



## Tim Gunn's Fashion Bible: The Fascinating History of Everything in Your Closet

By Tim Gunn, Ada Calhoun

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**“A smart and entertaining journey through the history of fashion”**  
(*Publishers Weekly*, starred review) from *Project Runway* co-host **Tim Gunn**.

**In the beginning there was the fig leaf...**

and the toga. Crinolines and ruffs. Chain mail and corsets. What do these antiquated items have to do with the oh-so-twenty-first-century skinny jeans, graphic tee, and sexy pumps you slipped into this morning? Everything! Fashion begets fashion, and what was the height of style yesterday has evolved into the trendsetting looks of today.

Join *Project Runway*'s Tim Gunn on an epic tour through centuries of what women and men want and have always wanted—to look and feel their best in clothes that express who they are—embellished with Tim's personalized commandments of the closet to help you build the perfect wardrobe for every occasion.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Tim Gunn is fun and chatty, but most of all he is incredibly knowledgeable and informed!"

—Diane von Furstenberg

"Tim Gunn's Fashion Bible is a must-have for discerning fashionistas. Not only is it packed with fun facts from the whole of fashion history, but it is a rollicking good read and, in many places, laugh-out-loud funny. Gunn combines acerbic wit with disarming charm—a rare combination—such that we don't realize how much we learn from the book. Beware: he may be unforgiving when it comes to a favorite style—but you can't help feeling he's right."

—Kathryn Earle, Head of Visual Arts Publishing at Bloomsbury

"Rich with photos, this book combines Gunn's signature brand of sassy wisdom with a smart and entertaining journey through the history of fashion--no item in the closet is left uncovered.... Gunn makes this history of fashion more than just another lesson about fabrics and dyes--for him, it's the people and the culture that bring the items we wear into sharper focus; in fact, Gunn states that "the primary purpose of this book is to give your clothes more significance." .... Numerous cultural tidbits, fantastic images, and sartorial wisdom from one of fashion's most respected gurus make this a must-read for "everyone who gets dressed in the morning, not just an elite crew in Manhattan."

—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review

"[Gunn's] expertise is very up to the minute, and while this book is a valuable guide for today, it will also reflect well historically on our current styles in decades to come." (Saturday Evening Post)

#### About the Author

Beloved pop culture icon **Tim Gunn** is best known as co-host of the twelve-time Emmy-nominated reality show *Project Runway*. He also hosted two seasons of his own Bravo makeover series, *Tim Gunn's Guide to Style*. **Ada Calhoun** was the founding editor-in-chief of the award-winning parenting site Babble.com. She is the co-author of *Tim Gunn's book Gunn's Golden Rules: Life's Little Lessons for Making it Work*, and has written for the *New York Times*, *New York* magazine, the *New York Post*, Salon.com and *Time* magazine. She lives in New York City with her husband and young son.

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#### Introduction

### WHY A HISTORY OF WESTERN FASHION?

WE ALL HAVE an intuitive sense of what clothes mean. When you walk into a room or down the street, even without thinking about it, you immediately take note of clothing clues and judge the wearers accordingly. You can usually tell at a glance whether a person is rich, poor, or somewhere in the middle. Often, you can even guess what someone does for a living—the messenger with his pants legs rolled up, the businessman in his suit.

And yet, it's rare that people think about what their own clothes signify about their place in the world or their priorities. Clothes are self-expression. If you have a limited range of outfits—say, only capri pants and T-

shirts—it's as though you have a limited range of words in your vocabulary.

While many historians concern themselves with the dress of indigenous civilizations, the work of certain designers, or with very specific periods in fashion, I am most interested in the clothes we wear right here and now and how various looks came into vogue. My focus in this book is on Western fashion, with a particular emphasis on America. I will look, piece by piece, at the items most Americans have in their closets and ask, "Do you know where this garment comes from—before Old Navy?"

*This old thing?*, you may think.

My answer is yes. Even that ratty band T-shirt has a fascinating history that goes back far before the Steel Wheels tour. While American fashion is often vilified as sloppy or as the poor relation of Parisian couture, I find it full of surprises, beauty, and history. And I love exploring the ways in which and the reasons why clothing changes over time.

Before writing this book, I considered myself to be something of a fashion expert. I was an educator for twenty-nine years, during which I loved learning as much as I loved teaching. And yet, while working on this book, my learning curve has so profoundly accelerated and my body of knowledge has so increased that I feel as though I've gone through graduate school again! The research required was simultaneously daunting and exhilarating. Every day brought exclamations of surprise and wonder.

Marie Antoinette, wife of Louis the XVI, in a gown that typified the excess of the French court.

For example, I have always maintained that fashion is all about context—societal, cultural, historic, economic, and political. But even I was shocked by what a massive fashion shift occurred during the French Revolution. The sumptuous gowns during the reigns of Louis XIV, XV, and XVI became so dazzlingly vast and the wigs and headdresses so loftily high that architecture, interiors, and furniture all had to be reimaged. Then, in a moment, these dramatic silhouettes suddenly vanished, along with the royal court. In their place were dresses so basic that they resembled the simplest of nightgowns. These unbleached cotton garments had no infrastructure and no embellishments. It just goes to show: fashion and history are inextricably linked!

Why is it, you may ask, that the lion's share of fashion history books examine fashion in the Western world? The answer is simple: for centuries clothing in the Western world has changed and evolved, while clothing in the East has remained unchanged. The Indian sari; the Chinese cheongsam, or qipao; the Korean *hanbok*; the Japanese kimono have all stayed the same for thousands of years. Their evolution is in the textile. The kimono, for example, is belted with an obi that must be 12 inches wide and 4.38 yards long. How's that for prescriptive?

There are many examples of beautiful clothes in these parts of the world, and their histories are also fascinating, but there isn't the same level of evolution. For this same reason, I'll also put aside discussion of the European folk tradition. Regional peasant clothing is remarkable in its consistency. There is a Bronze Age clay figurine found in Romania of a woman whose costume bears an uncanny resemblance to a Bulgarian folk costume worn in the early twentieth century. That's thirty-five hundred years in which the dress barely changed! But it's a dead end for us if we're talking about how fashion evolved to where we are today.

When you think, by contrast, about what happened to the toga, it's pretty mind-blowing. The toga was just a piece of cloth that you draped around your body to preserve your modesty. The original toga was floor-

length, and it was the apparel of the aristocracy. Wealthy Greeks and Romans wore it when gliding around rooms.

Outside, the ground was filthy, so the toga became shorter once Romans started to wear it beyond their marble-floored villas. Then, of course, people noticed that the bottom half of the garment became dirtier more quickly than the top, so the toga eventually evolved into separates . . . and today into both modern sportswear and the wrap dress.

In the 1920s, the drapiness of the ancient toga returned for the first time in centuries (although not usually as explicitly as in this 1920 photograph!).

When I take students to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I love to lead them through the museum chronologically, because that way they come to understand the evolution of ideas. Even more exciting: they start to anticipate what may come next. Everything comes from somewhere, for some purpose. That's why I love Renaissance painting. Every element has meaning, from a sparrow to a lily. And that's true of fashion, too.

In this book I will guide you age by age through fashion's evolution from cavemen's animal hides to the latest runway collections. Just as my students cheer when paintings with perspective emerge in the Met's collection, I hope this book's readers will gasp as they see how Saxon underwear begat the cargo capri pant (and why that's the worst fashion trend in America today), or how the traditional Roman sandal, strapped up the leg to stay on in the heat of battle, evolved into the flip-flop worn by nearly every twenty-first-century college student.

High, narrow heels, by contrast, have always signified wealth—there's no need to walk anywhere if you're of such a high class that you are carried around in a sedan chair or—in modern times—a car. You can wear Jimmy Choos when you're just stepping out of the back of a limo and onto a red carpet and don't need to worry about getting your heel stuck in sidewalk gratings or cracks. In the 1990s, we had chunky heels, partly because it was not as fashionable to be rich during the grunge era.

Things happen for a reason and only have staying power for a reason. Some fashion historians argue that every change in fashion reflects a focus on a new erogenous zone and that changes in necklines and hemlines stem from a desire to stave off sexual boredom.

Fashion innovations vanish quickly if they aren't sustainable—some garments return, some die out completely, and some never seem to leave at all. As I write this, some of the hippest young people in Brooklyn are running around in little tunic rompers nearly identical to those worn by soldiers in ancient Greece. Both groups value the freedom of movement such a garment provides, even if one is running on a battlefield and the other is scampering off to an indie rock show.

Jayne Mansfield shows off her high heels. A craze for clear shoes brought about the invention of sandal-foot—or sheer-toe and heel—panty hose.

And yet, most people are unaware of our nation's political history—much less its fashion legacy. We're living in a woefully a-historical age. Often when I asked my students at Parsons to tell me when World War II was, no one could. It's especially galling that so few young designers know about American fashion history because there aren't even very many years to learn about! Until World War II, we were a nation of copiers. During the war, we couldn't copy from Europe, because the couture houses had closed. Along came American innovators like Claire McCardell and Norman Norell, representing two different

aesthetics—sportswear and evening wear, respectively—and American creativity in fashion was born. The 1940s weren't that long ago, but even fashion students at some of the best schools are ignorant of what a huge shift occurred in the field during that era.

Meanwhile, I could frequently tell which students had no historical sense simply by looking at how derivative their designs were. They kept thinking they were inventing the wheel with every new design because they hadn't bothered to inform themselves that the wheel already had a long and happy history. This situation always reminds me of the Phoenicians. They made reproductions of Egyptian and Greek art, but they couldn't read hieroglyphs, so the writing they reproduced was all gibberish. They'd never seen a chariot in real life, so the scenes they depicted on vases showed someone standing in a little cart without the horses attached. Borrowing from cultures without understanding the fundamentals can yield some pretty weird and wholly illogical perversions.

I am especially concerned that American fashion not be forgotten. Once, I met the head of a hot design school in the Netherlands, and she expressed nothing but contempt for American design—an attitude I find very offensive when espoused by Europeans and downright tragic when held by Americans. When I look through *Project Runway* applications, I am always struck by how few American designers are cited in the influences section. Invariably, the only designers they name are Alexander McQueen, Christian Dior, and Coco Chanel—often misspelled “Channel.” You only rarely see American designers listed. If you do, it's usually Donna Karan. (I don't understand why people don't write Michael Kors—even just in their own political self-interest.)

Claire McCardell is one of the all-time great American designers.

When it comes to fashion, we clearly need to become more patriotic and defend our own country's tradition as a worthy extension of Western fashion history. I always wonder how these people who are trying to be the “next great American fashion designer” can fail to appreciate any of the historically great American designers. I'm thinking of Pauline Trigère, Claire McCardell, Norman Norell, Bill Blass, Rudi Gernreich, Bonnie Cashin, Larry Aldrich, Geoffrey Beene . . . The list goes on and on! Instead, many young designers I meet idolize the Antwerp Six, early-eighties graduates of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, including Dries van Noten and Ann Demeulemeester—and if people can't spell “Chanel,” they *really* cannot spell “Demeulemeester.”

While I'm naming names, a quick note on terminology: there has been an assault in certain academic circles on the word “fashion.” I am unsettled by people's dislike of the word—it's not the other F-word! Some TV executives once suggested I use “style” instead, because “fashion” is elitist. But the elite don't always like the word, either. A certain prestigious art school in the Northeast uses the phrase “apparel design” instead of “fashion design.” I was once on campus as part of an external review committee. In our exit interview, I told the president: “I believe the reason the program eschews the term ‘fashion’ is because this curriculum has nothing to do with fashion. It doesn't address the marketplace. It doesn't teach fashion history. It's basically a dressmaking school. I was bored out of my skull. No one here is interested in innovation. Don't you want your graduates to change the world?” (And that, dear readers, is one way to exempt yourself from future external review committees.)

I love the word “fashion.” That's why I'm using it in the title of this book. Fashion is about change and about creating clothes within a historical context. To me, dismissing fashion as silly or unimportant seems like a denial of history and frequently a show of sexism—as if something that's traditionally a concern of women isn't valid as a field of academic inquiry. When the Parsons fashion department was founded in 1906, it was called “costume design,” because fashion was then a verb: to fashion. But the word “fashion” has evolved to

mean something much more profound, and those who resist it seem to me to be on the wrong side of history.

American fashion designers are doing so much in spite of severe disadvantages in the global fashion world. First of all, they have always needed to make money from their work. They're not subsidized by the textile mills, as the French are. And they haven't enjoyed any of the design piracy protections that exist in Europe. It's hard to be a designer in America! It takes a lot of courage and feistiness. In short: up with America; up with fashion. If I never get invited back to Europe, or to another conference on structural garment design, I can live with that.

Lastly, before I am deluged, inevitably, with mail from academics complaining that I didn't mention a particular neckline or didn't pay proper attention to doublet construction: this isn't meant to be a textbook or exhaustive. Entire books have been written about what in this book are mere paragraphs. I have done my best to make sure the facts are straight, but minutiae have been eliminated. Unless you've read other histories of fashion, you wouldn't believe the degree of complex detail with which authors write about the transition of a collar width from 1750 to 1753. Do we really care? Well, yes, but not that much.

I encourage anyone whose interest in fashion history is sparked by this book to educate themselves further with more-academic sources. For now, I hope you'll enjoy this sweeping and selective look at my favorite parts of fashion history and that it will help drive home how much fun fashion, and historical inquiry, can be.

The primary purpose of this book is to give your clothes more significance. I've found that many people are afraid of taking a hard look at what's in their closets, because fashion is scary to many people. It shouldn't be. Fashion is fun and thrilling—and it's something that concerns everyone who gets dressed in the morning, not just an elite crew in Manhattan.

I hope this fashion bible will encourage you to study your clothing and appreciate its fascinating origins. Every article means something—usually a lot of things. By exploring the meaning and history of our clothes, I hope this book will magically transform your cluttered closet into a world of wonders! To that end, I have included a work sheet at the back of the book as a guide if you'd like some suggestions for what to look for and what questions to ask. This kind of closet inventory can teach us a lot about fashion, and a lot about ourselves.

So, let's climb into our time machine and get started!

## **Users Review**

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