

DRESSING BY THE BOOKS: GETTING THE WORD TO MEN

By Michael Gross

Oct. 19, 1985



See the article in its original context from
October 19, 1985, Section 1, Page 52 Buy Reprints

[VIEW ON TIMESMACHINE](#)

TimesMachine is an exclusive benefit for home
delivery and digital subscribers.

About the Archive

This is a digitized version of an article from The Times's print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. To preserve these articles as they originally appeared, The Times does not alter, edit or update them.

Occasionally the digitization process introduces transcription errors or other problems; we are continuing to work to improve these archived versions.

Good books on men's fashion have long been difficult, if not impossible to find. "Six months ago, there were none," according to Star Laurence, a senior editor at W.W. Norton.

But this fall, there are four new style manuals for men. The designer Alan Flusser's just-published "Clothes and the Man: The Principles of Fine Men's Dress" (Villard Books, \$29.95) and "Man at His Best" by William Wilson and the editors of Esquire magazine (Addison Wesley, \$24.95) are the newest reference works on male style. They join two books published last month, G. Bruce Boyer's "Elegance: A Guide To Quality in Menswear" (W.W. Norton, \$18.95), and James Wagnvoord's "Personal Style: The Man's Guide to Fashion, Fitness, Travel and Entertaining" (Holt Rinehart and Winston, \$16.95).

Four such similar books have all appeared this season, publishers say, because of the new commercial strength of men's fashion magazines.

Marc Jaffe, the editor-in-chief of Villard, pointed to "the surge of circulation of magazines like GQ." Mr. Laurence added that magazine "fashion coverage has been a stone rolling downhill gathering pages and money." Mr. Boyer also cited "the yuppie phenomenon."

"On the one hand," he said, "this is just another example, like Rolex watches, BMWs and Cuisinarts. On the other hand, consumer goods are getting so expensive that the smart consumer is turning towards quality."

Previous books in the men's fashion field have often focused on business dress. The titles of John T. Molloy's "Dress for Success," for example, and Egon von Furstenberg's "The Power Look," indicated their get-ahead-in-business bias.

These new books take a broader approach. "In the sixties and seventies," Alan Flusser said in an interview, "all the rules were ignored. The notion of doing your own thing was the main theme. I believe people should do their own thing, but the sixties contributed to an incredible malaise of taste. Proper style was thrown to the winds." Proper style is precisely what he and his fellow authors aim to teach by reviving and demystifying classic traditions as well as offering detailed advice on

how to tie a tie and buy a suit. Otherwise they a're as different as silk and wool. Their divergence on the history of the cummerbund is but one example. Mr. Flusser says it was originally a sash worn in India, brought west by the British, then used, pleats up, to hold theater tickets. Mr. Boyer concurs on the latter point. Mr. Wagonvoord says cummerbunds were designed for catching crumbs at formal dinners. Esquire's volume is mum on the subject.

Reflecting its source, "Man at His Best" looks and reads much like a yuppie lifestyle and fashion magazine. Its longest section, on wardrobe, is highly detailed. Illustrations of suit and coat fabrics and patterns and a section on storage are interesting features, but while the book is handsomely designed, much of its content will be familiar to regular Esquire readers.

In "Elegance," Mr. Boyer, an ex-English literature professor and long-time fashion editor of Town & Country magazine, takes a broader look at male style, tackling its evolution, psychology and sociology. While he includes information on packing and garment maintenance, his affluent attitude is more apparent in chapters on The Ascot, Cashmere, Harris Tweed, The Polo Coat, Top Hats, Umbrellas and Vests. Not that there aren't surprises. Filled with such bright trivia as a history of madras and an ode in praise of polyester by John Updike, "Elegance" is as much a book for reading as reference.

"Personal Style" is a purer how-to manual covering grooming, hair care, exercise, travel and entertaining as well as clothes. It offers easy advice on its wide variety of subjects. Partially subsidized by Jacqueline Cochran, a fragrance and cosmetic company that is using the book as a gift-with-purchase promotion, its opening section on grooming features illustrations of various Jacqueline Cochran products. "Personal Style" is nevertheless an instructive volume.

Where Messrs. Boyer and Flusser dote on upper-class dandies like the Duke of Windsor, and Esquire concentrates on northeast city style, Mr. Wagonvoord takes a more democratic approach. Style, he said in a recent conversation, is not "just wardrobe, or people in southern California would have no style by New York City standards. People out there don't know how to tie ties." Mr. Wagonvoord, who has

written over 40 nonfiction books on many subjects, quotes experts in each area he covers. "If you want to learn how to bone a fish," he explained, "find a waiter in a good fish restaurant."

Alan Flusser also talked with experts before writing "Clothes and the Man," but he'd been doing that all his life. "I always sought out the master," he said, recalling the purchase of his first custom-made garments as a teenager, then his graduation to Fred Astaire's London tailor and Adolphe Menjou's shoemaker.

From trilby hat to formal pump, Mr. Flusser, a Coty Award winner, shares his knowledge in precise detail in his illustrated, oversize volume. Useful sections include a gatefold display of shirting fabrics and detailed guides to fit and style. Like Mr. Boyer, the designer writes knowledgably on the history of men's fashion, but his emphasis is on the practical: how clothes work to hide or enhance the body and how to discern quality manufacture.

"People aren't interested in fashion," Mr. Flusser said. "They want to know how to dress." Then, with a laugh, he added a warning about the consequences of sartorial knowledge. Clothes are "an expensive habit. It's worse than drugs," he said.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section 1, Page 52 of the National edition with the headline: DRESSING BY THE BOOKS: GETTING THE WORD TO MEN