for the fashion-minded, did much the same thing. With a careful, almost mathematical attention to detail and a penchant for charts and tables, these publications not only rationalized the often helter-skelter business of getting dressed but also promoted an inclusive notion of “correctness.” To look modern, smart, and appropriate, all anyone had to do was to consult a “guide to correct dress” and follow its strictures.

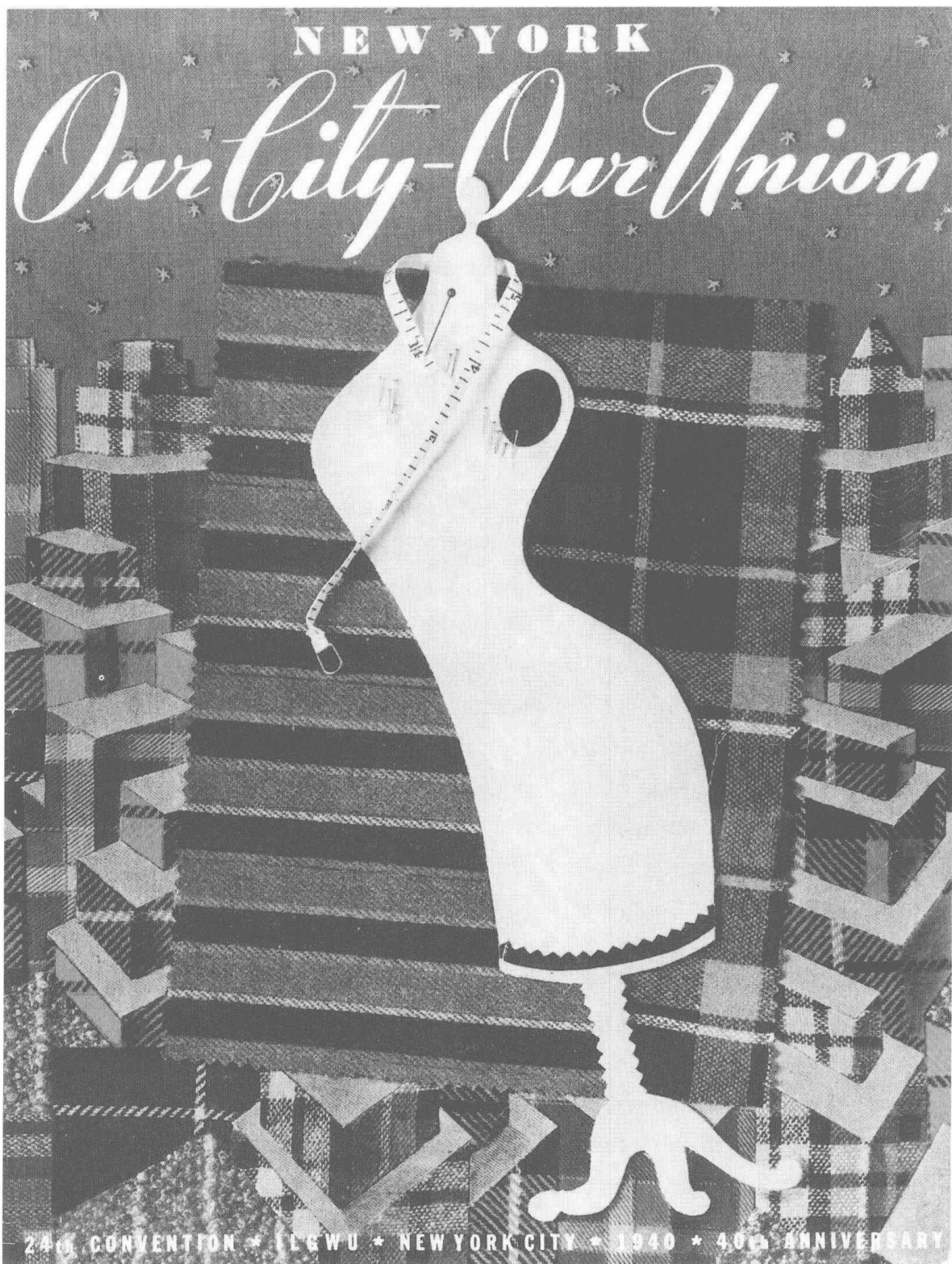
Taken together, these social and economic forces loosened the hold of social class on the American imagination and gave rise to the “democracy of beauty.” Now more attuned to fashion’s possibilities than they had ever been before, Americans from all walks of life—farmer’s wives and immigrant factory workers, businessmen and boulevardiers—paid increasingly close attention to the clothes on their backs. With eager anticipation, they enrolled in R. H. Macy’s Dress-of-the-Month Club, sent away to the Curtis Publishing Company for information on how to obtain a new outfit (“I want pretty clothes too. Will you please tell me how to earn for them”), paid homage to the great Temple of Fashion (or Palace of Fashion, as it was also known) at Philadelphia’s Sesquicentennial International Exposition of 1926, and routinely staged fashion shows in which “Mrs. Well Dressed” squared off against “Mrs. Poorly Dressed.” On stage and off, fashion was in the air. Transcending class, religion, region, and even race, fashion inspired growing numbers of Americans, men and women alike, to find meaning in the mundane act of getting dressed.

In the pages that follow, I explore the history and cultural consequences of modern America’s expanded sartorial awareness. The story that I tell is not the usual one, of Fashion with a capital F and its impact on the *belle monde* and the moneyed. Nor is my story a conventional clothes chronicle or a form of “hemline history.” It does not comprehensively chart the ups and downs of women’s clothing, take the measure of men’s suits, or study the marketplace,

the department store, and the factory. Instead, this book explores the relationship between clothes and the character of America, showing how the nation's collective identity was bound up in the warp and woof of its citizens' attire. Today, when fashion is associated with the avant-garde and the cutting edge, with the flouting of convention and the primacy of self-expression, it is hard to imagine a time when fashion had more to do with virtue than with license, with the commonweal rather than the individual. But only a half century ago Americans held fashion to a different standard. Wearing their beliefs on their sleeves, they freighted hats and suits, jewelry and shoes, outerwear and underwear with moral value. Fashion was not simply about looking good. Fashion was about being good as well.

The subject of intense debate—on the street and in the sanctuary, around the dinner table and the water cooler—fashion both registered the most pressing issues of the day and provoked them. In prewar America, the length of a dress, the color of a man's shirt, the size of a hat, the height of a pair of shoes, the sheen of a fur coat, and the glint of a gold bracelet brought to the surface the country's ongoing concern with womanliness and gentlemanliness, religiosity and simplicity, probity and perfectibility even as it focused attention on the health of the nation and the state of its soul. Far from being a mere flourish of history, something altogether incidental to the making of modern America, fashion was the most literal expression of who we were as a nation.

When it comes to the clothes that inhabit this book, much, of course, may strike the contemporary reader as hopelessly old-fashioned. But then, these old things, with their awkward shapes and aspirations, also contain what the late-nineteenth-century historian Alice Morse Earle referred to as the "lingering presence" of the past. "What harmless jealousies, what gentle vanities, what modest hopes linger" in their creases, she noted more than one hundred years ago. Old clothes, she said, "put me truly in touch with the life of my forebears." Like Earle before me, I've come to feel the same way.



The fashion industry was as integral to New York City as the skyscraper.

CHAPTER ONE



À la Mode

“No woman, however hard pressed for time, has a right to look dowdy nowadays,” the *Ladies’ Home Journal* categorically declared in 1925, underscoring the premium America of the twenties placed on looking “smart” and fashionable. No matter where she lived, in the city or on a farm, the magazine continued, she could buy stylish, affordable clothes at her local dress shop or department store, order them from a catalog, or make them herself from pattern books. The modern American woman could also attend a fashion show, hear a lecture, and consult all manner of fashion magazines and guidebooks on the art—and science—of dressing well. With so many opportunities, she had no excuse for not looking her best at all times. Like their womenfolk, American men could also avail themselves of a growing number of sartorial options. No longer could they blame their wives for their lackluster or even shabby

appearance. ("Men Neglect Clothes to Keep Wives Well-Dressed," proclaimed a headline in the *New York Times*, implying that cost-conscious husbands preferred to adorn their wives rather than themselves.) Now they, too, could purchase a great many things, including colored shirts. "Times have changed," observed the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1931, applauding the way color had emancipated modern man. A glimpse into the wardrobe of the well-dressed man would make the "explorers of Tut-ankh-Amen's tomb green with envy," asserted another student of contemporary mores, referring to the spectacular discovery of the ancient boy king's tomb a decade earlier. "His Royal Highness in Fashion" had nothing on the contemporary American gentleman.

Once the exclusive prerogative of the high and mighty, fashion by the 1920s had become a "social fact" that touched the lives of average people. Calling it one of the "greatest forces in present-day life," Paul Nystrom, a Columbia University professor of marketing, observed in 1928 that fashion had pervaded every field and reached every class. It was fashion that made men shave every day, crease their trousers, and wear shirts with attached collars and that encouraged women to change the "tint of the face powder, the odor of the perfume, the wave of the hair, the position of the waistline, the length of the skirt, the color of the hose, the height of the heels." In short, Nystrom concluded, "to be out of fashion, indeed, is to be out of the world." To be *in* fashion, though, was to be right on top. Offering a new form of identity to millions of Americans across the country, fashion placed within reach an expanded sense of life's possibilities. Women should never underestimate the "psychological effect of clothes," cheered businesswoman Bertha Rich. While a great deal went into making someone a success, the "one asset that *every* woman [could] count on as chief assistant" was her clothes. "First please the eye, and the rest will come easily." Journalist O. O. McIntyre couldn't have agreed more. Clothes not only make the man, he wrote, they "buoy [his] courage."

Mrs. Goldstein

Fashionable Dressmaker

119 FORSYTH ST.

NEW YORK

מרם. גאלדשטיין

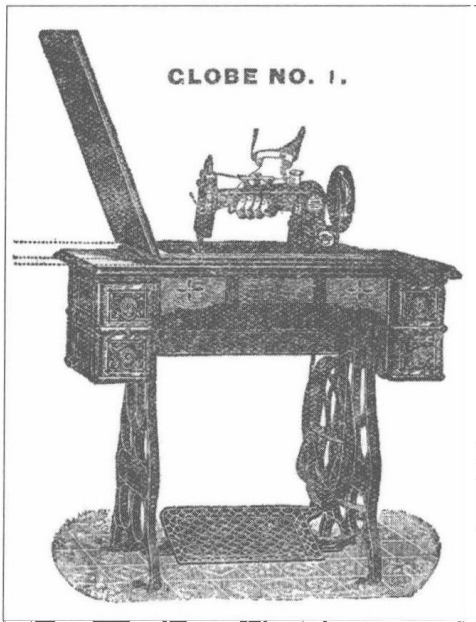
פעשיאנייבער דרעססמייקער

ניו יארק

119 פארסייט סט.

Fashion appealed to everyone, including Yiddish-speaking immigrants.

Rich, McIntyre, and increasing numbers of Americans like them associated clothing with pleasure and opportunity. Their parents and grandparents, citizens of the nineteenth century, probably did not. For them, assembling and maintaining a wardrobe was by no means easy. A drain on their finances and their energies, it took some doing. For one thing, those hankering for a stylish new dress or suit had first to purchase the fabric and then find a dressmaker like the chic-sounding Madame DeLyle or a distinguished firm of custom tailors like Howard, Keeler & Scofield to transform cloth into clothing through the complicated rigamarole of draping, pinning, cutting, and fitting, a process likened to a "cabalistic art." The practice of having one's clothes made also demanded patience and ready cash, both of which were in short supply among everyone but the well-to-do. "I could afford to have only my best dresses made by a regular dressmaker," admitted Anne Aldworth in 1885, adding that her modiste's extravagance in cutting (and wasting) cloth had "long filled me with indignation." Little wonder, then, that most Americans considered a new dress or suit a rarity and stylishness a perquisite of affluence.

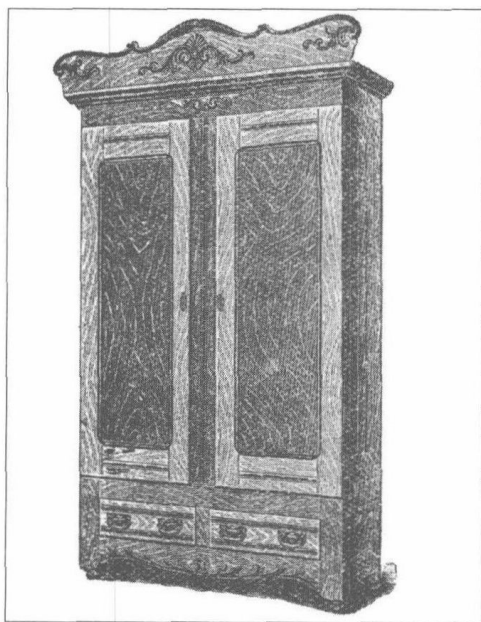


The sewing machine simplified the process of making clothes.

Instead, they made do by making their own. Armed with needles, pins, scissors, and thread, thousands of women across America took up sewing. As Aldworth noted, "I cannot help thinking that there must be many others like myself, anxious and ready and willing to do their own simple dress making if only they knew just where and how to make it easy." Aldworth was fortunate: she had her aunt Mary to help her over the rough spots. Sitting at her aunt's side, she watched and took notes as the older woman

ran through a series of complicated exercises: "Secure the seam at the waistline first and be very careful not to stretch the cloth . . . then pin about an inch above that, and from there towards the bottom of the waist with the *front* towards you. Now turn it so that the *back* will be towards you and pin from above the waistline towards the top. Baste in the same way." A sensible womanly skill transmitted from one generation to the next, from mother to daughter and from Aunt Mary to her niece Anne, sewing was held in high regard as much for its pedagogic value as for its utility. "Learning to cut, fit and make clothes, pretty clothes," it was widely believed, was critical to the making of a proper young woman. The "practice and art of making clothes which are so far as possible graceful, simple, economical, beautiful should be taught to girls and employed by them in a nation-wide movement if we are to have the best development of our race that our young women are capable of," insisted one fan of this household art, dreaming of an ambitious moral crusade with sewing at its core.

Then again, being clever with the needle was also a vehicle of rectitude, a way of demonstrating the American attributes of thrift and resourcefulness. The “vast army of mothers all over the land” who made their sons’ clothing, cheered *Good Housekeeping*, were to be commended for their “practice of economy.” The *Ladies’ Home Journal*, in turn, approved of those who, dressing themselves as well as their children, knew how to stretch their wardrobes. “To appear well-dressed on a limited income one must be able to sew neatly, must understand how to renovate old materials and have the knack of being able to use and make the most of pieces of old trimming and left-over scraps,” advised Emma Hooper, author of the popular monthly column “To Dress Well on a Small Income.” A new collar could “brighten up an old bodice as nothing else can,” she recommended, while a “circular flounce of broadcloth” did wonders for an otherwise skimpy skirt. Farm women were even more receptive to the art and craft of “clothing renovation,” the high-minded name social reformers gave to the process, born of necessity, by which the life of things was extended. Well into the 1910s and 1920s, economically straitened farmers’ wives watched and listened carefully as “clothing specialists,” home-demonstration agents hired by statewide agricultural extension programs, fanned out across the country teaching them resourcefulness. “Next to poultry, clothing . . . has perhaps the greatest economic and social value of any project in the state,” declared agent Agnes Ellen Harris. The program gave the “country



Before the built-in closet, most Americans kept their clothes in wooden wardrobes.