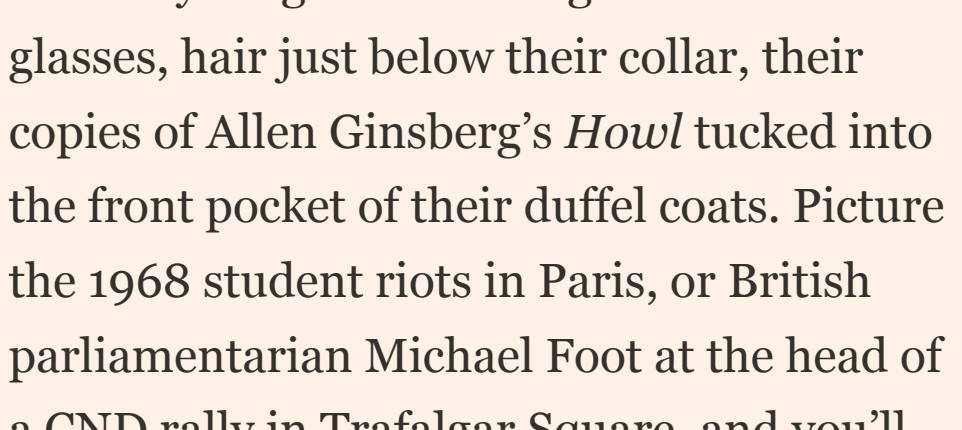


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Duffel entendre

From counterculture to catwalk, the classic coat is enjoying a renaissance



David Hayes NOVEMBER 12 2011

Until this year’s groundswell of political and social unrest, “protest movement” seemed like a term wrapped in nostalgia, recalling earnest young men wearing horn-rimmed glasses, hair just below their collar, their copies of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* tucked into the front pocket of their duffel coats. Picture the 1968 student riots in Paris, or British parliamentarian Michael Foot at the head of a CND rally in Trafalgar Square, and you’ll get the idea. And yet, with uncanny synchronicity, just as the current [Occupy Wall Street protests have gone global](#), the duffel coat, that very British symbol of the heady days of sit-ins and banner-waving is also back, making its own quiet revolution – in men’s wear.

Admittedly, it’s not exactly counterculture. Indeed, it’s almost the opposite, but designers from Burberry to Bottega Veneta, Balmain, Raf Simons and Junya Watanabe have all run up versions of the classic British navy coat, complete with decidedly un-protest-friendly price tags. In fact some of the numbers could provoke a mini-riot all of their own. “The duffel has become a real luxury item this winter,” says Stacey Smith, men’s wear buyer at Matches. “We have an amazing fur-trimmed Balmain duffel coat that takes it to a whole other level at £3,888.”

Jeremy Langmead, editor-in-chief at Mr Porter, says the appeal of the duffel coat lies in the fact that it is an item of clothing that has been adopted by both the establishment and the anti-establishment.

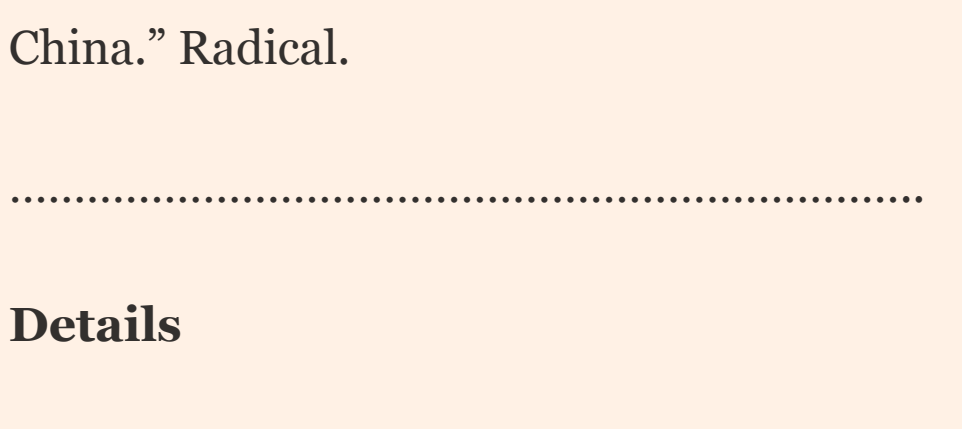
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He adds: “The duffel coat also has an inherent practicality – and that’s always a good thing for men. The original duffel design is such a classic that it doesn’t need reinventing, just a little toying with. Some designers have come up with duffels in unexpected fabrics, like cashmere or heavy felt, while others have just fiddled with details, such as the horn toggle fastenings. The biggest difference with this fall’s designs is the use of vibrant colour, such as powder blue at Bottega (£1,305) or burnt orange at Burberry (£1,895).”

Christopher Bailey, Burberry’s chief creative officer, says: “I wanted to evolve the duffel coat and keep it interesting and relevant without trying to reinvent it altogether. I’ve always worn duffel coats. I think there is something so British about them: they have this cosy and timeless feel that I really love.”

Langmead praises the duffel for being easy to wear and “incredibly versatile”. “I think the duffel coat can look great teamed with a sharply tailored suit and tie or skinny wool trousers. Equally, it can look highly appealing thrown over jeans and a sweater and worn with a pair of hiking-style boots or high-tops. The trick is not to go too 1970s, otherwise it might look a little costume-like: avoid wearing it with baggy cords. And needless to say, if you have an abundance of facial hair and a penchant for marmalade sandwiches, you’re asking for trouble.”



Dundee United football players at the Scottish Cup Final in 1974 wearing duffel coats gifted to them by Gloverall

Case in point: Gloverall, perhaps the most well-known duffel coat manufacturer in the UK. “We have always supplied schools, and so many people we speak to remember wearing our coats from an early age,” says Mark Smith, sales director of the British label that celebrates its 60th anniversary this year. “Initially we made a version of the original naval duffel, but in 1954 Gloverall developed what is really today’s duffel. The original had water buffalo horn toggles with the leather stays and was cut from an Italian double-faced ‘checkback’ fabric, and that coat became the iconic duffel that is emulated and copied worldwide; Gloverall can honestly lay claim to being part of its heritage.”

Ah yes, that other famous duffel coat wearer: Paddington Bear, a particularly tricky comparison for any man. “If you’re not sure about the duffel, I’d recommend the parka as an easier alternative this winter,” says Matches’ buyer Stacey Smith. “It has the same casual, throw-on quality but without any of the Paddington Bear associations.”

Despite the stuffed-animal downside, however, the high street has been quick to pick up on the classic duffel look, especially at the trend-led end of the market.

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“The duffel coat is definitely a strong candidate for coat of the season,” says Gordon Richardson, Topman’s design director. “It’s not just for the young; a duffel coat can suit all ages if worn with effortless style and elegance. Men tend to buy as a result of need, like when it gets colder, and a warm three-quarter length wool coat like the timeless, no-nonsense, duffel will work in more situations than shorter, more casual coats.”

For further evidence of the duffel’s renaissance, Gloverall’s Mark Smith says: “We still offer the recreation of the British Naval duffel, ‘The Monty’ (£295), and our ‘Classic Original’ (£295), both of which are still made in England. And we have seen a real growth in sales over the last three years.” Indeed, such is the duffel coat’s popularity that the company is in the midst of “developing a new luxury range for China.” Radical.

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