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 in the time, craft and experience instilled into each garment. A bespoke tailor is a sculptor whose medium is cloth. He moulds a shell out of this cloth that refines and accentuates the human form. It is a unique service in which the client’s individual measurements are applied to the creation of a garment made to their exact size specifications. Particular attention is given to the detail, quality and excellence in the work. Bespoke tailoring as a fashionable look had a revived popularity in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. Many fashion designers at the cutting edge of the fashion industry 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 a 1998 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 how the bespoke industry considers the incorporation of new and computerised technology. In so doing, it considers how the fashion industry could determine the future of tailoring. This could either be through contemporary fashion’s emphasis on the idiom as a look, or in the vast advances in technological development that could enhance it, in order to make bespoke more widely available. The article culminates by considering realistic strategies as the technology within an accessible and computerised mass market industry grows and develops.