

T-Shirts Encyclopedia Article

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T-Shirts

Sex, work, and democracy together advanced the T-shirt as a clothing icon of the late twentieth century. Until the 1940s, the T-shirt was exclusively an undershirt. Sailors, however, in shipboard fraternity, worked in T-shirts. These World War II, T-shirted heroes appeared in *Life Magazine* (cover, *Life*, July 13, 1942) and cavorted in the musical *South Pacific*. The private world was now public, and the undershirt entered society, sometimes with the renegade image of Marlon Brando, other times with the innocent white shirt of James Dean. The T-shirt would not have the authority of the cut-and-sewn shirt with collar until the 1980s when Bruce Springsteen reinforced the T-shirt's proletarian roots but also identified the T-shirt with the new 1980s masculinity of sex-object, gym-built male bodies.

Further Reading:

Harris, Alice. *The White T*. New York, Harper Collins, 1996.

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