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Delighting in the Business of Men's Fashion

Writer G. Bruce Boyer Delves Into the High-Profile Characters Behind the Sometimes Serious Looks

G. Bruce Boyer isn't a fashion designer, but he might know more about clothes than most do.



G. Bruce Boyer on craftsmanship: 'There used to be dozens and dozens of good tailors in New York and now there are maybe half a dozen, and maybe only two or three custom shoemakers in the whole country. Everyone thinks about luxury but real craftsmen are dying off.' Above, the writer was photographed in Len Logsdail tailor in New York City on Aug. 10.

Mr. Boyer, 70 years old, has established himself writing about stylish clothes and the men who wear them for more than 35 years. He left a job as a literature professor at DeSales University in 1973 to work for Town & Country magazine and has since written for the likes of the New Yorker, Esquire and Harper's Bazaar. In addition, he delves into the looks and lives of some of fashion's leading men.

His latest project is "Gary Cooper: Enduring Style." The book, scheduled for release in November, features newly published photographs of the Hollywood star alongside a lengthy essay by Mr. Boyer. Mr. Cooper's daughter, Maria Cooper Janis,

collaborated with him on the book and Ralph Lauren wrote the foreword.

Mr. Boyer spoke to The Wall Street Journal from his home in Bethlehem, Pa., about his approach to fashion, the decline of craftsmanship in America and why now is the Asian moment for classical tailoring. The following interview has been edited.

I started out in men's fashion at a fortuitous moment. When I left my job as a college professor in 1973, it was exactly at the time that the first generation of menswear designers started. There were pioneers of the genre like Pierre Cardin and Hardy Amies, followed by Giorgio Armani and Ralph Lauren. Before that, there were no men's designer labels.

Writing about men's clothing has to be different from writing about women's clothing. It shouldn't be just about getting rid of an old wardrobe and buying new things. Fashion writing should be tied to something beyond itself, rather than just fashion for fashion's sake.

It is both delusional and stupid to think that clothes don't really matter and we should all wear whatever we want. Most people don't take clothing seriously enough, but whether we should or not, clothes do talk to us and we make decisions based on people's appearances.

On the other hand, there are people, particularly in the fashion industry, who take clothing too seriously. We aren't doing biomedical research or working on some nuclear collider. Clothing is not everything in life and it won't solve problems of famine and overpopulation. It's a fine balance you have to strike and that's what I try to do.

One important moment is when I had my first meeting with the editor of Town & Country magazine. He said: "We like the way you write about men's fashion because it isn't like other fashion writing. We see you're trying to take an intelligent approach to the subject and we respect that." That kind of validated my thinking and approach to writing about clothing. It was the biggest thrill.

It is ironic that luxury products are so prevalent in the world today and yet at the same time, real luxury and real craftsmanship seems to be going down. Everybody knows Edward Green shoes or Hermes ties or Drakes scarves and they're all very well-made products. But there used to be dozens and dozens of good tailors in New York and now there are maybe half a dozen, and maybe only two or three custom shoemakers in the whole country. Everyone thinks about luxury but real craftsmen are dying off.

I think it's absolutely true that its the Asian moment when it comes to custom tailoring. The orient—Hong Kong, Tokyo—is where the new, wonderful, stylish things are coming from. What these young men in Asia are doing is very interesting because they're developing something that's very English and Italian, and yet out of that mix comes something unique to them. They really are developing their own style and it's the most exciting thing that I've seen lately. That's where the future is.

I've learned a lot from bloggers. Some of the young men doing it are wonderful and know much more than I do. But what bothers me is that some of them seem to know everything about clothing except how to enjoy it. They want the latest, hippest labels and they know what all the most expensive brands are but you get the feeling that they really don't enjoy it or don't know how to wear it the way they should.

It's both surprising and explainable that we're seeing a revival of 1960s fashion. In a way, it's a revival of the Ivy League styling of my youth. I see it in Japanese magazines and it's certainly been there in Britain and France and Italy. We have to give Ralph Lauren a lot of credit for this. He's held to the Ivy League look and kept to his own history.

