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Prints among men

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David Hayes APRIL 1 2011						

Judging by the array of shirts in bright florals, bold gingham checks and exotic paisleys appearing in men's wear departments, spring has most definitely sprung.

The actors Colin Firth and Jon Hamm have both recently been photographed wearing gingham shirts with suits, while the catwalks have offered an array of bolder, brighter takes on the growing trend for print and pattern. Dolce & Gabbana devoted its whole D&G line to the joys of tablecloth checks; at Jil Sander, Raf Simons took botanical floral motifs and splashed them on to neat, classic shirts; Paul Smith embraced pastel hues and marbled patterned silks. All this makes for eye-catching window displays but it's a harder sell in the real world, with many style pundits divided.

"At the moment I really like florals," says Richard James of Savile Row. "This season we wanted a happy feelgood summer vibe. I think most men like colour but are not very confident about it, particularly in an office environment, beyond the lining of their suit, bright socks or a silk tie – flashes of colour that are on the whole only seen by the wearer. But from this starting point a man can begin experimenting, say with something like a bolder-colour shirt. A lot of men are surprised how flattering colour can be."

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Stacey Smith, men's wear buyer at Matches boutique, is not so convinced. "Patterned shirts are more associated with weekend dressing, such as that good old staple the checked shirt," he says. "Our business shirts are generally a solid block of colour in shades of blue and white. Printed shirts at work can be seen as too 'playful."

Oscar Udeshi, a banker-turned-tailor who is showing his suit collection exclusively with white shirts, agrees. "In these times you want to stand out for your discretion and elegance, you don't want to draw attention to yourself by dressing like a clown," he says. "We have colour and print but it has to be the right colour and print. Green has negative connotations for many people, and bold checks are out as they have been overexposed by 'discount' shirtmakers."

When men do opt for something different, checks are often the first choice. "Gingham is always popular; in pale blue, pink or yellow, it is the ultimate summer shirt," says James. But florals are cropping up as an alternative. "This season we have a lot of abstract floral prints. It is a good way of showing you have a more individual approach and think creatively, no bad thing when you need to stand out at work. There are no rules in how best to choose prints. If you like it, wear it."

Some of the most famous floral print shirts have a very British heritage. "Men of all ages feel an affinity with the Liberty print," says Stephen Ayres, men's wear buyer at the landmark London store. "It's iconic and instantly recognisable. All our print items are selling well."

Who is buying into the look? "We have a big creative following," says Ayres, "but regardless of age it is someone who has confidence in their style. Men are more experimental these days. I think it is acceptable to wear bright shirts under suits; there's no harm in bringing fun and colour to the office this way."

Another British institution, one with a more conservative back-story, is also a surprise convert to brightening up men's wear at work. "Men in the City have been wearing pink shirts for years and many of our customers enjoy experimenting with colour," says Gordon Alsleben, master tailor at Ede & Ravenscroft, London's oldest tailor and robe makers. "Looking good gives you confidence and adding more colour to your outfit is one way to do this."

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Italian designer Angelo Galasso says: "Men are no longer afraid of showing off. My collection is proof that men's approach to fashion has changed. These days many men are not willing to put on a plain suit and shirt and are looking for something that will make them stand out." As Simon Kneen, creative director at retailer Banana Republic, says: "Men's printed shirts have that touch of individuality that a guy can be playful with."

Julian Fuller, head of men's wear design at Debenhams, adds: "Pattern sells incredibly well. It has become so mainstream over the past few seasons. Mixing patterns can look great but you don't want to look like you got dressed in the dark. Choose your statement piece and make sure everything works around it. Just like everything else, it's all about balance."

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Details

www.bananarepublic.co.uk

www.debenhams.com

www.dolcegabbana.com

www.edeandravenscroft.co.uk

Angelo Galasso: www.interno8.net

www.jilsander.com

www.liberty.co.uk

www.matchesfashion.com

www.mrporter.com

www.paulsmith.co.uk

www.richardjames.co.uk

www.udeshi.co.uk

Pattern recognition: 'Florals might be a bit too flashy in the workplace'

Nicholas Bradford, 22, financial

adviser at Barclays

Would you wear florals? No, too feminine for me. I don't think it would be flattering or help my look.

Would you wear gingham? Of course. It's a simple checked pattern that will go with most things in my wardrobe and be appropriate for most occasions. To work, out for drinks after work, on the weekends. The more people who wear it, the more will follow.

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Roger Tredre, 44, web editor

Florals? Yes, definitely, but if I wear a floral shirt I would want to pair it with a classic jacket so there's a counterbalance to the more extravagant style. I think the best way to do it is the micro-print but I do enjoy a paisley tie.

Gingham? Yes, absolutely. I would wear it very differently from the way in which you would see it in the catwalk shows, a literal interpretation would make most men look silly. I would never wear a jacket in gingham, for example, but I would wear a button-up shirt. Just a dash of personal flair is nice.

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Sidney Ashley, 61, retired marketing director

Florals? Only in Hawaii.

Gingham? Only on a ranch.

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Benjamin Wilcox, 28, estate agent

Florals? They might be a bit too flashy in the workplace but maybe on the weekend if I'm feeling extravagant.

Gingham? Definitely. I'd probably want something a bit subdued that won't distract from the properties I'm showing because I wouldn't want to scare off clients. I'd go for some reds, some light blues and maybe be a bit daring and put on a deep purple for a little kick.

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Rory Phillips, 49, lawyer

Florals? No, not even to a barbecue on the weekend.

Gingham? Yes, it's very classic.

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Timothy Davis, 37, copywriter

Florals? On vacation to Monaco or Miami maybe but not on a normal day, no.

Gingham? Sure I would wear it, layered under a V-neck or popping out of a crewneck jumper. It's a little preppy and good for the office. I like red and white and navy and white. Those colours go with most of my wardrobe and I can wear them almost anywhere.

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James Cannon, 34, web designer

Florals? Hmm, maybe I could pull off a little Liberty print but it isn't something I would naturally wear. It'd have to be something that someone picked out for me or that my girlfriend bought.

Gingham? Yes, definitely.

Nicholas John Look, 30, personal trainer

Floral? Sure, if it was done tastefully.

Gingham? Never, or maybe if I was working as a waiter at a country-themed restaurant. Only then.

Lindsey Botts

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