

Shirts that'll fit you to a T

Public speaking is a lot easier than it used to be. Today you don't even need a soap box. If you want to get something off your chest, simply put something on it—a T-shirt.

In more vibrant eras of American life, clothing was not in the habit of announcing its wearer's private feelings to the world. Today Americans wear T-shirts to trumpet political opinions, to boast cultural and ethnic pride, to make social statements. Quite often, they wear shirts that

total over 1 billion annually, the best-selling garment in the world.

The T-shirt is the casual wear garment of choice for millions of Americans of all ages, sizes, shapes and descriptions. People, including historians at the Smithsonian Institution, collect them. It's hard to imagine that this all started with the plain undershirt.

In 1917, American soldiers were sent to France to fight World War I. In the absence of wool undershirts, a number of them returned in light cotton knits undershirts worn by French soldiers. American manufacturers eventually began producing sleeveless, cotton knit undershirts and some short-sleeved ones in the "T" shape that gave the T-shirt its name.

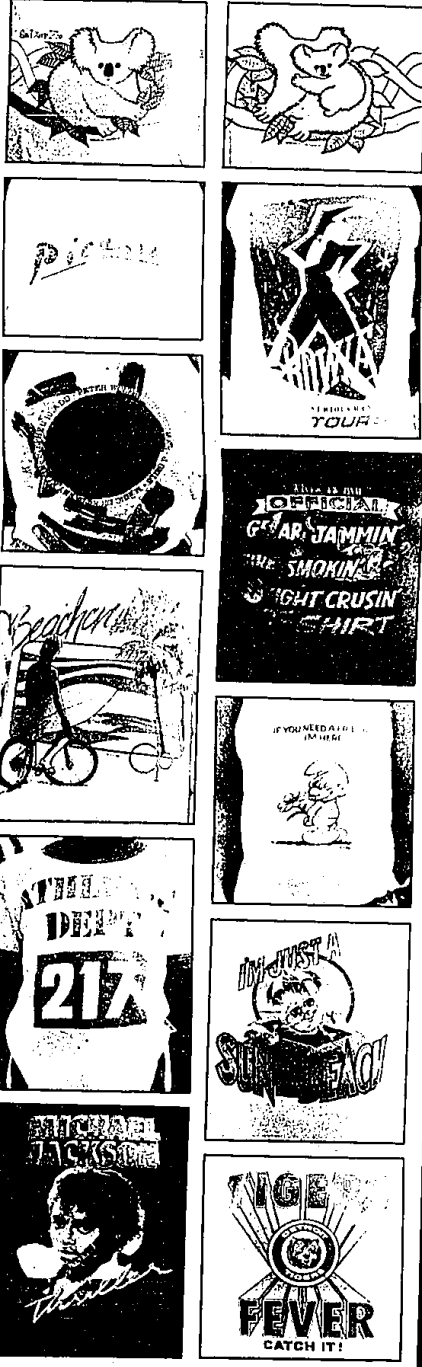
THE T WAS THE surge to come, but the favorite of men in the '30s was the sleeveless, "athletic" shirt, originally adapted from the top part of the tank swimsuit worn at the turn of the century. That is, it was the favorite until Clark Gable took off his shirt in the 1934 Academy Award-winning film, "It Happened One Night." Several years passed before undershirt sales in America recovered.

The T-shirt was launched by World War II when the U.S. Navy issued it as regulation underwear. Sailors who called it a "skivvy" shirt, welcomed the comfort and practicality of the garment. After the war, Americans then stayed faithful to T-shirts as underwear until, once again, a screen idol presented them with new possibilities.

Marlon Brando brought the T-shirt out of underwear drawers and put it into the closets of millions of Americans. As Stanley Kowalski in the 1951 film "A Streetcar Named Desire," Brando's wardrobe was simple but effective. James Dean and Elvis Presley followed suit with masculine T-shirts that dazzled their fans.

GLORIOUS COLOR dawned on the basic white T-shirt in the late 1950s. Southern California's drag racing culture took great pride in airbrush-decorated cars, and fans imitated the look with T-shirts. A number of these automobile enthusiasts found their airbrushed T-shirts in the store.

The imprinted T-shirt got an international boost when American actress Jean Seberg wore a white T-shirt with the words "T-shirt" printed on it while in Paris. When she wore her "T-shirt" (with the words "T-shirt") imprinted across the front in the 1961 French film "Breathless," the international sex symbol was imprinted on the T-shirt and then printed. Clearly, the T-shirt was on its way to becoming a fashion statement.



"In the 1960s, T-shirts and jeans were the uniform of protest," Barbara Dickstein of the Smithsonian Institution said. She is a museum specialist in 20th century costume. "We all wear clothing as a kind of uniform—a way of identifying ourselves to the rest of the world," she said.

IMPRINTED T-SHIRTS are wearable history—cloth chronicles of the past Americans all over the country are not only wearing T-shirts but collecting them. Some people attend auctions and acquire older such as an "OZIE" T-shirt from 1933, a 1949 model of "The Wizard of Oz," "Combine Shirt" from 1942, and a "T-shirt" from 1943.

Such as an "Elvis Presley" T-shirt featuring his greatest hits.

If you want to collect something, T-shirts are relatively inexpensive, easy to store, and you can wear your collection. Unless you're a collector at the Smithsonian, that is. There, Dickstein, Edith Mayo and Ellen Roney Hughes all collect T-shirts, but these artifacts are treated with the same meticulous care given to the Smithsonian's 100 million other artifacts.

Mayo collects T-shirts and other artifacts to chronicle American political and social issues, women's history and political campaigns. The earliest T-shirt in the Smithsonian is the "Dew-it-with-DEWEY" shirt created for the 1948 Truman-Dewey presidential campaign. It is a child's size, as is a 1952 "IKE" T-shirt and a 1960 "KENNEDY FOR PRESIDENT" T-shirt imprinted with Kennedy's PT-109. There's another from 1964 in a child's lettering saying, "WED VOTE FOR LBJ."

Mayo attends political rallies and protest gatherings to collect the Smithsonian's T-shirts. Would she ask for the T-shirt off some participant's back? "I have once or twice," she admitted.

For some people, they are what their T-shirt says they are. Environmentalists campaign to "Save the Whales" with their shirts. Other people wear their "Picasso" Ts to commemorate the Picasso art show held in New York in 1980 and to express their love of culture. Persons attending rock concerts return home with a memory of the concert on cotton. Tourists find they make good souvenirs. Stay-at-homes wear their "I'm Not a Tourist, I Live Here" shirts as defensive armor. Comedian Chery Chase wears his "I'm Chery Chase and you're not!" T so you'll know who he is and who you aren't.

Advertisers got on the T-shirt bandwagon and used to give away shirts proclaiming allegiance to their product. They turned out to be so popular that now people pay for shirts to help promote Coke, No Nonsense pantyhose and just about every other product you can think of.

T-shirt artists are no longer satisfied to have their work on just the front of the T-shirt. Patterns are appearing on both sides of the shirt in wrap-around designs. A variation is the front and back design. These are especially popular with artists who portray the front of an animal on the front of the shirt and its backside on— you guessed it—the back of the shirt.

And so the evolution of the T-shirt from a strictly functional undergarment to artsy fashionwear continues.

— Smithsonian News Service

Staff photos by Jim Jagdfield