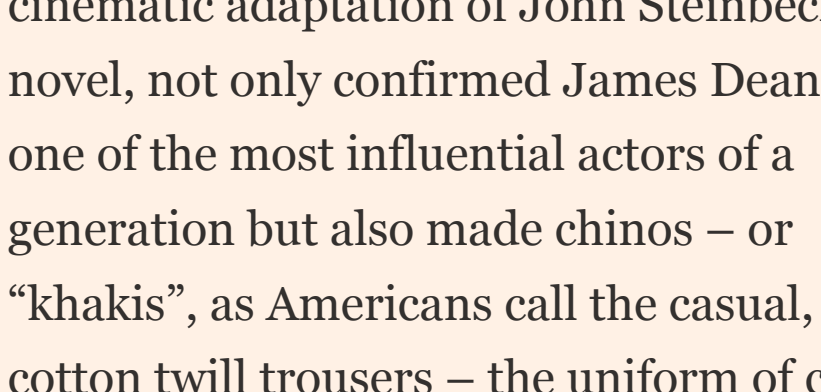


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# The new chinos



David Hayes JULY 17 2010

*East of Eden*, the brooding, 1955 big-screen cinematic adaptation of John Steinbeck’s novel, not only confirmed James Dean as one of the most influential actors of a generation but also made chinos – or “khakis”, as Americans call the casual, beige cotton twill trousers – the uniform of choice for budding teenage rebels.

As Glen Hoffs, fashion director at Brooks Brothers, New York’s original preppy label, says: “Undoubtedly, khakis became cool after James Dean wore them in the film. From that moment, the khaki trouser became an American style classic to rival jeans.”

Chinos lost their rebel appeal over time, becoming associated instead with something wholly uncool. After a long hiatus, however, they’re back. According to Adam Kelly, the contemporary and designer wear buyer at London department store Selfridges: “The chino trouser is one of the big men’s wear trends of the summer. We have bought chinos from designers such as Dries Van Noten, Dolce & Gabbana and Comme des Garçons, with many of our styles selling out.”

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Add Bottega Veneta, Louis Vuitton and Lanvin to the list of big designer names putting their stamp of approval to chinos this summer and you get the picture – the defining garment of casual Fridays and the 1990s dotcom heyday is most definitely back.

“When I first started work, we used to call dress-down Fridays ‘beige’ days,” says Jonathan Barker, a financial analyst at an investment bank in London. “Everyone wore chinos. It was like swapping one uniform for another every Friday. Personally, I’d be happy to never wear beige again.”

Thankfully the new crop of chinos has moved on from the tired old staple of dress-down office days. As Gordon Richardson, design director at high street store Topman, says: “Style-wise, it’s all about a slimmer silhouette with a look reminiscent of the early 1950s French Riviera. We’ve been watching the chino in the standard stone colour but also in newer palettes of brights and pastels. There’s been a total revamp in style too, with a move away from the traditional two-pleat shape of old into newer flat fronts, and even younger skater styles with twisted and arc shape silhouettes.” (Prices from £35.)

Another factor in the resurgence of chinos is the influence of the American television series *Mad Men*, which has fuelled new interest in the American preppy style. As Brooks Brothers’ Glen Hoffs says: “These days jeans are still viewed as being too casual for most workplaces, and the chino is easier to wear in a wider range of situations. We’ve been in such a denim-focused trend for the past few years that the chino now looks like a fresh alternative.”

Jane McCann, the UK sales manager at Brooks Brothers, says sales of chinos in Britain have increased by more than 80 per cent in the past two years. “Chinos now account for 66 per cent of our casual trousers business. Our most recent style, the ‘Milano’ fit (£79), has become our new ‘hero’ product. It was initially developed for the European market, but it is now performing strongly in the US and across the globe,” she says.

Whether it is a Brooks Brothers’ pair, Bottega Veneta’s luxury take on the look (£500, available at Harvey Nichols), or high street versions such as Mango’s turn-back cuff style, £49.90, Muji’s classic khakis, £39, or Banana Republic’s five-pocket style, £65, there are endless variations to choose from this summer.

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At Gap, the “Fremont” chino, £45, is proving a solid hit. Patrick Robinson, the brand’s vice-president of design, says: “We’ve been selling chinos since the mid-1970s. I’m always looking for a new way to show khakis, as they are at the heart of what Gap is about. I love wearing my straight khakis unpreserved, as I like the relaxed softness of the wrinkled finish, or our slim wrinkle-resistant khakis, which have a slicker, sharper feeling, with a white T-shirt. I like the juxtaposition of a relaxed and dressier style and vice versa. I’m also seeing a lot of guys around New York wearing their khakis rolled up, with loafers, in a remix of classic preppy style.”

Indeed, as far as Robinson is concerned, the chino is here to stay. “For autumn we’re relaunching our men’s khakis. We feel it’s definitely a growth area,” he says.

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