Ardmore tailor finds work an art, a craft, a calling

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Joseph Centofanti stood in his Ardmore tailor shop, where he has sewn suits by hand for 45 years, and held up a plaid sport coat.

Every line of the plaid - north and south, east and west - matched up. They matched where shoulder met sleeve, where front met back. And the pockets! It was as if the pockets were not there, the lines of plaid matched so perfectly.

He smiled. A tape measure - the tailor's stethoscope - hung around his neck. "This is really a work of art," he said. "The plaid is like it was painted on after the suit was made."

Joseph Centofanti was not boasting. At 84, who needs to boast? He was rejoicing. He is a man in love with his life and livelihood, with fabric and suit and style. He draws deep satisfaction knowing he's a da Vinci with needle and thread.

Being a tailor is all he has known. His mother was a tailor, and his father was a tailor, and he met his wife when he was fitting her for a suit. He knew as he pinned her skirt that this was the woman he would marry, before he even knew her name.

Joseph works six days a week. He takes a long lunch and a rest daily. He golfs in good weather on Wednesdays and spends January and February in Florida. Other than that he is here, in his shop on Station Avenue, with thousands of samples of the world's finest materials, with the old sewing machines and irons he has used for decades, and with his trio of helpers, all old masters like himself: Louis Russo, 70; Dino DiPrinzio, 68, and Manuel Dias, 72.

"There is nowhere in the world I am as happy as when I'm here," he said.

His customers are generally the rich and powerful, the doctors, lawyers and CEOs of the Main Line who can afford $2,500 - minimum - for a suit. The latest rage in fabric these days, he says, is worsted cashmere, made by Harrison's in Edinburgh, Scotland.

He picked up a cashmere blazer. "$3,900 for the jacket," he said. "The customer liked it so much he wanted a suit."

How much for the suit?

"I haven't figured it out yet," **Joseph** said. "He doesn't ask the price." He figured it out later: $5,300.

Joseph was tailor for Walter Annenberg. When Annenberg could no longer come to the shop, the ambassador sent a limo to bring **Joseph** to him. **Joseph** was invited to the memorial service for the late philanthropist last Friday at the Academy of Music, where he sat next to Annenberg's pilot and butler.

Joseph makes about 250 suits, jackets and topcoats a year.

"The clothes are superb," said lawyer Alfred Putnam, a partner at Drinker Biddle & Reath. "I see him as kind of the last of a breed. He's a perfectionist. He is a great believer in people looking their best."

Joseph was born in Philadelphia, but at age 4 returned to Italy with his parents. As a boy, he worked in their tailor shop in Torino. "My father teach me every little detail about the trade," **Joseph** said.

By 14, **Joseph** had his own ideas about style, and he fought over them with his father. "He learned the trade in the United States," **Joseph** said. "He thought that was better than Italian fashion. I was the other way. I was more into what was in style. Every six months I wanted to make a change."

His father refused. So **Joseph** would rebel. He worked for his father's competitors until father and son made peace.

In 1937, when he was 19, **Joseph** went to Ethiopia with his family and set up shop there. When World War II broke out, he was briefly forced to serve as a radio operator in the Italian army even though he was an American. When English troops took control in Africa, he was put in an internment camp in Kenya.

After the war, he returned to Philadelphia and got a job in the same tailor shop where his father had worked 30 years earlier. **Joseph** noticed that all the men for whom he fitted suits came from the Main Line, so he decided he should open a shop there. He's been in the same spot since the Eisenhower administration. He makes all styles of suit, but he prefers the traditional British walker, just as his father did. He lives in Ardmore. His wife of 49 years died two years ago.

Joseph today laments that such Old World education has vanished from his trade, that his trade itself is vanishing. Only 300 independent or private tailors belong to the Custom Tailors & Designers Association of America.

"I don't know what happens when he goes," one of his longtime customers said. "He really is the last of his kind."

In August, **Joseph** was named one of the Top 10 tailors in America by the Robb Report, a magazine for millionaires. He didn't know this until one of his customers brought the magazine in and showed him.

"They last forever," said one doctor, picking up his suit on Tuesday. "You don't have to be loaded. Just a little bit loaded."

Joseph realizes that not everyone can afford a handmade suit for $2,500. He says store-bought suits aren't bad, especially if you have an average build.

"Buy a Chevy, and you can go anywhere the Cadillac goes," he said.

I asked **Joseph** if he makes his own suits.

He started to laugh.
"Well, naturally," he said. "Do I walk with my own feet?"