



Why are some suits so much more expensive than others?  
Tangible quality is part of the answer,  
but judging the value of a suit is also a personal matter.

## The Value of a Suit



by Josh MacTate

The younger man was finally coming to the point, anxiety lending an edge to his voice. “So that’s my predicament. I need a new suit, but why should I spend almost \$2,000 when I can buy a perfectly good one for half the price? Is there really such a difference? They all look the same to me. I’d hate to think I was simply paying for the label!”

ILLUSTRATION, SARA TYSON





## Try on some less expensive suits to experience the leap in quality of a superior garment.

The senior partner leaned slowly back in his chair, a small frown on his brow as he searched for an analogy the other man might understand.

“If money were no object, what kind of car would you buy, a Ford or a Mercedes?”

“The Mercedes, obviously.”

“Why? Both are good cars. Both will take you from A to B efficiently.”

“For all sorts of reasons. Engineering. Design. Performance.”

The senior partner nodded. “Equally true of suits. Anything else?”

“Some cars are just a pleasure to drive. It’s a difficult feeling to define.”

“But you know it when you feel it. The same with a suit.”

“I still don’t follow...”

“Let me try to clarify. I like to believe that there are two ways of assessing the value of a suit. The first has to do with how different suits are made. Not just the price of the fabric but the quality of the tailoring, the sewing, the time it takes to do work by hand instead of machine, the materials inside the jacket that you never see but that give it the proper shape. All those tangible things are reflected in the way a suit performs when you wear it, and in its price. I think of that as its objective value.

“The other kind of value is subjective. It’s to do with you. Does the suit feel exceptionally comfortable? Does it make you look the way you want to look in a suit?”

“How do you mean?”

“You have to be honest with yourself about this one. Do you want to look debonair or dignified or dashing, unimpeachably correct or at fashion’s edge, a little bit slimmer perhaps? Whatever. I’m not saying a Brioni is going to turn you into James Bond, but different suits

can have subtly different influences on the impression you create. That’s why you end up with one design house rather than another. It’s a very personal thing and the only way to choose is to test drive a number of them. Try them on. Think about how they feel and then go to the mirror and see how they look. And while you’re about it, try on some less expensive suits: then you’ll be able to actually experience the leap in quality and compare the way a superior garment moves when you’re wearing it.”

“What if I can’t tell the difference?”

The senior partner pursed his lips thoughtfully.

“If it genuinely doesn’t feel and look better, you might as well save your money. But let me explain why I think it will. Let’s go back to what I was saying about tangible quality.”

He began by describing the canvas, the inner core of the jacket made from layers of linen, horsehair, wool, felt and actual canvas. The pieces are all washed repeatedly to make them softer, exposed to humidity, pre-shrunk to help them withstand a future of dry cleaning and finally sewn together. Each tailoring house has its own secret recipe for making and treating the canvas, but they all achieve the minor miracle of turning flat materials into something durably three dimensional that follows and flatters the contours of a man’s neck, shoulders and chest. The finer these materials are, the softer they are and the more demanding of the tailor. “In a cheap suit, they’re glued together,” he explained. “In a more expensive one, they are sewn so that they float between the lining and the outer fabric. You can imagine the difference in the way it feels. And because they are natural materials – alive, if you will – they gradually adapt to the lines of your own body as you wear the suit, until it fits you like a glove.”



## The more time and care and attention put into such work, the finer the ultimate performance of the jacket will be.

Now he talked about the sewing, the way a master tailor stitches different cloths in different ways, how sensitive his fingers must be when working with today’s super-fine fabrics lest they bubble or pucker. “Or consider the shoulder. He takes two pieces of fabric, the back and the front. The back is longer than the front, but he sews them together and they meet perfectly. Amazing, but that’s how the shoulder is shaped. And how does he achieve that permanent roll where the lapel turns across the chest? By sewing the canvas to the fabric with hundreds of stitches made in different directions. Or under the arm. Some stitches are looser than others so the jacket moves with you without distortion. The more time and care and attention is put into such work, the finer the ultimate performance of the jacket will be. It stands to reason. If he’s making three or four shoulders an hour instead of 20, there will be a difference in quality. And I haven’t even mentioned the underpressing.”

“Underpressing?”

“Many times during the creation of the jacket the tailor will put down his needle and pick up a hand iron, pressing and working the fabric, building shape into a particular part of the garment, then sewing again. The very best houses insist that this is done after almost every operation, then they hang the jacket up to let the fabric relax before proceeding. It takes a very long time. With cheap, mass-produced garments, that doesn’t happen at all. They wait until the jacket is almost complete – it looks like a sack – then put it through a machine that irons shape into the thing. The process takes about 25 minutes, I am told. Not surprisingly, the effect turns out to be temporary.”

“Is everything better when it’s handmade rather than made by machine?”

“Oh, I don’t suppose you can say that. There are hundreds of separate steps in the creation of a suit and no doubt some of them can be performed with laser perfection by machines. Houses such as Canali and Ermenegildo Zegna use the latest technology for a number of operations, but only because they have proved to their own satisfaction that those particular steps can indeed be done faster and equally cleanly by a machine. You’d look good in Canali, by the way. It would add a degree or two more definition to your appearance.”

“What do you wear?”

“Today,” said the senior partner, glancing down, “I’m wearing a Kiton. I confess I do like Kiton. Scottish fabric, very light, designed and made in Naples. It feels exceptionally soft, almost fluid, and the gently rounded shoulders appeal to me. A great deal of a Kiton suit is hand-sewn by a single individual. You might not know that to look at it – I certainly couldn’t tell – but I imagine it lends a kind of harmony to the garment, an artisanal singularity. I value that quality. Kiton isn’t for everyone, perhaps, but it suits me.”

“So you think I should get a Canali?”

“That’s not what I said at all. What you must do is try on a number of jackets from different tailoring houses and really concentrate on how each one feels and looks. Don’t just stand there: walk up and down. Talk to the sales associate. The better you can articulate what it is you’re looking for, the better they’ll be able to help you. And take your time. After all, a suit is a considerable investment. More importantly, it’s going to be with you for years to come. You should feel confidence whenever you lift it out of the closet and pleasure whenever you put it on.”