



Photography: courtesy of Knatchbull.

A CUT ABOVE

The world of TAILORING has traditionally been a DECIDELY male DOMAIN. But a new GENERATION of talented WOMEN TAILORS and tailoring houses is lending its UNIQUE TOUCH to the CRAFT

words TESS DE VIVIE DE RÉGIE

In a serene street in London's St James's, an area famed for its shirtmakers, cobblers and traditional grooming wares and the heartland of the city's old-school gentlemen's clubs, you'll find the atelier of Kathryn Sargent – a rare female-helmed workshop in the world of British tailoring. She started out as a tailor at the 254-year-old tailoring house Gieves & Hawkes, where she worked for 15 years and became head cutter – the first woman to reach this position in the history of Savile Row.

"I was making for more and more women, who ran hedge funds, who were lawyers," she recalls. "They were saying to me, 'Where do we go to get executive-type clothes? We're short-changed [compared to men]'. As a woman, I know how transformative a good suit is on the body." It was this that inspired Sargent to open her eponymous tailoring house in 2012, thus becoming the first woman in Savile Row history to hold the title of Master Tailor, which designates someone fully trained in bespoke suitmaking and cutting with a workshop in their own name.

The appeal of borrowing from the boys is longstanding. Marlene Dietrich mesmerised audiences in the romantic drama *Morocco* (1930), in which she smoked and serenaded a crowd while sporting a tuxedo and top hat. But Dietrich was also embroiled in the darker flipside of women in men's clothing, which has often been steeped in controversy and moral panic. In 2021, a photo purporting to show Dietrich being arrested in Paris in 1933 for wearing trousers was posted on Facebook and went viral; no such arrest occurred, apparently, but the urban myth pointed to a broader truth that persists to the present day – at certain airlines, for example, female flight attendants only recently won the right to wear trousers while on duty.

For many women, an attitude of sartorial defiance took hold. Bianca Jagger famously bucked the trend for traditional bridalwear by opting for a white Yves Saint Laurent skirt suit for her wedding to Mick Jagger in 1971, inspiring generations of brides to come. Then there was Diane Keaton's waistcoat and tie in *Annie Hall* (1977) and the striking beauty of Grace Jones in a Giorgio Armani jacket as sharp as her cheekbones on the cover of her 1981 album *Nightclubbing*. The likes of Carolyn Bessette-Kennedy and Charlotte Rampling adopted the hardworking reliability and elegance of menswear classics – tailored shirts and trousers and well-cut blazers – into their everyday wardrobes. But perhaps what has been missing from this equation is tailoring specifically with women in mind, akin to what has been available to men for centuries.



OPPOSITE PAGE A suit by Knatchbull ABOVE Knatchbull at 32 Savile Row, London.

Formerly known as The Deck London, Knatchbull was founded in April 2019 and is the first women's-only tailoring house on Savile Row. It's helmed by Daisy Knatchbull, formerly the communications director at Huntsman, which has outfitted the likes of King George V, Winston Churchill, Lee Radziwill and Ronald Reagan. In 2016, Knatchbull herself made history as the first woman to wear a suit in the Royal Enclosure at Ascot; she's also the great-granddaughter of Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India and great-uncle to the King. Her designs have been worn by Aerin Lauder, Gillian Anderson and *Bridgerton's* Adjoa Andoh.

"For many years there have been men's tailors that offer women's tailoring, but these suits have often been more about



Kathryn Sargent in garment-making mode.

Photography: Reuben Paris (this page), both courtesy of Kathryn Sargent.

adapting men's designs for women, rather than truly creating women's suits," says Knatchbull. "As a result, I think women were hesitant to go to men's tailors and felt their bodies weren't totally understood. We spent many years researching how to go about creating the perfect cut for women."

"Bespoke British tailoring has been synonymous with Savile Row for over 200 years," says Taj Phull, the managing director of Huntsman and board member of the Savile Row Bespoke Association (SRBA), founded in 2004 to represent the street's artisans and their craft. The body controls the use of certain terms, such as the trademarked 'Savile Row Bespoke', which requires, among other things, a garment to be made within a 100-yard

radius of Savile Row. Phull describes Knatchbull's contribution to the trade as "a breath of fresh air – she's [created] an incredible marketing tool to show that women can also come to Savile Row".

Making great clothing for women is not, of course, the preserve of women – Sargent cites Savile Row tailoring titans Richard Anderson and Edward Sexton, both famed for their beautiful female tailoring, to illustrate the point. But she acknowledges that, as a woman, she has an advantage. "Because I understand about underwear, about what women go through in their monthly cycles or what point in life they are at," she says.

Knatchbull employs an exclusively female team of tailors. "[It's] something I am very proud of," she says. "Traditionally, tailoring

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has been an extremely male-dominated trade, so it's great to see many more women working in the industry."

While Australia doesn't have quite the same centuries-spanning tradition, today it's carving out its own identity in tailoring. In 2019, P. Johnson Femme sprung out of the immensely successful P. Johnson tailoring house – the latter launching in 2009, initially just for men. Today, both arms offer ready-to-wear and tailoring for men and women.

P. Johnson alumna Emily Nolan is now creative director at tailoring house E Nolan, based in Melbourne; Cate Blanchett wore a made-to-measure red suit from the label for the Australian press leg of *Tar* in 2022. "I see this as a great opportunity to meet and sit with my wonderful female, non-binary and trans clients," reflects Nolan of her work. "How many times have you bought something and thought, *Close enough*, only for the garment to end up donated or, worse, thrown out? How can one design a collection of garments for all different bodies and styles? Made-to-measure tailoring is a vehicle for people to air their grievances and desires for the garments on their bodies."

Effie Katsounis' family have worked in men's suiting for two generations and, since 2018, she has been carrying on their legacy via her own label, Melbourne-based Effie Kats, which offers women's ready-to-wear wear and made-to-order tailoring. "[Historically], men were steered towards tailoring while women were steered towards dressmaking," says Katsounis. "From a client perspective, fashion for women has evolved differently – focusing on variety and trends over the pragmatism and longevity of suiting" – although, she notes, with the rise in women's tailoring, the tide is turning.

Tailoring, says Knatchbull, represents the antithesis to the churn of fast fashion. "We want [our clothes] to follow a woman through the many stages of her life – pregnancy, IVF, menopause and more; all the inevitable shifts in body shape," she says. For Sargent, her ultimate goal is to create clothing that will be used time and time again. "I don't want to make something that's just going to be worn once a year. I want these garments to have a life and be brought to life by the wearer."

Due to its steep cost, tailored clothing is not an option for everyone. For Sargent, the price of her pieces – starting at £1700 (\$3530) for trousers; a two-piece bespoke suit starts at £5950 (\$12,360) – is commensurate with the labour needed to produce them; each requires more than 50 hours' work and at least two or three fittings, with the whole process taking between three and four months. "This isn't a high-margin business," she says. "We're not doing it to amass the profits." And she's intent on sharing her passion for the craft with a younger generation. "I'm trying to recruit and get that philosophy instilled in [them]. I want to pass my skills on." HB

