

Clothes and the Man Alan Russer

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Clothes and the Man

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CLOTHES AND THE MAN

The Principles of Fine Men's Dress

Alan Flusser

Villard Books  New York 1992

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Contents

Introduction **XI**

I	The 1930s: The Height of Elegance	3
II	Suits, Sports Jackets, Odd Trousers, and Topcoats	19
III	The Dress Shirt	67
IV	Neckwear	83
V	Footwear and Hosiery	95
VI	Accessories: Suspenders, Belts, Handkerchiefs and Jewelry	109
VII	Formal Wear	123
VIII	Headwear	133
IX	Classic Sportswear	143
X	The Wardrobe: Fall/Winter and Spring/Summer	156
	Glossary	187
	Index	208

V

Footwear and Hosiery

“Play not the peacock, looking everywhere about you to see if you are well decked, if your shoes fit well, if your stockings sit neatly, and your clothes handsomely.”

—GEORGE WASHINGTON, *Rules of Courtesy and Decency of Behaviour*

It is entirely likely that prehistoric footwear consisted primarily of tree bark, plant leaves, or animal hides tied around the bottom of the foot simply to provide protection against rocks and rough terrain. However, it wasn't long before footwear became a touch more sophisticated while at the same time growing somewhat more attractive, to the extent that, as with a hat, a man's status could be judged merely on the basis of what he wore on his feet. In fact, many relief paintings from Egyptian times depict fine-looking sandals of interlacing palms and papyrus leaves worn by royalty along the order of Tutankhamen.

Eventually leather, which is pliable, durable, and was easy for man to obtain, became the dominant material used in footwear. As it is a living substance and therefore breathes, it allows air to circulate freely about the feet, adding appreciably to the comfort of the wearer.

Historically, the lower classes continued to wear sandals while those of higher position and rank chose to wear intricately designed slippers. In the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, when men's legs suddenly became a focal point of fashion, shoes took on new importance, as highly decorated bows and buckles were added to make them more attractive.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, the pendulum had begun to swing the other way, as shoes took on a more functional look. Styles became rigid, almost clumsy; colors vanished; and footwear was, for the most part, to be found only in black and brown leathers.

In this country, Massachusetts quickly established itself as the shoemaking center of the Colonies. Thomas Beard, who settled in Salem soon after arriving on the *Mayflower* in 1629, is widely considered the pioneer of the American shoe industry. Following his lead, other craftsmen set up shop in many of the small towns surrounding Salem. The industry grew, and by 1768, nearly thirteen thousand pairs of shoes were being exported each year by Massachusetts shoemakers to the other Colonies.

Up until the middle of the nineteenth century, shoes were slowly and painstakingly produced by hand. But as soon as Elias Howe's sewing machine was adapted to the tasks of shoemaking, the industry began to join the Industrial Revolution.

In the meantime, footwear fashions ran the gamut from slippers to boots, which became popular in the early part of the nineteenth century. There were boots with spring heels, developed in 1835, and there were boots with no heels at all, popular in the middle part of the century. Boots began to fade from the scene somewhat just before the turn of the century, at about the same time that the rubber heel was first introduced.

During the first twenty-five years of this century, shoes were rather dull and lackluster. But by the time the 1930s rolled around footwear with more style and imagination began to make a long-awaited comeback. American manufacturers copied styles of English custom shoemakers, who were turning out new models every few months. Brogues became popular and once again color was added to footwear, with black-and-white "co-respondent" shoes (that is, shoes with contrasting colors). From the 1940s to the 1950s a wide variety of shoes existed, yet styles did not change much from year to year and one simply wore shoes until they were no longer in good enough condition to be worn any longer.

It wasn't until the 1960s and the advent of the Peacock Revolution that shoe fashion began to change radically, with new models introduced each season. The choices were mind-boggling: platform shoes; sleek, pointed English mod shoes of wild, iridescent colors; boots, from cowboy to hiking to frontier styles; and sneakers. Italian shoes—sleek and lightweight styles produced to go with the European cut suits—flooded the market and immediately became a favorite of the American man. Today the choice remains wide as to the kind of shoe a man can wear. There are men who wear

practically nothing but sneakers or running shoes, while others enjoy the opportunity to change styles with each business and social engagement.

Hosiery, stockings, or leggings began simply as a binding or wrapping of the legs in order to provide protection. In Europe during the Middle Ages, people tied coarse cloth or skins around their legs, holding them up at the knees by the use of garters. By the eleventh century, when breeches were shortened to the knee, the lower leg was covered by a fitted cloth known as “chausses” or “hose” (probably derived from the Old English *hosa*).

At the time America was first colonized, early settlers were wearing heavy homespun woolen stockings in russets, blues, browns, and gray-greens. For the most part, styles in hosiery closely mirrored the styles being worn back in Europe, with the wealthier Colonial dressers able to afford hosiery of fine silk.

It wasn't until the early to middle nineteenth century, however, that knitting mills were established in this country, at which time the stocking industry found a home in several Connecticut towns. By this time, trousers had made their descent to just above the tops of the shoes, and as a result, hose was shortened accordingly. Over the next few decades, due to a need for extra warmth and comfort, hose length extended up, over the calf of the leg, and became known as the “sock” (probably from the Latin *soccus*, which was a light covering for the foot).

It was not until the twentieth century, though, that the hosiery industry began to flourish, as cotton, wool, and combinations of these fabrics in vivid colors and patterns caught the fashionable man's fancy. It was also during this period that sports hose in knitted wool, mixtures of wool and silk, and wool and cotton gained in popularity. This interest in patterns continued until the 1950s, at which time synthetic yarn for hosiery was introduced, permitting the manufacture of stretch hosiery, one-size-fits-all. Retailers, pleased to be able to reduce their inventory, didn't care that the hose was producible only in solid colors. Combined with the newfound interest in patterned trousers, solid hose regained popularity and fancy hose faded from the fashion scene. The industry has yet to recover. While today more patterns and colors are available for sports hosiery, a man looking for stylish dress hosiery has his work cut out for him.

Shoes are perhaps the most functional item in a man's wardrobe. And yet, in addition to serving a utilitarian purpose, shoes can often be the most obvious sign of a man's sense of style and social position.

As George Frazier often remarked, "Wanna know if a guy is well-dressed? Look down." And as Diana Vreeland, Frazier's counterpart in the women's fashion world and special consultant to the Metropolitan Museum's Costume Institute, advises concerning the development of a wardrobe: "First, I'd put money into shoes. No variety, just something I could wear with everything Whatever it is you wear, I think shoes are terribly important."

And they are. They reveal a good deal about the person wearing them. A man who buys fine leather shoes today shows that he respects quality, that he has confidence in his taste and in his future. Like other items of quality apparel, a well-made pair of shoes will give years of fine service if they are properly cared for. They must be of a design, however, that remains stylish through the years.

QUALITY SHOES

The key to a quality shoe is the way it's made and what it's made of. Eric Lobb, the great-grandson of the legendary English bootmaker John Lobb, discusses the criteria that go into the construction of a well-made shoe in his book *The Last Must Come First*. The last is the wooden form around which a shoe is made; hence it also determines the shape of the shoe itself. Lobb's pun, which was directed at the art of custom shoemaking, is actually a good guide for buying ready-made shoes. Examine first the last, or the shape of the shoe.

The shape of a shoe should follow as closely as possible the actual shape of one's own foot. The foot is not a particularly attractive feature of the anatomy, and a well-styled shoe will work to diminish its ungainliness by making it appear sleek and smaller. Think of the way a glove fits the hand: there are no excess bulges or gaps. A shoe should be cut similarly: no bulbous toes or crevices in front, a smooth line of leather following closely along the instep down to the edge of the toe. A custom-made shoe is designed to

follow the shape of the foot so closely that the outside line and sole are curved (like the foot), while the inside, instead of being symmetrical, follows an almost straight line. A last of this sort in a ready-made shoe is a sign of elegance and knowledge on the part of the manufacturer.

The sole must also work to lighten the effect of the shoe. A heavy weighted sole or double soles on a shoe make the foot appear thick and inelegant. The double-soled shoes that many businessmen wear today, either in a heavy-grain leather or with wing-tip perforations, were marketed after World War II by manufacturers who based their design on army issue. These shoes really seem more appropriate for storming an enemy camp than for strolling along a city street. Look for a shoe with a sole no thicker than one-quarter inch. The heels should be low and follow the line of the shoe; they should not be designed as lifts. Most important, both sole and heel should be clipped close to the edge of the shoe with no obvious welt around the outside. Used chiefly for fine-quality wing-tips, cap-toes, and brogues, the welt is that narrow strip of leather stitched to the shoe upper and insole. The sole of the shoe is stitched to the welt, which gives the shoe a sturdiness and allows it to be resoled. In less expensive shoes, the sole is cemented to the upper. The sole's function is simply protection and support. It should not interfere with the shoe's shape or be overly visible.

The vamp is what one sees most on a shoe. It is the piece of leather that covers the top of the foot. By keeping this piece of leather low on the instep (a short vamp), the front of the shoe will appear shorter, making the entire foot seem smaller. This deaccentuation of length gives the foot a sleeker look. Naturally, the vamp should not be cut so low that the shoe can easily fall off.

In sum, a man should look to purchase only those shoes that have a small, well-shaped toe; thin, closely clipped soles and heels; and a vamp that is short enough to maintain a refined look.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT SHOE

The most important factor involved in the choice of a man's shoe besides fit is its appropriateness to the style of clothing he is wearing. The finest makers of shoes today are the English and the

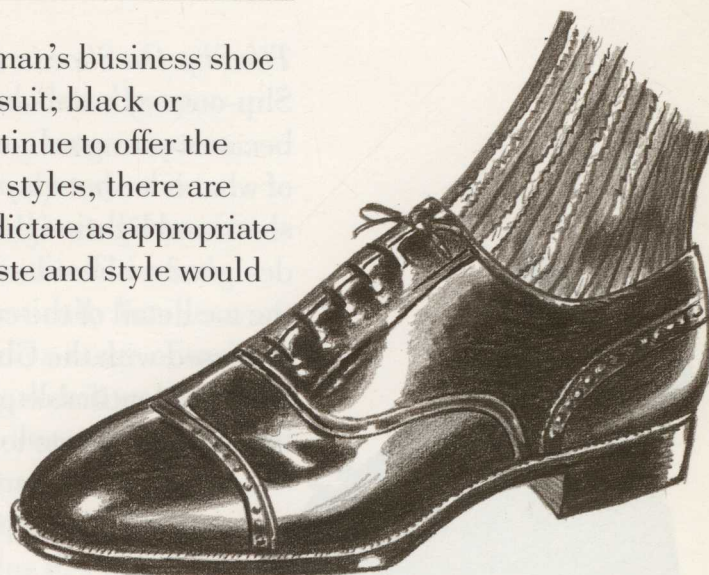
Italians, but for the updated American style of dress, only the English-style shoes (though they may be made in either Italy or America) should be worn. This is so for two good reasons. First, the shape of the updated American-style clothing is on the fuller side, and thus the shoe ought to be on the fuller side as well, if for no other reason than that of balance. Also, the updated American-style clothing uses fabric of greater weight and texture, and it is therefore necessary that the shoe correspond to these elements. Italian shoes are trim-lined and lightweight, made to go with the European-cut suit, and as a result are totally inappropriate to the American style of dress.

The Italian ready-to-wear men's shoe industry began as an offshoot of the women's industry. It brought with it an interest in lightness, softness, and color, criteria that have always ruled the women's market. The fine calfskin uppers are glued to the leather soles with no welts and no inner soles to encumber the sleek look. They are made almost completely by hand with a craftsmanship and finesse that is unequaled elsewhere.

On the other hand, the British men's shoe industry came into its own immediately following the end of World War I, with the companies that had made army boots turning to the commercial marketplace to make up for the loss of their military contracts. The qualities of strength and durability that had made their boots legendary during the war were now built into shoes for the consumer. Unlike people in Italy, where the climate is generally dry and warm, the English have always had to contend with the worst elements of rain and cold. Their shoes were thus constructed of heavier skin that was not glued to the sole but sewn with a leather welt. British manufacturers, moreover, inserted a second leather sole—a middle sole between the outer sole and the inner—to make the shoes even more durable. All this interest in protection and durability gives the British shoe and its American offspring a fuller, more solid and substantial, look—the perfect balance for the updated American style of clothing.

This is not to advocate heavy, cloddy shoes, however. To the contrary: shoes should look neither too heavy nor too light. Nor should the style and color make them look too contrived. Trying to match the color of the shoes to the color of the suit is a woman's

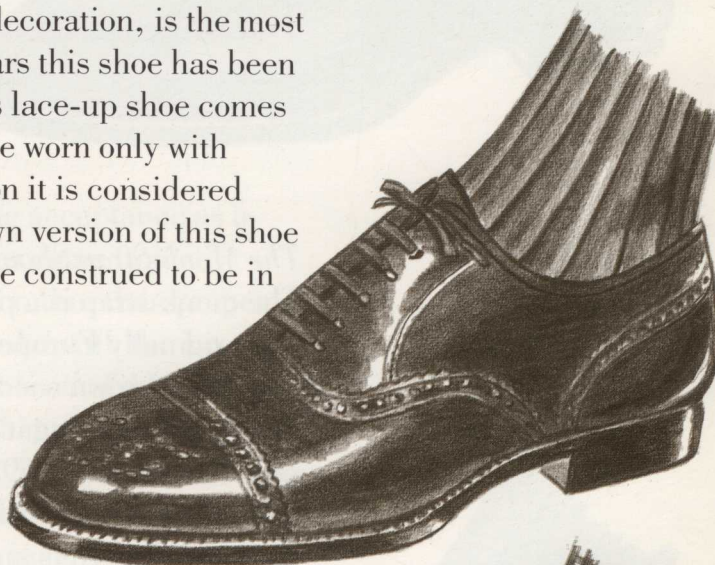
concept that has no place in the boardroom. A man's business shoe should never be a lighter shade than that of the suit; black or medium to dark brown have always and will continue to offer the proper balance to the business suit. As for shoe styles, there are approximately seven that tradition and good taste dictate as appropriate for business wear, and a man concerned with taste and style would do well to choose from among them.



The plain cap-toe brogue.

The Cap-Toe Brogue

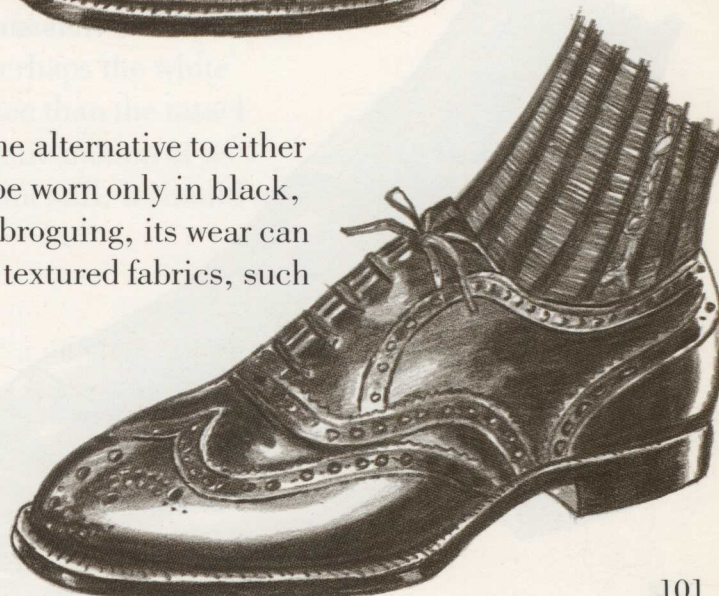
The cap-toe, either plain or with a medallion decoration, is the most dressy business shoe one can wear, and for years this shoe has been the staple of the businessman's wardrobe. This lace-up shoe comes in black and various shades of brown. It is to be worn only with business suits of worsteds or flannels. In Boston it is considered perfectly proper to wear a highly polished brown version of this shoe with a navy suit, whereas in London it would be construed to be in poor taste to wear this combination.



The perforated cap-toe brogue.

The Wing-Tip Shoe

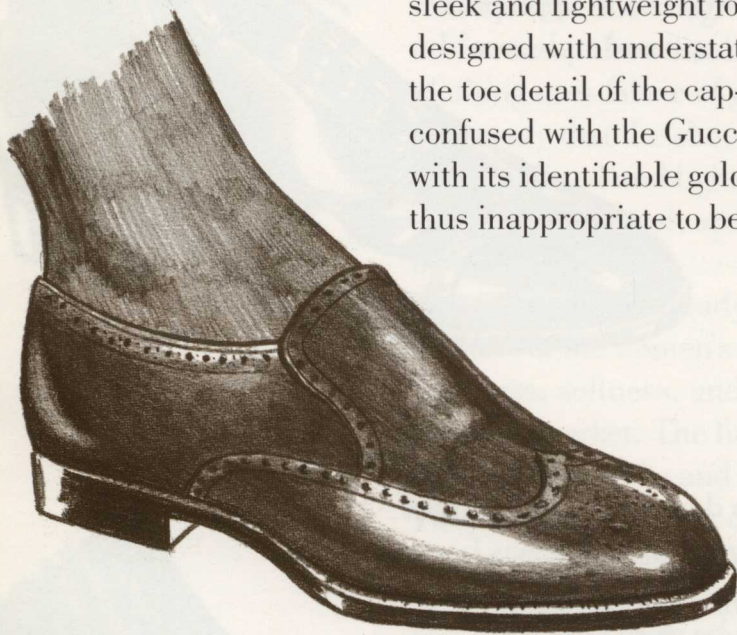
The traditional wing-tip or brogue shoe is a fine alternative to either the plain or the medallion cap-toe. It should be worn only in black, brown, or cordovan, and because of its heavy broguing, its wear can be expanded to include suits made with more textured fabrics, such as tweeds, chevots, and flannels.



The wing-tip brogue.

The Slip-On Shoe or Dress Loafer

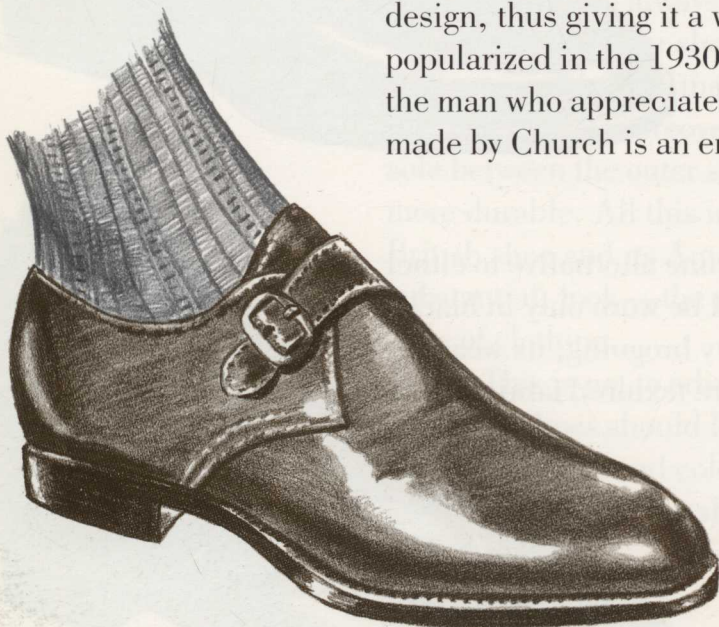
Slip-ons or Loafers have practically taken over the shoe industry because young men appreciate the convenience they offer. Yet much of what is worn today is of Italian style derivation and is much too sleek and lightweight for American-style suits. The simple slip-on, designed with understatement and using the shape and a version of the toe detail of the cap-toe or wing-tip style, should in no way be confused with the Gucci-style Loafer, for instance. This style shoe, with its identifiable gold or silver buckle, is far too casual and is thus inappropriate to be worn with the dressy business suit.



The dress slip-on.

The Monk-Strap Shoe

The monk-strap is a plain-toed, side-buckled shoe whose design was originally European. It is available in black or brown calf or chocolate-brown suede. Its plain front balances the sportiness of its design, thus giving it a wide range of sartorial applications. First popularized in the 1930s by European custom shoemakers, it is for the man who appreciates a little extra panache. The suede version made by Church is an enduring classic.

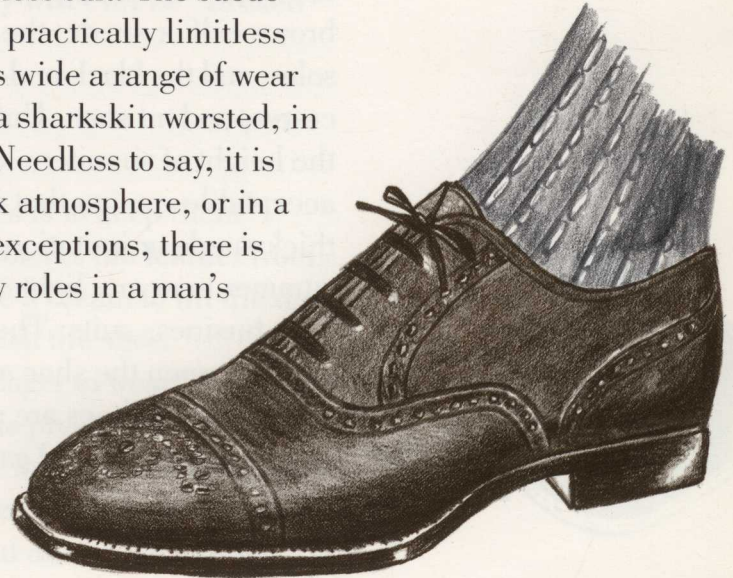


The calf monk-strap shoe.

The Suede Shoe

Until the Duke of Windsor, suede shoes were considered proper only for country attire. Once he took them to town, however, men immediately recognized the kind of soft elegance a suede shoe could offer in juxtaposition with the severe worsted suit. It remains the most elegant accompaniment to the business suit. The suede tie-up—either a wing-tip or cap-toe—offers practically limitless versatility, for it is a proper complement to as wide a range of wear as that encompassed by a seersucker suit to a sharkskin worsted, in any color from gray to green, in any season. Needless to say, it is probably not the shoe to wear in a stuffy bank atmosphere, or in a drenching spring downpour. But with these exceptions, there is probably no other shoe that can play so many roles in a man's wardrobe.

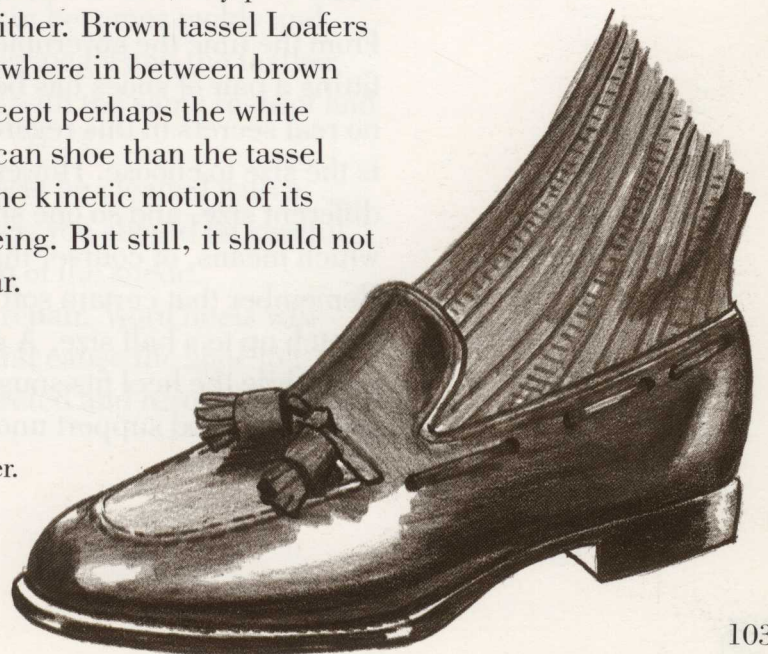
The suede cap-toe.



The Tassel Loafer

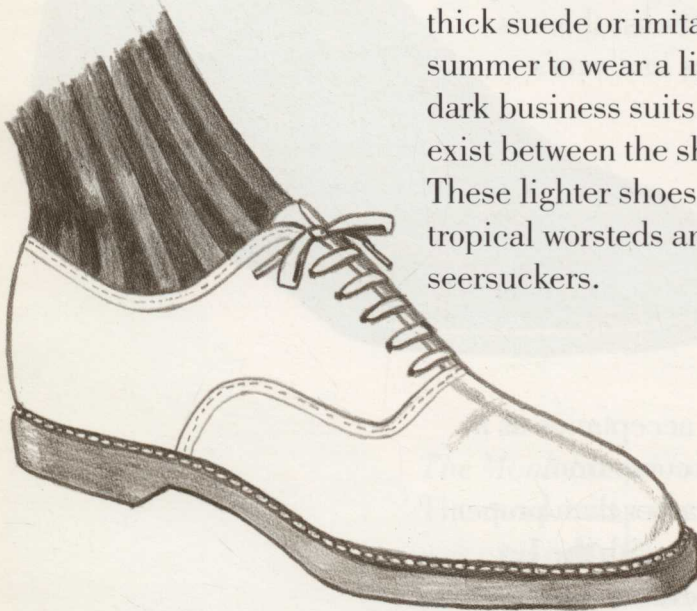
This originally sporty shoe has gained increasing acceptance as a shoe appropriate for business wear. The push has come from Americans' growing penchant for sporty comfort rather than proper styles. The black tassel Loafer—originally popular with the Ivy League set in the 1920s—offers about the same level of dressiness as the blue blazer, which itself falls on a somewhat ambiguous line between the business suit and the sports jacket. Thus, any place the blazer is not quite right, this shoe is not either. Brown tassel Loafers are even more sporty, with cordovan somewhere in between brown and black. There is probably no shoe (except perhaps the white buck) that has more identity as an American shoe than the tassel Loafer. It remains a lovely, casual shoe, the kinetic motion of its tassel projecting a jaunty sense of well-being. But still, it should not be confused with proper business footwear.

The tassel Loafer.



Summer Shoes

Today most men choose to wear their brogue business shoes twelve months a year and are quite correct to do so. However, for those who prefer a change of tempo when the summer months arrive and their seersucker or cotton suits come out of the closet, there are some alternatives. These include the cap-toe or wing-tip shoe in medium brown calf or suede; the classic white buck lace-up with red rubber soles; and the black-and-white or brown-and-white suede and leather co-respondent shoe. Unfortunately, the co-respondent shoe, perhaps the height of summer elegance, is difficult to find today in an acceptable version that uses white buckskin instead of the heavier thick suede or imitation leather. While there is the temptation in summer to wear a lighter-colored shoe, none of these look well with dark business suits. The principle that a similarity of tone ought to exist between the shoe and the suit should prevail even in summer. These lighter shoes are meant to be worn with the more mid-shade tropical worsteds and gabardines or the more casual poplins and seersuckers.



The white buck oxford.

FIT

From the time the government banned the use of X-ray machines, fitting a pair of shoes has become strictly a matter of feel. There are no real secrets in this regard. The size that feels comfortable for you is the size to choose. However, most men's feet are each of a slightly different size, and so one should buy the shoe to fit the larger foot, which means, of course, that both shoes should be tried on.

Remember that certain soft leathers, particularly in Loafers, will stretch up to a half size. A good fit should allow one to wiggle one's toes while the heel fits snugly into the back of the shoe. There should be good support underneath the instep, and the shoe should

be widest at the ball, where one's foot is the widest. Also, make sure there is enough room under the toe box so that there is no pressure on the top of your toes, and see that the insole is flat and extends to the shoe upper.

Shoes should feel comfortable from the moment you try them on. If they're not, it's highly unlikely that they will ever be "broken in" entirely to your liking.

CARE

The best way to care for a pair of leather shoes is to keep them polished and give them ample rest. Polish protects the leather from water and from scuffing. To clean leather, use a cream to lift the dirt and then follow with a wax to protect and polish the shoe.

Many men buy new shoes and are so eager to wear them that they forget to rub on a first coat of polish. This pre-conditioning of the leather will increase the shoe's resistance to dirt and water and is perhaps the most important first step in preventative maintenance.

Leather absorbs moisture. This is what allows it to stretch and why it is so important for shoes to be given time to rest. Never wear a pair of shoes for more than one day at a time. Leather breathes like cotton or wool. It needs at least a day or two to dry out, in order to release trapped moisture (if your shoes do get wet, be sure and keep them away from sources of excessive heat, such as a radiator), and to return to its original shape. By alternating shoes and keeping shoe trees in them, there is no limit on the years they can last. But if shoes are worn day after day and especially if they have not been adequately polished, the skin becomes moldy and attenuated until finally the suppleness disappears and the leather begins to crack. Leather is a skin. Treat it with the same respect and care you give your own.

If you have suede shoes, they can best be cleaned with a suede brush or artist's gum eraser. However, you should be careful not to over-rub, as this will destroy the nap of the suede.

It is best to keep shoes in constant repair. Worn heels will throw one's whole body out of alignment and cause the shoe to stretch out of shape. Shoes should be reheeled and resoled as soon as this appears to be required.

THE FINER POINTS

Skins

It is the skin used in the upper part of the shoe that more than any other factor determines the quality and cost of that particular shoe. The softer, more supple the leather, the higher the quality. Supple leather will last longer, as it does not easily crack. Such leather generally comes from smaller animals—kids and calves—which means there is less of it; hence its higher cost.

Calfskin is leather made from the hide of young cattle. It is lightweight, supple and fine-grained, and is generally used for quality business shoes. Cowhide is somewhat heavier than calfskin. It can be grained, embossed, or finished to enhance its natural texture and is generally found in casual shoes and boots. Kidskin is made from the skin of young goats. It is soft and light and is generally used for dress and tailored slip-ons. Suede is leather that is finished on the flesh side of the skin in order to produce a nap. The finest suede today is made from the male deer (buckskin). Cordovan is leather from the rump of a horse, and it is distinguished by its red-brown color. It is perhaps the most durable of all leathers. Patent leather has a synthetic surface that produces a glossy finish, and it is used mostly for dressy, evening shoes.

Before purchasing a shoe, feel the leather. Bend the shoe and watch how the leather moves. It should be soft and flexible and return quickly to its original shape.

Soles and Linings

The surest marks of a fine-quality shoe are leather soles and heels and leather linings within the shoe. It is said that a man exerts as much pressure on the soles of his feet when walking as an elephant does. Whether or not this is completely accurate, the pressure per square inch is nevertheless enormous. The sole provides a kind of shock absorber, and good leather does this better than almost any other material. A leather heel provides further cushioning with just enough give to make walking pleasant. Rubber soles can also cushion but because they will not slide on pavement, friction is built up when walking. Over a period of time, this can make your feet feel hot and uncomfortable.

Inside the shoe, the extra layer of leather that covers the interior offers further protection from the cold and gives greater structural support to the shoe. It also increases the shoe's life span. Aesthetically, a leather inner lining is a handsome detail that separates the fine quality shoe from the mass market model.

The Waist

The waist is the narrow part of the last where the front and back of the shoe come together under the instep. Like the vamp, a small waist can be helpful in creating the appearance of a more elegant shoe. Instead of having a blocky look, a small-waisted shoe curves smoothly in and then out, giving a cleaner, more streamlined look.

Vamp Decorations

Loafers with buckles or chains across the vamp have become increasingly popular since the Gucci Loafer was first marketed in the United States in the mid-1960s. One should be careful not to allow these gold or silver decorations to become so large or gaudy that they destroy the integrity of a man's look by drawing immediate attention to his shoes. More effective as vamp decorations are the leather penny saddle (Weejun shoe) or tassels. These work to break up the vamp, thus making it and the shoe look smaller and finer. And yet, because they are made of the same color leather as the shoe, they are not so obvious as to attract attention.

HOSIERY

A pair of hose is meant to keep your feet warm and to prevent irritation from rubbing shoes. This, of course, is the most basic definition of a pair of hose. They can do much more, however. Wear black hose with a dark blue suit, and they only serve their pragmatic purpose. But put on a pair of burgundy wool hose, and suddenly you've created aesthetic interest where none previously existed. Instead of a splash of color just at the top of the suit where the tie and handkerchief fall, you now have a subtle response at the bottom.

As a general principle, the dressier the clothing one is wearing, the finer the hose should be. This ranges from sheer silk or cotton lisle in formal wear, to fine ribbed wool or cotton in business wear, to cashmere or wool argyles for sports jackets and odd trousers. The hose should reflect the level of formality of the suit. One doesn't wear argyle socks with a pin-striped worsted, nor would one wear fine cotton lisle with a Harris tweed sports jacket.

The best type of hose is that made from natural fibers—cotton or wool. These materials allow a better flow of air, cutting down on perspiration and heat. When they are thin, as they should be, they are naturally delicate. However, because of the introduction of nylon reinforced heels and toes, your hose should serve you a reasonable length of time.

The length of hose ought to be either calf height or above the calf. Ankle-high hose are definitely to be avoided. Nothing looks worse when a man's legs are crossed than an exposed patch of skin separating the top of his hose and the trouser bottoms. The surest antidote is above-calf hose or calf-high socks worn with garters. While garters may sound like a bother, they do keep up one's hose and free one from having to wear high socks, thus eliminating their stockinglike sensation.

Good dressing dictates that the color of hose (or one of the predominant colors in their pattern) should relate to something above the waist, such as a tie, shirt, or handkerchief, with the hose always on the darker side of that color. Generally, the best dressers try to do something a little special with their hose. Anyone, they figure, can wear hose that match his trousers. They look for hose with interesting colors and patterns. Unfortunately, the wonderful clockface French lisle hose of the 1940s and '50s are nearly extinct, as are the fine-gauged ribbed English wool embroidered hose. Still, with a little enterprise, one can find a fine two- or three-color bird's-eye or other subtle pattern that will accomplish the same end. In these cases, the accent color of the pattern ought to relate to something above the waist.

Though the easy way out may be merely to stick to plain blue or black, why not try a medium gray wool with a dark suit? Or perhaps burgundy, or even a subtle pattern? It won't only be your feet that will enjoy the change.