



Gloves

The movie *Roman Holiday* (1953), starring Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn, has always been one of my favorites. At one point in the film, Hepburn is the perfect picture of the 1950s “look.” But what I notice most about her Givenchy outfit is that she is wearing gloves... yes, gloves. When was the last time you saw a woman wearing gloves to complement her daytime outfit?

One day, after watching the movie on television, I took my own satin-padded glove box from the top shelf of my closet and opened the lid to many memories. It's difficult for me to throw them away, especially those with sentiment attached; the little, white, cotton one-button gloves that I wore to sorority teas and church services in the 1940s; the elbow-length white kidskin gloves that I wore with my first “sophisticated” sleeveless black dress; the hand-embroidered Italian gloves that my brother bought me in Italy. No, I'm not quite ready to throw away those memories just yet. Gloves were a large part of the fashion until the 1960s, when everything went casual.

One of the first places I worked during my “executive training” days at Marshall Field's in Chicago during the late 1940s was the glove department. In those days, Marshall Field & Co was *the* fashion store of the Midwest, and its glove department carried the most expensive and luxurious gloves to be found.

Customer satisfaction was the number one priority in Marshall Field's merchandising policy, and that meant making sure the gloves I sold fit properly. I still have nightmares about trying to fit beautiful leather gloves on wealthy, matronly women who were *sure* that they wore a smaller sized glove than the one I was struggling to fit over pudgy multi-ringed fingers. Fitting gloves was a challenge, as each finger of a glove had to be stretched one at a time over their sensitive skin. Did you know that hands contain one-third of the sensory receptors in the human body? I can tell you those women were aware of all twenty-seven of them.

To ease the customers during their glove fittings, they sat in padded chairs and we placed small pillows on the counter to cushion their elbows. Clean towels and talcum powder were at the ready. (Retailing has certainly changed since those service-oriented days.)

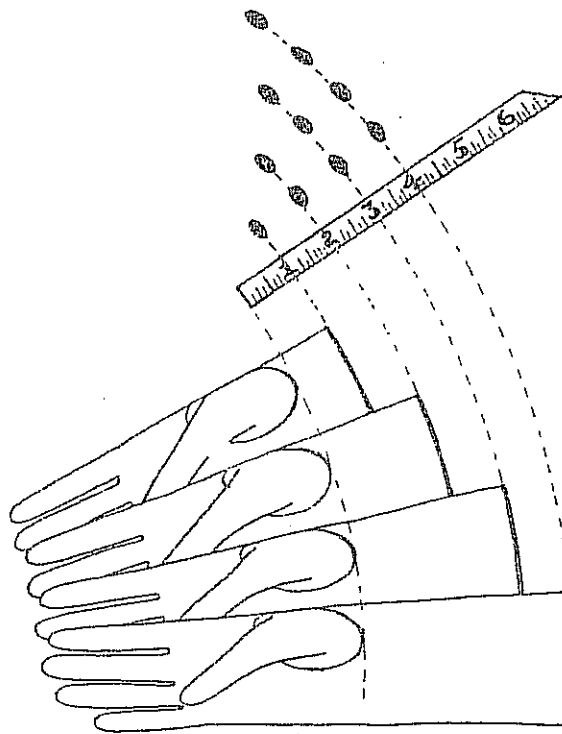
I didn't last long in the glove department, and was soon transferred soon to the accessory department, where I sold satin-padded boxes to hold our customers precious gloves.

GLOVES AS SYMBOLS

Throughout recorded history, gloves have served as a pledge of

GLOVES ARE MEASURED IN THIS MANNER FOR ALL LENGTHS.

- A ONE-BUTTON LENGTH GLOVE IS A GLOVE EXTENDING ONE INCH ABOVE THE BASE OF THE THUMB.
- A TWO-BUTTON GLOVE EXTENDS TWO INCHES ABOVE THE BASE OF THE THUMB.
- A FOUR-BUTTON LENGTH GLOVE MEASURES FOUR INCHES FROM THE BASE OF THE THUMB TO THE TOP EDGE OF THE GLOVE.



friendship and love, a symbol of hatred and defiance, a token of loyalty, a mark of honor, and a guarantee of safety. Leather gloves were found in the tomb of Tutankhamun, who lived in the mid-1300s B.C. Gloves are also mentioned in the Old Testament of the Bible.

As early as A.D. 960, white linen gloves had become part of the ceremonial attire bishops wore when celebrating Mass. By the 1300s, gloves had taken on broader ritualistic qualities. The inclusion of a glove along with a contractual agreement assured both parties of its binding nature.

A knight often went into a contest with his lady's glove fastened to his helmet—a token for favors not yet

bestowed. One knight at the court of a king of Castile was put to a stern test when his lady fair daintily dropped one of her gloves into a pit of lions. Without hesitation, the knight jumped in after it, plucked the glove out, and, according to Robert Browning's poetic version of the story, heaved it in the lady's face without daring to look into her eyes, thereby shunning her advances.

Gloves embroidered with gold and precious stones were also early emblems of royalty. It is said that King Richard the Lionheart attempted to disguise himself on his journey home from the Third Crusade, but because he would not part with his elaborate, gem-encrusted gloves, he was recognized and taken

prisoner.

In the 1400s and 1500s, gloves were almost always perfumed, which was thought to protect the wearer against pestilence. Even if they did not actually ward off disease, at least their scents helped compensate for the extremely low level of personal cleanliness of that time.

Gloves made of "chicken skin," actually the skin of an unborn kid, were preferred by both men and women as it was thought they would soften and whiten the skin. According to records, Queen Elizabeth I, who ruled England from 1558 to 1603, was especially fond of gloves, and she slipped them off and on at regular intervals to call attention to her lovely white skin. She was known to give gloves as gifts; to her favorites she would give one, while keeping the other to make the gift more personal and valuable.

Since the 1600s, gloves have become less flamboyant in design. The length of women's gloves has followed the rise and fall of sleeve length. Once men adopted the use of suits, their gloves stopped at the wrist, where they have remained.

HANDS ON GLOVE MAKING

Until well into the 1800s, common people did not wear gloves, except

for rough coverings used for protection. This was partly because they had no use for fashion, and partly because the construction of gloves by hand was very expensive. Some earlier gloves had more than 150 pieces sewn together in a very complicated manner. But thanks to a Frenchman named Xavier Jouvin, a native of Grenoble, which had been the French glove capital since the 1300s, a system of mass-producing gloves of standard shapes and sizes was created. In 1834, he invented a die that could cut six gloves at a time. The invention of the sewing machine further mechanized glove construction, and other changes, like size standardization, have led to today's gloves having fewer than 10 pieces.

The production of gloves in the United States is centered in Gloversville, New York. There, in 1760, Sir William Johnson brought Scottish glove makers to the area to manufacture mittens and work gloves for local farmers. By 1900, 80 percent of the gloves made in America came from Gloversville. It is still the major glove production center of the United States.

With mass production, standard sizes were identified. Interestingly, over the past few decades, the average glove size for men has declined from a size 10 to a

size 9, while the average size for women has increased from a 6 to a 7. Could this be the tip of some evolutionary iceberg, or is it related to the fact that women are doing more manual labor?

Another way of measuring gloves is length. Glove length is measured by button length, with one button being equal to one inch. This is measured from the base of the thumb, up the arm; 12 buttons is standard for elbow-length gloves and 16 buttons would measure nearly to the shoulder.

The twentieth century has seen many styles and lengths of gloves that are worn for different occasions. Dress gloves usually are color coordinated to an outfit. Who can forget Jackie Kennedy's long white gloves worn for the 1960 Inaugural Ball? Also, various glove styles have been developed for different sports, and in recent years a therapeutic glove has been marketed that aids in exercising the hand.

I often miss the fashion, elegance, and look of the past, of which gloves played an important part; but I doubt if their common use in fashion will ever return. While gloves and mittens are a necessity in cold weather, as a resident of Florida, the only glove I now wear is my golf glove.