



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

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In the beginning there was the fig leaf...

and the toga. Crinolines and ruffs. Chain mailand 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 life—from economics to politics, weather to warfare, practicality to the utterly impractical—is reflected in the styles of any given era, evolving into the threads you buy and wear today.

With the candidness, intelligence, and charm that made him a household name on Project Runway, Tim Gunn reveals the fascinating story behind each article of clothing dating back to ancient times, in a book that reads like a walking tour from museum to closet with Tim at your side. From Cleopatra's crown to Helen of Troy's sandals, from Queen Victoria's corset to Madonna's cone bra, Dynasty's power suits to Hillary Clinton's pantsuits, Tim Gunn's Fashion Bible takes you on a runway-ready journey through the highs and lows of fashion history.

Drawing from his exhaustive knowledge and intensive research to offer cutting-edge insights into modern style, Tim explains how the 1960s ruined American underwear, how Beau Brummell created the look men have worn for more than a century, why cargo capri pants are a plague on our nation, and much more. He will make you see your wardrobe in a whole new way. Prepare to be inspired as you change your thinking about the past, present, and future of fashion!

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

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David says

Tim Gunn's writing style is extremely conversational and easy to read, and his voice (as heard on "Project Runway") comes through loud and clear. This book is great and highly addictive - I had not intended to read it, but Sarah brought it home and when I was leafing through it it completely hooked me.

Gunn unsurprisingly has a lot to say, and has strong opinions about what looks good, what doesn't, and although this is ostensibly more of a history book it contains a tremendous amount of his perspective on what works (and how to "make it work" as he would say). He bemoans the creeping casualness of clothing - that yoga pants, tee shirts, and jeans have pretty much eaten the entire American wardrobe. His perspective is that clothing is a language by which you can express yourself, and limiting yourself to one mode of expression is like only learning twenty words - you might get by, but you'll certainly miss out on some conversations with interesting people!

Some particular targets of his ire and wit are the cargo Capri pant, which bulks up women's legs while making them look shorter and heavier, yoga pants (which he says properly belong in a gym, not in the grocery store), the fanny pack (about which the less said the better), five-fingers shoes (he says "when exercising only!"), baseball caps worn indoors, and sweatpants on men (see yoga pants above). He points out that if you run into an ex in the grocery store, don't you want to look put together? A fortiori if it's someone more important!

One refreshing thing about Gunn's writing is his humility: in the section about neckties, he talks about how costume designer Rita Ryack taught him a tremendous amount, including finally cracking the pocket square code (complimentary rather than matching, color and pattern). All through the book, he lists his influences, and talks about the people who have taught him and others, praising many designers greatly (with a few choice words for some design failures along the way).

I think the book does well as an occasional reference ("I need some new ties, what does Tim say?") and also as a lighthearted, fun way to think about clothing and how the choices we make influence the impressions we convey. Recommended.

Rebecca E. says

I try to invoke the spirit of Tim Gunn each and every day, and I am a better person when I succeed. Gunn embodies two seeming contradictions and, in the process, has gone a long way to elevate the fashion conversation. First, he is a gay man in the fashion industry who is his own complex person -- no condescending to "bitchy diva" or "every gal's darling, dishy best friend" stereotypes. Second, his books about fashion are written for educated adults; he avoids "let's deconstruct the trope of the whalebone corset" verbiage, but he's not afraid to reference something that sends readers to google to "get" the reference. This book is organized around specific articles of clothing, placing each within its historical, social, economic, and aesthetic context. He does so with humor, articulacy and an insistence on kindness. I particularly appreciate his commitment to educating the public about the contributions of American designers, particularly the women, including Bonnie Cashin, Claire McCardell, and Hattie Carnegie.

Marcie says

"Until...the Regency period..., daily bathing was far from common. The first deodorant wasn't patented until 1888. For thousands of years, people were grubby and literally lousy with bugs. A 1900 medical paper found that in the huge skirts that were the fashion of the day there were found large colonies of germs, including those of tuberculosis, typhoid, tetanus, influenza." Ewwwww!!! Awesome!! But they look so magnificent in their oil painting-portrait! lol

Also, CoCo Chanel is the sh**! "Look at them," she said of women who wore (the ultracorseted look of Christian Dior), "Fools dressed by queens living out their fantasies. They dream of being women, so they make real women look like transvestites...They can barely walk. I made clothes for the new woman. She could move and live naturally in my clothes."

I have admired Tim Gunn and his vocabulary for some time now, and his book is exactly like having a conversation over lunch with him, dissecting fashion, art, history, movie stars, politics, sex, etc. He is a man of great charm and intelligence, who happens to be gay. I particularly enjoyed his rant blasting the fashion industry's recent foray into using BOYS as models to sell women's clothes. He called it the "ultimate cynicism," as if the industry is saying "Here is the perfect woman for our clothes: A boy!" Screw them.

My favorite quote from the book: "To choose clothes, either in a store or at home, is to define and describe ourselves." Yes! And the best anecdote from the book: that crazy story about Diana Vreeland viewing the ruins of Pompeii on vacation, and coming eyeball-to-eyeball with a preserved diorama of a woman having "relations" with a slave (a volcanic eruption captured all manner of activities in AD 79 in situ!), and the thing she fixated on? The thong flip-flops the slave was wearing. She had the sandal reproduced, deeming it sublime in its simplicity. I'm wearing a pair of flip-flops myself right now. :^)

Shelley says

I love Tim Gunn. This walks you through fashion history, garment by garment, and I loved it. It was super interesting and filled with classic Tim lines like, "The fall 2010 collections were *full* of black and white stripes similar to the original Breton. No one *needs* to know that those stripes were originally created to help sailors spot their drowning crew-mates bobbing in the ocean, but doesn't that information make a trip to Style.com that much more fun?" Yep. It totally does.

There's are also tips on cultivating your closet (and getting rid of all cargo shorts). I also want to go out and learn everything about Claire McCardell, designer extraordinaire.

Martha says

It's not really clear to me exactly what this book is supposed to be! There are lots of exclamation points throughout the text, giving it a dramatic quality, but there is also a fascinating array of facts about the clothes we wear and their history. Something like fashion history disguising as pop culture. Attitude and opinion are sprinkled in like grains of pepper, which seems to reflect the author's personality and persona as host of Project Runway. Trends and fads throughout the ages as well as the socio-economic implications of dress are covered, though I'd have to say that the illustrations are a little weak. Too many times I found myself wishing to see an illustration of something he described. One of the most interesting chapters for me was the one on the sweater where the author discusses the origins of knitting (as opposed to weaving) and compares the qualities of a knit vs. a woven fabric, then goes on to describe knitting patterns and their symbols and local references. All said and done, this book has a lot of information in it and it is presented in a light, amusing way that should appeal to a wide array of readers.

Meghan says

We are cursed to live in the age of the fashion ascendance of the capri cargo pant. This book argues that people in general would be happier if their clothes were a little more uncomfortable, or at least if they wore "sweatsuit alternatives" as opposed to actual sweatsuits.

Tim Gunn offers a quick look at all sorts of garments and the history of their development, from gloves to dresses to the suit. Sometimes he offers his analysis, as when he says there are two main dress silhouettes - draped or fitted - and the draped is based on ancient Greece, and the fitted from ancient Egypt. This actually turns out to be practical advice for dress shopping, because you can think of which silhouette you are most drawn to, and choose styles based on that.

Amy Bunn says

I really admire Tim Gunn, and he seems like he would be a great person to know. He's witty, intelligent, charming, and, of the utmost importance, he seems like an all-around nice guy. (I have to qualify this statement with the word "seem," because apparently TV editing can do wonders at portraying an individual however the producers choose. For all I know, once the cameras are off, he runs around cursing like a sailor and slapping Project Runway Designers upside the head, but I sincerely doubt it.) I think I'd really enjoy having dinner with him sometime... which I'm sure he will invite me to... any day now.

Even so, I think he'd find my taste in fashion deplorable, and that was why I had to give this book three stars. While it was generally a good book, it left me with a sour taste in my mouth, and a neurosis about my own fashion shortcomings. I suppose I should have expected it, because one of Tim's specialties is providing fashion advice, but truthfully I dove into this book for its descriptive aspects, not its prescriptive. The evolution of culture over time is fascinating, and I was eager to see Tim's take on how fashion had changed over the years and the impetus behind those changes. If the focus stayed merely on that aspect, I would have been more comfortable with it.

As it is, the book is still good, but not what I would call great. (So sorry, Tim, I'm a picky sort.) There were a lot of illustrations, which proved helpful for the fashion-challenged like myself, but there were still moments

I wished for more. I also think it would be more helpful for the illustrations to appear in a more coordinated fashion (pun!) with the text. More than a few times, I found myself painstakingly trying to visualize a style he was describing, only to turn the page and find a large depiction of it. If the illustration had been one page earlier, I could have saved myself the trouble.

I was also surprised that there was no chapter on jewelry. There were chapters on undergarments, belts, gloves, handbags, coats, and scarves. Why did jewelry get the short shrift? True, it's a mammoth topic to explore, but a brief overview of this important fashion accessory could have been fascinating. I wonder, for example, when the first evidence of jewelry appears in the archaeological record. Were those early pieces worn for religious or purely decorative reasons? Who first decided to stick a hole in someone's ear, so they could hang a bauble from it? How did men's jewelry differ from women's over time? And how were they similar? And if Tim wanted to move into the prescriptive aspects, he could have discussed what jewelry best complements certain clothing.

Admittedly, part of my problem with this book-the tendency for it to tell a reader what should or shouldn't be worn-traces back to my own shortcomings in the area of fashion. Still, I'm curious what Tim's work could have been if he'd laid off the advice a little bit, and spent more time on the history.

And Tim, while you're reading this, (As I know you inevitably will, because what author doesn't read *every single* review and commentary on his work? ;)) please keep in mind that my lukewarm review of this book does not reflect my overall opinion of you. You rock (or seem to), and I welcome your... forthcoming... very soon... invitation to dinner! :)

Amy says

After reading this book I feel capable of making small talk about the history of trousers, sweaters, underpinnings, and togas. I consider that a plus. My social group might not agree.

I am really interested in going shopping and out for drinks with Tim Gunn now. I'm sure he will criticize every item of apparel I own but I would enjoy that because he's such an interesting chap. He's also motivated me to stop wearing yoga pants out in public after reading his book. Society should write him a thank you card for that.

The one huge negative in the book was the constant reminders that he worked on Project Runway. Okay. One reminder was enough.

Rachel says

One of my favorite courses in college was fashion history. Reading this is like having Tim Gunn for your history professor. Every word is in the voice of Tim Gunn and I could just hear him describing the difference between the Roman and Egyptian style of dress. A great read especially if you have ever wanted to know why a woman's shirt buttons up the opposite way of a man's shirt. I won't tell you. You have to read the book.

Christina says

A light history of fashion, organized by article of clothing. I love learning about historical fashion, and while I knew some of this, I did learn quite a bit, and I liked Gunn's insights as well as the fact the it was interesting without being exhaustive which kept it engaging.

I may not always agree with Gunn's opinions, but I loved that he was not shy about sharing them and that they were well-reasoned. He has some very strong negative feelings about cargo pants and trucker hats.

Photos throughout help illustrate the text, and he laces the history with fashion advice with the theme of eschewing trends for what fits your body best. In the conclusion, he criticizes the modern fashion industry for moving from women models in their thirties with naturally curvy bodies in the 1950s, to today's hyper-skinny teen and even pre-teens modeling clothes meant for adult women, as well as the fact that many designers refuse to create clothes meant for anyone over size 12, even though the mean size in the US is 14P.

I think this is primarily a history book, but I appreciated Gunn's sporadic advice, and I found the book inspiring me to go through my closet, and maybe do a little shopping....

Leslie says

I am not a fashion maven of any sort! I dont really even think about what I put on every day. However, I am a big fan of Tim Gunn. After watching him for many seasons on Project Runway, I love this man. He comes across on television as witty and fabulous, someone you would want as a close friend. His writing is even better! It takes talent to write a book about the condensed history of fashion and make it interesting--especially for us non-fashionistas! He has nailed it! This book is a fun overview of American fashion over the years. Gunn's writing style is similar to a letter from a friend dishing all the latest news! Some of it is laugh-out-loud funny.

For example, Tim is not a fan of capri jeans. He feels that they flatter no one. He states:

"At malls, I am tempted to set up the fashion equivalent of a guns-for-cash or needle exchange booth and call through a bullhorn: "Throw your cargo capris into the flaming trash can, step behind the screen and claim your wrap dress!" I would find it very cathartic...albeit very hot beside the pyre give the ubiquity of the look" Gunn covers the history of all of the main players in a wardrobe today, including t-shirts, underwear, jeans, skirts, dresses and pants. I learned a lot about the history with some tips on personal style.

I highly recommend this book for both entertainment and information. Good job, Mr. Gunn! Will you move close by and become my BFF??

Jennifer says

The title of this book accurately summarizes its contents--

Tim Gunn: author and source of too many anecdotes. Check.

Fashion: he makes a case for this word versus "style". Check.

Bible: verses used are taken out of context. Check.

Fascinating History: 100%! Check.

Everything in Your Closet: right down to the underwear. Check.

But the reason this is only getting two stars? Not enough pictures!

Gunn would often reference how a particular piece of clothing has changed over the course of time, and of the ten (random number) stages of such an evolution, he would only have images of two of those incarnations. While I did pick up more interesting trivia to store with the rest of the fluff in my head, I didn't want to resort to simultaneously searching Google while reading this book. Maybe it's too much to expect, but as visually appealing as they are, food and fashion are two subjects in which books need to have plenty of pictures.

Pamela says

A more proper title for this book would be: Tim Gunn's Fashion Bible: Tim Gunn's Opinion on Clothes, with History in a Walk-On Role.

I used to really like Tim Gunn. I love Project Runway, and he can be very grounding for the contestants. However, I then think about the things I don't like about Tim Gunn. He once called a model "zaftig" and blamed her for a contestant's ill-fitting clothes. My reaction to this was something like HULK SMASH!!!! He also seems to be a walking catchphrase. However, at other times I feel like he'd be a lot of fun to have a kaffeeklatsch with.

Gunn freely admits to the fact that this is not an exhaustive history of clothing, or even Western clothing. It's a sort of overview, and he encourages readers to educate themselves further by picking up more in-depth, scholarly works. I applaud this. Too often, Famous People Who Write Books present themselves and their product as the end-all-be-all of .

However. I found very little substance here, and too much of Tim Gunn holding forth on why he likes or dislikes a certain style of clothing. He often links a certain style with a moral judgement, and while this may be human nature, it's not right. For example, if you wear cargo capris, you are Sartorially Inept, a slob, and someone who's given up on themselves. Or ... you just might feel comfy in cargo capris. If this were really a history, he would note who first conceived of the cargo capri, and social factors into their popularity, etc. Mostly we get a rant about how they are ugly and unflattering (note: I do agree with him on the aesthetics).

The chapter on suiting, as well as the chapter on vests (mostly there is a chapter on vests because Tim Gunn likes vests) engages in a lot of French-bashing. Evidently, the English "invented" the vest. In order to be patriotic, therefore, Gunn suggests: "Maybe instead we should have gone with the seventeenth-century British strategy and all taken to wearing vests." Oooh, ow, that hurts! Everyone's wearing vests! In that chapter, there also seems to be an implicit link between being American and being British, as if everyone who lives in the U.S. is somehow indebted to the British for design and should aspire to that aesthetic. This is more than slightly inaccurate.

However, the thing that really got me (and as you can tell, I had a lot of angry feelings, mixed up with boredom) was the chapter on undergarments. Really, I wouldn't be surprised if it turns out Gunn was sponsored by Spanx or something. If this were Tim Gunn's world, everyone (and I mean everyone--you too, dudes) would be wearing shapewear. The absolute last thing I want to do is wrangle myself into some stretchy corset-by-another-name in order to wear some goofy dress, or present a slimmer profile. Way to

reinforce body image stereotypes! Thou shalt be thin! If thou be not thin and sculpted, thou shalt wear undergarments that squash thy body into the media ideal!

HULK SMASH!

He even presents corseting as a good thing (!!!) and seems to think we'd all be better if we went back to lacing ourselves up every day. I know that some women today wear corsets because they want to, or because they feel more supported and have less back pain, and hey, more power to them! But I do not subscribe to the view that the corset of times past was somehow liberating because it made your clothes look good.

I got halfway through the book, and just started saying to myself, "I cannot ... I just canNOT with this book!" And thus, it is abandoned, and will be returned to the library. You are free to vilify me for reviewing a book I haven't actually finished (gasp!), but I have a feeling that it's all in the same vein.

P.S. Don't forget your corset.

Glennis says

I read this book in bits and pieces over a period of time that worked out well since each chapter covered a different piece of clothing. Nothing was gone into huge detail but there were numerous footnotes and several other books were mentioned that would cover a certain article of clothing in much greater detail. Bits of fashion advice were sprinkled throughout the book and neat tidbits of history as well. A good gift book for someone fashion forward to see the roots of what they love so much.

Phyllis says

What a strange creature this book is. It is a chimera with the body of a fashion history text, the head of a style advice book for ladies, and the tail of a "ruminations from some famous person on TV type" book. The style advice pops up in the midst of the historical context throughout the book, and then at the end there's a very, very brief appendix reiterating what every style advice book in the history of the world says about evaluating your closet. It seems very phoned in, and I have a funny feeling Tim Gunn probably just wanted to do a big fashion history coffee table book and the publishers made some kind of provision for style advice, since it's what he's known for these days. Your enjoyment of this book is contingent on your personal feelings about Tim Gunn, obviously. I love him and his self-awareness of his fussy buttoned down ways, so I enjoyed this thing even though I kept shaking my head at how odd the tonal shifts between serious fashion history and editorializing were.
