

The White T-Shirt: A Right to Bare Arms

This utterly essential staple played a key role in the liberation of the male body from the tyranny of long sleeves.

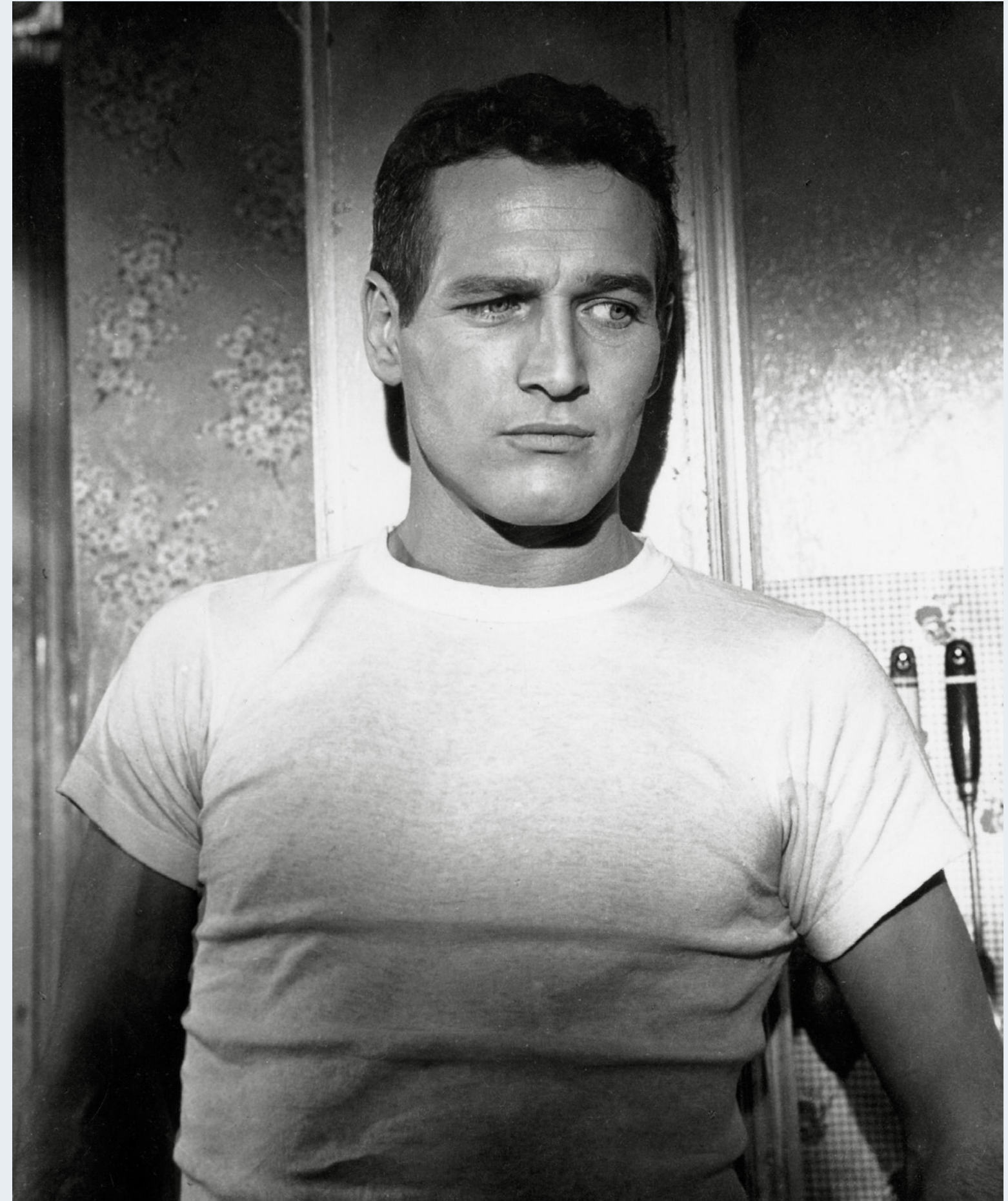


The T-shirt is so firmly ensconced in the modern wardrobe that it's easy to forget there was a time when baring one's arms was a transgressive act. Thanks to both servicemen and silver-screen icons, the simple white tee crossed the boundary from underwear to outerwear, becoming an essential part of the modern man's wardrobe.

The first tees were an outgrowth of union suits, a one-piece flannel garment worn by American women in the middle of the nineteenth century. Buttoned up from crotch to neck, the union suit was a welcome alternative to constricting Victorian undergarments, and American women were quick to adopt them—with working men quickly following. While the suit kept one warm in cooler temperatures, the red flannel was unsuitable for summertime work, so owners would cut them in half at the navel and, in some cases, cut the long sleeves off at the elbow. It may not have been pretty, but the T-shirt was starting to take shape.

At the turn of the century, new knitting techniques allowed manufacturers to do away with the buttons, which frequently snagged and popped off. Men who couldn't be bothered with the needlework would replace the missing buttons with safety pins—an effective but unattractive solution. The newly designed crew neck undershirt could be pulled over the head and then, thanks to the flexible knit, would snap back into shape. Two American brands, Cooper Underwear Company (now Jockey) and P.H. Hanes Knitting Company (now simply Hanes), soon started producing short-sleeve versions, giving us the prototype for the modern tee.

Military outfitters quickly latched on to the garment and started issuing it to sailors shortly before the outbreak of World War I. The cotton tee replaced the much looser-fitting square-neck flannel shirt that had been standard issue since 1880. Perfectly suited to the life of the sailor, the easy-to-laundry and fast-drying cotton tee could be worn for dirty work, sparing the sailor's crisp uniform. At the same time, it instilled a kind of hygienic discipline among the men, as grime could be more easily spotted.



Paul Newman bares his arms in a publicity still for *The Hustler* (1961): Tom Cruise would steal the show when Newman reprised his role as Fast Eddie Felson in *The Color of Money*, but in the 1961 poolhall classic, *The Hustler*, Newman ran the table, showcasing his star power in every scene.