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## The right stripes



David Hayes JANUARY 7 2011

They have different agendas and different creative engines, but every so often the worlds of fashion and film hit on the same visual touchstones with surprising serendipity.

Case in point: last month's US opening of *The Garden of Eden*, based on the posthumous novel by Ernest Hemingway about a jazz age American couple taking an extended European honeymoon featured an unforgettable image of the couple backlit by the Mediterranean and dressed in matching striped T-shirts and wide leg white trousers – outfits that could have been lifted straight from maverick Japanese designer Junya Watanabe's spring men's and women's collections.

Indeed, when it comes to nautical, the look is as unisex and universal as fashion gets (once you move beyond denim). Sam Lobban, men's contemporary buyer at Selfridges, says: "Nautical clothing has always had a romanticism surrounding it but in a very masculine way. I think designers turn towards this aesthetic because of this, but also because of its versatility. 'Nautical' can cover everything from naval military coats through to fisherman's knitwear to Norse-inspired, bright coloured jackets. It is a really easy look to integrate into their wardrobe as the pieces that take their cue from the sea are traditional menswear items by their very nature. A short, vividly coloured cotton parka is great for the rainy spring months and chunky 'nautical' knits will go with most things men already own."

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The striped top is the classic item that most defines the look, perhaps why it was so ubiquitous for spring. "Breton stripes and naval styling were picked up by many designers," says Lee Douros, men's wear buyer at My-wardrobe.com. "And not just at Junya Watanabe; designers such as Prada, Comme des Garçons Shirt, Kenzo and Salvatore Ferragamo all showed Breton stripe looks."

"The Breton stripe T-shirt is a childhood memory for me," says Jean Paul Gaultier, who has made the humble fisherman's striped top his signature. "My grandmother used to dress me in Breton tops, so when I think of navy stripes I feel a nostalgia for that era when I was growing up. And then there is, of course, Jean Genet and *Querelle de Brest* and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film of that novel. At the beginning of the 1980s I started wearing the Breton stripe top again. I wore them everywhere, even with a tuxedo for gala evenings. I paired them with everything – jeans, even a kilt." Not surprisingly, Gaultier's spring collection includes nautical knits and double breasted blazers, all in the distinctive Breton stripe.

"For us, the Breton stripe references workwear and utility," says Caroline Kelly of knitwear label Catirfina. "Though historically it was worn as a political statement, a rejection of privilege and status and as a show of support for the working man and his pure ideals. Just think of Pablo Picasso dressed in a Breton stripe T-shirt in his south of France studio at the height of his creativity. There is not just a little irony that the Breton stripe is referenced by luxury design labels now, worlds away from its origins."

"Nautical ticks all the age boxes," says Stacey Smith, head of men's wear at Matches. "From a buyer's point of view, it is commercial and inspires summer thoughts, which generally translates straight into sales. This is one of the easiest men's looks to incorporate into your day-to-day wardrobe; whether a gold crested button on a blazer, a Breton stripe sweater or a deck shoe and chino."

Thom Browne championed the nautical pea coat (£880) for spring with a white pique under-collar that suggests the arrival of summer, teamed with the navy cable crew (£380) that adds a modern sports-inspired twist. And Rick Taylor cuts an impeccable handmade jacket that is perfect for those that want only a subtle nod to the seas.

Ah yes, the blazer. Like the sailor shirt, it is enduring, wearable – and soon to be omnipresent. "We always have a navy blazer in the range; at least two in every collection," says tailor Oscar Udeshi. "But for this spring? We will be doing four different styles."

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**'Stripes instantly lift any outfit'**

"I've just packed for my holiday and have to admit: I've included four versions of the Breton stripe T-shirt," says Anita Borzyszkowska, vice-president of press and marketing at Gap. "They have become such a classic" – for women's wear as for men's wear.

Borzyszkowska is not the only one who thinks so. "Breton stripes have become like leopard print, something everybody has in their wardrobe and can go back to every season," says Rebecca Osei-Baidoo, women's wear buyer at Browns, London. "The 'Marinière' is now just like those skinny jeans that have become part of our every day casual uniform. I think the reason for this is because the Breton T-shirt is really easy to throw on, and the stripes instantly lift any outfit. Even paired with jeans and Converse, the Breton T-shirt still manages to look smart."

It's hard to pin-point the exact moment when the Breton T-shirt turned from being "everywhere" to becoming "essential," but not only did Junya Watanabe dedicate his entire spring women's collection to all manner of styles of all manner of navy and white stripes, but Miuccia Prada picked up on the look too, not just with her "Olive Oyl"-inspired stripey separates for Miu Miu's current resort collection, but also her jazz age striped dresses at Prada (from £1,100). Meanwhile, at Jil Sander, designer Raf Simons took the look to a whole new level with sporty, oversized dress shapes and plastic "carrier bag" accessories all run up in neat bands of navy and white, and at Céline, Phoebe Philo re-imagined zip-sided tops with stripes ("All about freedom and getting away from it all," says Osei-Baidoo).

"We have bought the nautical look from everyone including Joseph, DKNY, Sportmax, Moschino Cheap & Chic, Sportmax and Sonia by Sonia Rkyiel," says Lusia De Paula, buying and merchandising director at My-wardrobe.com, who recommends pairing a T-shirt with wide-leg jeans or a maxi skirt. "Key pieces include a Joseph striped cashmere knit shift dress (£318), and a Sportmax stripe sleeve dress, (£399). Coco Chanel gave the Breton T-shirt a timeless elegance when she first wore it in the 1930s," she says. "Her nautical 'Riviera' style has now become part of every woman's wardrobe in some form." Sail on, oh ship of style.

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