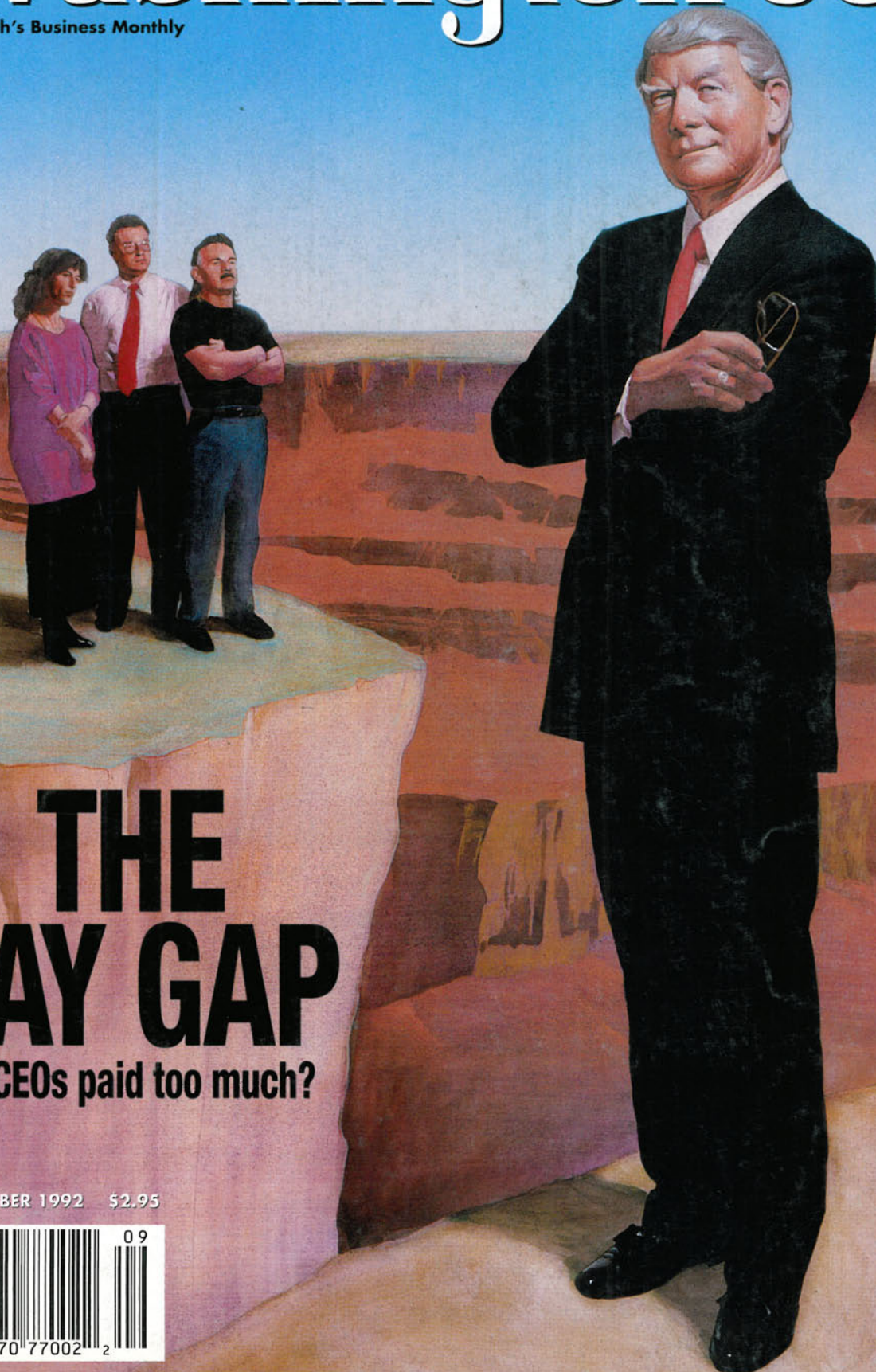


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Tailor Made

Custom made clothing offers subtlety, style, and detail—at a price.

By Jo Brown

GIAN DECARO POINTS TO ROW upon row of file cabinets in the back-room office of his Seattle custom tailoring shop. "If we got all of these people together in one room," he says, "we could probably solve most of the city's problems."

An exaggeration? Perhaps. But if DeCaro's secret client file is any indication—it purportedly includes some of the city's most powerful movers and shakers—at least we can finally put to rest the image of Northwest men as plaid-shirt-and-pocket-protector kind of guys.

With the onset of autumn and a new fashion season, many of Seattle's savvyest men in business will by-pass the ready-made racks in favor of custom tailored clothing. And DeCaro, who can spot a ready-to-wear garment at a glance from the window of his Gian DeCaro Sartoria shop, just north of downtown, is ready for them.

"A suit from a discount store looks like just that," he says, with a dismissive wave of the hand. "Or you can buy the most expensive suit off the rack at a fine specialty store. But if it doesn't fit, or it's not your style, it's all for naught."

DeCaro should know. Though only 35, he has plenty of tailoring experience under his belt. He apprenticed in Spokane with his father, Silvio, almost from the time he could reach the cutting table. After graduating from Gonzaga University in the late '70s, DeCaro moved to Seattle, where he worked his way up to national sales manager of James Jean in three short years. But DeCaro *liked* tailoring and he returned to

Spokane to help his father run the family business. He opened his Seattle shop in 1988, and the years of hard work seem to have paid off handsomely: Last fall, DeCaro was listed in a *Town & Country* magazine survey of America's top tailors.

DeCaro believes that personal attention and communication with clients are not just the mark, but the responsibility, of a good tailor. "Spending time with clients is very important. When a customer comes in, we'll sit down, talk about his personal sense of style and when and where he'll be wearing the suit. I try to find out what he likes to wear and how he's expected to dress for work. Last of all, we measure."

Achieving a perfect fit is undoubtedly the main reason most men choose custom tailoring over ready-made garments. But DeCaro says that most of his customers are surprised at how many styling options they have, no matter what kind of shape they're in. "We deal with a lot of misconceptions about clothing—such as men saying, 'I'm too heavy to wear pleated trousers or a double-breasted jacket,' or 'I don't want a tight European-cut suit.' The truth is that heavy men can wear trouser pleats and the double-breasted look, but only if the clothing fits right. And the ultra-fitted Italian suits of the '80s have given way to a fuller, more relaxed cut that looks flattering on many body types. Besides," shrugs DeCaro, "it's my job to make my clients look two inches taller and 20 pounds thinner."

As one might expect, such expertise doesn't come cheaply—or quickly.

Depending upon the selected fabric and style, a single suit typically runs from \$850 to \$1,000, and an order can take up to six weeks from fitting to completion. But considering the attention to detail, the superior quality of the fabric, and the workmanship that go into each piece, DeCaro argues, the buyer of a custom suit is really coming out ahead in the long run. "The longevity of a handmade suit is incomparable," he says. "I typically wear my suits for 10 years. In fact, I still get stopped on the street and complimented on an eight-year-old suit I still wear often."

Because a client's personal preference may not be quite in sync with his conservative work "uniform," DeCaro relies on subtle detailing, such as the silhouette of the shoulder or the cut of the lapel, in his effort to give a suit or jacket more distinction while allowing it to blend with other pieces in the client's closet. "I think that is really our forte, mixing traditional clothing with something a little more stylish," says DeCaro, who personally prefers contemporary Milanese and Florentine cuts. "I'm not a suit salesman—instead, I sell wardrobes."

What kind of Seattle man typically eschews the racks in favor of custom clothing? "Executives, mostly," says Michael Weinstein, owner of Michael's Bespoke Tailors in downtown Seattle. Weinstein characterizes his typical client as "an elegant and mature dresser, with fairly classic taste but with some interest in Italian influences." And which professions make the best dressers? "Out-front guys whose livelihoods depend on mak-



Jonathan Becker

ing a good impression.”

With 32 years in the business, Michael's has a loyal, established clientele that Weinstein says is built on trust. Recently, a senior Weyerhaeuser executive and long-time customer who was transferred to Japan stopped by while on a visit and ordered two suits, to be shipped to the Far East upon their completion. Like DeCaro, Weinstein keeps client files, some that date back four or five years, to help coordinate new purchases with existing garments. And he's frequently asked to consult clients on a total wardrobe overhaul, literally rum-

Gian DeCaro—with his father and mentor, Silvio—in the First Avenue shop where the younger DeCaro constructs wardrobes for some of Seattle's most powerful movers and shakers.

maging through their closets to help them decide what's salvageable and what just has to go.

Though the bulk of Weinstein's clientele comprises business professionals, he also does a brisk business with men whose jobs don't require the donning of suit and tie. “My mailman is a customer,” says Weinstein, and tells of how a couple of years ago, during the building of nearby Pacific First Centre, a construction

worker moseyed down the block and came in for a fitting. “For a man who doesn't wear a suit every day,” says Weinstein, “it makes sense to invest in a really good one.”

Like many tailors, Gian DeCaro maintains a policy of not identifying his customers by name, though he will say that several well-known local athletes are among his current clientele. One in particular, who DeCaro hints is “probably the most famous baseball player in the country right now,” favors sports jackets in rich, bold tones such as cobalt, and mustard, to judge from his recently com-

pleted order. In fact, there's a good chance this impeccably dressed mystery man will be sporting a DeCaro-designed tuxedo when he appears as a guest on the Arsenio Hall Show later this year.

DeCaro claims that once his customers—famous or not—don one of his custom-made garments, whether it's a pair of trousers, a bathrobe, or a supple suede jacket, they're likely to return for more. And indeed, he describes several regulars as "clothing junkies. Once they experience the luxury of the fabrics and the way the clothes drape and hang, they're hooked." ✂