

The History of Fit (And Why Most of Our Clothes...Don't)

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Have you ever wondered about the history behind how clothes are made and how fit is determined? We have. So we pitched in as a team and put together this (long!) post about the

history behind clothing, the history of fit, and how the industry moved from a Made to Measure paradigm to today's mass-manufactured environment.

You know that old dress form in your grandmother's basement? It probably saw a lot of use in its day. Grandma and all her friends made their own clothes because they were poor. Well, not ONLY because they were poor – many of our Grandmas grew up during The Great Depression, after all. It was also because ready to wear, store-bought clothes were still something of a novelty when our Grandmothers were young.



Of course Great-Grandma taught her daughters and granddaughters to sew their own clothes – to them, ready to wear clothes were too new to entirely trust. Making your own clothes is a novelty nowadays, but that doesn't mean Great-Grandma wasn't on to something.

In The Beginning

Let's start at the beginning. Well, not all the way in the beginning...togas and fur loincloths (hopefully) don't have much in common with what most of us wear today!

But let's go back to the 18th and 19th centuries when women either made their clothing at home or employed a dressmaker.

Only the elite owned several sets of clothing, because of the tremendous amount of time that went into creating a garment. As the fashions changed (which they did at a slower pace than our current two- or four-season cycle),

women would take their dresses apart and remake them in the new style. Fabric was precious and not something that you would just discard without care.

When a woman had de-constructed and then reconstructed a dress until it just wasn't suitable anymore, she would give it to one of her servants or find another use for the fabric. While upper class women were able to participate in the pleasures of a rather whimsical version of changing fashions, the lower classes were locked out of the experience because of cost.

It wasn't until the middle of the nineteenth century that things began to change rapidly. First, there was the invention of the Singer home sewing machine (http://inventors.about.com/od/sstartinventions/a/sewing_machine.htm) by Elias Howe in 1845. The sewing machine made it substantially faster to make and re-make clothing. Women used some of their brand new leisure time to look at fashion plates and women's pamphlets.



In 1858, Englishman Charles Frederick Worth invented Parisian haute couture (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haute_couture). Worth had worked at Maison Gagelin in Paris where his wife modeled his designs. He later set up his own shop, the House of Worth. Worth understood the power of publicity and the importance of obtaining the patronage of influential women, so he presented his designs to the Princess Pauline Metternich (http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/87/Pauline_Sandor_Princess) who wore his dresses at the French court.

Soon Empress Eugenie herself was a fan of Worth's dramatic designs, which incorporated a cage crinoline (hoop-skirt) a hundred years after the style had disappeared. Depictions of the dress floated there all the way over the Atlantic where American ladies oohed, aahed and got down to business sewing versions of the dresses for themselves.



The Empress Eugénie (Eugénie de Montijo, 1826–1920, Condesa de Teba), 1854 – The Metropolitan Museum of Art

And then industrialization happened. Shoe and uniform production had already begun to be mechanized during the Civil War – all those soldiers needed uniforms after all. But once those men returned home they wanted

to change, and fast. Shop owners such as Columbus, Ohio's [Simon Lazarus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon_Lazarus) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon_Lazarus) bought ready-made suits back East, and sold them at his store in the Midwest, building a vibrant department store business.

But it took longer for industrialization to reach women's clothing.

The Rise of the Department Store

If you've watched either of the PBS hits [Mr. Selfridge](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/programs/series/mr-selfridge/) (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/programs/series/mr-selfridge/>), and [The Paradise](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/programs/paradise/) (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/programs/paradise/>), you know what happened to change things. The Paradise even features a dressmaker's shop across the street from the fancy new department store, being driven out of business by the introduction of ready to wear clothes.

On Mr. Selfridge, when our fearless department store owner announces to his staff that they're going to start selling ready to wear women's clothes, they're astounded. How is this even possible? Women's bodies are all so different from each other that the characters find it unimaginable that women's clothes could be anything but custom-made.

From the 1870's through the 1950's the department store was a hive of commerce. But going to the department store was not just about making a purchase – it was about the experience of public life.



Image courtesy of telegraph.co.uk

Walter Benjamin's *Arcade Projects* recounts the rows of shops in the glass roofed Parisian arcades where 'flaneurs' – french for 'strollers' – would stroll through the shops to see and be seen. Families would turn the department store experience into a special outing, and stores accommodated them by adding restaurants and holding special events (like having Santa Claus come to visit) all the while feeding their clientele's desire for ready to wear clothing.

By the early 1900's the sewing-machine had lost a bit of its allure in comparison to the energy and convenience of the department store.

Everyone knew that the ready-made fashion didn't fit as well as handmade, but the department store had become incorporated into Western culture. By purchasing ready to wear clothing, women demonstrated that they had spare money. They began to have the financial independence to buy their own clothing, and the social freedom to experience public spaces, peruse goods and enjoy their precious leisure time.

The age of industrialization had brought young country girls from small towns to the big city for work, and those women could not possibly find the time to make their own clothing. Eventually some of these busy ladies forgot the lessons their mothers and grandmothers taught them about making clothing even as they gained new skills outside of the home in the workplace.

The Fall of Perfect Fit

After a while, women stopped caring about perfect fit in comparison to the ease of ready-to-wear and the allure of quickly changing fashions.

In 1911 Paul Poiret's designs appeared in *Art et Décoration* in the first true example of editorial fashion photography. The images were shot by Edward Steichen who would later give up his art to work for Conde Nast at *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*, and become one of fashion's founding photographers. Steichen and Baron Adolphe de Meyer developed a style that captured clothing in an idealized context rather than a blank background, so that they sold design as part of a fashionable and successful life.



[\(http://venetianred.net/tag/edward-steichen/\)](http://venetianred.net/tag/edward-steichen/)

Paul Poiret shot by
Edward Steichen, *Art et*

Décoration 1911

The rise of fashion photography put emphasis on fashion's aesthetic rather than tactile and practical qualities. People began to think of clothing as a static picture that they saw and wanted to embody. They saw stunning stars wearing dazzling designers, projecting the illusion of their perfect lives, and tried to capture it for themselves. Fashion was about the system around it – the shops, the media and the personalities – instead of a woman's relationship to the physical piece of clothing that she would wear and enjoy.

Women gave up *their own* perfect fit in favor of someone else's.

Every time you go clothes shopping, you're hit with how much "ready to wear" just doesn't work and isn't really ready for most of us to wear.

In the early 20th century, standardized clothing for women was attempted using the bust as the sole measurement ([Felsenthal 2012](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/US_standard_clothing_size#CITEREFFelsenthal2012) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/US_standard_clothing_size#CITEREFFelsenthal2012 (source: [Wikipedia \(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/US_standard_clothing_size\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/US_standard_clothing_size))).

"However, this proved unsuccessful because women's bodies have far more variety in shape. The [hourglass figure](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hourglass_figure)

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hourglass_figure) is frequently used as an industry standard, but only 8% of women have this body shape ([Felsenthal 2012](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/US_standard_clothing_size#CITEREFFelsenthal2012) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/US_standard_clothing_size#CITEREFFelsenthal2012

A woman with an hourglass figure and a woman with an apple-shaped figure who have the same bust size will not have the same waist or hip sizes."

So, it's not news that women's clothing sizes (<http://abbeypost.com/blog/plus-size/>) aren't standard, and when you finally do find something in what you think is the right size for you, it still may not fit

properly. A dress fits your chest and waist, but pulls across your hips. Or it's too tight over your chest, and too big over your hips.

It's infuriating, but since we've all been wearing ready to wear clothing for the past century, we all blame our hips instead of the clothing.

Why Do I Care How It Fits?

So why does fit matter so much? You can find our [top five reasons here \(http://abbeypost.com/blog/top-5-reasons-made-measure-beats-ready-wear/#sthash.z5EJS2cg.dpbs\)](http://abbeypost.com/blog/top-5-reasons-made-measure-beats-ready-wear/#sthash.z5EJS2cg.dpbs), but we could think of more. The gist is that clothing that fits you is flattering. It hugs you in the right spots, because it's made with your exact measurements in mind. You don't have to compromise on fit just because we've all been in the habit of looking in the department store mirror and saying "huh, well I guess that's good enough."

You deserve so much better than "good enough." You deserve to look and feel great, and that isn't going to happen until you feel comfortable in your clothing. Try walking into a room in an outfit you really feel good in. You move with more confidence. What if you could just be in the moment with your family, friends, colleagues and clients... instead of constantly worrying whether the dress you're wearing was really designed for someone with a bigger chest, or smaller hips, or "OMG why is this riding up?"

The Rise of Made to Measure (Again)

So we've established that hardly any of our clothes fit us properly these days. What can we do about it?

Make Your Own

There are some industrious DIYers who make most of their own clothes in this day and age. But remember: back in the 19th century, all those women who made their own clothes didn't have full time jobs, and they didn't have

to drive their kids to soccer practice, piano lessons and playdates. So don't feel lazy if the idea of making your own wardrobe seems like way too much work.

Tailored or Tailor-Made

If you have an exceedingly ample clothing budget, you can find a tailor to make clothes for you. More practically, you could have a tailor, well, *tailor* your ready to wear clothes to fit you perfectly. Those jeans that fit your hips, and gap at the waist? A tailor can fix that for you.



But let's face it, you probably only go to a tailor for the non-optional stuff like hemming your pants and skirts to the right length. You want to wear your new clothes now, not in a week when you get them back from the tailor—and you're probably not all that thrilled about having to pay for the alterations, either. So you're never to going to make it a priority to have a tailor make more subtle fixes, like taking in a dress around the chest so it fits you better.

So, are you doomed to wearing ill-fitting clothes?

Nope. Because now there's a new option for the busy, the tired, the frustrated, and the time-and-cash-strapped. [AbbeyPost Made to Measure](http://abbeypost.com/shop) (<http://abbeypost.com/shop>).

Made to Measure

By buying Made to Measure, we can leave 'it's good enough' in the dust and embrace "I'm absolutely totally awesome and...THIS FITS LIKE A DREAM!!!!"



And it's not just better for how you look or feel about yourself. It's also better for [your wallet, factory workers, the environment and the U.S. economy](http://abbeypost.com/blog/top-5-reasons-made-measure-beats-ready-wear/#sthash.z5EJS2cg.dpbs) (<http://abbeypost.com/blog/top-5-reasons-made-measure-beats-ready-wear/#sthash.z5EJS2cg.dpbs>).

We're using [the latest technology](http://abbeypost.com/how-it-works) (<http://abbeypost.com/how-it-works>) to make your clothes to your exact measurements. Delivered to you in 2 weeks or less. No more trips to the tailor. No more wishing you had a seamstress to make all your clothes for you. No more "good enough."

Once upon a time, the industrial revolution did away with Made to Measure. Now high technology is bringing it back to people just like you and me. And now you can be a part of the NEW closet revolution!

[AbbeyPost Made to Measure](http://abbeypost.com/shop) (<http://abbeypost.com/shop>) opens to the public on April 1, but you can get a [sneak peek](http://abbeypost.com/shop) (<http://abbeypost.com/shop>) (and special discount) [here](http://abbeypost.com/shop) (<http://abbeypost.com/shop>)! Or, just [sign up](http://abbeypost.com/shop) (<http://abbeypost.com/shop>) for all the latest info on getting perfectly fitting clothes, made of the highest quality materials and craftsmanship, delivered fast, and at department store prices.

Because you deserve it.

We'll see you there!

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