

Who Wore It Better?

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The 19th century was a great time to be alive; events such as the Napoleonic Wars, the War of 1812, the Civil War, and the start of the women's rights movement helped us get to where everyone is today. Innovations were everywhere, and things were moving left and right, but fashion never missed a step and adapted. Menswear in the 19th century consisted of three main pieces, as seen in figure 1, which were the tailcoat, vest, and trousers. The tailcoat in figure 1 is a vibrant blue color and made out of silk, while the vest is white and made out of what appears to be cotton, and the trousers are also white and made out of linen. This was a man's suit back in the day, and according to the MET Museum, the silhouette determined for women of the period was faintly reflected in men's high-waisted trousers accompanied by a jacket cut away to hug the rib cage and to stop short of the natural waist. Men who could afford to buy one of those suits would wear one, it was not only for the elite, but the elite would more than likely get their suits made out of more expensive materials.

The 20th century came onto the scene 100 years later and things did not look much different. The world was preparing for a war that would be so massive that two of them seemed unfathomable. Advances in technology had changed the standards of living and fashion was once again moving forward. The years of the corset keeping everyone's posture great were a thing of the past and menswear was evolving. A great contributor to such a change was Henry Sands Brooks, founder of a store known as H. & D.H. Brooks & Co., which became the place to go for off-the-rack suits, an early version of ready-to-wear (Kroll, 2006.) After Henry S. Brooks died in 1833, the store was refurbished and enlarged by his sons-Henry Jr., Daniel, John, Elisha, and Edward-"Brooks Brothers" for the business in 1850 (Boyer, n.d.) The advent of the sewing machine helped the business boom because the turnaround time for a garment to be made was six days of hand sewing, but now it took about three days (Kindell, 2018.) The company was very

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innovative and this helped them leave a mark on the American consumer, which later on helped them gain top customers. Abraham Lincoln wore a Brooks Brothers coat to his second Inauguration-and was wearing it again the night he was assassinated. Later, Charles Lindbergh celebrated his famous flight in a Brooks Brothers suit, and Clark Gable frequently placed custom orders (Kroll, 2006.) It comes as no surprise that their suits have always been elegant, as seen in figure 2, which shows an all-black Brooks Brothers Tuxedo from 1948 made out of wool and trimmed with silk. It is a piece that has withstood the test of time because anyone can put that on look ready for any event. Nowadays things are not looking so good for Brooks Brothers as they have been struggling with declining sales and a reported \$600 million debt load which could lead them to file for bankruptcy (Palmieri, 2020.)

Figure 1 and figure 2 look completely different, as they should because they are over 100 years apart from one another. Figure 1 depicts a tight-fitting suit with a blue tailcoat, white vest, and white trousers while figure 2 depicts a loose-fitting suit with a black blazer and black trousers. The blazer in figure 2 has a peak lapel while the tailcoat in figure 1 appears to have a notch lapel. Even with all those differences and having been made so far apart, one can see a couple of similarities. Both suits are double-breasted, but the main one to notice is that Brooks Brothers did not try to redesign the suit, all they did was improve upon it as time went on. The man's suit from the 1940s (figure 2) has all the fundamentals from the man's suit from the 1820s (figure 1,) and all that figure 2 did was remove the vest which some people still wear to this day. In short, everyone is always improving fashion because sometimes someone is onto something, but it needs a little tweaking.

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Images



Figure 1: Ensemble/ca. 1820/Wool, Cotton,
Silk, Linen/1976.235.3a-e



Figure 2: Tuxedo/1948/Wool,
Silk/2009.300.7053a, b

References

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