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Fine and dandy

TV shows such as ‘Boardwalk Empire’ have led to a resurgence in dressed-up men’s fashion



David Hayes OCTOBER 14 2011

Boardwalk Empire, HBO’s prohibition-era drama, won a raft of gongs at last month’s Emmy Awards but what was puzzling was that it lost the Outstanding Costume award to *The Borgias*. The three-piece suits, the homburg hats, the ties, those natty collar-pin shirts: *Boardwalk*’s look could have stepped straight off the Autumn/Winter men’s runway from designers as diverse as Lanvin, Hardy Amies and Dior Homme.

“The impact of popular culture should never be underestimated,” says Ben Leaver, men’s formal wear buyer at Selfridges. “*Mad Men* may have been a major influence in a return to traditional dressing for men but *Boardwalk Empire* has led demand for an even more dressed-up, dandy look. The popularity of our Emmett and Smyth & Gibson collar bar shirts [£125 and £135, respectively] are testament to this shift. The collar-pin shirt is a sure-fire way to make a strong, simple statement with your suit.”

But it’s not just shirts: all kinds of gentlemanly accessories, from felt hats to pocket squares, silk scarves to tie pins, are rising in popularity. “The pocket square has been the runaway success of the season,” says Leaver. “It’s the finishing touch that says you are a man who understands fashion and takes pride in how you look.”

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At Goldsmiths’ Fair, London’s most important jewellery industry gathering, which ran from September 26 to October 9, many men’s designers had noticed the shift too. “Year on year we have seen an increase of about 15 per cent of our male client base,” says Bobby White of Shipton White. “Our cufflinks are still our most popular item but recently we have seen a large increase in orders for bespoke tie and cravat pins.”

But why are men embracing their inner dandy right now? “We are going through difficult financial times and I believe men look for investment pieces rather than throwaway fashion,” says Claire Malcolm, creative director of long established but newly cool British label Hardy Amies. “I see the suit as a modern-day piece of armour: when you put on a suit it gives you an air of authority. A good suit can last you many years but you can restyle and reinvent your look.”

Just as women spend on lipstick when times are hard, men, it seems, look to the pocket square and the like. “Certain accessories are key: a beautiful tie, cufflinks, pocket squares,” says Malcolm. “Even if a guy feels uncomfortable wearing a tie, a simple pocket square can lift an outfit. But there is a real skill in selecting the right colours and textures to make this look still feel modern and fresh.”

“One must know the rules first,” says Edward Sexton, who worked with Tommy Nutter and is now a consultant at Chester Barrie, “even if you are going to break them. Your pocket square should never match your tie. Ever. It should contrast and complement in colour, pattern and texture. Only wear one tie accessory. Do not wear a collar bar and tie pin. And avoid wearing a tie bar with your waistcoat; it is superfluous, rather like wearing ‘belt and braces’. However, you can still wear cufflinks with your shirt; they should be in the same metal but need not match perfectly. The breast pocket on your suit jacket should always hold a pocket square, with hand-rolled edges and of a decent size so that it overflows from your chest. Always wear a pocket square, even when you do not wear a tie.”

And a final word of wisdom? “Great accessories cannot hide a poor-fitting and badly cared for suit,” says Sexton. “Attention to detail is everything.”

Hats have been the biggest statement of the season at Lanvin, Dior Homme and DSquared but are perhaps the trickiest to work in to your everyday look. However, Jean-Luc Guitard, manager of Bates Hats on Jermyn Street, says, “We haven’t sold this many hats in years. I’ve sold more than a thousand homburgs and bowlers. Our best selling hats are the ‘racing felt’ and our new trilby made of beaver fur,” says Guitard. “Young men usually start with the high street only to realise that the quality is not good enough. Then they come to us and we find the right hat.”

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And how do you find the right hat? “It’s a battle between proportions, customer taste and colour,” says Guitard. “You can compare finding a good hat to a good pair of shoes. And forget matching the hat to your suit; if you look good in a hat naked, then it will look good with anything.”

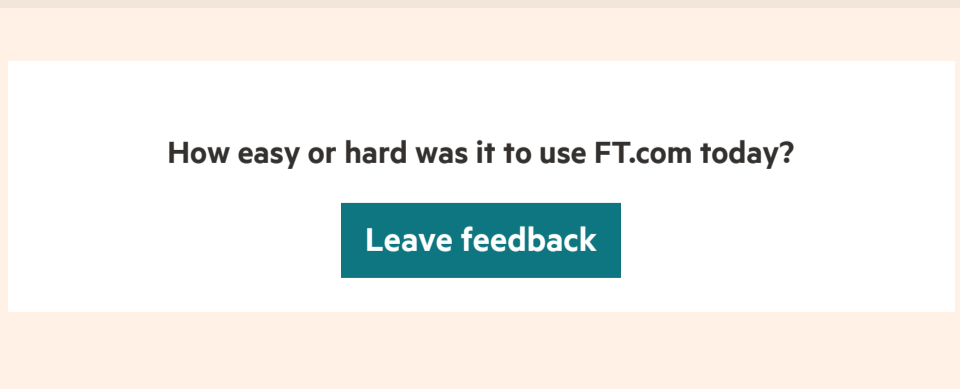
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