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Hand crafted bespoke tailoring

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BESPOKE TAILORING: THE LUXURY AND HERITAGE WE CAN AFFORD

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the conflict between hand crafted bespoke tailoring and computerised mass market tailoring in the UK, in order to assess the overall place for this traditional technique within fashion design. It supports a need for retaining the heritage of traditional skills practiced in bespoke tailoring and justifies this as a luxury the consumer can and should afford. The research emphasises the pedagogic approach to the delivery and understanding of tailoring technology in the fashion design courses at University of Huddersfield. This understanding underpins the student's perception of pattern cutting, fit, sizing, proportion and an overall approach to making clothes. Fashion tutors at Huddersfield believe that when students' are taught to appreciate the luxury, heritage and skill of bespoke tailoring, it equips them with the confidence and expertise to create any type of garment.

The luxury of the traditional tailoring process is the time, craft and experience instilled into each garment and bespoke tailoring as a fashionable look had a revived popularity in the late 1990's and 2000's.

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Many fashion designers such as Vivienne Westwood and Alexander McQueen pushed the look of tailoring and the craft traditions of bespoke to the forefront of directional fashion, which in turn provoked a resurgence of interest in the craft. In an interview in English Vogue, Vivienne Westwood said:

“I don't understand this desperate need to always move forward. To strive for the new is the most conformist thing you can do. Everyone can tell you about what is new and clever, but no-one can tell you what is good! There is a myth that the past is irrelevant, that progress is the only thing” (Holgate, 1998).

The article analyses if and how the bespoke industry has incorporated new and computerised technology and in so doing considers how the fashion industry could determine the future of tailoring either through fashion's emphasis on it as a look, or in the vast advances in technological development that could enhance it, in order to make bespoke more widely available.

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Tailoring as it is perceived today began in the thirteenth century when the first coats became fashionable, requiring skilled labourers to sew together by hand, the cloth cut pieces. The labourers eventually took the name 'Tailor' from the French 'Tailleur' meaning 'to cut'. The term bespoke is derived from the fact that originally the tailor's customer 'bespoke' (or told) his tailor the exact specification for their suit. The tailor then guided his client in their choice of cloth and cut to create a made to measure garment that paid great attention to fit and detail. With the advent of ready-to-wear fashion in the nineteenth century, bespoke tailoring has gradually declined in popularity although tailored 'looks' achieved through bespoke or made-to-measure techniques have been recurrent trends in fashion.

Tailoring can conceal or improve the human form through its use of various technical tricks. Predominantly it is about proportion. Through padding, canvassing, steaming, seaming and darting, a piece of fabric may be manipulated into structural shapes that enhance or alter the human figure and its proportions. A disproportionately large head can be disguised by cutting a suit larger on both shoulders. Hour-glass shapes can be created through hip-padding and bust-padding built into the garment. Ribbons inserted in the lower back of the inside of a jacket can be pulled tight, to accentuate the arch of the back, creating a more curvaceous figure. Tailoring is also deceptive in that it can produce a structured look or a soft look through different uses of interfacing, canvassing, cloth or design.

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A bespoke tailor could be compared to a sculptor, whose medium is cloth. They mould a shell out of cloth that refines, flatters and accentuates the human form. It is a unique service in which the client's individual measurements are taken and applied to the creation of a garment made to their exact size. Particular attention is paid to detail, quality and excellence in the production. A typical bespoke suit from Savile Row at the heart of London's tailoring industry can take up to forty hours to produce. Much of the suit is hand worked with hundreds of stitches on the inside of a jacket that secure the padding and canvassing required to maintain the tailored shape. Cloth is then hand-steamed or pressed into shape.

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The idea of modern tailoring had its origins in the thirteenth century when men's tunics became shorter and closer, fitting to the body. This shaping of the body with fabric pieces evolved into the tailoring techniques in existence today. Throughout subsequent centuries

skills developed in combination with fashion's demands. The contemporary three piece suit has been consistently re-worked. It evolved slowly from the thirteenth century tunic to the seventeenth century frock coat, through to its definitive, classic form in the mid-nineteenth century. This has changed fundamentally little. Bespoke, made-to-measure tailoring achieved prominence in the mid-nineteenth century and maintained its popularity and relevance in fashion until the 1950's when it was preceded by the growing popularity of ready to wear. It has enjoyed several revivals as fashion has recognised its wealth of craft and heritage. This is evidenced in the staid Victorian male interpretation, through to the 1930's glamour of Edward VIII and Hollywood stars, such as Cary Grant's wardrobe. Its contemporary representation has been through 'cool' tailors such as Oswald Boateng and Richard James.

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.FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the 1950's onwards fashionable personalities and fashion designers alike have worn, promoted and designed bespoke tailoring. In the 1960's amid revolutionary fashion changes, Savile Row, situated at the heart of London's bespoke industry, realised it needed to change and this meant moving on in terms of design. This move was spearheaded by the tailor Tommy Nutter, who was backed by trendy personalities such as: Bianca Jagger, Cilla Black

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and Twiggy. The move was to establish a new business on Savile Row that would merge high fashion with a new, exciting energy to the business. His style became emblematic with his creation of the suits worn by The Beatles on their Abbey Road record cover and his much copied white, three piece suit designed for Bianca Jagger's wedding to Mick Jagger.

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In the 1980's with the advent of power dressing tailoring developed in importance, both through bespoke and high street interpretations. Power dressing reflected the glamour of the newly wealthy yuppies and structured clothing such as tailored, fitted jackets, padded shoulders and short skirts represented spirit and affluence, typified in the work of designers like Rifat Ozbek, Jasper Conran and Catherine Walker. An avant-garde force in tailoring and design also emerged in the 1980's through an increasingly experimental approach in British art schools, with graduate designers such as John Galiano and John Flett literally turning tailoring on its head, converting sleeves into trousers and transforming coats from jackets.

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By the 1990's and 2000's there was a strong resurgence of interest in traditional tailoring techniques in designer fashion. Vivienne Westwood, Owen Gaster, Alexander McQueen, Nicolas Ghesquiere at Balenciaga and Alber Elbaz at Lanvin are just a few designer names to have popularised it. To create formal structured clothes designers have had to consider the technology used in bespoke. For instance the 2009 trend, for a hugely shoulder padded look, popularised by designers such as: Ennio Capasa at Costume National and Marc Jacobs at Louis Vuitton, demanded knowledge of traditional padding and canvassing in order to achieve the aesthetic. When asked about this renaissance David Williams, Managing Director at Anderson & Sheppard on Savile Row stated:

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“There has been a great enthusiasm created for Savile Row tailoring by the recent trend for tailored suits of high quality. Younger people have become more interested in the classic styling of the Savile Row suit” (Harris, 1998, p,11).

The evolution of youth fashion in the 1950's was probably the bespoke industry's biggest threat. The ready-to-wear industry established itself, led by Yves Saint Laurent. Its increased popularity, led to rapid developments in the manufacturing industry in order to meet demand. These developments have created a competitive production cycle globally. This shifting geographical focus seems to follow cycles, for instance companies have recently begun to source manufacturing in China, as it afforded cheap labour. These developments have often eroded the survival of tailors and smaller manufacturers. Their survival has often depended on merger and sub-contracting in order to reduce the costs of producing a garment.

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By the late 1990's, a buzz phrase in fashion was 'new technology'. Many fashion students from Universities in the UK, were looking towards traditional cut combined with modern technology as design reference. The increased use of new technology began to affect both mass market and bespoke tailoring. Mass market tailoring is now produced by manufacturers who use a significant input of computerised technology. Well established companies such as Berwin and Berwin, who were situated at the heart of the Leeds tailoring industry, moved all their production to Hungary as it was far more cost effective. Computerised technology helped to afford greater communication between a small design base in Leeds and larger overseas factories.

An analysis of up to the minute advancements in fashion technology and benefits to production helps to determine the relevance of traditional skills. It is undeniable that computer technology has made huge advances in the fashion industry. Designers no longer see it as a hindrance to their work but as a vital part of production. Companies such as Lectra, Gerber and Assyst continuously update their CAD/CAM packages. For instance Assyst have recently joined forces with a German company called Human Solutions to develop their interests in the 3D Body Scanning market in order to remain competitive.

3D Body Scanning is a system that scans the body and produces a series of exact body sizes from which to make an individualised pattern. It has been widely introduced into the corporate tailoring market. This is due to its need to develop garments that fit many different sizes. Computer technology with the increased take up of Production Life Cycle Management Systems (PLM) is also used within mass production this enables the work flow in the production cycle, which consists of costings, lay plans, graded patterns, sketches etc, to be brought together efficiently, on one computer system.

CAM systems have been slow to infiltrate the bespoke tailoring industry. Interviews with Savile Row tailors Anderson & Sheppard and Gieves & Hawkes resulted in a complete denouncement of computerisation:

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“We will not bring in any heavy duty machinery or computer aided manufacture to the workrooms as our history and selling point is the hand craft of tailoring” (Harris, 1998 p.21).

When further questioned about the use of lay planning and storing possibilities of CAM they explained, their lay planning was all done directly onto the fabric and customer’s patterns were stored until they died. These views were strongly reiterated during an educational visit to Gieves and Hawkes, a tutor said:

“Gieves and Hawkes showed us all the patterns for their individual customers which are drafted manually. A tour was given of the workrooms and I watched tailor’s sitting cross legged on tables, using all the traditional manual methods of shaping fabric, pad stitching and hand stitching. No computerised technology was observed” (Irene Spink, 2010).

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In contrast the mass manufacture tailoring industry has embraced modern technology. BMB Menswear in Leeds is an example of a successful tailoring manufacturer who use modern technology to produce quality garments for the designer ready to wear market. A large part of their production has become computerised and they believe the only way to remain competitive is to continue updating with more advanced technology (Spink 2010). Chris Steele, who was Design Manager at Berwin and Berwin in Leeds, felt that the only reason bespoke tailoring on Savile Row does not have computerised technology is because it frightens them, however if shown how to use it and given appropriate training they would soon have it installed within their workrooms.

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The one developing area of technology from which the bespoke industry could benefit, is computerised data collection of anthropometric measurements. Anthropometry is the science and technology of precise body measurements. Over the last forty years human figures have changed dramatically in size due to changes in diet, exercise and lifestyle. For example, consider Diana Dors a 1950's icon with a 2000's icon like Victoria Beckham, one voluptuous, the other skinny.

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It is only recently, through a sizing survey from Size UK, that changes in sizes have altered from the standard national size charts established in the British Standard Specifications in the 1950's. Manufacturers, however are doing their own interpretations of these changes. Kennett and Lindsell, the UK model stand manufacturers are working closely with suppliers and creating stands to their specifications. One problem that could emerge here is the difference in individual manufacturer's interpretation of size specifications. The American company Alvanon INC, have done vast global research on body sizing. At a recent sizing seminar in 2010, Ed Gribbin, President of Alvainsight a division of Alvanon INC, explained the complex 'emotional consumer connection' with sizing:

"20 per cent of fit is technical and the rest is how you communicate it" (Gribbin, 2010 p.24).

New computerised anthropometry systems and virtual reality programmes could bring bespoke tailoring to the high street. The retailer would be able to hold a database of customer statistics and offer a service that produces garments to specific body measurements from ranges shown in stores or displayed on a virtual dummy on the computer. This would present a direct threat to traditional bespoke tailoring. The specialised programmes could promote the

theory of a mass production bespoke industry that provided personalised clothing and tailoring at a more cost effective rate than traditional industries.

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Technology is now so advanced that it is almost possible for mass manufacturers to produce garments that are equivalent to bespoke standards. There are, however problems beginning to emerge that could enforce a rethink of traditional and hand-crafted skills. As new technology takes over, less people have skills in manual pattern cutting and manufacture. The physical sense through touch and feel, in both fabrics and patterns is also being lost.

TAILORING AND EDUCATION

It could be surmised that traditional tailoring skills will be essential until a fail-safe computer system can be designed. This needs to be addressed by both the UK and the global fashion education system. Gieves & Hawkes commented:

‘New blood is needed to carry on traditions, the one problem is that the younger generations do not want to put in the time that it takes to train up, which is four years as an apprentice.’ (Harris (1998), p.26)

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A small number of educational establishments in the UK, have responded to this need by reinstating a thorough understanding of technical skills within their curricula, or have developed courses and specific modules to capitalise on traditional industries. Applied within an academic context it instils students with an appreciation for the traditional skills that need to be acquired in order to construct a tailored garment. This knowledge can be retained when they enter industry ensuring its continuing survival. The fashion design courses at University of Huddersfield, include a compulsory tailoring module. Each student is required to cut and make a tailored jacket. Whilst not a made to measure garment, it is produced to manual bespoke standards. A specialist tailoring tutor and technician guide students through techniques. This understanding underpins the student’s perception of pattern cutting, fit, sizing, proportion and their overall approach to making clothes. It also helps them to fully understand and distinguish between different types of garments. For instance, the technical approach in making a shirt or a draped jersey dress is considerably different to the approach adopted when making a tailored garment.

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The tailoring module was developed to link with many of the traditional clothing and textile industries within the West Yorkshire Region, the philosophy being to integrate tradition with new technology. This has enhanced student's appreciation of tailoring and its relevance in contemporary fashion. By their final year, students develop individual collections and their knowledge of tailoring is cemented in the successful realisation of tailored garments within their coordinated looks. With this knowledge students are able to distinguish between softly tailored and more structured looks. They are also encouraged to consider other designer's tailored work when developing skills. Emphasis is placed on designers such as Dior, who revolutionised structured tailoring in his New Look collection in 1947, by introducing hip and breast padding in order to enhance silhouette. Chanel is also emphasised as a designer who innovated soft tailoring, by removing structural underpinning, in order to create supple, more fluid lines. The module is a learning process and that the skills acquired should be fully utilised and refined in their final year of study, when deciding if they wish to incorporate tailoring in final degree collections.

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As stated there are a small number of UK courses that offer dedicated programmes of tailoring study within their curriculum. The only degree course to offer a degree in Bespoke Tailoring, is at London College of Fashion. This was developed in association with Gieves and Hawkes, after consultation with 'Savile Row Bespoke', a group of the most prestigious names in UK tailoring. Their aim was to formalise the trade's casual recruitment procedures and set up formal tailoring courses in further and higher education establishments. Mark Henderson the Chief executive explained:

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"Fashion graduates usually go on to become cutters – sort of supervising tailors who make the patterns, cut the cloth and then hand over to the tailors, who physically make the suits. It takes up to ten years to become a proficient cutter" (Alexander, 2006, p.1). Emphasis on this course is placed on the passion, respect and hard work needed to gain the heritage status of the 'Master Craftsman' promoted by the bespoke industry. Graduates who enter the bespoke industry must, however recognise that they still have

a great deal to learn and that their introduction to the craft of bespoke in university, is a first step to acquiring the status of 'Master Craftsman'.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

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The hugely revived popularity of bespoke tailoring in fashion has led designers at the cutting edge of the industry to explore the craft traditions of bespoke in the UK and globally. This has influenced a resurgence of interest in craft and traditional technology as being at the forefront of directional fashion. The future of bespoke could be contemporary fashion's emphasis on the idiom as a look or the vast advances in technological development that could enhance it, to make bespoke far more accessible.

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Conflict is inherent in the tensions between traditional and new skills within the bespoke industry. The fashion business evolves alongside technology, yet often has to struggle with the difficulties in amalgamating established processes and in training and developing staff in new technologies. The bespoke industry focuses upon manual, technical tricks used to conceal the human form. The technological advances in virtual measuring and scanning greatly enhanced the development of mass manufacture tailoring and production but they cannot sew all the luxury, heritage and mystique into their garments in the way a bespoke tailor does. This conflict ultimately makes a case for the promotion of traditional technique as a cool, edgy, craft based product.

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The lack of 'New Blood' within the UK industry and the lack of staff with manual skills is an area that needs enriching which the fashion education system could recognise in greater depth and emphasise in their programmes of study. This is one reason the tailoring module at University of Huddersfield is considered an essential component within the fashion curriculum. The industry should always benefit from students who are instilled with in-depth traditional skills in order to produce the luxury and heritage in tailored garments we can all afford, understand and enjoy wearing.

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