



Tailoring creates firm structure by shaping flat cloth beyond seams and darts with techniques, such as hand-stitched layers. The ultimate result is a garment that mimics or flatters the wearer's shape.



Tailoring Principles

A traditional menswear tailor talks about
how to build impeccable shape into garments

BY JEFFERY DIDUCH



Tailored garments have a perennial appeal, but there seems to be an air of mystery about the tailoring process. Is tailoring defined by the results or the techniques used to achieve the results?

In my experience with custom menswear, tailoring is defined by proven methods. Cutting, sewing, and finishing a jacket follows a logical progression. Each step has a purpose, based on what is understood about fabric and interfacing, the rules of geometry, and the human body's shape and movement.

There are other schools of thought. In ready-to-wear manufacture, tailoring shortcuts are often required, and for the home sewer, the pattern instructions seldom, if ever, contain these details. Regardless of the precise route, creating a well-tailored jacket or garment is a process requiring attention to detail and applied sewing skills. These skills can be learned and mastered, particularly once you understand the rationale behind them.

MANY WAYS TO CREATE A GREAT SHAPE

Tailoring techniques go beyond using seams and darts to shape a garment. Underlayers are used to ensure that the shape is as permanent as possible.

The most commonly used cloth in tailored projects is wool, because it shapes with heat and humidity, the same way hair is styled by curling and crimping irons. Portions of the cloth can

be stretched or shrunk and the grain manipulated to give shape without always having to cut and sew.

Canvas and haircloth interlinings help to hold and preserve the shaping. Different grades are available from tailors' supply houses in various blends of fiber types, to give either firm or soft support. The canvas is a blend of wool, cotton, and horse or camel hair. The animal hair gives a great resiliency, bounce, and "roundness" to the weave, and it provides the ideal support for a tailored garment. Note that the animal hair in haircloth is woven only in the weft, so that the interlining's cross-grain is stable, but the lengthwise grain remains soft.

The shoulder, collarbone, and chest form peaks and valleys.

Interlinings vary in resiliency from stiff canvas, far left, to soft felt, far right. A tailor learns where each works within a garment to add support and build shape.



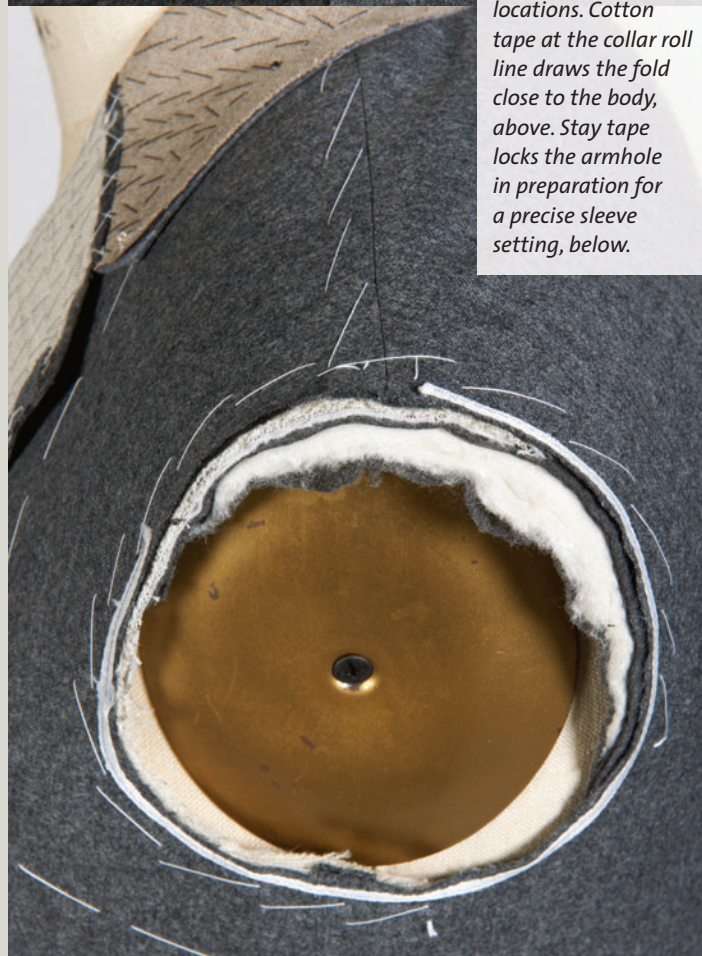
The tailor's aim is to smooth them with as little weight and padding as possible. Lightweight haircloth moves with the wearer, yet springs back to its original shape, maintaining a smooth fitting. If you look at inexpensive ladies' jackets, they often seem to be a mess of wrinkles around the chest and shoulder. Haircloth camouflages little imperfections in fit.

TAPE, THE NEXT TOOL FOR CONTROL

At key locations, stitched-in fabric tape tames the fabric layers to a precise length, a roll line, or a careful curve. In preparation for assembly, and during the construction process, stay tapes—



Specialized tapes control fabric in key locations. Cotton tape at the collar roll line draws the fold close to the body, above. Stay tape locks the armhole in preparation for a precise sleeve setting, below.



some straight-cut and some bias-cut—stabilize the shoulder seam, front edges, vents, and especially the armhole to prevent distortion. The shape of the sleeve cap, for example, must correspond in a very precise manner to the shape of the armhole to achieve the best results. Distortion from stretching the garment along this very sensitive bias area can cause much frustration when setting sleeves.

Areas that conform closely to the body, such as the roll line on the collar and lapel, are shrunk slightly. This is done by pulling a cotton tape while basting it along the roll line, then pressing out the subsequent ripples. The shoulder blade area can also be stretched, and a too-short tape drawn along the armhole to eliminate the need for a vault dart. Such a dart, usually $\frac{5}{8}$ inch deep and 3 inches long, is typically used at the back shoulder, either on the shoulder seam or in the armhole seam, to accommodate the shoulder blade.

EACH LAYER LOCKS WITH THE NEXT

We've discussed the concept that multiple layers of cloth and interlining work together to create great tailoring results. In the menswear tradition, these layers are generally thicker than



Pad stitching combines graded fabric layers (here, canvas and undercollar) into a firmer material that conforms to the body.

those used in dressmaking. That means it is particularly important for the layers to combine smoothly and to stay in position during a garment's lifetime. A tailor understands the turn of cloth and that it's necessary to hand-stitch liberally.

On a racetrack, the starting positions are staggered because the outside lanes are longer than the inside lanes. This principle also applies to cloth when multiple layers are worked into a shape, whether it is the shape of the chest or the roll of the lapel. The outer layers of cloth must be longer than the inner layers, and this principle is applied in a number of ways.

On the lapel and its canvas interlining, the two layers are rolled one over the other and pad-stitched. In pad stitching, short diagonal stitches are sewn along the roll line, through the interlining but not through the fabric's right side. These stitches lock the canvas in place and create the roll that holds the edges



A tailor's interlining coat front, left, is built with canvas and felt to create subtle shape. From the exterior, right, the layers invisibly support a smooth chest and shoulder.

tight to the chest. This pad-stitching technique is used to create shape in the lapel, the collar, and the chest. Anytime several layers are stitched together, they will be firmer than they were unstitched, and they will tend to hold the stitched-in shape.

The turn-of-cloth principle—that outer layers often need to be bigger than inner layers—also applies to facings and top collars. If the layers are flush, even when flat, the finished collar's edges may curl. You can prevent this by making sure there is a bubble of extra cloth worked over the outer layers. The excess fabric enables the collar to roll without drawing up or pulling on the edge. Edges that are flat or subtly curved to the body are a wonderful hallmark of tailoring, a subtle detail based on a simple geometry concept.

A CONSTRUCTION SECRET FOR STRUCTURE

There is a step in creating a custom-tailored jacket that is frequently overlooked outside of the industry. Home-tailoring instructions often suggest stitching the interlining to the jacket fronts before assembly. Traditionally tailored garments, however, have a separate interlining substructure called a coat front. It is a large canvas interlining piece, with other canvas pieces

basted onto it to give structure to the chest and shoulders.

By building up this structure as a separate element prior to basting it to the garment, you can pad-stitch through all the layers, giving a convex shape to the chest and a concave curve to the upper shoulder area. Darts and wedges are then built into the coat front to support the outer wool shell that could otherwise have been stretched or shrunk to help preserve the shape. In the menswear industry, a piece of thin felt or flannel is

Layers within a tailored jacket are hand-stitched to stay in place.



applied over the haircloth to prevent the wiry hairs from bothering the wearer.

The entire coat front, once assembled, is submerged in water overnight and hung to dry to avoid shrinkage that would later cause ugly puckering on the front. Built in this manner, the coat front is a framework ready to support the jacket's fabric.

THE NECESSITY OF BASTING

The many rows of white basting thread you see in professionally tailored garments represent steps in fitting all the pieces and layers together permanently. In this open-coat construction method, you assemble the whole garment, shell, interlining, and lining from edge to edge before joining the shoulders. It is time-consuming and requires some experience, but produces the best results.

When the assembled coat front is basted to the garment, it is over a dress form or blocks to approximate the body shape. Basting the layers together over a shape ensures that enough length is given where it is needed. Each layer of cloth, lining, interlining, and facing is worked into shape and then tacked or fell-stitched, so nothing shifts or sags with repeated wear and cleanings.

In dressmaking, there is a tendency to cut linings and facings smaller than the garment's outer shell. The inverse is true for a tailored jacket. Because cloth shrinks, stretches, twists, moves, and reacts during the sewing stages, many pieces are cut larger than needed, to imprecise shapes, and then trimmed more exactly during the construction process. The front edges are cut larger than needed and only cut to shape after the canvas has been basted and the lapels pad-stitched. The lining and facings are cut extralarge and basted into place using exactly the



As a tailored jacket develops, basting delineates fitting reference points, holds layers together, and tests construction seams.



A generous lining, pleated or eased to fit, does not pull on the garment's exterior as the wearer moves.

fullness required to conform to the body's shape. The excess is cut away, piece by piece, as the linings and facings are joined together. In tailoring, when linings are tight, it causes the garment's outer layer to buckle. To ensure a smooth appearance for the garment, the linings are cut large and full. The extra fabric is eased in when sewn, sometimes even pleated, to give extra room for movement and to avoid tightness.

Tailoring, as I know it, begins with the correct materials that are then worked with proven techniques into garments that fit better and last longer. These processes and materials are traditional for a reason—they work. By learning more, and testing these concepts, you can discover tailoring's benefits for your own results.

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RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Tailoring supplies:

I use Richard James Weldon Ltd., 5-6 The Mews, Hatherley Road, Sidcup Kent DA14 4BH, United Kingdom, +44 (208)300-7878 (RichardJamesWeldon.com). In the United States, the company is represented by the Isles Textile Group, (516)409-0948 (Email: IslesT@optonline.net).

Further reading:

I recommend Classic Tailoring Techniques: A Construction Guide for Men's Wear and Classic Tailoring Techniques: A Construction Guide for Women's Wear by Roberto Cabrera (Fairchild, 1983 and 1984). These guides are used in the tailoring programs at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City.

