



ZIPPER More generically called a “slide fastener,” the zipper is used as a closure in garments and a variety of other articles. Zippers were first introduced in a primitive form in the 1890s, but were not widely accepted in clothing until the 1930s.

The fastener that Americans most commonly call “zippers” can be traced to the invention of a Midwestern traveling salesman, Whitcomb Judson, in the early 1890s. Judson patented his device as a “clasp locker or unlocker” for shoes; this invention resembled the later zipper only superficially. It consisted of a series of hooks and eyes, each pair of which was engaged by the action of a key or slider. Over the next few years, Judson designed modifications of this device, none of which worked very effectively. The idea of an “automatic hook-and-eye,” however, caught the attention of entrepreneurs, so Judson was given money and encouragement to continue engineering his invention, and in the first years after 1900, the first devices came to market under the aegis of the Universal Fastener Company of Hoboken, New Jersey.

After several years of futile design and sales efforts, the Hoboken company gained the services of a Swedish immigrant, Gideon Sundback. Trained as an electrical engineer, Sundback was a remarkably clever and astute mechanic. He analyzed with care the key elements of the automatic hook-and-eye, and concluded that the hook-and-eye model was not a suitable one for any kind of automatic fastener. Late in 1913, Sundback introduced his “Hookless Fastener,” based on novel principles and resembling in all important respects the modern metal zipper.

Sundback’s hookless fastener depended on the action of a series of closely spaced elements, technically called “scoops,” whose precise spacing and ingenious shape are key to the fastener’s success. Each scoop has a dimple on one side and a protruding nib on the other. The fastener consists of two opposing rows of scoops, spaced so that the scoops from one side engage in the spaces between the scoops on the other side. The nib from one scoop fits into the dimple in the facing scoop, whose nib in turn fits into the next dimple down the row. Sundback likened the action to a series of spoons in which the bowls of alternating spoons fitted into one another. If the spoons at each end of the rows are held in place, the intermediate

spoons cannot disengage one another. The slider’s function is simply to bring the two rows of scoops together (or to separate them) in a continuous, serial action.

The entrepreneurs who had backed Judson and then Sundback readily saw the efficacy of the hookless fastener design. Sundback’s contributions went further to include the construction of machinery that made fastener manufacture rapid and economical. The Hookless Fastener Company was organized in Meadville, Pennsylvania, and efforts to market the novel device began in 1914. The fastener makers encountered challenges every bit as formidable as the technical ones they had overcome after such effort. The early hookless fastener was an unquestionably clever device, and it worked reasonably reliably and consistently. It was, however, expensive compared to the buttons or hooks and eyes that it was designed to replace, and it posed a host of difficulties for the designers and makers of most garments.

The clothing industry initially rejected the new fastener. It might, in fact, have died an ignominious early death if its salesmen had not cultivated small niche markets that sustained it for several years. Money belts for World War I sailors were followed by tobacco pouches, which in turn were followed, in the early 1920s, by rubber overshoes. The manufacturers of this last, the B. F. Goodrich Rubber Company, came up with a moniker for their new product, “Zippers,” that became even more popular than the overshoes themselves, and the term “zipper” came to be the common American term for the fastener (despite Goodrich’s trademark claims). Through most of the 1920s, expanding niche markets brought the fastener to a wider public, although garment makers still resisted wider adoption. Hookless Fastener adopted the trademark “Talon” in 1928 (and changed the corporate name to Talon, Inc., a decade later).

Only in the 1930s did zippers come to be accepted elements of men’s and women’s clothing, and even then only by steps. The famous haute couture designer, Elsa Schiaparelli, chose to set her designs of 1935 off by liberal use of zippers—even in places where no fastener was needed or expected. A couple of years later, in 1937, zippers began to appear widely in high fashion lines—Edward Molyneux’s pencil-slim coats, for example, used zippers to emphasize the sleek silhouette. At about the

same time, the designers of the best tailored men's clothing let it be known that zippered flies were acceptable, and by the end of the decade, zippers were common in the better men's trousers and were making their way into the ready-to-wear market. The combination of a reduction in prices (due to higher volume production) and the growing association of the zipper with modernity and fashion overcame the long-standing resistance of the garment makers and buyers. The widespread use of zippers in military uniforms during World War II was associated by many with the final popularization of the fastener, but its usage was already well on its way to becoming common before the war. By the 1950s, the zipper was the default fastener for everything from skirt plackets and trouser flies to leather motorcycle jackets and backpacks.

Even before the war, some manufacturers experimented with replacing the copper-nickel alloy standard in zippers with plastic, but this substitution was not very successful until Talon and the DuPont Company collaborated on a very new zipper design, in which the metal scoops were replaced by nylon spirals. The nylon zipper, after a few difficult years, became the standard appliance for lightweight applications, as garment makers were particularly attracted to the ease with which the nylon could be colored to match fabric dyes. Other materials were used for more specialized purposes: surgeons even adopted inert Teflon zippers for post-operative applications.

The zipper was by no means a strictly American phenomenon. Within only a few years of its introduction, British manufacturers sought to establish manufacture, and by the mid-1920s, French, German, and other suppliers followed. The chief British manufacturer, the Lightning Fastener Company of Birmingham, gave its name to the fastener itself in a wide range of languages; in France it became known as a "fermeture éclair," and in Germany as a "Blitzverschluss" (*Reissverschluss* became the more common German word later).

As the zipper became increasingly common in the twentieth century, it acquired an unusual cultural status. It became a widely recognized and used symbol with a host of associations. Aldous Huxley used zippers throughout his 1932 novel, *Brave New World*, to allude to the impersonal and mechanical nature of sex in his nightmarish world of the future. Broadway and Hollywood began in the same decade to use the zipper to convey images of promiscuity: Rodgers and Hart's 1940 musical *Pal Joey* included a famous pantomime striptease with the refrain of "zip" throughout. Rita Hayworth, in her 1946 movie *Gilda*, used the zipper more than once as an instrument of sexual provocation. Even in the realm of urban legend, the zipper quickly became a common trope, conveying the awkwardness of relying on the mechanical in the intimate realms of daily life.

In the course of the twentieth century, the zipper became so ubiquitous as to become almost invisible. It has multiplied in form, size, style, and function; ranging from

the simple plastic of the Ziploc bag to the zippers used in surgery and spacesuits. Arguably the most characteristic fastener of the twentieth century, the zipper has still not, even in the twenty-first century, lost its symbolic power to convey sexuality, opening and closing, separating and joining. And, despite the apparent allure of alternatives from old-fashioned buttons to modern Velcro, zippers appear in no danger of being displaced as the leading fastener.

See also **Fasteners; Uniforms, Military.**

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Robert Friedel

ZOOT SUIT The zoot suit cut a suave silhouette. Initially popularized by black "hipsters" in the mid- to late-1930s, but embraced more generally by swing jazz enthusiasts of all colors, the zoot suit jacket exaggerated the upper male body with wide padded shoulders and broad lapels, tapering dramatically down to the waist and flaring out to the knees. The pants were flowing, high waisted, and pleated, flaring at the knees and angling radically down to a tight fit around the ankles. The look was usually completed with a porkpie hat, long watch chain, thin belt, and matching shoes. It was a style androgynous enough to be worn by either men or women, but the fashion was most popular among men.

Eastern zooters favored eye-catching colors and patterns, but youth on the West coast preferred a more discreet appearance, possibly prompted by the March 1942 ruling of the War Production Board restricting the measurements for men's suits and rationing the availability of material for civilian use. Men's fashion in general became more moderate, and "the drape" was the more conservative version of the zoot suit. The length of the drape jacket was considerably shorter than the zoot jacket, falling at mid-thigh, and otherwise looked little different from a man's oversized business suit. Some women in Los Angeles took to wearing pleated skirts underneath the drape jacket with hosiery and huarache sandals.

Contemporary accounts placed the origins of the zoot suit in the African American communities of Gainesville, Georgia; Chicago; and Harlem, but the stylistic foundations of the zoot suit trace back to Edwardian fashion at the turn of the century. In the Northeast, the style was known as the "root suit," "suit suit," and "zoot suit"; in the South as "killer diller"; and in the West as "drape shape" or in Spanish as "el tacuche" (the wardrobe).

Jobs in war production allowed young people to experiment with consumption and a popular culture largely inspired by the African American jazz artists they admired. Jazz music, dance, clothing, and language that



Three men wearing zoot suits at a Los Angeles night club, 1942. Zoot suits were a trend carried by many Latino and black youth. Police and government authorities were often suspicious of the youth who wore it. © BETTMANN/CORBIS. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION.

youth across the color line shared allowed for re-creations of social identities. For some, jazz music and the hipster style were audacious celebrations of life in spite of the difficulties blacks faced during the 1930s. For others, wearing the fashion was a show of newfound but modest wealth from wartime employment that signaled their move from square to cool or from “country” to urbane. At the same time, the zoot suit was a dashing if not scandalous image because of its association with hipsters, drugs, and sex. Such layered meanings promised rich possibilities for transforming cultural expression into a form of resistance to the social conventions of segregation.

Although a few saw the popularity of the zoot suit as a harmless development, many more had visceral reactions to it as a symbol of the breakdown of social convention. Critics of jazz fashion seemed unable to accept that working-class youth of color could afford such an expensive suit through honest means. Some saw the suit as a waste of rationed material and an unabashed disregard for community values of thrift and sacrifice. Others projected the antiwar sympathies that some black hipsters expressed to all jazz enthusiasts who wore the zoot suit.

In many communities, the zoot suit grew into a powerful symbol of subversion by the mid-1940s, transformed by different sources of tension over changing social

boundaries. As people of color challenged racial barriers across the nation, many whites violently resisted integration. To them, the popularity of the zoot suit seemed to epitomize growing concerns over juvenile delinquency as young people of color increasingly refused to defer to white privilege.

In early June 1943, sailors, soldiers, and some civilians in Los Angeles rioted for a week, setting off a wave of race riots in cities large and small across the nation. The Zoot Suit Riot in Los Angeles was the longest, but the Detroit Race Riot in mid-June was the deadliest. Growing tensions over integration led to a day and a half of rioting, leaving twenty-five blacks and nine whites dead and more than 1,800 arrested. Conversely, in Los Angeles, no murders, rapes, deaths, or serious damage to property were reported in connection with the riot, and only a few cases of serious injury. The mob of mostly white military men seemed focused on reasserting segregation, breached by “uppity” young men of color, by destroying their public displays of wealth and beating those who refused to yield their drapes.

Jazz followed wherever American troops were stationed abroad, and for a moment zoot suits were fashionable among jazz enthusiasts in France, England, and



Jazz band members in zoot suits, 1942. Jazz band leader Lionel Hampton shortens a band member's zoot suit on stage. Zoot suits were popular with jazz enthusiasts. © BETTMANN/CORBIS. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION.

as far away as South Africa. The zoot suit fell out of fashion in the postwar years as the jazz world moved from swing to be-bop, but it served as the inspiration for the Teddy Boys' distinctive look in postwar London.

Decades later the zoot suiter arose immortalized in the dramatic and scholarly works of Chicano artists and intellectuals who saw the wartime generation as cultural nationalists. A zoot suit revival inspired by Luis Valdez's stage and screen musical continues in popular venues, and productions of *Zoot Suit* continue to draw large audiences in the Southwest. Some businesses and Internet sites cater to customers interested in zoot suits, and zoot-suited youth are a staple at some low rider car shows. For many Mexican American youth, putting on the zoot suit serves as a way to connect with a past that was self-assertive and stylish, pay homage to community elders, and assume a place in the continuum of cultural resistance and affirmation.

High-end designers such as Stacey Adams, Vittorio St. Angelo, and Gianni Vironi produce suits that could well be considered next-generation zoot suits. Updated zoot suits no longer elicit the public censure received in the 1940s, because the social context in which the fashion was first received has changed so dramatically.

See also **African American Dress; Latin American Fashion.**

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ZORAN Zoran Ladicorbic, born in 1947, was an architectural student from Yugoslavia who came to New York and launched an unconventional fashion business in 1976 that stood out for its simple formula of luxurious, casual basics. In contrast to the ornate frocks of Parisian couture that screamed "expensive," Zoran made stark minimalism his signature as he turned out spartan collections of tops, pull-on pants, shift dresses, sarong skirts, and sweaters in sumptuous cashmere, Tasmanian wool, cotton and silk taffeta, and lamé. Zoran's silhouettes never changed, so that a Zoran wardrobe defies the very notion of fashion trends. Zoran calls his fashion formula

"jet pack" fashion: simple styles without zippers, fastenings, or other embellishments. The clothes can be folded flat and tossed into a carry-on suitcase stashed in the overhead compartment of an airplane. Zoran's business is as spare as his fashions; he has neither design assistants nor does he offer secondary lines like jeans and fragrances that round out other designer collections.

In the 1990s, Zoran's business exploded and became one of the top-selling high-fashion brands in stores such as Neiman Marcus, Bergdorf Goodman, and Saks Fifth Avenue. As a luxury brand, Zoran appealed to upscale businesswomen and movie stars such as Isabella Rossellini and Elizabeth Taylor, who preferred the low-key glamour of simple basics that allowed them—and not the clothes—to shine through. His most devoted fans are known as the Zorans. Fashion observers regarded Zoran's minimalist formula as basics for the rich.

Fueling the mystique of Zoran's quirky fashions is his iconoclastic demeanor. As he wears his hair and busy beard long, he has been dubbed fashion's Rasputin. A chain smoker who loves Stolichnaya vodka, Zoran is a confrontational dictator who doesn't believe in fashion's usual conventions. He believes that confident women should simplify their lives and wear flat shoes, no jewelry, and a wash-and-wear haircut—along with his clothes.

Retailers say that the Zoran formula is luxury goods marketing 101. He only sells to one or two stores in every city, which makes his clothes hard to find, and therefore all the more coveted by his fans. As a result, retailers aren't compelled to mark down the goods to fuel sales, as Zoran repeats the same styles year after year so that nothing in his collections looks dated. Because he does no fashion shows and gets very little publicity in the press, shoppers regard his brand as having the ultimate snob appeal—the epitome of "dog whistle fashion," pitched so high that only insiders recognize it.

See also **Department Store; Fashion Designer; Fashion Marketing and Merchandising; Retailing.**

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ZORIS. See **Sandals.**