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Brown in town

Italians love the earthy hue, but is it about to win the vote of the city gent?



David Hayes FEBRUARY 15 2013



Brown Italian style as seen by The Sartorialist style blog: Simone Righi

As Silvio Berlusconi, Mario Monti et al gear up for the much-ballyhooed [Italian elections](#) next weekend, which helpfully coincide with the opening of Milan Fashion Week, political watchers can anticipate a flurry of TV appearances, op-ed pieces – and brown suits on the hustings. Perhaps more than any of their global peers, Italian businessmen are comfortable with the idea of putting together a crisp blue shirt, natty tie, perhaps the flourish of a pocket square, polished brogues and a tobacco-coloured ensemble to make a statement during the day. In other countries around the globe, however, “brown in town” can still prove controversial.

“In our opinion, brown is less likely to make an impact in the city and would still be considered a bit of a risk,” says Colin Heywood, manager at tailors Anderson & Sheppard. “It is a colour for the weekend or country. It’s no coincidence that the majority of tweed cloth ‘books’ contain mostly browns but very few suiting books do, so any customer wishing to select a brown suit cloth would find their options severely limited.”

At last, however, things are changing. “It is true to say that, to the more conservative mind, brown is still a colour for country clothing,” says John Blanco, head of bespoke at Gieves & Hawkes. “But nowadays men in general are more aware of what suits them and are willing to bend the rules.”

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Rich shades of the surprisingly troublesome colour have made a stealthy appearance in assorted spring/summer menswear collections, from slouchy tobacco-hued tailoring at Dries Van Noten to snug-fitting mahogany double-breasted suits at Dolce & Gabbana and sharp, single-breasted bitter chocolate two-pieces at Kenzo. Not to mention luxurious casual layers in shades of russet at Bottega Veneta, Belstaff and Trussardi. London label Rake even sent out a tuxedo jacket in a particularly fetching shade of polished teak silk. “I’ve often thought that men are resistant to brown because it’s simply a dull word,” says Richard James, Savile Row stalwart and master colourist. “But brown covers such a wide spectrum of shades that sound far more attractive. It is a colour that actually offers a lot of choices to work with.”

“Brown was very popular in the 1930s and 1940s,” says Edward Sexton, renowned tailor and creative consultant at Chester Barrie. “If it were possible to see those old black-and-white films in colour, you would be surprised how many beautiful brown suits were worn. Today it is rare that a man will wear a brown suit – it tends to be the customer with a really good dress sense and an eye for colour who has the confidence to create a complete look around a brown. But it is not as hard as many people think. And it does work well for a smart look. We tend to find that the customers wanting a brown suit go very dark, as it keeps it looking formal.”

Mei Chung, senior menswear buyer at London boutique Browns, says: “Because brown is produced by a mixture of colours, it is important to get that mix right. Designers such as Jil Sander, Ann Demeulemeester and Dries Van Noten inject ‘washes’ into the browns they use to create a vintage or smoky look.”

But some tailors are less cautious. Richard James, who showed brown Prince of Wales checks, Donegal tweeds and herringbones in his recent London show, says, “it’s a wonderful base colour to work with because, like grey, it sets off other colours beautifully. Our brown Prince of Wales checks invariably feature bright, lifting overchecks, and the Donegal tweeds are flecked with colour. We have also produced a number of brown pin and chalk stripes with bold, contrasting stripes: sky blue and turquoise work particularly well.”

Still, for those not entirely convinced, Chung advises customers to “start with touches of brown, such as a piece of knitwear, a shirt or scarf to go with what they already have.” Max Summerskill, director of menswear at Alfred Dunhill, agrees: “A little brown can work with formal wear, with a dark navy or grey suit. Adding a very dark brown leather brogue and a chocolate woven or knitted silk tie with a pale blue Bengal striped shirt can look really sophisticated. But I would keep brown as the accessory colour.”

Either way, says James, the shade “offers a smart, flattering alternative to the norm. A man stands out in brown, but not too obviously.” He might even be electable.

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