

## **The new importance of old classics**

*Hywel Davies*

Presenting: the "new classic wool trouser". Yes, we're in fashionland. And we're reinventing the wheel! Consider, however, the reasoning behind this initiative by Topman, Topshop's men's wear division. "It started as a very simple idea based on the need for contemporary designed classics for a young, fashion-savvy audience," says Topman's design director Gordon Richardson. He knows what he is talking about, having launched similar "white shirt" and "classic sunglasses" projects. "The designers' unfettered and swaggering approach rejuvenates the classics for a new audience," he says.

"Men's wear tends to seem limited," explains New Yorker Tim Hamilton, one of the five designers picked to work on the Topman trouser project and the creator of a sportswear-inspired style. "At the end of the day, it's the designer's versions of these garments that make this new."

"Men's wear is all about limits and restrictions on what you can do," agrees Hamilton's colleague Patrik Ervell, whose black trousers are cut like jeans and tapered. "It's built around a set vocabulary, and then it's about changes in detailing and silhouette and colour."

"The challenge," says Ann Sofie-Back, who contributed a pair of loose-fitting chinos to the Topman effort, "is not to take it too far."

Put another way, men like the same old same old. But they really like the same old slightly different. After all, as Todd Lynn, another member of the trouser project, points out: "A classic trouser from the 1970s has a very different cut from the classics of today. Details and fabrications give classic garments a modern edge."

According to Martin Raymond, trend and consumer insight director at think-tank The Future Laboratory, "Men are concerned about the mechanics of clothing as well as the aesthetics. They are very particular when it comes to detail, performance and finish."

"I think much of it might stem from our days growing up in uniform; school, cubs, scouts, cadets, sports, the military," observes UK-based designer Aitor Throup, who also worked on Topman's project and was inspired by the generic trouser design of the M51 US military combat trouser. "The familiar feels comfortable to us. It's also hard to get wrong. Keep clothing simple and classic and you are unlikely ever to look foolish."

This is a sentiment no longer confined to mass-marketers such as Zara, which recently overtook Gap as the world's biggest retailer (3,900 stores across 70 countries), basing its business on offering updated classics to a fashion-eager consumer. High-end brands - known for statement-making catwalk shows that have seen men in skirts, metallics and lace - are increasingly adopting the same attitude.

Tom Ford, for example, formerly of Gucci and now head of his own men's wear label, will be dressing James Bond for his upcoming screen outing and says: "Style is most potent when it is least complicated."

Similarly, when Belgian Kris Van Assche was named the new designer at Dior Homme last year, he announced that he did not want to present impenetrable concepts. "I wanted to reinterpret a classic wardrobe, and look at the heritage of Monsieur Dior," he said. For his recent collection, he took 1950s zoot suits from the archives and reworked them into modern pieces. The process was based on evolution, not revolution, and the result was customer-friendly.

Sir Paul Smith, who has created an empire worth £300m out of combining classical men's wear with quirky detailing such as coloured buttons and bright linings, sums up: "My clothes have elements of craftsmanship, classicism and tradition but always with a modern aspect."

Philip Start, the founder of men's wear chain Woodhouse, says: "We tend to find that our customer wears items that have the trends smartly diffused into classics - garments that are made in classic fabrics but are cut in a contemporary fashion."

And Todd Lynn adds: "Essentially this is what everyone is looking for: designers reinterpreting classics with modern ideals. These pieces are the foundation of every man's wardrobe."

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**WHITE SHIRTS**

## Conservative comeback

A curious phenomenon is gripping credit crunch Mayfair. It's not to do with a fall in restaurant reservations, haute gamme watches or far-flung holidays. Rather, it's about shirts. Shirts?

"Over the past two months I've noticed that 99 per cent of shirts worn to lunch in The Wolseley have been white," says Rowland Lowe-MacKenzie, communications director of venerable Jermyn Street men's wear shop Turnbull & Asser. "The exaggerated stripes with contrast white collars and cuffs have vanished. That feel-good factor colour has been drained."

"It is a given that white and pale blue shirts are bestsellers," says Jermyn Street bespoke shirtmaker Emma Willis. "But I have noticed a new conservatism. The big deep Italian collars with four buttons have gone and the stripe is being replaced by a collective desire for the purity, classicism and practicality of the perfect white shirt."

Willis has observed a growing demand from her City and boutique finance clients for multiple orders for the definitive white shirt and sober tie. "The runaway success this season is white Sea Island cotton that will perform equally well in the Tokyo heat or in a sub-zero New York climate. By removing the question of colour or pattern, men can concentrate on the fundamentals: ability to travel well, feel and opaqueness."

In June, shirtmakers Thomas Pink opened its first White Shirt Bar at the Jermyn Street shop. Choices are presented in menu format with staples such as poplin, herringbone, and Oxford button-down offered with options such as double or button cuffs and a variety of collar shapes. Going beyond the office remit, Pink also addresses the informal linen and double-washed beach shirt. There are plans to open White Shirt Bars in Pink shops on New York's Madison Avenue and rue François 1er in Paris.

"When the economy takes a downward turn, the classics come to the fore and you rely on the discernment of your peer group to understand the language of what you are wearing," says Turnbull's Lowe-MacKenzie. "For example, I don't see the bespoke suit business suffering as a result of the credit crunch. People who know, know that you're wearing an immaculately cut bespoke suit. This is more, not less pronounced when you're wearing grey or navy. The shirt and tie choice inevitably becomes more strict, so with a white shirt and relatively simple tie the cognoscenti know you're well dressed, but the world doesn't notice."

"I have one customer who will buy the same micro-dot tie but in every colour variation I have designed. He knows that every one of those ties will work with a white shirt when he travels," says Emma Willis.

"The parallel with what happened in the market when we went into the recession in the 1990s is obvious," says Lowe-MacKenzie. "The very flamboyant designer-led pack suddenly got serious and decided to embrace much simpler tones such as the grey suit and white shirt. This is history repeating."

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